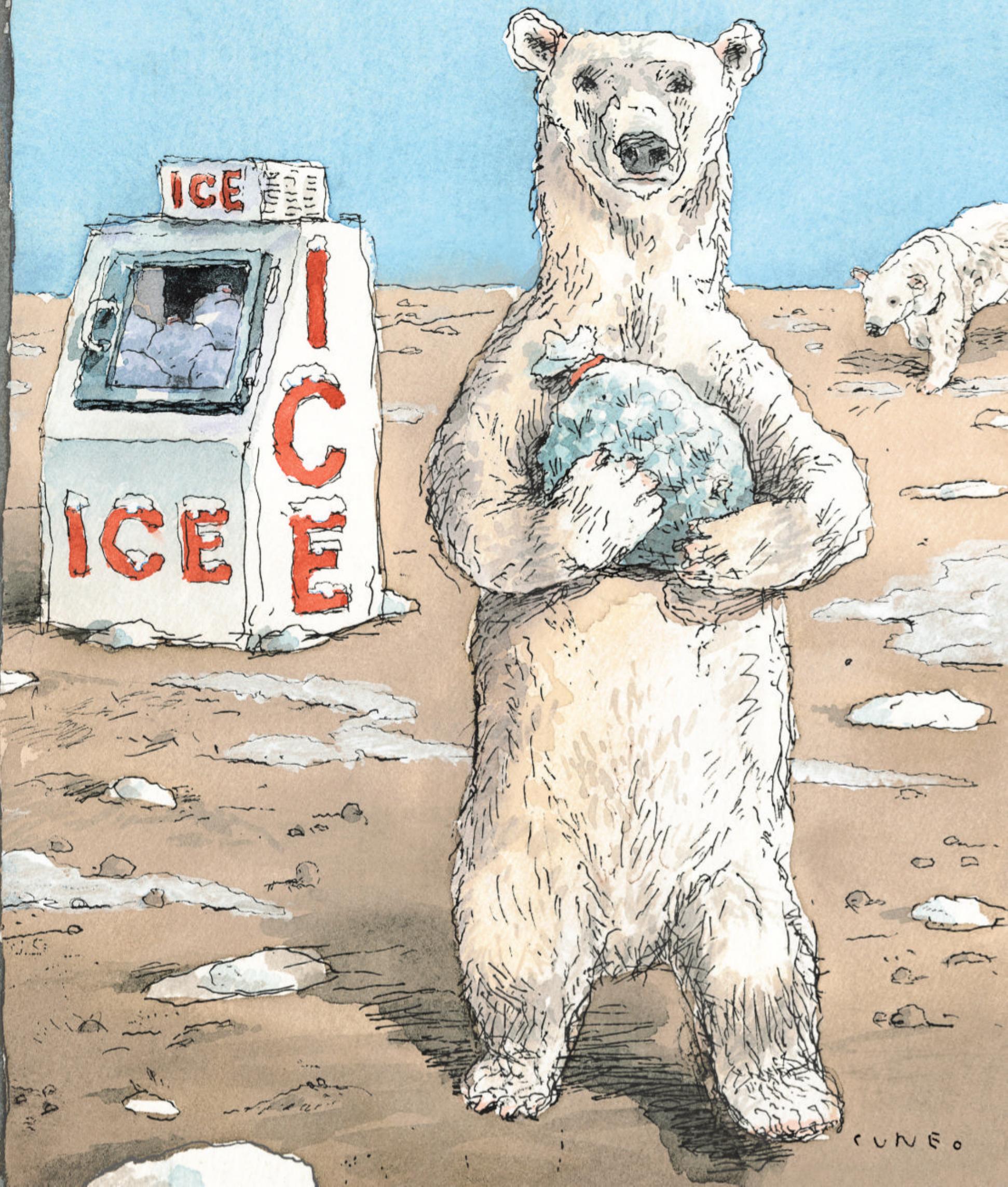


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# THE NEW YORKER



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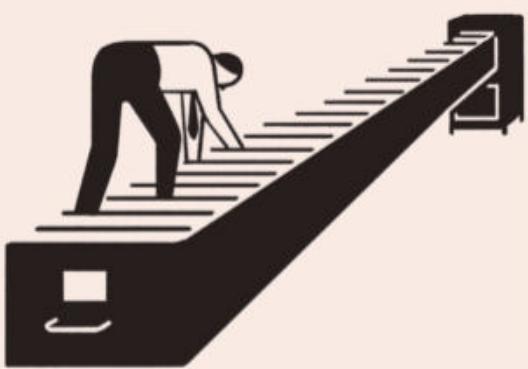
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**Jim Moore** (*Poem*, p. 45) will publish a new book of poems, “Prognosis,” in the fall.

### THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



#### A REPORTER AT LARGE

In a new multimedia experience, Ben Mauk investigates China’s campaign of persecution in Xinjiang, with art work by Matt Huynh.

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# THE MAIL

## THE CHURCH'S LAND GRAB

David Owen's fascinating piece about the cartographer Molly Burhans's attempts to map the Catholic Church's lands, with the goal of empowering the Church to fight climate change, does not fully explain how the Church came to own two hundred million acres of land ("Promised Land," February 8th). The answer involves the Doctrine of Discovery, a collection of edicts issued by the Church throughout the past thousand years that sent explorers around the world to appropriate land that was unoccupied by Christians. Ever since, the logic of terra nullius, or "nobody's land," has been used to justify the seizure of land and water and the accompanying attacks on indigenous sovereignty. Visionary though Burhans's project may be, the work of harnessing the power of the Catholic Church to battle climate change assumes that the Church should be the institution making decisions about what to do with these lands. Any efforts to address environmental concerns through the Catholic Church that do not grapple with its history of colonization will come up short.

*Erika Arthur  
Freedom, Maine*

## WHEN ASYLUM SEEKERS FACE DEATH

Sarah Stillman's article vividly chronicles how the Trump Administration's policy changes have harmed immigrants and refugees ("The Damage," February 8th). It's worth adding that U.S. law doesn't guarantee the right to an attorney in immigration proceedings. As the A.C.L.U. and other groups have demonstrated through lawsuits on behalf of young children, it is absurd and immoral to force asylum seekers to navigate these proceedings without legal counsel. In cases in which there is a credible claim that deportation could result in death—as when immigrants invoke asylum pro-

tections or the Convention Against Torture—due process requires access to an attorney. Prisoners facing the death penalty are afforded that right, along with many other procedural protections. Our legal system fails if it does not provide analogous protections, including the right to counsel, to those facing death through immigration proceedings.

*John Mills  
Principal Attorney  
Phillips Black  
Berkeley, Calif.*

## A RETURN TO CONSERVATION

Elizabeth Kolbert, whose reporting on climate change is prescient, writes, "Congress hasn't approved a major environmental bill since 1990" (Comment, February 8th). This may be true, but in 2019 Congress enacted the John D. Dingell, Jr., Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act, which added 1.3 million acres to our National Wilderness Preservation System; enlarged many national parks, such as Acadia, in Maine; established or expanded numerous conservation areas (notably, in Utah and California); and added to the National Trails System and the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. The Senate approved the bill 92–8, and the House of Representatives passed it 363–62. Now, in accordance with President Joe Biden's goal of preserving thirty per cent of our landscape by 2030, many more such pieces of conservation legislation are in the works. These will be good for the land and for wildlife, and vital for meeting our commitment to reversing climate change.

*Doug Scott  
Palm Springs, Calif.*

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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 3 – 9, 2021



# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



For four decades, the unparalleled Lorraine O'Grady—an American daughter of the Caribbean diaspora and a feminist trailblazer—has been centering Black lives in her performances and photo-based works. In recent years, homages to her art have graced the 2019 Met Gala and a Biden-Harris campaign video. On March 5, the Brooklyn Museum opens the retrospective “**Lorraine O'Grady: Both/And**,” which includes the début of her 2020 piece “Announcement of a New Persona (Performances to Come!),” excerpted above.

## MUSIC

### Cal Performances

**CLASSICAL** This performing-arts presenter traditionally brings top-calibre talent to Bay Area audiences at its home base, the University of California, Berkeley; now, with its pay-per-view streaming series, “Cal Performances at Home,” it offers artists to the world in prerecorded performances from far-flung locations. With the spring season under way, the fierce harpsichord advocate Mahan Esfahani plays Bach’s canonical Goldberg Variations at the Bach Archive, in Leipzig, Germany (March 4). The luminous pianist Mitsuko Uchida performs two Schubert impromptus and his gently unfurling Sonata in G Major, D. 894, at the renowned Wigmore Hall, in London (March 18).—Oussama Zahr

### CHUNG HA: “Querencia”

**K-POP** Originally a bit player in the eleven-member, reality-show-born K-pop girl group I.O.I., Kim Chung-ha, known mononymously as CHUNG HA, has blossomed into a solo star since the group’s disbanding, in 2017, after only a year of promotion. Her proper débüt, “Querencia,” is a kaleidoscopic survey of dance music the world over, dipping in and out of Korean, English, and Spanish. The album’s concept, inspired by a metaphysical Spanish term for a place where one’s real identity is revealed, concerns a young woman seeking her true self through song, scanning tropical house, synth pop, Afrobeats, and Latin pop along her journey of discovery. In its brightest, most colorful moments—the Rina Sawayama-esque mashup pop of “Bicycle,” the vogue-friendly house of “Stay Tonight,” a lively *urbano* duet with the Puerto Rican rapper Guaynaa, “Demente”—the music finds personal revelations in global aspirations.—Sheldon Pearce

### Cloud Nothings: “The Shadow I Remember”

**ROCK** A line like “The world I know has gone away, an outline of my own decay,” off of Cloud Nothings’ new album, “The Shadow I Remember,” slots almost too easily into the dense gloom of the pandemic era. With its stifled discordance and biting existentialism, the record does seem to be an artifact of the moment, but it’s also a survey of where the Cleveland band has been for the past decade: the group reunited with the producer Steve Albini, returning to studios from earlier in its career and pulling in some of the most intense, belligerent sounds of its past. Yet streaks of brightness come often, as when OHMME’s Macie Stewart buoys the melodies on “Nothing Without You.”—Julyssa Lopez

### DMX Krew: “Loose Gears”

**ELECTRONIC** The moniker DMX Krew is a clue to where the London electronic musician Edward Upton is coming from—the golden age of electro and early techno, with its rubbery grooves and vintage synthesizers at the fore. (The Oberheim DMX was an early drum machine.) On “Loose Gears,” Upton crafts jumpy rhythms and arranges them with antic bass lines and the squeaky-toned instrumentation of an eighties arcade game. The pas-

tiche works because Upton writes engaging tunes that come across as proper songs, albeit wordless ones, rather than the kind of shapeless tracks that tend to dominate the dance-music realm.—Michaelangelo Matos

### Melissa Aldana Quartet

**JAZZ** When the Chilean player Melissa Aldana cuts loose on her original tunes, it becomes obvious that she’s dissected and expertly absorbed any number of post-bop influences while developing a distinct voice of her own on the tenor saxophone. Her continued evolution during the past decade—as with other prodigiously talented players who surround her on the contemporary jazz scene—has become a compelling narrative in itself. She’s also fostered a limber rapport with the guitarist Charles Altura, a similarly incisive improviser and a key element of the quartet that Aldana brings to the Brooklyn club Bar Bayeux for this live-streamed performance.—Steve Futterman (March 3 at 7:30; barbayeux.com.)

### New York Philharmonic

**CLASSICAL** Missing from the streaming throngs throughout most of the pandemic, the New York Philharmonic finally entered the crowded field in February, with NYPhil+. The new initiative—now accessible online, with platform-specific apps due in the spring—arrived bearing treasures from the orchestra’s rich au-

diovisual archives, as well as a newly produced concert that placed familiarity before innovation. The platform’s second original offering provides a welcome infusion of new blood, showcasing Tito Muñoz, a substantial young conductor making his Philharmonic débüt, and Aaron Diehl, an elegant improvising pianist, in selections from Mary Lou Williams’s “Zodiac Suite” and works by Copland, Ives, and Still.—Steve Smith (March 8; nyphil.org.)

## TELEVISION

### Barb and Star Go to Vista Del Mar

At first, this wacky lime Daiquiri of a comedy, written by and starring Kristen Wiig and Annie Mumolo, feels like a long setup for a “Saturday Night Live” sketch. Barb (Mumolo) and Star (Wiig) are middle-aged best friends from an unnamed Midwestern town who share a house, a hair style, and an unceasing passion for discount culottes; after losing their jobs as salesclerks at Jennifer Convertibles, they decide to go on a big trip to Florida to shake things up. There are solid jokes from the get-go—Vanessa Bayer steals an early scene as the dictatorial leader of a local women’s “talking club”—but as the movie unfolds its quirky heroines feel less and less like stand-ins for a certain type of T. J. Maxx shopper. Instead, the film goes for something far more specific, silly, loving, and

## ROCK



Recent years have seen monstrous surveys compiling every incendiary note of the mythic 1966 tour and studio trail leading to Bob Dylan’s “Blood on the Tracks.” “**Bob Dylan—1970**” again examines his construction process, not of a masterpiece but of a pair of minor LPs: the unloved “Self Portrait” and, especially, the quirky “New Morning.” Dylan’s workshopping here emits a vibe akin to his home-recording touchstone “The Basement Tapes” as he plays through elegantly rumpled renderings of American music authored by himself and others. The well-worn band includes George Harrison, who joined for a handful of songs weeks after the Beatles finalized their divorce. Throughout these sessions, Dylan returns to a new composition, “If Not for You,” chasing an elusive sublimity that would finally be realized months later—when the song was covered by Harrison.—Jay Ruttenberg



The National Geographic Channel's anthology series "Genius" stretches the traditional, glossy Hollywood bio-pic into multi-hour television epics. This taffy-pulling method has been hit or miss. The first season, about the scientist Albert Einstein (played by Geoffrey Rush), had moments of sappiness but also plenty of flinty and exciting edges. The second, in which Antonio Banderas played the painter Pablo Picasso, felt flabbier and less successful, an over-polished, hagiographic mishmash. There was going to be a season about the writer Mary Shelley, but the network scrapped it after the producers "couldn't find a way to crack it creatively." Now a third season has finally emerged, and, thankfully, it is the best of the lot. In "**Genius: Aretha**," lovingly shepherded by the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, the triple-threat actor Cynthia Erivo takes on the role of the Queen of Soul, Aretha Franklin. Although the show falls into some formulaic ruts (relying too heavily on gauzy flashback scenes, for instance), Erivo's acute, lionhearted portrayal of one of music's most talented divas ultimately succeeds. This is a powerhouse showcase for a powerhouse performance, and for that it is worth your time and respect.—*Rachel Syme*

often lovely. "Barb and Star" may not be great cinema, but it is great kitsch, and, like the best cult hits, it's the sort of movie that will bloom with time and multiple viewings.—*Rachel Syme*  
(Streaming on YouTube, Apple TV+, and other services.)

### Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel

This four-part, tabloidish documentary quickly shot to the top of Netflix's most-watched list when it debuted, last month. The fervor makes sense in an age of zealous true-crime rubbernecking; the show investigates a hotly debated unsolved mystery—the death, at the downtown Los Angeles hotel the Cecil, of a guest named Elisa Lam, who, in 2013, was found inside one of the hotel's rooftop water tanks—and the Cecil's haunted past. The story is a tragic tale of a woman struggling with her mental health, and

of a neighborhood (Los Angeles's Skid Row) that has been systematically neglected with policies that have confined the city's homeless population to a small area. But the documentary withholds this information until the last minute, instead indulging a series of "Web sleuths," who became obsessed with the Lam case and are given bizarrely free rein to unspool their wild theories. Many of the sleuths ultimately apologize for turning one woman's devastating death into viral content, but their mea culpas show how retelling the story in this sensational format might be repeating the harmful cycle once again.—*R.S.*

### It's a Sin

This new drama, by Russell T. Davies (on HBO Max), centers on a group of friends living together in London during the first decade of the AIDS crisis, when the ignorance that allowed H.I.V. to spread was both individual

and societal. The flatmates include Jill (played with warmth and sensitivity by Lydia West), a drama student, who is desperate to educate herself about the peculiar sickness that is beginning to blight her circle of friends, mostly gay men; Ritchie (the singer Olly Alexander), her best friend, who remains closeted at his family home, on the provincial Isle of Wight, but is gloriously liberated among his newfound peers in London; Colin (Callum Scott Howells), a shy apprentice tailor on Savile Row; the handsome, confident Ash (Nathaniel Curtis), who starts out as a drama student but ends up as a teacher; and Roscoe (Omari Douglas), who flees the home of his religious parents to work at a gay bar. Davies honors the eighties, and those who died and lived during those years—and reminds us that the period was also one of joyful freedom, for which the only appropriate term was, and is, life-affirming.—*Rebecca Mead*

### DANCE

#### New York City Ballet

This season, the company is diversifying its free virtual offerings, adding conversations and backstage footage to the mix. The first few weeks include spotlights on three Balanchine ballets, the third of which is "Stravinsky Violin Concerto," from 1972. It's a striking work that begins and ends with energetic, even competitive dances for large ensembles. These sections frame two contrasting pas de deux, one fraught with aggression, the other oppressive and full of need. On March 8, the ballet is the subject of a podcast interview with one of its original interpreters, Jean-Pierre Bonnefoux. This is followed by an open rehearsal and discussion with the company dancers Sara Mearns and Claire Kretzschmar, on March 9. And, on March 11, N.Y.C.B. broadcasts a recent performance of the full ballet, starring Sterling Hyltin, Ask la Cour, Sara Mearns, and Taylor Stanley. Also on March 9, the troupe presents a conversation with three dancers who will be retiring in the fall—la Cour, Maria Kowroski, and Gonzalo García—when, hopefully, the company returns to the stage.—*Marina Harss* ([nycballet.com](http://nycballet.com))

#### Martha Graham Dance Company

For its digital "Martha Matinee" on March 6, the company broadcasts "Every Soul Is a Circus" (1939), one of Graham's few comedies. The rarely seen film of the work features the original cast of Graham, Erick Hawkins, and—in his first role with the company—Merce Cunningham. Originally silent, the film now includes a recording of the score, by Paul Nordoff. Graham experts contribute context and trivia in a live chat.—*Brian Seibert* ([marthagraham.org](http://marthagraham.org))

#### San Francisco Ballet

The company's digital season continues with Program 3 (available on the troupe's Web site March 4-24), a triptych of ballets, one of which, "Wooden Dimes," was created and filmed during the pandemic. Its choreographer, Danielle Rowe, sets the story in the Jazz Age, following a "Star Is Born" pattern, with a loving couple shaken by the female partner's rise to stardom. It includes an original score by the American composer

James M. Stephenson. Also on the program are Ratmansky's "Symphony #9," a rollicking, tongue-in-cheek piece set to Shostakovich, and Yuri Possokhov's meditation on Cheever, "Swimmer."—M.H. ([sfballer.org](http://sfballer.org))

## ART

### "Grief and Grievance"

This terrific show, subtitled "Art and Mourning in America"—whose starry roster includes Kerry James Marshall, Glenn Ligon, Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, and Theaster Gates—was originally intended to open at the New Museum last October, amid the furores leading up to the Presidential election. The pandemic scuttled that. But "Grief and Grievance," the brainchild of the late Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor, doesn't have a use-by date, because it celebrates what artists are good at: telling personal truths through aesthetic form. Works by thirty-seven artists emphasize interiority and the patterns of feeling that attend Black experience in America, channelling the emotional tenors of the history, and the future, of race in this country. Playing in a darkened room near the start of the show is Arthur Jafa's video-montage masterpiece "Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death." The quantity of rapid clips, ranging from violent scenes of the civil-rights movement to children dancing, overloads comprehension—so many summoned memories and reconnected associations, cascading. The experience is like a psychoanalytic unpacking, at warp speed, of a national unconscious regarding race. Irresistibly exciting and profoundly moving, the piece will induce a heightened state of mind and heart to accompany you throughout the exhibition.—Peter Schjeldahl ([newmuseum.org](http://newmuseum.org))

### Becky Kolsrud

With a limited palette and a strict lexicon of images, this Los Angeles-based painter brushes into existence a mythic, metaphysical realm of O'Keeffian horizons, blobby clouds, high heels, and salmon-colored women. The centerpiece of her exhibition "Elegies," at the JTT gallery, is a fifteen-foot-long panorama, completed in 2021. Titled "The Chorus," it can be read as an allegory of the past year of isolation and mourning. A body of water is dotted with small islands, populated by cypress trees whose trunks are human legs; an open casket floats in the center of the composition. In another, smaller landscape, bordered by a band of sky blue, a neon-pink skull rests on the curve of a green planet as a lemon moon blares from the corner. On the floor, Kolsrud has installed a sculptural counterpart to her canvases—an expanse of mannequin feet in clear plastic mules—as if to suggest that every utopian Eden or Lesbos has a dystopia lurking beneath.—Johanna Fateman ([jitnyc.com](http://jitnyc.com))

### "Threads"

The four artists in this winning exhibition at Foxy Production enjoy an easy rapport: each repurposes a craft or textile tradition to envision an alternate, queer lineage of domesticity and décor. The multicolored shapes of Ulrike Müller's handsome wool rug float in a burgundy field, the composition's scattered

pink triangles evoking a history of political reclamation. Steve Reinke's needlepoint "doodles" (the artist is best known as a filmmaker) are displayed in acrylic frames that reveal their messy versos, transforming a deliberate, prim pastime into a form of spontaneous expression. Jonathan Payne's intricate, gridded constructions, made from acrylic and thread on shredded paper, recall stained glass and spiderwebs, and have the humble charm of summer-camp string-art projects. One of Tuesday Smillie's lush hanging works, which loosely resemble both quilts and pennants, may be the show's keystone: trimmed with a long curtain of gold beads, it proposes a new adage with a line of cutout text: "your wound is a blessing."—J.F. ([foxyproduction.com](http://foxyproduction.com))

## MOVIES

### Before Summer Ends

The Swiss director Maryam Goormaghtigh reinvigorates the road movie with this lyrical, acute political comedy, from 2018. It stars three thirtysomething Iranian men living in Paris—Arash, Hossein, and Ashkan, nonprofessional actors playing versions of themselves—who take a sentimental journey through France two weeks before Arash moves back to Iran. Hossein is ironic and artsy, Ashkan is earnest and solitary, and Arash is socially awkward, an obese student who, as a teen-ager in Iran, deliberately gained weight to avoid military

## IN THE MUSEUMS



In the aftermath of the Second World War, the French painter Jean Dubuffet began to champion the unrecognized geniuses making art on the streets and in psychiatric institutions, labelling their raw passion "art brut." But photography was still considered subpar by high culture, so the visionaries with cameras remained unseen. **"Photo | Brut: Collection Bruno Decharme & Compagnie,"** an overwhelming, exciting, disturbing, and inspiring exhibition at the American Folk Art Museum (through June 6), corrects that omission with some four hundred pieces by more than forty artists, made between the late nineteenth century and the past few years. (Advance tickets, available via [folkartmuseum.org](http://folkartmuseum.org), are required.) A few names may be familiar: Mark Hogancamp, an American world-builder who stages gritty and tender wartime tableaux with dolls, inspired a 2018 Hollywood movie. (Dolls, sex, and alter egos are among the show's recurring themes.) And the legendary Lee Godie, an Illinois native and a self-proclaimed French Impressionist, had a thirty-year show at the Art Institute of Chicago—on the front steps, where, starting in the late sixties, she would attach the embellished self-portraits she made in a bus-depot photo booth (such as the undated image above) to her paintings, or gift one to a lucky admirer.—Andrea K. Scott

service—which he's still hoping to avoid when he goes home. As the men explore the French countryside, they chat about Iran and France, tradition and freedom, memories and aspirations. They also meet people along the way—notably, two musicians, Charlotte and Michèle, whose presence prompts Ashkan's dreams of romance. But the idyll is soon shattered by new political circumstances. Goormaghtigh made the film with a few thousand dollars and one assistant, but her poised, ample images and her wryly tender regard for her characters give the film dramatic grandeur to match its global embrace. In Farsi and French.—Richard Brody (*Streaming on Amazon and Kanopy.*)

## Closer

Patrick Marber adapted his own hit play of the same name, and gave a lucky director, Mike Nichols, a script that he could chew on. Peel away the carnal talk and what's left—the bone structure of the piece—resembles Noël Coward's "Private Lives." We get two interlocking couples: Dan (Jude Law), a writer who falls in love with Alice (Natalie Portman), a stripper,

and Larry (Clive Owen), a doctor who marries a photographer named Anna (Julia Roberts). The transactions are quick and brutal: Dan has anonymous online sex with Larry and a yearlong affair with Anna, Alice leaves Dan and starts working at a night club, Larry finds her there and tells her precisely what he wants, and nobody is happy. The film is more civilized than the play, the acid slightly diluted, and Law, for one, looks eaten away by the bitter pace of it all. Roberts, too, is haunted and pained, whereas Portman and Owen drink and spit their lines with undiminished relish, often at speeds that Nichols can barely handle. Released in 2004.—Anthony Lane (*Reviewed in our issue of 12/13/04.*) (*Streaming on Amazon, Vudu, and other services.*)

in riotous euphemisms by his lawyer (William Redfield)—that he's broke. After a terrifying vision of having to buy ready-to-wear, he accepts a usurious loan from his sneering uncle (James Coco) and must marry rich, fast. Henry impresses his chosen prey, Henrietta Lowell (May), an awkward, lonely heiress and a botanist, with his displays of chivalry. In anticipation of the big day, Henry also studies botany—and, most unchivalrously, studies toxicology, too. Having started out with the hatred, dependency, and surrender that it takes most couples years to achieve, Henry and Henrietta are no less suited than regular folks for marriage until death do them part—one way or another.—R.B. (*Streaming on Amazon, the Criterion Channel, and other services.*)

## A New Leaf

Elaine May's antic and macabre 1971 comedy reveals the essence of marital love more brutally than many melodramas. Walter Matthau plays Henry Graham, an effete and idle Manhattan heir; the film opens with a loopy view of Henry's caprices, notably his red Ferrari. But he's stopped cold by the news—delivered

## Perfumed Nightmare

This uproariously confrontational comedy by the Filipino director Kidlat Tahimik, from 1977, is an audacious classic of independent filmmaking. Tahimik also stars, as a puckish character of the same name—a jeepney driver in the village of Balian who is obsessed with American culture. He listens devotedly to Voice of America and, dreaming of space travel, is the president of the local Wernher von Braun fan club. But when he gets his long-awaited chance to travel abroad—to Paris, with an American businessman who runs that city's gumball-machine empire—his observations dispel his illusions. With his copious and whimsical voice-over, Tahimik freely fuses personal and political cinema, documentary and fantasy; he depicts his village with a sharp anthropological attention to ritual and religion along with a sardonic view of economic inequality, and unfolds family stories marked by war and imperialism. The wandering hero's idiosyncratic encounters and discoveries are capped with a dazzling touch of the supernatural that represents what he calls his "declaration of independence."—R.B. (*Streaming on Kanopy and MUBI.*)

## Shoah

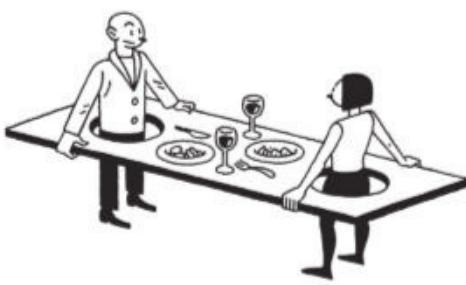
From the time of its release, in 1985, Claude Lanzmann's film has transcended the cinema to become a primary record of the extermination of the Jews of Europe during the Second World War. The two-part, nine-hour film consists mainly of interviews about the death camps with Jews who survived them, Poles who lived in their vicinity, and Germans who helped run them. (The surreptitious filming of a former Treblinka guard is the apotheosis of investigative journalism.) But Lanzmann didn't make a film about or an evocation of the Holocaust; joining these interviews to scenes of the vestiges of the camps, he filmed, in effect, the Holocaust itself, with the faith that the bearing of witness is the ultimate representation. He conveys the sense of a supremely moral mission as he presses his subjects to speak despite their anguish, fear, or shame. With his camera, he bears witness to the bearing of witness and, at the sites of the unfathomable horror, depicts, to the limits of consciousness, the experience of life in the presence of death.—R.B. (*Streaming on Amazon, IFC Center at Home, and other services.*)

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[newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town](http://newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town)

## WHAT TO STREAM



In 1974, two years after making "Super Fly," the director Gordon Parks, Jr., infused the picaresque Western "**Thomasine & Bushrod**" (streaming on the Criterion Channel and Amazon) with a similar blend of cool swagger and social acuity. The action starts in 1911, in Texas, where Thomasine (Vonetta McGee), a sharpshooting bounty hunter, and H. P. Bushrod (Max Julien), a most-wanted outlaw, team up to rob banks. Distributing their pelf to the poor and disposing of murderous racists, they become living legends throughout the South—fictional Black forerunners of Bonnie and Clyde. Much of the movie (written by Julien) involves the lovers' gruff romance and practical difficulties on the run. Bushrod, an expert horseman, switches to early-model autos, giving rise to semi-comedic low-speed chases; the proud and temperamental Thomasine drolly schemes to join her partner on wanted posters—and to get top billing. But the horrific landscape of lynchings and summary executions puts their impulsive energy and taut composure into fatal focus. When, during a shoot-out, Bushrod—in a majestic closeup—reloads his revolver, the whispered click of metal on metal resounds like righteous thunder.—Richard Brody



## TABLES FOR TWO

### Ha's Đặc Biệt

If there's an image of pandemic dining that will stay with me years from now, it may be one posted on Instagram by Anthony Ha and Sadie Mae Burns for their pop-up, Ha's Đặc Biệt. In it, the couple, who met while working at Mission Chinese Food, in 2015, are standing at the hood of a car that's covered with a magnificent spread of takeout containers. Chopsticks poised near their mouths—Ha's mask pulled down to his chin, his shirt pocket stuffed with napkins—they wear goofy, deer-in-headlights expressions. The photo is both pragmatic—"This could be you! (If you wear your warmest parka and are committed to eating on the hood of your car)," the caption reads—and heartening: they look, genuinely, in spite of it all, to be having a good time.

If you're not committed to eating on the hood of your car, no problem: Ha and Burns's food, which is available for pickup or delivery on weekends (check @has\_dac\_biet on Instagram for the location) is just as fun to eat indoors. Ha, who started at Mission Chinese as a dishwasher before realizing that he had an in-

terest in, and the talent for, life on the line, is Vietnamese-American; *đặc biệt* means "the special" in Vietnamese. Each weekend, the pair offer a set meal—designed to feed one, very generously—inspired by the food Ha grew up eating (his mother sometimes comes in from New Jersey to help cook), by their travels through Vietnam, and by whatever strikes their fancy; both are passionate, for example, about pie. Call it Vietnamese bistro, they told me the other day.

Last spring, my family established a routine: Pizza Friday. If life during the past year has been defined by monotony, it's also brought the loss of many comforting rituals, and a need for new ones. In January, we enjoyed the first in a stretch of Vietnamese Saturdays. Silky-skinned bell peppers, roasted in tomato sauce, were stuffed with a heady mixture of ground pork, duxelles (a classic French minced-mushroom sauté, here made with Vietnamese lemongrass and shallots), bean-thread noodles, dill, and cilantro. It was a knockout, and yet side dishes threatened to steal the show: fat, just-tender green stalks of *yu choy*; sticky half-moons of caramelized Japanese eggplant, fragrant with fish sauce.

Every meal comes with white rice ("always rice!" the menu assures), a rotating assortment of tart pickled vegetables (daikon, carrot, ramps), and a pint of rich golden broth obscuring cubes of winter melon or kabocha squash. À-la-carte add-ons may seem excessive, but to skip them would be a mistake. I'm still dreaming of a dense, crusty mini

baguette sandwiching crumbly chicken-liver pâté, matchsticks of cucumber, and pickled daikon and carrot, smeared in mayo and topped with cilantro and red Thai chili. A refreshing *gỏi cá* salad—featuring crunchy shredded Savoy cabbage, raw onion, and fragrant herbs, including sawtooth and basil, plus the pungent dipping sauce *nước chấm*, fried shallots, roasted peanuts, and a black-sesame rice cracker—held up beautifully in the fridge until lunch the next day.

Both Ha and Burns were working in high-profile kitchens until last March. Burns described the pre-pandemic restaurant industry as determined by money and status, in a way that "sort of strips away . . ." She trailed off. "A culture," Ha chimed in. Neither has any plans to go back to that world. With the exception of Ha's mom, they're a two-person operation, happily and painstakingly sourcing seafood and vegetables from Fulton Fish Market and Sunset Park grocers, and sustainably produced meat and eggs from local farmers. "We're improvising," Burns laughed. "We're a little scrappy, and we like it." Before they started Ha's Đặc Biệt, they had a food cart (originally called Mr. Fish Sauce), from which they served such thrillingly ambitious dishes as grilled oysters with scallions and peanuts, and crispy-shrimp-head lettuce wraps. When they eventually open their own restaurant, I can only imagine that they'll help redefine the form, for the better. (*Set meal \$38, à-la-carte dishes \$10-\$12.*)

—Hannah Goldfield

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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT

#### GETTING CLOSE?

Optimism is one of the things that the coronavirus pandemic has made it hard to hold on to, or even to measure. Going through the data can have a seesawing effect on a person's state of mind. Last week, Johnson & Johnson announced that, in trials, its COVID-19 vaccine had an efficacy rate of more than sixty-six per cent in preventing moderate to severe disease, and was eighty-five per cent effective at preventing severe to critical cases—and that no one who got the vaccine was hospitalized or died because of COVID-19. On Friday, the Food and Drug Administration's vaccine-advisory committee voted, unanimously, to recommend that it become the third vaccine to be given an emergency-use authorization in the United States. It could be deployed as soon as this week.

Should one's mood be lowered by the knowledge that the two vaccines that were previously approved, from Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna, have higher efficacy rates—around ninety-five per cent? (Not really; the J. & J. numbers are still very good.) Alternatively, should one's mood get an upswing from the knowledge that, unlike with the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines, only one J. & J. shot is required, and that the vaccine can be stored in a normal refrigerator? (Definitely.) Is there a sign that vaccinations, along with the end of the holiday season and a growing willingness to wear masks, are, finally, altering the trajectory of the pandemic? (Yes: since the beginning of the year,

the average daily number of new cases in the United States has fallen by three-quarters; worldwide, the number is half of what it was.) Thankfully, the ups seem to be beating the downs.

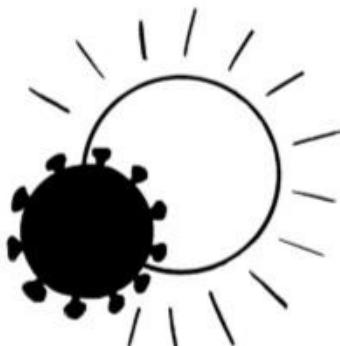
Yet joy can be hard to come by, because of the weight of what the country is still going through. The average daily number of deaths is about two thousand—a sharp drop from mid-January, when it was well above three thousand, but quadruple what it was last July. And, as February ended, there seemed to be something of a wavering in the progress—perhaps because extreme weather caused disruptions or, more ominously, because of the spread of what appear to be more infectious variants.

The biggest brake on optimism concerns those variants: the British, the Brazilian, and the South African. The J. & J. vaccine held up well in large-scale trials in South Africa. There is ev-

idence that other vaccines will not work quite as well against that variant or, apparently, against the Brazilian one, though vaccine makers are working on boosters to address that issue. The vaccines do appear to be effective against the quickly spreading British variant. But the fear is that variants may yet outpace vaccinations. The race is still on: a new variant with worrisome mutations seems to be gaining ground in New York City.

Two White House commemorations last week embodied the lurch between pain and progress. The first, on Monday evening, was held on the South Portico, to mark half a million recorded U.S. COVID-19 deaths. Before calling for a moment of silence, President Biden urged Americans not to become "numb to sorrow." Just three days later, Biden, with Vice-President Kamala Harris and Dr. Anthony Fauci, watched four front-line workers get their first shots at an event billed as "50 Million COVID Vaccinations." The "50 Million," as Biden made clear, referred only to the number of doses administered since he was inaugurated. The total is approaching seventy million doses, with twenty million people fully vaccinated. Biden offered a stream of banter about how the shot doesn't really hurt, then cautioned, "This is not a victory lap." But, he added, "we're getting close."

It is hard to cheer unabashedly when the distribution of vaccines has been such a mess. Donald Trump had no real plan, and left matters such as eligibility to the states. The Biden Administration has been far more involved, but the system remains fragmented. Just



because you are eligible to get a vaccine in New York, it doesn't mean that you are eligible in Massachusetts or Georgia. A contentious issue is whether prioritizing K-12 teachers should be a requirement for reopening schools; they are eligible for vaccines in about thirty states, and only in certain counties in some others. If you are eligible, you still often need a lot of spare time and technical access to secure an appointment. Racial and class inequities abound, along with a certain arbitrariness. Yet, looking only at the raw numbers, people in the U.S. are being vaccinated at almost twice the rate of those in Germany. (And both the U.S. and Germany are in a better position, in terms of supplies, than much of the developing world.)

One measure of how tricky it can be to think about the pandemic's next chapter is the discussion around "vaccine passports." The idea is that a person's

vaccine status—perhaps documented by an app—could open doors that would otherwise be closed. But which doors? Showing proof of vaccination before travelling to another country is a familiar practice. Difficulties arise over access to jobs and whether vaccinated people should be encouraged to act as if COVID-19 is no longer a factor—to go to big indoor weddings, crowded theatres, busy restaurants—when vaccines are not universally available and vaccinated people may still spread the disease, albeit to a lesser extent.

