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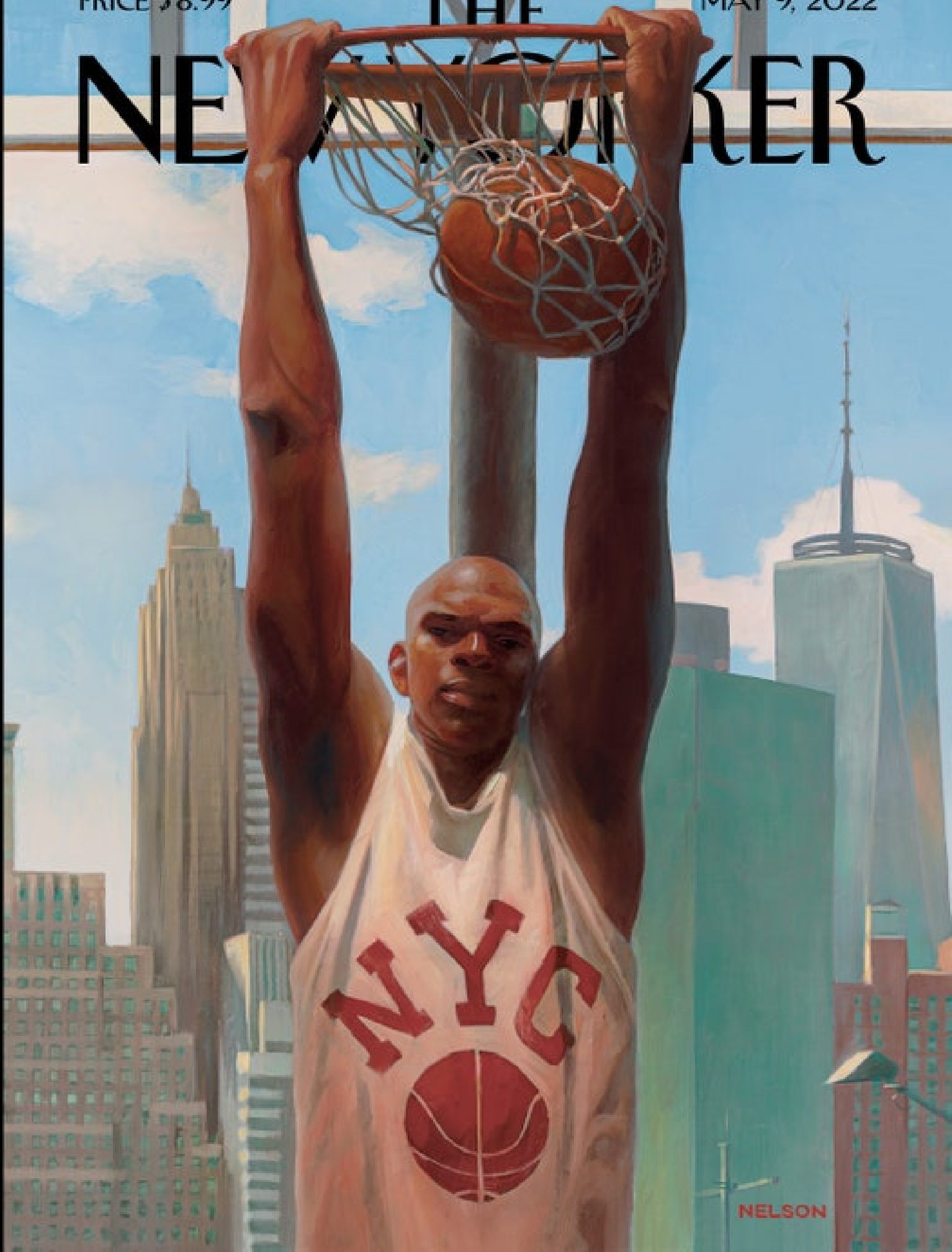

- A Critic at Large
- App推荐-英阅阅读器
- Books
- Comment
- Crossword
- Currency Dept.
- Fiction
- Letter from Ukraine
- North Carolina Postcard
- On Television
- Poems
- Portfolio
- Profiles
- Shouts & Murmurs
- Tables for Two
- The Boards
- The Theatre
- Tour Dept.

A Critic at Large

- **Our Obsession with Ancestry Has Some Twisted Roots**

By Maya Jasanoff

Content

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A mile into Utah's Little Cottonwood Canyon, heading east from Salt Lake City toward the Wasatch ski slopes, several concrete arches open into the face of a mountain. Behind doors designed to withstand a nuclear strike, through tunnels blasted six hundred feet into the rock, in a vault that's another seven hundred feet down, lies a trove stashed in steel cases: not bullion or jewels but microfilm, millions of reels of it. They contain billions of images of genealogical documents, an estimated quarter of all vital records on earth. The collection, owned and operated by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is the largest physical archive of ancestry in the world.

"You hardly meet an American who does not want to be connected a bit by his birth to the first settlers of the colonies, and, as for branches of the great families of England, America seemed to me totally covered by them," Alexis de Tocqueville marvelled in 1840. It's often said that genealogical research is the second most popular hobby in the United States, after gardening, and the second most popular search category online, after porn. Those claims should be sprinkled with a few grains of salt, but more than twenty-six million people have taken genetic ancestry tests since 2012, incidentally creating a database of huge value to pharmaceutical companies and law enforcement. The Silicon Valley-based testing company 23andMe, which formed a partnership with Airbnb to market "travel as unique as your DNA," went public in June, 2021, with a valuation of $3.5 billion. The genealogical behemoth Ancestry, which boasts more than three million subscribers and the nation's largest genetic database, was purchased for $4.7 billion in 2020.

For those not drawn to genealogy, such an interest can seem "at best, embarrassing, if not a sign of narcissism and pitiable aspiration," Maud Newton acknowledges in a candid memoir about her own genealogical obsession, "Ancestor Trouble" (Random House). But, whatever you think about genealogy, it has profound ramifications for you. From the doctor's office to the passport office, ancestry inflects the social, material, legal, and

medical conditions of nearly everybody's life. "The stories we tell ourselves about our ancestors have the power to shape us," Newton observes. Why and how this has come to be has an ancestry of its own.

Virtually every culture tells a story about the origins of humankind—a story about its ancestry. In Norse tradition, the gods Odin, Vili, and Ve turned an ash tree and an elm tree into man and woman, and infused them with breath, intelligence, and speech. The sacred text of the K'iche' Maya people, Popol Vuh, describes how the creators tried making human beings from clay, but they crumbled in the rain; then from wood, but they were stiff and unfeeling; and then from ground-up yellow and white maize, with water for blood, and they grew healthy, fat, and expressive. The God of the Old Testament, after making the heavens and the earth and filling them with birds, animals, and fish, "formed man of the dust of the ground," and from the man's rib fashioned woman. The origin story that we tend to believe today describes the emergence, through evolution, of anatomically modern humans in Africa about three hundred thousand years ago.

Origin stories provide collective accounts of where "we" come from, but they also help some lineages claim power over others. Ruling dynasties often boasted of sacred or supernatural ancestors. Egyptian pharaohs styled themselves sons of Amun-Ra, and Chinese emperors were "sons of heaven." Inca emperors traced their pedigree to the sun, Roman rulers to Venus, and Merovingians to a sea monster. The "begats" of the Old Testament reflected the importance of lineage as a basis for authority in the ancient Near East. These were echoed by the Gospels of Luke and Matthew, which took pains to endow Jesus with descent from Adam and Abraham, respectively; and by later Arabic genealogies that traced the Prophet Muhammad's ancestry to Abraham. A verse of the Hindu scripture Rigveda, which describes how the gods divided the cosmic being Purusha into four parts—to form priests, warriors, merchants, and laborers—has been interpreted, controversially, as justifying the development of caste.

"Maybe it was inevitable that humans would choose to explain the order of things to themselves in this way," Newton says. But the near-universality of hierarchies based on ancestry makes it all the more important to consider

who gets to define genealogical knowledge, record it, and access it. Before the print and digital eras, genealogical records overwhelmingly resided with religious and kin-based authorities: in the tablets of Chinese ancestral halls and the lineage books (*jokbo*) kept by eldest sons in Korean families; among the reciters of Maori lineages (*whakapapa*) and the griots of West Africa, who sing the histories of dynasties; in the baptism registers of the Catholic Church and the lists of births and deaths kept by Hindu *pandas*. In Europe, the "family tree," which had its own roots in early-medieval representations of the lineage of Jesus, emerged by the sixteenth century as the dominant metaphor for genealogy.

The expansion of European empires in the early-modern era imposed the genealogical priorities of Western Europe on countless other populations. One especially consequential strand can be traced to fifteenth-century Spain, where, following the mass conversions of Jews and Muslims to Christianity, "purity of blood" (*limpieza de sangre*) statutes were passed to ferret out "New Christians" and keep them from holding public or religious offices. Transplanted to the Americas after 1492, the Iberian obsession with genealogical purity informed the development of a *sistema de castas*, as scholars have termed it, that stratified colonial populations according to their proportions of white, Black, and Indian ancestry. The Portuguese brought the freighted term *casta* to India, where it was picked up by English speakers to describe the descent-based groups they found there.

Starting in the eighteenth century, genealogical authority increasingly shifted from religious and family figures to government officials who certify births, license marriages, decree divorces, register deaths, and probate wills. Identity documents emerged in tandem with typically spurious theories advanced by practitioners of "race science" and by ethno-nationalists about the ancestral origins of various human populations—one of which persists, shockingly, in the use of "Caucasian" as a synonym for "white." Legal codes granted and restricted citizenship and civil rights on the basis of ancestry, resulting in the United States' "one drop" rule, exclusion acts, and immigration quotas tied to "national origins." A pair of Supreme Court rulings about naturalization played on pseudoscientific associations between ancestry and race. In 1922, the Court determined that the Japanese immigrant Takao Ozawa could not become a U.S. citizen because he was not ancestrally "Caucasian," and therefore was not white; in 1923, it held that

the North Indian immigrant Bhagat Singh Thind—who, according to the race science of the period, was Aryan and thus Caucasian—could not naturalize, either, because he didn't look "white."

Today, geneticists have emerged as authorities on ancestry, replacing "blood" with DNA. Even before the word "gene" was coined—sharing a Greek root with "genealogy"—to describe the biological units of heredity, Francis Galton came up with the term "eugenics" to promote human improvement by means of selective breeding. It's hard to overstate the international appeal of eugenics in the early twentieth century, including among progressive intellectuals. Eugenic policies deployed ancestry in violent new ways; a Virginia sterilization law was upheld by the Supreme Court in 1927, when Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., made the notorious pronouncement that "three generations of imbeciles are enough." (It was his father, incidentally, who originated the phrase "Boston Brahmin," to describe the city's hereditary élite.) American eugenicists inspired the architects of Nazi race laws, which triggered what must be the largest mass uptake of genealogical research in history, by requiring the vast majority of Germans to produce "ancestor passes" to prove Aryan descent. Another term sharing the familiar root was coined in 1943 to describe what happened to Jews and others who couldn't comply: "genocide."

Each way that humans have conceived of ancestry has been layered onto others. Genealogies record spiritual and social priorities rooted in origin stories. Family and citizenship law codifies privileges and exclusions based on lineage. Today's addictive Web sites and sleekly packaged DNA kits rest on deep, if not always acknowledged, assumptions about the fixity of status, race, ethnicity, and nationality. Ancestry doesn't simply *have* power, in the emotional and psychological respects that Newton describes; in critical ways, it is an instrument of power.

"You just had to Yelp this place, didn't you?"
Cartoon by Jack Reilly

The emergence of the Mormons as drivers of the modern genealogy industry exemplifies these interconnections. Just a few years after the antiquarian John Farmer published the "Genealogical Register of the First Settlers of New England" (1829)—a work that, according to the historian François Weil, "transformed the practice of genealogy in the United States"—Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, had a vision in which the prophet Elijah urged him to turn "the hearts of the children to their fathers." While middle-class white Americans looked for lineal connections to a national origin story embodied in "first settlers" and "Founding Fathers," Mormons began conducting proxy baptisms of ancestors who had died before the origin of the Church. By the mid-eighteen-forties, when the nation's first genealogical organization was founded, in Boston, Mormons had performed more than fifteen thousand proxy baptisms, including at least four for George Washington.

Completing "temple work" on behalf of ancestors required researching and transcribing genealogies, a pursuit in which Mormons were aided by the providential (as they saw it) expansion of state-administered record-keeping. In 1894, the Church president Wilford Woodruff enjoined members "to trace their genealogies as far as they can, and to be sealed to their fathers and mothers." The Church-sponsored Genealogical Society of Utah was

established a few months later, coinciding with a spate of lineage organizations founded by white, Protestant, self-styled "Anglo-Saxons"—including the Daughters of the American Revolution (1890) and the General Society of Mayflower Descendants (1897)—in the face of surging immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe. The Church, as Francesca Morgan observes in a perceptive history of genealogy in the United States, "A Nation of Descendants" (North Carolina), has long held that "the more people—Mormon or not—engaged in genealogy, the closer everyone drew to fulfilling God's plan." But Mormons were also taught that Blacks were the cursed descendants of Cain. The Church began admitting Black men into the priesthood only in 1978, a year after Brigham Young University granted an honorary degree to Alex Haley, crediting the publication of his book "Roots" with "generating more interest in genealogy than any other event in American history."

The Genealogical Society of Utah is now known as FamilySearch, and run by the Church as a nonprofit. But in 1996 two B.Y.U. graduates seized a commercial opportunity by launching a genealogical Web site that put up searchable, digitized versions of public databases like the Social Security Death Index. In the early two-thousands, the company partnered with a pioneering genetic-testing firm that was founded by another Mormon entrepreneur, and in 2013 it signed a deal with FamilySearch to digitize a billion of the Church's volunteer-indexed records. Joining the projects of state, science, and salvation, the company's name is, simply, Ancestry.

Our engagement with ancestry spans the spiritual, material, political, and biological realms, each of which has its own technologies and authorities. As a result, our laws, institutions, and imaginations are poorly prepared to deal with the contradictions that arise when one kind of evidence, like a DNA test, contradicts another, like a family story. Such tensions provide fertile ground for memoirs and magazine features, but the situation gets murkier when it comes to privacy, social justice, and national politics.

As the American liberal élite unites around a commitment to "trusting science," it is especially sobering to consider the implications of handing over the authority to define ancestry to geneticists. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., among others, has spoken eloquently about the power of genetic ancestry tests to reveal African American family history hidden behind the "brick

wall" of 1870, before which enslaved people were not recorded by name in federal censuses. Such tests can be of immense personal significance, especially for those whose access to other forms of genealogical knowledge has been destroyed or impeded. Yet the relationship of race, ancestry, and genetics has been tortured at best. Critics worry that genetic tests can reaffirm the idea that there's a biological essence to given populations, from which percentages of descent can be calculated; "mixture," the Indigenous-studies scholar Kim TallBear says, "is predicated on purity."

Using "ancestry" in place of "race" or "ethnicity" (as is becoming increasingly widespread) may sidestep some problems, but it opens up others. The truth is, all genealogies are selective, often by design. Kinship terms and naming practices single out certain family members as more consequential than others. Most traditions of ancestor veneration regard only some of the dead as having power over the living, and commemorate just those figures accordingly. Even genetic tests offer selective accounts of a person's ancestry. Owing to the random process of recombination, the chances are vanishingly small that any given person has inherited detectable autosomal DNA from a specific progenitor more than eight generations ago. We know that "race" is a social construct. We need to acknowledge the ways in which "ancestry" is, too.

Maud Newton has a keen appreciation for the fictive quality of stories about ancestry. As she relates in "Ancestor Trouble," she was brought up to care about her ancestors by an abusive father who "viewed his and my fair skin as a mark of superiority" and revered their Confederate forebears. Her book succeeds best as an exploration of the racism that has pervaded American genealogical practice. She describes how, trying to escape her father's prejudices, she took on "Maud" as a nom de plume, inspired by a great-great-aunt Maude whom she believed to have been appealingly feminist and nonconformist. But "a genealogist's family tree is always evolving, as is the genealogist," Newton notes, and further research revealed that her great-great-aunt was a racist supporter of Jim Crow. "In naming myself Maud Newton, I'd accidentally honored the parts of my family history that trouble me most."

As genealogy in the twenty-first century increasingly became the province of science and corporate laboratories, Newton's own quest turned spiritual.

She began to practice “ancestral lineage healing,” a New Age-style initiative informed by shamanism and other kinds of ancestor veneration, and her book delivers a heartfelt endorsement of its individual emotional and psychological rewards. This approach firmly rejects the quantitative logic of genetic tests, which reduces people to percentages. It’s revealing, however, that the term of art for the process is “ancestor work” (echoing the Mormon “temple work”), as opposed to, say, “ancestor worship.” As marketed by companies such as the North Carolina-based Ancestral Medicine, it shares the commercial apparatus of retreats, courses, trainings, and self-help books characteristic of today’s “wellness” and “mindfulness” movements. In the genetic-testing industry, customers pay to surrender their property; in this one, they pay to do the work.

Like Newton, many individuals and institutions in the United States have had to contend with a racist past. Often, they have committed themselves to a kind of collective lineage repair—taking down the Confederate monuments erected by white-supremacist heritage organizations, renaming Columbus Day, receiving anti-racist training, delivering land acknowledgments. These gestures do little to address the material effects of generational dispossession. But discussions of concrete repair come with challenging questions about who deserves recompense, and from whom it should come. Witness the controversial American Descendants of Slavery movement, which seeks reparations specifically for Black people who can show that their ancestors were enslaved in the United States, not elsewhere in the Black diaspora. When reparative justice is fitted into the template of genealogy, there’s a risk of recapitulating deep-seated lineal distinctions between the deserving and the undeserving, the pure and the polluted.

Genealogy as a technique may bring individual rewards, but as a historical paradigm it has tended to serve those in power, and such effects are not diminishing. Élite colleges are recruiting “first generation” students but continue to grant special admissions to “legacies.” The U.S. government taxes a smaller share of estates than do the governments of comparable nations, but the American Dream of generational upward mobility has slipped farther out of reach. The medical establishment promises great things from the advent of accessible genetic medicine, but there remain circumstances in which Americans can be denied insurance coverage on the basis of their “preëxisting” genes.

“To plant a family!” Nathaniel Hawthorne exclaimed in his novel about ancestral ghosts, “The House of the Seven Gables.” “This idea is at the bottom of most of the wrong and mischief which men do. The truth is, that, once in every half century, at longest, a family should be merged into the great, obscure mass of humanity, and forget all about its ancestors.” It’s tempting to agree. Yet if there is one thing that the history of genealogy makes clear it is that stories about ancestry can always be instruments of exclusion. To forget about where we come from can be a privilege, too. ♦

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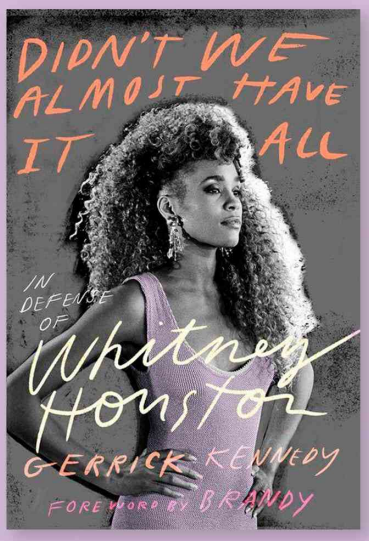
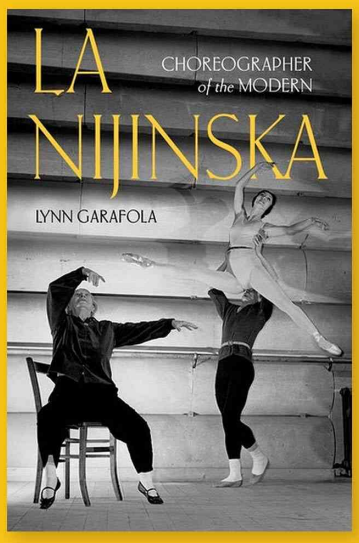
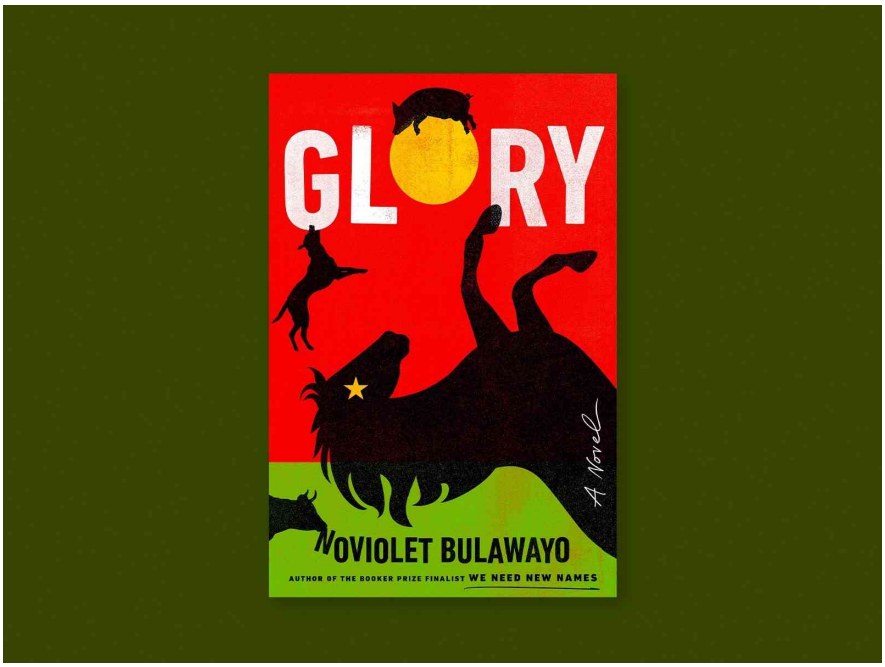


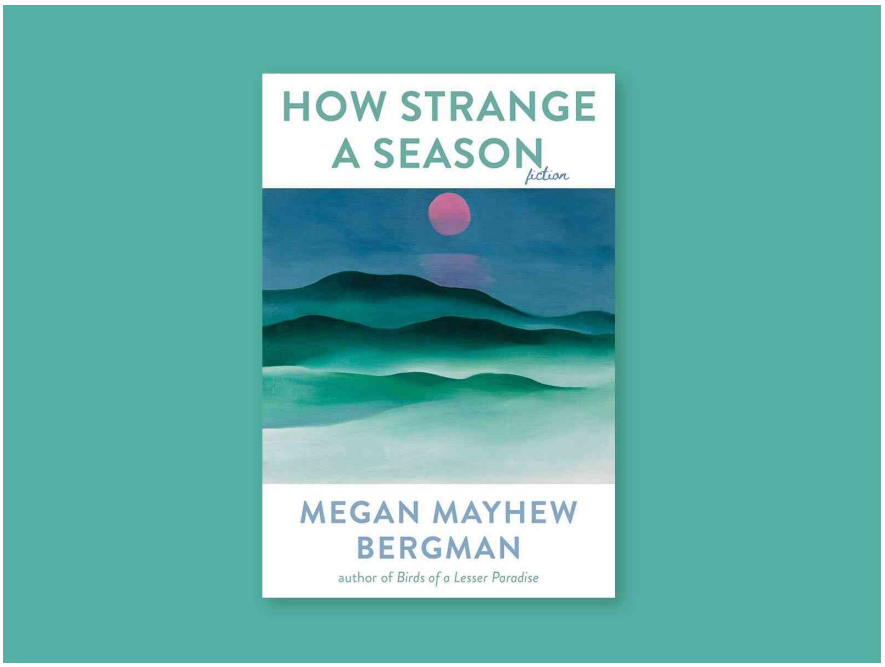
Didn't We Almost Have It All, *by Gerrick Kennedy (Abrams)*. Fusing biography and cultural criticism, this consideration of Whitney Houston is also a study of reputation. Houston, born in 1963 in Newark, cultivated her voice in church and under the tutelage of her mother, a gospel singer; she also suffered sexual abuse and began using cocaine at a young age. Such troubles—and an important same-sex relationship—made living in the public eye fraught. Even at her most successful (she remains the only recording artist to have had seven consecutive No. 1 hits), she was dismissed as a "yuppie icon," with some Black radio stations refusing to play her music. Kennedy, however, highlights her "sisterhood" with younger Black singers, including Faith Evans and Monica.



La Nijinska, *by Lynn Garafola (Oxford)*. Long overshadowed by her older brother, the tragic virtuoso Vaslav Nijinsky, Bronislava Nijinska (1891-1972) was also an important dancer and choreographer, and this scrupulous biography illuminates the formidable scope of her accomplishments. Nijinska made integral contributions to her brother's legendary dances, staged groundbreaking creations of her own (including "Les Noces" and "Les Biches"), and trained future stars such as Frederick Ashton, Cyd Charisse, and Maria Tallchief. Garafola documents the ways in which a misogynistic establishment undermined Nijinska's achievements and argues that, despite this, her ideas about the relationship between movement and music and her gender-bending experiments in abstraction helped shape the modern art of ballet.



Glory, *by NoViolet Bulawayo (Viking)*. Populated entirely by animals, this novel slyly invokes "Animal Farm" while depicting more recent political struggles. The protagonist is a goat named Destiny, an exile returning to the fictional African nation of Jidada after the ouster of its longtime autocrat, Old Horse (explicitly modelled on Robert Mugabe), by a new authoritarian, called the Savior. Destiny delves into the taboo subject of political disappearances, and her fearlessness catalyzes a citizenry whose most potent act of defiance is to name the dead in public. Bulawayo's chronicle of the new government's corruption and the old one's brutality dramatizes Zimbabwean history while also illuminating the challenges of many developing nations.



How Strange a Season, *by Megan Mayhew Bergman (Scribner)*. Women's homeownership and its promise of security are at stake in this closely observed story collection. A rancher concocts a peculiar side business to save the property she inherited from her mother; a divorcing woman must decide whether to move to California to claim the glass house her grandmother left her; a matriarch's fear of losing her family home compels her to send her barely adult daughter down a life-altering path. In several stories, climate change looms, but casting darker shadows are the book's many absent or inadequate parents. One character is convinced that her forebears' missteps are "inside of her, like the rings of a felled tree."