Conversely, some worry that downplaying what vaccines can do might further people's reluctance to get one. (Vaccine hesitancy is a concern; a third of the members of the military who have been offered a vaccine have turned it down.) In that sense, the vaccines highlight, rather than eliminate, a central dilemma of this brutal but unevenly ex-

perienced pandemic: how to balance rational risk-taking with community obligations and realism about what's still ahead. It is reasonable, for example, to expect vaccinated people who gather at home with vaccinated friends and relatives to continue wearing masks in public settings.

The winter wave is ending, and there is every chance, with luck and vigilance, that we won't soon see its like again, even if the coronavirus and its descendants linger. Recently, Fauci told CNN both that he thought life might return to its usual patterns by the end of this year and that Americans might still be wearing masks in 2022. As he put it, "It really depends on what you mean by normality." One can, in the course of a long pandemic, begin to get used to too many intolerable things. But it would be disastrous to grow numb to hope.

—Amy Davidson Sorkin

## SKY LINE POSTCARD HUNGARIAN HUSTLE



Four years ago, during a three-month artist's residency in Brooklyn, Andi Schmied, a photographer from Budapest, visited the Empire State Building and was surprised to see so many taller skyscrapers. She immediately wanted to shoot photos from their top floors, but she quickly learned that these glass minarets were mostly new luxury residences—private in the extreme. "What is my way to get in?" she wondered.

Schmied, then thirty, decided to impersonate a prospective buyer or renter, a Hungarian billionaire named Gabriella Schmied. (Gabriella is her middle name, so her passport sufficed as I.D.) To fill the role of husband, she recruited a friend from Budapest, an art and book dealer named Zoltan. She worked up a backstory: Gabriella, architect, moving to the States with toddler son, owing to Zoltan's work. She invented an imaginary assistant named Coco, blew her art-residency materials budget on a credible outfit, made a list of fancy buildings, and, with the selling agents demon-

ing no real inclination for due diligence, bluffed her way into some of the planet's loftiest, most expensive apartments.

By this point, of course, the undertaking had grown into an art project, and an anthropological investigation. She recorded her interactions with the Realtors on her phone and shot intentionally unartful photos on a Nikon F-601—for the absentee husband's benefit, of course. The transcripts and pictures would become the basis of an exhibit and a lavish yet mischievous book called "Private Views: A High-Rise Panorama of Manhattan," published in December by VI PER, a gallery in Prague.

"Most of these viewings were like theatrical scenes for me," she said the other day, from Budapest. Many of them are reproduced in the text. "Sit down, Gabriella. It is really a moment for you," an agent says, at one boxy high-rise. "Imagine I am not here. Imagine your son running around, saying words in Hungarian.... Imagine the smell of your favorite food going through the apartment, from the kitchen to the dining room; perhaps a goulash. Your maid would be getting ready with dinner, while you are just having one of the finest French champagnes in the soaking tub with your husband."

(Schmied: "You don't even have to try to convince me.")

When she returned to New York a

year ago, just before the world shut down, to hit the remaining buildings on her list, she brought along Zoltan. At a tower overlooking Central Park, an agent, figuring that Zoltan, as a man, would know his wines, said, "My husband loves duck.... Usually, we do Burgundy duck breast or a lamb chop, and we have it with red wine like Bordeaux. He loves that."

Zoltan: "Who doesn't?"

No one, Schmied said, ever seemed to suspect a thing. She acted naturally, for the most part, and gave her sincere opinions. She learned as she went—staging, airspace, Marni—and sharpened her act. She became a connoisseur of what she calls "convincing tactics."

"'Timeless yet contemporary': this expression, whatever the hell it means, I heard in every single apartment," she said. "The agents try to make the buyer feel that this apartment is the most unique thing you've ever seen. Everything is 'handcrafted' or 'hand-selected,' but the fact is these apartments are all the same." Just about every one had, as its crowning indulgence, a soaking tub in front of a floor-to-ceiling window. The view, always stunning, even when it was obscured by clouds, often contained other new luxury towers, but the agents never called attention to them. They spoke of the Chrysler Building and the Empire State, or the fact that

one could see planes taking off from all three major airports. "They talk about their own buildings as the most amazing thing on the planet," Schmied said. "And yet they never mention them as something you would like to look at."

Addressing her, the agents focussed on emotional fulfillment. To Zoltan, they emphasized return on investment. They tended not to mention that thousands of these apartments remained unsold. (One agent, on learning that she'd made a sale, jumped up and down, and hugged a construction worker, as she and Schmied, in hard hats, made their way in a hoist elevator to the as yet unfinished hundredth floor. "You better act fast," the agent told her.) But the agents considered it a selling point that most of the apartments that had been sold remained empty, because they were investments—"a new global currency," as Schmied said.

"I will always remember the surprise on their faces when I said I actually wanted to live there. One of their favorite tactics is to assure the buyer that no one lives in the building," she said. "As if the fact that you will be completely alone in this monster tower is desirable. The deeper I went, the crazier it seemed that all these giant, robust buildings with this huge presence in the city that I imagine ninety-nine per cent of the people hate are not actually lived in and yet are going to be there for so long."

—Nick Paumgarten

## HOMETOWN HEROES ATTENTION, PASSENGERS!



Nicolas Heller, better known online as New York Nico, wears his love for the city he hopes to save on his head. A wide-brimmed Yankees cap was the first thing that popped into view when he logged on to a Zoom call recently to get to work on a new project. More than half a million people follow his Instagram, where he shares the stories of regular New Yorkers, such as bodega owners struggling to stay afloat. (The exposure is a boon to their GoFundMe campaigns.) Now he has signed on to help another New York sector in distress: the M.T.A.

A few months ago, the agency reached out to Heller to see if he wanted to "collab," as he put it, and he proposed a series of public-service announcements for trains and buses, to be voiced by iconic New Yorkers, such as Jerry Seinfeld, Desus and Mero, and Fran Lebowitz. The M.T.A. said sure.

The only catch: zero budget. That's why he was sitting in his Bed-Stuy apartment the other day, waiting for Reminisce Smith, the Grammy-nominated rapper known as Remy Ma, to show up on the Zoom to virtually record her message. COVID-19 has made Heller's work as a documentary filmmaker disappear, so he has plenty of free time. And the equipment for the M.T.A. project is simple: an iPhone. Given the state of the subway's P.A. system, he said, the recordings will "sound just as good as if you did it in a studio." He hopes that hearing Seinfeld's nasal voice declaiming "Hello, New York, and welcome to the première of 'Comedians on Trains Getting Coffee'" will be a morale boost for travellers. (Daily ridership has plunged more than thirty per cent in the past year.)

Heller, who is thirty-two and has a beard and a nose stud, killed time while he waited for Smith by checking his social-media metrics. "I never get traction on Twitter," he complained to his publicist, also on the call.

"I told you—your thing is visuals," the publicist said. "Twitter is not the platform for that."

"Right, right," Heller said. There was some good news, though: Debbie Harry, of Blondie, had said that she was into the idea of recording a P.S.A. "I was standing right by the Blondie mural on Bowery when I got the message," he said. "Bizarre." Finally, fifteen minutes late, Smith joined the call.

"Hey, Remy," Heller shouted.

"Hey!" The video wobbled as Smith, who stars on the reality show "Love & Hip Hop: New York," walked around a sunny studio in L.A., the click of her heels echoing through the room. "I'm looking for somewhere to put this phone." She brushed some hair from her face and gave up. "I'll just hold it."

"Actually," Heller said. He hesitated, aware that Smith was doing this for free in the middle of a busy workday. He explained that she would need an additional phone, to record the audio.



New York Nico and Remy Ma

She logged off and returned a few minutes later, out of breath, holding two more iPhones—just in case. "I told my husband"—the rapper Papoose—"just give me your phone!" Her laugh was big and warm.

Heller asked her about taking public transit while growing up in the Bronx. "I remember riding the buses and trains with my grandmother and getting the paper transfers," she said. She confessed to selling her city-issued bus pass in junior high to buy Chinese takeout. "I probably owe the M.T.A. so much money from hopping the turnstile."

After following Heller's instructions on how to adjust the settings in her Voice Memos app, Smith started recording. "Yo, what's up, New York? It's ya girl, Remy Ma," she said. "Remember to always wear a mask on the train and in the train station, and remember to wear it the *right* way, not on your chin, not on the back of your neck."

"That really gets me mad," she said afterward. "When you see people and their whole nose be out. Like, *bro!*"

"Yeah, it's the worst," Heller said. "O.K., next is holding the doors."

Smith hit Record: "Now, everyone knows if you can make it here you can make it anywhere, but if you hold the doors nobody's gonna make it anywhere.... You ain't never seen those videos of people where they get their necks caught and dragged down the platform?"

Heller: "Damn, getting graphic with it."

Next: priority seating. "Please remember, if requested, priority seating

will be given to people with disabilities. Not people whose shoes are too small—people with disabilities. . . . Stay classy!"

Heller looked confused. "People whose feet are too small?" he asked.

"No," Smith said. "Shoes!"

"I don't get the reference," Heller said.

"That's because you're not a girl!"

After the session, Smith reminisced about the subway, which she said she hadn't ridden in twenty years. "I've literally seen someone with a whole living-room set on the train platform," she said. Soon, she promised, she'll catch the 6 train at the Castle Hill Avenue station and ride south until she hears her voice.

—André Wheeler

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## WORST CASE DEPT. UNDEAD PEDAGOGY



Though not as venerable as novels based on movies, novelizations of video games have been a sturdy publishing genre for decades. *Assassin's Creed*, *Halo*, *Donkey Kong Country*—all have been rendered in what technically counts as prose. You wouldn't call these novels of ideas, probably, but that's what the

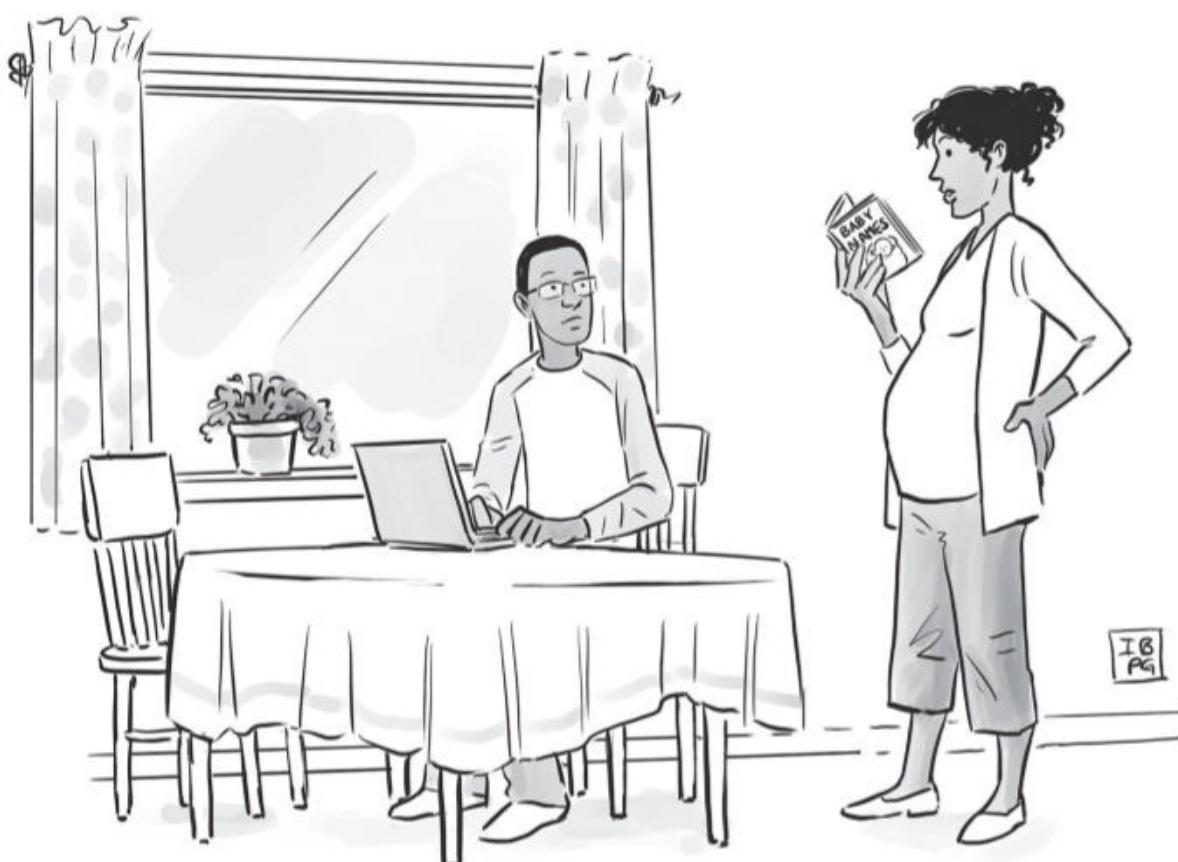
Swedish gaming company Mojang got, in 2016, when it approved Max Brooks to write a book based on *Minecraft*, widely considered the best-selling video game of all time. In most iterations, *Minecraft* players enter a Lego-like universe where they must learn how to shelter and feed themselves, marshal resources, build stuff, and otherwise survive while coping with nightly mobs of zombies, skeletons, and other bad actors. There is an often ignored way to "win" *Minecraft*, but for most players the game is more a world to invent. Authors, too.

Brooks was both an obvious and an unusual choice for a novelization. He had previously written *"World War Z,"* the best-selling 2006 zombie novel that was loosely adapted into a Brad Pitt movie. Brooks's book took a more rigorous approach to exploring the ways a zombie contagion might unfold in a globalized world—so rigorous that it helped earn him a senior fellowship as a worst-case scenarist and lecturer at the United States Military Academy's Modern War Institute. (The pandemic, which mirrored his zombie plague by originating in China, only enhanced his reputation as an alarmist seer.) His first two *Minecraft* novels—"Minecraft: The Island," published in 2017, and "Minecraft: The Mountain," out this month—continue in this semi-wonky vein: both read less like narratives

than like introductory texts on problem-solving theory, albeit lively ones with zombie attacks. They are aimed at kids.

Brooks, forty-eight, was playing *Minecraft* with his young son when he realized that the game might be "the most important teaching tool we have since the first printing press," as he put it during a recent Zoom call (from his family's pandemic hideaway, somewhere "in the mountains"). "I'm not exaggerating," he went on. "Growing up with dyslexia happened to make me very conscious of our education system. Since the nineteenth century, we have had the Prussian model of education. There's only one way to solve a problem. Binary. If you do it the right way, you get rewarded by getting kicked up to the next grade." This approach was useful, Brooks said, when it came to educating a conventional workforce—as well as designing most video games, with their obvious rewards and increasing levels of difficulty. It is less useful in a gig economy, "where everyone suddenly has to become the master of their own destiny. How do you train our children to be creative problem solvers?" he continued. "I struggled with that as a new parent. Then *Minecraft* came along, and I thought, Oh, my God." Playing with his son, Brooks would say, "See? You just learned that there are a million ways to solve a problem like *Don't Starve*." The lessons he hopes future Uber drivers and freelance content makers will absorb from his novels are codified in study-guide appendices—e.g., "Don't dwell on mistakes; learn from them."

Brooks is the rare author whose conversation is peppered with casual references to zombie films and "Beavis and Butt-head" as well as to SOCOM (the Pentagon's Special Operations Command) and "this blue-ribbon biodefense panel that I worked on for a little while." In his view, the U.S. military could benefit from some *Minecraft*-style slippery-mindedness. "Our enemies have invested in what's called asymmetric warfare—cyber warfare, economic warfare, information warfare," he said. "The Russians came closer than they've ever come to wiping out NATO without firing a shot. Or what does it mean when the Chinese could hack a soldier's Fitbit and then they know our deployments all over the world?" Channelling both Dr. Strangelove and Willy Wonka, he



*"I just want to name her something that one day will be a great crossword-puzzle clue."*



Max Brooks

concluded, “Our enemies now have a twenty-year imagination gap on us.”

Brooks is the only child of Mel Brooks and the late Anne Bancroft. You can see traces of his father in the way he underscores a point by cocking his head and grinning. He dates his productive obsession with zombies to an evening in adolescence when his parents were out. “I snuck onto their cable TV, probably trying to find a shot of boobs.” It was 1985, and he was thrilled to happen on a closeup of a woman’s open shirt. “What I didn’t know was that it was an Italian cannibal-zombie movie”—a genre known for depicting extreme gore and using footage of real atrocities. “That freaked me out,” he said. “But a few years later I saw ‘Night of the Living Dead,’ and that movie gave me hope, because instead of just screaming and blood the characters discussed the rules: ‘Oh, if you destroy the brain, you can move on? O.K.’ So I could start to think tactically. What are the rules of my enemy?”

—Bruce Handy

#### AUTHENTICITY DEPT. YEARS LOST



To see Pearl in all her glory, you have to make an appointment at the Watermark, a new “luxury senior community” in Brooklyn Heights. You enter a lobby with a grand piano, get

a thermal scan, then emerge onto a mezzanine. You scan a QR code on the wall and download an augmented-reality app. Pearl’s photo hangs to the right: drawn-on eyebrows, hand over mouth, delighted eyes. If you hold up your phone, the portrait comes to life on the app, and you can watch Pearl tell the story of how she became herself. If this level of technology eludes you—maybe, like Pearl, you’re seventy—you can use a pair of headphones connected to an iPad.

There are some three million L.G.B.T. seniors in the United States; twelve of them are represented in “Not Another Second,” the residence’s inaugural exhibition. Many carry the burdens of less accepting times, before Stonewall or gay marriage or “RuPaul’s Drag Race.” Their numbers are diminished from AIDS, and thirty-four per cent of them fear having to go back into the closet when seeking senior housing. Watermark, a national chain, is trying to change that, by pursuing a platinum accreditation from SAGE, an organization that serves L.G.B.T. elders. (SAGE avoids the “Q,” for “queer,” because it still sounds pejorative to many of its members.)

For “Not Another Second,” the subjects were photographed by Karsten Thormaehlen. “They gave me the superstar treatment,” Pearl said, recalling her shoot, at a warehouse in Greenpoint. “There was a full buffet. There was a makeup artist. They said, ‘What music would get you in the mood to relax?’” (Whitney Houston.) Her last name is Bennett, but it took many years to become Pearl. She grew up in West Palm Beach, Florida; her father was a landscaper, and her mother cleaned houses. Her brothers were jocks, but she was more interested in Easy-Bake Ovens. She moved to Brooklyn in 1970 and got into the underground disco scene, living as a gay man. Some nights, she and her friends would hit the clubs on Christopher Street in drag. “I would wake up the next morning, still in that dress,” she recalled. “I wouldn’t want to take it off.”

She started performing on Fire Island as Mother Pearl—a church-lady drag character, modelled on her mother. But something was off. “My life felt hollow, like I was going through the

motions,” she said. “I felt more like I was in drag as Ken.” Just before she turned fifty, in 1999, she had an odd experience on Fire Island. “I said to one of the performers, ‘Something is wrong. For some reason, Pearl’s not letting me take off this dress.’” She took the train back to town as Pearl and never wore men’s clothing again. After a year, she began hormone therapy: “I would wake up and I would touch my breasts and say, ‘Ah, that wasn’t just a dream!’” In “Not Another Second,” the participants each tabulate their “years lost,” before they began living as their authentic selves. Pearl’s number is fifty.

Ray Cunningham, eighty-three, and Richard Prescott, seventy-nine, were photographed together. Both served in the Navy in the fifties. One of Cunningham’s duties was to file paperwork for “undesirable” discharges, including homosexuals. “I realized that I could be in their boat—excuse the pun,” he said. “It hurt, to the point where I went into the Navy with the idea of having a career and retiring in thirty-five years or whatever, and I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t live under those circumstances of always looking over my shoulder.” He left the Navy and moved to San Francisco. He and Prescott were both middle-aged and driving buses when they met, in 1991. “We enjoyed camping. We enjoyed model trains,” Prescott said. They married in 2008, in Palm Springs. Years lost: a combined hundred and fifteen.

Lujira Cooper, seventy-three, was born in Queens. At twenty, she started working as a telephone operator at the Y.M.C.A. on Thirty-fourth Street, known as a gay haven, and dated a female co-worker. When Stonewall happened, she shrugged. “I remember saying, ‘Oh, they’ve actually decided to do something about how we’re treated,’” she recalled. “I’m sorry that I didn’t pay more attention, but at the same time I don’t like crowds, particularly.” A few years ago, she was homeless for ten months. “My biggest challenge became not blaming other people for anything,” she said. She got a place on the Upper West Side, earned three degrees in four years, and is working on her second detective novel. “I don’t think I ever came out, because I don’t think I was ever in the closet,” she said. Years lost: zero.

—Michael Schulman

PERSONAL HISTORY

# HOW TO PRACTICE

*Learning to let things go.*

BY ANN PATCHETT



I started thinking about getting our house in order when Tavia's father died. Tavia, my friend from early childhood (and youth, and middle age, and these years on the downhill slalom), grew up in unit 24-S of the Georgetown condominiums in Nashville. Her father, Kent, had moved there in the seventies, after his divorce, and stayed. Over the years, we had borne witness to every phase of his personal style: Kent as sea captain (navy peacoat, beard, pipe), Kent as the lost child of Studio 54 (purple), Kent as Gordon Gekko (Armani suits, cufflinks, tie bar), Kent as Jane Fonda (tracksuits, matching trainers), Kent as urban cowboy (fif-

teen pairs of boots, custom-made), and finally, his last iteration, which had, in fact, underlain all previous iterations, Kent as cosmic monk (loose cotton shirts, cotton drawstring pants—he'd put on weight).

Each new stage in his evolution brought a new set of interests: new art, new cooking utensils, new reading material, new bathroom tile. Kent taught drama at a public high school, and, on his schoolteacher's salary, in the years before the Internet, he shopped the world from home—*mala* prayer beads carved in the shape of miniature human skulls, an assortment of Buddhas to mix in with his wooden statues of saints

*What I had didn't surprise me half as much as how I felt about it.*

(Padre Pio in his black cassock, as tall as a five-year-old). He laminated the receipts and letters of authenticity that came with his purchases and filed them away, along with handwritten prayers, in zippered leather pouches.

I grew up in 24-S, in the same way that Tavia grew up in my family's house. We knew the contents of each other's pantries and the efficacy of each other's shampoos. And, though our house was much larger (it was a house, after all), the domain of the Cathcarts—Kent and Tavia and Tavia's older sister, Therese—had a glamour and an exoticism that far exceeded anything most Catholic schoolgirls had seen. Candles were lit at all hours of the day. The walk-in closet in Kent's bedroom had been converted into a shrine for meditation and prayer. A round, footed machine that looked like a plate-size U.F.O. burped out cascades of fog from the kitchen counter. The dining-room chairs were spring green, with backs carved to mimic the signs of the Paris Métro—a flourish of Art Nouveau transplanted to Nashville. Kent had had the seats of those chairs reupholstered in hot-pink patent leather. Tavia and I spent many happy hours of childhood standing between the two giant mirrors (eight by six feet, crowned with gold-tipped pagodas) that faced each other from either end of the tiny living room. We watched ourselves as we fluttered our arms up and down, two swans in an infinity of swans.

After his daughters were grown and gone, Kent amassed an enormous collection of Tibetan singing bowls, which crowded into what had once been Therese's room, each on its own riser, each riser topped with a pouf made of Indian silk. He played them daily, turning sideways to move among them. When Tavia came home from Kentucky to visit, she slept at my house, as there was no longer an inch of space for her in 24-S.

“Can you imagine what he could have done if he'd had money?” I said to her. We were standing beside stacked cases of Gerolsteiner mineral water in Kent's galley kitchen. Despite his chronic lack of space, Kent was a disciple of bulk purchasing. This was in April of 2020, in the early days after

his death, and we were sick with missing him. The dresser drawers had not yet been opened; the overburdened shelves in the highest reaches of the closets were undisturbed. Still, Tavia and Therese had already found more than thirty power strips. Always a director, Kent saw every room as a stage. Lighting was just one of his many forms of genius.

Tavia wanted to show me a painting of a Hindu deity riding a white bull, four blue arms reaching out in every direction, that Kent had left me in his will.

"I don't want to seem ungrateful," I said, after careful study. I liked the painting, but either you have a place for that sort of thing or you don't.

Kent's will was remarkably specific: Tavia got the fourteen-inch All-Clad covered sauté pan, Therese got the extensive collection of light bulbs, Tavia got the blue wool blanket, Therese got the midsize dehumidifier. The list went on and on: art, artifacts, household supplies. Since neither Tavia nor Therese had the space for more than a few mementos, they decided to sell most of their inheritance and split the proceeds equally. I added the blue deity to the sale.

"Take something else, then," Tavia said. "He'd want you to have something meaningful."

In the end, I took a blue quartz egg held upright by a silver napkin ring. I took a case of Lance cheese crackers with peanut butter and a gross of Gin Gins ginger candy for the staff at the bookstore I co-own. I claimed six boxes of vegetable broth for myself.

For the rest of the summer, Tavia drove down from Louisville on the weekends to work with her sister on the cleanout. I, too, kept going back to 24-S, both to see my friend and to watch the closing down of a world that had helped shape me. "He made everything magic when he was alive," Therese said sadly one day. "Now it's all just stuff." Friends and acquaintances came before the estate sale, wanting to pick through the bounty. I bought the painting of a floating house that had hung in Tavia's bedroom throughout our childhood, the first painting I ever loved. I bought the green-and-pink dining-room chairs and gave them

to my mother. Tavia was hugely relieved to know that they would be in a place where she could still come and sit in them.

The deeper 24-S was excavated, the more it yielded. Unit 24-S became the site of an archeological dig, cordoned off from the rest of the Georgetown condominiums, where the two sisters chipped into the past with little picks.

How had one man acquired so many extension cords, so many batteries and rosary beads?

Holding hands in the parking lot, Tavia and I swore a quiet oath: we would not do this to anyone. We would not leave the contents of our lives for someone else to sort through, because who would that mythical sorter be, anyway? My stepchildren? Her niece? Neither of us had children of our own. Could we assume that our husbands would make order out of what we left behind? According to the actuarial tables, we would outlive them.

**T**avia's father died when she and I were fifty-six years old. At any other time, we might have been able to enjoy a few more years of ignoring the fact that we, too, were going to die, but thanks to the pandemic such blithe disregard was out of the question. I put Kent's egg and its silver napkin ring on the windowsill in my office, where it ceased to be blue and took on an inexplicable warm orange glow—Kent's favorite color. Every day I looked at it and thought about all the work to be done.

My friend Rick is a Realtor who lives in my neighborhood. We run into each other most mornings when we're out walking our dogs. He'd been after me for a while to look at a house that was for sale down the street. "Just look," he said. "You're going to love it." I didn't want a different house, but, months after Kent's death, his legacy still nagged. Maybe by moving I could force myself to contend with all the boxed-up stuff in my own closets.

Walking down the street to see a house that we passed every day, my husband, Karl, and I convinced ourselves that this was exactly the change we needed, so we were almost disappointed to find that we didn't like this other house nearly as much as we liked the one we already lived in.

"I wonder if we could just pretend to move," I said to Karl that night over dinner. "Would that be possible? Go through everything we own and then stay where we are?"

I could have said, "I wonder if we could just pretend to die," but that pulled up a different set of images entirely. Could we at least prepare? Wasn't that what Kent had failed to do? To make imagining his own death part of his spiritual practice, to look around 24-S and try to envision the world without him?

Karl had been living in our house for twenty-five years. I'd been there for sixteen—the longest I'd ever lived anywhere, by more than a decade. Ours was a marriage of like-minded neatness. Karl's suit jacket went directly onto a hanger. I wiped down the kitchen counters before going to bed. Our never-ending stream of house guests frequently commented on the tranquility of our surroundings, and I told them that the secret was not having much stuff.

But we had plenty of stuff. It's a big house, and over time the closets and drawers had filled with things we never touched and, in many cases, had completely forgotten we owned. Karl said that he was game for a deep excavation. He was working from home. I had stopped travelling. If we were ever going to do this, now was the time.

I started in the kitchen, a room that's friendly and overly familiar, sitting on the floor, in order to address the lower cabinets first. The plastic soup containers were easy—I'd held on to too many of those. At some point, I'd bought new bread pans without letting the old ones go. I had four colanders. Cabinet by cabinet, I pulled out the contents, assessed, divided, wiped down, replaced. I filled the laundry basket with the things I didn't want or need and carried those discards to the basement. I made the decision to wait until we'd finished with the entire house before trying to find a place for the things we were getting rid of. This was a lesson I'd picked up from my work: writing must be separate from editing, and if you try to do both at the same time nothing will get done. I would not stop the work at hand in order to imagine who might want the square

green serving dish I'd bought fifteen years before and never put on the table.

What I had didn't surprise me half as much as how I felt about it: the unexpected shame that came from owning seven mixing bowls, the guilt over never having made good use of the electric juicer my mother had given me, and, strangest of all, my anthropomorphism of inanimate objects—how would those plastic plates with pictures of chickadees on them feel when they realized they were on their way to the basement? It was as if I'd run my fingers across some unexpected lump in my psyche. Jesus, what was *that*?

My willingness to idly spin out a narrative for the actual chickadees that pecked at the bricks outside my window was one thing, but where did this quick stab of sympathy for tableware come from? I shook it off, refilled the laundry basket, and headed downstairs, wondering if this was a human condition or some disorder specific to novelists. My ability to animate the people who exist solely in my imagination is a time-honed skill, not unlike a ventriloquist's ability to throw her voice into a sock puppet, a ventriloquist who eventually becomes so good at her job that she can make her hand speak convincingly without the sock, until finally there's just the empty sock singing "O mio babbino caro" from the bottom of the hamper. Of course, it may not be a problem of humans *or* writers but something specific to me, though I doubt it. If this were my problem alone, more people would be cleaning out their kitchens.

To end Day One on a positive note, I struggled to open a drawer with about thirty-five dish towels crammed inside. They were charming dish towels, many unused, patterned with images of dogs, birds, koala bears, the great state of Tennessee. I decided that ten would be plenty. I washed and folded them all, then took the excess down to the basement. I revelled in the ease with which the drawer now opened and shut.

That was the warmup, the stretch.

The next night, after dinner, I hauled out a ladder in order to confront the upper kitchen cabinets. A dozen etched crystal champagne flutes sat on the very top shelf, so tall I could just

barely ease them out. A dozen? I had collected them through my thirties, one at a time. Some I'd bought for myself, others I'd received as gifts, a single glass for my birthday, wrapped in tissue paper, as if I were a bride for an entire decade in which I married no one. Had I imagined that, at some point, twelve people would be in my house wanting champagne?

Everything about the glasses disappointed me: their number, their ridiculous height, the idea of them sitting



up there all these years, waiting for me to throw a party. (See, there, I'm doing it again: *the glasses were waiting*. I had disappointed the glasses by failing to throw a party at which their existence would have been justified.) But it wasn't just the champagne flutes. One shelf down, I found four Waterford brandy snifters behind a fleet of wineglasses. In high school, I had asked my parents for brandy snifters, and I had received them at the rate of one a year. I had also scored six tiny liqueur glasses and a set of white espresso cups that came with saucers the thickness of Communion wafers. The espresso cups were still in their original cardboard box, the corner of which had, at some point, been nibbled away. I had never made a cup of espresso, because I don't actually like espresso.

"Dad changed his look every year for the kiddos," Tavia had told me, "kiddos" being what Kent called his students. "They loved it. They were always waiting to see who he was going to be next."

Who did I think I was going to be next? F. Scott Fitzgerald? Jay Gatsby? Would I drink champagne while standing in a fountain? Would I throw a brandy snifter into the fireplace at the end of an affair? I laid the glasses in the laundry basket, the tall and the small, separating them into layers with a blanket. Downstairs, I set them up

on the concrete floor near the hot-water heater, where they made a battalion both pointless and dazzling.

I had miscalculated the tools of adulthood when I was young, or I had miscalculated the kind of adult I would be. I had taken my cues from Edith Wharton novels and Merchant Ivory films. I had taken my cues from my best friend's father.

I had missed the mark on who I would become, but in doing so I had created a record of who I was at the time, a strange kid with strange expectations, because it wasn't just the glasses—I'd bought flatware as well. When I was eight and my sister, Heather, was eleven, we were in a car accident, along with our stepfather. We each received an insurance settlement—five thousand dollars for me and ten thousand for her, because her injuries were easily twice as bad as mine. The money, after the lawyer's cut, was placed in a low-interest trust, which we could access at eighteen. When Heather got her money, I petitioned the court for mine as well. I told the lawyer that the silver market was going up, up, up, and if I had to wait another three and a half years I'd never be able to afford flatware.

The judge gave me the money, maybe because he realized that any fourteen-year-old who referenced the silver market was a kid you wanted to get off your docket. I bought place settings for eight, along with serving pieces, in Gorham's Chantilly. I bought salad forks, which I deemed essential, but held off on cream-soup spoons, which I did not. With the money I had left, I bought five South African Krugerrands—heavy gold coins I kept in the refrigerator of the doll house that was still in my bedroom—then sold them two years later for a neat profit.

"Keep everything you want," I said to Karl. "I don't want you to feel like you have to get rid of things just because I'm doing this."

"I'm doing this, too." He was working through closets of his own.

I found a giant plastic bin of silver trays and silver vases and silver chafing dishes in a hidden cupboard under the kitchen bar. Serving utensils, bowls, a tea service, a chocolate pot. I won't

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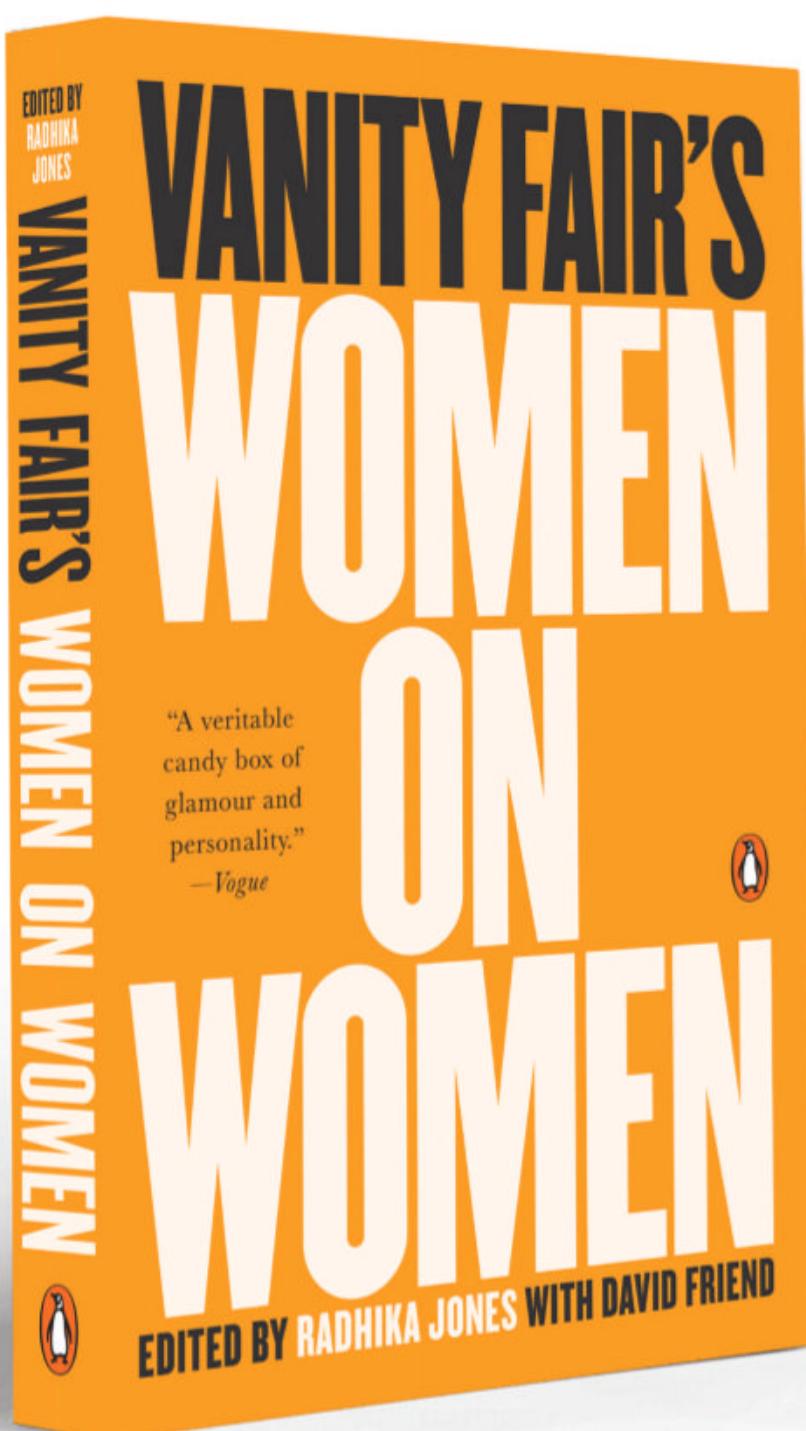
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say that I had forgotten them, but the bin hadn't been opened since I'd wrapped the pieces and stored them, maybe fifteen years before. I spread out the contents on the dining-room table. These things were all Karl's and, like my glasses, predated our marriage.

He idly reunited a dish with its lid. "Let's get rid of it," he said.

"Maybe you want to hold on to some of it?"

"Ten years ago, I would have said yes," he said.

I waited for the second half of that sentence to arrive, but nothing came. Karl started to pile the silver back into the bin without a hint of nostalgia. I was worried that he would regret this later and hold it against me. I said as much, and he told me I was nuts. That I was nuts was becoming increasingly evident. Once full, the bin of silver was as heavy as a pirate's chest, and we struggled to get it down to the basement together. He then called Leslie, the nurse at his medical practice, who steers him through his long, hard days with good sense and good cheer, and invited her to come over with her daughter to check out what was available.

I was mercifully able to keep myself from saying, "We were going to wait." Of course this would be Karl's favorite part, the part he would never be able to wait for: he got to give these things away. The first time I met Karl, he tried to give me his car.

An hour later, we were in the basement with Leslie and her daughter. Leslie had come straight from work and was wearing scrubs. Her daughter, Kerrie, also a nurse, was wearing hiking sandals and what appeared to be a hiking dress. She had recently returned from a journey down the Colorado Trail—Denver to Durango—logging five hundred miles alone. She came down with COVID along the way and waited it out in her tent.

"She just got engaged," Leslie told me. Kerrie smiled.

"You're going to need things," Karl said.

Leslie laughed and told us that her daughter could still fit everything she owned in her car.

I believed it. Kerrie was the embodiment of fresh air and sunshine, her only adornment a mass of spectacular

curls. Clearly, she had chosen to pursue a completely different model of adulthood. I watched as she took careful steps around the glasses and the cups laid out across the concrete floor. She lifted a single oversized champagne flute and held it up. "You really don't want these?" she asked.

I told her that I didn't want any of it. I didn't tell her that she shouldn't want any of it, either.

She took the champagne flutes. She took the brandy snifters, the decanter. She took the set of demitasse cups, but not the espresso cups. She took the stack of glass plates and the large assortment of mismatched wineglasses that had multiplied like rabbits over the years. Whenever she appeared to have reached her limit, Karl picked up something else and handed it to her. She accepted a few silver serving pieces, the square green serving dish. With every acquisition she asked me again, "Are you sure?"

I went through the motions of reassurance without being especially reassuring. The truth was, I felt oddly sick—not because I was going to miss these things but because somehow I was tricking her. I was passing off my burden to an unsuspecting sprite, and in doing so was perpetuating the myths of adult life that I had so wholeheartedly embraced. As she and her mother tenderly wrapped all those champagne flutes in dish towels, I pictured them

watched them back out of the driveway. "If we hadn't given it to her, she would have registered for it."

I did feel bad, but not for very long. The feeling that came to take its place was lightness.

This was the practice: I was starting to get rid of my possessions, at least the useless ones, because possessions stood between me and death. They didn't protect me from death, but they created a barrier in my understanding, like layers of bubble wrap, so that instead of thinking about what was coming and the beauty that was here now I was thinking about the piles of shiny trinkets I'd accumulated. I had begun the journey of digging out.

Later that evening, Karl called his son and daughter-in-law, and they came over to look through the basement stash. After great deliberation, they agreed to take a Pyrex measuring cup and a device for planting bulbs. Karl's daughter came the next morning and took the teacups, the industrial mixer, and every bit of the remaining silver. She was a woman who threw enormous parties for no reason on random Tuesdays. She was thrilled, and I was thrilled for her. It had all changed that fast. Making sure that the right person got the right things was no longer the point. The point was that those things were gone.



tied to her backpack. When they were finished, I helped them carry their load out to the car. There they stood in the light of the late afternoon, thanking me and thanking me, saying they couldn't believe it, so many beautiful things.

I had laid out my burden on the basement floor and Kerrie had borne it away. Or at least a chunk of it. There was still so much of the house to sort.

"Don't feel bad," Karl said, as we

Night after night, I opened a closet or a drawer or a cupboard and began again. The laundry room was surprisingly depressing, with that gallon container of Tuff Stuff, a concentrated household cleaner I had bought so many years ago from a Russian kid who was selling it door to door. When he saw that I was about to decline, he unscrewed the cap and took a slug straight from the bottle. "Nontoxic," he said, wiping his mouth with his hand. "You try?" I found half a dozen bottles of insect repellent with expiration dates in the early two-thousands, an inch of petrified Gorilla Glue, the collar and the bowl of a beloved dog long passed. The laundry room was where things went to die.

Every table had a drawer, and every drawer had a story—none of them interesting. I scouted them out room by

room and sifted through the manuals and remotes and packets of flower food. I found the burnt-down ends of candles, campaign buttons, nickels, a shocking quantity of pencils, more decks of cards than two people could shuffle through in a lifetime. I gathered together the paper clips, made a ball out of the rubber bands, and threw the rest away.

I never considered getting rid of the things that were beautiful—the brass cage with a mechanical singing bird that I'd given Karl for our anniversary, the painting of the little black dog that hangs in the front hall. Nor was I concerned about the things we used—the green sofa in the living room, the table and chairs. If Karl and I were to disappear tomorrow, someone would want all of that. I wanted all of that. I was no ascetic, though I say that with some regret—I grew up with the Sisters of Mercy and attended twelve years of Catholic school. (Kent, who loved his worldly goods, had studied at the Trappist monastery at Gethsemani in his early years.)

I was aiming for something much smaller than a vow of poverty, and was finding that small thing hard enough. I turned out the lights on the first floor and went upstairs.

The closer I got to the places where I slept and worked, the more complicated my choices became. The sandwich-size ziplock of my grandmother's costume jewelry nearly sank me, all those missing beads and broken clasps. I have no memory of her wearing any of it, but she liked to sort it now and then, and she let my sister and me play with it. Somehow the tangle of cheap necklaces and bracelets and vicious clip-on earrings had managed to follow her all the way to the dementia ward. I scooped it out of the nightstand in her room after she died, not because I wanted it but because I didn't know how to leave it there.

In the end, I decided to let it go, because who in the world would understand its meaning once I was gone? I had my grandmother's heart locket with pictures of my mother and my grandfather inside. I had the ring with the two ovals of green glass that her brother Roy gave her when she graduated from eighth grade. I had her wed-



*"Your eggs—we can do 'em the easy way or the hard way."*

ding ring, thin as a thread, which I wore on my left hand now.

I found little things that had become important over time for no reason other than that I'd kept them for so long: a small wooden rocking horse that a high-school friend had brought me from Japan; two teeth that had been extracted from my head before I got braces, at thirteen; a smooth green stone that looked like a scarab—I couldn't remember where it had come from. I got rid of them all. I found the two tall Madame Alexander dolls of my youth wrapped up together in a single bag on the highest shelf of the closet in my office. They were what was known as fashion dolls, which meant that they were beautifully dressed and not supposed to be played with, but I had slept with the black-haired one for years. She had neither stockings nor shoes, and her hair was dishevelled, her crinoline wilted. I had buried my whole heart into her. The other doll, a Nordic blonde, was still perfect, down to the ribbons on her straw hat, because I'd

never wanted a second doll. I had loved only the black-haired one. I loved her still. The blonde I just admired. I hadn't thought about those dolls from one decade to the next, and still they were there, waiting. Maybe, like the sock in the hamper, they'd been singing all that time.

I could see that even after childhood's long and sticky embrace, followed by more than forty years in a sack, both dolls were resplendent in their beauty, lit from within. I wrote to my friend Sandy, attaching pictures, and asked if her grandchildren would like to know the true friends of my youth. She wrote back immediately to say yes. Yes. Champagne flutes by dolls by teeth, I felt the space opening up around me. Unfortunately, the people closest to me could also feel it opening. Having heard that I was cleaning out, my mother gave me a large box of letters and stories I'd written in school. She'd been quietly saving them, and, even as I balked (I didn't want to see those stories again), my sister, also cleaning out, dropped off a strikingly

similar stack of my early work. They had sensed a vacuum in my house and rushed in to fill it.

**M**y sister's friend Megan and her eight-year-old daughter, Charlotte, came to visit as I was nearing the end of my project. Megan and Charlotte were driving a loop from Minneapolis to the Great Smoky Mountains and back, hiking and camping along the way. They were spending the night with my sister, and Heather brought them over to see me. By that point, I had only a little bit of the basement to go.

"I told Charlotte I'd show her your bathroom," Heather said.

"She loves seeing other people's bathrooms," Megan said.

And so we went upstairs, the four of us. As Megan was walking by my office, she stopped. "Oh, Charlotte," she said. "Come look at this. Come see what she has."

The child walked into my office and immediately clapped her hands over her masked mouth to keep from screaming. I switched on the light. She was staring at my typewriter, a cheap electric Brother I used for envelopes and short notes.

"*You have a typewriter!*" Charlotte started hopping up and down.

"What she really wants is a manual," Megan said. "We've looked at a bunch of them but they never work. Once they get old, the keys stick."

There were two manual typewriters in the closet right behind us. One was my grandmother's little Adler, a Tippa 7 that typed in cursive. She'd used it for everything, so much so that if I were to type a note on it now I'd feel as if I were reading her handwriting. I wasn't giving the Adler away. I also owned a Hermes 3000 that my mother and my stepfather had bought for me when I was in college, the most gorgeous typewriter I could have imagined. I wrote every college paper on it, every story. In graduate school, I typed at my kitchen table in a straight-backed chair that my friend Lucy had bought at the Tuesday-night auction in Iowa City. Draft after draft, I banged away until my back seized, then I would lie flat on the living-room rug for days. A luggage tag was still at-

tached to the Hermes's handle—Piedmont Airlines. I'd brought the typewriter home with me every Christmas, even though it weighed seventeen pounds. Such was my love for that machine that I hadn't been able to imagine being separated from it for an entire holiday vacation. The stories my mother and my sister had returned to me: they were all typed on the Hermes.

My mother and my stepfather, my darling Lucy, college, graduate school, all those stories—they made up the history of that typewriter. It waited on a shelf in the very closet where the dolls had been kept. When I was cleaning out the closet, I didn't consider giving either of the typewriters away, but I don't think I'd used them once since I got my first computer, when I was twenty-three. I took Megan aside. "I've got a manual," I whispered to her.

She looked slightly horrified. "You don't want to give that away."

I told her that I'd sleep on it, that she shouldn't say anything to Charlotte. I told her to come back in the morning.

I didn't need the glasses or the silver, those things that represented who I thought I would become but never did, and I didn't need the dolls, which represented who I had been and no longer was. The typewriter, on the other hand, represented both the person I had wanted to be and the person I am. Finding the typewriter was like finding the axe I'd used to chop the wood to build the house I lived in. It had been my essential tool. After all it had given me, didn't it deserve something better than to sit on a shelf?

(Yes, I accept that this is who I am. I was thinking about what a typewriter deserved for its years of loyal service.)

In any practice, there will be tests. That's why we call it a practice—so we'll be ready to meet our challenges when the time comes. I had loved a typewriter. I had believed that every good sentence I wrote in my youth had come from the typewriter itself. I had neglected that typewriter all the same.

Kent, the cosmic monk, had laminated his prayers. He'd laminated pictures of his daughters, his granddaughter, his dog. He'd laminated good re-

views of my novels. After he died, Tavia found two laminated cards. One said:

I Have  
Everything I Need

And the other:

All that  
is not Ladder  
Falls away

He needed both prayers in order to remember. We had tried the world on for size, Kent and I, and, one way or another, we would figure out how to let it go.

I took the Hermes down from the closet shelf, unsnapped the cover, and typed *I love you iloveyou*. The keys didn't stick. I looked online to see if replacement ribbons were available.

They were. I watched a video of Tom Hanks, that famous champion of manual typewriters, replacing a ribbon on a Hermes 3000. "No typewriter has ever been made that is better than a Hermes," he said in a salesman's voice.

Well, that was the truth.

That night, while Karl and I were walking the dog, I told him about Charlotte. I told him what I was thinking. "As much as I loved it, it would be wonderful if someone could use it. How many little girls are out there pining for manual typewriters?"

"So give her mine," he said.

I stopped. The dog stopped. "You have a manual typewriter?" There were three manual typewriters in the house?

Karl nodded. "You gave it to me."

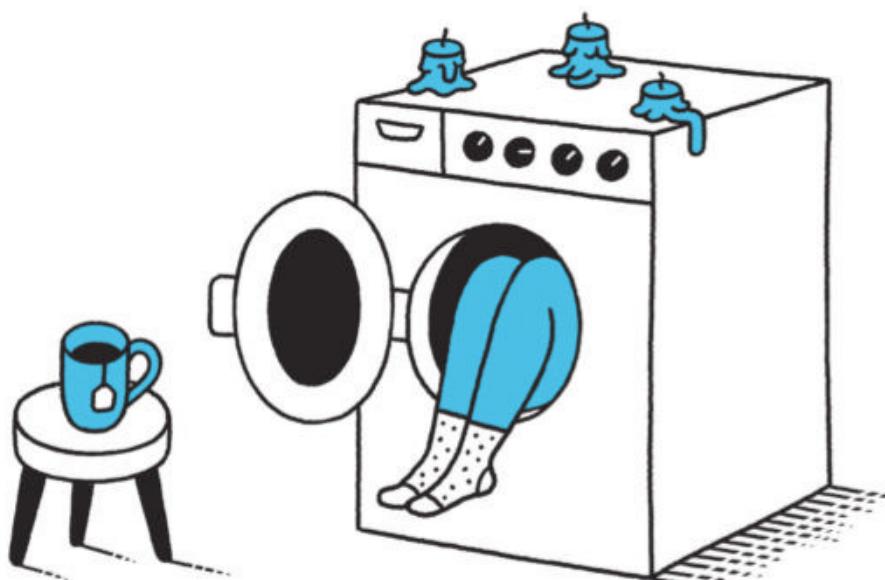
I had forgotten. I had given Karl an Olivetti for his birthday when we were first dating, because I was used to dating writers, not doctors. Because I didn't know him then. Because I saw myself as the kind of woman who dated men with manual typewriters. I had bought it new. Twenty-six years later, it was still new.

*Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son.*

O.K., it wasn't like that. But I had been ready to let the Hermes go, and now I didn't have to let it go. There was another typewriter caught in the thicket.

When I gave the Olivetti to Charlotte the next morning, she thought I'd given her the moon. She had imagined herself as a girl with a typewriter. And now she was. ♦

## SHOUTS & MURMURS



# BEYOND HYGGE

BY SUSANNA WOLFF

Friluftsliv (pronounced FREE'-loofts-liv) [is] a Norwegian custom that means living "life in fresh air," or more simply, spending time outdoors and being active. . . . Both in Norway and other countries, the friluftsliv lifestyle can be a potential way to combat wintertime sadness.

—CNN Health.

**A** few other Scandinavian trends to make your sad pandemic life seem intentional:

### HUNDAFVISE

Sitting on the floor to pet your dog, but then your dog walking away, and you just staying on the floor alone.

### MORSKJULE

Rejecting an unexpected FaceTime from your mom because even your mom shouldn't see how you look right now.

### DRIKKEDRUKNE

Slowly filling your bedside table with empty mugs and wineglasses and one full, old, ChapStick-rimmed glass of stale water with dog hair floating in it.

### SMURTSVIN

Putting on so much hand lotion that you can't use your phone or computer.

### OSTSKAM

Eating cheese with the refrigerator door open so it counts as a light snack and not

a three-thousand-calorie cry for help.

### UENDELIG SMERTE

Making a cup of tea that's a thousand degrees too hot and forgetting to drink it until it's cold.

### BESKIDT HUS

Vacuuming, but not vacuuming your baseboards or under any furniture, then wondering why your house is still dirty even though you just vacuumed.

### NULLBUTIKK

Putting things that would make your house nicer in online shopping carts and then never buying them.

### HELSEHELVETE

Reading about Scandinavian countries' universal health care while on hold with Aetna as you try to dispute a bill from Quest Diagnostics.

### FRILUFTSLIV NEI

Saying that you're going to go for a walk in the crisp, wintry fresh air and then it suddenly being nighttime without you even having put on pants.

### HJÆLP

Google-translating words from English to Danish in an attempt to pass off the true and pathetic details of your depressing existence as amusing, relatable content. ♦

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LETTER FROM GAMBIA

# THE SMELL OF MONEY

*Fish farming feeds the world and fuels the economy. But at what price?*

BY IAN URBINA

**G**unjur, a town of some fifteen thousand people, sits on the Atlantic coastline of southern Gambia, the smallest country in mainland Africa. In the spring of 2017, the town's white-sand beaches were full of activity. Fishermen steered long, vibrantly painted wooden canoes, known as pirogues, toward the shore, where

meant to protect seven hundred and ninety acres of beach, mangrove swamp, wetland, and savanna, as well as an oblong lagoon. A half mile long and a few hundred yards wide, the lagoon had been a lush habitat for a remarkable variety of migratory birds, as well as humpback dolphins, epauled fruit bats, Nile crocodiles, and

the lagoon had turned red in response to sudden changes in pH or oxygen levels. Soon, there were reports that many of the area's birds were no longer nesting near the lagoon.

A few residents filled bottles with the tainted water and brought them to the one person in town they thought might be able to help—Ahmed Manjang. Born and raised in Gunjur, Manjang was living in Saudi Arabia, where he worked as a microbiologist. He happened to be home visiting his extended family, and he collected his own samples from the lagoon, sending them to two laboratories in Germany for analysis. The results were alarming. The water contained double the amount of arsenic and forty times the amount of



*When the Bolong Fenyo lagoon turned red, locals suspected that the pollution was from a nearby fish-processing plant.*

they transferred their still-fluttering catch to women waiting at the water's edge. The fish were hauled off to nearby open-air markets in rusty metal wheelbarrows or in baskets balanced on heads. Small boys played soccer as tourists watched from lounge chairs. At nightfall, the beach was dotted with bonfires. There were drumming and kora lessons; men with oiled chests grappled in traditional wrestling matches.

But just five minutes inland was a more tranquil setting—the wildlife reserve known as Bolong Fenyo. Established in 2008, the reserve was

callithrix monkeys. A marvel of biodiversity, the reserve was integral to the region's ecological health—and, with hundreds of birders and other tourists visiting each year, to its economic health, too.

But on the morning of May 22nd the Gunjur community woke to discover that the Bolong Fenyo lagoon had turned a cloudy crimson overnight. Dead fish floated on the surface. "Everything is red," one local reporter wrote, "and every living thing is dead." Some residents wondered if the apocalyptic scene was an omen delivered in blood. More likely, water fleas in

phosphates and nitrates deemed safe. Pollution at these levels, Manjang concluded, could have only one source: illegally dumped waste from a Chinese fish-processing plant called Golden Lead, which operates on the edge of the reserve. That summer, Gambian environmental authorities filed a lawsuit against the plant, and reportedly reached a settlement for twenty-five thousand dollars, an amount that Manjang described as "paltry and offensive." The plant's license was briefly revoked, but operations soon started back up. When I reached him last month, Manjang had relocated to Gun-

jur to take a teaching job at the local university. By then, it wasn't just the lagoon that had been transformed; the coastal waters had also turned a reddish brown.

Golden Lead (pronounced "leed") is one outpost of an ambitious Chinese economic and geopolitical agenda known as the Belt and Road Initiative, which the Chinese government has said is meant to build good will abroad, boost economic coöperation, and provide otherwise inaccessible development opportunities to poorer nations. As part of the initiative, China has become the largest foreign financier of infrastructure development in Africa, cornering the market on most of the continent's road, pipeline, power-plant, and port projects. In 2017, China cancelled fourteen million dollars in Gambian debt and invested thirty-three million to develop agriculture and fisheries, including Golden Lead and two other fish-processing plants along the fifty-mile Gambian coast. The residents of Gunjur were told that Golden Lead would bring jobs, a fish market, and a newly paved three-mile road through the heart of town.

Golden Lead and the other factories were rapidly built to meet exploding global demand for fish meal—a lucrative dark-yellow powder made by cooking and pulverizing fish. Exported to the United States, Europe, and Asia, fish meal is used as a protein-rich supplement in the booming industry of fish farming, or aquaculture. West Africa is among the world's fastest-growing producers of it: more than fifty processing plants operate along the shores of Mauritania, Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, and Gambia. And the volume of fish they consume is enormous. One Gambian plant alone takes in more than seven thousand five hundred tons of fish a year, mostly of a local type of shad known as bonga—a silvery fish about ten inches long.

For the area's fishermen, most of whom toss their nets by hand from pirogues powered by small outboard motors, the rise of aquaculture transformed their working conditions. Hundreds of legal and illegal foreign fishing boats, including industrial trawlers and purse seiners, began

crisscrossing the waters off the Gambian coast, decimating the region's fish stocks and jeopardizing local livelihoods. Abdul Sisai, a fisherman who sold his catch at the Tanji market, north of Gunjur, said that two decades ago bonga were so plentiful that they were sometimes given away for free. But the price of the fish has soared in recent years, and for many Gambians, half of whom live in poverty, bonga is now more expensive than they can afford. (Fish accounts for fifty per cent of the country's animal-protein intake.) Sisai began supplementing his income from the fish market by selling trinkets near the tourist resorts in the evenings. "*Sibijan deben*," he said in Mandinka, one of the region's major languages. The phrase refers to the shade cast by a palm tree and is used to describe the effects of extractive export industries: the profits are enjoyed by people far from the source.

Nearly a year after the lagoon turned red, a new controversy erupted over a long wastewater pipe running under a public beach, dumping the plant's waste directly into the sea. Swimmers were complaining of rashes, the ocean had grown thick with seaweed, and thousands of dead fish had washed ashore, along with eels, rays, turtles, dolphins, and even whales. Residents burned scented candles and incense to combat the rancid odor coming from the fish-meal plants, and tourists wore white masks. The stench of rotten fish clung to clothes and was virtually impossible to remove.

In March of 2018, about a hundred and fifty residents gathered on the beach wielding shovels and pickaxes to dig up the pipe and destroy it. Two months later, with the government's approval, workers from Golden Lead installed a new pipe, this time planting a Chinese flag alongside it. The gesture carried colonialist overtones. One local called it "the new imperialism."

Jojo Huang, the director of the plant, has publicly denied polluting nearby waters, and said that the facility follows all regulations for waste disposal. The plant has benefitted the town, Golden Lead told Reuters, by investing in local education and making Ramadan donations to the com-

munity. (The company did not respond to multiple requests for comment.)

Manjang, the microbiologist, was outraged by the plant's apparent impunity. "It makes no sense!" he told me, when I visited him in Gunjur at his family compound, an enclosed three-acre plot with several simple brick houses and a garden of cassava, orange, and avocado trees. Behind Manjang's thick-rimmed glasses, his gaze was gentle and direct, even as he spoke urgently about the perils facing Gambia's environment. "The Chinese are exporting our bonga fish to feed it to their tilapia fish, which they're shipping back here to Gambia to sell to us, more expensively—but only after it's been pumped full of hormones and antibiotics," he said. Adding to the absurdity, he noted, tilapia are herbivores that normally eat algae and other sea plants.

After the wastewater pipe was re-installed, Manjang contacted environmentalists and journalists, along with Gambian lawmakers, calling the pollution "an absolute disaster." But he was warned by the Gambian trade minister that pushing the issue would only jeopardize foreign investment. Dr. Bamba Banja, the head of the Ministry of Fisheries and Water Resources, was dismissive, telling a reporter that the awful stench outside the plants was just "the smell of money."

**G**lobal demand for seafood has doubled since the nineteen-sixties. Our appetite for fish has outpaced what we can sustainably catch: more than eighty per cent of the world's wild fish stocks have collapsed or are unable to withstand more fishing. Aquaculture has emerged as an alternative—a shift, as the industry likes to say, from capture to culture.

The fastest-growing segment of global food production, the aquaculture industry is worth a hundred and sixty billion dollars and accounts for roughly half of the world's fish consumption. And even as retail seafood sales at restaurants and hotels have plummeted during the pandemic, the dip has been offset in many places by the increase in people cooking fish at home. The United States imports eighty per cent of its seafood, much of

which is farmed. Often, it comes from China, by far the world's largest producer, where fish are grown in sprawling landlocked pools or in offshore pens spanning several square miles.

Aquaculture has existed in rudimentary forms for centuries, and it does have some clear benefits over catching fish in the wild. It reduces the problem of bycatch—the thousands of tons of unwanted fish that are swept up each year by the gaping nets of industrial fishing boats, only to suffocate and be tossed back into the sea. And farming bivalves (oysters, clams, and mussels) promises a cheaper form of protein than traditional fishing for wild-caught species. In India and other parts of Asia, these farms have become a crucial source of jobs, especially for women. Aquaculture makes it easier for wholesalers to insure that their supply chains are not indirectly supporting illegal fishing, environmental crimes, or forced labor. There's potential for environmental benefits, too: with the right protocols, aquaculture uses less freshwater and

arable land than most animal agriculture. The carbon emissions produced per pound of fish are a quarter of those produced per pound of beef, and two-thirds of those produced per pound of pork.

Still, there are also hidden costs. When millions of fish are crowded together, they generate a lot of waste. If they're penned in shallow coastal pools, the solid waste turns into a thick slime on the seafloor, smothering plants and animals. Nitrogen and phosphorus levels spike in surrounding waters, causing algal blooms, killing wild fish, and driving away tourists. Bred to grow faster and bigger, the farmed fish sometimes escape their enclosures and threaten indigenous species.

Drawbacks aside, leading environmental groups have embraced the idea that industrial aquaculture could help feed the planet's growing population—and the growing demand for animal protein. In a 2019 report, the Nature Conservancy argued that by 2050 sustainable fish farms should become our primary source of seafood. Many con-

servationists advocate stronger oversight, better composting, and new technologies for recirculating the water in on-land pools. Some have also pushed for aquaculture farms to be located in deeper waters with faster and more diluting currents.

The biggest challenge to farming fish is feeding them. Food constitutes roughly seventy per cent of the industry's overhead, and so far the only commercially viable form is fish meal. About a quarter of all fish caught globally at sea end up as fish meal, produced by factories like those on the Gambian coast. Perversely, the aquaculture farms that yield some of the most popular seafood, such as carp, salmon, or European sea bass, actually consume more fish than they ship to supermarkets and restaurants. Before it gets to market, a "ranched" tuna can eat more than fifteen times its weight in free-roaming fish that has been converted to fish meal. Researchers have identified various potential alternative food sources—including seaweed, cassava waste, soldier-fly larvae, single-cell proteins produced by fungi and bacteria, and even human sewage—but none are being produced affordably at scale. So, for now, fish meal it is.

The result is a troubling paradox: the seafood industry is ostensibly trying to slow the rate of ocean depletion, but, by farming the fish we eat most, it's draining the stock of many others—the ones that never make it to the aisles of Western supermarkets. Gambia exports much of its fish meal to China and Norway, where it fuels an abundant and inexpensive supply of farmed salmon for European and American consumption. Meanwhile, the fish that Gambians themselves rely on are rapidly disappearing.

In September of 2019, at a meeting in the Gambian National Assembly House, a white ultra-modern building that emerges out of the ground like a wave, James Gomez, a government minister, assured lawmakers that the country's fisheries were thriving. Industrial fishing boats and plants represented the largest employer of Gambians in the country, including hundreds of deckhands, factory workers, truck



*"We're going on my annual trip to bite the veterinarian."*

drivers, and industry regulators. When a lawmaker asked him about controversies at the fish-meal plants, including their voracious consumption of bonga, Gomez refused to engage, insisting that Gambian waters even had enough fish to sustain two more plants.

Estimating the health of a nation's fish stock is a murky science. Marine researchers like to say that counting fish is like counting trees, except they're mostly invisible—below the surface—and constantly moving. Ad Corten, a Dutch fisheries biologist, told me that the task is even tougher in West Africa, where many countries lack the funding to properly analyze their stocks. The only reliable assessments in the area have focussed on Mauritania, Corten said, and they show a sharp decline driven by the fish-meal industry. "Gambia is the worst of them all," he said, noting that the fisheries ministry barely tracks how many fish are caught by licensed ships, much less by the unlicensed ones.

As global fish stocks have been depleted, many wealthier nations have increased their marine policing, often by stepping up port inspections, imposing steep fines for violations, and using satellites to spot illicit activity at sea. They have also required industrial boats to carry mandatory observers and to install monitoring devices onboard. But Gambia has historically lacked the political will, technical skill, and financial capacity to exert its authority offshore. Still, though it has no maritime police of its own, the country is trying to better protect its waters. A month before the Assembly meeting, I joined a secret patrol that the fisheries ministry was conducting with the help of the international ocean-conservation group Sea Shepherd, which had brought to the area—as surreptitiously as it could—a hundred-and-eighty-four-foot ship, the Sam Simon, equipped with extra fuel capacity and a doubly reinforced steel hull.

In Gambia, the nine miles of water closest to the shore have been reserved for local fishermen, but on the days leading up to the patrol dozens of foreign trawlers were visible from the beach. Sea Shepherd's mission was to find and board trespassers or other vessels engaged in prohibited behaviors,

such as shark finning and the netting of juvenile fish. In the past few years, the group has also worked with governments in Gabon, Liberia, Tanzania, Benin, and Namibia. Some fisheries experts have criticized these collaborations as publicity stunts, but the patrols have led to the arrest of more than sixty illegal fishing ships.

Barely a dozen local government officials had been informed of the Sea Shepherd mission. To avoid being spot-



ted by fishermen, the group used several small speedboats to spirit a dozen heavily armed Gambian Navy and fisheries officers out to the Sam Simon after dark. We were joined by two gruff private-security contractors from Israel, who were training the Gambian officers in military procedures for boarding ships. While we waited on the moonlit deck, one of the Gambian guards, dressed in a crisp blue-and-white camouflage uniform, showed me a music video on his phone by one of Gambia's best-known rappers, ST Brikama Boyo. He translated the lyrics of a song, called "Fuwareyaa," which means "poverty": "People like us don't have meat, and the Chinese have taken our sea from us in Gunjur, and now we don't have fish."

Three hours after we embarked, the foreign ships had all but vanished. Sensing that word about the operation had got out, the captain changed plans. Instead of focussing on the smaller unlicensed ships close to land that were mostly from neighboring African countries, he would conduct surprise at-sea inspections of fifty-five industrial ships that *were* licensed to be in Gambian waters. It was a bold move: officers would be boarding larger, well-financed ships, many of them with political connections in China and Gambia.

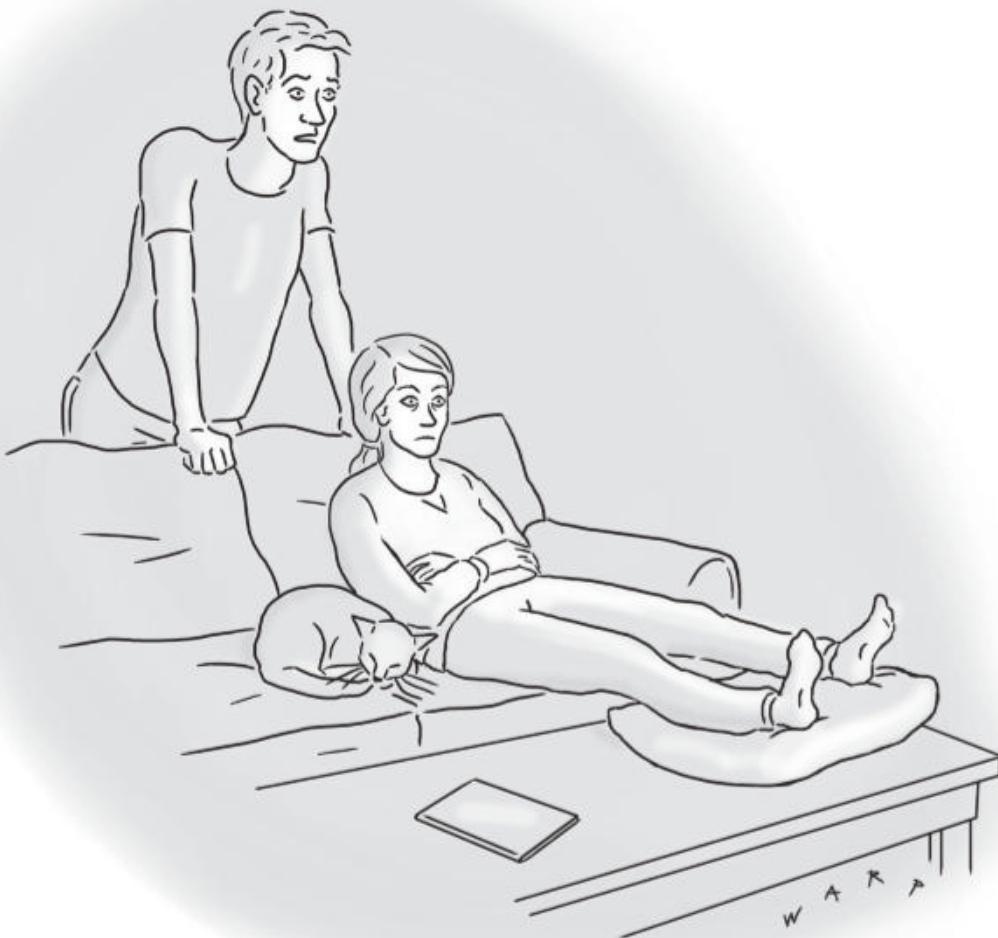
Less than an hour later, we pulled alongside the Lu Lao Yuan Yu 010, a

hundred-and-thirty-four-foot electric-blue trawler streaked with rust, operated by Qingdao Tangfeng Ocean Fishery, a Chinese company that supplies Gambia's fish-meal plants. A team of eight Gambians from the Sam Simon boarded the ship, AK-47s slung over their shoulders. One nervous officer forgot the bullhorn he was assigned to carry. Another officer's sunglasses fell into the sea as he leaped onto the deck.

Onboard the Lu Lao Yuan Yu 010 were seven Chinese officers and a crew of four Gambians and thirty-five Senegalese. The Gambian team soon began grilling the ship's captain, a short man named Qiu Shenzhong, who wore a shirt smeared with fish guts. Belowdecks, ten African crew members in yellow gloves and stained smocks stood shoulder to shoulder on either side of a conveyor belt, sorting bonga, mackerel, and whitefish into pans. Nearby, floor-to-ceiling rows of freezers were barely cold. Roaches scurried up the walls and across the floor, where some fish had been stepped on and squashed.

I spoke to one of the workers, who told me that his name was Lamin Jarju. Though no one could hear us above the deafening *ca-thunk, ca-thunk* of the machinery, he stepped away from the line and lowered his voice. The ship, he told me, had been fishing within the nine-mile zone until the Captain received a radioed warning from nearby ships that a policing effort was under way. When I asked Jarju why he was willing to reveal the ship's violation, he said, "Follow me," and led me up two levels to the roof of the wheel room, the Captain's office. He showed me a large nest of crumpled newspapers, clothing, and blankets, where he said several crew members had been sleeping for the past several weeks, ever since the Captain hired more workers than the ship could accommodate. "They treat us like dogs," Jarju said.

When I returned to the deck, an argument was escalating. A Gambian Navy lieutenant named Modou Jallow had discovered that the ship's fishing logbook was blank. All captains are required to keep detailed accounts of where they go, how long they work,



*"So . . . you're binge-watching Scandinavian noir to cheer yourself up?"*

• •

what gear they use, and what they catch. Jallow had issued an arrest order for the infraction and was yelling in Chinese. Captain Qiu was incandescent with rage. "No one keeps that!" he shouted back.

He was not wrong. Paperwork violations are common, especially on fishing boats along the coast of West Africa, where countries don't always provide clear guidance about their rules. Captains tend to view logbooks as weapons of bribe-seeking bureaucrats or as tools of conservationists bent on closing fishing grounds. But scientists rely on proper records to determine fishing locations, depths, dates, gear descriptions, and "effort"—how long nets or lines are in the water relative to the quantity of fish they ensnare. Without such logs, it's almost impossible to determine how quickly Gambia's waters are being depleted.

Jallow ordered the ship back to port, and the argument moved from the upper deck down to the engine room, where Qiu claimed that he needed a few hours to fix a pipe—enough time,

the Sam Simon crew suspected, for him to contact his bosses in China and ask them to call in a favor with high-level Gambian officials. Jallow, sensing a stalling tactic, smacked Qiu in the face. "You will make the fix in an hour!" Jallow shouted, grabbing the Captain by the throat. "And I will watch you do it." Twenty minutes later, the Lu Lao Yuan Yu 010 was en route to shore.

Over the next several weeks, the Sam Simon inspected fourteen foreign ships—most of them Chinese and licensed to fish in Gambian waters—and arrested thirteen of them: all but one vessel was charged with lacking a proper logbook, and many were also fined for improper living conditions and for violating a law that Gambians must compose twenty per cent of certain shipping crews. On one Chinese-owned vessel, there weren't enough boots for the deckhands, and a Senegalese worker had been pricked by a catfish whisker while wearing flip-flops. His swollen foot, oozing from the puncture wound, looked like

a rotting eggplant. On another ship, eight workers slept in a space meant for two—a four-foot-tall steel-sided compartment directly above the engine room—which was dangerously hot. When high waves crashed on board, water flooded the makeshift cabin, where, the workers said, an electrical power strip had twice almost electrocuted them.

One rainy afternoon in Gambia's capital city, Banjul, on the coast just north of Gunjur, I sought out Mustapha Manneh, a journalist and an environmental advocate. We met in the white tiled lobby of the Laico Atlantic hotel, decorated with fake potted plants and thick yellow drapes. Pachelbel's Canon played in an endless loop in the background, accompanied by the plinking of water dripping from the ceiling into half a dozen buckets. Manneh had recently returned to Gambia after a year in Cyprus, where he had fled following the arrest of his father and brother for political activism against Yahya Jammeh, a brutal autocrat who was forced from power in 2017. Manneh, who told me that he hoped to become President one day, offered to take me to the Golden Lead factory.

The next morning, Manneh picked me up in a Toyota Corolla that he had rented for the difficult drive. Most of the road from the hotel to Golden Lead was dirt, which recent rain had turned into a treacherous slalom course of deep and almost impassable craters. The trip was about thirty miles, and took nearly two hours. Over the din of a missing muffler, he prepared me for the visit. "Cameras away," he cautioned. "No saying anything critical about fish meal." Just a week before my arrival, some of the same fishermen who had pulled up the plant's wastewater pipe had apparently switched sides, attacking a team of European researchers who had tried to photograph the facility, pelting them with rocks and rotten fish. Some locals, though they opposed the dumping and resented the export of their fish, did not want foreign media publicizing Gambia's problems.