By Juan Gabriel Vásquez

Content

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In September of 1967, Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa, perhaps the greatest Latin American novelists of the twentieth century, met twice in Lima, Peru, to talk about literature in front of a university audience. In the middle of one conversation, after discussing questions as diverse as the origins of "One Hundred Years of Solitude" and the political commitment of the novelist, Vargas Llosa asked García Márquez about William Faulkner and his influence on Latin American literature. "I think it's the method," García Márquez said. "The Faulknerian method is very effective in narrating Latin American reality. . . . This is not strange at all, because I'm not forgetting that Yoknapatawpha County borders the Caribbean Sea."

Actually, Yoknapatawpha County would appear to be landlocked, at least according to a hand-drawn map that Faulkner published in 1936. But the geographical mistake is beautifully eloquent: for decades, Latin American novelists have claimed Faulkner as one of their own, finding in his fiction—in its exploration of a problematic history, in its use of lore and myth, in its formal inventiveness—a key to the interpretation of their world. That's evident in the Mexican novelist Fernanda Melchor's astonishing "Hurricane Season," which, in 2020, became her first novel to appear in English, and now in its successor, "Paradais" (New Directions), both translated by Sophie Hughes. With a nimble command of the novel's technical resources and an uncanny grasp of the irrational forces at work in society, the books navigate a reality riven by violence, race, class, and sex. And they establish Melchor, who was born in 1982, as the latest of Faulkner's Latin American inheritors, and among the most formidable.

"Hurricane Season" is a taut novel with chapter-length paragraphs of relentless, serpentine prose and a claustrophobic intensity barely mitigated by the open spaces where the action occurs—a scattering of shacks built amid cane fields near a port city modelled on Veracruz. The inhabitants live in squalor, moral as well as physical. Prostitution and drug dealing are part of the daily grind, and Melchor paints a hellscape of distrust, venality,

private aggressions, and general grimness. The novel begins with a group of roaming children—"their slingshots drawn for battle and their eyes squinting, almost stitched together, in the midday glare"—who are about to come upon a body. Melchor's prose is muscular but always attentive to the world of the senses and carried forward by an impeccable ear. (Hughes sticks close in her agile rendering, riding an untamed beast and staying in the saddle.) The chapter closes with an arresting image:

> The ringleader pointed to the end of the cattle track, and all five of them, crawling along the dry grass, all five of them packed together in a single body, all five of them surrounded by blowflies, finally recognized what was peeping out from the yellow foam on the water's surface: the rotten face of a corpse floating among the rushes and the plastic bags swept in from the road on the breeze, the dark mask seething under a myriad of black snakes, smiling.

We learn that the body is that of a local woman who was known as the Witch, just as her mother had been; we learn about her mother's dealings with the town, the curses she conjured and the poisons she concocted from herbs; we learn about the rumor that the mother killed her husband, a landowner straight out of Faulkner's "Sartoris" saga, who died before he could finish building his own house. Once widowed, she locked herself away in the house, perhaps out of fear of the town's reaction, perhaps because "she was hiding something, a secret she couldn't let out of her sight." When she died, in "the year of the landslide" (an incident invoked momentously, like a Biblical flood), her daughter inherited her nickname. And now, many years later, the daughter has turned up dead in an irrigation canal, and nobody knows what happened.

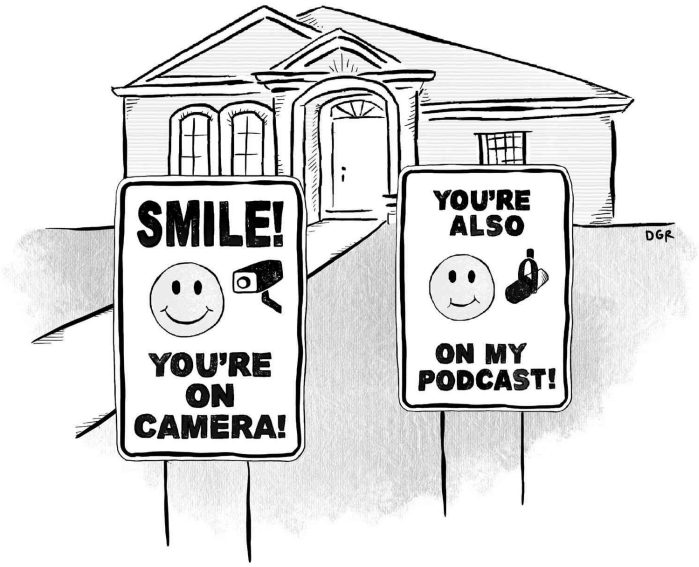
Such is Melchor's world. The scene is contemporary, but the atmosphere is unmistakably gothic; events here have a mythic quality, and hearsay, rumor, and gossip, filtered through the narrative voice, are our only access to the ambiguous truths of these lives. "So the story went," "they say," "some say": these expressions drape a gauzy veil between the characters and the reader. ("Absalom, Absalom!," with its movements back and forth in time, and between reality and perception, comes to mind.) The result is that our

relation to the victim is distanced. “Hurricane Season” proposes that we slowly discover the Witch—gain a fuller sense of her uncertain identity—through the different perspectives of the men and women who gravitate toward her and her legendary ruin of a house. The ensemble of observers is presented both in various group formations and, through deft shifts in point of view and diction, as distinctive voices.

“Hurricane Season” is built in circles, with narrative segments starting at a given point in the chronology and then returning to the past and spiralling forward to tell us how we got there. The novel’s success depends on this structure: beginning with an effect and then asking us to hunt for the cause. The approach also obviates transitional scenes, a hazard of conventional realism. In the acknowledgments of the novel’s Spanish-language original, Melchor thanks a friend for recommending that she read “The Autumn of the Patriarch,” and “at just the right moment.” Melchor plainly owes quite a bit to García Márquez’s use of time. In the 1971 study “García Márquez: Historia de un Deicidio,” Vargas Llosa evokes the temporal movement of “One Hundred Years of Solitude” with a quote from Joseph Conrad’s “The Secret Agent”: “Circles, circles; innumerable circles, concentric, eccentric; a coruscating whirl of circles.” Melchor built “Hurricane Season” in just this way. The fact that it feels like the only way to tell this story is a measure of the book’s success.

Melchor’s characters are defeated, dispossessed, and disenfranchised, never in control of their own existence, always victims of violence and too often (and too easily) turned into willing perpetrators. The governing forces here include deep-seated machismo and systemic misogyny, and it’s virtually impossible to escape them. This is clear in the case of Luismi and Brando, young men thrust into premature manhood by the hardships and the viciousness of their messy lives. Like the men in the novel, they live in fear and awe—or awe produced by fear—of the narcos who rule the area; their sexual lives regularly involve rape (although they don’t call it that), homosexual encounters filled with ambiguity, and, in Brando’s case, compulsive masturbation to images of bestiality and the like. While Melchor’s prose calls to mind “Absalom, Absalom!,” the brutality of her world outstrips even that of “Sanctuary.”

Enter Norma, a thirteen-year-old girl who becomes pregnant after being serially raped by her stepfather, and receives an abortifacient from the Witch. If the Witch's murder is the engine that moves the novel forward, Norma's predicament swiftly becomes its center, the eye of the narrative hurricane; a novel that had been about men becomes a novel about what men do to women. Norma has been trailed by men in a pickup truck who call her names, "clicking their tongues as if she were a dog." But there's nowhere to turn for help; when she tells Luismi about the men, he worries that one of them is a narco known for abducting girls, and asks her to promise to never "go asking the police for help, because those fuckers worked for the same boss."



Cartoon by Dahlia Gallin Ramirez

The atmosphere of permanent threat, of constant vulnerability, recalls the fourth section of Roberto Bolaño's "2666," titled "The Part About the Crimes," loosely based on a spate of murders in Ciudad Juárez. But where Bolaño looks at victims from the outside, relying on inventory and reiteration to produce a feeling of numbness that is itself an indictment of the routinized violence against women, Melchor uses her sinuous sentences to inhabit her women and impersonate her men, granting an almost spooky knowledge of their darkest recesses. Throw in her peculiar awareness of superstition ("They say she never died, because witches don't go without a fight," we read in the last pages) and we begin to understand what Melchor

is after. She isn't holding a Stendhalian mirror up to Mexican society; she's dissecting its body and its psyche at the same time, unafraid of what she might find.

Violence against women has shaped Mexican life in recent decades, so much so that a neologism popularized in the seventies has become omnipresent: *feminicidio*, or "femicide." The term describes murders in which the gender of the victim is part of what motivates the perpetrator. This concern takes center stage in "Paradais." Like its predecessor, "Paradais" is a portrait of an ailing society inured to its own cruelty, and employs long paragraphs and supple sentences, always alive to the rhythms of speech. But the new novel departs from the previous one in important ways: it is more contained, less daring, less ambitious; it is, in a peculiar way, more reader-friendly.

Unlike "Hurricane Season," where the moral misery of the characters is set against a backdrop of material misery, the new novel takes place in an affluent world: a gated community given the English name Paradise (with an irony that seems to be addressed only to the reader) and referred to with the phonetic rendering "Paradais." The milieu is one of luxury and wealth, insulated from what happens outside its perimeter; in a sense, the gates of Paradais are built to keep out the world of "Hurricane Season." All borders are porous, however, and this porousness, in the shape of an unlikely friendship, will harrow the supposed sanctuary.

The friends are teen-agers, both outcasts of a kind, lonely and looking for ways to palliate their solitude. Polo Chaparro, a gardener at Paradais, comes from Progreso (another name fraught with irony), one of the downtrodden neighborhoods that surround the gated community. It's a place dominated by narcos so feared that they are referred to throughout the novel only as *they* or *them*, in italics. Franco Andrade, a.k.a. fatboy, who lives with his wealthy grandparents, is overweight, addicted to porn, and consumed by the prospect of having sex with Señora Marián, the attractive housewife next door. The two boys meet in the evenings to drink, with Franco fantasizing volubly about Señora Marián, talking about "nothing but screwing her, making her his, whatever the cost." When "Paradais" opens, that cost has been paid. In another example of Melchor's fondness for circular structures, the catastrophe has already taken place and we spend the rest of the novel watching these two misfits sluggishly resort to an act of extraordinary

violence. The question, of course, is who or what pushes them in that direction, and the novel in its entirety, a slender hundred and twelve pages, is the only satisfactory answer.

“Paradais” is a study of misogyny. But Melchor is primarily a novelist, not a journalist, and there are no concessions here to any kind of reportorial completeness. We never get to know Señora Marián as anything other than Franco’s object of desire: we never have access to her thoughts or emotions, or get more than a perfunctory look at her private world. The novel stays stubbornly within the vantage of the two friends who plan to attack her; its narrative choices mimic their highly circumscribed empathy. Since they don’t care who Señora Marián is, in other words, the novel doesn’t care, either. Melchor must have been aware of the risks of this decision: if the novel doesn’t care, why should the reader? Ford Madox Ford once wrote that novels are “the only source to which you can turn in order to ascertain how your fellows spend their entire lives.” We ascertain almost nothing about Señora Marián.

By contrast, Polo’s entire life is laid before us in convincing, even moving detail. Tellingly, in a novel obsessed with decisions and their consequences, Polo is the only character endowed with a past. We learn about his grandfather, an important presence in his childhood, an alcoholic who didn’t keep his promise of teaching Polo how to build a boat before he died. In conveying Polo’s memories, Melchor’s writing alters slightly, abandoning coarseness and profanity and assuming an almost lyrical quality, as if channelling Hemingway’s Nick Adams:

> Whenever he crossed the bridge over the river he would stop for a few minutes to watch the brackish waters snake their way between the lawns, the luxury villas on one side, and on the other the tiny islands populated by willows and shaggy palm trees, barely visible against the salmon pink canvas of the port, all lit up in the night sky, there in the distance, and he would get to thinking about the boat that he and his grandfather should’ve built together when there was still time. . . . He could earn his living fishing in his boat, or taking tourists out on the lagoon, or just head upriver with no destination, no plans or responsibilities, row his way to one of the towns along the river and its tributaries any time he needed something, and leave again just as freely.

The lines are poignant, because Polo's dreams of freedom are utterly out of his reach. That's why he strikes up a frivolous friendship with a rich kid he despises—fatboy provides the bottles of alcohol Polo needs to escape his gruelling reality—and why he doesn't resist fatboy's insane plans of sexual violence. It's as if the scheme offers an illusion of escape, a linear plot that will shatter his circular routine. Melchor seems fascinated by the gratuitousness of violence, by the absence of any sense of responsibility. The issue shadows the novel to the very last paragraph, where Polo meditates on "the comforting certainty of his total innocence" before echoing the novel's opening line: "It was all Franco Andrade's fault."

In 1955, when Faulkner visited Manila during an Asian tour, he gave an interview in which he contended that he never depicted degradation and violence for their own sake. "I have used them as tools," he explained, "with which I was trying to show what man must combat, and specific instances in which he has been strangled by degradation and violence, when he has hated the violence he participated in, when he has resisted the violence." Both "Hurricane Season" and "Paradais," however contoured by Faulkner's techniques, make that writer's vision of humanity look hopeful. In Melchor's world, there's no resisting the violence, much less hating it. All a novelist can do, she seems to suggest, is take a long, unsparing look at the hell that we've made. ♦

Comment

- **A Role Model for the Midterms**

By David Remnick

"Unhappy is the land that needs a hero." The famous line is from Brecht's "Life of Galileo," and it's often trotted out in reference to repressive regimes and their dissident truthtellers: Václav Havel, in Czechoslovakia; Nelson Mandela, in South Africa; and now Alexei Navalny, in Russia. Just how unhappy political life has been in the United States was demonstrated recently in Lansing, Michigan, when Lana Theis, a Republican state senator, delivered an invocation in the legislature that melded the cadences of prayer with the lexicon of QAnon paranoia: "Dear Lord, across the country we're seeing in the news that our children are under attack. That there are forces that desire things for them other than what their parents would have them see and hear and know."

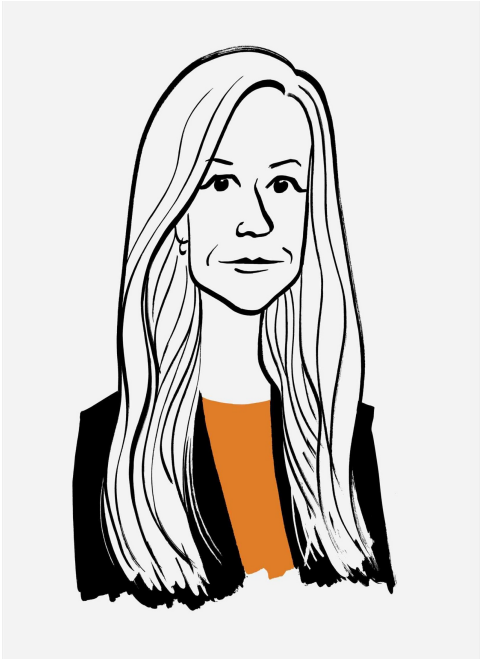


Illustration by João Fazenda

State Senator Mallory McMorrow, a Democrat who represents Mitt Romney's home town, understood that Theis was exploiting the occasion to call for a crackdown on teachers making any mention in the classroom of slavery, racism, or homosexuality. Michigan Republicans, like so many Republican lawmakers across the country, have been trying to foment moral panic in their constituents; in Lansing, they are eager to draft their own version of Florida's so-called "Don't Say Gay" law. McMorrow and two other Democrats walked out of the chamber in protest and expressed their dismay on social media. Not long afterward, Theis sent out a fund-raising e-

mail that attacked her by name: “These are the people we are up against. Progressive social media trolls like Senator Mallory McMorrow (D-Snowflake) who are outraged they can’t teach can’t groom and sexualize kindergarteners or that 8-year-olds are responsible for slavery.”

It was hard to know if Theis was speaking out of genuine conviction, careerist desperation, or both. She is facing a primary challenge from a Trump-endorsed candidate named Mike Detmer, who has said that voters should “be prepared to lock and load” at the polls. McMorrow, responding to Theis, gave a fierce and eloquent speech in the Senate chamber that made the case for decency and integrity in politics better than anything heard of late from a lectern in the District of Columbia. She denounced Theis’s “hollow” rhetoric as an attack on “marginalized kids in the name of ‘parental rights,’ ” and the phony culture-war tactics in Michigan—and, by inference, on the national scene—as a diversion:

> People who are different are not the reason that our roads are in bad shape after decades of disinvestment or that health-care costs are too high or that teachers are leaving the profession. I want every child in this state to feel seen, heard, and supported, not marginalized and targeted because they are not straight, white, and Christian. We cannot let hateful people tell you otherwise, to scapegoat and deflect from the fact that they are not doing anything to fix the real issues that impact people’s lives. And I know that hate will only win if people like me stand by and let it happen.

McMorrow’s speech comes at a time when many are convinced that the Democrats are doomed in this year’s midterm elections and beyond. The foreboding is general, the prognostication stark: A Republican, Trumpian majority in Congress will stymie all substantive legislation coming from the White House and, out of a sense of vengeance, establish sham committees to harass Joe Biden. The House may even contrive a reason to impeach the President, if only for the fun of it. Biden has been polling badly since the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan and the spike in inflation. In 2024, Trump, or one of his epigones (Governor Ron DeSantis, of Florida, is the comer of the moment), will crush the incumbent—legitimately or otherwise, whatever is required. At that point, the hideous scenario concludes, we shall

be entirely in the hands of a more experienced, more vindictive version of Trump 1.0. American democracy will not be imperilled. It will be erased.

The anxiety is not to be dismissed. As McMorrow put it in an interview, "If Democrats don't stand up and fight back, the Republicans are going to put forward people who may not support our having free and fair elections ever again." In fact, they're already doing that. A resumption of Trumpism is an invitation to an increasingly authoritarian America, a nation contemptuous of the rule of law, the disadvantaged, and the planet itself. The effect on national security is a misery to contemplate. Imagine if Trump had won in 2020. Imagine his inevitable indulgence of Vladimir Putin, his expressions of disdain for *NATO*, for Ukraine, for Volodymyr Zelensky, whom he once tried to extort for political gain. At a moment of wanton killing in Ukraine, Trump has shown scant concern. His only interest in the region seems to be whether he can cajole Putin to dig up dirt on Hunter Biden.

But, while alarm is appropriate, paralyzing despair is not. After fifteen months in office, Biden is polling at around forty per cent. At the same point, so was Ronald Reagan—then, as inflation receded, he ran for reëlection against Walter Mondale and won forty-nine states. Trump is making a tremendous noise as he travels the country, endorsing J. D. Vance and other obedient candidates, but his popularity has declined. His miserable handling of the pandemic and his starring role in the January 6th insurrection have eroded his standing among at least some Republican voters. His near future is hardly promising. The select committee investigating the insurrection will hold hearings in June, and Representative Jamie Raskin, of Maryland, predicts that the revelations will "blow the roof off the House." The former President also faces ongoing legal scrutiny in cases in New York and Georgia, and from journalists everywhere.

The analysts who keep flogging Biden for his inability to pass more ambitious legislation through Rooseveltian persuasion and Johnsonian party discipline tend to ignore the fact that F.D.R. and L.B.J. enjoyed immense congressional majorities. Biden has Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema. His stimulus bill, a significant achievement, attracted zero Republican support. The members of the political class of the G.O.P., with rare exceptions, have determined that their voters are with Trump, and so they must be, too. These men and women have all the political independence and moral courage of

the trembling members of Putin's national-security council. They have traded the principles of a liberal democracy for a job. Does the future belong to them?

"We have to let go of the idea that this is politics as usual," Mallory McMorrow said. She did a heroic thing in the Michigan State Senate. The country is in real need of many such acts, many such heroes. ♦

Crossword

- **The Crossword: Thursday, April 28, 2022**

By Caitlin Reid

Currency Dept.

- **Making Art Out of Inflation**

By Sheelah Kolhatkar

Carla Zaccagnini was seated on a bench the other day, riffling through a pile of cash. “I’ve been collecting money that’s not in circulation anymore,” she said, looking up from stacks of bills sheathed in cellophane. “So, currencies that are dead.” It was five days before Zaccagnini’s first solo exhibition in the United States would open, at Amant, a nonprofit art space in Brooklyn, and three days before the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics would announce that consumer prices had risen 8.5 per cent in the past year, sparking panic about the cost of broccoli and gasoline. Zaccagnini’s show, “Cuentos de cuentas / Accounts of Accounting,” is based on her childhood in Argentina and Brazil in the nineteen-seventies and eighties, when hyperinflation drove people to hoard U.S. dollars. Zaccagnini recalled that grocery workers spent hours walking the aisles, replacing price tags throughout the day as prices went up.

Carla ZaccagniniIllustration by João Fazenda

In Brazil, for example, where annual inflation rates in the late eighties shot up above a thousand per cent, the currency declined so quickly that the government kept devaluing and renaming it. Before 1986, the Brazilian dollar was called the cruzeiro (a reference to the Southern Cross constellation); then it was renamed the cruzado (“crusader”), and existing bills were stamped with a new value until fresh bills could be printed. In 1989, the currency was devalued again, and a thousand cruzados became

one cruzado novo. And on and on. (A publication accompanying the exhibit estimates that one of today's Brazilian reals, as the currency is now called, would be worth 2,750,000,000,000,000,000 of the original reals used when Brazil became an independent country, in 1822.)

Each time there was a change, money in circulation had to be traded in for new bills, and the old ones were retired. A few years ago, Zaccagnini started buying them, on Mercado Libre, the Latin American eBay. "The first idea I had was to just make a list, printed on the wall, of all the dead currencies since I was born," she said. "Currency is one of the identities of a country, like the national anthem. Can you imagine if we had a new anthem every three years?" She picked up a bluish-white bill worth five thousand cruzados, which featured a portrait of Candido Portinari, a famous Brazilian artist. "Then I came up with the idea of little boats."

She folded the bill in half and pressed the corners down, before folding it again into quarters. "It's the first thing you learn to do with paper," she went on. "It's something I kind of do when I'm bored and I have a paper in my hand. I make little boats." After a few more folds, she stuck her fingers into the center and popped the sides out, revealing a trim vessel.

Ruth Estévez, Amant's chief curator, walked in. In addition to dozens of busted-currency boats, called "Fleeting Fleet," the exhibition was to include a six-foot-long mobile that, owing to an airport-worker strike in France, was stranded in Paris. Estévez had been calling FedEx for days, begging the company to turn the mobile over to a friend, who would bring it to New York. "But it's in the warehouse there, and there is no way to take it out," she said. "It's like it's kidnapped."

Zaccagnini lives in Sweden, a country known for generous family-leave policies and a notable lack of financial upheavals. She was born in Argentina, which has been studied extensively for the number of times the government has defaulted on its debt (nine). Her mother was a Lacanian psychoanalyst, and her father was a car salesman and a part-time inventor; he created a machine that could test the ink on American dollar bills to determine whether they were authentic. It became highly useful as the trading of dollars blew up on the illegal market.

In 1981, when the exchange rate was particularly favorable, Zaccagnini's parents decided to move the family to Brazil, where their money would go further and allow them to buy a house with a pool. Zaccagnini's grandmother set up a sewing machine in her kitchen and made Zaccagnini's mother a vest with special hidden compartments, in which about thirty thousand U.S. dollars could be concealed and secreted across the border. "She got really warm," Zaccagnini said, remembering the flight. "But she couldn't take it off."

The family settled in São Paulo, and Zaccagnini's father came up with a scheme to hide their savings and thwart potential robbers, putting some dollars in a safe that he built behind an electrical outlet, and thousands more dollars and German marks in a plastic jar that he buried under tiles behind a bidet. One night, Zaccagnini said, she came home late and found her father on his hands and knees, piecing together mutilated hundred-dollar bills. Water had got into the jar, and the money had congealed into a wet ball. Not all of the notes could be saved. Zaccagnini said, "My mother was super mad." ♦

Fiction

- **“Nondisclosure Agreement”**

By Saïd Sayrafiezadeh

Content

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

Audio: *Saïd Sayrafiezadeh reads.*

There must have been some sort of defective wiring in the early-warning system of my brain, because by the time the owner put his hand on my thigh I was already in way too deep. Later, I would try to piece it all together, remembering how, at my one and only interview for the job, he had offered, without prompting, to give me more money than I was asking for. "Why don't we just make this simple and double it?" he'd said. He'd smiled. He'd held out his open hand as I pictured everything I would suddenly be able to pay for—including my student loans. Then he'd taken me on a brief tour of the office, a former FedEx with the original carpeting and an open floor plan —"I believe in transparency"—which was situated above a topiary shop, of all things. There were four other employees, all women, none of whom happened to be there at the time, and he'd said, breezily, "It'll be nice to finally have some male energy around here for a change." I could smell the faint scent of gardening coming from below.

This was my job after the Amazon fulfillment center, where there had been benefits and room for growth, which had been my job after Trader Joe's, where there had also been benefits and room for growth, and which had been my job after Hertz, where, once a week in the predawn hours, I would drive with the regional manager through poor neighborhoods on the outskirts of Buffalo looking for cars that hadn't been returned on time. Leaving aside the six months that I tutored the little girl of a single mother who paid me off the books, this was the basic trajectory of my employment post-grad school, with my specialty, comparative literature, receding further into the background with each passing year, sometimes occluded entirely. In a quiet, halcyon New England classroom, on a tree-lined campus, with the sunlight gauzy and the real world a twenty-minute walk in any direction, I used to spend my afternoons discussing the intricacies of literary criticism with a dozen students and a tenured professor, but never the intricacies of how to make a *living*. It had seemed impolite to broach the subject of money, it had seemed unintellectual. We believed the act of reading and writing to be its

own legitimate form of labor, and we had referred to it as such—work, opus, métier—and we had all got A's.

Now my job was inputting data for a mail-order catalogue. It was easy, untaxing, and mindless. More important, I was able to do it while sitting in a chair. That the mail-order catalogue was a dying business, if not already dead, having been crushed beneath the weight of e-commerce, seemed to be no cause for concern. Indeed, the owner viewed my decision to leave my job at the Amazon fulfillment center for a job in his office as a clear indication that the American people were asserting what was essential in life and that the economy was finding its level. He mentioned this often throughout my first few weeks in the office, usually as a humorous anecdote, then as a scientific fact, and eventually as a selling point to potential clients. "The winds of generational change" was how he phrased it. According to the owner, orders for his catalogues were up, or soon would be—he cited numbers—and by next summer, if not spring, he would be expanding into all fifty states, plus Puerto Rico and Guam. He would sit at his desk, paging through one of his catalogues, plucked at random from a previous year, a hundred pages of small type and low-res images. "Hands want to feel paper," he'd say with something like reverence. I was in agreement with him on this, partly because of my own love of reading but mainly because I knew from firsthand experience that the tens of thousands of objects I'd packed up during my un-air-conditioned twelve-hour shifts at Amazon had often been books. From fifty feet away, I would watch them slowly winding down the conveyor belt in my direction, and I would try to anticipate what they might be and whether I had been assigned them in grad school, and almost always they were by James Patterson.

Saïd Sayrafiezadeh on writing about bad jobs.

By late afternoon, it was usually the two of us alone in the office, the owner and me, me clacking away on the keyboard, him on the phone trying to drum up business. He thought big. He aimed high. Mostly, he couldn't get through. "Please tell him I called," he would say. He was always upbeat. He was never daunted. His passion was inspiring. So was his perseverance. He reminded me of the famous authors I'd studied who had managed, despite the odds, to create something lasting. Staring at the computer screen, with its blank blinking fields waiting to be filled, I would sometimes recall the scent

of those ubiquitous Amazon boxes, also waiting to be filled, and I would marvel at how, as if by magic, the smell had suddenly been transformed into the soothing aroma from the topiary shop.

Unlike me, the women in the office were actual professionals, with training in design, publicity, copy editing, which they carried out with a ruthless efficiency at part-time hours. They would come in at ten and leave by three. If the owner was out, they would leave by two. “Don’t stay too late,” they’d tell me. They were nice but no-nonsense. They had husbands, they had children, they had degrees from the local community college, having gone to school with the prime objective of a return on their tuition. They would sometimes joke about setting me up with one of the young women who worked downstairs in the topiary shop. Other times, they would talk about the owner, alluding to him in vague and cryptic terms. “Eccentric.” “One of a kind.” “A piece of work.” But mostly he was “enigmatic,” his origin story a mystery to everyone. He was from down South maybe, and had arrived not too long ago, but with no trace of an accent. Or maybe he was originally from Europe. No, he was from the suburbs and had lived in Buffalo his whole life. Whatever the truth was, he was rich, that was for sure, deep pockets thanks to his family. There had been another data-entry person, the women said, a young man like me, who had been on staff. He’d been hired before they started, but he hadn’t worked out, for whatever reason, and suddenly one day he was gone without a trace. “Just be careful,” they told me, but they didn’t offer any follow-up, and partly because I knew they were suggesting something that I didn’t really want to hear, and because I knew this would be the best job I’d ever be able to find, I never asked them to elaborate. Before leaving, they’d say, “Don’t stay too late.”

It took only two paychecks for me to be able to move to a better apartment, on the other side of Buffalo, with a bay window and a non-working fireplace. I bought a fake log for the fireplace, because why not, and drapes for the window, which I left open so that I could see the trees that reminded me of the trees from my classroom window in New England when we’d sat around the wooden table.

It took only two more paychecks for me to go down to the dealership to trade in my old car, and where I was surprised to see that my regional manager from Hertz was working as a salesman.

“Congratulations,” I said.

“It pays the bills,” he said. He shrugged. He was dressed in a wash-and-wear suit with a nametag where the pocket square should have been. “Mike” in blue marker. “Next stop: retirement,” Mike said. Herewith, the trajectory of his employment.

Podcast: The Writer’s Voice
Listen to Saïd Sayrafiezadeh read “Nondisclosure Agreement.”

He asked me what I was doing these days, and I told him mail order, and he nodded as if he heard this all the time.

“If you ever need a job,” he said, “you have one here.”

This was generous of him but unnecessary. As far as I was concerned, my life in the service industry was a thing of the past, soon to be eclipsed entirely. “I’ll definitely keep it in mind,” I told him.

He walked me around the showroom—new cars with state-of-the-art this and that, good mileage, zero A.P.R. He talked up everything the way we talked up the rental cars to unsuspecting customers, giving them twice as much as they needed, padding our commissions in the process. He said he could get me a good deal. He said he could get me an even better deal. “You won’t have to make payments for six months,” he said under his breath, as if this were something special just for me. He seemed to forget that I knew the game he was playing. I prided myself on my savvy and on my street smarts. Still, I was ready to make my decision, money no object, and I chose the burgundy hatchback with a sunroof, leather seats, and a heated steering wheel.

“You can take it for a spin,” he said. “Just make sure to have it back on time.” This was a joke from our days at Hertz.

And it was two more paychecks after that when I happened to catch the owner of the mail-order catalogue gazing at me from across the open floor plan of the office.

It was a Friday, late afternoon, early fall, five o'clock, give or take. The women were already gone, of course, and the workweek was coming to an end, and the owner was leaning back in his chair, uncharacteristically relaxed, tie undone, feet on desk, catalogue in lap, which he was paging through absent-mindedly as he stared at me.

But when I glanced back, no, I'd been wrong, he wasn't looking at me at all, he was leaning over his desk, hunched, really, lingering on each page of the catalogue with what seemed like melancholy, as if he were never going to see that page again, those boots, that luggage, half-price everything, two-week delivery if you ordered now using this promo code. Here was the optimistic entrepreneur facing the reality of what he was up against: an indifferent consumer.

The office was silent, and the fall sunlight was casting shadows across the carpet. It was time for me to go downstairs and drive my new car to my new apartment with the trees turning yellow, and I powered off the computer and I put on my new jacket, and when I said good night to the owner he looked up at me startled, as if he'd forgotten I was still there. His face was flushed, as if he might be about to weep, business on the brink, and I got the sense that he was trying to keep me from seeing what it was he had been reading. It suddenly occurred to me that perhaps I had made a mistake leaving my job at the Amazon fulfillment center for a job that was, after all, nothing more than a startup in an obsolete industry. I'd quit without giving notice. It had felt satisfying. It had felt redemptive. "Don't think about ever coming back here," my team leader had told me. We were standing inside the break room, six hours still to go on my shift, where, despite the door's being closed, the low rumble of the conveyor belts could still be heard. "Don't worry," I said. "I won't."

"See you Monday," the owner was saying to me now, voice hoarse, trying to maintain composure, and as I turned to leave I was able to glimpse that the mail-order catalogue, which he had been examining with such emotion, was actually, inexplicably, a volume of Rilke's poems. I could see the poet's face on the cover, preoccupied genius that he was, no doubt conjuring one of his brilliant poems in his head as he took a moment to be photographed. He had always appeared, at least to me, old and pompous. Now he appeared young and troubled.

“Have you heard of him?” the owner asked. He sounded embarrassed at having been discovered reading poetry, in the workplace no less, never mind that he was the owner. I told him yes, I’d heard of Rilke. I’d studied him in grad school. “Grad school . . . ” the owner said, trailing off. “I’m sure they didn’t know how to teach him.” *They* meant my comp-lit department. I was strangely impressed by this. I had always considered formal education to be a thing above reproach, with grad school the pinnacle, and my professors infallible. I thought of my loans.

“Do you have a favorite poem of his?” the owner wanted to know.

“ ‘Imaginary Career,’ ” I said without hesitation, and this happened to be the owner’s favorite, too. We laughed together at the coincidence.

“Look,” he said, and, like a magic trick, the book was open on that very page.

And then he began to read, unprompted, leaning forward in his chair, elbows on his knees, tie undone and dangling, while I stood there in my jacket.

“At first a childhood, limitless and free of any goals,” he began, “Ah sweet unconsciousness.”

He read well, sonorously, reminiscent of how my favorite professor had read in class, as we, the dozen students, listened rapturously while also trying to think of something smart to say when he was done. In fact, the owner looked as if he could be a professor, middle-aged, tweed jacket, paunch showing, not yet bald, but thick blond hair a thing of the past.

It was a short poem, a dozen lines or so, and the owner milked them for all they were worth, luxuriating in the sound of the words—“slavery,” “temptation,” “defiance”—each one selected with care by Rilke and then translated from the German with figurative precision, which I had been taught held multiple meanings.

“The child bent becomes the bender,” the owner read on, being sure to acknowledge the alliteration—b, b, b—and his voice deepened with

solemnity as he approached that blockbuster last line: “Then, from His place of ambush, God leapt out.”

When he was done, he remained still, resting on his elbows, perhaps drained from the emotional exertion, staring down at the poem. I thought for a moment that I might see a tear fall onto the page.

“It’s better in the German,” he said finally. I was impressed that he knew German.

He was silent again, an extended awkwardness, and I didn’t know if I was supposed to leave or stay, and the sunlight was shifting from late afternoon to early evening, shining across the carpet and the cartons of mail-order catalogues stacked against the wall, sixty-some cartons ready to be distributed any day now. And somehow I knew that the owner was right, all that schooling for what? All those days in the classroom, two years total, where I had analyzed the big books with the tenured experts, and yet here I was, closing in on thirty, doing data entry in a former FedEx office, and utterly unable to recognize the dangerous and looming significance of the title “Imaginary Career.”

But the phrase “fulfillment center” had not been lost on me. Oh, no, that I’d immediately grasped the first time I’d seen it, Day One of my twelve-hour shift packing boxes, and I’d never passed up an opportunity to point it out to anyone who would listen, including my team leader. “That’s another word for ‘warehouse,’ ” he’d told me, completely missing the point.

I’d also seen the writing on the wall, literally—“work hard. have fun. make history.”—painted in lowercase letters above the front entrance, so that I had to pass beneath it when I entered for work. By midnight, I’d be exiting the way I’d come, smelling of cardboard and sweat, “make history” now behind me. I recognized the irony in this as well.

As a way to even the playing field, I would steal from the open boxes that floated by on the conveyor belt. The woman who stood next to me had taught me how: repack, rescan, reroute. “Don’t worry, honey,” she told me. “They can’t trace it.” She’d been hired at the fulfillment center when it first opened, to big fanfare and ribbon-cutting, in the middle of a former

cornfield. I took toothpaste, packs of gum, knickknacks made in China. "Don't take too much, honey," she told me. Half the stuff I threw away when I got home. Even in the midst of the act, I knew that there was a deeper implication beyond the act itself, because, if nothing else, comparative literature had trained me to seek out paradoxes and parallels. No symbol too insignificant. No metaphor too remote. And so on my noncontiguous days off (always Sunday and some other day of the week), I began writing some of it down, spilling the beans on the fulfillment center from the ground up, most of the basics already known to the general public—the heat, the wages, the non-union precarity—but doing it in a comp-lit way, where I might be able to salvage some of my three-hundred-page grad-school thesis, which I wasn't sure my professor had ever read, and publish the new work in a quarterly, the way my former classmates were publishing in quarterlies. Every so often, an unsolicited group e-mail would pop up in my in-box, with a subject line that included the word "literature," and always began "Dear Cohort," followed by a dozen links to what they had accomplished in the past year. "I couldn't have done it without you," they'd write. But it seemed that they had. By the time I'd finished thirty pages of a first draft, I reached out to my favorite professor, hoping for guidance or encouragement, preferably both. What I really wanted was for him to offer to read it. He'd always said that he'd "be there for us," even after we'd graduated, "for a long time to come," that this was the kind of dedication that set our grad program apart from the other grad programs, and that this was what set our cohort—his "favorite"—apart from any other he'd had. It took me half an hour to compose one paragraph, buttering him up with remembrances of how much he'd meant to me, how much his class had stayed with me, with the subject line "Literary fulfillment," which I hoped he'd find clever. A moment after I clicked Send, an e-mail appeared in my in-box, subject line: "Auto reply."

It was winter now and the mail-order catalogue for *next* winter was due and everyone in the office was rushing around—the designer, the publicist, the copy editor—trying to meet the deadline. We were a year away, but nothing was ready and everything was late. "Now or never," the owner kept saying, panic in his voice, and I made sure to show that I was doing my part, feverishly entering data. When three o'clock came, no one left for the day. When five o'clock came, the owner asked me if I would pick up dinner for the staff. "We're going to be here all night," he said. He reached into his

deep pockets and handed me a hundred dollars. It gave me a good reason to drive my new car six blocks to Au Bon Pain, steering wheel heated, sunroof open, even though it was too cold, because I wanted to use every feature for as long as I could, thinking how surreal it was to be living one winter in the future. I waited in a long line, watching the Au Bon Pain cashier running ragged, nametag "Vicky," thinking how not too long ago I had been a cashier, ringing up customers at Trader Joe's, warm and personable on the outside, minimum wage on the inside. I bought a dozen sandwiches and a quart of soup, and I paid for them with the owner's money, and I put two more dollars in Vicky's tip jar, and she said, "Thank you," and I said, "No problem, Vicky," and I drove back to the office, driving fast because I knew the staff would be working hard and hungry, passing the topiary shop, which was closing for the night, the latest creations displayed in the window—potted plants in the shape of house cats, chess pieces, and other everyday objects. But when I opened the door to the office the owner was sitting alone.

The overhead lights were off, and the desk lamp was on, and his tie was undone.

"We did it," he said by way of explanation. He smiled wide. He gave a long exhale. "Whew!" he said. I noticed that he had taken off his shoes.

He nodded at the Au Bon Pain bags I was holding. "That's too much for me to eat all by myself," he said. He laughed as if I had done something funny on purpose. He opened his desk drawer and rummaged around and removed two cloth napkins, spreading them across the desk the way a waiter might spread a tablecloth. I was technically still on the clock, but I wasn't sure if I was supposed to stay and eat with him. In ten minutes, I would be off the clock, and I wasn't sure if I was supposed to remind him of this.

"You bought my favorite soup," he said. He opened the lid and inhaled. "How did you know?" he asked me.

"Lucky guess," I said.

He found this funny. He laughed with gusto. "I think you knew!" he said. Then he was concentrating, as he poured two cups of soup, him and me,

steam rising, trying not to spill a precious drop, and so I sat down on the other side of the desk, my knees pressing into the metal, forcing me to lean at an angle toward the food. He handed me a set of plastic cutlery from the Au Bon Pain bag. “Workplace elegance,” he said. He slurped when he ate his soup, big gulps, saying, “Mmm.” He unwrapped a sandwich. “Turkey!” he said. “How did you know?” Six bites later, he was done, crumbs in the corners of his mouth, unwrapping another.

“Before I forget,” he said, and as if he were only right then remembering, he opened the same desk drawer where the cloth napkins had been and withdrew a copy of “Miracle of the Rose.” “I saw it in the bookstore,” he said, “and I thought of you.”

It was an early edition, slightly distressed, must have been expensive, and whether this was supposed to be a gift or a loan or just a book he wanted to show me, I didn’t know. Genet’s face stared out from the cover, once old and pompous, now young and troubled.

“I suppose you studied him in grad school,” the owner said.

“I did,” I said.

“Grad school . . . ” he said, trailing off as he had before. Then he said, “I’m sure they didn’t know how to teach him.”

He was right, the soup was good, and so was the sandwich, and it was dinnertime, and I was hungry, and the desk lamp glowed like a candle. With our mouths half full, we chatted about literature, French in general, Genet in particular, each of us taking turns thumbing through the yellowing pages of “Miracle of the Rose,” sliding it back and forth across the cloth napkins, the owner saying, “It’s better in the French.” It was a novel, sure, but everyone knew it was really an account of the years Genet had been imprisoned in the Mettray Penal Colony. He had been an orphan, he had been a prostitute, he had been a thief, he had been facing life behind bars—and literature had saved him.

“What do you like about Genet?” the owner asked me.

I had been asked the same question by my professor during one of our afternoon classes, and my response, perhaps influenced by the languid swaying of the tree branches outside the window, had been: “I like his sentences.” The moment the words left my mouth, I was able to hear how academically substandard they sounded, a simpleminded observation from someone who should have known better, and that what I should have said was something about the content, or the *context*, and the professor had sat expressionless at the head of the table, and none of my classmates had come to my aid.

But, sitting there with the Au Bon Pain food in front of me, I could still think of nothing better to say than “I like his sentences.”

The owner looked up at me startled, holding his spoon in midair. “I’ve never heard it put so incisively,” he said. He was energized now, unwrapping another sandwich, his third. He was telling me how he had once planned on publishing a journal, a bimonthly, in the spirit of *Les Temps Modernes*, which had, as it happened, published Genet. Had I heard of *Les Temps Modernes*? No, I hadn’t. “Grad school . . . ” he said. He opened his desk drawer again, the same one, and this time withdrew a booklet, a few pages thick, bound with silver string, entitled simply “Journal, Issue Number One.” It looked as if it could have been made in an arts-and-crafts class. “Prototype,” the owner said.

"We've been married for fifteen years. We could at least get off at the same stop."
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

This had been his plan from the beginning, his business plan, and also his *dream*, and he had hired a designer, a publicist, and a copy editor to make it real. "My publishing staff," he said. He sounded wistful. But his parents with the deep pockets had disapproved and intervened, never mind that he was a grown adult, and he had to come up with another idea, which was the mail-order catalogue, and he had to fire his publishing staff, sadly, and hire an entirely new designer, publicist, and copy editor. "Perhaps you didn't know this about me," he said. I didn't know anything about him. But now it all made sense—the office eccentricity, the off-kilter behavior, the poetry after hours. He wasn't an upbeat entrepreneur hoping that the economy would find its level; he was a frustrated intellectual trying to overcome the obstacles of his past and the dissatisfaction of his present. I thought of Rilke's poem that we both loved, and of those many layers of meaning, if only you knew where to look for them: *the child bent becomes the bender*.

He slowly flipped through the journal. "Paper," he said. And, since he was being open and honest about his aspirations, I decided to confide in him about my own, beginning with the thirty pages I'd written on my noncontiguous days off at the Amazon warehouse. I knew what I was doing: I was angling. I was hinting. I was holding out hope that perhaps this thwarted publisher would ask to read my pages, give me some guidance and

feedback. Later, this night would be brought up in my lawsuit against him, his version of the details and mine, and his lawyer would ask me under oath if it wasn't true that I'd stayed after hours in the office to talk to him about Jean Genet, of all people, but the court transcript would render his name as *John Chaney*.

Sure enough, the owner seemed interested in what I was saying. He sat upright. He wanted to know more. "Tell me more," he said. I told him more. The heat. The wage. The nonunion.

"Jeff," he said. "Fuck him." He sounded aggrieved on my behalf. He sounded as if he knew Jeff Bezos personally. "I'd like to read it," he said. "If you don't mind, of course."

"No," I said. "I don't mind at all."

I was overjoyed but trying to act calm. It was eight o'clock, and it was time to go. I stood up. "Before I forget," I said. I handed him his change, a pocketful of tens and twenties. The desk lamp glowed golden above the Au Bon Pain wrappers and the empty soup cups, everything strewn across the cloth napkins as after a picnic, an image made more apt by the owner's shoeless feet.

"No," the owner said, "you keep that." He smiled such a warm and optimistic smile. "Overtime," he said.

They were brilliant, all thirty pages. "I knew they would be," he said. He wanted to publish them in the journal he had dreamed of publishing, which he was determined to publish now, soon, because of what I'd written, never mind what Mom and Dad might say. "My parents," he said. "Fuck them." No one from my cohort had ever published thirty pages in a single journal. I would send them an e-mail. I would cc my professor. I would tell them, "I couldn't have done it without you."

"Congratulations," the designer, the publicist, the copy editor told me.

"Thank you," I said.

Instead of data entry, I worked on revisions, sitting in the same chair in front of the same computer with the same faint scent of topiary wafting through the office vent. I was impressed by how careful a reader the owner was. His line edits were extensive. He saw the big picture. He saw the small picture. He saw typos. By the end of the day, I would have one page revised. In the morning, another page would be waiting for me. If I worked hard, we would be able to have the first issue out by spring. If not spring, summer. How surreal it was to be living so far ahead. He already had a cover in mind, which was similar to the cover of the prototype, if not identical, still entitled "Journal, Issue Number One," but with my name listed below in bold type. He was planning on distributing the journal himself—bookstores, newsstands, libraries. He knew people; he had connections. He had a pickup truck if we needed extra space to transport the bundles. I was surprised that this was how publishing worked. He was surprised that grad school hadn't taught me how publishing worked.

"On second thought," he said, "I'm not surprised."

During the day I would hear him on the phone talking to suppliers, an upbeat entrepreneur, trying to get a good quote on quality paper. "Only the best," he'd tell them.

And then he read my graduate thesis, on a whim, all three hundred pages in a week, and he said, "I read your thesis with a pencil in my hand and I didn't make one mark." Moreover, he couldn't believe a grad student had written this. "Every once in a while grad school gets something right. . . ." His new idea was to reorder the three hundred pages, reorder in order to serialize, if that was O.K. with me. He didn't want to presume. "Is that O.K. with you?" No one in my cohort had ever had a thesis published, let alone serialized. I'd be sure to send a group e-mail every several weeks. I'd tell them I couldn't have done it without them.

Winter came and went, and spring arrived, and the topiary shop revamped its offerings with Teddy bears and billy goats, and every morning there'd be several pages of my thesis waiting to be revised, until there were only a few more pages to go, and the owner told me that he had reread everything, including the Amazon essay, start to finish, and realized that the revisions weren't quite good enough.

“Something’s off,” he said. It was late in the day and he was standing by my chair, trying not to make eye contact. “If this is hard for you to hear,” he said, “it’s hard for me to say.”

As far as what wasn’t working, he wasn’t quite sure. “It’s hard to pinpoint.” The bottom line was that he’d been hoping to have the journal sent to the publisher by the end of the week, next week at the very latest, but now it looked as if it wouldn’t be until the summer. If not summer, fall. Or maybe winter. Or maybe, if I worked really hard, it could be the summer. “It’s not your fault,” he said, but I knew it was. He could sense my disappointment. “We’ll make this work,” he said. “We can stay late.” He handed me a hundred dollars for some fast casual. I knew I would be keeping the change as I had before; I knew that the women would be gone as before. I drove back to Au Bon Pain, same as last time, and waited in the long line, watching the cashier, Vicky, who didn’t remember me, and I bought the sandwiches the owner liked, and the soup he liked, and when I put two dollars in Vicky’s tip jar I thought briefly that I wished I could change places with her, that maybe a service job wasn’t so bad, and I could see the thought, as absurd as it was, flit through my mind before it was gone.

And I drove back to the office. It was still light out because it was springtime in Buffalo, and the owner was there, sitting at the desk as he had before, shoes off, tie undone. My three hundred pages were piled up in front of him, filled with red marks, far more than the professor had ever made on anything I’d written, and he patted the chair beside him, and I sat down close.

“Look,” he said. He was showing me that the comma goes here, and the semicolon goes there, and the clause goes here, and look at how it changes everything when you make this small edit—the rhythm, the style, the meaning. It all changes.

He was being patient. He was leaning next to me. “They didn’t teach you this in grad school. . . .” he said.

“No, they didn’t,” I said.

“I know they didn’t,” he said.

This was going to take a long time. But I was determined to make it happen. If not now, when? If not this job, what? I would see this through until the end. I would not be dissuaded. The spring sun was coming through the window, moving toward late afternoon, the FedEx carpeting soft beneath my shoes, the unused mail-order catalogues piled high against the wall. I watched the owner's hand as his pen moved deliberately across my pages, each page with many, many red marks, each page, paragraph, sentence, word, punctuation mark. ♦

By Cressida Leyshon

Letter from Ukraine

- **How Ukrainians Saved Their Capital**

By Luke Mogelson

Content

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

The original St. Michael's Monastery, in the historic center of Kyiv, was commissioned around the year 1100 by a Christian prince, who dedicated it to the archangel and patron of soldiers after winning a war. The complex, which included a cathedral famous for its golden dome, was pillaged by the Mongols in 1240 and restored a few centuries later. In 1937, Communist authorities demolished it. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Kyiv City Council had the buildings reconstructed. On March 1st, I accompanied my friend Anastasia Fomitchova to St. Michael's. Uniformed men with Kalashnikovs patrolled the perimeter and guarded the gate. Anastasia approached a fence, through which we could see the cathedral. She bowed her head; when she lifted it, she was crying. I asked her what she had prayed for. "My country, my city, and my family," she replied.

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I'd met Anastasia several years ago in Paris, through my wife, when they had both belonged to an academic consortium sponsored by the European Research Council. Although Anastasia, a graduate student in political science, had spent most of her life in France, she was born in Kyiv and returned there regularly. When Russian forces launched multiple simultaneous offensives against Ukraine, on February 24th, I called Anastasia to ask after her relatives. One prong of the attack was advancing on the capital, and missiles had already started landing there. Anastasia was preparing to travel to Kyiv, and invited me to go with her.

Two days later, in Paris, at 7:30 *A.M.*, I arrived outside a Métro station near the Place d'Italie, where people were loading boxes of food and other provisions into the luggage compartment of a commercial bus. I spotted Anastasia, wearing a backpack and smoking a cigarette. She told me that she'd been returning home on this bus, which was owned by a Ukrainian man and which departed every Sunday, for the past several years. The voyage took more than thirty hours but cost only eighty euros. Normally, the

passengers were immigrants visiting friends and family; now they were mostly young men and women going back to fight.

In response to the Russian invasion, the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, had declared martial law and ordered a general mobilization, forbidding males between the ages of eighteen and sixty to leave the country. Ukrainians who were abroad, of course, could have chosen to remain so. But every seat on the bus was occupied. The man across the aisle from Anastasia and me, named Petro, was a thirty-three-year-old construction worker who had lived in France for eight years. He was bound for his home town, Ivano-Frankivsk, where Russian missiles had recently targeted the airport. He planned to spend one night with his parents, then report for duty.

As we traversed Luxembourg and Germany, the driver stopped at a gas station every four or five hours, to let us use the rest room and buy food; Petro neither ate nor slept, and his anxiety seemed to increase as we neared Ukraine. He had never fired a weapon. “I don’t know where they’re going to send me,” he told us midway through Poland, his hands trembling. “I don’t know what’s going to happen to me.” Embarrassed by the tears welling in his eyes, he explained, “Not everyone is ready for this.”

The Russian military, which was superior in numbers and firepower, was widely predicted to prevail. Hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians were already fleeing the country. The mood on the bus was sombre as the passengers reckoned with their decision to join a possibly doomed resistance.

Anastasia informed Petro that she, too, planned to participate in the war. Twenty-eight years old, petite, and blond, with a round, open face and a wide smile, she radiated youthful optimism and earnestness. When she told Petro, “I’m scared, too, but we need to fight,” he seemed reassured that such a person had made the same choice, and by her certainty that it was the right one.