We finally pulled up at the entrance of the plant, five hundred yards from

the beach, behind a ten-foot wall of white corrugated metal. An acrid stench, like burning orange peels and rotting meat, assaulted us as soon as we got out of the car. Between the factory and the beach was a muddy patch of land, studded with palm trees and strewn with litter, where fishermen were repairing their boats in thatched-roof huts. The day's catch lay on a set of folding tables, and women were cleaning the fish, smoking it, and drying it for sale. One of the women wore a hijab dripping wet from the surf. When I asked her about the catch, she gave me a dour look and tipped her basket toward me. It was barely half full. "We can't compete," she said. Pointing at the factory, she added, "It all goes there."

The Golden Lead plant consists of several football-field-size concrete buildings, and sixteen silos where dried fish meal and chemicals are stored. Fish meal is relatively simple to make, and the process is highly mechanized. Video footage clandestinely taken by a worker inside Golden Lead reveals a cavernous space—dusty, hot, and dark. At a plant of its size, there are about a dozen men on the floor at any given time. Sweating profusely, several shovel shiny heaps of bonga into a steel funnel. A conveyor belt carries the fish into a vat, where a giant churning screw grinds it into a gooey paste before it enters a long cylindrical oven. Oil is extracted from the goo, and the remaining substance is pulverized into a fine powder and dumped onto the floor in the middle of the warehouse, accumulating into a huge golden mound. After the powder cools, workers shovel it into fifty-kilogram plastic sacks that are stacked from floor to ceiling. A shipping container holds four hundred sacks, and the men fill roughly twenty to forty containers a day.

Near the entrance of Golden Lead, a dozen or so young men hustled from shore to plant with baskets on their heads, brimming with bonga. Standing under several gangly palm trees, a forty-two-year-old fisherman named Ebrima Jallow explained that, although the local women pay more for a single basket than Golden Lead does, the plant buys in bulk and often pays for

twenty baskets in advance—in cash. "The women can't do that," he said.

A few hundred yards away, Dawda Jack Jabang, the fifty-seven-year-old owner of the Treehouse Lodge, a deserted beachfront hotel and restaurant, stood in a side courtyard staring at the breaking waves. "I spent two good years working on this place," he told me. "And overnight Golden Lead destroyed my life." Hotel bookings had plummeted, and the plant's odor at times was so noxious that patrons left his restaurant before finishing their meal.

Golden Lead has hurt more than helped the local economy, Jabang said. But what about all those young men hauling their baskets of fish to the factory? He waved the question away dismissively: "This is not the employment we want. They're turning us into donkeys and monkeys."

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the tenuousness of this economic landscape, as well as its corruption. Last May, many of the migrant workers on fishing crews returned home to celebrate Eid al-Fitr just as borders were closing down. With workers unable to return to Gambia, and with lockdown measures in place, Golden Lead and other plants temporarily suspended operation.

At least, they were supposed to. Manneh obtained secret recordings in which Bamba Banja, of the Ministry



of Fisheries, discussed taking bribes in exchange for allowing factories to operate during the lockdown. In October, Banja took a leave of absence after an investigation found that, between 2018 and 2020, he had accepted ten thousand dollars from Chinese fishermen and companies, including Golden Lead. He declined to comment for this article. The plants are now legally operating again, but, with the price of gas rising, fishermen are spending

less and less time on the water. They continue to take cash advances from the fish-meal plants, and the fewer fish they bring in, the more mired in debt they become.

On the day that I visited Golden Lead, when the pandemic was still an unknown threat on the horizon, I made my way down to the beach. The pirogues bobbed close to shore and fishermen waded knee-deep in the water. The surf was gentle, with hardly a wave in sight. I found Golden Lead's new wastewater pipe easily. It was about a foot in diameter and already rusted, rising above the sand. The Chinese flag was gone. Kneeling down, I felt liquid flowing through it. Within minutes, a Gambian guard appeared and ordered me to leave the area.

The next day, I took a taxi to the country's international airport, located an hour from Banjul, to catch my flight home. My luggage was light now that I'd thrown away the putrid-smelling clothes from my trip to the plant. At one point, as the driver negotiated pothole after pothole, he vented his frustration. "This," he said, gesturing ahead of us, "is the road the fish-meal plant promised to pave."

At the airport, I discovered that my flight had been delayed by a flock of buzzards and gulls blocking the only runway. Several years earlier, the Gambian government had built a landfill close by, and scavenger birds descended in droves. While I waited among a dozen German and Australian tourists, I called Manneh. I reached him at home, in the town of Kartong, seven miles from Gunjur.

Manneh told me that he was standing in his front yard, looking out on a litter-strewn highway that connects the JXYG factory, a Chinese fish-meal plant, to Gambia's largest port, in Banjul. In the few minutes we had been talking, he said, he had watched ten tractor-trailer trucks rattle by, kicking up thick clouds of dust as they went, each hauling a forty-foot-long shipping container full of fish meal. From Banjul, those containers would depart for Asia, Europe, and the United States.

"Every day," Manneh said, "it's more." ♦

# MISSING A BEAT

*Why is it so hard to build an artificial heart?*

BY JOSHUA ROTHMAN

Daniel Timms started working on his artificial heart in 2001, when he was twenty-two years old. A graduate student in biomedical engineering, he was living with his parents in Brisbane, Australia. He was searching for a dissertation topic when his father, Gary, who was fifty, suffered a massive heart attack. At first, the problem seemed to be a faulty valve; soon they learned that Gary's entire heart was failing. Heart failure is a progressive condition—a person can live for years while his heart slowly gives out. There was a narrow window of time. A course of study had presented itself.

Gary was a plumber, and Timms's mother, Karen, was a high-school science assistant. Theirs was a tinkering, experimenting household; as a kid, Timms and his father had spent countless afternoons in the back yard building an elaborate system of fountains, ponds, and waterfalls. It was only natural that he and his dad would work together on a heart. They bought tubes, pipes, and valves at the hardware store and, in their garage, constructed a crude approximation of the circulatory system. Timms started reading about the history of the artificial heart. The first human implantation had been done in 1969, by a surgeon named Denton Cooley, of the Texas Heart Institute, in Houston. The patient, Haskell Karp, had been sustained for sixty-four hours—a great success, considering that his heart had been cut out of his chest. Engineers felt sure that, within a few years, they'd have the problem licked.

From there, however, the story became uncertain, even contentious. It was hard to design a small, implantable device that could beat thirty-five million times annually, pumping two thousand gallons of blood each day, for years on end. In the following decades, patients survived for days, months, even years on various kinds of artificial hearts, but their quality of life was often poor. They were connected by

tubes to large machines; they frequently suffered from strokes and infections; their new hearts were too big or had parts that wore down. Every year, heart disease killed millions around the world. Only a few thousand transplantable hearts were available. And yet, Timms learned, existing artificial hearts could be used only temporarily, to "bridge" patients to transplants that might never come. There was no such thing as a permanent artificial heart.

Reviewing the designs, Timms saw that many had taken shape in the nineteen-sixties, seventies, and eighties. He thought that improving them substantially should be straightforward. In the past, most artificial hearts had been made of flexible plastic; he'd create one from durable titanium. Their pumps had often been driven pneumatically, by air pushed into the body through tubes; he'd use an electromagnetic motor. Most crucially, where traditional artificial hearts had been "pulsatile"—they squeezed blood rhythmically out of artificial ventricles—he would move blood in a continuous flow: instead of beating, it would *whoosh*. In a lab notebook, he sketched a possible heart. Blood would flow into a small chamber with a spinning metal disk at its center; the disk, like a propeller, would push blood outward into the lungs and the rest of the body. It was a clever, parsimonious design that, instead of seeking to emulate the biological heart, completely reimaged it. Beneath the sketch, he wrote, "Fuck yeah!"

In their garage, he and his dad built a prototype. Made of clear plastic, it successfully moved water through their mock circulatory system, in which tiny beads served as blood cells. But there was a problem—a spot beneath the rotating disk where the currents stalled and the beads got stuck. This eddy was dangerous; blood cells that hang around together tend to coagulate, creating clots that can cause strokes. Over Skype, Timms talked with a researcher in Japan who worked

on the magnetic-levitation systems used in high-speed trains. They decided that stronger magnets could be used to suspend the disk away from the walls of the heart, so that blood could flow around it more easily. This "maglev" approach would also eliminate wear and tear: none of the parts would touch.

Timms was still a graduate student when he finagled a meeting with some cardiologists at the Brisbane hospital where his father was receiving treatment. He pulled the plastic pump out of his backpack and explained how a heart based on his design would function. One doctor, incredulous, walked out of the meeting. Another secured Timms a small stipend and a room in the basement. By 2004, while Gary was recovering from valve-replacement surgery upstairs, Timms was working on prototypes downstairs. Soon he used one to keep a sheep alive for a couple of hours. Like the artificial-heart engineers of the past, he anticipated that further progress would come quickly.

Today, more than a decade and a half later, Timms's company, Bivacor, has an engineering office in Cerritos, a suburb of Los Angeles. About a dozen engineers work in a building surrounded by palm trees and flowering hedges. Last year, before the pandemic, Wilson Xie, a twenty-three-year-old biomechanical engineer, stood over a lab bench, using zip ties to attach the newest version of the Bivacor heart to a mock circulatory system. The system, known as "the loop," was a vast improvement on the one Timms and his father had built; made of plastic tubes and about four feet tall, it resembled a model roller coaster. Filled with sugar water mixed to the viscosity of human blood, it used valves to simulate different circulatory circumstances: high pressure, low pressure, standing up, sprinting. The heart attached to it was solid and steampunk, made of black and gold titanium. Four openings were designed



*The Bivacor heart contains a single titanium chamber with a rotor that spins at its center, sending blood out to the body.*

to lead to the aorta, the vena cava, the pulmonary artery, and the pulmonary vein; a cable connected it to a black dictionary-size control box. The cable would pass through the skin of the abdomen; users would need to carry the box with them at all times.

As Xie adjusted the valves of the loop, air was pumped out with a hiss. Nicholas Greatrex, an Australian electrical engineer, entered a command on a computer, and current began flowing to the heart's electromagnets. Water began to course through the loop, moving with a low, vibrating hum.

The Bivacor and human hearts work on entirely different principles. A human heart has two distinct sides. Blood first loops from the smaller, right side to the lungs and back, so that its oxygen can be replenished; it then crosses over to the larger, stronger left side, which pumps it forcefully into the body. The Bivacor heart is one combined chamber. It sends blood in two directions using its spinning disk, or "rotor," which has two differently contoured sides, each shaped to create the appropriate level of blood pressure. Where the heart of a healthy adult beats anywhere between sixty and a hundred times a minute, the Bivacor spins at between sixteen hundred and twenty-four hundred r.p.m.

Take the pulse of someone using such a heart, and you'd feel only a steady pressure, as in a garden hose. But some heart surgeons and cardiologists are uncomfortable with the idea of a pulseless heart. Tapping the computer keyboard, Greatrex instructed the rotor to oscillate its speed. "By accelerating and decelerating the rotor, we can create an artificial pulse," he said. I reached out and touched one of the loop's white rubber hoses. Uncannily, it was warm; beneath my fingers, it began to pulse with a familiar human rhythm.

"Blood pressure of a hundred over seventy," Greatrex said triumphantly, touching his own wrist. "A doctor might look at that and say, 'You're doing pretty well!'" According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, an estimated 6.2 million Americans suffer from some form of heart failure, often feeling weak, out of breath, and unsteady. Having this kind of artificial heart would turn back time.

Bivacor is in a transitional stage. It has never sold a product and is still run

entirely on venture capital, angel investment, and government grants. Its hearts have been implanted in sheep and calves, which have survived for months, occasionally jogging on treadmills; it's preparing to submit an application to the Food and Drug Administration for permission to perform human implantations. To cross the animal-human threshold is to enter a harsh regulatory environment. In the early days of artificial-heart research, a team could implant a device in a dying person on an emergency basis—as a last-ditch effort to save his life—and see how it functioned. Ethicists were uneasy, but progress was swift. Today, such experimentation is prohibited: a heart's design must be locked in place and approved before a clinical trial can begin; the trial may take years, and, if it reveals that the heart isn't good enough, the process must start again. Bivacor is currently deciding which features will be included in the clinical trial of its heart. A wrong decision would likely sink the company; almost certainly, there wouldn't be a second attempt on the summit.

Timms, trim and sandy-haired, is now forty-two. Since his days in Brisbane, he has devoted almost all of his working life to the heart, moving to Japan, Germany, Taiwan, and Houston to work with particular surgeons or engineers. Quiet and alert, he is the opposite of a TED talker: he prefers not to tell people what he does for a living, lest the ensuing conversation tempt him to



hype a project that has blown every deadline. Wearing jeans, running shoes, and a rumpled dress shirt unbuttoned to the third button, he led me into a back room where half a dozen prototype hearts had been operating continuously for as long as sixteen months. "It's really important to show that they never, ever stop," he said, above the hum of moving water. Timms himself looked as if he hadn't slept properly in a couple of decades.

On our way out of the lab, we passed

a conference room where an engineer was discussing, on video chat, how the Bivacor could be tested before implantation: "Your thumb goes on the left inlet port, and you're going to very gently push," she said. In Timms's office, the furniture might have belonged in a home study. (It was a gift from an early investor—the owner of a Houston furniture store.) A pressed shirt haunted a hanger on the wall, and a road bike leaned in one corner.

From his creaky desk chair, Timms recalled driving his father to the hospital, in 2006. Gary's valve-replacement surgery had helped him regain heart function, but only temporarily. "He'd got a clot on his mechanical valve," Timms said. "It was backing the blood flow up into the left side of his heart and into his lungs." Timms mimed the buildup with his hands, tracing a path from his left breast to his sternum and up his neck—the blood piling up, like water struggling to navigate a drain. "That's when you get edema," he said. "You cough up blood because it's transferring across the pulmonary membrane."

Two weeks later, Timms was in Germany, meeting with pump engineers, when he learned that his father had taken a decisive turn for the worse. He flew home immediately, but arrived too late for a final conversation with his dad. "He was in I.C.U., with the trach and everything," Timms said. "His dying made me even more resolute. It was, like, That's it. We're gonna do it, at any cost."

I asked Timms if, two decades ago, he'd actually believed that he might invent an artificial heart in time to save his father.

He swivelled back and forth, nodding. "At that stage, I was, like, if there was a device that could be implanted for him, then maybe he could stay around for another five or ten years—for the time when I got married and had kids. He could experience that. That was the philosophy then. Just another five or ten years of life." He laughed. "That still hasn't happened," he said, referring to marriage and children. He gestured around his office. "I've been stuck on *this*."

**B**efore the heart was replaceable, it was untouchable—a forbidding marker of the surgical frontier. Nineteenth-century physicians thought that, when it came to surgery, the heart was

"the limit set by nature." In the first half of the twentieth century, anesthesia made surgeons braver; they began darting in to mend arteries and valves while the heart was still beating. They tried cooling patients to hypothermic levels, then operating on their hearts quickly, while they were stopped. It wasn't until the nineteen-fifties, with advances in the heart-lung machine, that open-heart surgery became routine. Blood travels out of the body and into the machine, bypassing the heart and lungs, and giving surgeons access to a still and bloodless heart, which they can treat almost like an ordinary muscle.

Early heart-lung machines were desk-size, and could be used safely only for short intervals; still, they made an artificial heart seem both desirable and feasible. So did several other converging trends. More people were living into their sixties and seventies, when hearts start to deteriorate; by mid-century, as many as forty per cent of American deaths were caused by heart disease. These statistics were of grave concern to policymakers. In 1948, Congress—a group of aging men—passed the National Heart Act, initiating a decades-long expansion in federal funding for cardiological research.

It was the Apollo era, and the artificial heart seemed like an inner moon shot to rival the outer one. In 1964, the National Institutes of Health launched the Artificial Heart Program, a multi-million-dollar engineering effort that aimed to put hearts into patients by the end of the decade. Structured like a NASA project, it awarded grants and contracts to teams of engineers who competed to develop the best valve, pump, or power source; a few groups experimented, unsuccessfully, with nuclear-powered hearts. *Time* and *Life* devoted covers to the work. As the medical historian Shelley Mc-Kellar writes, in "Artificial Hearts: The Allure and Ambivalence of a Controversial Medical Technology," the high expectations for artificial-organ implants "did not necessarily reflect contemporary surgical reality."

The true difficulty of the challenge quickly became apparent. At Maimonides hospital, in Brooklyn, Adrian Kantrowitz, a surgeon-inventor who had helped perfect the pacemaker and the heart-lung machine, began working on pump designs. He landed on a clever ap-



*"We should just buy the color our white towels always end up being."*

proach: instead of replacing the heart, he would install a pump just outside it, compensating for the failing heart and perhaps giving it time to heal. Kantrowitz's prototype pumps were tested on dogs, and by 1966 he was ready to implant them in people. But the first human patient to receive one died after bleeding extensively; the second—a sixty-three-year-old bedridden diabetic woman who'd had two heart attacks—survived for twelve days but died after a series of strokes.

When Kantrowitz retrieved his pump and opened it up, he found clots. He had encountered an obstacle that would become known as "hemocompatibility." Subjected to too much force or pressure, blood cells can tear apart; caught in eddies or crevices, they can stick together; on textured surfaces, they can catch and form tangled beds that narrow passages. Kantrowitz's devices mangled the blood they pumped, and, as the "blood damage" mounted, the consequences spread.

Meanwhile, at Baylor College of Medicine, in Houston, Michael DeBakey and Denton Cooley, widely regarded as the world's best heart surgeons, navigated a different set of complexities. DeBakey and Cooley began as partners, performing vast numbers of heart surgeries at a prodigious pace. Then, as the journalist

Mimi Swartz explains in "Ticker: The Quest to Create an Artificial Heart," the two men fell out. Cooley left DeBakey's practice in 1960, and later founded the Texas Heart Institute, just down the road. DeBakey, meanwhile, hired Domingo Liotta, a pioneering Argentine heart surgeon, to work on artificial hearts. By 1969, Liotta had begun implanting prototypes in calves. The results were discouraging—of seven animals, four died on the operating table—and DeBakey thought they weren't yet ready for use in humans. But Cooley was eager to move the work forward; he had patients waiting for donor hearts not just at his hospital but in nearby motels. Without informing DeBakey, he hired Liotta to moonlight at the Texas Heart Institute, with an eye to using his heart there.

Cooley began looking among his patients for a candidate. Haskell Karp, a forty-seven-year-old printing estimator from Skokie, Illinois, had been hospitalized thirteen times for heart trouble; he was routinely so out of breath that he struggled to brush his hair. Cooley would see whether Karp's heart could be surgically repaired, but Karp and his wife agreed that, if it couldn't be, Cooley could implant Liotta's prototype, in the hope that a donor heart would later

become available. “Mr. Karp was wheeled into the surgical ward,” Cooley later wrote, in a memoir. “He was pale, sweaty, and breathing with difficulty. His blood pressure had fallen to half its normal level.” Halfway through the operation, it became obvious that his heart was unfixable.

In its place, Cooley installed an air-powered device connected by hoses, which ran through Karp’s side, to a refrigerator-size console. The heart’s ventricles were made of rubbery plastic, with a bendable polyester lining; when air was driven between the lining and the plastic, the ventricles contracted and the heart pumped. The device kept Karp alive for sixty-four hours, until the transplanted heart of Barbara Ewan, a forty-year-old mother of three, could replace it. Still, Karp died thirty-two hours later, of pneumonia and kidney failure—consequences of the advanced heart disease that had made him a candidate for the risky procedure in the first place. Cooley regarded the operation as a success. But DeBakey, incensed by what he saw as the theft of his artificial heart, doubted whether his former partner had acted ethically. There were a series of investigations, and Cooley was censured by the American College of Surgeons. Observers disagreed about whether the surgery was heroic or reckless, but, either way, a new difficulty had emerged: by the time people were willing to try an artificial heart, they were so sick that they were almost beyond saving.

Willem Kolff, the Dutch-born internist who had invented dialysis, in the nineteen-forties, was undeterred. He aimed to create not just a bridge to transplantation but a heart so good that it could be used permanently. In Kolff’s lab, at the University of Utah, a physician-engineer named Clifford Kwan-Gett created a ventricle gentle enough to avoid blood damage. Robert Jarvik, a gifted biomedical engineer who joined the Utah team while he was in medical school, relentlessly refined the design and the manufacturing process, giving the heart space-saving and more hemocompatible lines. When Jarvik arrived, in 1971, the group’s prototype could sustain a calf for just ten days. But progress was steady; within a decade, a calf named Alfred Lord Tennyson lived for two hundred and sixty-eight days on what was by then called the Jarvik-5 artificial heart.

## NUMBER THEORY

The four-and-a-half-foot black-backed rat snake swayed up and across the kitchen screen door, seeking a way in. Encountering, instead,

our eyes, it slowly, deliberately, withdrew to slide across the stone porch, over the wall, and along the foundation, inspecting every crevice,

feeling, nosing, listening its way toward a solution, which it found around the corner, up the back flagstone steps,

where it squeezed its impossible length and girth, inch by patterned inch, into the crack beneath the topmost slate. So we know we’re living with a patient

companion, like you, inquisitive. You sit taut in your chair, whispering, as you probe the gaps between prime numbers. Until infinity.

It’s pattern you seek. The opening through which your thought will glide suddenly into a lit space and be at home. In a shaky house, where wasps gnaw the walls.

—Rosanna Warren

In December, 1982, the heart surgeon William DeVries implanted an upgraded version of the heart—the Jarvik-7—in Barney Clark, a sixty-one-year-old dentist. Clark’s heart had been functioning at about a sixth of its normal capacity; he felt so bad that, upon meeting some calves and sheep living with Jarvik hearts, he said, “I believe they feel a lot better than I feel at this time.” The surgery drew international attention, often centered on the personalities of the participants: DeVries, accomplished and “Lincoln-esque”; Jarvik, young and handsome; and Clark, a charismatic Everyman who had flown combat missions in the Second World War. Television networks broadcast video of the seven-and-a-half-hour surgery; afterward, reporters attended daily press briefings held in the university’s cafeteria.

Clark lived for a hundred and twelve days, with tubes connecting him to a four-hundred-pound pump and control console. He was, by turns, in decline and recovering, miserable and optimistic; briefly, he stood, and even used an exercise bike, but more often he was in bed

and short of breath, drawing air through a respirator mask. One of his mechanical valves had to be replaced in a follow-up surgery; he suffered from nosebleeds, seizures, kidney failure, and pneumonia. Speaking above the chugging sound of the heart’s pneumatic pump, not long before he died of sepsis and organ failure, Clark said, “It has been a pleasure to be able to help people.”

The F.D.A. had given DeVries permission to implant seven artificial hearts, and he moved forward. In 1984, DeVries installed a slightly improved Jarvik-7 in William Schroeder, a fifty-two-year-old former Army munitions inspector. Before the surgery, Schroeder asked for the last rites; he ended up living for six hundred and twenty days, moving out of the hospital into an apartment, and occasionally using a new, portable pumping unit, with three hours of battery life, to go untethered in the hallways or on drives with his son. On the phone with Ronald Reagan, Schroeder complained in jest about the tardiness of his Social Security check; reporters, feeling his chest, marvelled at his heartbeat, which seemed more powerful

than a normal man's. Still, Schroeder suffered from a variety of ailments, including strokes, one of them massive. After he succumbed to chronic infections and lung problems, he was buried with a grave-stone featuring a drawing of two overlaid hearts—a human one and the Jarvik-7.

The hearts were getting better, as were the surgical techniques. But incremental improvements left the essential contours of the technology unchanged. DeVries did a few more implantations, with varying degrees of success; in Sweden, a man who had been given a Jarvik-7 did extraordinarily well, going for extended walks and eating at his favorite restaurants. Still, he died after seven and a half months, sparking a legal debate about whether he'd been alive in the first place. (According to Swedish law at the time, he'd died when his heart stopped.) The attitudes of doctors, patients, and reporters began to cool. Confidence in the idea of permanent heart replacement started fading, and funders wondered if the money wouldn't be better spent elsewhere. What was the point of a short-term artificial heart? Were surgeons trying to save their patients, or just experimenting on them? Were the days of life gained worth having?

The first artificial-heart engineers had achieved a narrow kind of success. Their devices could sustain patients for long periods, but not permanently; they made heart failure survivable, but with a quality of life that seemed too low. A qualified wonder; a mixed blessing. "They did it," Timms said, in his office, as we discussed this history. "But nobody wanted it." A sobering conclusion for someone trying to do it again.

A couple of decades ago, at the beginning of my senior year of college, I found myself living next to two charming women: Suz from Montana and Jess from New Jersey. We became friends, and I soon learned Jess's story. During her senior year of high school, she had a massive heart attack. After receiving the last rites, she was saved through the implantation of an experimental heart pump—a "ventricular assist device," or VAD, called the HeartMate. The device, loosely descended from the ones that Adrian Kantrowitz had pioneered in the nineteen-sixties, was not an artificial heart; it replaced the function of the left side only, leaving

the right side in place. Jess had attended prom and performed a lead role in her high school's production of "How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying" while connected through a wire to a battery in a handbag. She also learned to walk using a prosthesis, because a complication after the heart attack had required the amputation of her left leg above the knee. A few days before her high-school graduation, she received the transplanted heart of a teen-age girl who'd died after a car crash. Not long afterward, she developed non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, likely resulting from the immunosuppressive drugs she took to prevent rejection. When I met Jess, all this was behind her; she was battery-free, cancer-free, getting a college degree.

We stayed friends after college. Jess worked in health care, as an organ-donation advocate. Her trick was to be both sweet and steely. She travelled the world, beat cancer twice, went to concerts, ate a lot of dessert, had boyfriends, earned promotions. Generally, she acted like a young person, not like a living miracle. It was only by observing the ease with which she navigated any medical setting—bonding with nurses, sending e-mails from her hospital bed—that I grasped the degree to which she lived provisionally, and with courage.

Curious to meet some of the people behind the HeartMate, I travelled to the Texas Heart Institute, in Houston. Situated near St. Luke's hospital, within the city-like Texas Medical Center—the world's largest medical complex, with ten million patient visits a year—T.H.I. is the Vatican of cardiology; it contains a substantial museum dedicated to the history of heart surgery and pump devices. Not far from where Denton Cooley had implanted the first artificial heart, more than five decades ago, I sat in a windowless conference room with two surgeons, O. H. (Bud) Frazier and Billy Cohn. Cohn, intense in a black button-down and jeans, was fifty-nine; Frazier, laconic in a sports coat, trousers, and tortoiseshell glasses, was seventy-nine. Both men wore cowboy boots. Between them, they had implanted more than a thousand "mechanical circulatory support" devices. Today, the vast majority of patients receive VADs, which usually assist or replace the left side of the heart—an LVAD. But Cohn and Frazier, like Timms,

are among the small group of researchers who are still working to develop a complete, permanent heart replacement. In 2011, they implanted two HeartMate IIs simultaneously—one for the left side, one for the right—into a fifty-five-year-old man whose heart had failed completely and been removed; the VADs amounted to an artificial heart that kept him alive for five weeks.

Frazier's career began during the golden age of the artificial heart and extended into its wilderness period. In 1963, he arrived at Baylor College of Medicine and studied under Michael DeBakey; he joined Cooley at T.H.I. in the seventies, and was still there in the eighties, when the discovery of cyclosporine, an immunosuppressive drug, made heart transplantation dependably survivable. Convincing of the value of heart pumps as bridge devices, he began working in a basement lab stocked with pigs, sheep, cows, and goats; over decades, he partnered with engineers to test and refine almost every heart pump currently in existence, including the original HeartMate. (Earlier, in Cerritos, I'd watched a video of a Bivacor-powered calf strolling on a treadmill in Frazier's lab; Frazier and Cohn are advisers to the company.)

"Here's this guy, O. H. Frazier," Cohn said, pointing to a photograph on his laptop of Frazier in bloodstained scrubs, taken long ago. "Total rock star." Frazier chuckled.

Cohn, radiating messianic energy, described how, in 1986, Frazier had been the first surgeon to use the HeartMate successfully, as part of a clinical trial that lasted until 1993. After it was approved by the F.D.A., in 1994, around four thousand people received one worldwide. It was doughnut-shaped, with a mechanical "pusher-plate" pump, and one of its core innovations was the use of specially textured plastic and titanium on which blood cells could grow a smooth, biological surface. Early versions were powered by air, delivered through a hose; later models, like the one Jess received, were motor-driven. The device had a life span of a year and a half at most, but that was enough for patients who came into the hospital blue-lipped and close to death. "You put 'em on the breathing machine, you made a *big* cut, you put this pump in their abdomen, you hook it up, and, at the end of the

operation, the lips turn pink.” The challenge was, and remains, a lack of transplantable hearts: “At a year and a half, it would break, and you’d better find ‘em a transplant in that period of time, or they would all die.”

To address this problem, Frazier began working with a Massachusetts-based heart-pump company, Abiomed, to design a next-generation artificial heart, the AbioCor. Devised in the early nineteen-nineties, the heart was traditional in some ways (it had two chambers, like a real heart) and futuristic in others. There were no air hoses or electrical cables leaving the body; completely self-contained, the AbioCor used hydraulic fluid, which could be recirculated, to squeeze its ventricles. It was powered by a battery that could be recharged wirelessly, through the skin. In theory, you could swim with it.

“Super, super ambitious,” Cohn said, pulling up a diagram. “They spent a quarter of a billion dollars developing this. Several hundred animals, half of ‘em done here, by Bud and his team.” In 2001 and 2002, the heart was installed in fourteen patients. That’s when the ambitious plans began to falter. “By nine months, all of them except four had died from either complications or device failure,” Cohn recounted.

The F.D.A. gave Abiomed permission to implant sixty more devices, but it was clear that the heart would need to be updated, and then approved all over again—a lengthy process for which no one had the

fortitude. “Abiomed threw in the towel,” Cohn said. “They were, like, ‘This is too hard!’” One problem was that the heart was so large that it fit only in the chests of the biggest male patients.

“You know, your heart beats a hundred thousand times a day,” Frazier drawled.

“Thirty-five million times a year,” Cohn said.

“So, looking back on it, it’s amazing it lasted as long as it did,” Frazier said.

Throughout the eighties and nineties, even as he helped with the Heart-Mate and AbioCor, Frazier argued that engineers should shift from pulsatile pump designs to ones based on the more mechanically straightforward principle of “continuous flow”—the strategy that Bivacor later adopted. Some researchers argued that the circulatory system might benefit from the pulse; there’s evidence that blood-vessel walls expand in response to a quickening beat. But Frazier had come to believe that, whatever the benefits of pulsation, they were outweighed by the virtues of durability and simplicity. He began working on two continuous-flow designs in parallel—one with a cardiologist named Richard Wampler, the other with Robert Jarvik—implanting them in animals, taking them out, disassembling them, and analyzing how they’d performed. By the two-thousands, the designs had come into use as the Jarvik 2000 and Heart-Mate II, respectively.

On his laptop, Cohn pulled up a diagram of the HeartMate II. Essentially,

it’s a narrow pipe filled by a corkscrew; as the screw turns between two bearings, it acts like a stationary propeller, pushing blood continuously out from the heart and into the aorta above it. (In farming, the same design—a so-called Archimedes’ screw—is used to pump water for irrigation.)

Cohn pointed to the screw: “One moving part, suspended by ruby bearings. People said, ‘Well, you can’t have bearings in the blood.’ It turns out you can! There’s enough blood washing over them that they stay cool and clean. One of these on a bench will pump forever.” Clots are still a problem, as is infection. Still, more than a thousand people each year now receive HeartMate IIs or similar devices, living with them as they inch their way up the transplant list; a Heart-Mate II kept Dick Cheney alive, with a fainter pulse, from 2010 to 2012, until he could receive a transplant.

In the summer of 2019, I got an e-mail from Jess. “I recently celebrated twenty years with my heart transplant,” she wrote to a group of us. “But heart transplants don’t last as long as native hearts.” I hadn’t known this; I’d assumed that her transplant was permanent. In fact, her borrowed heart was giving out. She’d been short of breath and, one night, had almost collapsed while walking home to her apartment. Now she was back in the hospital, waiting for a second heart. “It could be weeks, or months, or (less likely) tomorrow,” she wrote. “Please send good vibes.”

I visited Jess in the critical-care unit, where we talked about restaurants, careers, and television shows. We looked at a few photos of my son, who was around a year old. I was about to visit again when she died.

“She did great,” Cohn said. “Many heart-transplant recipients are dead in ten years.”

“Recently, I went to a birthday party for a guy I transplanted thirty years ago,” Frazier said. “But those are rare, rare, rare. Only about five per cent of transplant recipients make it to thirty years.” The artificial pumps on the market are considered bridge therapies, and heart transplants “destination” therapies; but, if you live long enough, the transplants, too, are merely bridges.

I asked Frazier and Cohn how they felt about all the people who had died while,



*“Here’s what we know so far about the Little Dipper.”*

or after, using their devices—whether they lingered in the mind, and how.

"Martyrs," Cohn said. "They were clinging to life. The technology may not have been there, but it sure beat drawing their last breath. Many of them spent years with their loved ones, doing the stuff they enjoyed. Some went to the I.C.U., were gravely ill for six weeks, and then died, when in retrospect they would've been better off if we'd just let 'em die. But you don't know! It's a statistics game, and they were willing to go for it, for a couple more days of life. And it advanced the field, every time."

"I had a lot of experience working with leukemic children when I was a medical student," Frazier said, quietly. "They all died. In fact, the doctors at Texas Children's wanted to stop the work."

"Because you were torturing them with these poisons," Cohn said.

"They looked awful," Frazier said. "Their bellies swelled, and they lost their hair, and it scared the other children. But they kept plugging away with it. And I think that helped me. Because the first twenty-two people of the seventy that we put the first LVADS into all died."

It was getting late. Frazier led me through the deserted office area, along a series of twisty, silent corridors, and finally down an elevator to the basement. We entered his lab—the vast lair where he'd spent most of his working life. We passed through a veterinary operating theatre and a pathology lab, where deceased animals and failed pumps could be disassembled and analyzed.

"We've got pigs in here," Frazier said, opening a door. There was an animal smell, and a large pink pig lumbered into view, snuffling.

"Pigs have a heart that's most like the human heart," he said, closing the door. He gestured down the corridor: "Goats. I don't like to do goats. They're too smart!" He laughed. "They look up at you."

We went deeper into the lab. In a carpeted conference room, a display case contained a few dozen artificial hearts and heart pumps—the history of the field, more or less. "The one in the middle is the AbioCor," Frazier said, indicating a heart-shaped twist of metal and plastic. "This is the old Jarvik-7": two yellow-beige ventricles with tubes running out. "That's a HeartMate II": a gray metal cylinder with white tubing

at either end, like something you'd find under a sink. Framed on a wall, an issue of *Life*, from September, 1981, declared, "THE ARTIFICIAL HEART IS HERE."

Frazier pointed to a big metal pump, and to a white bit of tubing protruding from it—a "long inlet," he said. Until it was corrected, it had doomed the device to failure. Small differences, iteratively tweaked, their effects uncovered only after death. It was invention in slow motion.

The AbioCor was cancelled. The Bi-vacor is years away. Today, the only company manufacturing and selling artificial hearts that are actually implanted in people is SynCardia Systems, of Tucson, Arizona. The company was formed as a rescue mission. Symbion, the Utah company that Robert Jarvik helped found, had lost F.D.A. approval for the Jarvik-7 heart in 1990, because of quality-control issues; its heart technology was acquired by another firm, which ran a decade-long clinical trial with an improved version of the heart, only to exhaust its funding in 2001. For a time, it seemed that the technology would vanish from the earth. But two heart surgeons and a biomedical engineer scraped together the venture capital to buy the rights to the system; they rebranded the heart as the SynCardia Total Artificial Heart, or T.A.H. The company, now based in a handful of buildings surrounding a sandy parking lot, sells somewhere north of a hundred hearts a year, all descended from the old-style, air-powered Jarvik-7. Although SynCardia has succeeded in building a network of surgeons capable of installing its heart, the company is only tenuously in business. A few years ago, it declared Chapter 11, and was bought by new investors. It coped with the coronavirus pandemic, which has led to the cancellation of surgeries around the country, by manufacturing hand sanitizer.

With Karen Stamm, SynCardia's director of program management, and Matt Schuster, an engineer, I watched through a window as a technician in a clean room assembled one of the hearts. "The key to being able to build the artificial heart is the material we use," Schuster said. "Segmented polyurethane solution. You'll hear us call it 'spuzz'—S.P.U.S." Stamm laughed. "We actually manufacture SPUS here on campus,"

Schuster continued. "It's our own proprietary mix. It comes out of our manufacturing equipment almost like a sap, or a thick honey." Using a dental pick, the technician carefully manipulated layers of the molded honey. A translucent something shifting over another translucent something. The assembly process takes two and a half weeks.

We walked through a lab dedicated to "explant analysis"—"If we get a heart back, we'll take it apart and inspect it," Schuster said—and into another room filled with a few dozen water tanks on shelves. Inside each tank was a heart, beating; next to the tanks were the air pumps, or "drive units." The sound in the room was deafening: a fast, loud *whump-whump, whump-whump*, and within that a mechanical clacking, like a typewriter. The sounds cycled twice a second—an industrial rhythm, as though we were in a factory for the manufacture of circulation. "This is where we run our long-term studies," Stamm shouted, above the din. On one side of the room were the fifty-c.c. hearts, used by smaller patients; on the other, the seventy-c.c. models, used by larger ones. "There's the driver, which is the mechanical sound," she said, pointing to a lunchbox-like mechanical pump that was connected by an air tube to a heart inside a tank. "Then you hear the clack-clack—that's actually the valve inside the heart."

The drive unit has been a focus of innovation for SynCardia. Its heart can be driven by one of two units, the first the size of a mini-fridge, the second the size of a toaster—both much smaller than the ones DeVries's patients used. The drivers need to be serviced after a few months; when a warning light comes on, a caregiver unplugs the drive line and reattaches it to another unit as swiftly as possible, lest the user's heart skip a beat. As I watched, the water in the tanks rippled slightly, in rhythm. It takes a lot of *whump* to push five or six litres of blood through the body every minute.