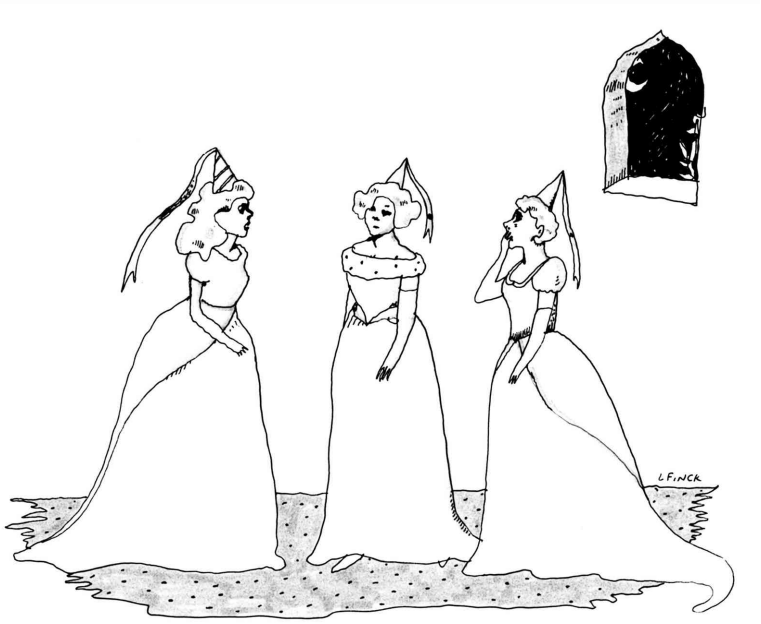
We reached the Polish-Ukrainian border the following afternoon. Throngs of women, children, and elderly people waited to cross in the opposite direction, toting as many of their possessions as they could. The driver was unable to go to Kyiv and deposited us in Lviv, some three hundred and fifty miles to the west. Anastasia and I said goodbye to Petro and went to the railway station. Outside, hundreds of people had converged on stands and tents where young volunteers in neon safety vests served hot soup and tea. More displaced Ukrainians had packed into the main terminal, bundled in heavy coats, sleeping on benches or on the cold tile floor. Suitcases and strollers clogged the passageways. Most people were transiting to points west or south. The only train to Kyiv wasn't scheduled to depart until midnight, and Anastasia went to buy some groceries for her father and stepmother. There were rumors of a run on the supermarkets in Kyiv, by residents anticipating a long Russian siege. I ducked into a shop to buy cigarettes, and when I came out Anastasia was speaking with two old men who were drinking beer and vodka. They'd just brought their wives and daughters to Lviv from the southern port city of Mariupol, on the Sea of Azov, and were returning to sign up with the armed forces there. They were in high spirits and full of bravado.

In the weeks ahead, Russian forces would decimate Mariupol. The indiscriminate bombardment would raze much of the city and kill thousands of civilians. Other residents would starve to death. Corpses would contaminate streams, and stray dogs would feed off dead Ukrainians left to rot in the streets. "*Slava Ukraini!* " one of the two old men shouted, a little drunkenly, as we wished them luck and parted ways. I didn't take down their names, and I don't know if they survived.

Our train arrived in Kyiv the next morning. We caught a taxi to an apartment that Anastasia had rented before the war for the month of March. It was on Andriyivsky Descent, a steep cobblestone road, lined with cafés, bars, and art galleries, near the Dnieper River. The hill, usually overrun with tourists and street musicians, was as deserted as the rest of the snow-dusted city. Many residents had taken refuge in subway stations, camping on the platforms and in the train cars. Almost everyone else was sheltering in their basements or locked in their homes. The torpid silence was punctuated by the slow whine of air-raid sirens—and by crows. Passing some trees taken over by a strident flock, Anastasia remarked, "I've never seen that before."

Her father's place was within walking distance, and on our way there we encountered a small monument dedicated to the acclaimed Ukrainian baritone Vasyl Slipak.

Anastasia had known him. He had lived in Paris, where he'd performed at the Opéra Bastille and the Palais Garnier. He'd also led a parallel life, as a militant in his home country. In late 2013, President Viktor Yanukovych, ceding to Russian pressure, had scuttled an agreement to form closer ties with the European Union. Enormous protests, which grew into an uprising called the Revolution of Dignity, erupted across Ukraine. At Independence Square, in downtown Kyiv, tens of thousands of demonstrators erected barricades and violently clashed with security forces. By March of 2014, militarized police, often using live ammunition, had killed more than a hundred protesters. The Ukrainian parliament voted to remove Yanukovych, who fled to Russia. Vladimir Putin dismissed the revolution as a Western contrivance and promptly annexed Crimea, a strategic peninsula between the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. His troops then entered the Donbas, a region in the southeast of Ukraine, in support of pro-Russian separatists who wanted to secede. Ukraine mounted a counter-offensive, and soon an entrenched front line circumscribed some six thousand square miles on the Russian border. Many young Ukrainians who were galvanized by the revolution, including Slipak, joined volunteer battalions that had originally formed at Independence Square. Over the next seven years, more than two dozen ceasefires were negotiated and violated. The result was few significant territorial gains or losses, and thousands of dead Ukrainians.



"Wait—you two were also rescued by, and live happily ever after with, Prince Charming?"
Cartoon by Liana Finck

Anastasia had met Slipak through activist networks in France. The last time they saw each other, at a protest in Paris in June, 2016, she was on summer vacation from the Sorbonne and he was preparing to return to the Donbas. Two weeks later, a Russian sniper killed him. "His death changed my vision of the war," Anastasia told me, at the monument on Andriyivsky Descent. "It became concrete, and I understood that I had to go there." The following month, she accompanied a group carrying donated supplies—rations, power banks, generators—to military units on the front line. At one forward position, she met an ambulance driver who showed her videos of casualty evacuations that he had on his phone. "I was really impressed, and I felt I wasn't doing enough," Anastasia said. When she told the driver that she would like to become a medic but had no experience, he gave her the name of an organization that could train her: the Hospitallers.

In 2017, when Anastasia was twenty-three, she attended a one-week course with the Hospitallers at their base, in southern Ukraine. She began deploying to the Donbas for brief rotations when not at school. The inertia and slow-grinding toll of the conflict produced a specific kind of anguish. The first casualty that Anastasia evacuated was a soldier who had nearly severed his arm while trying to kill himself. Mines, mortars, and bullets had killed or

wounded others. “Most of them are younger than me,” Anastasia wrote, in a journal entry. She worried that their deaths changed “absolutely nothing.”

In the summer of 2020, after a tour in the Donbas during the pandemic, she recommitted to her studies in France. “I thought I had put the war behind me,” she said. Now she planned to rejoin the Hospitallers. Her first priority, though, was to see her father and to persuade him and his wife to go abroad. As we left the monument to Slipak, we could hear the rumble of ordnance in the suburbs to the north. A forty-mile Russian column, composed of hundreds of tanks, armored vehicles, and approximately fifteen thousand troops, was bearing down on the capital. Most Western analysts believed that Kyiv would be rapidly encircled, blockaded, and subjected to devastating shelling. U.S. intelligence officials estimated that Russian forces could take the city within two or three days. The Ukrainian Ambassador to Germany later told the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* that Germany’s finance minister had rebuffed his appeals for aid and weapons, and had said to him, “You have only a few hours.”

The mayor of Kyiv would soon announce that half of the city’s three million residents had fled. The remaining population leaned toward the stubborn, the courageous, the hopeful, the deluded, and the poor. Anastasia’s father, Sergey, wasn’t poor. He answered the door in an elegant patterned robe, his rotund midsection straining at the sash. His cheeks flushed with drink, he jovially greeted his daughter as if she were home for the holidays. His demeanor soured after we sat down at the kitchen table and Anastasia began urging him and her stepmother, Irena, to abandon the city.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Sergey said.

Irena, who also wore a robe, assured Anastasia that they could protect themselves: they had an antique hunting rifle and three bullets. On a large television, a news anchor was talking about Putin. Irena shook her head. Like many Ukrainians, she and Sergey were stunned by the Russian President’s decision to invade. In a speech a few days before the incursion, Putin had offered various fanciful justifications: that “modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia” and should never have been recognized as a sovereign state; that the Revolution of Dignity was a “coup d’état” perpetrated wholly by “radical nationalists,” corrupt oligarchs, and neo-

Nazis; that the Ukrainian military answered directly to *NATO* and had committed genocide in the Donbas; and that Ukraine intended to develop nuclear weapons. Irena said that she believed Putin was possessed.

We left the house, and Anastasia asked if we could stop by St. Michael's, a few blocks away, so that she could pray. She was a devout believer. As soon as we'd arrived at her temporary apartment, she had removed from her backpack a small icon of the Virgin Mary and placed it on the windowsill.

The Orthodox Church of Ukraine vigorously opposed Russian interference in the country and had backed the Revolution of Dignity. St. Michael's stood at the top of a hill that sloped down to Independence Square, and during the protests the monastery became a sanctuary from the mayhem. Priests and volunteer medics treated wounded protesters and served them food. The dead were brought there to be mourned by their friends. Now a memorial outside the cathedral honored the demonstrators killed during the uprising—and a wall of remembrance featured the photographs of thousands of soldiers and volunteers who had died in the Donbas. At the foot of the wall, flowers had been placed in upright artillery shells.

After Anastasia's prayer at the fence, we returned to the apartment. She was frustrated with her father and stepmother, but accepted that their minds were made up. She texted one of the medics in the Hospitallers, to find out where they had mustered. The medic responded that they were in St. Michael's.

The gate was opened for us the following morning. Inside the monastery, everything was in a state of frenetic metamorphosis. Men and women in combat fatigues hurried in all directions; priests in black robes unloaded boxes from trucks and vans; in a lecture hall where seminary students normally underwent theological instruction, a soldier provided basic firearms training to volunteers who had just received Kalashnikovs. Shouted commands rang through hallways adorned with oil paintings of church patriarchs from centuries past.

Anastasia found Yana Zinkevych, the leader of the Hospitallers, in a small office packed with people vying to speak with her. Twenty-six years old, Zinkevych was lavishly tattooed and had a pierced eyebrow and pink-and-blue hair. She was also in a wheelchair. This hadn't been the case in 2014,

when, as a recent high-school graduate, she'd abandoned her plans to become a doctor and joined a unit of volunteer fighters in the Donbas. "There was nobody to treat the wounded," she later told me. "I understood I had to do something." She began teaching herself tactical first aid and using it to help injured comrades. One night, while huddled in a bunker under heavy bombardment, a chaplain recounted to her the story of a medieval Catholic military order, the Knights Hospitaller. The next day, Zinkevych resolved to create her own battalion.

She started with six volunteers and a pickup truck; eventually, she acquired a Volkswagen van. Zinkevych led more than two hundred evacuations until, at the end of 2015, she was paralyzed from the waist down in a car accident. A few months later, she learned that she was pregnant. Against the expectations of her physicians, she gave birth, to a daughter, without complications. She went on to train hundreds of Hospitallers who treated thousands of casualties. In 2019, she ran for parliament and was elected as a representative of the European Solidarity Party.

Zinkevych sent Anastasia to an annex of the monastery where she was issued a combat uniform, body armor, gloves, long underwear, thermal socks, a headlamp, a pocketknife, and a sleeping bag. Helmets were not yet on hand. Anastasia went into a bathroom to change, and when she emerged —no longer a civilian, her folded bluejeans under her arm—she marvelled at the speed with which her world was transforming. "It doesn't feel real," she told me. "It's like a dream, or a nightmare."

Bandages, gauze, saline, syringes, litters, splints, and other medical equipment were piled on a set of stairs. Donated food—sacks of potatoes, jars of pickled vegetables, preserved meat, canned goods—crowded the corridors. The refectory had been converted into sleeping quarters, and dozens of mattresses covered the dining tables. In the kitchen, medics waited in line for bowls of borscht and kasha. I would get to know many of them: an economics professor, a dentist, a cellist, a cryptocurrency trader, a knife-fighting coach, a ballet dancer, numerous students, a filmmaker, a farmer, a therapist, several journalists. Fearing Russian reprisals, they all used code names. I found a free mattress across from Italia, a physician's assistant and a single mother who had immigrated to Milan two decades ago. When the war started, she took a bus back to Kyiv, leaving behind her twenty-three-

year-old daughter. “She supports my being here,” Italia said. Her daughter was now assisting Ukrainian refugees, whose numbers across Europe soon exceeded five million.

Kyiv did not fall. Withering Ukrainian artillery and intrepid ambushes stopped the Russian convoy. Anastasia and Italia were dispatched to a municipal police academy near the airport, where they trained officers in first aid and set up a medical-evacuation point. Reporters were forbidden there, but a Hospitaller I’d befriended—code-named August—invited me to accompany his ambulance to a northwestern suburb called Irpin, where residents were escaping the intensifying combat.

August, a twenty-four-year-old auditor in Kyiv, had long been fascinated by all things military. The HBO series “Band of Brothers,” in which his favorite character was the medic, Eugene Roe, had been especially inspiring. In 2017, August attended the same one-week course as Anastasia; he went on to spend most of his vacations in the Donbas, where he learned how to handle a rifle and fire mortars. He exuded the impatient craving for action typical of young soldiers not yet run down by the realities of war. The English words “*FUCK DAY*” were scrawled in Sharpie on a magazine in his ammo vest, which was also decorated with a purple ribbon that his former girlfriend, a Hospitaller named Anya, had given him for good luck. A patch on his flak jacket featured the Patagonia logo, altered to read “Donbasonia.”

There were five of us in the ambulance. Heading out of the city, we passed numerous checkpoints under construction. Volunteers shovelled dirt from the roadside into sandbags or felled pine trees with chain saws, stacking the logs behind tank traps that had been made by welding together I-beams. August stared out the window, gripping a Kalashnikov, tense and mesmerized. Another Hospitaller, Orest, sat on a stretcher, absorbed in reading “Little Dorrit,” the Charles Dickens novel, on a tablet. Orest was a thirty-six-year-old arborist, a father of five, and a passionate mountaineer. A week earlier, he told me, he’d been trekking near the Romanian border, far from cell-phone reception, when he picked up a signal on a high ridge and saw the news. He hiked for two days to the nearest village and caught a train back to the capital. He’d been planning to make an expedition to the Arctic, and had decided to buy a bolt-action rifle to protect himself from polar bears; in Kyiv, he bought an AR-15 instead.

“The expedition has been postponed,” Orest deadpanned.

To prevent the Russians from penetrating Kyiv, the Ukrainians had destroyed the main bridge over the fast-moving Irpin River. Several buildings on the south side of the river had been hit by Russian shells, which had also killed some fleeing civilians. To the north, explosions sounded and smoke filled the sky above another nearby suburb, Bucha. Russian forces had stalled there, and waves of residents were now arriving—abandoning their vehicles at the edge of the caved-in bridge, clambering down a high embankment, and crossing the icy currents on a treacherous walkway composed of pallets and scrap lumber. Passenger buses idled, ready to bring displaced Ukrainians to downtown Kyiv. People advanced single file, lugging bags and suitcases; some hugged dogs, cats, or babies to their chests. Elderly men and women with canes and walkers staggered haltingly over the rickety planks.

Many geriatric, ill, and injured civilians could not navigate the walkway at all. August, Orest, and several other Hospitallers began carrying them across on litters and spine boards. For the next six hours, the Hospitallers went back and forth across the rapids, delivering dozens of people to ambulances, for transport to hospitals in Kyiv. Exhausted-looking Ukrainian soldiers returning from the front also used the crossing. At one point, a group of them arrived conducting a prisoner whose head was covered in a black hood. His hands were bound in front of him and his shirt was stained with blood.

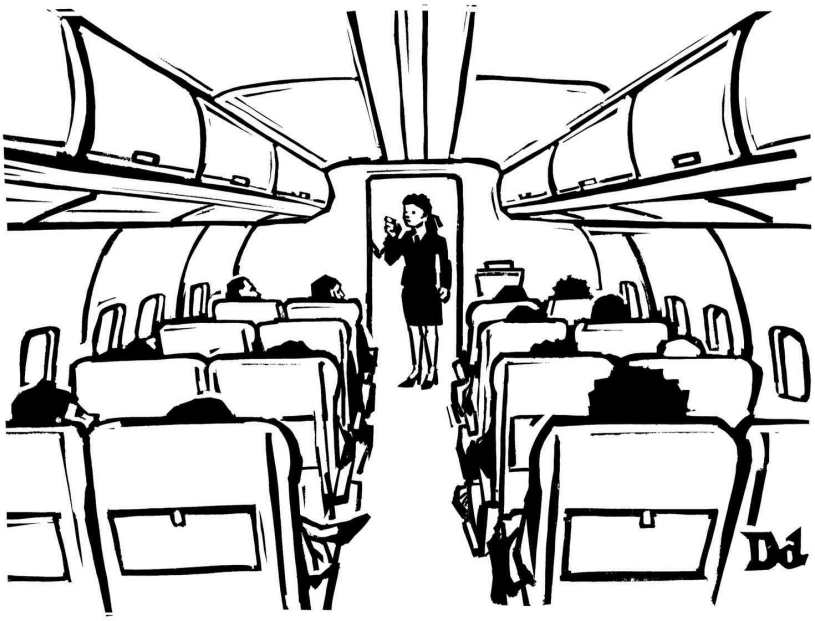
The rage and desperation of the people at the bridge suggested harrowing experiences. “I want him to die!” a limping babushka in a floral head scarf cried as August helped her down the embankment. She meant Putin. “He’s a fascist! He’s a bastard! He’s not even a bastard—he’s an animal!” Another woman, who’d left her house in a sweatsuit and slippers, with nothing but a purse, told August, “They’re by the forest. If you need to bomb our houses, do it. Just kill them.”

Most of the civilians were women. A lot of the men from Irpin and Bucha had stayed behind, to look after pets, to protect their homes, to assist neighbors, or simply from a sense of duty. In the afternoon, a pair of male municipal workers brought their families in a car; a young girl with a pink Tinker Bell knapsack carried a stuffed My Little Pony unicorn under her

arm. The two men ushered their wives and children to the end of the bridge. “Listen to your mother,” one said while hugging and kissing his kids. “Be good to your mother.” The other man was walking away, hiding his tears, unable to say goodbye. Suddenly, he stopped and called out, “Lova!” His adolescent son turned, and the man hurried back to embrace him.

Late in the day, a van arrived with two old women, one of whom refused to get out. “You have to come,” her friend yelled at her. “Maybe we won’t see each other again! Just come. Come!”

“I want to go home.”



“Now that we’ve landed, it’s safe to talk to the person next to you.”
Cartoon by Drew Dernavich

“Please, get out of the car,” a Hospitaller told her.

“Don’t try to convince me,” she replied. “I don’t want to go anywhere but home.”

When the Hospitallers asked whether anyone else was living in her house, she said that she was alone.

“You know who will be in your house?” August said. “The Russians, that’s who. What will you do then?”

The woman was unmoved: “I’m eighty-two years old. I hope you live as long as me.”

Her friend was already gone. More vehicles were pulling up. “Bring her back,” August told the driver. “We have other people to help.”

The van turned again toward the rising smoke plumes.

Most Ukrainians who signed up during the first days of the general mobilization were assigned to the Territorial Defense Forces, a kind of national reserve. It was soon at capacity and turning people away. A middle-aged physiotherapist at St. Michael’s told me that he had waited all night in the lobby of a conscription office before being sent home. He joined the Hospitallers instead. Others banded together in ad-hoc collectives, assembling Molotov cocktails, sewing camouflage nets, building fortifications, and preparing and delivering food. One day in Kyiv, I met a young bar manager who belonged to a network of about two hundred former restaurant workers—cooks, waiters, baristas—who made thousands of meals a day for Army units and for civilians marooned in their homes. The military lacked sufficient body armor, and as the war dragged on the bar manager began paying a metal fabricator, using his personal savings, to cut steel-plate inserts for bulletproof vests.

Some troops were also in urgent need of basic medical equipment. At St. Michael’s, Anastasia spent hours assembling individual first-aid kits for infantry units: pouches containing pressure bandages, tourniquets, trauma shears, emergency blankets, hemostatic gauze, and chest-wound seals. These products had been either sent by European donors or purchased by the Hospitallers. More ambulances were acquired similarly, their stencilled lettering indicating their provenance: “*ambulanza*,” “*ambulancia*,” “*ambulans*.”

Anya, the ex-girlfriend of August’s who had given him the lucky ribbon, was in charge of fund-raising. She’d been studying the violin at the Kyiv Conservatory when the Revolution of Dignity started; a policeman had broken her hand at Independence Square. “I’d spent my whole life, since I was four years old, playing all day,” she told me. The injury had put an end to her musical career. A year later, she’d volunteered to fight in the Donbas.

To raise money, Anya marshalled her contacts in the Ukrainian diaspora and solicited contributions on social media. One day, after helping to acquire five thousand tourniquets from a Swiss manufacturer, she told me, “There are no more tourniquets in Switzerland!”

As the fighting continued on the outskirts of the capital, the Hospitallers set about establishing several “stabilization points.” At these forward positions, wounded soldiers and civilians could receive initial treatment—mainly hemorrhage control and intravenous therapy—before being evacuated to primary-care facilities in Kyiv. In the first week of March, I went with August and Orest to the edge of a neighborhood called Horenka, where the Hospitallers were scouting out a location for a new stabilization point. Horenka, which bordered Bucha to the east, was the scene of fierce Russian shelling—on our way, as we passed Ukrainian tanks and armored vehicles, a mortar exploded on the road ahead of us, rocking the ambulance and obliging us to turn back for a while. It was dark when we finally reached our destination, and bright trails streaked across the night sky. Rockets launched by the Ukrainians flashed in the woods. We linked up with a Territorial Defense unit that had occupied an abandoned children’s sanatorium. The volunteers did not look particularly impressive—they were older, and some of them were out of shape—but they told me that they had been preparing for this moment for seven years.

The men belonged to a “civilian sniper club” that had formed in 2015. In anticipation of an expansion of the war in the Donbas, they had gathered on weekends to practice marksmanship, outdoor skills, combat medicine, and even “tactical alpinism.” (A sudden urban assault might require them to rappel from their apartment buildings.) They did not know one another’s names—or any other identifying details. When I expressed surprise at this, an ungainly man in a black turtleneck replied, “It’s easy for me, because I come from the gamer society.”

I recognized these men. Of course, the difference between them and their American analogues—preppers, survivalists, militia members—was that the dreaded scenario they had envisaged was not a lurid fantasy. As the gamer in the turtleneck told me, “We woke up on February 24th and said, ‘O.K., it’s here. It’s happening.’ ”

There were some similar types in the Hospitallers. When we got back to St. Michael's, a new arrival, with a goatee, wire-framed glasses, and short-cropped hair, was unpacking a vast trove of tactical apparel—some of it still shrink-wrapped and marked with price tags—onto a mattress next to mine. He was from Kyiv but lived in Alberta and was code-named Canada. After doing a tour in the Donbas, in 2016, he'd realized: "It can happen anywhere." He had a business salvaging and reselling used winter tires, but he devoted much of his time and money to his "project." In Alberta, he had a dozen guns, a thousand rounds of ammunition, plastic containers stocked with food, and a beloved "patrol truck"—an S.U.V. that he had customized with a sixteen-thousand-pound winch, roll bars, and a rifle rack. He was saving up for portable solar panels; when things fell apart, he planned to strike out for the wilderness with his wife and live off the land.

Had we met in North America, I likely would have seen Canada's world view as paranoid and apocalyptic. In Ukraine, though, it was harder to dismiss: many analysts were speculating that Russia might deploy a nuclear weapon. Russian soldiers had attacked a nuclear power plant in Zaporizhzhia, causing a fire. Some of the forces targeting Kyiv had entered the country through the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, churning up contaminated soil and digging trenches in a lethally radioactive forest.

Canada's wife was also Ukrainian. Her parents and brother lived in Mariupol, which had no electricity, heat, or water, and was running out of food. The day after I met Canada, Russian aircraft bombed a maternity hospital in the city. His in-laws weren't answering their phones.

The situation in Mariupol was uniquely grim, but the Russians were targeting civilian areas and infrastructure across Ukraine, most notably in Kharkiv, three hundred miles to the east of Kyiv. On March 16th, I went there with a few photographers. Shelling had laid waste to several square blocks downtown. Offices, shops, restaurants, cafés, university buildings, and an iconic pub named after Ernest Hemingway were in ruins, some encased in ice from broken pipes. An enormous crater yawned outside the regional administrative headquarters, a six-story monolith that had partially withstood the blast. A second missile had destroyed a kitchen in the basement, killing several women. The top of a skull lay nearby. Firefighters with shovels were still digging through the rubble, searching for bodies. A

Territorial Defense soldier, code-named I.T., said that twenty-four corpses had already been retrieved. I.T., who had been inside the building during the strike, told me, “I should be dead.” He’d worked as a computer engineer in Kharkiv before the war, and he shared Anastasia’s astonishment at the sudden onset of havoc. “Two weeks ago, I was arguing with my wife, telling her I was bored with my life,” he recalled, with rueful irony. Looking around at the collapsed buildings, the charred husks of vehicles, and the mountains of wreckage, he seemed unable to process it all. “I feel like I’m in a video game,” he said.

An hour later, a market a few miles east of us was shelled. I went there and found firefighters hosing down a burning complex of outdoor stalls. Nothing that might have been mistaken as a military target was anywhere in sight. I was filming the damage when another mortar landed, a short distance away from me. The blast and shrapnel wounded a woman who, bleeding from her abdomen, was quickly loaded into an ambulance. Such “double-tap” strikes had been common in Syria, where Russia and the Assad regime had systematically targeted first responders to demoralize the population and terrorize it into submission.

The same strategy was clearly being employed in Ukraine. That day, the Russians also bombed a theatre in Mariupol where civilians were sheltering. “*CHILDREN*” had been painted in Russian, in huge white letters, over the parking lot. Hundreds reportedly died. The next afternoon, in Kharkiv, one of Eastern Europe’s biggest markets was shelled. Thousands of people had worked there before the war. A raging inferno consumed the complex, and tar-black smoke darkened the sky.

The following morning, I was eating breakfast in the lobby of our hotel when a huge explosion shook the building. Its glass façade warped in and out as we all jumped from our chairs. The target had been a government academy for civil-service employees. It wasn’t far, and we arrived there at the same time as a team of rescuers. A whole section of the institution had been reduced to smashed slabs of concrete, bent I-beams, and twisted rebar. A dead man lay next to the building. Another man, caked with dust, was climbing out of a ground-floor window.

Nearby, a firefighter, in a white helmet and flame-retardant coveralls, heard shouts emanating from a narrow crevice. “Can you hear me?” he yelled. “Do you have air to breathe?” Another rescuer pointed a few feet away. “He’s somewhere down here!”

A Territorial Defense soldier who belonged to the same unit as the trapped man managed to reach him on his cell phone. He’d been brushing his teeth, in a bathroom below street level, when the building came down. The soldier gave his phone to the firefighter, who asked the trapped man, “What’s your name? Are you standing or sitting?” He then instructed him, “Go to a load-bearing wall, an exterior wall. Sit next to it and pull your knees to your chest.”

“Why, Jameson! Does this mean that Musk character will own all of my quips and retorts?”
Cartoon by Emily Flake

“We have to lift the debris piece by piece,” someone announced. Climbing on top of the rubble, the rescuers took turns with sledgehammers and power saws. A crane was sent for. No sooner had it arrived than a soldier yelled at us to vacate the area—another attack was expected. Everyone started running. Firefighters, searching for cover, struggled to kick down the locked door of a building across the street; a man with a crowbar tried and failed to pry it open. The second strike never came, and eventually the rescuers resumed their work, using the crane to pull away furniture-size chunks of concrete. It was getting late, and we decided to head back toward Kyiv.

On our way, we stopped in a small town whose secondary school had been levelled by a Russian air strike the previous morning. In the yard, a group of teachers surveyed the wreckage. “I heard a plane, and then an explosion,” Yaroslava, an English teacher who’d once been a student at the school, told me. She said that there were no Ukrainian soldiers in the vicinity. Some of the teachers were sifting through a demolished classroom. “We’re saving what we can,” Yaroslava said.

I later learned that the man trapped beneath the government academy had been successfully extracted. A Hospitaller from Kharkiv knew him, and showed me a video on his phone of the man walking away from the rubble, eight hours after being buried alive. In the clip, blood splotches his face and jacket. Someone asks him how he’s feeling. “Better than ever,” he answers. “But I could use a cigarette.”

When I rejoined the Hospitallers at St. Michael’s Monastery, on March 20th, their fleet of ambulances had grown from four to more than a dozen. Each vehicle had been spray-painted dark green, and black tape covered their tail-lights. Anastasia was heading to a stabilization point in an abandoned maternity hospital a few blocks from the sanatorium where I’d met the civilian snipers. The fighting had dramatically escalated across the northern suburbs. The medics being relieved by Anastasia’s team had just treated twenty-two soldiers wounded by shelling. All had survived.

The other four Hospitallers in Anastasia’s ambulance were old friends who ran an N.G.O. called the Veteran Hub. One of them, a former military psychologist code-named Artem, had co-founded the organization, in 2018, to provide counselling and employment assistance for veterans of the Donbas. Mamont, the ambulance’s rifleman, had met Artem while seeking help himself, after a Russian mortar left him with a brain injury and a disabled right hand. (He could still shoot with his left.) For years, the vast majority of Ukrainians had been insulated from the conflict with Russia in the east; much of Artem and Mamont’s work had focussed on helping veterans re-integrate into a society from which they’d come to feel estranged. That would no longer be necessary. Artem, foreseeing a nationwide mental-health crisis, told me, “We’re going to have a lot to do when this is over.” The Veteran Hub had already opened a psychological-support hotline, available for traumatized civilians and relatives of soldiers.

Outside the maternity hospital, there was a statue of a stork, a bundled baby dangling from its beak. An artillery shell had lodged in the pavement; shrapnel had pocked the hospital's walls and shattered its windows. The ranking Hospitaller was a fifty-two-year-old neurosurgeon code-named Yuzik. A grenade in the Donbas had given him a limp. He walked with a cane and wore a lanyard from which dangled a wooden crucifix and a miniature handgun. Yuzik showed us an examination room that he'd converted into an emergency first-aid station. In a lobby lined with photographs of infants, heart-shaped balloons were still filled with helium; on February 26th, when the Russians first shelled Horenka, six women had given birth in the basement.

During the three days that we stayed at the maternity hospital, the Ukrainians mounted a strenuous counter-offensive across the northern suburbs. Armored vehicles raced up and down the street, and Ukrainian artillery thundered until dawn; in response, Russian ordnance pounded our immediate surroundings. One Russian rocket tore through the tiled roof of a house adjacent to the hospital. Others whistled overhead or crashed into the ground close enough to send even Mamont running down the stairs.

Most civilians had left the area, but not all. The first patients that Anastasia's team received were adult siblings, a brother and sister, whose house had been hit. The sister had been sheltering in the cellar with her mother, and had suffered only minor injuries; her husband had been in the yard, and was killed. Her brother, who'd also been outside, was bleeding profusely from multiple shrapnel wounds. He cried in agony as Yuzik applied pressure bandages to both of his legs, and another medic gave him an I.V. with the opioid tramadol.

The sister sat on an examination table, waving off the medics who approached her. "I'm O.K.," she said. "Don't worry about me."

"What about Grandma?" Yuzik asked.

"She's fine—she was with me in the basement. My husband was killed instantly. If I'd been with him, I'd be dead, too." She recounted all of this with the uncanny detachment of someone in shock. Her husband's body was buried under debris. "I couldn't move him," she said. As Yuzik wrapped a

roll of gauze around her ankle, her principal emotion seemed to be embarrassment at people fussing over her.

“You’re very tan,” Yuzik said, trying to distract her.

The woman laughed. “I like the sun,” she told him.

Anastasia helped load the siblings into the ambulance and accompanied them to the hospital. While she was monitoring the brother’s vital signs, she later told me, he became agitated, moaning and writhing. The sister patiently soothed him. “She was so calm,” Anastasia said.

That night, an eighty-four-year-old woman was delivered to the stabilization point with shrapnel wounds to her groin and abdomen. She did not cry out. When a medic commented on her grit, the woman said that she had also survived the Second World War.

The eighty-four-year-old had been injured in a strike on the local fire station, which was across the street from her house, a few blocks from our position. I visited the next morning. The station was still smoking, and the ground was gouged with craters. Vasyl Oksak, the fire chief, watched his men spray water on the collapsed walls and roof. He seemed to accept the attack with placid resignation. The Russians had destroyed almost every public building in his jurisdiction, he said. A few days earlier, the children’s sanatorium where I’d stayed with August and Orest had been hit.

Shortly after I returned to the stabilization point, a group of soldiers pulled up in a civilian S.U.V. One of them had been wounded by artillery. While the Hospitallers treated the casualty, a soldier named Roman Shulyar told me that they all belonged to a Territorial Defense unit deployed in the neighborhood. Shulyar was a mergers-and-acquisitions attorney whose life, until three weeks earlier, had revolved around negotiating corporate contracts. “We’re not professional soldiers, but we are holding our position,” he said. A second patient from the unit was a plumber in his fifties who had begun experiencing heart palpitations and extreme hypertension during the bombardment. As the medics gave the plumber oxygen and treated his wounded comrade—a retired police officer—Shulyar told me, “Not one of us has quit. No one has run away.” In a later phone call, he said, “Once

you've had that feeling of being a soldier in wartime, you want to repeat it. You want to be useful to your country."

The Hospitallers I'd met also seemed to be animated by this impulse. However, the groups with which some of them had previously been affiliated had faced criticism, both in Ukraine and abroad. In the Donbas, Mamont had served with the Azov Battalion, and one night at the maternity hospital Yuzik, the neurosurgeon, showed me a tattoo on his chest: a medical cross below the words "*RIGHT SECTOR*," in Ukrainian. The Azov Battalion and Right Sector had emerged out of the Revolution of Dignity, from protesters who had spearheaded confrontations with the police at Independence Square. Both organizations had gone on to fight in the east. Some hard-line types, including white supremacists, were drawn to their bellicosity and jingoism; others gravitated to them less because of any ideological affinity than because they were inspired by the groups' discipline and bravery. After the revolution, the Ukrainian armed forces were in a state of disarray, enfeebled by years of corruption and neglect. For people such as Mamont—as well as Yana Zinkevych, the founder of the Hospitallers, who briefly joined a Right Sector unit when she went to the Donbas after high school—volunteer militias offered an appealing alternative.

The invocation of "nationalist" as a derogatory term with fascistic connotations baffled many Ukrainians, who argued that their nation's history had been defined by the Russian denial of its right to exist. Whereas American and European nationalism typically implied internal persecution of others—vilifying marginalized segments of the domestic population—Yuzik and Mamont's foremost concern was resisting an external and vastly more powerful aggressor. Much of the Azov Battalion, including Mamont's former platoon, was currently defending Mariupol against a Russian onslaught that threatened to annihilate it. One of Mamont's friends had been killed there; the friend's father had died while volunteering in Kharkiv. Mamont was exasperated by non-Ukrainians still confused about who the tyrants were.

There was no question that leaders of the Azov Battalion and Right Sector championed a chauvinistic, illiberal ethos. Some had openly espoused anti-Semitism, homophobia, and racism. In 2010, the first Azov commander, Andriy Biletsky, declared his desire to "lead the white races of the world in a

final crusade," and in 2015 the founder of Right Sector, Dmytro Yarosh, said that a gay-pride parade in Kyiv "spat on the graves of those who died and defended Ukraine." Over all, however, such views were more marginal in Ukraine than in Russia—or, for that matter, in the U.S. Yarosh ran for President, in 2014, but received less than one per cent of the vote. In 2019, Right Sector and veterans of the Azov Battalion allied with other far-right groups to field parliamentary candidates and failed to win a single seat. That year, Volodymyr Zelensky, a Russian-speaking Jew whose great-grandparents had died in the Holocaust, was elected President in a landslide.

The director of the maternity hospital where we were staying, Valery Zukin, was also Jewish. Zukin had urged Yuzik and the Hospitallers to make use of his facility. When he visited the site one day, he told me that he was from Donetsk, a major city in the Donbas. His family, along with many Jews, had fled Donetsk in 2014, after Russian-backed separatists took control of it. "The level of anti-Semitism had become unbelievable," he said. When I mentioned depictions of anti-Russian fighters as neo-Nazis, Zukin replied, "It's very big bullshit."

Putin had fixated on the Azov Battalion as an excuse for his pitiless assault on Mariupol, where the group was based. Ever since the Revolution of Dignity, though, Russian propagandists had generated a steady feed of disinformation for those inclined to rationalize Russian belligerence and malign Ukrainian self-defense. During my second week in Kyiv, I visited a tall apartment building that had been struck by two Russian rockets. As tenants and neighbors watched firefighters put out the flames, I spoke with one of the onlookers, Oleksii Prokopov, who was renting a room in a university dormitory next door. Prokopov was from the Donbas city of Luhansk, which, like Donetsk, was governed by pro-Russian separatists. Though he'd left Luhansk in 2014, his brother had stayed. "I don't communicate with him anymore," he said. "He's been watching Russian TV for eight years, and now he believes whatever Russia says." Sounding more saddened than resentful, Prokopov added, "If you watch these programs every day, then, yes, you will believe."

His parents, Russians from the Kuban region, near Crimea, had moved across the border to Luhansk after their wedding. They had both died before the Revolution of Dignity, but, Prokopov told me, his mother had recently

visited him in a dream. “When I saw her, I was so happy,” he recalled. “I said, ‘Mom, come and sit with me.’ ” Before they had a chance to talk, Prokopov was jolted awake by an explosion somewhere in Kyiv. He opened his eyes to the sound of air-raid sirens. Still, he said, “I continued to speak with her. I was crying. I said, ‘Mom, this is your motherland. How is it possible they are doing this to us?’ ”

Prokopov had also been sleeping during the attack on the apartment tower. He’d woken to window shards falling on his face. Rushing outside, he’d found an elderly woman, half dressed and barefoot, escaping the burning building. As he recounted this, with the same unsettling urgency he had conveyed while describing his interrupted dream, I began to suspect how the two events might be connected.

When I asked Prokopov how he thought his mother would have seen the current crisis—from his perspective or from his brother’s—he avoided answering directly. “She was a good woman,” he said. “She loved art and poetry. She taught me poems about the Second World War—about the Russian heroes and Russian women who took up arms against the German fascists.” He stared wide-eyed at the smoke and flames, as if to reassure himself that it was not a dream. “Now the war is *here*,” he said. “But it’s not the German fascists. It’s the Russian fascists.”

“We’ve been fighting all day, but we were hungry, so we came.”
Cartoon by Guy Richards Smit

The Ukrainian counter-offensive that took place while Anastasia and I were at the maternity hospital marked a pivotal turn in the battle of Kyiv. As destructive as the Russian shelling was, there had been more outgoing artillery than incoming. *NATO* member states, spurred by the unexpected resilience of Ukraine's resistance, had begun shipping huge numbers of arms to the country. By mid-March, the U.S. was allocating billions of dollars for anti-aircraft and anti-tank systems, radar equipment, helicopters, drones, grenade launchers, artillery rounds, and other matériel. Later, additional aid packages would include such heavy weapons as howitzers, the long-range cannons that U.S. marines had used to level Raqqa, in northern Syria.

The Ukrainian troops, which *NATO* advisers had been training throughout the conflict in the Donbas, employed this arsenal with exceptional proficiency—and not just in Kyiv. A broader shift was also under way. At the end of March, Russian forces retreated from Trostyanets, a city in the northeast which they had occupied for a month. I visited a few days later. A landscaped public square was now a muddy wasteland littered with obliterated Russian tanks and armored vehicles. Amid the wreckage, a Second World War memorial, featuring a life-size Soviet tank, still sat atop a hulking plinth. A plaque embossed with a hammer and sickle commemorated the Soviet battalion that had captured the nearby train station, severing a German supply line.

According to a group of soldiers I later met in Trostyanets, the Ukrainian Army had all but encircled the city, leaving the Russian forces with only one road out and two choices: "Go or die." The soldiers estimated that about a hundred and fifty vehicles had departed. When I asked whether the withdrawal had been negotiated, they said that such matters were above their pay grade. However, one soldier remarked, "Apparently, there was a deal. Otherwise, we would never have let them leave like that."

In the square, two Ukrainian Railways employees were painting over the "Z" markings on a flatbed that belonged to the city's train station. (The letter, originally used as an identifying marker for Russian convoys, now symbolized support for the invasion in general, and could be seen on T-shirts, billboards, and bumper stickers throughout Russia.) The station was across the square; on my way there, I encountered a middle-aged man walking his bicycle through the mud. He wanted to check on his daughter's

house, which, he'd heard, had been destroyed. The man's name was Oleksandr, and he told me that, toward the end of the occupation, Russian soldiers had taken refuge in a basement underneath the station. We decided to have a look together.

Several locomotives on the tracks had been blown up, and the platform was covered with mortar shells and wooden ammunition boxes. I turned on my phone's light and followed Oleksandr down a flight of stairs, into a dank network of rooms cluttered with Russian uniforms, boots, and ration packs. Socks were draped over pipes, playing cards lay on tables, and a shocking number of empty vodka, wine, and whiskey bottles were scattered everywhere. I was taken aback by the evidence of heavy communal drinking —this was the fourth war I had covered and the first time I'd ever seen that —but many residents later told me that one of the first things the Russians did in Trostyanets was plunder its supermarkets for booze.

Oleksandr seemed less aghast at the alcohol than at the presence of Bibles and icons. In a room filled with bandages, bags of saline, and bloody mattresses, he picked up a New Testament and marvelled, "Look at that! It's horrible! How could they be religious?"

In a narrow corridor outside the room, more than a dozen letters and cards from Russian schoolchildren were taped to the wall. A nine-year-old named Olya had signed a colorful drawing of a bright sun smiling down on two tanks with flowers protruding from their cannons. "For Peace" and "Victory for Russia" were scrawled in the sky, beside a red Soviet flag. "Dear soldier!" another note read. "I really hope that you will be strong and able to defend us, and that the world will be sunny and happy." In early March, in the Russian city of Kazan, a hospice for terminally ill children had released a picture of its patients standing with their parents and staff in a "Z" formation in the snow. The messages and illustrations in the rooms beneath the train station were nearly identical to one another—obviously copied from a template—and what most disturbed me was not that children had been so cynically exploited but that adults had derived genuine comfort from this rote compliance.

Perhaps it was wrong to think of them as adults. All over Trostyanets, people were emerging from their homes and basements, and everyone I spoke to

noted how young the occupiers had seemed. At a cultural center where volunteers were distributing sugar, eggs, diapers, and other basic provisions, residents huddled around power cords connected to diesel generators, charging their phones and reading the news for the first time in weeks. They described the Russian soldiers mainly as volatile looters. When the troops left the city, their vehicles were filled with TVs, carpets, electronics, appliances, and other stolen goods.

The mayor, Yuriy Bova, wanted to show me the city hall. "What was the point of this?" he asked, gesturing at overturned filing cabinets and smashed computers. Menstrual pads were glued to a door below graffiti that read "*Slava Rossii!!!* "

Across town, Bova took me to a confectionery plant that had manufactured products for Oreo, Milka, and Nabisco. The Russians who had been stationed there appeared to have subsisted largely on the warehouse stock: discarded chocolate-bar wrappers and cookie boxes were as ubiquitous as expended ammunition casings. Dozens of crates of unused rockets were still stacked near the factory's assembly line. All the offices had been ransacked. In a conference room whose windows were barricaded with jumbo tins of candy, Russian soldiers had left several messages, in marker, on a white projector screen.

"We are just following orders. Sorry."

"We don't need this war."

"We were sent, please forgive us."

"Brothers! We love you!"

A few days later, the Russian forces north of Kyiv also retreated. I returned to the capital to see whether they, too, had left anything behind.

Ivana-Franka Street was a quaint dirt lane on the eastern edge of Bucha, across the Irpin River from the maternity hospital where the Hospitallers had been stationed. During the monthlong Russian occupation, the street, which was close to various Ukrainian-held neighborhoods, had become a front line,

and now burnt-out Russian tanks and trucks listed among the remains of splintered houses and overturned or pancaked vehicles. The few people who were around wandered amid the debris with dazed expressions, resembling the survivors of a natural catastrophe.

At the end of Ivana-Franka Street, an elderly woman in a down coat and a shawl beckoned to me. I followed her up a steep berm to a set of railroad tracks. They ran parallel to an open culvert where, at the bottom, two male bodies were tangled together, half buried under weeds and trash that had collected during recent rains. The woman said that the victims were brothers, adding, "Everybody loved them. We don't know why they were killed."

The brothers, Yuri and Victor, had been in their sixties and had lived in adjacent houses. Locals had referred to them as Uncle Yuri and Uncle Victor. While Bucha was occupied, Yuri had worn a white cloth around his sleeve, to signal neutrality, and baked bread for hungry neighbors. Both men had been shot in the head. Empty beer bottles lay in the grass.

"Him I don't know," the woman said, pointing at a form slumped on the roadside. The man was overweight and middle-aged, dressed in civilian clothes, with receding gray hair and a neatly trimmed white beard. So much blood had seeped from the bullet hole in his temple that a patch of crimson earth extended past his feet.

A Ukrainian soldier approached me to say that he'd found another victim. I followed him into the basement of a yellow house, where a rail-thin teenager was crumpled on the floor. Blood had leaked from his mouth and nose. The soldier crouched and felt under his skull. "He was shot in the back of the head," he said.

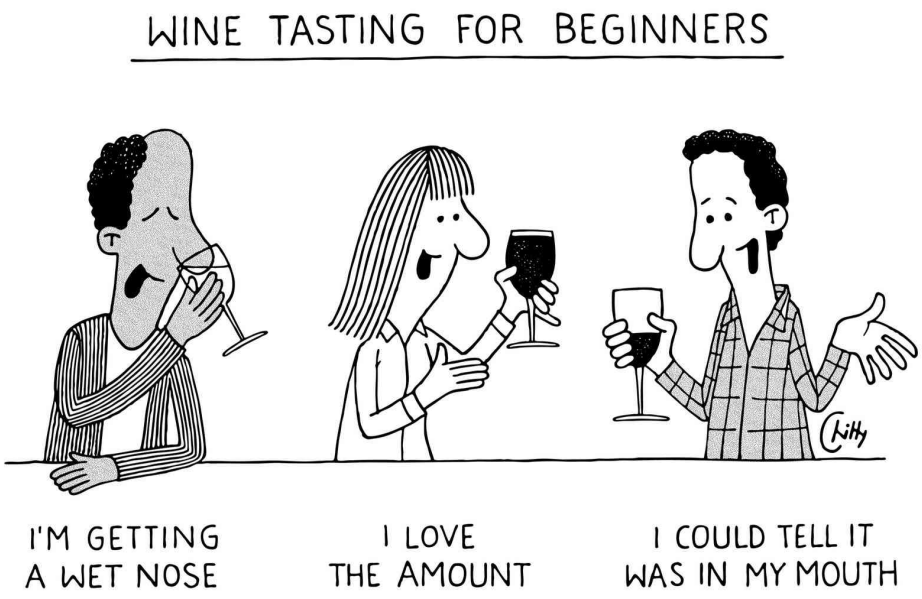
Outside a small two-story home, Russian soldiers had constructed a makeshift checkpoint from pallets, cinder blocks, and empty ammunition boxes. In the back yard, three more men had been executed. One, shot through the ear, lay on his back against a fence. Another, beside a woodpile, wore a sheepskin-and-leather jacket that was speckled with unmelted snow. He, too, was on his back; a T-shirt covered his face. The third man was

prone. Half of his head had been blown off, and his brain had spilled into the dirt.

I hadn't been there long when two women in their mid-thirties appeared in the yard. There was something immediately incongruous about them. Unlike everyone else in Bucha, they were clean. Their clothes were unrumpled and stylish, their white sneakers immaculate; they wore makeup and jewelry. A police officer accompanied them. One of the women, in a polka-dot sweater and black jeans, crouched beside the man with the T-shirt on his face. Her name was Iryna Havryliuk, and the man was her husband. The corpse by the fence was her brother.

Later, Havryliuk told me that, when Russian troops descended on Bucha, she, her mother, and her brother's son had fled to Kyiv. The soldiers were shooting at any moving cars, so the family ran for two miles, amid deafening exchanges between tanks and artillery, until they arrived in Irpin, which the Ukrainians still controlled. Someone there gave them a ride to the destroyed bridge, where they joined the mass of displaced civilians whom August and Orest had helped traverse the river. A bus on the far bank took them to the railway station in Kyiv, and they caught a train to Zakarpattia, in western Ukraine, where they were put up by friends.

Havryliuk's husband, Sergey, a forty-seven-year-old private security guard, had remained in Bucha, refusing to abandon their two dogs and six cats. Her brother, Roman, stayed with him. After the Russians sabotaged Bucha's power plant and began confiscating people's phones, Havryliuk lost contact with the two. She had learned only yesterday that they were dead.



Cartoon by Tom Chitty

Havryliuk confirmed Sergey and Roman's identities, and the officer took photographs. Then Havryliuk lifted the T-shirt over Sergey's face. His mouth was ajar. A bullet had pierced his right eye, leaving a gaping hole.

"Maybe it's not a good idea to do that," the officer said.

Havryliuk returned the shirt.

The other woman was her best friend, Olena Halaka. As they left the back yard, Havryliuk told Halaka, "My hands are trembling." Her tone was calm, almost subdued, much like that of the woman at the maternity hospital who'd said, "My husband was killed instantly." Following a path to the front door, which had been left open, Havryliuk stopped at a wheelbarrow and raised her palm to her brow. The wheelbarrow contained one of her dogs, a pit bull named Valik, also shot dead.

She and Halaka continued inside; seeing a bloodstain on the floor, Havryliuk said, "This is where they shot Valik." She went into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, entered the pantry, and rummaged through cupboards and cabinets. It was not clear what she was looking for. Russian forces were said to have rigged some houses with booby traps, and Halaka, a member of the

Kyiv Police, was worried about explosives. “Stop fucking running around, you’re scaring me,” she told Havryliuk.

Havryliuk wasn’t listening. In the living room, she began removing dresses and shirts from an armoire and placing them in a plastic bag. Recognizing her friend’s need to apply herself to a practical task, Halaka set aside her security concerns and helped her.

“Do you want Sergey’s clothes?” she asked.

“Let me think,” Havryliuk said. Then: “Yes, take them.”

Empty shoeboxes were heaped in a pile. “They stole my shoes,” Havryliuk said. Her lingerie, perfume, and jewelry were also missing. Finding a box of chocolates that she’d stashed away for a special occasion, she gave it to Halaka. “Here, for your kids,” she said.

Halaka eyed the box. “Do you think it’s poisoned?”

The two women climbed a staircase to the bedroom, surprising a small bird that had become trapped inside. It fluttered wildly, banging into the walls and hopping across the floor. Halaka opened a window, and, for several dreamlike seconds, Havryliuk chased the bird around until it flew away. She then lowered herself to her knees and withdrew an old leather-bound book from underneath the bed. It was a collection of poetry by the nineteenth-century writer Taras Shevchenko. Widely considered the progenitor of modern Ukrainian literature, Shevchenko had contributed as much as anyone to the development of a Ukrainian national identity, distinct from Russia’s. “My Testament,” one of the poems in the book, had become a kind of anthem for protesters during the Revolution of Dignity. It begins, “When I am dead, bury me / In my beloved Ukraine.”

“What’s this?” Halaka asked, holding up a zippered pouch.

“Ah,” Havryliuk said. “His coins.”

She was smiling. She opened the pouch to reveal a cache of foreign currency that people had given Sergey from their travels to Cyprus, Singapore, the U.S., Indonesia. He’d been a collector. A dozen miniature beach chairs were

arranged on a shelf, and Havryliuk explained that it was an installation Sergey had made for his defunct cell phones, each of which had occupied a chair. The Russians had taken the phones.

As Havryliuk gathered items from other rooms, a woman in a long coat and glasses stopped by to express her condolences. She'd been in Bucha for the length of the occupation and looked frail and underfed. Havryliuk filled her arms with whatever she could find—soap, shampoo, beauty products, clothes.

"What size are you?" she asked, foisting on the woman three pairs of shoes that had been left behind.

The woman demurred. "What about you?"

"We're moving to Zakarpattia."

"You're not coming back?"

"Not anytime soon."

"Are you going to cremate Sergey and Roman?"

"I don't know." Noticing a pencil jar on its side, Havryliuk stood it upright.

A while later, a neighbor named Nadejda Cherednichenko arrived. Her vest and hooded sweatshirt were tattered, her hands cut and blistered, her nails filled with dirt. After embracing Havryliuk, she told her that her son, a twenty-seven-year-old electrician named Volodymyr, had been detained in early March. After three weeks, Cherednichenko had approached two Russian soldiers patrolling outside of her house. She recalled to Havryliuk, "I said to them, 'I'm asking you as a mother. Is my son alive?' " One of the soldiers had responded, "You don't have a son anymore."

A neighbor had taken Cherednichenko to a basement where Volodymyr had been shot through the ear. All five fingers on his left hand had been wrenched backward.