"What does this actually sound like in a person?" I asked.

"It's much quieter," Stamm said. "But you can hear it. I've heard stories where patients say that, if they open their mouths, other people can hear the clicking." She told me that some patients couldn't tolerate the noise at first. But then, she said, "they couldn't sleep without



*"I'm beginning to suspect that he really doesn't care about us."*

• •

the sound of the *ca-chunk, ca-chunk.*"

We continued through a warehouse area, where a dozen or so hearts were kept on shelves, ready to ship; surgical kits, containing the materials required to install them, were boxed in a separate stack. Then we traversed the parking lot to another building, where a group of engineers waited with safety glasses in a high-ceilinged lab space. One of them handed me a small piece of hourglass-shaped plastic: the SPUS. See-through but slightly milky, slick but grippy on my fingertips, it was almost surreally stretchy—I pulled on its ends, drawing the neck of the hourglass to several times its initial length, and it effortlessly returned to its original shape.

Through a doorway I spied a giant, well-worn machine, perhaps a dozen feet tall, combining aspects of an oil derrick and a KitchenAid. "The SPUS reactor," Troy Villazon, SynCardia's production manager, said. "It's from the early sixties." SynCardia had acquired the machine in the early twenty-tens, to insure a steady supply. "The machinery itself has gone through the whole history of this material," Villazon said. For a while, we stood speculating about whether this very machine had been used in the creation of the Jarvik hearts. "It very well might have," Schuster said.

I stopped in front of a whiteboard where four photographs of SynCardia patients had been arranged above the usual hand-drawn schematics. A Black

man in a hospital bed, holding a shopping bag; a balding white man on a golf course, with a slender air hose running out from under his shirt and toward his clubs; a blond man, perhaps in his teens, carrying a backpack; and a young brother and sister sitting together. "We like to keep some motivation up on the wall," Villazon said. The boy, nine years old, was the youngest person ever to receive a SynCardia heart. The longest-surviving SynCardia patient has been using the heart for almost seven years—an achievement that, in the nineteen-eighties, might have made the cover of *Life*.

One of the biggest problems that SynCardia faces is obsolescence. The Jarvik-7, on which the SynCardia heart is based, was designed nearly forty years ago; the company's initial F.D.A. approvals are decades old. Today, changing any single part of the heart—a bolt, a valve, a resistor—can require a new approval process. As suppliers go out of business or update their offerings, SynCardia engineers must hunt down, test, and then win approval for replacement components. They live in fear of a fatal malfunction in the SPUS reactor: constructing and securing approval for a new one could take a year, leaving potential new patients without hearts. Maintaining a legacy device is expensive. "Even if you're not improving it or changing it, just to keep manufacturing that same thing—people don't realize," Schuster said. "I've worked in aerospace, and I can tell you, it's often

easier to make massive aerospace-defense changes than it is to change something on an artificial heart." Listening, I imagined the focus with which users of the heart must track SynCardia's ups and downs.

In the United States, there are fewer than twenty hospitals at which surgeons have been trained to install the heart. "It's a narrow market," Don Webber, the C.E.O. of the company, told me. He took out his phone and pulled up a spreadsheet that listed all the candidate patients for the heart at that moment. "We have a daily sheet that comes out," he explained. "We'll get a phone call, or a text or an e-mail, that says, 'We may have a patient.'" On the phone's screen, rows of patients scrolled by, color-coded.

SynCardia faces the same problem that Cooley encountered in the nineteen-sixties: you have to be very sick to consider cutting your heart out of your chest, but if you wait too long, and get too sick, you are beyond saving. "There are cases that sit there," Webber said, alarm in his voice. "You see it on the list this week, you see it on the list at the end of the week, you see it on next week's list. They're just waiting, and waiting, and waiting." The longer a patient waits, the less likely she is to survive the implantation of the artificial heart and any subsequent transplant. "It's not a clean decision," Webber said. "You have several people that are on that team"—surgeons, cardiologists, hospitalists, all of whom have to agree.

Business scholars use many different metaphors to describe invention and innovation. They say that technologies can progress in continuous and discontinuous ways; that new products must climb an "adoption curve," or leap across a chasm of usability. Nobody wanted mobile phones until they got so small that everyone wanted one. Electric cars have seemed impractical, but hybrid engines, by giving drivers a taste of the technology, have speeded their adoption.

The artificial heart faces a unique challenge. Only those confronting imminent death are willing to use today's models. And yet nearly six hundred and sixty thousand Americans die of heart disease annually—a pandemic-level death toll about which we feel little sense of emergency. An increasing number of us live with diseased hearts and suffer

the consequences. To realize their full potential, artificial hearts must get good enough that people actually want to use them; they must be preferable not to death but to a failing heart, the way hip replacements are preferable to failing hips. Meanwhile, until they achieve wider adoption, they will remain a niche product—and so be unavailable to many people who need them. For another moment, Webber scrolled his list; I wondered whether Jess should've been on it. Then he put the phone away.

The engineers at SynCardia are charged with sustaining a legacy technology, but they also understand that it needs to advance. Before I left Tucson, Villazon told me about a next-generation heart that SynCardia was developing. The heart would use a new, battery-driven pump engine, which could be housed entirely within the patient; like the AbioCor, it would be wireless, without an external driver. At the same time, it would pump blood using the company's preexisting, SPUS-based ventricles, which had already been approved by the F.D.A. By hooking this new engine up to its old car—a hybrid model—SynCardia hoped to develop and market the heart quickly, and to bring its existing customers along. The new heart could be a reliable, permanent implantation, Villazon said. It might be used by people a little further from the precipice.

I'm no Bud Frazier, but I've seen a lot of artificial hearts, and Villazon's design struck me as both simple and ingenious. And yet SynCardia's engineers were busy—manufacturing, selling, and updating the current heart, saving more than a hundred lives a year. They were struggling to find time to get the new heart up and running. They'd 3-D-printed a few prototypes and shopped the specs around; they were talking with investors.

The Bivacor team, in Cerritos, is blissfully unencumbered by the technological past. When I visited, everyone was going out for Thai—a weekly team lunch. It was a large group for the restaurant, but a small one for the design of an artificial heart. Timms sat at one end of the table, near Nicholas Greatrex, the electrical engineer.

"Now that you're getting closer to putting a device in a person, how does it feel?"

I asked. "Is it exciting, or freaky, or what?"

"The closer you get to it going into a human, the more you think about everything that can go wrong, and what you can do," Matthias Kleinheyer, a bearded engineer, said. "Even if I had no doubt that the system is performing the way it's supposed to, it would still be very scary." Kleinheyer is in charge of the heart's backup systems; there are backups to the backups to the backups.

"Nick wants to go and live with the person who gets the first heart," Timms said.

"Yeah," Greatrex said.

"In case something goes wrong, we could fix it right away," Timms said.

I pictured Timms, two decades younger, tinkering in the garage with his dad. Once the company shipped its heart—to a human implantation, a clinical trial, and eventually the market—its design would have to be set in stone. The process of approval was at odds with the process of improvement.

"If I could, I'd just keep working on it and working on it and working on it," Greatrex said. "I'd never implant it." People laughed, but he wasn't exactly joking.

If patients in need of artificial hearts can wait too long before taking the leap, the engineers who design them face a parallel decision. Implant too soon, and the device may be immature; chase perfection, and it may never leave the lab. Back at the office, I talked with Timms about the question of wireless hearts. Investors

adoption of the heart, it could bring the whole effort to an end. "I hate the drive line so much," Timms said. "I mean, that thing has to go." But not yet.

In the lab, Greatrex walked me through a technical innovation of which the team was especially proud. The human circulatory system is housed within a body that is constantly adjusting its configuration in space. As a result of the body's movements and exertions, the rate of blood flow changes. Lie down and it generally decreases; stand and it speeds up. Run or jump and it spikes, in order to feed oxygen to the muscles. All this movement poses a challenge for Bivacor's maglev rotor. As the body moves and stops, and as blood flow surges and ebbs, the disk can find itself pushed toward the walls. Ideally, the rotor would resist the currents—floating and spinning as if weightless, holding the position no matter the circumstances.

On a whiteboard, Greatrex outlined the elaborate magnet-control systems that the heart uses to sense and adjust to the forces around it. Timms himself had worked out the math that made the adjustments possible—a difficult problem in fluid dynamics. The engineering depended on digital technologies that had been unavailable to previous generations of designers.

Greatrex handed me one of the rotors: a coin-shaped object, a few inches across, made of burnished gold-colored titanium. It was a source of regret for the team, he said, that, in the final production version, the titanium would be a more practical gray. I hefted it. On one side, eight metal tines clustered, Stonehenge-like, in the center. On the other, eight curving, windswept triangles studded the edges, as though sails, or shark fins, were performing a circumnavigation. An intricate pattern of whorls filled the middle of the disk—machining marks, or waves on the sea.

"I think if you showed that to a bunch of people no one would figure out that it's part of an artificial heart," Greatrex said.

I turned it in the light and snapped a photo. It was a strangely evocative object—a beautiful one. It wasn't biological, but it didn't seem entirely mechanical, either. It had the idiosyncratic, refined particularity of something that had evolved. In a way, it had. ♦



have offered to give the company more money if it will design a wireless, rechargeable heart right away; gritting his teeth, Timms has decided to refuse the funding, saving wireless charging for version 2.0. "We'd rather keep the money to make sure that the device works properly in the body," he said. "If we do the test flight, and we try to do too many things at once, we're going to crash." It was, he thought, the most consequential design decision the team had made; if it prevents broader

A REPORTER AT LARGE

# LAST EXIT

*In Afghanistan, will peace talks and the prospect of an American withdrawal create a breakthrough or a collapse?*

BY DEXTER FILKINS



*As American troops depart, winding down a twenty-year intervention, Afghans are forced to reckon with the question of*



*whether their government can stand on its own against the Taliban.*

**O**n the night of August 14th, Fawzia Koofi was on her way home to Kabul from the funeral of family friends. Koofi, forty-five, is one of Afghanistan's leading advocates for women's rights—a former parliament member who, in the twenty years since the United States and its allies toppled the Taliban, has carried on a ferocious public fight to reverse a history of oppression. She and her twenty-one-year-old daughter, Shuhra, were riding in an armored car, as they often do. A second car, filled with security guards, trailed behind. The guards were necessary; in 2010, Taliban gunmen had attempted to kill her.

As they neared Kabul, her driver pulled over to get gas, and Koofi decided to switch cars. "Sometimes the armored car feels like a prison," she explained, when I visited Afghanistan in December. As they left the gas station, she saw a car behind hers, seeming to track its moves; she was being followed. While she watched, a second car veered into the road, blocking the lane. Koofi's driver accelerated and swerved onto the shoulder, but, before he could get clear of the blockade, men in the other car opened fire. Bullets smashed through the windows and tore through her upper arm. The assailants sped away. Koofi was rushed to the nearest safe hospital, forty-five minutes away, where surgeons removed a bullet and set her shattered bone.

A month later, Koofi was due to represent the government in peace talks with the Taliban—the latest in a decade-long series of attempts to end the Afghan conflict. As she prepared, the mood in Kabul was unusually fraught. A wave of assassinations had begun, which has since claimed the lives of hundreds of Afghans, including prosecutors, journalists, and activists. Officials in Afghanistan and in the U.S. suspect that the Taliban committed most of the killings—both to strengthen their position in talks and to weaken the civil society that has tentatively established itself since the Taliban were deposed. "They are trying to terrorize the post-2001 generation," Sima Samar, a former chairperson of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, told me.

The peace talks began last September, in Doha, Qatar, a Persian Gulf microstate that sits atop the world's largest natural-gas field. For seven years, Qatar's leaders have hosted several of the Taliban's most senior members in luxurious captivity, housing them and their families with all expenses paid. At the opening ceremony, delegates from the Taliban and the Afghan government gathered at the Doha Sheraton, in a cavernous convention space staffed by an army of guest workers. When Koofi walked into the lobby, she saw a group of Taliban negotiators. They were staring at her arm, which was still in a cast. Koofi smiled at them. "As you can see, I'm fine," she said.

Despite Koofi's assurance, the Afghan government was in a precarious position. For decades, it had been buttressed by U.S. military power. But, as Americans have lost patience with the war, the U.S. has reduced its presence in Afghanistan, from about a hundred thousand troops to some twenty-five hundred. Seven months before Koofi went to Doha, officials in the Trump Administration concluded their own talks with the Taliban, in which they agreed to withdraw the remaining forces by May 1, 2021. The prevailing ethos, a senior American official told me, was "Just get out."

Afghanistan presents Joe Biden with one of the most immediate and vexing problems of his Presidency. If he completes the military withdrawal, he will end a seemingly interminable intervention and bring home thousands of troops. But, if he wants the war to be considered anything short of an abject failure, the Afghan state will have to be able to stand on its own.

For Koofi and her fellow-negotiators, a question hangs over the talks: How much of the American-backed project, which has cost thousands of lives and more than two trillion dollars, will survive? Before the U.S. and its allies intervened, in 2001, the Taliban imposed a draconian brand of Islam, in which thieves' hands were cut off and women were put to death for adultery. After the Taliban were defeated, a new constitution opened the way for democratic elections, a free press, and expanded rights for women. Koofi worries that the Taliban leaders,

many of whom were imprisoned for years at Guantánamo, do not grasp how much the country has changed—or that they view those changes as errors to be corrected. "I want their eyes to see me, to get used to what Afghan women are today," Koofi told me. "A lot of them, for the past twenty years, have been in a time capsule." She hopes that a deal can be made to keep the Americans in the country until a comprehensive agreement brings peace. But she fears that the talks won't be enough to save the Afghan state: "Even now, there are some people among the Taliban who believe they can shoot their way into power."

**T**he United States has spent more than a hundred and thirty billion dollars to rebuild Afghanistan. The effort has been beset by graft and misrepresentation by Presidents and commanders, but in Kabul the effects were evident. High-rise apartment buildings remade the skyline, and the streets filled with cars; foreign aid helped create new jobs, and women began going to work and to school. After decades of civil war and repressive government, the capital became a rollicking international city. Diplomats, aid workers, and journalists gathered at a French restaurant called L'Atmosphère and a Lebanese place known as Taverna; after hours, they stumbled over to the bar of the Gandamack Lodge, named for a site where nineteenth-century Afghan tribesmen massacred British invaders. The Taliban were gaining strength in the countryside, but the cities flourished.

These days, assassinations and bombings have driven most of the foreigners away. Taverna closed in 2014, after a Taliban attack there killed twenty-one civilians. As American and NATO troops have departed, blast walls, barbed wire, and armed checkpoints have risen to provide a semblance of security. The few Western visitors mostly stay at the fortress-like Serena hotel, even though American officials warn that the insurgent Haqqani network, an adjunct of the Taliban, is scouting the place for people to kidnap. At night, the streets are quiet. Twenty years into the American-led war, Kabul feels again like the capital of a poor and troubled country.

On a frigid evening in January, I paid a visit to Ashraf Ghani, the Afghan President. I got out of my taxi at the edge of the security cordon, about half a mile from his office, and trekked past concrete barricades, armed guards, and machine-gun nests. At the center of the defenses is the Arg—a nineteenth-century castle, replete with towers and parapets, which houses Ghani's administration. Inside, guards searched and X-rayed me, then confiscated my voice recorder and my phone. I was led to a waiting area, a chilly room with rock walls and marble floors, and finally to the office of the President. Ghani was at his desk, wearing a mask, alone. "Welcome," he said.

Ghani, who is seventy-one, was born to an educated family near Kabul and went abroad as a teen-ager to study. He taught anthropology at Johns Hopkins and then spent a decade at the World Bank, in Washington, D.C., helping developing nations strengthen their economies. After the U.S. invasion, he returned to Afghanistan and threw himself into the reconstruction. Ghani has the cool demeanor of a technocrat, but he spoke passionately about giving up a stable career to work for his country. "I made my decision to come home, and I never looked back," he said.

Ghani's Presidency has been a long struggle. He came to power in 2014, in an election marred by fraud. He promised to unite the country but instead watched it deteriorate around him, as more American troops departed. When he won reelection, in 2019, fewer than two million Afghans cast ballots. In the past year, he has seemed increasingly aware that his country's future is being decided far from Kabul—first in the Trump Administration's negotiations with the Taliban over an American withdrawal, and then in the Afghan government's talks with the Taliban over the potential for peace.

When Trump decided to reach out to the Taliban, in 2018, he chose as his envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, a seasoned diplomat and a native Afghan. Khalilzad had known Ghani since high school, when they played basketball together. But the two found themselves at odds over the country's direction, and their relationship soured. In January, Khalil-



*At peace talks, the delegate Fawzia Koofi was often the only woman in the room.*

zad arrived for a visit, and Ghani declined to see him.

Trump was clearly desperate to make a deal that would allow him to say that he had ended the war. When the Taliban refused to include the Afghan government in the talks, the U.S. did not insist. The senior American official told me, "The Trump people were saying, 'Fuck this—the Afghans are never going to make peace anyway. Besides, who cares whether they agree or not?'" As the talks progressed, Trump repeatedly announced troop withdrawals, depriving his negotiators of leverage. "He was steadily undermining us," a second senior American official told me. "The trouble with the Taliban was, they were getting it for free." In the end, the two sides agreed not to attack each other, and the Americans agreed to withdraw.

The Taliban had to meet a list of conditions, including preventing terrorists from operating out of Afghanistan and refraining from major attacks on the country's government and military. But the prospect of insuring a total pullout was appealing enough that the Taliban began rooting for Trump

to win reelection. In one of the odder moments of the U.S. campaign season, they issued an endorsement of his candidacy. "When we heard about Trump being COVID-19-positive, we got worried," a senior Taliban leader told CBS News. (The group subsequently claimed that it had been misquoted.)

In my meeting with Ghani, he seemed abandoned, like a pilot pulling levers that weren't connected to anything. He professed gratitude to the United States, but was clearly uneasy with the deal. Recently, he said, he had ordered the release of five thousand Taliban prisoners—"not because I wanted to, because the U.S. pushed me." He feared a security disaster, as Taliban fighters returned to the streets and American soldiers left the country. "The U.S. can withdraw its troops anytime it wants, but they ought to negotiate with the elected President," he went on. "They should call me. I'm the elected President."

Many Afghans say that Ghani is to blame for his predicament, describing him as remote, vindictive, and surrounded by sycophants. A prominent

businessman who meets often with senior government officials told me that, when Khalilzad reported that Trump had ordered a pullout, Ghani should have tried to win over his old friend. Instead, the businessman said, “Ghani went around town announcing his intention to destroy him.” I noticed that Ghani did not have a television in his office; he prefers to read transcripts of shows afterward. “He is delusional,” the businessman said. “He has no idea what the country thinks of him.”

Ghani was still hoping that Afghanistan would retain its place in the minds of American policymakers. “All I need from the U.S. is four or five videoconferences a year,” he told me. But the Americans have given every sign that Afghanistan is no longer a major consideration. U.S. officials now see Ghani as an obstacle to a peace deal—wedded to the status quo, which keeps troops in the country and him in power. “Each step of the way, he’s resisting,” the senior American official said.

In 2018, the U.S. asked Ghani to appoint a negotiating team; it took two years—and the announcement of a billion-dollar cut in American aid—for him to complete the process. Before the current talks began, he assembled his negotiators for a historical seminar on persistent conflicts. He walked them through Colombia’s civil war, which lasted fifty-two years; Nepal’s, which lasted ten; and Sri Lanka’s, which dragged on for twenty-five. Ghani’s message was that long wars take a long time to end. When talks were convened to end the Vietnam War, he noted, it took nearly three months just to agree on the shape of the negotiating table. Whatever pressure his negotiators felt—from the Americans or from the Taliban—ought to be resisted, he said, instructing them, “Don’t bring home a bad deal.”

According to U.S. officials, the most favorable outcome of the talks is a ceasefire and an agreement to form a transitional government, with power shared between the Taliban and the existing Afghan government. The transitional government would write a new constitution and lay the groundwork for nationwide elections.

Ghani insists that compromise is dangerous. He was chosen by the Af-

ghan people, in an election that was open, at least notionally, to every adult in the country. Why would an elected President hand over power to a group of unelected insurgents? “My power rests on my legitimacy,” he said. “The moment that legitimacy is gone, the whole thing implodes.”

The negotiators gathered in Doha at the Sharq hotel—a sprawling beach resort, owned by the Ritz-Carlton, with high-arched buildings set alongside ornately tiled pools. It struck some delegates as a peculiar place to end a war. “You walk around the hotel and people are swimming,” Koofi said. “Women are walking around in bikinis. And then you go inside a meeting room to talk about the fate of the country.”

At first, the loathing between the two sides was so intense that they bristled at standing together in the same room. “They wouldn’t even look at each other,” a Qatari official told me. After a couple of days, they sat down in a conference room, but even then some of the delegates found their anger difficult to contain. Three weeks earlier, Taliban gunmen had killed the nephew of Nader Nadery, one of the government negotiators. Nadery himself had been arrested and tortured by the Taliban in the nineties, when he was a student activist. “I can’t tell you how badly I wanted to leave the talks,” he told me. Another negotiator, Matin Bek, had lost his father to a Taliban

(He denies this.) As the talks broke down, Khairkhwa fled to the Pakistani border town of Chaman. He was captured, put on a plane, bound and blindfolded, and flown to the newly opened prison at Guantánamo Bay. “The flight was endless for me, a journey to Hell,” he told me.

At Guantánamo, Khairkhwa said, he was denied sleep, handcuffed to chairs for hours, denied prompt medical treatment, and subjected to months of interrogation. There were occasional moments of tenderness, as when a female military-police officer slipped him earplugs, hidden in a roll of toilet paper, to help him sleep. Mostly it was boring.

In prison, Khairkhwa insisted that he was merely a bureaucrat in the Taliban’s administration. American prosecutors said that he was a military commander, who had helped foment a massacre of ethnic Hazara civilians—but much of the evidence was classified. In 2009, President Barack Obama gave a speech suggesting that cases like Khairkhwa’s belonged in an uneasy category: too innocent to charge, too guilty to free.

Then, in 2014, an American soldier appeared at his cell and told him that he was being transferred to house arrest in Qatar. He and four other Taliban leaders were being swapped for Bowe Bergdahl, an American soldier who had been captured five years before. Khairkhwa didn’t know much about Qatar, but his guards assured him it was a Muslim country. As it turned out, life was easy there; his wife and children joined him, and he had an apartment, all expenses paid by the Qatari government.

Just as Khairkhwa settled in, he was summoned again: he had been chosen to be a negotiator on behalf of the Taliban for an Afghan peace settlement. Soon afterward, he met for the first time with his American counterparts—diplomats instead of soldiers. “All of a sudden, I was negotiating with the same people who had imprisoned me,” he said. “It is a very strange feeling.”

In the current talks, American observers noted that the Talibs who had been held in Guantánamo seemed to struggle to stay focussed. “Their phys-



attack ten years before; a third, Masoom Stanekzai, had survived three attacks in which bombs blew up his car.

The Taliban had their own grievances. Among their negotiators was Khairullah Khairkhwa, who helped found the Taliban and served as an interior minister in its government. In the chaotic days after the U.S. began attacking, in 2001, Khairkhwa negotiated to become a C.I.A. informant.

## POEM THAT ENDS AT THE OCEAN

1

I've always wanted to write a poem that ends at the ocean. How the poem gets there doesn't much matter, just so at last it arrives. The manatee will be there we saw all those years ago, almost motionless under the water like a pendant swaying at an invisible throat, the one my mother used to wear on the most special of occasions. My God is still there, the one I prayed to as a boy: he never answered, but that didn't keep me from calling out to him.

2

I turn off the notification app for good, no longer needing to know exactly how many gone. After all, clinging to life is what we have always done best. We are still trying to hide from the truth of things and who can blame us. Lists don't make sense anymore, unless toilet paper and peanut butter head them. Last-stage patients are not being told how crowded the ferry will be that will take them across the river.

3

We are forbidden cafés, churches, even cemeteries. Fishing by ourselves, however, is still permitted. As long as we keep nothing at all. As long as we walk back home, in darkness, empty-handed, breathing deeply, having thrown back what was never ours to keep.

—*Jim Moore*

ical and mental resilience has clearly been affected by their time there," the second senior U.S. official told me. Still, their team was audacious. Before the negotiators could work on matters of substance, they had to devise a code of conduct. The Taliban proposed that disputes be decided exclusively by Sunni jurisprudence. Government delegates insisted that Afghanistan's Shiite populace be represented, too. "We made it clear to them that we stood for the diversity of our society," Sadat Naderi, one of the negotiators, told me. The Taliban—whose members had massacred

Shiite civilians before 2001—stormed out of the room.

Eventually, they returned to the bargaining table, but things didn't go much better. "They told us we were puppets of the infidels," Naderi recalled. "They told us the war was over." Khairkhwa suggested to me that the 2020 peace deal with the U.S. had established the Taliban as the victors in the conflict. "We defeated the Americans on the battlefield," he said. Hafiz Mansoor, a former minister in the Afghan government, blamed the Americans for giving the Taliban the impression that they had won the war:

"By making the deal, the U.S. legitimized them."

In meetings, the two sides shouted at each other; Taliban leaders said the Afghan officials represented an illegitimate government, propped up by infidels and bankrolled by Western money. "They were so arrogant," Nadery said. "They thought they were there just to discuss the terms of surrender. They said, 'We don't need to talk to you. We can just take over.'"

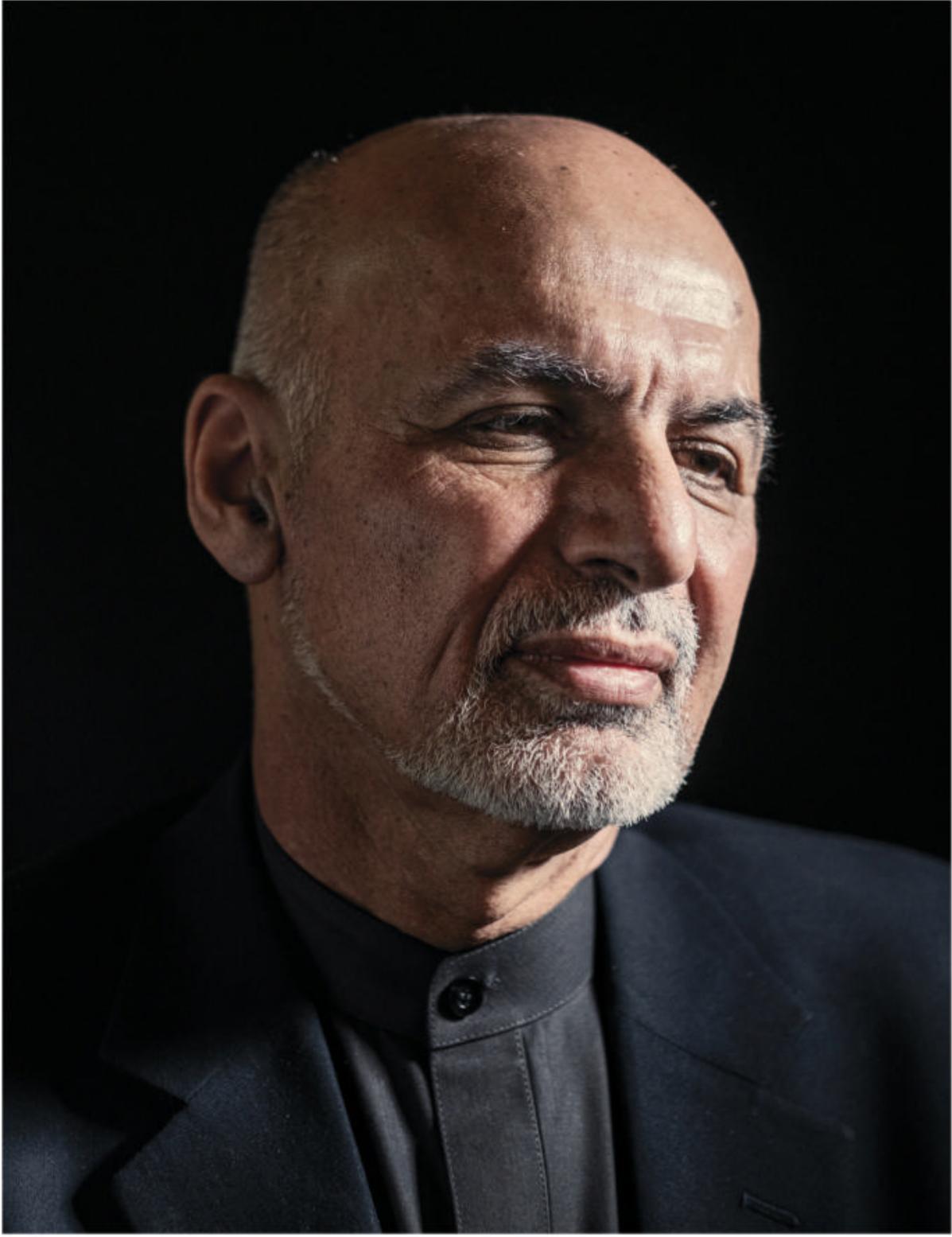
Since 2001, the main arena of conflict in Afghanistan has been the countryside: the government held the cities, while the Taliban fought to control the villages and towns, particularly in the south, their heartland. But by early this year the paradigm had begun to fall apart. The Taliban were entrenched across the north; their shadow government had begun to creep into the cities.

In January, I visited the Qalai Abdul Ali neighborhood, in western Kabul; it straddles the national highway, which runs south to Kandahar. Taliban fighters, distinguished by black turbans that trail down their backs, were strolling through the streets. A decade ago, when there were nearly a hundred and fifty thousand American and NATO troops in the country, such a scene was unimaginable.

In Qalai Abdul Ali, the government was mostly in hiding. A squad of police hunkered down behind Hesco barricades. The real authority, the locals said, was a Talib called Sheikh Ali, who took me on a driving tour of the neighborhood. "I am the mayor," he said, as he climbed into my car.

While we drove, an Afghan Army truck passed through without stopping. The police and other security agencies were not technically banned from the neighborhood, but those who entered risked attack. As Ali and I drove by a large, abandoned house on a hill, he pointed out the window and said, "Last year, we killed a judge who was living there." We passed a tangle of twisted metal. "Here, you can see, we blew up an N.D.S. vehicle"—a truck from the National Directorate of Security, the equivalent of the F.B.I.

Ali, soft-spoken but assured, told me that the Taliban in Qalai Abdul



*Before talks, Ashraf Ghani warned negotiators, “Don’t bring home a bad deal.”*

Ali were collecting taxes, providing security, patrolling the streets. Every truck that passed through—hundreds a day, on the highway—had paid a toll to the Taliban. He produced a receipt for a payment from a driver who had recently carried a truckful of laundry detergent from Faryab Province. The receipt, marked “The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan,” was complete with a contact phone number and an e-mail address. “The government is full of thieves,” Ali said. “We’re the real authority.”

The neighborhood’s residents weren’t necessarily happy to see the Taliban take control, but they didn’t trust the government, either. A former police officer named Sultan told me that, in the years after 2001, he had thrown himself into his job, inspired

by the local police chief, whom he regarded as competent and honest. But his colleagues extorted bribes from the locals; to get hired, he said, he was forced to hand over several months’ salary. Meanwhile, tales spread of corruption and illicit activities among the country’s leaders. They included *bacha bazi*—a tradition, practiced by warlords in the nineties, of keeping boys as sex slaves. Sultan showed me a video, which was making the rounds on social media, of a former Afghan official ogling a dancing boy. “It turns my heart black,” he said. Sultan gave up his job a year and a half ago, after the Taliban assassinated the local police chief. Now he was working as a minibus driver. The Taliban patrolled the highway at night, all the way to Kandahar, he said: “The road is safe now.”

On the second floor of a house on Qalai Abdul Ali’s main street, I sat with three Talibs—middle-aged men who said they’d been fighting since the Americans first arrived. The group’s leader called himself Hedyat; he had a scraggly gray beard and slouched against a pillow, regarding me with narrowed eyes. Hedyat said tersely that Taliban fighters had moved into the neighborhood two years ago from Wardak, an adjacent province. “The Taliban control all of Wardak now,” he said. “We can bring people from all over the country.”

These days, he said, Qalai Abdul Ali was so secure that the Taliban were using it to stage attacks in other parts of the capital. “Oh, yes,” one of the other Talibs crowed. Hedyat told me that his local group was observing the ceasefire with the Americans. But, when I asked about making a deal with the Afghan government, he smiled scornfully. “We’re not sharing power with anyone,” he said.

Freshta Kohistani was fifteen when the Taliban government fell, and she thrived on the new freedoms. In the next two decades, she became an advocate for the poor in her ancestral province of Kapisa, north of Kabul, where she helped families find food and medicine. She carried herself in a defiantly modern way, driving her own car, walking around in jeans, flashing a bright smile, and asking direct questions of powerful men. She used Facebook to publicly demand better conditions; she separated from her husband when he discouraged her activism. “You can’t imagine someone as brave as Freshta,” her brother Roheen told me. “She was confronting our stupid traditional society.”

For years, Kohistani received threatening text messages, but she ignored them. Then, about a year ago, a group of men with knives surrounded her, and one of them slashed her side as she escaped. In December, Kohistani pleaded for the government to protect her. “I am not a frightened little girl,” she wrote in a Facebook post. But she was worried about what her family and her co-workers would “do in this ruined country after I’m gone.” Twelve days later, as she and her brother Shah-

ram were driving in Kapisa, two motorcycles pulled alongside them, and a man on the back shot them both dead. When I arrived at the Kohistanis' home, the family was still greeting mourners. Freshta's father, Najibullah, said that he wasn't sure who killed her, but that her death resembled many others in recent months. "They are killing the élites," he said.

When the U.S. negotiated its withdrawal with the Taliban, American officials made it clear that they expected suicide bombings and other mass-casualty attacks to end. In their place, the Taliban appear to have launched a campaign aimed at terrorizing the educated élite, just as the Afghan government began its own talks. More than five hundred Afghans have been killed in targeted attacks in the past year, many of them shot or struck by "sticky bombs," explosives placed underneath cars. Among them are Malala Maiwand, a female journalist in Jalalabad; Pamir Faizan, a military prosecutor; and Zakia Herawi, one of two female Supreme Court justices who were killed. A deep unease has permeated Afghanistan's cities. "I feel like I'm in a dark room filled with people, and I don't know who's hitting me," an official named Ali Howaida told me in Kabul.

The Taliban deny responsibility for the attacks, but Afghan officials say that many of them are orchestrated by the Haqqani network. Amrullah Saleh, one of the country's two Vice-Presidents, told me that Taliban commanders, meeting in Pakistan, mapped out the campaign early last year. Saleh said that he passed a warning to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Secretary of Defense Mark Esper before the United States made the deal with the Taliban. (The State Department says that it has no record of this.) "We told them exactly what was going to happen," Saleh said. Pompeo and Esper were undeterred.

But not all the victims of assassination are enemies of the Taliban. In June, 2019, as Ustadh Abdul Salaam Abed was being driven to his office, a bomb blew off the back of his car and wounded him in the neck. Every week, during Friday prayers at the Osman Ghani mosque, Abed had been telling his congregation that Afghans had to recon-

cile. While he sometimes criticized the Taliban, he advocated dialogue; it was the government and its American supporters who were driving the violence, he maintained. At his house in Kabul, he gestured to his wound and told me, "I'm a hundred per cent certain the government did this."

A growing number of Afghans believe that people inside the government are directing some of the killings. In August, a group of prominent former officials, many of whom are close to former President Hamid Karzai, wrote to Ghani alleging that there were "high-ranking officials who are credibly suspected of being involved in targeted assassinations." The letter also accused a Vice-President and a deputy in the N.D.S. of "attempting to spread an environment of fear and terror among government critics and opposition figures." A senior Afghan leader told me, "I don't have proof, but there are people around Ghani who are determined to destroy the peace process."

Ghani denied that anyone in his administration was behind the killings. Saleh, the Vice-President, dismissed the claims, saying, "They equated our lack of capability to stop the targeted assassinations with being complicit." The senior American official told me that it seemed plausible that people in the government were behind some of the killings: "Why would the Taliban kill someone who supports the peace talks?" But, he added, with so few troops left in the country, the U.S. was struggling to gather reliable intelligence. "We don't exactly know what's going on."

In January, General Austin Miller, the commander of NATO forces in the country, flew to Doha to deliver a message to the Taliban: The assassination campaign was putting the deal with the Americans at risk. If the Taliban didn't back off, the U.S. could resume attacks. The Taliban maintained that it had no obligation to reduce violence: "the Islamic Emirate has not committed itself to any such undertaking."

At fifty-nine, Miller is compact, no-nonsense, and direct. When I arrived at his base, he was leading his soldiers in an hour of running and calisthenics, which, at nearly six thousand feet above

sea level, were enough to tire a soldier half his age. He is a kind of living symbol of America's post-9/11 wars. Since 2001, he has spent more than seven years fighting alongside Special Operations Forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, he hunted members of Al Qaeda and the Taliban; in Iraq, he took part in the operation that killed the insurgent leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. He noted wryly that many of the Afghan leaders that he and his staff encountered, friend and foe, were already present when he first came to the region. "We're dealing with their sons now," he said.

Since 2002, American soldiers and officers have typically served tours of a year or less. With each rotation, new soldiers have to learn the country, and senior officers devise fresh plans. The result is that twenty years of effort in Afghanistan has meant twenty different campaigns. Miller returned to the country in 2010 and took the top job in 2018. "This is my fourth, fifth, or sixth tour," he told me. "I haven't counted."

Miller arrived at the peak of the American effort, and has presided over a rapidly shrinking force. Where the U.S. once pursued ambitious goals, instilling democracy and economic development, he defined his mission narrowly: Don't let Afghanistan become a terrorist haven. But, he said, there's a catch. "You need a government for that."