"She's still getting ready."
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

Havryliuk listened in silence as Cherednichenko recounted all this, occasionally nodding. Although she had no words for her friend, her own loss seemed to have made her someone in whom Cherednichenko could confide. Cherednichenko later showed me her garden, where she had buried Volodymyr. It is traditional for Ukrainians to leave some of the deceased's preferred food on a grave, but during the occupation the residents of Bucha barely had enough sustenance to survive. Volodymyr had loved caffeine, and Cherednichenko had found a small packet of instant coffee to place on the otherwise unmarked mound of dirt.

After Cherednichenko left, Havryliuk went into the front yard. The fence had been knocked over, and when she moved some of the lumber she found her other dog crushed underneath.

Havryliuk put her face into her hands. Her shoulders quaked. For the first time since returning home, she allowed herself to weep.

Down the road from Havryliuk's place, charred corpses lay beside a garbage pile. Locals said that Russians in a tank had dumped them and lit them on fire. (Later, police would tape off the scene and place yellow markers identifying six victims.) One appeared to be a woman, another a child—though they were so severely mutilated that it was hard to say for sure.

Orphaned cats and dogs sniffed around the burned and severed legs and torsos.

Such atrocities were not limited to Ivana-Franka Street. According to the chief regional prosecutor, more than six hundred bodies were found in the district. Researchers with Human Rights Watch reported "extensive evidence of summary executions, other unlawful killings, enforced disappearances, and torture." At least one man was decapitated. The office of the attorney general released photographs of men who had been bound and executed in "a torture chamber" in the basement of a children's sanatorium. Lyudmyla Denisova, Ukraine's human-rights commissioner, told the BBC that two dozen women and girls, between the ages of fourteen and twenty-four, "were systematically raped" while being held captive in another Bucha basement. Nine had become pregnant. A *Times* contributor photographed the corpse of a woman shot in the head in a potato cellar, naked apart from a fur coat.

When the Russians first invaded Bucha, a team of volunteers risked their lives collecting bodies and delivering them to the local morgue. After ten days, with the morgue at capacity and lacking refrigeration, residents dug a mass grave behind a local Orthodox church. As corpses piled up, a tractor covered them with earth. When the first grave was full, a second was excavated, and then a third. I visited the church the day after I met Iryna Havryliuk. Bulky black bags were still heaped in the third pit, and limbs protruded from the mud. The priest, Father Andrii Halavin, was in the nave, repairing windows shattered by projectiles. "It's not just here," he told me. "People are buried all over Bucha."

He wanted to show me a park. On the way, we passed a street where Ukrainian drones had wiped out a convoy from the first Russian unit to enter the neighborhood. The turrets, engines, cannons, and tracks of dismembered tanks were strewn across a four-hundred-yard stretch of road. The destruction was extraordinary. Several residents told me that the conduct of later waves of Russian soldiers had been much worse, perhaps out of vengeance for the first.

A van next to the park was riddled with bullet holes. The Russian word for "children" had been painted on its hood. White sheets hung from its side mirrors. "They were trying to leave," Father Halavin said of the passengers.

He didn't know their identities; nor had whoever buried them. The only marker on a plot of fresh soil in the grass was a license plate that had been removed from the van's rear bumper.

Curiously, the park was littered with horse manure. Father Halavin explained that a stable had been bombed. The horses that survived had run wild through the suburb, crazed by the incessant shelling. When I asked where they were now, Halavin shrugged.

Whatever had happened to the horses, stray pets were everywhere, each attesting to an absent master. On a small street across the tracks from Ivana-Franka, an old woman lay face down in her doorway; a trembling dog stood at her shoulder, barking over and over. When I opened a can of tuna, the dog ravenously devoured it. I went inside and found a second woman, also elderly, lying dead on the kitchen floor. Neighbors later told me that they had been sisters, both in their seventies. Their names were Nina and Lyudmyla. In the only bedroom, two narrow mattresses were pushed together and covered by a single blanket. Their little house teemed with hardcover books. Russian translations of French classics filled half a dozen shelves: Voltaire, Camus, Maupassant. In a stack on an armoire, I noticed the same collection of Shevchenko's poetry that Iryna Havryliuk had retrieved from under her and Sergey's bed.

I thought of the old woman on the bridge who'd refused to cross the Irpin River. It wasn't clear how Nina and Lyudmyla had died—but the outcome seemed inevitable. A Russian tank had plowed through the yard across the street. A sniper had occupied the attic of a house next door. Amid such brute lethality, what chance did the sisters have?

Another elderly woman, who lived alone in Bucha, had recounted begging for her life when Russian soldiers burst into her house one day. "I never would have imagined that, at seventy, I would have to get on my knees before a nineteen-year-old bastard," she'd told me. Echoing the residents of Trostyanets, she and others described the occupiers less as fearsome, battle-hardened butchers than as capriciously homicidal youth. At a high school not far from Ivana-Franka Street, crushed beer cans surrounded former artillery positions. The principal's office had been trashed. A Russian soldier

had used a rubber stamp to painstakingly imprint the outline of a phallus on the wall.

Anastasia, Artem, and Mamont had been stationed at a stabilization point near Irpin. One day, after the Russian retreat, Anastasia went with Yuzik, the neurosurgeon with the cane and the miniature-handgun necklace, to distribute food, water, and medicine in Bucha. They met an elderly woman who had been wounded in a blast several days earlier. Shrapnel had cut a large gash in her arm. "We had to argue with her to let us dress it," Anastasia said. "She kept saying that we shouldn't waste our time."

On April 6th, another Hospitaller called me to say that he was en route to the church in Bucha with the mass graves. "I can't say why," he told me. I was already in the area and got to the church a few minutes before several ambulances and vans arrived. One of the priests from St. Michael's was there. His name was Ivan Sydor, and at the monastery I had interviewed him about the night of December 11, 2013—three weeks after President Viktor Yanukovych, acquiescing to Russia, had cancelled the E.U. agreement. Father Sydor had been a seminary student at the time. At around 1 *A.M.*, he began receiving panicked calls. Hundreds of security forces had stormed the protesters encamped at Independence Square. Until then, the demonstrations had largely been tolerated. Now the government had resolved to quash them.

"They were asking me to ring the bells," Father Sydor had recalled. The tower at St. Michael's contained dozens of cast-bronze bells linked to a keyboard of wooden batons—a carillon—and Father Sydor served as the bell ringer. Typically, the carillon was played for brief interludes in advance of morning services and prayers. But there was also a form of bell ringing called *nabat*, which heralded grave danger and was extremely rare. The last known instance of *nabat* at St. Michael's had been in 1240, when the Mongols laid siege to Kyiv.

After securing approval from the abbot, Father Sydor and five other priests-in-training had climbed the tower and taken turns pounding the batons of the carillon with their fists. They did not stop until 5 *A.M.* Then they descended the tower and walked down the hill to Independence Square. The protesters were still there; the battered security forces were leaving.

“We had won,” he told me.

In Bucha, Father Sydor stood beside an older man with a long graying beard, a black clerical robe, and a tall cylindrical headdress. I recognized him as Metropolitan Epiphanius, the head of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. Photographs of Epiphanius, often with foreign dignitaries, were hung throughout St. Michael’s, and I’d seen him address a group of journalists in the cathedral. When a reporter had asked whether he had a message for Putin, Epiphanius had said, “I don’t want to address this person—he’s the Antichrist. When you see our destroyed cities, you realize that only the Devil is capable of such things, or someone in league with the Devil.”

While Father Halavin greeted Sydor and Epiphanius, a medic helped Yana Zinkevych, the leader of the Hospitallers, into her wheelchair. Everyone then proceeded to the pit. Standing at the edge, the three clergymen intoned a dirge, in a low, melodious chant. Walking the length of the trench, Epiphanius sprinkled holy water, from a silver basin, over the heaped-up corpses.

It was a private ceremony, and only a handful of medics attended. August—the “Band of Brothers” fan—was among them. A month earlier, I’d run into August at St. Michael’s while he was putting on his ammo vest and flak jacket. Grinning broadly and emanating excitement, he’d told me, “I’m going to the war!” That person was no more. He looked sombre and exhausted. Older, too.

“How are you?” I said, when the ritual had ended.

“Angry,” August answered.

He and Orest, the arborist, had spent the past two weeks fifty miles east of Kyiv, in Nova Basan—another town from which Russian forces had withdrawn. Civilians had been executed there, too: “They were just left in the street. Many old people—grandmothers and grandfathers.” When the Russians left Nova Basan, August said, they took several young girls with them. He had met with their families, who had no idea what had happened to them or if they were alive.

As if in consolation, he took out his phone and showed me a photograph of himself standing over a dead soldier. “Good Russian,” August said. But the joke failed to amuse even him, and he quickly put the phone away.

Hundreds of bodies were collected in Bucha and brought to the local cemetery. From there, they were to be transported to Kyiv, where medical professionals would attempt to identify them, using DNA samples.

The day before the ceremony, I’d gone back to Ivana-Franka Street. The burnt corpses were gone. All that remained was a patch of scorched earth.

A white van was parked outside Iryna Havryliuk’s house. On the dusty rear doors, someone had used his finger to write “200”—a military code for fatalities, which I had learned from the Hospitallers (“300” signified injuries). The van belonged to the team that had collected bodies throughout the occupation, bringing them first to the morgue and then to the church. The volunteers were all large, sturdy men who looked accustomed to heavy lifting. One of them, Sergey Matiuk, had been a professional soccer player in Ukraine. He had a shaved head and broad shoulders; a pin attached to his colorful windbreaker was emblazoned with the Bucha town crest above the words “*I LOVE MY CITY*,” in Ukrainian. He estimated that he and his colleagues had picked up about three hundred corpses, at least a hundred of which had had their hands tied behind their backs. “A lot of them were tortured,” he said.

One of the volunteers had known Iryna Havryliuk's husband, and as he and Matiuk bent over to lift Sergey's body the volunteer said, "They even took his gold tooth."

Matiuk, focussed on the task at hand, said, "Let's go."

Havryliuk was at the house, but she avoided the back yard. While the volunteers carried body bags to the van, one at a time, she roamed the property, searching for her missing cats. At one point, she froze and looked down at her hands.

"Everything is dirty," she muttered.

The van was half filled with other bodies, and Matiuk had to climb into the back in order to haul Sergey and Roman onto the pile. Then they proceeded to the yellow house, and carried the teen-ager out of the basement. From there, they brought their cargo to the local cemetery.

I stopped by the cemetery the following afternoon. Dozens of bagged corpses were laid out in rows and stacked in piles beside a brick shed that Matiuk and his team used as their office. Matiuk was wearing the same colorful windbreaker and pin. An antique knife with a jewel-embedded handle was sheathed on his hip; he'd found it at an abandoned Russian checkpoint and had kept it as a trophy. He said that the bodies were to be transported to Kyiv, where medical professionals would attempt to identify them, using DNA samples. In the coming days, more than a hundred and ten corpses would be exhumed from behind the church.

"I'm very tired," Matiuk said. "We haven't slept."

"Since the Russians left?"

"Since they came."

I asked what he planned to do after the war, and Matiuk said that he'd accepted a job with the cemetery, as a gravedigger.

"My place is here," he said.

Anastasia completed her rotation with Artem and Mamont the next day, April 7th, and I met her at the apartment she had rented on Andriyivsky Descent. We walked down the cobblestone road, past the monument to the opera singer Vasyl Slipak, and continued to the banks of the Dnieper. Restaurants, shops, and cafés were reopening. The afternoon was warm and sunny—the first good weather since I'd arrived in Ukraine—and several joggers passed us on the quay. An island in the river had a sand beach, and Anastasia smiled as she recalled concerts that she'd attended there. "In the summer, it's amazing here," she said.

Anastasia told me that, according to Yuzik, the Hospitallers would soon be sent east. The Russians, having given up on Kyiv—at least for now—were shifting their focus to the Donbas. Their stated objective was to seize the entirety of the region and then push southwest to the Black Sea, thus creating a land bridge to Crimea. Mariupol, which stood in the way of that projected corridor, was already shattered; the last Ukrainian holdouts, including members of the Azov Battalion, were taking refuge, with their families, in the tunnels beneath a steel plant, which the Russians would soon blockade.

The second phase of the war would involve more heavy weaponry and ordnance than the first—as well as increasingly willful cruelty. In mid-April, Putin awarded an honorary title to the unit thought to be responsible for the depravity in Bucha, in recognition of its "heroism and valor." The day after Anastasia and I walked to the Dnieper, Russian cluster munitions struck a railway station in Kramatorsk, where hundreds of civilians, mostly women and kids, were awaiting trains out of the Donbas. More than fifty were killed.

On the quay, when I asked Anastasia if she would go east, she said, "I have to think about it. There is a high chance of being killed." She was returning to Paris for a week or two. She had an academic article to write, and wanted to pursue various ideas for advocacy and fund-raising. In the past month, she had sometimes struggled to readapt to the military culture, routine, and mind-set of the Hospitallers. She'd been one of the few medics who had refused to carry a Kalashnikov. In contrast to August, Yuzik, and Mamont, Anastasia was not fascinated by war or temperamentally suited to it. Like many Ukrainians, she had simply declined to run from it.

After going to Paris, Anastasia went back to Ukraine. When we last spoke, she was visiting her family in Kyiv. The Hospitallers were moving out of St. Michael's. She planned to join them in the east. ♦

North Carolina Postcard

- **Madison Cawthorn and Mark Meadows: Congressional Racers**

By Charles Bethea

Madison Cawthorn, the twenty-six-year-old Republican congressman from western North Carolina, has been racking up traffic tickets. In March, a cop pulled him over for crossing the centerline, in Cleveland County. As the officer discovered, Cawthorn was driving with a revoked license. Two months earlier, he'd been clocked going eighty-seven in a seventy-miles-per-hour zone, in Polk County. A few months before that, he'd been stopped for doing eighty-nine, in Buncombe County. Cawthorn didn't have his license on him during that joyride, but a trooper let him take a mulligan for the possible misdemeanor.

"Do your best to make sure you have your driver's license on you," the trooper said, as he wrote up a speeding ticket.

"Is this something I can just go in and pay?" Cawthorn asked. The trooper told him that it was not quite that simple. Cawthorn faces a court date in early May, followed, a fortnight later, by a Republican primary against seven challengers, who have more than tickets to talk about on the campaign trail.

For instance: Cawthorn was recently busted, for the second time, for carrying a loaded pistol at an airport (possible misdemeanor); he was implicated in a potential insider-trading scheme involving a meme

cryptocurrency (possible felony); and, as Politico reported last month, he once wore "women's lingerie in a public setting." (Cawthorn tweeted that he'd done this during "a game on a cruise" before his election, and he invited followers to "share your most embarrassing vacay pics in the replies.") Weeks earlier, a former Cawthorn staffer had remarked, on a secretly recorded phone call, that one of the congressman's district offices has "more liquor bottles than they do water bottles," and that staff members there drink "like crazy."

A few weeks before that, on a YouTube episode of "Warrior Poet Society," Cawthorn volunteered that colleagues whom he'd "looked up to through my life" had invited him to "a sexual get-together" and done "a key bump" of cocaine in his presence. He was responding to a question about whether Congress is really like the TV show "House of Cards." (He called it "wild.") He was not specific about the identities of the G.O.P.'s orgy inviters and cokeheads. Corruption in Congress, Cawthorn gravely explained, "has to do with the fallen nature of man."

"He's so annoying. If you know you have rabies, just call in sick!"
Cartoon by Tim Hamilton

Mark Meadows, who represented Cawthorn's district before becoming Donald Trump's chief of staff, is the rare North Carolina Republican who has not publicly scolded Cawthorn lately. As a gesture of appreciation, perhaps, Cawthorn has not dragged Meadows for turning over text messages

to the January 6th House Committee, nor has he accused Meadows of voter fraud—which he appears to have committed, in 2020, by writing the address of someone else's mobile home on his voter-registration form. As it happens, the two conservatives from North Carolina have something in common beyond their indifference to rules: a need for speed.

On June 28, 2016, a highway patroller clocked Meadows, who was then in Congress, doing seventy-two in a fifty-five-m.p.h. zone: excessive speeding. If convicted, he faced a possible suspension of his license. The patroller noted the congressman's confession in the citation's notes: "*DEF SAID HE WAS SORRY DOING A SPEECH THIS MORNING JUST BEING A FUDDY DUDDY NOT PAYING ATTN*." That day, Meadows was scheduled to speak at a "Faith & Freedom" rally alongside "Congresswoman Jody Hice of Georgia," according to a flyer on his Web site. (Hice, a Republican challenging Georgia's secretary of state, is a man.) The address listed on Meadows's citation was the Henderson County Courthouse, where both he and Greg Newman, the district attorney prosecuting his case, kept offices.

Three days later, Newman dismissed the misdemeanor charge and ordered community service. The Meadows case file consists of two pages—the citation and the dismissal order, but nothing about community service scheduled or completed. "I was very generous, especially with people who did a lot to make our communities better," Newman said. He didn't think that Meadows had an attorney for the case. Still, a month after the dismissal, the Meadows for Congress *PAC* paid more than seventeen hundred dollars to a local law firm specializing in traffic law. Meadows and his *PAC* did not respond to requests for comment. The law firm's founder, Douglas Pearson, could not say what services it provided, citing a recent fire that destroyed records.

Newman was removed from office last year following allegations of willful misconduct, including failing to prosecute a child-rape case. He found a new job, at the King Law Firm, which, according to the Asheville *Citizen-Times*, may have paid some of Cawthorn's recent speeding fines. ♦

On Television

- **“The First Lady” Is a Bad-Wig Costume Drama**

By Doreen St. Félix

“The First Lady,” a ten-episode miniseries on Showtime, desperately wants to convince you that it is a chamber piece. Scarcely does the camera go wide; it observes the East Wing of the White House in medium closeup, shrinking the domain of the President’s spouse down to a miserable tableau of dour furniture and even more dour facial expressions. This is a straightforward dramatic metaphor—domestic interior as psychological interior—and it might have been effective if the script demonstrated an interest in its protagonists’ inner lives. But it does not. The show won’t let Eleanor Roosevelt, Betty Ford, and Michelle Obama, who are played by Gillian Anderson, Michelle Pfeiffer, and Viola Davis, respectively, be anything but handsomely wounded victors.

The miniseries, cooked up by Aaron Cooley, a first-time creator, and showrun by Cathy Schulman, with all ten episodes directed by Susanne Bier, is an odd failure. It has a halting structure and a maudlin view of history that make the show feel dated. Early on, it dawns on you that the project is very anti-Ryan Murphy. When middle-aged Hollywood goddesses are gathered, our minds are thrust to that auteur’s precinct, where, for better or for worse, the mature performer is the rebel muse and historical incident is a putty plaything. In contrast, Cooley’s cast has been sealed in an enclosure, given no freedom to roam beyond the barrier of impersonation. Style, too, has been banished. “The First Lady” refuses any hint of irony, satire, glamour, or scandal. I, too, can tire of the showy po-mo aesthetics of historical fictions these days, but that doesn’t mean the answer is to abdicate the insertion of perspective.

If “The First Lady” does have a perspective, it’s a mannered one, a fait accompli: the idea that Americans have an insatiable fascination with the paradox of the First Spouse, she who is proximate to power though officially endowed with none. As Eleanor Roosevelt, dismayed to have not been given an official position in her husband’s Cabinet, laments, the First Lady position is not a job but, rather, her “circumstance.” The show makes First Ladydom both generic and somehow cosmic, a kind of condition passed on from Administration to Administration, a mark placed on fifty-three Eves.

The creators have chosen their three subjects carefully; a feminist gloss sticks on them. The nature of these First Ladies does not mesh with the

expectations of the role. Eleanor is the visionary, in the closet in more ways than one; initially, she can evince her genius as a diplomat only through ventriloquism, feeding her husband his best lines. Betty is exhausted with the fakery of political life; an iconoclast, and the last Republican wife before the onslaught of the Reaganite far right, she thumbs through "The Feminine Mystique" and dances uninhibitedly to Harry Nilsson. Michelle, as we know well, has a disdain for the equivocation necessary to keep the political engine going. She's also, as the First Black First Lady, the unspoken justification for the series: the ne plus ultra of its gurgling optimism. Virtually every shred of dialogue is aphoristic. "First Ladies and their teams are often the vanguards of social progress in this country," Betty writes in a letter to Michelle, at the beginning of the Obama Administration. That argument is specious at best, though there's nothing wrong with the show allowing a fictionalized Betty to impart her belief. The problem is that "The First Lady" doesn't dare to stray from her viewpoint.

In its attempt to tell three histories, the show scrambles the chronologies of its subjects' White House tenures as well as their larger biographies. There are flashbacks nested in flashbacks; a second suite of actors play the women and their husbands when they were young. Two time lines, which span more than a century of activity, are tenuously anchored by theme. The writers have fabricated resonances, but these only elide the specificity of each woman's life. It serves none of these figures, and certainly not the viewer, to insinuate equivalence between a young orphaned Eleanor (Eliza Scanlen), sent to boarding school in Britain; a young Michelle (Jayme Lawson), facing institutional racism on the South Side of Chicago; and a young Betty (Kristine Froseth), a dancer who trained under Martha Graham, and whose dreams of stardom were thwarted by a bad first marriage and by alcoholism.

On occasion, "The First Lady" offers insights into the eccentricity of political marriage. That's not to say that any of the Presidents are well written or capably performed. Kiefer Sutherland, Aaron Eckhart, and O-T Fagbenle—as Franklin D. Roosevelt, Gerald Ford, and Barack Obama, respectively—struggle to give life to waxen cartoons of ironic emasculation. Still, scenes of compromise stand out amid the two-dimensionality. Anderson's pursed mouth (even tighter than the mouth she uses for Margaret Thatcher, on "The Crown") breaks when her character discovers correspondence between her husband and his longtime mistress; it breaks,

too, in the company of Eleanor's own lover, the reporter Lorena Hickok (Lily Rabe). The Roosevelts' marriage is a détente, an alliance between political operators. Pfeiffer and Eckhart, meanwhile, give the Fords a sexual chemistry that feels daring; when Gerald pardons Richard Nixon, his decision disturbs the couple's emotional universe. Davis and Fagbenle, as the Obamas, are the least successful pairing. Their relationship is filtered only through racial insecurity, with Michelle as the real-talk bully to Barack's dreamer. Playing Michelle is clearly a burden for Davis. How do you summon a living titan, a figure who already plays herself so well? The actor ultimately relies on mimicry, and makeup—a parody of two-thousands corporate glam, with the thin eyebrows and the glossed lips. "The First Lady" is not ready to puncture the hip grandiosity of the Obamas, instead leaving the couple hazy and ill-defined. It's an offensive naïveté, considering how artfully the Obamas have crafted their modern legend.

Throughout the show, extraordinary events—Pearl Harbor, Watergate, the Sandy Hook shooting—are rendered as catalysts for personal growth. "Anna, what happened?" Eleanor asks her daughter, after rushing into the West Wing. "The Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor," Anna responds. "How bad?" "Very bad." But, on the other hand, the tragedy gave Eleanor an opportunity to address the frightened populace, so, as the series seems to imply, not all bad? After a few minutes of this, we are jolted to another lady, another dilemma. Encouraging her husband to stand up to his white liberal base, Michelle Obama speechifies, "We've been called nigga in every way possible. For once, let's be the niggas." The rushed tempo has a way of caricaturing what is meant to be serious.

Sometimes you ought to allow a bad-wig costume drama to be a bad-wig costume drama. The triumphalist vibe of "The First Lady" penetrates every element of its world, down to the major-chord score. This sort of big-name vehicle, reeking of Hollywood hubris, can sometimes take on cult-classic status owing to its concentration of bad performances from great actors—or, as in the case of "The First Lady," its one good performance amid a sea of middling ones. If such status is conferred on this show, it'll be because of Michelle Pfeiffer. Anderson and Davis are regulars on the grandstanding-bio-pic circuit, so they have a bag of tricks to pull from when giving flesh to

myths. Pfeiffer is acting in a different milieu altogether. When she speaks the wretched dialogue, she tempers the awkwardness, adding a sigh, a pause. Her Betty Ford is a study of the woman's fears and attractions, a suggestive riff on themes of addiction, frustrated freedom, and wifely melancholy. When Betty's compulsions spin out of control, and her family stages an intervention, Pfeiffer nudges the script away from the written psycho-biddy mania, deciding to show us, instead, controlled rage. It's real. ♦

Poems

- **“Pompeii”**
- **“Sundown Walks to the Edge of the Story”**

By Cynthia Zarin

Content

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

Audio: *Read by the author.*

Presence of an absence, absence of a presence,
which was it? Strings on a broken harp.
How eager the earth is to have us in its debt—
dusk on loan from its library of hours.

At dawn our clattered knees are chariot wheels
turning in the amber air, our numbered days
a whizzing pinwheel zodiac: the sycamore,
the dog, the lobster trap, your long-dead mother's

tale of Pliny at Pompeii—grief, or madness
to want the sky to fall and cover our blent
bones with ash? This morning in New Haven,
the bleached moon blotted by the rain, then light

pressing its claim against the window, dawn
threading itself once more through time's needle.

By Joy Harjo

Content

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

Audio: *Read by the author.*

In the lands of forgotten memories,
I hear a woman singing.
A dog runs in circles, barking.
Then children laugh as they run through,
The sashes of one girl's dress are dragging
On the ground from playing horse.

In this story is a woman with a husband she adores.
He is the color of warm brown earth, tall,
With kind eyes that shine with love for her.
When he loves, it is with every part of his body,
From his planted feet to his head good with numbers.

When she first lay down with him, their love made roots
That dove into the ground, caressed the stones.
These roots find water where water is needed.

Those nights of early love, he spoke to her when she was sleeping.
His words were the vision of an architect of dreams.
He told her how he would treasure her, how they would walk
Through this life to the next with each other, no matter
The tests and disappointments that befall a human
On this earthly road.

Those words blossomed into flowers, waters, and sunrises.
She wears each day as a river pearl in a necklace. Though the pearls
Darken with age, they never let up their glow.

Time is nothing in those lands.
It has been years.
They lay down together to sleep, in their grown old bones,

Their weathered skins.
She is a woman made of words.
He is a man now impatient with words.
They hold hands in the dark and fall asleep together.

I find them, as sundown walks to the edge of the story
To wait for sunrise. I find them in a song about a woman
Weeping with joy, about a man whose love for her
Does not need words but contains every color
That love has ever worn.