Senior officials in the Biden Administration say that they intend to take their time before they decide how to handle Afghanistan. "They're trying to figure out the best of the bad options they inherited," the second senior American official told me. They are conscious that, if Biden ignores Trump's deal and decides to keep the roughly twenty-five hundred American troops in Afghanistan, the Taliban will almost certainly resume attacking them.

In January, a senior U.S. military-intelligence officer told a group of American soldiers to get ready for attacks. "We've been in this country for twenty years, and we may be entering the last four months. These could be the most uncertain of all," the officer said. "Come May 1st, if we are still here, I think it's game on for the Taliban."

Miller told me, "If the Taliban were to attack U.S. or coalition forces, we

are prepared to respond proportionally, with precision, and with capacity to spare." But he also said that he was prepared to pull out the last of his soldiers if ordered to do so. The unanswered question—which has hung over the country since 2001—is whether the Afghan state can survive without Western troops. When I asked if he thought that the Afghan Army could secure the country alone, his answer was not reassuring. "They have to," he said.

In early January, I flew with Miller to Afghan Army bases in Mazar-i-Sharif, in the north, and near the Helmand River, in the south. Looking down on the Hindu Kush from our C-130 transport plane, I was reminded of the country's natural beauty but also of the geographic realities that have hampered every attempt to help it stand on its own: it's landlocked and covered by mountains and desert, with only twelve per cent of its land suitable for farming. For much of its modern history, Afghanistan has been a ward of the international community: foreigners pay seventy-five per cent of its federal budget, and American taxpayers largely underwrite its Army and its security forces, at a cost of four billion dollars a year. But, if there is any hope that the Afghan state can be-

come self-sufficient, it resides with the soldiers who train here.

In Mazar-i-Sharif, we met General Sami Alizai, the commander of the 209th Corps. (He has since been promoted to lead the Afghan Army's special-operations corps.) An ethnic Pashtun from the south, Alizai signed up in 2004 and went on to graduate from the Joint Services Command and Staff College, one of the United Kingdom's élite military academies. A typical U.S. officer of Alizai's rank is in his fifties; Alizai is thirty-five and exudes restless confidence. "It was a tough fighting season," he told Miller. "There are a lot of Taliban dead."

At a lunch meeting with Miller, the limitations of NATO's campaign became clear. When the season began, five of the fifty districts that Alizai's troops oversaw were under Taliban control, and twenty-nine were "on the edge," he said. His men had secured a dozen of them, he told Miller. But the Taliban had captured several villages along Highway 1, effectively cutting off the northern and western parts of the country. In Maimana, the capital of Faryab Province, the local government's control extends barely past the city center. "You can only go to the end of the bazaar," he said. Sev-

eral local leaders had been assassinated.

"What do you think is happening?" Miller asked.

"The Taliban are trying to set up a network here," Alizai said. "We don't know who they are." It was a conversation that might have taken place fifteen years ago.

The 209th Corps is assisted by sixteen hundred NATO troops, who help with training, and by an American Special Forces team, which provides both training and protection in combat; if an Afghan unit comes under attack, the Americans can call in a plane or a drone. (In one of the more unusual aspects of the U.S.-Taliban peace deal, the United States is allowed to protect Afghan forces from attacks. In practice, that means almost daily American air strikes and drone attacks; when I visited Helmand Province, the U.S. had carried out two drone strikes that morning.) The U.S. team was highly competent; all of its twenty members were seasoned, with some having served a dozen combat tours, and many spoke Dari and Pashto. But Alizai worried that the West's commitment might be coming to an end—or that it might become too small to matter. Over lunch, Miller told him bluntly that he didn't know what the future would bring. "You know where we're at," Miller said. "It's just not clear."

The 209th, budgeted for fifteen thousand troops, was fielding barely ten thousand. Even though the Army guarantees employment, in a country where jobs are scarce, Afghan officers struggle to find recruits; young people are often reluctant to leave their families for long tours. Alizai was undeterred. "I think we can get it up to ninety per cent soon," he told Miller.

Alizai said that he was trying to contain the militias of two local warlords: Abdul Rashid Dostum, a former Vice-President, and Atta Mohamed Noor. Both men befriended the Americans in 2001, and both fight the Taliban. But they operate more like local fiefs than like agents of the government. Dostum has been accused of murder, rape, torture, and mass executions. "I will try to bring them in," Alizai told Miller. "Once we pay them, we can influence them." But there was little sign that this time would be different.

Alizai told me that, despite all the



*"How long do we need to stand here so you can avoid talking to your neighbor?"*

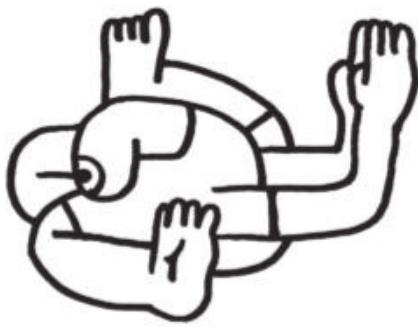
problems besetting the Afghan Army so late in the American era, his sponsors shouldn't give up hope. "It takes time to build an army, brother," he said. "We are trying to train the right people. We started from nothing. Please be patient."

**A**t the Sharq hotel in Doha, Fawzia Koofi was often the only woman in a room full of male negotiators. At first, she told me, some of her Taliban counterparts refused to speak to her. At a lunch meeting, two Taliban seated across from her asked her to move to another table. A third Taliban at the table stared at the floor, unwilling to meet her gaze. Koofi picked up a plate and offered him a kebab; the Taliban took it and smiled. "Miss Koofi, you are a very dangerous woman," he told her. They have been talking ever since.

By the time I arrived, in late December, the negotiators had begun to relax. "They let their hair down," the senior American official told me. The government delegates found that the Taliban, though often hostile in groups, were friendlier one on one. The harsher rhetoric began to fade, and on some afternoons I saw Taliban and government delegates walking together through the Sharq's gardens.

Negotiators from both sides told me that they felt a heavy responsibility to end the conflict. Most believe that the Taliban would accept a deal under the right circumstances—that they are as tired of war as everyone else is. But many observers in Kabul suspect that the Taliban are using the talks to buy time until the Americans depart. One of the skeptics was Sima Samar, who for seventeen years presided over the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, which seeks to bring modern concepts of justice and equality to the country. Samar believes that the Taliban will ultimately decide it's easier to take power by force. "The Taliban?" she said. "They haven't changed a bit." In December, during a break in the talks, a video surfaced of Fazel Akhund, one of the Taliban negotiators, greeting a group of masked men at what appears to be a military training camp. As Akhund embraced the trainees, one of them cried out, "Long live the holy warriors of Afghanistan!"

In Kabul, Vice-President Amrullah Saleh suggested to me that pro-government Afghans would be no less reluctant than the Taliban to share control of the country. I met Saleh in 1999, as the Taliban were surging to victory in the country's long, brutal civil war; back then, Saleh and a few holdouts were clinging to a tiny piece of territory in the northeast. In 2004, Saleh became the head of the National Directorate of Security, and earned a rep-



ing in sewing and catering, and works with a restaurant to supply jobs for trainees. It also provides a shelter for women and children escaping the difficulties of a society that, in many places, is still bound by age-old rules. Almost every day, a woman or a girl appears at the doorstep: a child bride fleeing her husband; a wife forced into an abusive marriage; a recently divorced woman whose family regards her as a disgrace and sent her into the streets. One recent morning, a young woman arrived so badly pummelled that attendants massaged her every day for two weeks. "There wasn't a spot on her body—not one—that was not black-and-blue," a worker at the center told me. "I wanted to scream." The shelter, the first of its kind in Kabul, has a maximum capacity of seventy; it is often full.

One of the women who run the shelter is Mahbouba Seraj, an ebullient seventy-year-old. Born to royal lineage, she fled Afghanistan with her family in 1978, as the country disintegrated, and settled for a time in Manhattan, at Lexington Avenue and Forty-third Street. After 2001, Seraj was drawn back by the prospect of change in her homeland. Ever since, she has been sustained by a sense that outdated traditions were falling away. "There's a lot of change here, and a lot of possibility—and a lot of pain and a lot of happiness," she told me. "All these things used to get swept under the rug, and there was nowhere for a woman to go. Now there is."

Would the shelter survive a Taliban regime? Seraj isn't sure. She believes that the younger generations, which constitute most of the country's urban population, will fight. "I have a belief in the energy and the idea and the newness and the commitment of the young people of this country," she said. "We have doctors now, we have people with master's degrees and Ph.D.s now. So many women and so many young people, so full of energy. They're not going to give this up."

Seraj is less sure about everyone else. She told me that she'd been chatting with friends recently, and they all agreed that the situation was likely to get much worse: "For the first time after all these years, I said to my friends, 'Let's not be heroes. At this point, we have to save our lives.'" ♦

utation among the Taliban as a fierce and efficient foe. In July, 2019, suicide bombers breached Saleh's security cordon and killed thirty-two people.

Saleh argued that, if the Afghan government is forced to make a deal with the Taliban before the group forsakes violence, the peace will fail, and the group will try to reimpose its medieval vision. "Society has changed," he said. Women have been educated, young people are connected to the wider world, English has become common in the cities. "People will not accept the Taliban," he said. "They will not lie down. We have forty thousand Special Forces. Do you think they will let the Taliban slaughter them one by one?" He went on, "It will be another civil war." The first, in the nineties, killed more than fifty thousand people. "But it will be worse than the last one. Absolutely worse."

Yet the government negotiators will have to make some concessions to the Taliban, or the talks will break down, and the Western countries will likely leave the population to fend for itself. "I will fight with my claws and my teeth for the rights we have gained," Fatima Gailani, a government delegate and an advocate for women, told me. "But there is a risk that some of these rights are going to be lost."

One place to measure that risk is the Afghan Women's Skills Development Center, in Kabul. The center offers train-

# The Crooked House

Jonathan Lethem



**T**he week he met the man who claimed to have exited the house by falling downward into a desert valley, Mull decided to give up coffee.

Mull had lost regular access to the community cafeteria and its coffee supply. The corridor leading to it had disappeared, in one of the building's periodic shifts. But he could still see into the cafeteria. The window of his dormitory room opened onto the scene from high above, offering a bird's-eye view. When Mull cracked the window, he could smell the rising steam of the coffee brewing.

Mull, after laboring through the now elusive corridor, had rarely found others in the cafeteria. Just coffee in the twenty-pot urn. Once or twice the supply had been down to dregs. Those times, Mull had brewed a fresh urn himself, from supplies stacked there. Others probably did the same, though he'd never caught them at it. The scene was hardly scintillating to watch, once one adjusted to the surveillance-camera perspective.

Still, he glanced through the window. Should the woman for whom Mull searched appear in the cafeteria, he could try again to relocate the corridor. He might even risk a plunge through the window, aiming himself at an empty area of floor. Coffee alone, however, wasn't worth it. Long before, Mull had concluded that accepting the loss of inessential things was an elemental lesson that his present life, his life since entering the tesseract house, had to teach him. Coffee was just the latest sacrifice.

**T**he last time he'd been in the corridor, it had been almost completely blocked. Occupants of the San Pedro overpass had located a new one-way hatch into the house and begun shoving their possessions through: filthy bedding, shopping bags stuffed with clothing and keepsakes, photograph albums, nonworking electronics, baby strollers full not of children but of children's toys, and unrecognizable other stuff, bundled with twine or extension cords or jammed into cardboard cartons loosely flapped shut. Mull had picked his way through the debris, fearful of accidentally treading on a sleeping body.

These days, he frequented the atrium. It was there that he met the man who spoke of the desert window. The atrium had food, though no coffee. Some vol-

unteers had dragged a steam table in from the kitchen and most days it was loaded with hot food. If not, piles of sandwiches. No one oversaw the serving, or kept track of what was taken. Meals merely waited for takers. Some might load a shopping cart with sandwiches to distribute elsewhere, but no one had ever carted away the steam table itself. The food continued to be supplied, for now.

The atrium, which in the original plan had voiced both the grandiose and the bureaucratic aspects of the building, was ruined. Its central purpose, as a portal from the outside, had been lost in the first collapse. Little remained of its original splendor. The celebrated "night sky" ceiling, depicting the astrological figures, had fallen, its tiles collected as souvenirs or trodden into grit on the vast floor.

Nevertheless, the atrium's ruins served as the clearest echo of the architect's vision. Was this why residents treated it with reverence? No one slept there. Conversation was scarce and hushed. In contrast to the dormitories, the atmosphere was churchlike. Mull also regarded it as a crossroads, where he could scan for familiar faces and perhaps find the woman, Rose Gutiérrez. Mull still remembered, more days than not, that he was here to keep a promise to find her.

**S**een you round," the man said.

A greeting that strangely mimicked a farewell, it left Mull momentarily speechless. When he managed to say, "Oh, hey," it came out as a croak. His voice—when had he used it last? He cleared his throat and tried again. "You mean inside?" he asked the man. "Or before?"

Mull had been sitting against a wall in the atrium, slurping at broth with one of the inadequate plastic spoons that were the sole utensil provided. Others nearby, whether eating or only resting, kept their distance. The hippieish drifter, on the other hand, plopped down beside Mull now, even as he made his enigmatic reply: "Oh, I seen you both places."

At first, Mull had taken the lanky man for eighteen or nineteen, but no. His face was sun-lined, though he was pale, not tanned. He might be in his forties, around Mull's age. Mull hurriedly calculated: crazy, hostile, or both? A newcomer to the house? Or a longtime resident, perhaps even one of those who

had entered before the first collapse?

Mull hedged his own reply. "Have we met?"

"Didn't say that. I just recognized a fellow wanderer first time I laid eyes on you."

"Through a window?"

The man laughed. "There's a lot of those. I been known to look."

So far as Mull knew, there were no views into his dormitory. "I used to get coffee every day at that cafeteria, that one with the mural of the cruise ship—"

"Sure, yeah, I know it."

"Maybe you saw me there."

"Maybe."

"Or through a window," Mull suggested again. "I can see into that cafeteria from above, myself."

"You like down-facing windows, I got a good one. You like the desert?"

"The desert?"

"Yeah. I'll show you. I went through it once. Maybe you'll want to try."

**T**he window over the cafeteria wasn't the only high vantage Mull had encountered. Another window he'd discovered appeared to dangle perilously a quarter mile or so above the glamorously tangled intersection of the Santa Monica and San Diego Freeways. This view was vertiginous. Most seemed to shun it, and the room that contained it.

When he peered at the freeways, Mull found the activities below mysteriously reduced, a subject of study to file away for another time. It wasn't that there were no cars, but there were fewer, and whole intervals of bright daylight in which no cars appeared at all. Once, Mull had seen a group of walkers on the freeway, a cluster of eight or nine, centered in the empty lanes, moving together northward, toward the old post office or beyond, out of sight.

But these windows were the exception. The preponderance of the house's windows or doorways looked into different parts of the house. Others appeared to gaze upward from deep wells or pits in the earth. It seemed to Mull that these windows told a truth. Yes, the four-dimensional collapse contained enigmas. Likely the house still unfolded itself spatially with each aftershock. Yet the structure hadn't been able to defy the simple law of gravity. It had reorganized its geometry downward. Since the start

of the earthquakes, Mull and the population of the formerly unsheltered were essentially living underground.

**I**t was only a short distance from the atrium to the drifter's desert window, which lay hidden behind a maintenance door, at the back of a room full of breaker boxes and wiring panels. The frame wasn't large, though wide enough to clamber through. The view was panoramic. Yellow scrub to a horizon of sand, sky-petitioning Joshua trees, molten-appearing rock formations. Had Mull never visited the desert east of Los Angeles, he could have mistaken it for Mars.

"You really went through."

"Oh, yeah."

"How did you get back?" Mull asked.

"I hitchhiked back, from J-Tree. It ain't *that* far."

"Why did you return?"

The man shrugged. "Nothing else to do."

"How did you get back inside?" Mull was interested, generally, to know which entrances were in use. The one he'd used had closed. Yet still new faces appeared. The numbers grew.

"I came through the train tunnel, under Union Station." This reply took a moment. Was the man uninterested? Or unremembering?

"Have the trains quit running?"

"Maybe."

The drifter's tale of escape and return tested Mull's credulity. For one thing, the height of the desert window looked to Mull too dangerous to risk bridging with a leap. And there was no sign of shelter below. No road out of that blasting sunlight. One wouldn't have to break one's legs in the fall to die of thirst, such distance from help. Even a turned ankle could be fatal.

The man's account was too vague. Had he observed nothing during his sojourn outside the house? Mull had yet to meet anyone who'd persuasively gone outside and returned; the matter of the present state of the wider city was, for Mull, an open one. Perhaps there was no city to return to now, not as he'd known it.

In any case, Mull had put aside the question of whether he would be capable of exiting the house if he wished. All windows and doors worked in one direction only. For instance, when Mull had crawled over the debris and tried

the hatch in the now disappeared corridor, it had led to another point deep inside the house. This was typical.

Mull had no idea whether he could still transit outside. His own entry point had grown remote as the house unfolded itself through the series of earthquake collapses. Would his car still be parked on the other side of the door through which he'd entered, at the bottom of the public stairs where Reservoir Street descended to Glendale Boulevard? It might have been stripped for parts by now. Even beyond his uncertainty about the condition of the city outside, Mull's sense of time had been damaged by his residence in the house.

Mull excused himself from the window. The vision of the desert was entrancing but nauseating. So different from the life he'd learned inside. The drifter said nothing. Mull, as he left, attempted to memorize the turns that led to this place, another possible subject of his study.

**E**nvironmental analysis. That had been Mull's field, when the earthquakes began and the house first fell. He could barely recall now what it was supposed to entail. He'd studied the Los Angeles River, the secret system of concrete channels, as often dry as carrying a trickle of moisture, which went ignored by most Angelenos. The fenced zones zigzagging alongside the freeways were home to wildlife—to lizards and frogs, swimming rats, weird herons—and to unsheltered

were a requirement in the architecture major; otherwise they'd have been empty. The handful of disciples Mull attracted tended to be those with roots in the wider city, sometimes older students. Others were transfers from the community colleges and living alone or with their families rather than in the dorms. Often the type to wander from college, into trades or the military, or off the radar entirely. Mull had felt more than once that if he were faithful to his ambivalence he'd have followed them out of the institution, to set up a life by the river.

Mull had been spending more time there, testing himself for exile, before the earthquakes. He'd leased an in-law house from a friend, ostensibly a "writing studio." It backed onto a wide embankment, accessible through a rent in the fencing. The river's concrete was streaked with white trails of bird shit, liquid ejections stretched by velocity into a kind of hieroglyphic language, if only Mull could read it.

At the channel's edge, where the rain's surges deposited refuse, one bare tree sheltered a gnarl of sun-bleached junk, stuff pitched through car windows from overpasses. Most days, Mull was alone at this crap oasis, his personal Walden. Few of the tent-dwelling people chose Mull's embankment. Perhaps that was because of the lack of shade, perhaps because Mull, in his studio, seemed to the tent dwellers to be surveilling the area.

**T**he time leading to Mull's decision to enter the house had been marked by a series of catastrophic occurrences. The earthquakes, but not merely the earthquakes. In the contemplative vacuum of his present life those events stacked in memory, as if they'd transpired in a matter of days, or hours. In truth, it had been almost five months from the first earthquake to the moment when Mull committed himself to searching for Rose Gutiérrez.

An example: it was at the third press conference on the subject of the collapse, not the first, that the assassination attempt had occurred. The televised presentations were already threatening to become routine, always the same three men on the stage, flanked by policemen and press secretaries: the slim dapper mayor; the beleaguered president of the housing authority; the architect Quin-



humans, with their tents, their carts, their fires. Mull had liked to think he was "working" on that intractable problem. Though, in comparison with the intervention of the church volunteers, the food banks, and the charity medical clinics, anything Mull had to offer was paltry, theoretical. He reported to no one. No office of the city waited for his results.

Few students had ever affiliated with Mull, choosing him as an adviser, say, or to supervise their thesis work. His classes

tus Burnham, with his shock of white hair teased to the ceiling, his black collarless suit, his red-framed glasses, looking as though he belonged more on the stage of the Cannes Film Festival. Their incomprehensible maps and charts, attempts to track the rescue efforts, to decipher the shape the structure had taken as it settled and settled again.

Who had been the assassin's target? The architect took the only bullet, in his spine. Just days before Mull entered the house, Burnham had reappeared on television, a glimpsed form in a wheelchair, hair still coiffed. Why had Mull been so glued to the news? In his recollection, he'd been watching live the morning that the L.A.P.D. perp-walked the would-be assassin: Mull's onetime student James Gutiérrez.

As it happened, Mull had once been at a dinner party with the architect. At a private home, that of an author Mull knew, a glamorous type, who'd married the sister of the mayor. Though the man never spoke aloud any suggestion of access or influence, this association by marriage conveyed an air of civic celebrity that the author plainly relished.

Burnham seemed to style himself a man of action, in some mid-twentieth-century Hemingway or Picasso sense. His only battles, so far as Mull could tell, had been with aggrieved civic institutions, or with neighbors of his proposed incursions upon sunlight or airspace. The money that flowed everywhere around men like Burnham guaranteed that he vanquished all such opponents.

Another thing Burnham vanquished was dinner parties. At least this one. His monologue began lightly enough, with a disquisition on Los Angeles as the site of a contest between flatness and what he called *stepped tessellations*. "The richer and crazier you are"—here Mull began instantly to hate him, for this romantic conflation—"the likelier you are to occupy a tessellated planar environment. The simplest example is the standard canyon house. Notched into a ravine, turning a buttressed backside to anyone approaching from below. But the spectacular examples are those private homes the studios rent, at great expense, to play the domiciles of villains in science-fiction movies—"

Mull tuned out. He looked to his table companion at his left for a side



*"I don't know about tides. What about torts? I know about torts."*

conversation. A woman he knew, who'd left academia to serve on the city's planning commission. She, too, gave signs of impatience with Burnham's preening. She had to explain it to Mull, who was being a little slow. Burnham had sold the city on his solution to the problem of Skid Row. The tens of thousands living unsheltered, the tent cities strung along miles of streets. That explained the confluence of guests here. Burnham's table talk was a rehearsal for the public unveiling of his plan, the tesseractic shelter.

The dinner concluded with Burnham's toast to the partnership. "Why shouldn't our refugees from late-stage capitalism participate in the wonders of hypercubic spatiality? You don't have to understand a house to live in it."

It struck Mull, at the time, as tendentious. Crypto-scientific nonsense. He left before dessert.

Lately Mull wondered if Burnham had, in a sense, delivered exactly what he'd proposed. The psychic catastrophe of unapproachable canyon houses, windows that functioned as one-

way glass, rooms locked in abutment, like coffins. All of these had been the domain exclusively of the canyon dwellers. Burnham had brought such marvels to those finding shelter along the overpasses and riverside embankments. Should he be blamed for the earthquakes? Some claimed that the faults had been triggered by the anchoring of the structure to the bedrock. Yet Los Angeles had been overdue.

In any case, the collapses had turned Burnham's revolutionary shelter into its own opposite. At its unveiling, the tesseractic house had been a kaleidoscopic tower, impossible to gaze upon except from below. Now it could be seen only by peering into apertures in the ground. Sinkholes, some of which might even be dangerous to approach. In a time of continual earthquakes, the windows into the earth could only inspire fear.

There'd been more aftershocks the day Mull had been in the visiting room at Men's Central, talking with James Gutiérrez. Entombed in the windowless vault of the jail, Mull took the



*"It says, 'Save yourselves, the plants have won.'"*

rumbling for trains passing by on their way to Union Station. None of the prisoners on their telephones seemed to notice it at all. Yet the guards immediately began talking on their radios about earthquakes, and Mull understood.

Gutiérrez had shaved his head. He was heavier and more slow-moving than the hectic and furious kid Mull remembered from his class, as though formed now of denser molecules.

Gutiérrez had been told by his guards that the architect had survived. Mull didn't choose to ask whether Burnham had been the lone intended target or one target among many.

"Motherfucking house swallowed my mother," the prisoner said. The words were ferocious, but spoken in a meditative monotone. All anger seemed to have exited the teen-ager's body, or blended into the ambient rage of his surroundings.

"They're alive in there," Mull offered stupidly. "It's not like they're pulling out bodies."

"What kind of alive?"

Mull had no answer to this.

"Human garbage disposal, I call it. Urban removal."

Mull recognized the last term, one he'd introduced in his lectures on East St. Louis, Tulsa, Robert Moses, the Housing Act of 1949.

"If I understand the complexities of

the house," Mull said, speaking carefully, "many of the people inside may not know what's happened out here. They may be living just like they were before the collapse."

They'd spoken for perhaps fifteen minutes when the second tremor hit. At that, the guards declared the visits finished. An order had come to clear the rooms. Before he racked the receiver, Gutiérrez said, "You find her. Tell her what I did." This request's pass-the-salt mildness induced confusion in Mull.

"Your mother?"

"Go in the house. Tell her, Professor Mull."

The specificity of this address could have been mocking, caustic even, had Mull's former student not lowered his eyes in—modesty? Shyness? Shame? Perhaps all of these, or none. James Gutiérrez likely knew no other name to call him.

Mull's wish to avoid seeing the deserter drifter again too soon kept him from the atrium for the next days. He needed to renew his search for the prisoner's mother, or so he told himself. He'd been puzzling, too, over the replenishment of the food, and other staples, like toilet paper. For that matter, how had the pipes kept water flowing after the collapses, which ought to

have ruptured most if not all of the plumbing? Was the house being maintained from the outside? Necessarily so. Yet Mull had never seen a crew, or found evidence of the supply chain for what appeared in the cafeteria. Was the city administration responsible, or had something taken its place? Were the residents of the house beneficiaries of a humane intervention, or rats in a scientist's maze?

What Mull had begun to observe was that the house seemed to bend him toward three or four destinations, as though determined to thwart his wider mapping effort. Near though it was to the atrium, he never would have found the service closet in which the desert window was hidden. The doors Mull chose tended to dump him into familiar corridors, those that terminated in his dormitory wing, or ones that led back to the atrium. It was as if some subroutine had executed a misguided directive to spare him effort or confusion, to shrink his residency's scale. Could the house be adapting itself in this way to each occupant?

Moving alone through the rooms, he moved as though through a prism, reflections of the same exhausted territories. Eventually he'd find himself alone in his dormitory room, facing his bed.

The answer was to pick another body and follow it on its route. By that means, Mull could break the spell. He began trailing others along the corridors, walking at a discreet distance, the length of a room or two, yet close enough to keep that other person within his sight.

In this way, Mull found himself led to further wings of the collapsed house. He located, among other things, a gymnasium, complete with a pool, which he'd never known existed. When he blundered into the cavernous facility he found it populated by older women.

"This isn't for you," one informed him, before he could apologize.

"Do you know someone named Rose Gutiérrez?" Plashing echoes swallowed his words.

"You shouldn't be here," the woman informed him.

"Will you tell her I need to speak with her?" Mull was seized with the certainty that the prisoner's mother was one of the bodies arrayed on the

far side of the enormous pool, or immersed in the lanes.

"Please go."

**A**t the conclusion of any bout of following, Mull fell into a narcotic sleep. He'd wake hungry and reduced, seeking solace in routine, in reliable sites for feeding and washing. In this state, it nauseated him to contemplate the complexities of the house. He could barely stomach his usual routes, or afford glimpses through crooked, paradoxical thresholds. It felt as though the house had punished the attempts to widen his orbit.

The habit of tracking, however, was now an addiction. He returned to the atrium only to find unknown persons to follow out of it. On his fourth morning of doing so, Mull observed that the figure ahead of him seemed also to be tracking another.

He'd selected a man who'd visited the atrium alone. The man was young, dressed in long shorts and Air Jordans. He wore a small backpack but was otherwise unencumbered, no cart, no bags of Tupperware to ferry away supplies. He'd browsed the steam table in a cursory way and then headed back through the corridor.

Mull was quickly drawn into unfamiliar portions of the house, or portions formerly familiar, now rendered strange. He trailed the man through a room of built-in library carrels, never outfitted with the intended computer terminals, which Mull recognized from his earliest days. In some settling action after one of the earthquakes, the room had lodged sideways, and sleepers, after first smashing out the interior dividers, employed the carrels as a series of bunks.

It was in the next corridor that Mull spotted the other man, far ahead. Another voyager through rooms, shadowed by the man Mull himself was shadowing.

The distant figure slipped around corners before Mull could discern much. He was older than the man in shorts between them, and dressed less like one of the unsheltered who'd moved into the house at the start, more like Mull. The default costume of the average white man, which Mull had chosen, half-consciously, for its invisibility.

Mull couldn't see far enough ahead.

The man he followed blocked his view. Mull struggled with the urge to dash forward. He didn't want to draw attention, raise an alarm in his own target. Yet, should he warn the man beyond, that figure cutting out of view again and again? Was that man in danger?

Attending to this double chase, Mull failed at first to register the alteration in the rooms. They'd become familiar in some different sense. Not from his residency but from his visit to Men's Central, to see the prisoner James Gutiérrez. The dun-colored cement-block walls, the linoleum floor, the green-painted metal sliding barriers—hard to call them doors. They'd entered it, somehow. The collapsing underground structure had melded with the jail, or the jail had tunneled itself into the tesseract house. They'd been less than a mile apart to begin with, Mull supposed. On either side of the disused train yards. He shouldn't be so surprised that they'd met.

Now he looked up again, not wishing to fall behind in his pursuit. It seemed all the more essential that he keep sight not only of the man he'd chosen to follow but of that other, vanishing ahead.

When he spotted them again, racing along a row of holding cells, the man between had closed on his quarry.

All at once, Mull saw that it wasn't that the far man was dressed as Mull was, or that he resembled him. The man ahead of the man Mull followed was Mull himself. Mull had chased and been chased. Been ahead and behind, both. The house had worked as a refracting lens.

Two others came from within the open-gated cells, to join in the capture. At that, Mull was no longer behind, watching. He was in their hands.

**T**hough the cell they placed him in was open, it was nevertheless a cell. The drifter who'd shown him the desert window had joined the men who held Mull there, and regarded him again with the same snickering familiarity.

"Told you I seen you."

The words unexpectedly stung. Among the illusions they'd stripped from Mull was his belief in his invisibility. But this hardly mattered now. Mull needed to understand the relation between the structures.

"Did the building fall into the jail?" he asked them. "Or did the prisoners ... escape?"

"We're all prisoners," said the man Mull had been following and who had been following him.

"One building all along?"

"You need me to say it?" the man said. "One building all along."

"Talk to a kid named Gutiérrez," Mull said. "He'll explain."

"Gutiérrez isn't a kid, no more than me," the man said. Mull had to grant the case. That Mull was thirty years older didn't make them kids.

"He sent me searching for his mother."

"Everybody's searching for someone," the drifter said. "We got a lot of explanations, too."

"Gutiérrez takes care of his mom," another man said. "He don't need you searching no more."

"He sent you to do this?" Mull asked. They kept him pinned, needlessly. Yet nothing felt gratuitous in their attitudes or postures. Mull sensed instead their clarity of intention.

Only the drifter was giddy. "Everybody's sent, or else they're sending!" he quipped.

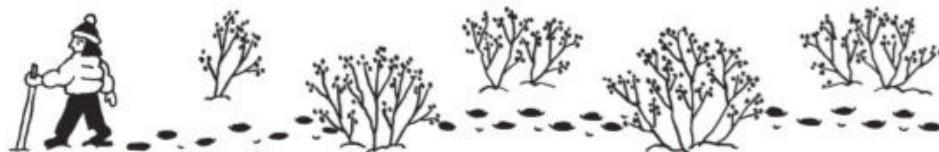
"Are you going to lock me in here?" Mull asked.

"We lost the keys," the man Mull had followed said. "We don't like to put people deeper in. We like to put them deeper out."

"Deeper out," the drifter said, shaking his head. "Damn, I like that." As if on a signal, Mull's captors had him on his feet, to frog-march him through the open gate of the cell. Then, true to their word, they pushed him screaming through the desert window.

The plunge wasn't as far as he'd feared. Mull ended on all fours atop a soft knoll, his left arm sunk to the elbow into some creature's burrow. Here, from the ground, he saw what he couldn't from the window: a sand-strewn asphalt roadway, lined by the twisted, mocking trees. Beyond them, desert stones, those wind-carved orange bodies sleeping beneath the unreachable bridge of the sky. Nothing prevented Mull from setting out west, toward the house. He supposed he could find his way back inside. ♦

# THE CRITICS



BOOKS

## THE UNKNOWN KNOWN

*Kazuo Ishiguro uses artificial intelligence to show the limits of our own.*

BY JAMES WOOD

In the early nineteen-eighties, when Kazuo Ishiguro was starting out as a novelist, a brief craze called Martian poetry hit our literary planet. It was launched by Craig Raine's poem "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home" (1979). The poem systematically deploys the technique of estrangement or defamiliarization—what the Russian formalist critics called *ostranenie*—as our bemused Martian wrestles into his comprehension a series of puzzling human habits and gadgets: "Model T is a room with the lock inside—/ a key is turned to free the world/for movement." Or, later in the poem: "In homes, a haunted apparatus sleeps,/that snores when you pick it up." For a few years, alongside the usual helpings of Hughes, Heaney, and Larkin, British schoolchildren learned to launder these witty counterfeits: "Caxtons are mechanical birds with many wings/ And some are treasured for their markings— / they cause the eyes to melt/ or the body to shriek without pain./ I have never seen one fly, but/ Sometimes they perch on the hand." Teachers liked Raine's poem, and perhaps the whole Berlitz-like apparatus of Martians, because it made estrangement as straightforward as translation. What is the haunted apparatus? A telephone, miss. Well done. What are Caxtons? Books, sir. Splendid.

Estrangement is powerful when it puts the known world in doubt, when it makes the real truly strange; but most powerful when it is *someone's* estrangement, bringing into focus the partiality of a human being (a child, a lunatic, an immigrant, an émigré). Raine's poem, turning estrangement into a system, has

the effect of making the Martian's incomprehension a familiar business, once we've got the hang of it. And since Martians don't actually exist, their misprision is less interesting than the human variety. The Martian's job, after all, is to misread the human world. Human partiality is more suggestive—intermittent, irrational, anxious. One can crave a more proximate estrangement: how about, rather than an alien sending a postcard home, a resident alien, or a butler, or even a cloned human being doing so?

But it's one thing to achieve that effect in a poem, which can happily float image upon image, and another to do so in a novel that commits itself to a tethered point of view. It would be hard not to personalize estrangement when writing fiction. The eminent Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky was interested in Tolstoy's use of the technique, noting that it consists in the novelist's refusal to let his characters name things or events "properly," describing them as if for the first time. In "War and Peace," for instance, Natasha goes to the opera, which she dislikes and can't understand. Tolstoy's description captures Natasha's perspective, and the opera is seen in the "wrong" way—as large people singing for no reason and spreading out their arms absurdly in front of painted boards.

The twentieth century's most ecstatic defamiliarizer was Vladimir Nabokov, who had a weakness for visual gags of the Martian sort—a half-rolled and sopping black umbrella seen as "a duck in deep mourning," an Adam's apple "moving like the bulging shape of an arrased eavesdropper," and so on. But in his most affecting novel, "Pnin" (1957), estrange-

ment is the condition and the sentence of the novel's hapless hero, the Russian émigré professor Timofey Pnin. In Tolstoyan fashion, Pnin is seeing America as if for the first time, and often gets it wrong: "A curious basketlike net, somewhat like a glorified billiard pocket—lacking, however, a bottom—was suspended for some reason above the garage door." Later, we learn that Pnin must have mistaken a Shriners' hall or a veterans' hall for the Turkish consulate, because of the crowds of fez wearers he has seen entering the building.

In the English literary scene, both Craig Raine and Martin Amis have been, in their devotion to Nabokov, flamboyant Martians. Such writing is thought to prove its quality in the delighted originality of its rich figures of speech; what Amis has called "vow-of-poverty prose" has no place at the high table of estrangement. Cliché and kitsch are abhorred as deadening enemies. (Nabokov regularly dismissed writers such as Camus and Mann for failing to reach what he considered this proper mark.) Kazuo Ishiguro, a consummate vow-of-poverty writer, would seem to be far from that table. Most of his recent novels are narrated in accents of punishing blandness; all of them make plentiful use of cliché, banality, evasion, pompous circumlocution. His new novel, "Klara and the Sun" (Knopf), contains this hilarious dullness: "Josie and I had been having many friendly arguments about how one part of the house connected to another. She wouldn't accept, for instance, that the vacuum cleaner closet was directly beneath the large bathroom." Aha, we say to ourselves,



*In "Klara and the Sun," a robot caretaker tries to come to grips with the anguishing injustice of a dying child.*

we're back in Ishiguro's tragicomic and absurdist world, where the question of a schoolkid's new pencil case ("Never Let Me Go"), or how a butler devises exactly the right "staff plan" ("The Remains of the Day"), or just waiting for a non-arriving bus ("The Unconsoled") can stun the prose for pages.

But "*Klara and the Sun*" confirms one's suspicion that the contemporary novel's truest inheritor of Nabokovian estrangement—not to mention its best and deepest Martian—is Ishiguro, hiding in plain sight all these years, lightly covered by his literary veils of torpor and subterfuge. Ishiguro, like Nabokov, enjoys using unreliable narrators to filter—which is to say, estrange—the world unreliably. (In all his work, only his previous novel, "*The Buried Giant*," had recourse to the comparative stability of third-person narration, and was probably the weaker for it.) Often, these narrators function like people who have emigrated from the known world, like the clone Kathy, in "*Never Let Me Go*," or like immigrants to their own world. When Stevens the butler, in "*The Remains of the Day*," journeys to Cornwall to meet his former colleague Miss Kenton, it becomes apparent that he has never ventured out of his small English county near Oxford.

These speakers are often concealing or repressing something unpleasant—both Stevens and Masaji Ono, the narrator of "*An Artist of the Floating World*," are evading their complicity with fascist politics. They misread the world because reading it "properly" is too painful. The blandness of Ishiguro's narrators is the very rhetoric of their estrangement; blandness is the evasive truce that repression has made with the truth. And we, in turn, are first lulled, then provoked, and then estranged by this sedated equilibrium. "*Never Let Me Go*" begins, "My name is Kathy H. I'm thirty-one years old, and I've been a carer now for over eleven years." That ordinary voice seems at first so familiar, but quickly comes to seem significantly odd, and then wildly different from our own.

You can argue that, at least since Kafka, estrangement of various kinds has been the richest literary resource in fiction—in Kafkaesque fantasy or horror, in science fiction and

dystopian writing, in unreliable narration, in the literature of flâneurial travel as practiced by a writer like W. G. Sebald, and in the literature of exile and immigration. Ishiguro has mastered all these genres, sometimes combining them in a single book, always on his own singular terms. Sebald, for instance, was rightly praised for the strange things he did with his antiquarian first-person prose, as his narrators wander through an eerily defamiliarized English and European landscape. But Ishiguro got there before him, and the prose of "*The Remains of the Day*" (1989) may well have influenced the Anglo-German author of "*The Rings of Saturn*" (1995). Here, Stevens describes the experience of driving away from familiar territory, as he sets out from Darlington Hall:

But then eventually the surroundings grew unrecognizable and I knew I had gone beyond all previous boundaries. I have heard people describe the moment, when setting sail in a ship, when one finally loses sight of the land. I imagine the experience of unease mixed with exhilaration often described in connection with this moment is very similar to what I felt in the Ford as the surroundings grew strange around me. . . . The feeling swept over me that I had truly left Darlington Hall behind, and I must confess I did feel a slight sense of alarm—a sense aggravated by the feeling that I was perhaps not on the correct road at all, but speeding off in totally the wrong direction into a wilderness.

This might well be one of Sebald's troubled intellectuals, his mind full of literature and death, tramping around a suddenly uncanny Europe—a "wilderness." Stevens is, in fact, just driving to the blameless cathedral town of Salisbury.

Klara, the narrator of Ishiguro's new novel, is a kind of robot version of Stevens, and a kind of cousin of Kathy H. She's a carer, a servant, a helpmeet, a toy. "*Klara and the Sun*" opens like something out of "*Toy Story*" or the children's classic "*Corduroy*" (in which a slightly ragged Teddy bear, waiting patiently in a department store, is first turned down by Mother, and finally plucked by her delighted young daughter). Klara is an Artificial Friend, or AF, and is waiting with anticipation to be chosen from a store that seems to be in an American city, sometime in the nearish future. As far as one

can tell, the AFs, which are solar-powered and A.I.-endowed, are a combination of doll and robot. They can talk, walk, see, and learn. They have hair and wear clothes. They appear to be especially prized as companions for children and teen-agers. A girl named Josie, whom Klara estimates, in her pedantic A.I. way, to be "fourteen and a half," sees our narrator in the shopwindow, and excitedly chooses Klara as her AF.

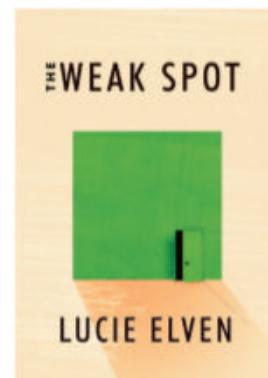
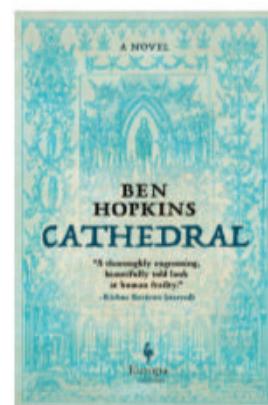
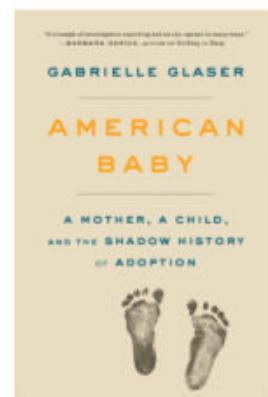
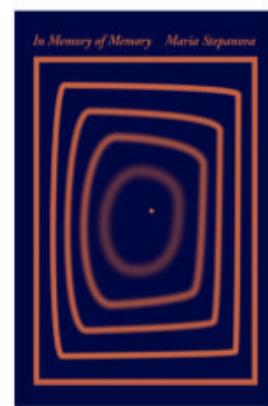
Two kinds of estrangement operate in Ishiguro's novel. There's the relatively straightforward defamiliarization of science fiction. Ishiguro only lightly shades in his dystopian world, probably because he isn't especially committed to the systematic faux realism required by full-blown science fiction. Still, we must navigate around a fictional universe that seems much like our own, yet where people endlessly stare at, or press, their handheld "oblongs," where adults are somehow stratified by their clothes ("The mother was an office worker, and from her shoes and suit we could tell she was high-ranking"), and where roadworkers are called "overhaul men." In this colorless, ruthless place, children are fatalistically sorted into losers and winners; the latter, who are known as "lifted," whose parents decided to "go ahead" with them, are destined for élite colleges and bright futures. Josie's best friend, Rick, wasn't lifted, and it will now be a struggle for him to get a place at Atlas Brookings ("their intake of unlifteds is less than two percent"). The parents of Josie's privileged peers wonder why Rick's parents decided not to go ahead with him. Did they just lose their nerve? It seems significant that the lifted Josie has an AF for companionship and solace, while the poorer, unlifted Rick does not.

Subtler than this teasing nomenclature are the cloudier hermeneutics that have always interested Ishiguro. Klara is a fast learner, but she's only as competent as her algorithms permit, and the world outside the shop can overwhelm her. Her misreadings are suggestive, and since she narrates the book, the reader is supposed to snag on them, too. She seems to lack the word for drones, and calls them "machine birds." She makes a handy

phrase out of the fact that Josie's mother always drinks coffee swiftly in the morning—"the Mother's quick coffee." When Klara is taken for a drive, she marvels that cars would appear on the other side of the road "in the far distance and come speeding towards us, but the drivers never made errors and managed to miss us." She interprets a block of city houses thus: "There were six of them in a row, and the front of each had been painted a slightly different color, to prevent a resident climbing the wrong steps and entering a neighbor's house by mistake." When Klara hears Josie crying, the cracked lament is novel to her, and she renders it with naked precision: "Not only was her voice loud, it was as if it had been folded over onto itself, so that two versions of her voice were being sounded together, pitched fractionally apart."

The pathos and the interest of her misapprehensions are deepened by her proximity to us: she's like a child, or perhaps an autistic adult, looking for signals, trying to copy. As in "The Remains of the Day" and "Never Let Me Go," Ishiguro has created a kind of human simulacrum (a butler, a clone) in order to cast an estranging eye on the pain and brevity of human existence. Pain enters the world of this novel as it does ordinary life, by way of illness and death: Josie suffers from an unnamed disease. Klara had noticed, at their first meeting at the store, that Josie was pale and thin, and that "her walk wasn't like that of other passers-by." We learn that Josie had a sister, who died young. When Klara first hears Josie sobbing in the night (that folded-over sound), the teen-ager is calling for her mother, and crying out, "Don't want to die, Mom. I don't want that." As Josie begins to decline, we realize that Klara was selected to be the special kind of AF who may be required to comfort a young, dying human, and one who may uselessly outlive her human mistress.

What sense can an artificial intelligence make of death? For that matter, what sense can human intelligence make of death? Isn't there something artificial in the way that humans conspire to suppress the certainty of their own extinction? We invest great significance



## BRIEFLY NOTED

**In Memory of Memory**, by Maria Stepanova, translated from the Russian by Sasha Dugdale (New Directions). This remarkable account of the author's Russian-Jewish family expands into a reflection on the role of art and ethics in informing memory. After the death of an aunt, Stepanova examines family lore and heirlooms that hint at how the family largely survived the atrocities of the tsarist and Soviet eras. She probes gaps in her knowledge, and—drawing on artists and writers including Charlotte Salomon and Marina Tsvetaeva—considers how memories are perpetuated and manipulated. Stepanova is both sensitive and rigorous, writing that she was "smitten with the idea of blindly retrieving and reliving scraps from my life, from a collective life, rescued from the shadows of the known and accepted histories."

**American Baby**, by Gabrielle Glaser (Viking). In 1961, Margaret Erle Katz, an unmarried teen-ager, gave birth to a son she named Stephen. Her story anchors this book, an indictment of forced adoptions in mid-century America. Threatened with juvenile detention, she was coerced into surrendering her baby to an adoption agency that lied to adoptive parents about where the babies were from, and to birth mothers about where they were sent. Shame, and a closed adoption system, discouraged Katz from looking for her son, and it was not until he started researching his ancestry that, in 2014, a relative was able to connect them. As some states unseal birth records, millions of Americans are still seeking their biological parents—victims, Glaser writes, of a system in which in order "to create one family, another had to be disintegrated."

**Cathedral**, by Ben Hopkins (Europa). Set in Germany, this ambitious début novel begins in 1229, when a young serf buys his freedom and becomes an apprentice stonemason, working on the construction of a cathedral. "It will be made of the mortal Stuff of this World," his master says of the project. "But it will point, in all its stones and mortar, to He who laid the cornerstone, the foundations of the Universe." As the edifice rises and decades pass, Hopkins weaves together a multitude of voices to examine the relationship between medieval worship and the era's politics and economics. The resulting epic is both sweeping and human.

**The Weak Spot**, by Lucie Elven (Soft Skull). This fable-like novel takes place in an unnamed town at the top of a mountain, accessible only by funicular, and near woods where, centuries ago, beasts were said to roam. The narrator is a pharmacist-in-training, alienated from her family, who arrives to work for an imperious, mercurial man named Mr. Malone. Watching him absorb the complaints and confessions of his customers, she begins to imitate him, learning to enter their minds "like a contortionist threading her fillet of a body through her arms." This process, along with Malone's subtle intimidations, leads to the erosion of her identity. Hints of trauma begin to flicker through the novel's dreamlike surface, as the narrator attempts to keep her feelings "as still as possible."

in the hope for, and meaning of, longevity, but, seen from a cosmic viewpoint—by God, or by an intelligent robot—a long life is still a short life, whether one dies at nineteen or ninety. “Never Let Me Go” wrung a profound parable out of such questions: the embodied suggestion of that novel is that a free, long, human life is, in the end, just an unfree, short, cloned life.

“Klara and the Sun” continues this meditation, powerfully and affectingly. Ishiguro uses his inhuman, all too human narrators to gaze upon the theological heft of our lives, and to call its bluff. When Pascal wrote that “an image of men’s condition” was “a number of men in chains, all condemned to death, some of whom are slaughtered daily within view of the others, so that those who are left see their own condition in that of their fellows, and, regarding one another with sorrow and without hope, wait their turn,” the vision was saved from darkest tragedy by God’s certain presence and salvation. Ishiguro offers no such promise. We learn, late in the book, that Artificial Friends are all subject to what is called a “slow fade,” as their batteries expire. Of course, we, too, are subject to a slow fade; it might be the definition of a life.

Klara wants to save Josie from early death, but she can do this only within her understanding and her means, which is where the novel’s title becomes movingly significant. Because the AFs are solar-powered, they lose energy and vitality without the sun’s rays; so, quite logically, the sun is a life-giving pagan god to them. Klara capitalizes the Sun, and speaks often of “a special kind of nourishment from the Sun,” “the Sun and his kindness to us,” and so on. When Klara joins Josie’s household, she assesses the kitchen as “an excellent room for the Sun to look into.” Before she left the store, a troubling incident had occurred. Roadwork had started outside the shop, and the workers had parked a smoke-belching machine on the street. Klara knows only that the machine’s three short funnels create enough smoke to blot out sunlight. It has a name, Cootings, on its side, so Klara takes to calling it the Cootings Machine. There are several

days of smoke and fumes. When a customer mentions “pollution” (which Klara capitalizes), and points through the shopwindow at the machine, adding “how dangerous Pollution was for everyone,” Klara gets the idea that the Cootings Machine “might be a machine to fight Pollution.” But another AF tells her that “it was something specially designed to make more of it.” Klara begins to see the battle between the sinister Cootings Machine and the Sun as one between rival forces of darkness and light: “The Sun, I knew, was trying his utmost, and towards the end of the second bad afternoon, even though the smoke was worse than ever, his patterns appeared again, though only faintly. I became worried and asked Manager if we’d still get all our nourishment.”

So Klara begins to construct a world view—a cosmogony, really—around her life-giving god. If the Sun nourishes AFs, it must nourish humans, too. If the Sun is a god, then perhaps one might pray to this god; one might, eventually, bargain and cajole, as Abraham did with the Lord. So Klara prays to the Sun: “Please make Josie better.... Josie’s still a child and she’s done nothing unkind.” And she has a specific bargain in mind. She tells the Sun that she knows how much he dislikes Pollution. “Supposing I were able somehow to find this machine and destroy it,” she says. “To put an end to its Pollution. Would you then consider, in return, giving your special help to Josie?” Klara sets about vandalizing the first Cootings Machine she comes across, apparently unaware that it’s not the only one in the world.

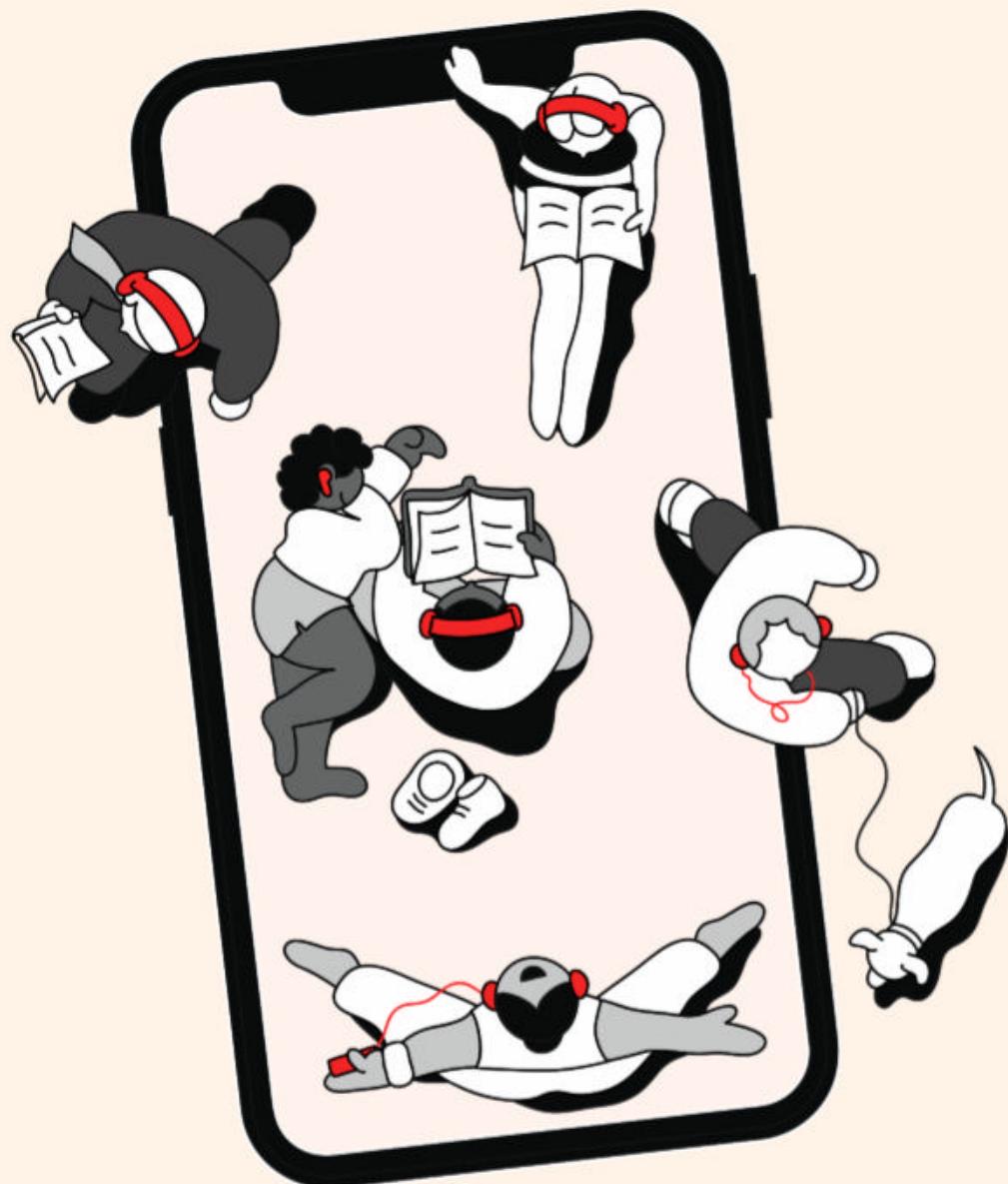
Other writers might labor to make their science fiction more coherent. Ishiguro seems unconcerned that our AF somehow understands godly mercy and “sin” (“she’s done nothing unkind”) but can’t work out why houses are painted different colors. Another novelist might play up the dystopian ecological implications of a world in which the sun is beset by forces of life-quenching darkness. These implications are certainly present here. But Ishiguro keeps his eye on the human connection. Only Ishiguro, I think, would insist on grounding this speculative narrative so deeply in the ordinary; only he would

add, to a description of a battle between sunlight and darkness, Klara’s prosaic and plaintive coda: “I became worried and asked Manager if we’d still get all our nourishment.”

Ishiguro invites us to share the logic and the partiality of Klara’s world view by making plain that its logic flows from its partiality—sun equals life equals God—and by making plain how closely her world resembles ours. Her estrangement is ours, a reminder of the provisional nature of our own grasp on reality. No more than Klara can we understand—theologically speaking—why children die, which is why we, from the merely superstitious to the orthodoxy religious, construct our own systems of petition and bargain. If it is time for a child’s slow fade to become an unbearably faster fade, there is nothing, theologically speaking, we can do about it: the sun will continue to shine down—“having no alternative, on the nothing new,” as Beckett had it—on the just and unjust alike. Our prayers evaporate into the solar heat.

At one moment in her pleading on behalf of Josie, Klara wheedlingly says to the Sun, “I know favoritism isn’t desirable.” The word has resonance, but weak leverage, in a world premised on systematic favoritism, in which whole classes of society are “lifted” and others are not. In Klara’s world, favoritism is considered not just desirable but apparently essential; she is a product of it. The relation between society’s increasingly invidious, focussed, and sinister patterns of selection (fascism, genetic engineering, “lifting”) and the cosmic arbitrariness of our ultimate destinies has been Ishiguro’s great theme: our nasty efforts at “favoritism” versus God’s or the universe’s inscrutable lack of it. For we die unequally but finally equally, in ways whose randomness seems to challenge all notions of pattern, design, selection. Theology is, in some guises, just the metaphysics of favoritism: a prayer is a postcard asking for a favor, sent upward. Whether our postcards are read by anyone has become the searching doubt of Ishiguro’s recent novels, in which this master, so utterly unlike his peers, goes about creating his ordinary, strange, godless allegories. ♦

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# ROOMS OF THEIR OWN

*A history of New York's most famous hotel for women.*

BY CASEY CEP



For decades, the Barbizon was one of the city's most coveted addresses.

On the corner of East Sixty-third Street and Lexington Avenue, in a building where the apartments sell for anywhere from one million to thirteen million dollars, there is a woman who pays around a hundred and thirteen dollars a month in rent. She lives on the fourth floor, and has maid service two days a week, a front-desk staff to take her messages, and a private bricked terrace at the end of her hall.

That woman is one of a handful who have lived in this twenty-three-story building for decades, through renovations and condominium conversions; as the World Trade Center rose and fell and was rebuilt; as mini-skirts gave way to bell-bottoms and then to skinny jeans; as newspapers

went on strike and transit workers went on strike and teachers went on strike; as civil-rights marchers and gay-rights protesters took to the streets; as crime waves gave way to market booms. These women checked into the Barbizon Hotel and—even though it technically no longer exists—they never left.

New York City once had more than a hundred residential hotels, places like the Algonquin, where Dorothy Parker and James Thurber held court by day and laid their heads at night; and the Carlyle, where President Kennedy kept an apartment; and the Plaza, whose most famous resident was fictional, the six-year-old Eloise, who lived in her “pink, pink, pink” room. Most of these hotels were curiosities of long-since-reformed real-estate regulations, ex-

empt from building-height restrictions and from fire-safety regulations, so long as they did not have kitchens in their guest rooms. Some of them opened in the late nineteenth century, though most were built around the time of the First World War; few had the cultural cachet of the Barbizon. The subject of films and of novels, the Barbizon was also a mainstay of the society pages. Actresses like Grace Kelly, Liza Minnelli, Phylicia Rashad, and Cybill Shepherd took their beauty sleep there, walking the same halls as writers like Sylvia Plath and Peggy Noonan and riding the same elevators as the future First Lady Nancy Reagan.

The historian Paulina Bren, in her new book, “The Barbizon: The Hotel That Set Women Free” (Simon & Schuster), chronicles the experiences of these women, and of some of the hundreds of thousands of others like them, who stayed in the hotel. More than a biography of a building, the book is an absorbing history of labor and women’s rights in one of the country’s largest cities, and also of the places that those women left behind to chase their dreams. In Bren’s telling, some of the same forces that brought them to Manhattan led to the end of the Barbizon as they knew it—and to the New York City that we know today.

The Barbizon was not Manhattan’s first hotel exclusively for women—that was Alexander T. Stewart’s Hotel for Working Women, on Fourth Avenue, which opened in 1878 and closed within a year. But the Barbizon was larger, more fashionable, and more successful. The seven hundred or so women staying there on any given night had access to a swimming pool, a gymnasium, a library, lecture halls, soundproof music rooms, a rooftop garden, and first-floor businesses including a hairdresser, a dry cleaner, a pharmacy, and hosiery and millinery shops. There was a free afternoon tea for guests. Male visitors were barred from the residential floors.

The hotel’s Upper East Side corner lot, previously the site of Temple Rodeph Sholom, had cost its developers nearly a million dollars, and they spent another four million on

construction. The modern amenities and the neo-Gothic style of the skyscraper were designed to appeal to young women from the middle and upper classes; the limited access for men and the letters of recommendation that the Barbizon required of guests were meant to appease their parents. Those parents wanted to believe that the hotel was run like a nunnery, but for their daughters it was more like a sorority. For more than three decades, Mae Sibley, officially an assistant manager and unofficially the front-desk bouncer, screened for what she called “the right kind of girl,” assigning letter grades to would-be residents based on their age and their looks: A’s were for women under twenty-eight, while those over thirty-eight were lucky to get C’s.

The Barbizon was named for a school of naturalist painters in nineteenth-century France, but its glamorous clientele quickly earned it the nickname the Dollhouse. When the hotel opened, in 1927, flappers and new women were all the rage—and also a reliable source of outrage. Women had won the right to vote in 1920, but their appetite for other rights generated a backlash, including new laws and regulations meant to control their lives before and after marriage. Hotels regularly refused to accommodate female travellers who arrived alone after dark, the implication being that any such woman was a prostitute. New York is thought to have had more speakeasies during Prohibition than anywhere else in America, and some of the most notorious among them were run by women, including Mary (Texas) Guinan, a gunslinging movie star turned hostess, and Belle Livingstone, a stage actress who’d had four husbands and ran nearly as many wet night clubs, most of them shut down by the Feds almost as fast as she opened them. (Though not before she had supposedly served Al Capone, John D. Rockefeller, an English duke, and Russian noblemen—on the same night.) When alcohol became legal again, in 1933, some bars banned women entirely, and others required them to have an escort if they wanted to drink. By then, women were attending college and entering the workforce at higher

rates than ever before; in response, half the states in the country made it illegal for them to hold a job if they were married.

The Barbizon pitched itself as a kind of middle ground between the old and the new, offering young women a safe and respectable place to stay, while also offering them entrée into whatever sort of life they desired: careers, if they wanted to be working women; cosmopolitan dating pools, if they were looking for a husband. The hotel had club rooms for some of the Seven Sisters schools, and it cultivated special relationships with certain employers and institutions—which, taken together, suggest the range of occupations that women of this particular class were allowed to pursue at the time.

Students from the Katharine Gibbs Secretarial School, for instance, had a private dining room and lived on two floors of the Barbizon while they learned typing and shorthand and attended what some people considered charm school. They were required to don hats and white gloves; they studied art with László Moholy-Nagy and literature with Mark Van Doren. Until the Civil War, secretaries were mostly male, but “Gibbs girls” were part of the wave of women who feminized the field.

Besides the “Gibblets,” the Barbizon was home to a number of Powers models, women who were under contract with the John Robert Powers Agency. Many of these women had used beauty-pageant winnings to buy their bus tickets to New York and aspired to appear in Sears or Montgomery Ward catalogues. All the models who signed with Powers got the same matching black hatbox and filled it with the accessories and makeup that they carried to shoots around the city. As prestigious as it was to be part of what is thought to be the world’s first modelling agency, Powers models could not always make a living from the infrequent gigs and irregular income. Take Celeste Gheen, who was profiled in this magazine in 1940. Her early years with Powers were rough: nearly half her wages went to covering the weekly eleven-dollar Barbizon rent, and she went home to Cleveland after a nervous breakdown. She returned to New

York, spent another few years building up her reputation, and eventually averaged fifteen or twenty hours of work a week, having become the face—or the limbs, or the lips—of five cigarette brands, Spam, Texaco, Oldsmobile, Log Cabin syrup, Schaefer’s beer, Bayer aspirin, Bon Ami cleanser, Simmons Beautyrest mattresses, and Hellmann’s mayonnaise. (She once made fifty-five dollars by taking a full-body bath in Colman’s mustard.) But even successful models struggled between paychecks and were frustrated by how long agencies took to pay them. One night at the Barbizon, a woman named Eileen Ford listened to a friend complain about these conditions and decided that agencies should treat the models—rather than the photographers or the advertisers—as their clients. She founded her own agency, which went on to represent the likes of Candice Bergen, Martha Stewart, Christie Brinkley, and Brooke Shields.

A common venue for the work of these models was women’s magazines like *Mademoiselle*, which was founded in 1935 and not long afterward developed a guest-editor program that offered college students internships in New York, during which they stayed at the Barbizon. The editor-in-chief Betsy Talbot Blackwell increased the magazine’s circulation more than fivefold, and cultivated a new readership, which ranged from teen-age girls to career women. She published Truman Capote, Flannery O’Connor, and Edward Albee, among others, and made the internship program one of the most prestigious in the country, decreeing that “the staff must get younger every year, even if it kills them in the process.”

The Millies, as the guest editors were known, numbered one or two dozen each summer. Many went on to writing careers, including Joan Didion, Sylvia Plath, Gael Greene, and Meg Wolitzer. In her novel “The Bell Jar,” Plath fictionalized *Mademoiselle* as *Ladies’ Day* and the Barbizon as the Amazon, including details from her own fateful last night at the hotel, when she threw every article of clothing she had brought to the city off the roof, a gesture some Millies saw as a catharsis, others as a sign of despair. Didion began her essay “Goodbye to

All That” with her arrival in New York for the internship. Greene returned to the Barbizon in 1957 to write a series of articles for the *Post*—not about the hotel per se, but about the kinds of women who lived there. She designated some of them “lone women” who checked in and never checked out, forsaking husbands for work or enduring hotel life because, as she tells it, they never found a way to get to the suburbs. “Our town,” the series teased, “is full of them. They come—looking for careers, romance, adventure, an escape from boredom. What happens to them once they get here? What of their high hopes for spectacular success, their dreams of marriage to a handsome prince charming? Can they overcome the universal fears of metropolitan bachelor girls—fear of failure, fear of spinsterhood, fear of sexual assault?”

Greene’s exposé drew attention to what the Barbizon and plenty of other social institutions of the era had tried to keep hidden: the depression and the despair experienced by so many mid-century women who were striving for careers while facing systematic discrimination, and pursuing sexual independence while being judged by the mores of earlier generations. In addition to secret abortions and covered-up suicides, there were women who could never afford their own apartment, and families who lived in residential hotels because they had nowhere else to go. Despite its reputation, the Barbizon had never housed only ingénues. The future diplomat and reproductive-rights advocate Robin Chandler Duke lived at the hotel as a teen-ager, sharing a tiny room with her mother and sister when her father could no longer support them. One of the earliest residents was the activist and actress Molly Brown, who famously survived the sinking of the Titanic but found herself financially strapped after her estranged husband, a millionaire, died intestate.

Almost all the women in Bren’s book are white, a reflection of the demographics of the Barbizon’s clientele. “The Upper East Side was New York’s whitest of white enclaves,” Bren writes, before telling the story of the

woman she suspects to have been the first Black guest at the hotel. In 1956, Barbara Chase-Riboud, a student at Temple University, won one of the *Mademoiselle* guest editorships. Already a distinguished artist with work in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, she would go on to publish a best-selling novel about Sally Hemings. But, during her internship, Chase-Riboud was asked to leave the room whenever clients who opposed integration came to the Madison Avenue office for meetings. She was not allowed to participate in the summer fashion show and was never invited to use the swimming pool in the basement of the Barbizon. She did, however, appear in *Mademoiselle*, photographed with her fellow-Millies for the annual college issue, which also included an article about the activist Autherine Lucy’s desegregation of the University of Alabama.

The civil-rights movement took place mostly outside the walls of the Barbizon—although Bren suggests that the fight for equality may have had something to do with the hotel’s demise. In 1963, the same year that Plath published “The Bell Jar,” Betty Friedan published “The Feminine Mystique,” offering the sort of women who stayed at the Barbizon a way of seeing themselves in the feminist movement. And in 1970, when Gloria Steinem and Eleanor Holmes Norton led

That petition soon became irrelevant. Real-estate trends were making residential hotels like the Barbizon obsolete. Shared bathrooms and common kitchens were out; luxury co-ops and condos were in. A consultant tasked with reviving the Barbizon by renovating the space and attracting new residents discovered that more than a hundred of the women living in the hotel were protected by rent control or rent stabilization. He disparaged them as lonely hearts like those Greene had written about decades before, claiming that they loitered in the lobby in curlers and slippers, heckled younger guests, and opposed integrating the hotel with male guests. In reality, of course, management was just eager to replace them with higher-paying clientele. But the Women, as they were called, understandably did not agree with that characterization and did not want to move, and they found an effective leader for their resistance in the Crown Publishing editor Alice Sachs, who, during her more than forty years at the hotel, took on Tammany Hall and served as Manhattan Democratic Commissioner. Sachs and the other women were paying a fourth of the average rent for the area, and they banded together to retain a tenant-rights lawyer.

In the end, their rents were protected, but not their way of life. The Barbizon opened to men on Valentine’s Day in 1981, with a promotional lottery to determine which bachelor would become the first man to spend the night at the hotel and which married couple would be the first to share a room. Allowing men upstairs resulted in scandals, but of a different sort than the founders had feared: in a tabloid trifecta, the Republican lobbyist Craig J. Spence was arrested at the Barbizon, after police, responding to a distress call he made when a male prostitute allegedly threatened him with a gun, found cocaine and a crack pipe in his room. A few months later, the wife of the first President Bush’s Secretary of Commerce was mugged at gunpoint outside her Barbizon room.

By this point, the Barbizon had shuffled through a series of owners: bought by KLM Royal Dutch Airlines in 1983 and renamed the Golden Tulip Barbi-



marchers down Fifth Avenue, they were calling for an end to gender discrimination of all kinds, technically including same-sex housing like that offered by the Barbizon. After New York City began making sex a protected category in its anti-discrimination laws, the hotel petitioned the Commission on Human Rights for an exemption—as did the New York Mets, which wanted permission to keep holding Ladies Day eight games a year.

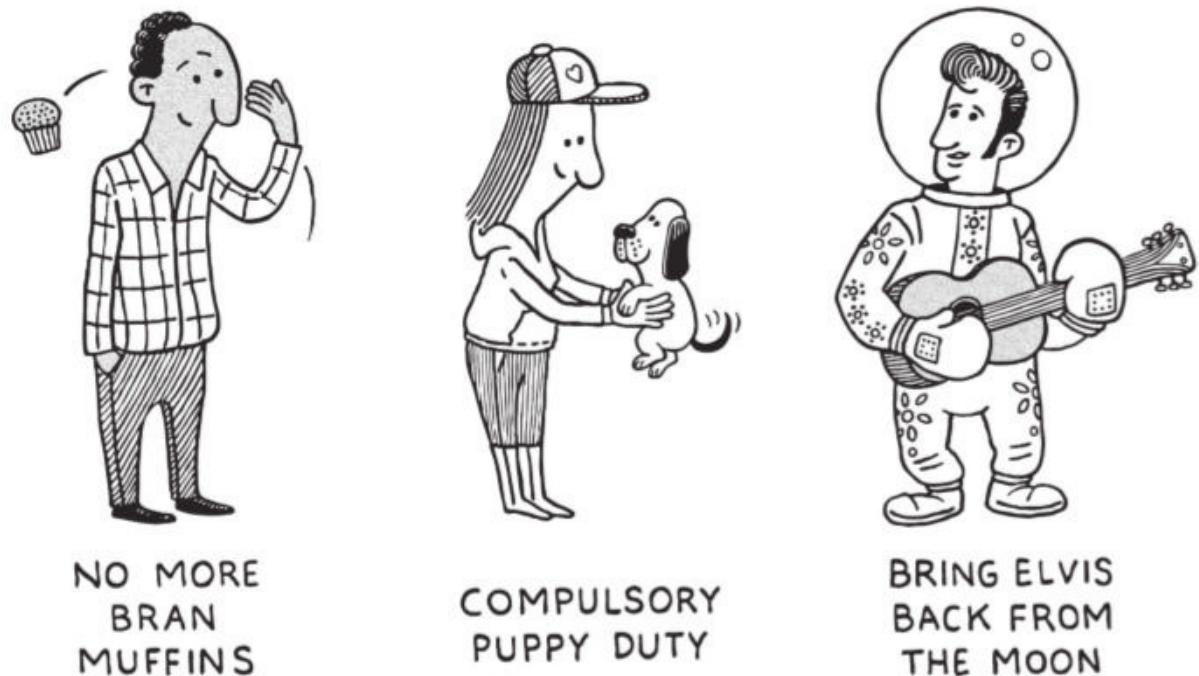
zon Hotel, it was then sold to a group that included the owners of the Studio 54 night club, who went into foreclosure in 1994. One of them managed to buy back the hotel with another group of investors in 1998, only to eventually sell it to the Berwind Property Group, which renamed it the Melrose Hotel at the Barbizon before announcing that it would be converted into condominiums. The earliest buyers at Barbizon/63 included the grandson of the Bulgari jewelry founder, the former C.E.O. of the Meow Mix cat-food company, and the comedian Ricky Gervais. Condos were listed for as much as fifteen million dollars, but the Barbizon women moved back into their renovated S.R.O.s for the same rents that they had been paying before.

Bren argues that what first attracted women to the hotel is what ultimately shut it down: freedom. In the twenties, women had limited options for work, and few places to live outside the family home. But, with each passing decade, as more careers and more housing opportunities opened up to them, fewer and fewer wanted to live in same-sex hotels.

A residential hotel in New York offers a rich longitudinal history of class and of sexual politics, and by and large Bren does her subject justice. "The Barbizon" is full of fantastic detail, from Grace Kelly scandalizing other guests by dancing topless in the hallway to the litany of men who claimed to have sneaked past the front desk. But, apart from one stray remark, Bren ignores whatever countercultural narratives might have been recovered from the shadows and silences of the hotel's institutional history. That remark comes from the owner of Malachy's, a nearby bar, who, in his recollections of the neighborhood, mentioned rumors of "dykes, queers, fruits, and pansies." Bren says nothing else about same-sex attraction among any of the hundreds of thousands of women who stayed there over the decades. It's a surprising lacuna in the work of a scholar who seems to have mined every newspaper report, memoir, living resident, and private archive of anyone who ever stayed at the hotel.

Perhaps because they left the most

## HOW TO UNITE THE COUNTRY



extensive records of their experiences, or perhaps because she herself is a writer, Bren focusses too much on the famous authors who called the Barbizon home. After writing about both Plath and Didion in the chapter on *Mademoiselle*, the book devotes a stand-alone chapter to each of them, repeating material and revisiting the same narrow demographic. That's a shame, because some of the most fascinating characters in the book are the least well known. One of Plath's fellow-editors, for instance, was Neva Nelson, who watched a nuclear-bomb test with her geology class in Death Valley the summer before her internship, an experience that left her with facial scars that lasted seven years. She later got thyroid cancer, which she blamed on a radioactive fish that she had swallowed that day, on a dare. The summer Nelson worked at *Mademoiselle*, she began dating a wealthy New Yorker who wanted her to stay in the city, but whose family helped her settle her bill at the Barbizon so that she could return to the West Coast. At the end of her trip, she realized she was pregnant. She later delivered the baby herself, in the bathroom of a couple who had offered to help her but took her son away not long after he was born. She never saw him again.

It was another tragedy associated with the Barbizon that helped her carry on. "Sylvia saved me," Nelson tells Bren. "I didn't want to be known as the other one who killed herself."