Portfolio

- **The Costs of War**

Profiles

- **How Elisabeth Moss Became the Dark Lady of the Small Screen**

By Michael Schulman

Content

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

“Wowzers,” Elisabeth Moss said, peering down at a bloodied corpse made of silicone. It was January, and Moss was on the Toronto set of “The Handmaid’s Tale,” the Hulu series on which she plays June, an escapee from a patriarchal dystopia known as Gilead. The series, based on Margaret Atwood’s 1985 novel, imagines a repressive theocracy that has overthrown the United States and forced women into regimented roles, including Handmaids, who are ceremonially raped and impregnated by their Commanders. The first season, hewing to Atwood’s book, introduced June’s life as Offred, renamed to mark her ownership by Commander Fred Waterford, played by Joseph Fiennes. By Season 5, for which Moss was in preproduction, June has fled to Canada and, along with a pack of former Handmaids, pummelled Fred into oblivion. The nude silicone body, wheeled out on a metal tray, was his.

Moss inspected its exposed shinbones, mangled wrists, and clawed-up chest. “Anyone want a charcuterie plate?” she said, laughing. Moss was vetting the corpse in her role as the director of the first two episodes of the season; she began directing in Season 4, and she is also an executive producer. The day had been reserved for camera tests, with the crew sorting out such details as the exact shade of red that June’s bloody handprint should leave on a car window.

“I do have a penile note,” Moss said, brightly.

“More? Less?” a prosthetics designer named Zane asked, as they surveyed Fred’s damaged genitals.

“Well, I just don’t want it to look like they *bit* it off.”

“We could always add more on.”

“Maybe,” Moss said. “So it looks more like it’s smashed.” Her eyes trailed downward. “The toes look so real!”

Moss had freshly dyed blond hair and wore a T-shirt that read “Liberté! Egalité! Maternité!” At thirty-nine, she has worked on television sets for more than three decades, and she projects a jaunty professionalism. “The Handmaid’s Tale” may be relentlessly gruesome, but Moss’s off-screen presence is as light as tulle. She snapped gum, cracked jokes, and showed me photographs of her two tangerine cats, Lucy and Ethel. A Los Angeles native, she deployed the occasional Valley-girl “Totally!” Everyone calls her Lizzie.

On camera, though, Moss has an almost alien self-possession, channelling extreme states of trauma, rage, fear, or savagery. Her characters are often poised at the crossroads of meekness and ferocity. Directors like to shoot her in lingering closeups, her knotty, expressive face going blank with detachment or flashing with wildness, her eyes staring down her beaky nose like a pair of determined headlights. Alex Ross Perry, who directed her in three independent films, described her talent for “looking into the darkness and coming back with a bit of a glint in her eye.”

Moss, who was raised in the Church of Scientology, is one of the most unconventional stars of her generation, and her career traces the trajectory of the past quarter century of television. At seventeen, she began playing the President’s daughter on “The West Wing,” perhaps the high-water mark of turn-of-the-millennium network drama. At twenty-three, she was cast as Peggy Olson on “Mad Men,” which starred Jon Hamm as the adman Don Draper, part of a wave of prestige cable series centered on male antiheroes. But as the show went on—and Peggy morphed from mousy secretary into tart copywriting whiz—she became its stealth heroine, pointing the way to TV’s more female-centric next phase. (Moss received six Emmy nominations.) Before “Mad Men” was over, she starred in Jane Campion and Gerard Lee’s limited series, “Top of the Lake,” a forerunner of such highbrow whodunnits as “Mare of Easttown.” Then came “The Handmaid’s Tale.” If “The West Wing” was liberal America’s alternative to the Bush Administration, “The Handmaid’s Tale,” which premièred in the spring of 2017, midway between Trump’s Inauguration and #MeToo, was timed for the Resistance. Women protesting abortion rollbacks in bonnets and red

robes is now a staple of American activism. Moss won her first Emmy for the role.

At the same time, she has built up an idiosyncratic film résumé, choosing projects that reflect her penchant for dark, even feral characters. She played a woman stabbed in the neck by her own doppelgänger, in Jordan Peele's "Us," and a demonic version of the writer Shirley Jackson, in Josephine Decker's "Shirley." Many of her roles deal with violence against women. In 2020, she starred in Leigh Whannell's "The Invisible Man," which recast the H. G. Wells novel as the story of a woman terrorized by her abusive tech-mogul ex, who uses his invisibility suit to stalk her. She told me, giggling, "I can't tell you how many children I've lost in roles. They're either being taken away or stolen. It's, like, *Jesus Christ*."

In the past decade, Moss has become a kind of muse to Alex Ross Perry. After casting her in the literary satire "Listen Up Philip," Perry made her the protagonist, a woman on the edge of madness, of his micro-budget drama "Queen of Earth." Then he wrote her a tour-de-force role as a self-destructive punk rocker, in "Her Smell." Anyone who still thought of Moss as a secretary in a Peter Pan collar was disabused, watching her prowl around rock clubs in smeared mascara, snarling lines such as "Ding-dong, the bitch is back!" During awards season, Perry wrote a letter to the New York Film Critics Circle pleading for Moss to be recognized, to little avail. "It obviously remains a black mark on any organization—all of them—that didn't appropriately award that performance," he told me.

During the pandemic, Moss and the former WME agent Lindsey McManus launched a production company, Love & Squalor Pictures. Its first project, "Shining Girls," a crime thriller with flecks of sci-fi, has just premièred, on Apple TV+. The show, based on a 2013 novel by Lauren Beukes, stars Moss, who also directed two episodes, as a newspaper archivist in early-nineties Chicago. After surviving a near-deadly assault, she is pursued by a time-bending serial killer.

"I like playing roles that are very conflicted or have some major trauma, which is all very different from my life," Moss told me one day, applying lip balm with her pinkie. She watches rom-coms and Marvel movies, but

through acting she travels to an emotional netherworld, a process she likes to describe as “fun.”

Moss, who wouldn’t dream of going camping, enjoys extreme-sports documentaries. “I’m fascinated by that need to climb that mountain, this need to show yourself what you can do,” she said. Acting is her version of free-soloing. Early in “The Handmaid’s Tale,” Margaret Atwood had a cameo as an Aunt, one of Gilead’s matronly enforcers, who smacks June on the face during an indoctrination. “We had to shoot it four times, because I was apparently not doing it forcefully enough or with enough scowling and determination,” Atwood told me. “So I had the bizarre experience of my leading lady turning around and saying to me, ‘Hit me harder! C’mon, gimme a whack!’ ”

One afternoon, Moss sat in her “Handmaid’s Tale” production office, in an unglamorous building on the outskirts of Toronto. The walls were covered in storyboards and shots from movies (“Moonlight,” “Black Swan”) whose look she wanted to emulate. Occasionally, an associate came in to show her head shots of potential extras. “Every day, we lose a Handmaid,” Moss lamented. “Search the couch cushions!” (Some actors, she said, had dropped out because of the show’s vaccine requirement.) She had tacked John Everett Millais’s painting of the drowned Ophelia on the door. “One of the themes this season is water,” she explained. “There’s definitely a theme of rebirth and finding out who you are.”

Moss was also in postproduction for “Shining Girls”; McManus, her producing partner, calls her “an absolute workhorse.” “I went to dinner a couple of weeks ago with some of the cast, and you would have thought I was going to the fucking Oscars,” Moss told me. “I’m not used to having a life outside of work.” In her office, she held up a display of costume swatches. “I love prep,” she said. “Acting I’m much more laissez-faire about.” Collaborators say that she can instantly switch from casual banter to earth-shattering emotion. “Lizzie has an incredible ability to turn it on and turn it off,” Jon Hamm told me.

When I asked Moss about a harrowing scene in “The Handmaid’s Tale” in which June confronts her former tormentor Mrs. Waterford with such seismic fury that spit shoots from her mouth, she laughed and said, “The fun

part is that, in life, you're not supposed to go and scream in people's faces like that." Music is essential to her process. She makes a detailed playlist for each character, to get in the mood. The one for "The Handmaid's Tale" includes works by the post-minimalist composer Max Richter, Hans Zimmer's soundtrack for "Interstellar," and, when June is in avenging mode, Beyoncé's "Formation." For "Her Smell," she listened to Radiohead. "AirPods were a massive addition to my career, because I don't get all wrapped up in wires now," she said.

In Toronto, Moss reported to the studio for a location survey. Lurking among the crew was Bradley Whitford, who plays a Commander and was observing Moss before directing an episode himself. "I'm just here out of fear," he said, dryly. Whitford has known Moss since "The West Wing," and, as she led the walk-through, he beamed with avuncular pride. "It's a very odd combination of being able to be the bird that flies around in the cage and to care about how the cage is built," he said. "It's extremely impressive to me, and my heart is the size of a raisin."

We drove to a small park next to a cathedral, the site of a scene in which June sits on a bench in Canada. Although she has escaped Gilead, she struggles to adjust to her freedom, her wrath fading into a kind of damaged glee. A blizzard had dumped more than a foot of snow on the city, and Moss was barely visible behind her scarf, hat, and sunglasses. She discussed removing some recycling bins on the day of the shoot. "We good, Boss?" she asked an assistant director, Michael Johnson, known as MJ.

"Yeah, Boss," he replied. Moss told me, "We all just call everybody Boss. MJ's Boss, I'm Boss—or Moss Boss."

At a civic center that would double as the exterior of a morgue, Moss surveyed a spot where extras would assemble. "I've tended to think like a director for a while," she told me, mentioning that she'd been involved in the tactile world-building of "Handmaid's" since the beginning. When Moss took up directing, she asked every director she encountered (Wes Anderson, Taika Waititi) for advice. Ben Stiller reminded her not to shortchange herself as an actor when she needed another take. But her model was Jane Campion. "I learned from Jane that it's O.K. to say, 'I don't know,' " Moss told me. She was talking about her more carefree approach to acting when Whitford

walked by. “I’m just dispensing some wisdom,” she deadpanned. “You might want to stick around.”

The two chatted in the snow. “I learned how a set should be from ‘The West Wing,’ ” Moss went on. “Everyone was so professional—knew their lines, because those lines were *insane*—but had fun.”

As casually as Moss talks about acting, the results run deep. For “Queen of Earth,” Perry wrote Moss a monologue in which she excoriates a man she loathes at a dinner table. The lines are vicious—“You are weak and greedy and selfish”—and Moss delivered them in a methodical near-whisper. A lav mike was taped near her chest, and during editing Perry noticed that he could hear her heartbeat accelerate as her character released more bile. He kept it in the film. “She’s changing her biology as it pertains to the scene,” he said. “And then can do it again in the next take.”

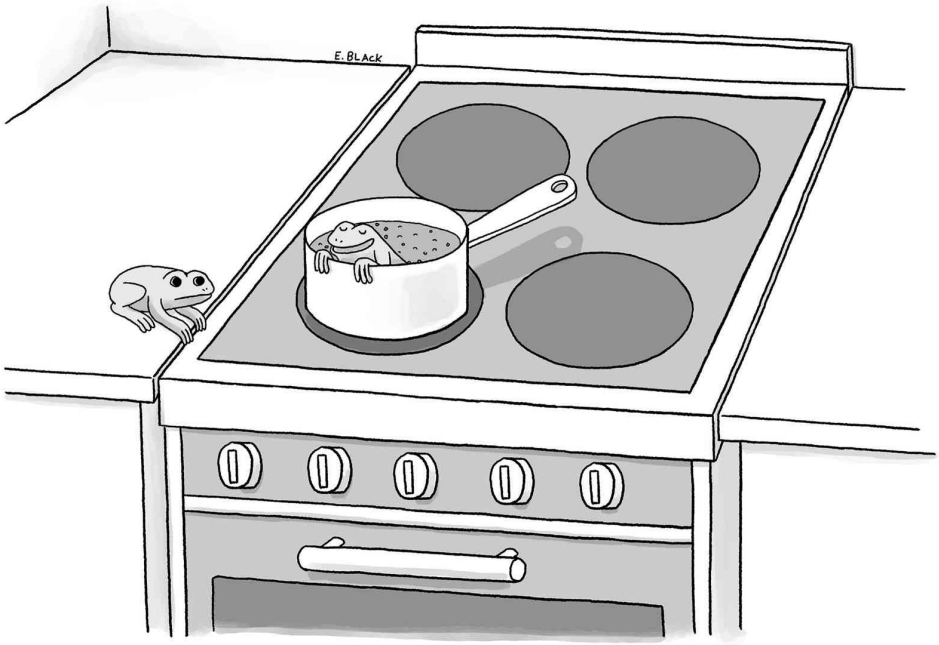
Moss has always had a transportive imagination. As a child, living in Laurel Canyon, she would read “Little House on the Prairie” and pretend she lived on a farm. She tended to an imaginary garden in the back yard. “I would dig a little hole and put some gravel or stones in it, and then I would put a little stick there,” she recalled. “I must have read a book about a garden.”

She comes from a family of musicians: her father, Ron, is a jazz trombonist and manager, and her mother, Linda, plays blues harmonica. (They are now divorced.) She has a younger brother, Derek. One of her earliest memories is of hanging around backstage at the Blue Note Jazz Club, in New York. “Musicians would come over all the time, and everyone would bring an instrument and play,” she recalled. “And I would dance. It was a very creative, artistic environment. But not, like, in a hippie way—in a jazz way.” When she was five, her mother put her in ballet classes. “Growing up in a family of musicians, you weren’t a dilettante about things,” she said. “If you had a chosen art form, you took that seriously.”

Moss told me that her acting career began when her ballet class put on “The Sound of Music” and an agent saw her play Gretl, the littlest von Trapp. She was soon booking toy and cereal commercials. At seven or eight, she got her first television job, in a Jackie Collins miniseries called “Lucky Chances,” as a girl who finds her mother, played by a young Sandra Bullock, dead in a

pool. She worked steadily as a child actor, in projects including “Suburban Commando” (in which she watches Hulk Hogan rescue a cat from a tree) and the TV movie of “Gypsy,” starring Bette Midler. (Moss played the child version of Gypsy Rose Lee.)

But her professional life predates “The Sound of Music.” When she was five, her godfather, Chick Corea, the famous jazz pianist, cast her in a music video for a piece he’d composed called “Eternal Child.” Corea was a longtime Scientologist—he’d once recorded a jazz album based on an L. Ron Hubbard novel set on a time-travelling spaceship—and Moss’s father was his manager. In a nineteen-eighties advertisement that has made its way online, Corea and Ron Moss pose at a keyboard, next to the slogan “Who guarantees the future of Scientology? WE DO!”



“I know the water is slowly heating up, but I figure that’s the younger generation’s problem.”
Cartoon by Ellie Black

Moss’s parents joined Scientology before she was born. Her father, who comes from England, once played in a jazz band with Ron Miscavige, whose son, David, is the current head of the Church. (Ron Miscavige, who died last year, later published a damning book about his son, titled “Ruthless.”) According to an interview that Ron Moss gave last year, on the occasion of Corea’s death, he and Corea met in England, at the Scientology headquarters in East Grinstead, around the early seventies. Soon afterward, Ron moved to L.A. and became Corea’s tour manager, and they formed a label together. He

later managed Isaac Hayes, another Scientologist, who stopped voicing the character of Chef on "South Park" after an episode that spoofed the Church.

Moss told me that Corea was "the first person to see me as an artist, even at five years old. He treated me the same as he would if I was his age." Geoff Levin, a composer who knew the Mosses through the Church and has since left Scientology, recalled seeing the young Moss, who then went by Lissa, at the Church's Celebrity Centre International, in L.A., and finding her strikingly precocious. But that may have had to do with how Scientology views children. Levin said, "In Scientology, they are ancient beings that just happen to get in a baby body that is born to you."

Moss performed Corea's "Eternal Child" in theatres on both coasts; the video she was in aired on MTV in 1988, with cameos by Karen Black, Al Jarreau, and John Travolta—all celebrity Scientologists. In the video, she appears in a red dress with a lace collar, then picks up pink ballet shoes and transports to a barre in a leotard and tights; later, she returns as an apparition in a mirror, as another young girl picks up ballet shoes. At the time, a Los Angeles *Times* profile of Moss described her as a ballet prodigy with a perfect arabesque. Asked by the writer what she liked best about dancing, Moss said, "The lights and the people and the clapping. I like Chick Corea, and I like dancing with Chick Corea. And I like being the Eternal Child."

According to Scientology records that have been made public, Moss took the Hubbard Key to Life Course when she was eight and achieved the state of Clear when she was eleven. Although Moss downplays her religious affiliation publicly, she is part of a small set of second-generation Hollywood Scientologists, and her religious network has played a role in her career. Her manager since the age of ten has been Gay Ribisi, the mother of the actors Giovanni and Marissa Ribisi, a prominent Scientology family; when she was preparing for "Her Smell" and needed to ask someone about punk rock, she called Beck, who at the time was married to Marissa Ribisi. (He has since denied that he ever "actively pursued" Scientology.)

Moss says that her friends growing up were mostly other ballerinas, not the children of Scientologists. As an adolescent, she acted on shows such as "Picket Fences" and continued to dance, attending the School of American Ballet, in New York, and studying at Suzanne Farrell's summer intensive at

the Kennedy Center. At fifteen, she faced a choice: apply for year-round ballet programs or pursue acting. “I remember thinking, I want to have a career past thirty-five,” she said. But her ballet training gave her a sense of rhythm, she said, and an instinct for “how your entire body can communicate an emotion in a scene, whether it’s stillness or the opposite of stillness.” That same year, after a “cobbled together” education of homeschooling and tutors, she got her G.E.D. She knew she wanted to be a full-time actress: “I was, like, I don’t know why I need algebra.”

As a teen-ager with gawky features, Moss began to figure out where she fit in in Hollywood. “I wasn’t the perfect-cheerleader type. I couldn’t get one of those WB shows to save my fucking life,” she said. “It was also to do with my style as an actor, which was kind of weird, and remains kind of weird. I was not very good at playing something straight.” In 1999, she appeared as an institutionalized burn victim in “Girl, Interrupted” and began her role on “The West Wing,” as Zoey Bartlet. At her audition, she saw an actress who looked just like Winnie Cooper, from “The Wonder Years.” “I remember thinking, Oh, that’s that. Winnie Cooper’s here. I’m not getting this part,” she recalled. “And all three times I read with this man who seemed really nice and was really good at the dialogue, and I had no idea who he was. It was only after I got the part that I realized it was Aaron Sorkin.”

At nineteen, Moss moved to New York to act in an Off Broadway play, “Franny’s Way,” alongside Martin Scorsese’s daughter Domenica. (The *Times* wrote that both actresses “mix defensive malice and vulnerability.”) After the run, she moved into an apartment in Stuyvesant Town that she found on Craigslist and shared with a fiftysomething man whose name, she thinks, was either Johnny or Walter. “He had the living room, which had a partition, and I had the bedroom, which had a mattress on the floor,” she recalled. “He was a substitute teacher, so he was gone during the day, and I was nineteen, so I was kind of out all night.” She stayed in the apartment for three or four years. In 2003, she starred in an indie film called “Virgin,” as a pregnant teen-ager who believes she is carrying the child of God, and was nominated for an Independent Spirit Award. But she was often short on cash, and Johnny-slash-Walter would sometimes cover her four-hundred-dollar rent. She had no backup plan and no day job. “It was this weird juxtaposition of being a super tiny bit famous but then also having absolutely no money,”

she said. “I’d go, ‘I don’t think I can get another job. They’re going to be, like, Why is Zoey Bartlet working at the coffee shop?’ ”

After years of intermittent roles, she auditioned for “Mad Men.” She showed up looking like a “beachy California girl”: long blond hair, tanned skin, skimpy halter dress. “I looked nothing like Peggy,” she said. But she got the part. “I just knew who she fucking was. It felt like putting on the most comfortable sweater you own. It felt like a good cocktail.”

In the first season of “Mad Men,” Peggy is so naïve that she doesn’t realize she’s pregnant until she goes into labor. Moss brought an uncanny, even creepy quality to the character which added to the show’s gelid mystique. In one scene, she tells her condescending supervisor, Joan, “I just realized something. You think you’re being helpful.” Moss delivered the line in a slow whisper, like an alien observing an earthling. She had little sense of how Peggy would evolve. “The first season, I spent a lot of time sitting outside an office,” she recalled. “I’d be behind the door on a typewriter. And the door would close, and I’d pull out a gossip magazine, and when I heard the scene was ending I’d put it back and the door would open, and I’d be there pretending to type again.” Her first indication that Peggy was destined for something greater was when the creator, Matthew Weiner, showed the cast the opening credits, and she saw that her name was second, after Jon Hamm’s.

In 2008, Hamm hosted “Saturday Night Live,” and Moss made a cameo in a “Mad Men” sketch. That night, she met Fred Armisen, a cast member. Three months later, they got engaged, and they were married within a year. “I was twenty-seven years old, and I was young, and things happened for reasons that I believed in at the time,” she told me. They split after eight months. Not long afterward, Moss told the *Post*, “One of the greatest things I heard someone say about him is, ‘He’s so great at doing impersonations. But the greatest impersonation he does is that of a normal person.’ To me, that sums it up.” Since then, the story of what happened between them has played out cryptically in the press: Armisen admitting he was a “terrible husband,” Moss saying that the marriage was “traumatic.” In 2015, Armisen told Marc Maron, on his podcast, that he’d been caught up in the fantasy of dating the girl from “Mad Men.” “I have a problem with intimacy, where, all of a

sudden, there's a real person there," he told Maron. He added that he tended to sabotage relationships with infidelity.

When I read these comments to Moss, she said, evenly, "I would say, good for him for being open about that. He said more to Marc Maron than he said to me at the time." She went on, "I definitely learned that you should make sure you know somebody before you marry them." Her best friend, Susan Goldberg, who was an AMC executive during "Mad Men," told me, "It was rough. One of the things Lizzie says, which I think is true, is everyone is into Hollywood breakups. We all get *Us Weekly* when we're getting on the plane, so she understands the interest behind it. But then, when it's you, it's not that fun."

In Season 5 of "Mad Men," Peggy gets another job and gives notice to her mentor, Don Draper. When Moss, shooting the scene, held out her hand for a handshake, Hamm surprised her by kissing it and not letting go, and the camera caught Moss choking up. She kept only one costume from the show, the purple dress she wears in that scene. "I don't know if it was my favorite scene to shoot, but it was the most real," she told me. "Because I was just about to go do 'Top of the Lake,' and I had this feeling of leaving the nest, and that I was going to go off and try something new."

Among the "Mad Men" cast, Moss has had the most adventurous post-show career. Josephine Decker, who directed "Shirley," told me, "She's drawn to really complicated material." But Decker admitted that there was "an ocean of Lizzie" that remained enigmatic to her: "I never talked to her about the Scientology thing, but I'm really curious about it."

The Scientology thing. Even the casual Moss fan has to grapple with cognitive dissonance: what's an approachably cool pop-culture feminist icon doing in an organization that its defectors, among other critics, describe as a dangerous cult? It's tempting to imagine that she's just culturally Scientologist, like a Jew who goes to temple only on Yom Kippur. And yet, according to a Web site that tracks "service completions" listed in Scientology magazines, in 2017 Moss did a Purification Rundown, a detox treatment that involves prolonged heat exposure and ingesting large quantities of niacin.

When I brought up Scientology, Moss was Zooming from her trailer in Toronto, sitting on the floor. In my time with her, she had been friendly and accessible. “I don’t want to come off as being cagey,” she said. “If you and I met, just hanging out as friends, I’m, like, an open book about it.” But, she added, “I don’t want people to be distracted by something when they’re watching me. I want them to be seeing the character. I feel like, when actors reveal too much of their lives, I’m sometimes watching something and I’m going, Oh, I know that she just broke up with that person, or, I know that she loves to do hot yoga, or whatever it is.”

I told her that people are already distracted by it—that they don’t always know how to hold the public and the private Lizzies in their mind. Smiling, she replied, “People can obviously hold in their mind whatever they want to, and I can’t control that. If it’s not that, it’s going to be something else.” She smeared on lip balm and continued, “It’s not really a closed-off religion. It’s a place that is very open to, like, welcoming in somebody who wants to learn more about it. I think that’s the thing that is probably the most misunderstood.”

One of the tenets of Scientology is that the mind is divided into two parts: the analytical, which we use to make conscious choices, and the reactive, which holds on to trauma and pain, and must be vanquished in order to “go Clear.” It seems like an odd fit for Moss, who is drawn to performing trauma. “Well,” Moss said, “I think it’s more about those traumatic incidents, or those moments of pain, whether it’s emotional or physical, holding you back from being who you are now.” I asked how Scientology had helped her as she grew up. She scratched her neck, thinking, and said, “Communication is something that I obviously use so much, not only in my job but in my interpersonal relationships as well. That is probably one of the No. 1 basic things that I grew up learning and grew up using and use every day: the power of just being able to listen to somebody, of making somebody feel heard, of not belittling them for what they think or believe, even if you think it’s wrong. ”

Many of the reported abuses perpetrated by Scientology—mind control, making family members cut ties with apostates (a policy known as Disconnection), assigning troublesome members to hard labor—echo the authoritarian tactics of Gilead. (The Church calls these allegations “false and

mischaracterized.") I asked how a viewer of "The Handmaid's Tale" might reconcile these two things.

"I would just encourage people to find out for themselves," Moss said, a line she would repeat several times. "I've certainly been guilty of reading an article or watching something and taking that as gospel." She said that she thought it was important to reflect her own values in the work she does. "And obviously something like religious freedom and resistance against a theocracy is very important to me."

I asked Margaret Atwood, who describes herself as a "strict agnostic," the same question. She replied, "I don't think it's a question of a religion as such. I think it's a question of who's running it, and what are they using it for. What kind of power are they exerting over other people, benign or not? As far as I can tell, there's a Hollywood version of Scientology. I mean, the origins are just batty, but compared to what?" Then she told me about the Pastafarians, a satirical religious group that worships a spaghetti god and whose members have sued for the right to wear colanders on their heads in government-I.D. photos.

Scientology's controversial place in Hollywood has embroiled Moss in some awkward moments. In 2017, she was nominated for a Television Critics Association Award for "The Handmaid's Tale." At the ceremony, Leah Remini, one of Scientology's most high-profile defectors (the Church says that she was "expelled"), won for her anti-Scientology docuseries. It was reported that Moss left the room during her speech. "I went to the bathroom," Moss told me. "I wish it was more exciting than that." Remini claimed that the Church forbids Moss to speak to her because Remini is an "antisocial personality." "I have never been approached by her," Moss said. "I have never received any request to talk to her. So there hasn't been an opportunity for her to say that. I don't know her that well, so it's not like we were friends."