For Nelson, as for most of the women who stayed at the Barbizon, the hotel was a way station, somewhere to escape their past or to plan their future. Much of history has that kind of transience; it is full of lives and institutions too fleeting to have left much of a trace. The delight of "The Barbizon" is how it temporarily holds those forces of oblivion at bay, as Bren lets us into the rooms and the lives of otherwise anonymous women. Such glimpses are sometimes uncanny, as when Peggy LaViolette, who first stayed at the Barbizon during the summer of 1955, returned thirty years later, after the hotel had integrated, to stay there with her husband. One night, after getting off the elevator, LaViolette watched an older woman walk down the hall and disappear through an unmarked door, behind which she briefly glimpsed a section of the Barbizon's outdated green paint and original doorframes. "The old woman glanced back again at Peggy, said nothing, and then closed the door behind her," Bren writes. "Peggy shivered as if she had seen a ghost." ♦

# CHORD TALK

*“Switched On Pop” brings musicology to the Top Forty.*

BY ALEX ROSS



When I was a music-obsessed kid, in the nineteen-seventies and eighties, I could easily find radio and television shows that purported to explain how classical music worked. Karl Haas genially elucidated form and style on “Adventures in Good Music,” and Leonard Bernstein held forth on PBS about Beethoven. These were late-period examples of a genre known as music appreciation, which peaked in the thirties and forties, when Walter Damrosch, on NBC radio, invented ditzy ditties for the classics—“This is/The sym-pho-nee/That Schu-bert wrote but nev-er fin-ished . . .”—and Aaron Copland had an unlikely best-

seller, “What to Listen for in Music.”

Music appreciation is having a resurgence, although the music being appreciated has changed. Early in the twenty-tens, song-explainer videos began proliferating on the Internet. When podcasts took off, dissections of the innards of pop hits were in demand. Now TikTok has its own pithy army of music theorists. I occasionally checked up on the trend, usually when musicologists became incensed about something on social media. In 2016, Vox Media published a video claiming to have identified a “secret chord” that made songs sound “Christmassy.” This esoteric harmony turned out to be a half-diminished

*Episodes often pair a hit with such musical topics as text painting or modulations.*

seventh, which has appeared in countless pieces across the centuries, Christmassy and not.

The podcast “Switched On Pop,” which began in 2014, offers music appreciation at a higher level. I started listening in September, when the hosts, Nate Sloan and Charlie Harding, presented a four-part series on Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. I almost fled when Sloan began singing along to the Fifth in the Damroschian style: the second theme of the first movement became “Lit-tle Fräu-lein Hen-ri-et-ta.” But the earnest enthusiasm of the effort won me over, and I set about exploring other episodes, which focus less on Beethoven than on Bieber. I gave up trying to follow current pop years ago, but I soon found myself absorbed in disquisitions on the creative arc of Taylor Swift. Perhaps the ultimate test of good music criticism is whether it can keep you interested in music you don’t know, even in music you don’t think you like.

The secret chord in “Switched On Pop” is that the hosts know what they are talking about. Sloan is an assistant professor of musicology at the University of Southern California, specializing in pop and jazz. Harding is a songwriter. Friends from college, they had the idea for the podcast during a road trip along the California coast. When Carly Rae Jepsen’s “Call Me Maybe” came on the stereo, Sloan told Harding about how he’d used the song to teach some students the rudiments of music theory. After losing themselves in an analysis of the song—or an “overanalysis,” as they like to say—they decided to record their conversations.

The basic pedagogical technique of the podcast might be called mutual mansplaining. Sloan and Harding take turns imparting musical basics to each other, with one adopting a tone of expertise and the other playing dumb. (“Can you explain the major/minor chord?”) As the bantering rhythms of a long-standing friendship take over, this artifice threatens to collapse. When, in the middle of a discussion of text painting in Justin Timberlake’s “Can’t Stop the Feeling!,” Harding describes the technique as “a paintbrush that has, like, a word on it,” Sloan responds, “I think you’re being deliberately obtuse.” Indeed, Harding

soon delivers a succinct definition: “Text painting is where something that happens lyrically is mirrored musically—that the musical form resonates along with whatever the message of the song is.”

A typical “Switched On Pop” episode pairs a contemporary hit with a musical topic—modal scales, descending bass lines, modulations, and so on. The strategy that Sloan used when he taught harmony by way of “Call Me Maybe” remains in play. Because the songs are so familiar to much of the audience, the hosts can wallow in technical lingo without fear of losing people. A sly bait and switch is at work: the conversation often wanders far from the song in question, ranging across pop-music history or delving into the classical past. For me, the switch operated in the opposite direction. For the sake of listening to Sloan and Harding musicologically jabber away, I received an education in the mysteries of the modern Top Forty.

Somewhat at random, I clicked on a 2019 episode that scrutinizes “If I Can’t Have You,” a song by the young Canadian singer-songwriter Shawn Mendes, who was known to me mainly as an underwear model. The topic was declamation—the art of setting texts to music in a way that follows the rhythms and the stresses of speech. The general rule is that songwriters should imitate spoken language as closely as possible, but the rule can be bent. Sloan notes that Taylor Swift, in “You Need to Calm Down,” sings “some-bo-*dy*,” while Whitney Houston and Freddie Mercury, rendering the same word, waver between emphasizing the first syllable and emphasizing the second. Harding expresses distress over Beyoncé’s “Sand-*cas-tles*.” The conversation then spirals back in time to Handel’s “Messiah,” which contains the peculiar prosody “in-cor-rup-ti-ble,” and eventually returns to Mendes, who is found to practice nearly impeccable declamation.

“Switched On Pop” delights in such detours. The episode that assesses Timberlake’s text painting takes in Bernart de Ventadorn’s twelfth-century troubadour song “Can vei la lauzeta mover” (“When I see the lark beat its wings”). A look back at Queen’s “We Are the Champions” includes a digression on the operatic cadenza. A survey of musical selections from the Netflix series

“Bridgerton” becomes happily distracted by the erotic dimensions of four-handed piano playing in the nineteenth century. This isn’t to say that the podcast is entirely a Trojan horse for music-history lessons. An investigation of the Weeknd’s monster hit “Blinding Lights” concentrates on the song’s eighties-era production and dives into an almost line-by-line reading of its lyrics, pinpointing a tension between its danceable beats and its allusions to depression and addiction. Harding links the ambiguity to the song’s main harmonic template—a “chord loop” that sways between darker minor chords (F, C) and brighter major ones (E-flat, B-flat). This zest for detail sets Sloan and Harding apart from most pop commentators now working.

As a persnickety classical-music critic, AI inevitably had some issues with the Beethoven series, which is called “The 5th.” The first two episodes consist of a movement-by-movement account of the symphony, and, as I listened to Sloan and Harding banter over the score, I thought of “New Horizons in Music Appreciation,” a brilliant skit by the composer-comedian Peter Schickele, in which the Fifth is narrated in sports-announcer style. (“And they’re off, with a four-note theme.”) Still, they efficiently lay out the piece’s structure, with apt commentary from members of the New York Philharmonic, which collaborated on the series.

In the third installment, the guys confront the posthumous cult of Beethoven, the ossification of the canon, and issues of élitism and racism in classical music. In September, a stray tweet about this episode riled up right-wingers on social media, who warned that podcasters were threatening to “cancel” Beethoven. If those self-appointed defenders of Western civilization had listened to the entire series, they would have found that the hosts were simply arguing for Beethoven to be played alongside newer music. I had my own reservations about Sloan and Harding’s narrative. It’s never clear what role the Fifth itself plays in the undeniable syndrome of classical élitism, and when they merrily catalogue pop-culture riffs on the symphony’s opening gesture—Walter Murphy’s disco track “A Fifth of Beethoven” and the like—they tes-

tify to Beethoven’s uncannily wide reach.

What struck me most about “The 5th” is that it adopts a mode of sociological critique not often found on “Switched On Pop.” The show tends to be formalist and apolitical: melodies are melodies, chords are chords, patterns recur across the centuries. There is, however, no such thing as “pure music,” as Beethoven’s afterlife makes clear. The issue surfaces in a fascinating way when Sloan and Harding address Kanye West’s recent ventures in gospel music. They begin by explaining that they’ve been tuning out West of late, making brief mention of his “MAGA-embracing” side. Midway through the episode, they reach the provisional conclusion that West’s gospel music merits attention, insofar as it’s “deconstructing conventions and norms.” Then they bring on a gospel authority, the critic Naima Cochrane, who supplies a much harsher assessment. West is dabbling in gospel, Cochrane says, at the same time that he’s supporting Trump and describing slavery as a choice: “He’s saying things that are very anti-Black, even in a space that is modelled after call-and-response traditions and musical narrative traditions that go back to slavery.” Sloan and Harding, in a commendable exercise in self-critique, allow themselves to be led away from their initial praise for West’s gospel incursions.

An irony attendant on contemporary pop is that the discourse around it recycles many of the grandiose formulas that have long beset classical music. Reviews of Taylor Swift’s 2020 album “folklore” routinely used the words “genius” and “masterpiece.” Sloan and Harding have called Swift “Beethovenian.” Such genuflections may seem less problematic in pop than they do in classical music, where the grim weight of European history looms behind the idolization of Beethoven and Wagner. Yet American culture has its own engulfing shadows: white supremacy has shaped popular song from the minstrelsy days onward, and celebrity power mirrors the radical inequality of the winner-takes-all marketplace. I’d love to see an intelligent podcast like “Switched On Pop” push past the façade of triumphal innocence. The deepest kind of music appreciation takes music not as a divinely gifted art but as an agonizingly human one. ♦

# WILDEST DREAMS

*"Behind Her Eyes," on Netflix.*

BY NAOMI FRY



It can be tricky to pull off a double twist. “Behind Her Eyes,” Netflix’s new nail-biter of a miniseries, is thematically chaotic, and its characters are messy, but its ending has an effect like breaking the seal of a ketchup bottle—a startling, satisfying *pop*. Many viewers were outraged by the finale; shortly after the show’s six episodes dropped, disturbed fans took to Twitter with the hashtag #WTFThatEnding. But, much like the “sensation fiction” of the Victorian era—those cleverly plotted “novels with a secret” intent on revealing the bonkers impulses beneath the respectable surfaces of ordinary people—“Behind Her Eyes” manages to be both over the

top and efficient. It’s the kind of show that rewards a reread, if one is able to stomach it.

Louise Barnsley (the excellent Simona Brown) is a young Black single mom who works as a part-time secretary at a posh mental-health clinic in London. As the series opens, we see her leaving her seven-year-old son, Adam (Tyler Howitt), with a babysitter for a rare night out. Cue the meet-cute: in the next scene, at a bar, Louise bumps into a handsome, thick-maned Scot named David Ferguson (Tom Bateman), spilling his drink all over him. She insists on buying him a new one, which ends up being out of her

*In Steven Lightfoot’s twist-heavy miniseries, the violence is largely psychological.*

price range. (“Bloody Macallan?” she asks, in disbelief. “I’ve never heard of it!”) One drink leads to another, and the flirty evening ends with a kiss, which David breaks off, looking tortured, before apologizing and leaving. What a coincidence it is when, the next day, he turns out to be Louise’s new boss.

David is a psychiatrist. He is also married—to the hyper-composed Adele (a spooky Eve Hewson), a white woman perennially draped in white clothing. The couple just relocated from Brighton to a leafy corner of Islington, where, as Louise says knowingly, “the local M.P. lives.” In what appears to be another coincidence, Louise bumps into Adele on the street and is drawn into a friendship with her, which she keeps hidden from David. Soon enough, Louise and David embark on a steamy affair, which she keeps hidden from Adele. David has his advantages, among them the physique of a Calvin Klein model, a face that is strikingly reminiscent of Roger Federer’s, and the appealingly brooding air of a hangdog puppy. So why, Louise wonders, does his wife seem so lonely, and terrified that she might miss his calls, which arrive every day at predetermined times? Why is her cupboard crowded with pill bottles? Who gave her the shiner she’s suddenly sporting? Why, for God’s sake, does she only have a flip phone? And why is it that she always seems to know things that she has no logical way of knowing?

“Behind Her Eyes,” which is based on Sarah Pinborough’s best-selling novel of the same name, has been adapted for TV by Steven Lightfoot—a writer on the NBC thriller “Hannibal,” and the creator of the Marvel crime series “The Punisher,” on Netflix. Unlike the splatter-core violence of those shows, “Behind Her Eyes” is more of an inner simmer: its violence is largely psychological, like if Hannibal Lecter were a repressed housewife. The show also has supernatural elements, which reminded me of such series as “Stranger Things” and “The OA,” in which the real is dappled with the mystical in order to throw the characters’ innermost desires into high relief. In tone and genre, though, the show is closest to twist-heavy cine-

matic thrillers like “Diabolique,” from 1955, or “Deathtrap,” from 1982, or even “Wild Things,” from 1998—films that focus on a tight cluster of heated, passionate characters locked in a world whose rules keep changing. “Maybe his wife is crackers,” Louise’s friend Sophie says, when Louise expresses concerns about Adele’s well-being. “Proper Jane Eyre-in-the-attic stuff.” Sophie misspeaks: in Charlotte Brontë’s novel, it is not Jane Eyre who is locked in the attic but her rival and shadow double, Bertha Mason. And yet the comment is apt. In “Behind Her Eyes,” it is hard to tell who is warden and who is prisoner, who is crazy and who is sane, and the show revels in this uncertainty. Part of the fun for the viewer, too, lies in just letting go and seeing where the series’ dizzying hairpin turns will take you.

In flashbacks, we see Adele in a mental institution, whose verdant meadows and wandering white-clad patients bring to mind scenes from HBO’s “The Leftovers,” with smidges of Henry Darger’s Vivian Girls and Manet’s “Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe” tossed in. Her parents died in a mysterious fire, and she has gone to the institution to cope with the trauma. She bonds with another patient, Rob (Robert Aramayo), a gay working-class junkie from Glasgow, who is delightfully irreverent and suffers from night terrors. Adele, who is skilled in the art of lucid dreaming, teaches him how to take control of his dream life. In the show’s present, she offers to help Louise, who has night terrors as well. With Adele’s instructions, Louise is able to escape from the images of her recurring nightmares (her dead mother’s limp hand, a screaming Adam, the oily, heaving walls of a hallway) and into a dreamland that, with its bright-blue skies, lily pond, and sunny, gingerbread-esque house, has the generic pleasantness of a Target commercial or, perhaps, “The Good Place.”

The two-pronged mystery of the series—What is the secret at the core of Adele and David’s unhappy marriage, and how might lucid dreaming be connected to it?—is taut and effective enough to bundle together a jarring collage of moods and environments. Flashbacks to Rob, as he narrates his

slummy days shooting up in the Glasgow projects, took me straight back to Danny Boyle’s “Trainspotting,” with its menacing rhythmic soundtrack thumping beneath a voice-over’s burr; meanwhile, the scenes set in Louise’s modest, knickknack-filled flat, with snatches of “The Great British Bake Off” and “Ab Fab” on the telly, seem to belong, not just in milieu but also in tone, to an entirely separate stratum of life, as does David and Adele’s upper-class domesticity. The spouses circle each other stiffly at home, like actors in an avant-garde play. (In one bone-chilling moment, as Adele chops herbs with machinelike precision, she cracks her neck so audibly that I half expected her head to keep spinning on its axis, “Small Wonder” style.)

This patchiness might be read as a comment on class and racial differences, and their tendency to create discrete worlds of experience. Adele’s conventional beauty and wealth—her upper-class English whiteness—is the planet that the other characters orbit around. “What is it like to be so fucking rich and so fucking pretty?” Rob asks her, adding, “I’ll swap you.” Louise, too, is awed. “Fuck me,” she murmurs when visiting Adele and David’s home, taken aback by its grandeur. But, although the show might aspire to make sociopolitical points, its agenda is ultimately murky. It’s never clear, for instance, how Louise, who works three days a week, is able to stay afloat in a costly city like London, or how her Blackness in a predominantly white environment affects her. We also don’t learn how Rob the urchin ended up in the same institution as Adele the heiress. The show’s focus is psychic: the human desire to break free from one’s own limiting narrative, whether in dream life or in real life, by becoming someone other than oneself—a craving that is increasingly explored as the series nears its end.

Now, about that ending. (Here’s where I arrive at the spoiler alert that I’ve been working up to since the beginning: Reader, beware!) In the fifth episode, the show takes a hard turn toward sci-fi, and astral projection enters the chat. “I’ve always just called it ‘travelling,’” Adele tells Rob in a flashback. Her lucid-dreaming lessons are a gateway to learning how to project oneself

into other people’s waking experiences—hovering, N.S.A. style, unseen but all-seeing, as they go about their private lives. Rob suggests to Adele that they use the technique to project their souls into each other’s bodies. (“It’d be such a total mindfuck!” he muses.) Bad move, Adele: once Rob enters her body, he likes it there just fine. He also likes her money, and the prospect of being married to David. He kills her and dumps the body—his own—in a well on the grounds of her estate. Unbeknownst to David, the gorgeous shell of his partner now houses the soul of a murderous junkie, which might go a long way toward explaining the couple’s marital problems.

That’s only half the twist. When Rob, as Fake Adele, learns of David and Louise’s affair, he grows increasingly hopeless at the prospect of recapturing David’s love for Real Adele, and comes up with a new plan. He tricks Louise, who unknowingly learned how to astrally project while she was practicing lucid dreaming, into swapping bodies with him. Once his soul is in her body, he kills the real Louise, who is now trapped in Adele’s body. Rob lives on, now in the form of a Black woman.

If this seems like a lot, that’s because it is. It is also difficult to know what kind of message we are meant to glean from a white upper-class woman displacing a Black single mom, not least since that white woman is in fact a working-class gay man. But, though the ending is ridiculous and perhaps a little cheap in its excess, it works. As I watched those final moments, the horror felt not just pleasurable but also well earned. David, poor boob, has married Fake Louise, and we can’t help but feel sorry for him. Even more unsettling is the fate of Adam, who can just tell that something has gone awry with his once loving mum—there’s a new impatience in her voice, a brusqueness in her gestures. “You’ve always said you hate boats,” he says miserably from the back seat of the car, when Fake Louise suggests that she and David book a Caribbean cruise for their honeymoon. “Maybe I’ve changed,” she says, facing Adam, her eyes startlingly cold. Is there anything more terrifying than a bad mother? ♦

## FINAL ACTS

*"The Father," "I Care a Lot."*

BY ANTHONY LANE

The hero of “The Father” is an old man named Anthony. He is played by Anthony Hopkins, and the two of them, fictional and real, share a date of birth—the final day of 1937. When we first meet Anthony, he is wearing headphones and listening to music: a high and stammering plea, sung by a countertenor. It comes from Purcell’s “King

country. Anthony stares out of the window and spies a kid, in the street, tossing and kicking a plastic bag. Such is the lenient envy with which age regards the idleness of youth.

Anthony had a caregiver, who has recently quit, claiming that he maltreated her. His daughter, Anne (Olivia Colman), who comes to see him, is galled

more disconcerting for being so matter-of-fact. Anthony walks into an adjoining room, finds a man sitting there, and inquires, “Who are you?” The man explains that he is Paul (Mark Gatiss), Anne’s partner, and that he, too, lives in the apartment. When we next see Paul, however, he is played by Rufus Sewell instead of Gatiss, and is far more abrasive than the earlier incarnation. As for Anne, she is played not only by Colman but also by Olivia Williams—who, like Gatiss, will later show up in another role. What’s going on?

Zeller is not the first director to jumble his *dramatis personae*, and to maintain a cool composure in the process. When Luis Buñuel was at an impasse in the creation of “That Obscure Object of Desire” (1977), he hit upon the idea—“after two dry Martinis,” as he said—of having a pair of alternating actresses play the heroine. The delectable joke was that, to the roué of riper years who yearned for her (and who appeared not to notice her metamorphoses), she thus became twice as unattainable, and doubled her mockery of his lust. The trick is repeated in “The Father,” but for sadder reasons; Anthony is driven by confusion rather than passion, and, if the folks around him keep swapping places, that is because his capacity for human recognition has shrunk. In short, we view the world through his bewildered eyes. What looks like his apartment is, in fact, the inside of his head.

A while ago, I saw “The Father” on-stage, with a different cast. By the following morning, I had forgotten all about it. Why, then, should the film make so potent an impression? Partly because of the deeper spatial perspectives that moviegoing affords, and the furtiveness that they encourage; unlike a theatre audience, we can gaze down the long hallway in Anthony’s apartment, as he slips through a door at the end of it and peers at us darkly through the crack. Let’s be honest: the mainspring of “The Father,” onscreen, is the presence of Hopkins—an actor at the frightening summit of his powers, portraying a man brought pitifully low. The irony is too rare to resist.

One thing that distinguishes actors of the loftiest rank is the fascination that they breed in us as they carry out quite ordinary deeds. A famous exam-



*Anthony Hopkins stars in Florian Zeller’s adaptation of his own play.*

Arthur,” and the lyrics, by John Dryden, tell a chilling tale: “What power art thou, who from below/Hast made me rise, unwillingly, and slow,/From beds of everlasting snow?” There is no better guide to the plight of Anthony, upon whom the season of dementia has descended. He is all iced up.

The film is directed by Florian Zeller. It comes from his play of the same name, which he has adapted for the screen, in consort with Christopher Hampton. Most of the action unfolds in a London apartment, which retains the air of a stage set; a fine light slants in from one side, as though we were trapped in a perpetual late afternoon. Occasionally, the characters venture into the external world, but it feels like a foreign

by the situation, but Anthony is mulish and unmoved. “I don’t need anyone,” he says. It’s not long, however, before this proud self-reliance gives way to a wheedling cry. When Anne announces that she may be moving to Paris, he replies, “You’re abandoning me. What’s going to become of me?” Shyly, he rests his hand against the side of his face—a Hopkins trademark, visible in “The Remains of the Day” (1993), and suggesting a need to shield himself from the scrutinizing glare of other people.

At this stage, we are braced for a harsh and realistic portrait of a failing mind, and of the loved ones who get hurt along the way. To an extent, “The Father” fulfills that brief. But something else emerges here: a mystery, all the

ple is that of James Stewart, in “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington” (1939), toying with the brim of his hat to indicate social awkwardness, and the sight of Hopkins, in “The Father,” pottering about the kitchen, filling the kettle and unpacking groceries, casts a comparable spell. We could be watching a priest preparing for Mass. This air of deliberation grows more intent with the introduction of Laura (Imogen Poots), a friendly young woman who is bravely applying to be Anthony’s next caregiver. Greeting her, with a silk handkerchief rakishly tucked into the breast pocket of his robe, he is charm personified—flirting with her, flashing his grin, and intimating that he used to be a dancer by profession. (Not true. He was an engineer.) He paces round and round the living room, tracked by the camera, and then unsheathes his rage:

“All I want is for everyone to *fuck off*. Having said that, it’s been a great pleasure. *Au revoir*. Toodle-oo.”

It’s an astonishing sequence, toughened by its mixture of the courtly and the profane, and by the force with which Hopkins hammers out his lines, striking the consonants until they spark. (Elsewhere, he even stretches the word “Anne” into a disyllable.) We cut away to Anne, who hears his tirade in tears. Why is it that this cramped family saga should have a reach and a clutch that were denied to other studies of dementia, like “Away from Her” (2006) and “Still Alice” (2015)? It is, I would argue, because of the ghost of “King Lear.”

Hopkins played Lear at the National Theatre, in 1986, and, in 2018, he returned to the part for a television pro-

duction, directed by Richard Eyre. That performance was oddly muffled in its impact; the rage of the King felt predetermined, as though he were armed for conflict in advance, whereas Anthony’s ire, in the new film, bursts out of nowhere, like thunder. To be sent to a nursing home—his underlying terror—would be like being evicted, in foul weather, onto a blasted heath. “I’m losing all my things, everyone’s just helping themselves. If this goes on much longer I’ll be stark naked,” he says, with half a laugh, clinging madly to his apartment much as Lear does to his retinue of knights. (Anne, exasperated and fond, is a Cordelia who gets raved at like a Goneril.) Despite the strong ensemble of supporting players, “The Father” is a work of dreadful loneliness. Hopkins rules the screen, swaying between grandeur and finicky fuss, and in Anthony’s decline we see a portent. “Who, exactly, am I?” he asks. And how many lives, like his, must end in a one-man show?

For an alternative approach to the treatment of the elderly, lay aside “The Father” and try “I Care a Lot,” which is fast, hard, bright, and about as gentle as a mouthful of sour candy. The movie stars Rosamund Pike as Marla Grayson, who is a guardian by trade. This means that she takes over the affairs, personal and financial, of senior citizens who are no longer capable of handling their own lives. It sounds like a noble calling, and the authorities tend to trust her. What they don’t know is that a local doctor supplies her with easy prey—“real high-maintenance assholes,” we learn, who can be committed to a care facility, under a court order,

while Marla strips their assets bare. As she says to her latest victim, Jennifer Peterson (Dianne Wiest), “You’re just another old lady, in a care home, with dementia, with incontinence, with arthritis, and with no one. Except me.”

Written and directed by J. Blakeson, the film is in love with its heartless heroine, loath to let her out of the camera’s sight. We are invited to bask in her depravity, and to side with her when things go wrong—when Jennifer, far from being meek and defenseless, turns out to have (a) unregistered diamonds in a safe-deposit box and (b) unsavory criminal connections, in the shape of Roman Lunyov (Peter Dinklage). Marla squares off against Roman, whose unfathomable evil is signalled by the menacing fashion in which he eats an éclair.

The trouble with “I Care a Lot” is not how cynical it seems but how pleased it is with that cynicism, forever straining to top its own tastelessness. (No wonder it’s so unwilling to let go; the last film with this many endings was the final part of “The Lord of the Rings,” in 2003.) “To make it in this country you need to be brave and stupid and ruthless and focussed,” Marla declares, and guardianship is revealed to be just another wrench in the toolbox of capitalism. Wiest, who gives the least calculated and the most beguiling performance, fades from the scene, and, in essence, the movie does a Marla: rather than paying genuine heed to the aged, it uses them, wheels them away, and parks them in a corner of the plot. The old story. ♦

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NEWYORKER.COM

Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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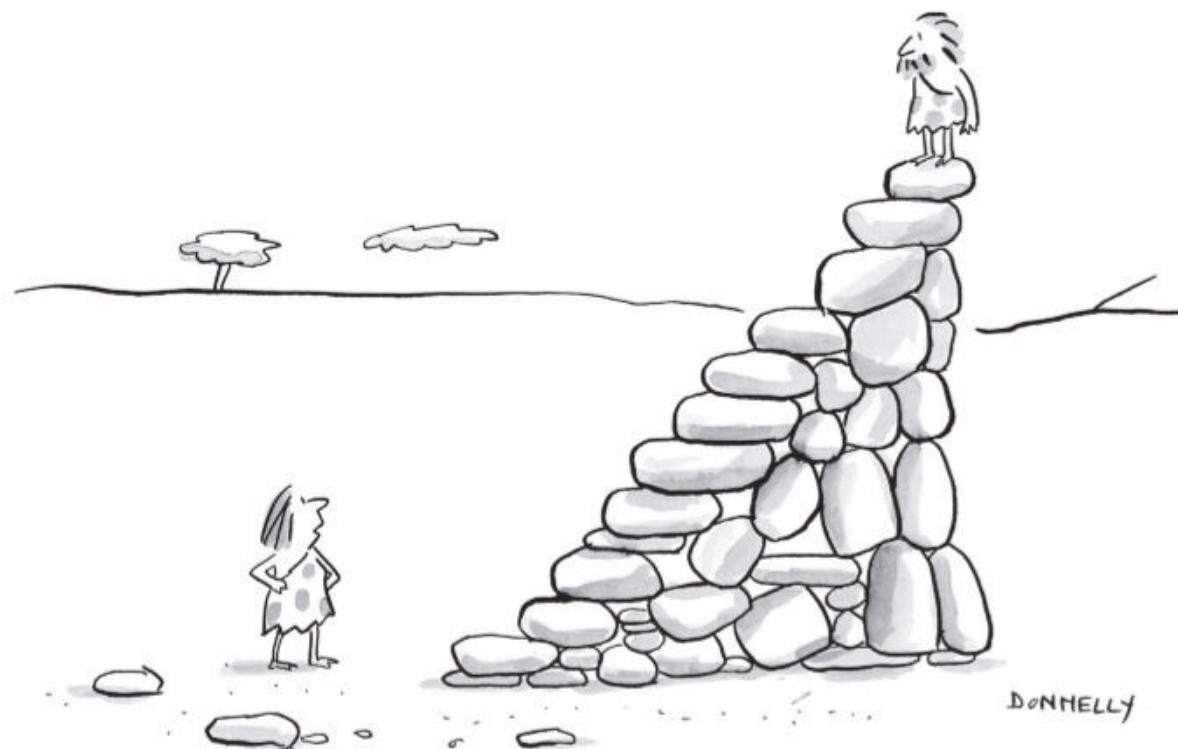
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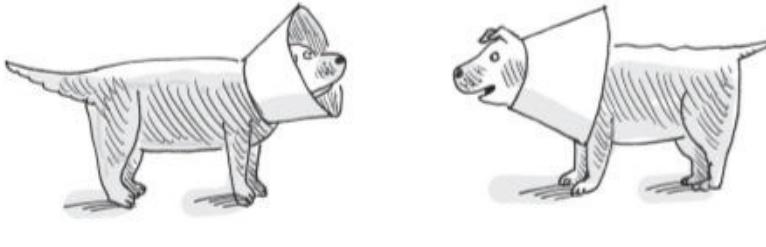
Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Liza Donnelly, must be received by Sunday, March 7th. The finalists in the February 15th & 22nd contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the March 22nd issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit [contest.newyorker.com](http://contest.newyorker.com).

### THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



" " .....

### THE FINALISTS



*"I could never pull that off."*  
Nicole Chrolavicius, Burlington, Ont.

*"He said I had to wear it. He didn't say how."*  
Jim Cohen, Elkins Park, Pa.

*"You should see how my owner wears his mask."*  
Matthew Lane, Norwood, Mass.

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*"That's a rare medium. Well done."*  
Benjamin Branson, New York City

W O M E N

Photograph / Jennifer Chase

W H O

T R A V E L

P O D C A S T

W O M E N

W H O

T R A V E L

P O D C A S T

W O M E N



WOMEN  
WHO  
TRAVEL

CONDÉ NAST TRAVELER

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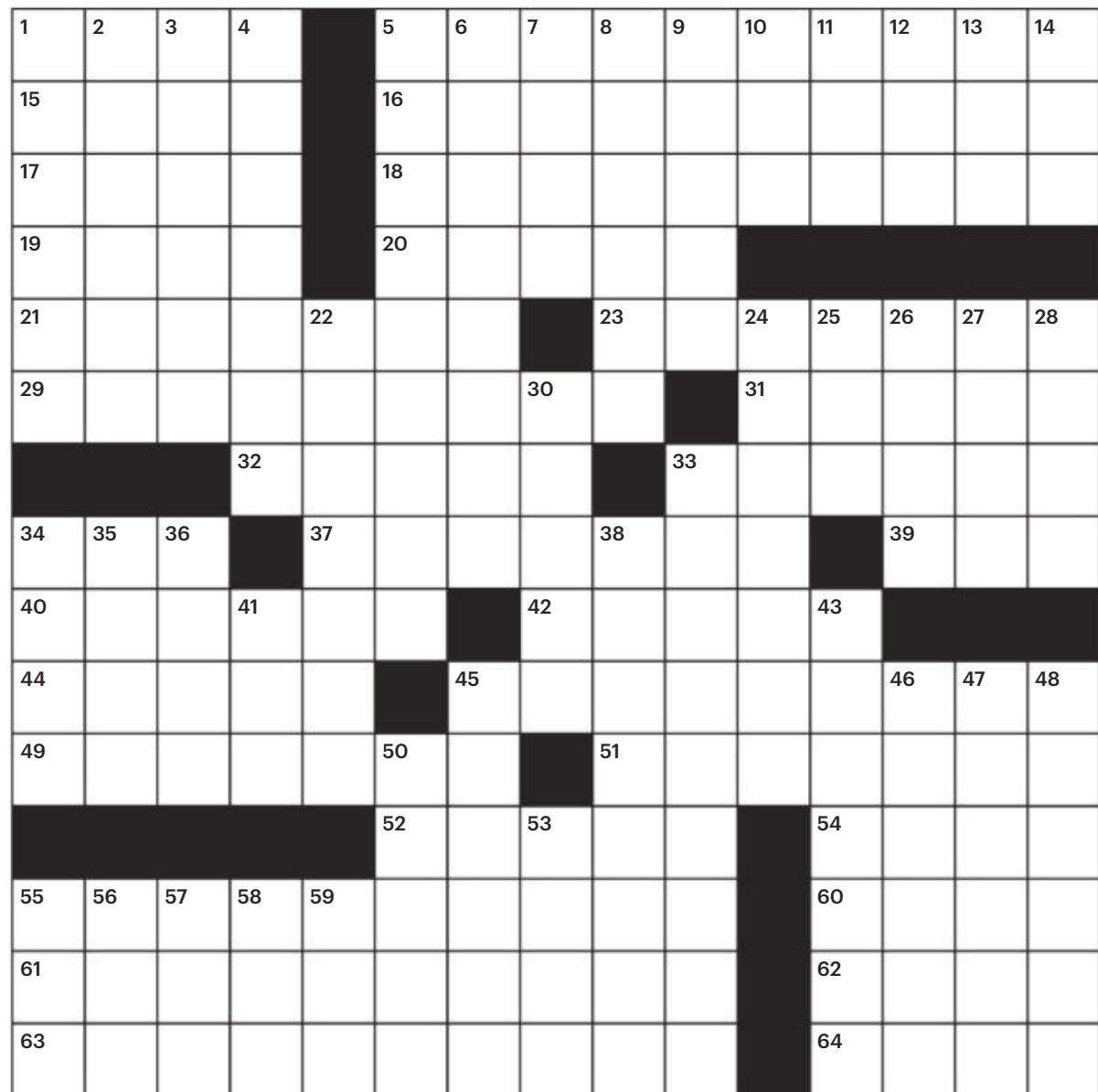
# THE CROSSWORD

*A challenging puzzle.*

BY ANNA SHECHTMAN

## ACROSS

- 1 Eye-cream targets
- 5 Big Bad Voodoo Daddy and Squirrel Nut Zippers, e.g.
- 15 Biblical figure for whom Aron Trask is an allegory, in "East of Eden"
- 16 Avid reader of Derrida, Spivak, Irigaray, and the like
- 17 Tax
- 18 They're Sirius business?
- 19 Simile center
- 20 Words before "Easy" in a Linda Ronstadt title and "Hard" in a John Lennon title
- 21 Exalts
- 23 Abu Dhabi, for one
- 29 Certain economic deficits
- 31 Rock bottom
- 32 Michael in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame
- 33 Subject of the 2019 docuseries subtitled "Of Mics and Men," to fans
- 34 Inexplicable, irreparable turnoff, with "the"
- 37 Stayed in shape
- 39 Tenor role in the opera "Nixon in China"
- 40 Nineties action thriller with the tagline "They were deadly on the ground. Now they have wings"
- 42 Diogenes, notably
- 44 Lemon juice and vinegar, e.g.
- 45 Phrase at the end of a dashed-off e-mail
- 49 1887 French play that inspired a Puccini opera
- 51 Raise
- 52 Norwegian king who led a campaign to convert the Vikings to Christianity
- 54 Sources of some lean red meat
- 55 Hints at
- 60 Fabricated
- 61 Public intellectual with cameos in "The Matrix Reloaded" and "The Matrix Revolutions"
- 62 Chrysler Building architect William Van \_\_
- 63 Techniques for a yo-yoer?
- 64 Platform for tweets?



## DOWN

- 1 Kitsch, e.g.
- 2 Exploitative type
- 3 Pass with flying colors
- 4 Subtle acknowledgments
- 5 Less voluminous, as hair
- 6 Twenty-two-billion-dollar Facebook purchase in 2014
- 7 Roadside dangers in war zones, for short
- 8 Snap, crackle, and pop
- 9 One with a stable job?
- 10 Fly-\_\_ (close aerial passes)
- 11 Response to a doctor's request, perhaps
- 12 Liberal or conservative leader?
- 13 Cousin of a crow
- 14 Sixties campus-activism org. revived in 2006
- 22 Gift from a golden retriever, maybe
- 24 Without function
- 25 \_\_ race
- 26 Father of 15-Across
- 27 Talking Heads bassist Weymouth
- 28 Part of a Cartesian declaration
- 30 \_\_ Park, home stadium of the San Diego Padres
- 33 References with white pages?
- 34 Erstwhile Mac scheduling app
- 35 Andean crop
- 36 Furrow
- 38 Notorious 2017 scam chronicled in two 2019 documentaries, familiarly
- 41 Fracas

- 43 Alley Oop or Fred Flintstone
- 45 Neighbor of Mozambique and Tanzania
- 46 Dish containing masa
- 47 Practice pieces
- 48 Take exception to
- 50 " \_\_ You Be Loved" (Bob Marley song)
- 53 Perfectly, after "to"
- 55 Justice org. headquartered in The Hague
- 56 Conjunction repeated in an unofficial Postal Service motto
- 57 Mujer who's married: Abbr.
- 58 Networking assets
- 59 Government agcy. that sponsors the Jefferson Lectures

*Solution to the previous puzzle:*

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| T | H | R | O | W |   | A | C | H | E |   | A | L | P | O |
| H | A | I | T | I |   | P | O | T | S |   | F | O | I | L |
| O | R | S | O | N |   | A | C | T | S | A | L | O | N | E |
| S | P | E | E | D | T | R | A | P |   | M | A | K | E |   |
| E | O | N |   | S | A | T |   |   | D | E | T | A | C | H |
|   |   |   |   |   | L | O | X |   | S | E | A | R |   | L |
|   |   |   |   |   | P | E | R | F | E | C | T | T | I | M |
|   |   |   |   |   | C | H | O | C | O | L | A | T | E | C |
|   |   |   |   |   | A | E | S | A | R | S | P | A | L | A |
|   |   |   |   |   | B | R | R | S | M | E | E | I | N | K |
|   |   |   |   |   | S | P | O | R | T | S | A | N | D | Z |
|   |   |   |   |   | E | M | I | L | T | A | T | E | R | T |
|   |   |   |   |   | S | T | O | N | E | W | A | L | L | E |
|   |   |   |   |   | F | E | N | G | A | R | E | A | A | L |
|   |   |   |   |   | O | D | E | S | D | O | C | S | M | E |

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# STRENGTH

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