That year, Moss won her "Handmaid's" Emmy, and she thanked her mother onstage for teaching her "that you can be kind and a fucking badass." *The Hollywood Reporter* ran a story in which a former Scientologist claimed that swearing was part of how adherents communicate "down the tone scale" to average people; Tony Ortega, who writes a Scientology whistle-blower blog,

explained, “Cursing in Scientology is almost a sacrament,” having trickled down from L. Ron Hubbard’s time in the Navy. (The Church maintains that “no such teaching exists.”) When I asked Moss about the story, she said, “That pissed me off. That was a really, really big moment for me, and it was a big moment for my mom and me. My mom, who has supported me through the years and been such an incredible mother to both me and my brother. And to tell a lie like that, about that—I didn’t deserve that, and it was wrong.”

Perhaps it was unfair to view Moss’s every move through the lens of Scientology, but I wondered about her comment about communication. Later, I spoke to Mike Rinder, a former senior executive in the Church, who has since become one of its most prominent critics. He said, “That’s a fundamental concept that is sold to new people to get them into Scientology. You’ll hear a lot of Scientologists say, ‘It taught me to communicate,’ because it’s a simple, uncontroversial thing. Lizzie is good at communicating her roles to audiences, so you can’t say that’s a lie. It’s a great line to use, because it’s one of those things that you can’t really challenge.”

In Toronto one evening, Moss sat in her office, videoconferencing on her laptop. Outside, the winter sky grew purple and orange over a parking lot. Moss, in a hoodie and sneakers, was ending her day with a music-spotting session for “Shining Girls,” reviewing cues for an episode she had directed. She and her collaborators watched a scene in which the serial killer, played by Jamie Bell, stumbles around beneath a Chicago El station.

“The emotion shouldn’t feel ominous—it should just feel frantic,” the showrunner, Silka Luisa, commented. Moss threw out her gum and bit into an apple. Occasionally, when someone knocked on the door with a “Handmaid’s Tale” question, she muted herself. A light snow began to fall, and soon Moss’s office was lit by the glow of the Christmas lights she’d strung on the walls.

In “Shining Girls,” Moss’s character, Kirby, experiences abrupt shifts in her life: her hair style changes, or she’ll suddenly have a husband or a different apartment. In her office, Moss turned to me and said, “This is a very important score cue.” Onscreen, Kirby was in a living room at night, looking

outside. Her pursuer, Harper, is out in the rain, looking in. He can see her, but she can't see him. But the two share a metaphysical connection. In the scene, Moss explained, Harper "figures out that he can fuck with me, and chaos ensues."

The music was slow and sinister, punctuated with plinks and a sound like insects gathering. Someone asked how everyone felt about the score. Moss seemed unsure, but, as she told me later, she hadn't worked with the composer, Claudia Sarne, before, and was "hesitant to take the lead."

Luisa was underwhelmed. "It's a big discovery for Harper," she said. "So at first it feels ominous, and then it's this light-bulb moment, something that feels a little distinct."

"Exactly," Moss chimed in, relieved that someone else had said it first. "It needs to be something that's a little more unusual." Sarne said that she would rethink the cue. Moss grinned. Later, I spoke to Bradley Whitford again, as he was filming a "Handmaid's Tale" episode under Moss's direction. "Yesterday, I was shooting a scene where I found this weird beat," he told me. "And she comes out and says, 'That thing you found is great. Go ahead and swim in the weird.' " ♦

Shouts & Murmurs

- **Mastering the Art of Stress Eating**

By Jiji Lee

Much like the art of French cooking, the art of stress eating can be honed through practice, proper technique, and watching the evening news in a state of panic.

Here are some of my favorite dishes that you can prepare while crying into your Le Creuset.

Ratatouille
This classic Provençal dish showcases fresh summer produce. If you don't have fresh vegetables on hand, you can easily substitute Cheetos.

Ingredients

Get the best Cheetos you can find that are in season. If the package says "Flamin' Hot" or lists "Yellow 6" as a main ingredient, you'll know they're the right ones.

Instructions

In a baking dish, arrange the Cheetos in the following pattern: one layer of Cheetos; one layer of Flamin' Hot Cheetos; repeat, alternating the Cheetos with the Flamin' Hot Cheetos.

Take special care to include different Cheeto shapes and textures, and reasons why you can't sleep at night. Mounting tensions between superpowers? Our enormous stockpile of nuclear weapons? How to politely decline a social invitation without offending the host? Toss them all in. You'll know the dish is ready when a finger dipped in the center of it comes out *DEFCON* orange.

Canapé
"Canapé" is just a fancy French term for "I can't be bothered with utensils." And when it comes to stress eating you'll want to dispense with formalities such as silverware and plates, and opt for something more practical, like using your palm as a serving bowl.

Ingredients

Nutella

Your fingers

Potato chips

Instructions

Plunge a finger into a jar of Nutella and then transfer it directly into your mouth. Some Nutella will naturally dribble down your chin; reserve this. It will taste even better the next day.

While using one hand to dip into the Nutella, use the other to flip through today's paper. Continue until you find yourself boiling with anger but unable to articulate any intelligent thoughts besides "Argh!" and "Ugh!"

For a sweet *and* savory treat, dip some potato chips into the Nutella. If you accidentally drop chips down the front of your shirt, don't worry. Just pluck those gooey chips from your cleavage and pop them right back into your mouth. Yum!

Bouillabaisse

This Mediterranean fish stew is so easy to make that you can leave it bubbling on the stovetop while you go and do something relaxing, like eating leftover lamb chops straight from the fridge.

Ingredients

Assorted fresh fish and shellfish

Leftover lamb chops (any cut of red meat will do, as long as it's cold)

Instructions

Add fish to pot.

Eat a cold lamb chop.

Eat another cold lamb chop.

One more.

Take a moment to use your shirt collar as a napkin. Have another chop.

Allow yourself to rest. Use this time to stare blankly out a window as you contemplate the possibility of World War III breaking out. Mon Dieu!

Bœuf Bourguignonne
This classic French stew is made by simmering beef in red wine for hours. But a bottle of French red wine is something you can enjoy right now.

Serves one person.

Ingredients

A bottle of red wine that, miraculously, you haven't polished off yet

Instructions

Pour wine into a nice stemmed glass. Remember: the presentation of a dish can elevate your day drinking. So go ahead and break out the crystal. The intricate patterns cut into the glass will go nicely with the worry lines engraved on your forehead.

Let your thoughts swirl as you wonder if you've waited too long to respond to that invitation and now everyone will know that you're a flake. Chide yourself for worrying about social etiquette at a time like this. You won't have to worry about tardy R.S.V.P.s when Armageddon arrives.

Open another bottle of wine.

Allow your emotions to cool before helping yourself to the remaining Nutella on your chin.

Bon appétit! ♦

Tables for Two

- **Nostalgia with a Twist, at Gage & Tollner**

By Hannah Goldfield

The last time Gage & Tollner was featured in this magazine, it had been open for fifty-two years. That was in 1931. The management at the time estimated that John Anderson, an oyster-fry cook who had recently died, shucked sixty-six million oysters in his forty-nine-year career—he was on staff when the place opened, in 1879. "Old customers are always coming in again after absences of years, and getting emotional at sight of the same ancient mahogany tables, deep with wax, the red Turkey carpet, the dim, mirrored walls," the story said.

The Edna Lewis-inspired she-crab soup is finished tableside with a splash of sherry.

This nostalgia continued for another seven decades, until 2004, when Gage & Tollner, named for its original owners, finally went out of business. For a few years, the downtown-Brooklyn address was occupied by a TGI Fridays, followed by an Arby's and a series of discount retailers. But a 1975 landmark designation meant that, though some of those tenants covered up the dim, mirrored walls, they remained intact. In 2019, Sohui Kim and Ben Schneider, the married couple behind the Good Fork, in Red Hook, and Insa, in Gowanus, along with St. John Frizell, of Red Hook's Fort Defiance, restored them to their former glory, with a fresh plastering of William Morris wallpaper. In 2021, after some *COVID*-related setbacks, Gage & Tollner 2.0 débuted, and the nostalgia picked up where it left off. What's a twenty-odd-year wait to go home again?

Compared to cuts of steak that are priced, steeply, by the ounce, the sixty-three-dollar veal chop, with roasted-shallot-porcini verjus, is a steal.

In William Styron's 1979 novel, "Sophie's Choice," set in the forties, the narrator, Stingo, dines at Gage & Tollner "beneath gaslight on littleneck clams and crabmeat imperial." A few weeks ago, I dined at Gage & Tollner on clams and crabmeat, under light that was as romantic as gas, if decidedly electric. Now as then, the restaurant is a chophouse, specializing in oysters and other shellfish on ice, wedge and Caesar salads, and various cuts of beef, with sides including creamed spinach and butter-roasted hash browns, which come in the form of an incredibly precise Hasselbacked rectangle of golden-edged potato. My crab was molded into a crisp, salty disk, airy without skimping on sweet meat, served with a tangle of frisée, a smear of lemon aioli, and a soft-boiled egg.

The list of classic cocktails features seven varieties of Martini, including a Perfect, left, and a Dirty, right.

The original place also offered items like fried chicken and cornmeal fritters, which is part of why, in 1988, the celebrated Black Southern chef Edna Lewis, then seventy-two, was brought in to polish things up. Now Kim, the chef, along with Adam Shepard, has lovingly re-created those dishes while ushering in a new era by subtly incorporating flavors from her own Korean American heritage: my clams were “Kimsino,” with pats of bacon-kimchi butter bubbling beneath crispy bread crumbs.

That this is food begging for a Martini is borne out by the seven varieties on the comprehensive list of classic mixed drinks. (Frizell is a historian of cocktails.) A server recommended the Perfect—gin with equal parts sweet and dry vermouth, up with a twist—and indeed it was, whetting my appetite for butter-glossed Parker House rolls, for luscious, Edna Lewis-inspired she-crab soup, finished tableside with a splash of sherry, and for broiled meat. The T-bone sirloin and the bone-in rib eye are priced by the ounce; $4.55 looks like a bargain until you multiply it by twenty-four. A juicy sixty-three-dollar veal chop, topped with roasted-shallot-porcini verjus, is a steal by comparison.

It’s genuinely difficult to save room for dessert. One idea is to order nothing but; the pastry chef Caroline Schiff’s menu could sustain its own establishment. Start with a beguilingly creamy (yet dairy-free) scoop of

roasted-pineapple sorbet, followed by a slice of coconut layer cake whose daintiness belies the zing of its lime curd and its cashew-pink-peppercorn brittle. Who needs steak when there's a confection as metaphorically meaty as the Baked Alaska for Two? Torched whorls of Swiss meringue give way to fresh-mint, dark-chocolate, and Amarena-cherry ice creams, layered like archeological strata atop a bedrock of crumbled chocolate cookie, a record of the reimagined past. *(Entrées $28-$64.)* ♦

An earlier version of this article misspelled the names of Adam Shepard and St. John Frizell.

The Boards

- **The Rediscovery of a Lost Black Playwright**

By Michael Schulman

The playwright Alice Childress, who lived from 1916 to 1994, never saw her work produced on Broadway. Unlike some of her Black contemporaries—Lorraine Hansberry, August Wilson—she wasn't canonized or widely taught. In her later years, "she felt like she had been forgotten," the dramaturge Arminda Thomas said the other day. Lately, though, Childress has been remembered. This past winter, her 1955 play, "Trouble in Mind," about an actress navigating backstage racism, made its long-awaited Broadway début. And, this month, Theatre for a New Audience is staging her drama "Wedding Band" at the Polonsky Shakespeare Center, in Brooklyn, its first New York production in half a century.

"Wedding Band" (subtitle: "A Love/Hate Story in Black and White") is set in 1918, under the cloud of war and a pandemic, in Charleston, South Carolina, where Childress was born. Its heroine, Julia, is a Black seamstress in love with a white baker named Herman, a situation that her neighbors and the law disapprove of. Childress was raised by her grandmother, who once told her about an interracial couple who had scandalized her neighbors. "That sparked her imagination," Thomas said. Thomas was sitting next to Awoye Timpo, the revival's director, at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, in Harlem, where Childress's papers are kept. Thomas had suggested reviving "Wedding Band" to Timpo, and last fall the two began

visiting the Schomburg to pore over drafts. “I feel like we actually have been in a very intense dialogue with Alice Childress,” Timpo said. They visited Charleston and found locations mentioned in the play—Roper Hospital, Queen Street—as well as the address where Childress lived with her grandmother. “Their place was 35 Line Street,” Thomas said. “There was a 33 and a 37—and there was a big hole.”

A Schomburg archivist brought over boxes, and the women pulled out a typewritten draft from 1962: hole-punched, yellowed on the edges. “Look at this,” Timpo said, squinting at a pencilled note in the margins: “ ‘Fanny. Too intense now. And I thought she was’—What does that say? ‘Used cream’?”

“ ‘And I thought she was ice cream’—that’s a line that got cut,” Thomas said. After the play’s first reading, in 1963, it was immediately optioned and scheduled for a Broadway production the next fall. “And it just fell apart,” Thomas said. Some of the white producers “lost their nerve. They thought, This is a great piece, it has great bones, but it needs to be a little more about Herman.” Childress, who felt that she had compromised for “Trouble in Mind,” resisted attempts to make the play a white man’s story instead of a Black woman’s. Years passed. A 1966 production in Ann Arbor got good reviews, but an Atlanta production was scuttled when a funder objected. It was finally staged in New York in 1972, at the Public Theatre, with Ruby Dee as Julia and James Broderick (Matthew’s father) as Herman. It was a mixed experience for Childress. Joe Papp, the Public’s pugnacious founder, rejected her suggestions for directors. “He said, ‘No, *you* direct it,’ ” Thomas said. “So she directed it, and that allowed him to decide during previews that *he* was going to come in and direct it.”

The play did well, but a lot had changed in the decade since Childress started writing it: miscegenation was legal, thanks to Loving v. Virginia, and Black nationalism was ascendant. “There was some commentary that the play felt outdated,” Timpo said. “On opening night, there was a loud protest by an audience member in a dashiki—just the idea that she would spend the time on this white man.” The play had gone from risqué to passé. The next year, Childress wrote a popular young-adult novel, “A Hero Ain’t Nothin’ but a Sandwich.” Yet her plays “just kind of disappeared,” Timpo said.

Thomas added, “She was doing drafts for a film or televised revision of ‘Wedding Band’ up until when she died.”

In the late nineties, Thomas began working as an archivist for Ruby Dee and her husband, the actor Ossie Davis, and she went on to spend eighteen years rummaging through their basement, in New Rochelle. She found scripts of “Wedding Band” and a long letter from Childress to Dee, from 1966, cajoling the actress into playing Julia in Ann Arbor. Thomas said that the letter had been “a guiding light for us.” She read aloud, “Ruby, you have touched the pulse-beat of Julia.” The character “has the power to unlock everyone she meets. All want and seek the shelter of being close to a woman who is capable of loving, has the gift of a truly loving nature. . . . A racist society is not set up for the expression of love.”

Childress continued, “Yes, there is tenderness and poetry and delicacy and loveliness . . . beauty of line and form . . . beauty of scene and costume . . . but there is horror, terror, ugliness and . . . humiliation. Humiliation is the hardest thing for a human being to bear!” ♦

The Theatre

- **Dinosaurs, New Jersey, and Impending Doom in “The Skin of Our Teeth”**
- **Sondheim’s Wise “Into the Woods”**

By Vinson Cunningham

Without quite knowing why, I've always disliked the truism that conflict is drama's fundamental ingredient. Yes, we fight and cajole and coax and settle scores: that's our species, and it's frequently how we show ourselves onstage. But this bit of craft wisdom—conflict is king—is the handmaiden of a paranoid anthropology, and a limited way of thinking about action and speech. We humans do much more than struggle, will against will. And our talk isn't strictly coefficient with our need to act upon or influence others for our own ends. Often, to the contrary, it springs from a mysterious overflow of unbidden feeling, more a free gift of sound and syntax—of humor, of love—than a blunt instrument of acquisition.

Moments of high and bizarre political and social drama send us rushing back to fundamentals—what a person is, why we do what we do—in art as much as in life. So I've been watching plays these days—especially during April's overflow of Broadway premières racing to make the deadline for Tony eligibility—hoping to discover onstage new ways of thinking about theatrical speech.

I was heartened, therefore, to see the actor Roslyn Ruff anchoring a new production of Thornton Wilder's Pulitzer Prize-winning 1942 play, "The Skin of Our Teeth," directed by Lileana Blain-Cruz (in a Lincoln Center Theatre production, at the Vivian Beaumont). Ruff is a fantastically talented performer whose great gift is her ability to dissect long speeches, searching them for pleasing rhythms and hidden melodies. I still think back to Jackie Sibblies Drury's 2018 play, "Fairview," in which Ruff played a chic, cutting aunt who, at a moment of growing tension, went off on a zany riff about how families weather troubles in the movies. Her delivery of that monologue convinced me that I'd listen to Ruff say almost anything, just as I'd pay to hear some singers hum through the names in the telephone book.

In "The Skin of Our Teeth," Ruff plays Mrs. Antrobus, the matriarch of the Antrobus family. The Antrobuses—a skewed nuclear unit whose surname is close to *anthropos*, Greek for "man"—scuttle frenetically through the disjointed action of Wilder's play, standing in for humanity at various fraught junctures. The play's three acts don't tell a unified story, but what they have in common is the threat of impending doom.

At the beginning, it becomes clear that the Antrobuses are living in some dreamlike amalgam of the Ice Age and a suburb called Excelsior, New Jersey. They're almost like a family in a vintage sitcom. George (the galvanizing James Vincent Meredith), the husband and father, is a kind of Promethean domestic hero. He's the inventor of the wheel, the lever, and sundry other doodads necessary to civilization. Mrs. Antrobus is, we're told, "the charming and gracious president of the Excelsior Mothers' Club." Their kids are Gladys (Paige Gilbert) and Henry (Julian Robertson, convincingly troubled but also funny), two highly strung rapscallions who can't help sensing oncoming disaster: "Mama, I'm hungry. Mama, why is it so cold?"

They've also got a huge source of family shame to deal with: Henry used to be named Cain, and, at some point in the past, he killed his brother, Abel. That's the logic of the play—it employs so many deft and often slapstick allusions to classical, Biblical, and philosophical texts that it would be impossible to account for them all without an encyclopedia, or a raft of footnotes that ran as long as the play. To the extent that the show provides its own interpretive key, it comes through the Antrobuses' maid, Sabina (Gabby Beans), who begins the play with a long, semi-hysterical monologue, which Beans delivers with a campy rasp reminiscent of Eartha Kitt. Sometimes, intriguingly, Beans steps apart from the play and addresses the audience, the accent slipping away to reveal a more natural, less strained voice.

"I hate this play and every word in it," she says:

> As for me, I don't understand a single word of it, anyway—all about the troubles the human race has gone through, there's a subject for you.
>
> Besides, the author hasn't made up his silly mind as to whether we're all living back in caves or in 1950s Jersey, and that's the way it is all the way through.
>
> Oh—why can't we have plays like we used to have—*South Pacific,* and *Vanya and Sonya and Masha and Spike,* and *Bootycandy*!—good entertainment with a message you can take home with you?

My own twinned aversion to and fascination with the play reminded me of Marianne Moore and her vexed relationship with poetry, her true love. “I, too, dislike it,” she wrote. But, as Sabina starts to understand the play better, she keeps signalling her growing awareness to the audience in asides, with speech that I could only think of as a kind of generosity.

Any audience member these days will also, like the Antrobuses, have some end-time scenario in mind; the play’s final act takes place in the aftermath of a seven-year-long war, which seems as probable today as it must have when the show premièred, in the early forties. The brilliance of Blain-Cruz’s production is that it’s not so much a faithful adaptation as a work of criticism, thinking through Wilder’s play even as it dramatizes the narrative, visually and sonically echoing the dense thematic thicket of the text. The script, which has been augmented with modernizing touches by the playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, calls for a dinosaur and a woolly mammoth, and their very appearance—helped along fluidly by a team of puppeteers wearing earth tones—acts almost as a symbol of the play’s odd scaffolding, brought into the world and held up by Blain-Cruz’s plucky troupe.

Adam Rigg’s sets, an obvious response to Blain-Cruz’s brainy exuberance, are marvellous—the Atlantic City boardwalk in Act II, complete with a working slide, almost took my attention away from the actors. Later, in the last act, a starkly beautiful display of flowers and tall grasses made its own statement, quite apart from the play’s text, about the world’s overabundance of loveliness, and how wantonly it reveals itself, even in the worst moments for the species.

The best exponent of this kind of onstage thought is Ruff’s Mrs. Antrobus, who, in the second act, is called upon by the members of the “Ancient and Honorable Order of Mammals, Subdivision Humans,” of which George has just been elected president, to give a speech. She and George are about to celebrate their five-thousandth wedding anniversary—“I regret every moment of it,” she says, supposedly by accident—and the Order would like to hear some words about their marriage.

It’s an interesting contrast: the conflicts in the play are civilizational, on an existential level for the species—wars, glaciers, shortages of food. So

perhaps it's only right that moments such as Mrs. Antrobus's ensuing speech and Sabina's furtive communication with the audience are forms of address that touch our hearts and try, however feebly, to reach our deepest needs at their roots: lines that feel like disclosures from an equally bewildered friend; a speech used to hearten, even amid frustration.

Mrs. Antrobus hadn't planned to speak, but she gives a short oration that Ruff, through a series of pauses and thoughtful facial expressions, turns into a kind of thesis statement for the show—and perhaps a guide for those seeing and thinking about it, via allegory, today. "My husband says that the watchword from the year is Enjoy Yourselves. I think that's very open to misunderstanding," she says, warding off hedonism as a response to trouble. Instead, the words she shares counsel collaboration and togetherness, a kind of antidote to thin entertainment—and to needless fractures among people who, in the end, need one another. "My watchword for the year is: Save the Family. It's held together for over five thousand years: Save it! Thank you." ♦

In the outpouring of adoration following Stephen Sondheim's death, last year, many fans turned to Sondheim and James Lapine's musical **"Into the Woods,"** from 1987, a wise, witty, grief-tinged spin on classic fairy tales. Encores! stages the show at City Center, May 4-15, with an all-star cast that includes (above, from left to right) Cole Thompson (as Jack), Ann Harada (Jack's Mother), Denée Benton (Cinderella), Neil Patrick Harris (Baker), Sara Bareilles (Baker's Wife), and Gavin Creel (Wolf and Cinderella's Prince).

Tour Dept.

- **Spoon Gets Sidelined in New York**

By Nick Paumgarten

Spoon, shooting pool. Or really just two members of Spoon, the rock band from Texas: Britt Daniel, the singer and songwriter, and Jim Eno, the drummer. They were in a West Village pool hall called the Cellar Dog, formerly the Fat Cat, which Daniel had discovered one night some years ago when the wait to get into a few other jazz clubs nearby was too long. Spoon had a scheduled appearance the next day on "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert," and another after that at the Hammerstein Ballroom. But now they had time to kill—an idle afternoon on tour.

Britt Daniel and Jim EnoIllustration by João Fazenda

Daniel and Eno ordered pints and got a table. Eno took a few cues off a rack and rolled them on the felt. In one corner, a pair of let's-say-Bulgarian dudes in tight pants played a fierce game of Ping-Pong. The speakers were blasting DJ Drama: "Stop bein' friendly to the fuckboys, stop bein' friendly to the fuckboys." Daniel racked, Eno broke.

Daniel, blond, lean, and a little scruffy, had on gray jeans, a Joe Strummer T-shirt, and a green denim jacket. Eno, dark-haired, stockier, with a hard-to-place George Clooney vibe around the eyes, had on black jeans, a black shirt, and a black denim jacket. They'd been in bands together for thirty years, all but two in Spoon.

Had they ever had a falling out?

“Hmm, constant fallings out, right?” Daniel said. Eno laughed. “Never a big one,” Daniel went on. “But I definitely have pissed Jim off.”

“I’ve pissed you off, too.”

“Probably. When we met, we were young, and I definitely—I’m still a dick sometimes, but less often than I used to be.”

“I don’t think you’re really a dick.”

“I was a dick the other day, and I apologized to you.”

“I didn’t even think twice about it.”

“That wouldn’t have happened when we first met.”

“I probably would have dwelled on it a lot more. And you probably wouldn’t have apologized.”

As for the offense, Daniel said, “It was him asking if we—I don’t know if I can explain it.”

“I can,” Eno said, smiling. “Do you want me to?”

No need.

Eno was better at pool than Daniel. He more or less ran the table, in a self-effacing kind of way. He is five years older than Daniel, who was turning fifty-one the following day. Daniel, from Temple, Texas, grew up in a household religious enough that the name of Spoon’s latest album, “Lucifer on the Sofa,” has been problematic at home. “I planned for weeks about how to tell my mother about the title,” he said.

Originally from Rhode Island, Eno moved to Houston after college to work as a computer engineer at Compaq. A job at Motorola designing microprocessors, and an itch to make music, took him to Austin, in 1992,

where he and Daniel, a student at the University of Texas, played in a rockabilly band called the Alien Beats.

“I only started playing drums when I was twenty-one or so,” Eno said. “I was always asking for a drum set growing up.”

“Really?” Daniel said.

“My parents, they’d say, ‘It’s too noisy.’ My mom still feels bad.”

“Interesting. I didn’t know that. You couldn’t play in the garage?”

“They just—didn’t want it.” Instead, he bought drumsticks and wore out the upholstery on the couch. “They were, like, ‘This is just another fad.’ ”

“What were the other fads?” Daniel asked. “Rasslin’?”

“I can’t think of any other fad things.”

The balls had got cluttered up in a way that made almost any shot impossible. Daniel did the thing where you sit on the edge of the table and shoot behind your back. Eventually, Eno sank the eight ball. Across the room, some musicians were setting up. Guitar, organ, drums. The organ, a B-3, lives at the Cellar Dog. Eno and Daniel hung around for a number, then went back to their hotel, to rest.

The next day, they were en route with the rest of Spoon in a van to “The Late Show” when a producer called to inform them that Eno and a bandmate had tested positive for *COVID*. They turned around and isolated at their hotel. The gig was cancelled. The next three concerts were postponed. Not much of a birthday for Daniel. A week later, during their first show back, in Chicago, he lost his voice—not *COVID*, the swab said—and they had to reschedule again.

“It’s turned into a very strange tour that may not end up being profitable,” Daniel said. (The Hammerstein date was moved to May 6th.) “You add a week’s worth of salaries, hotels, bus costs, gas. It’s a bit of a mess.”

Eno said, “The idea that it would bring everything to a crashing halt is still hard for me to deal with. And I’ve had a lot of time to think about it.” ♦

Table of Contents