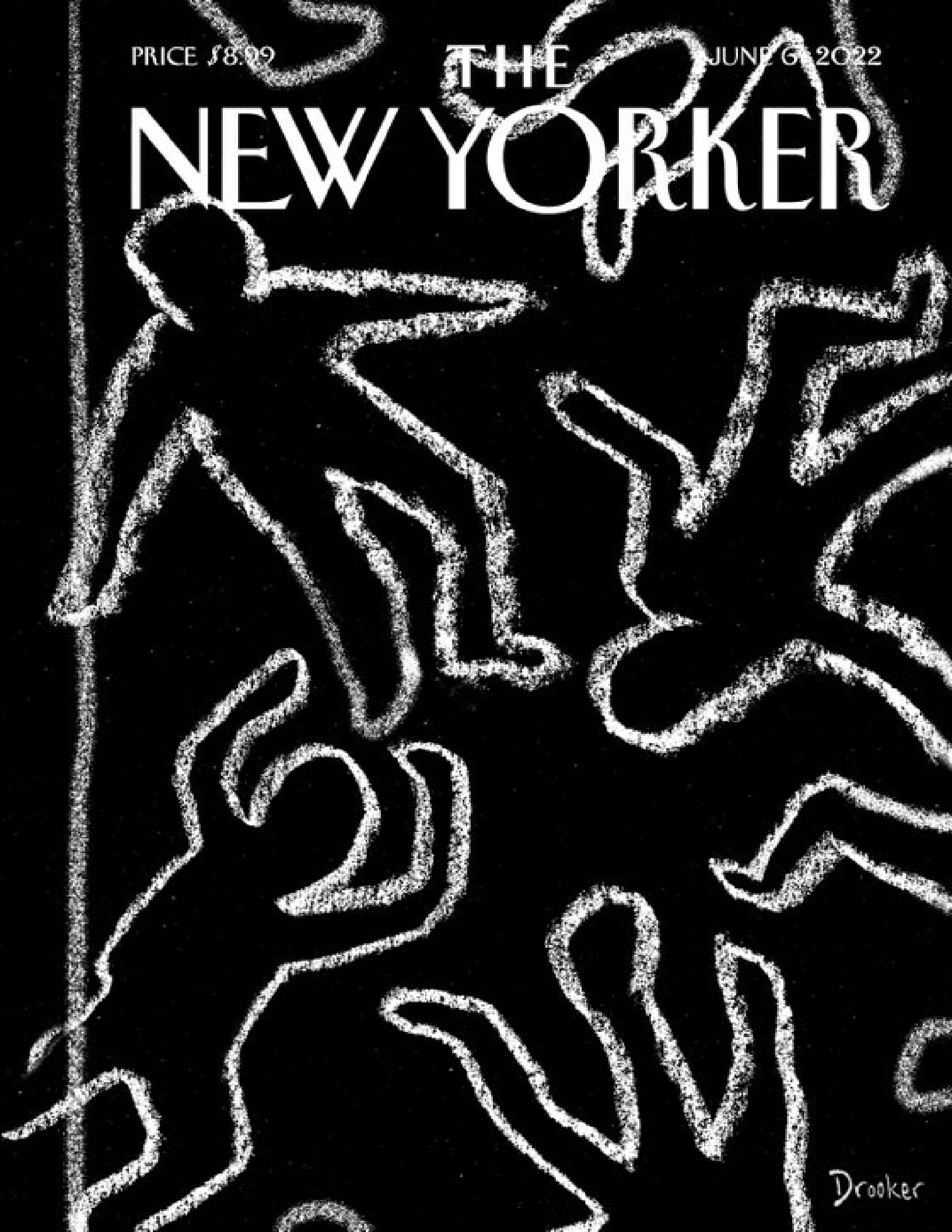
PRICE $8.99 THE JUNE 6, 2022

THE NEW YORKER



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Annals of Justice

- **Harvey Weinstein’s Last Campaign**

By Ken Auletta

Content

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Harvey Weinstein and his younger brother, Bob, grew up in Queens as friendly but intense competitors. Their father, Max, was a quiet, heavyset man who worked as a diamond cutter in Manhattan; their mother, Miriam, ran the house. Weinstein's childhood friend Alan Brewer told me that Miriam "put constant pressure on the boys—I heard that Harvey called her Mama Portnoy." The brothers shared a bedroom, listening to Yankees and Mets games on the radio after lights-out. They both dropped out of college and started working in Buffalo as music and movie promoters, before becoming producers of independent films. They named their first company Miramax, for their parents. Together, the brothers built a business—maverick, talent-driven, and international in focus—that helped define an era in American film production. First at Miramax and then at the Weinstein Company, they hired promising executives, but, as Jason Blum, a former co-head of acquisitions at Miramax, said, "There was no hierarchy other than Harvey and Bob."

For decades, there were rumors in Hollywood that Harvey Weinstein sexually abused women. To suppress such stories, he often used the same tools he employed in marketing his films, which earned eighty-one Academy Awards (and three hundred and forty-one nominations): a large Rolodex and a bullying persuasiveness. And for years his strategies worked. His accusers were silenced. Actors and directors vied to work on his movies, agents buckled to his demands, and the press applauded most films he produced. Bill and Hillary Clinton attended his premières.

But on October 5, 2017, the front-page headline of the New York *Times* read "*SEXUAL MISCONDUCT CLAIMS TRAIL A HOLLYWOOD MOGUL*." The *Times* investigation, by Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, highlighted thirty years' worth of "previously undisclosed allegations" against Weinstein. For the first time, women had gone on the record to share their experiences of Weinstein's sexual abuse—the actress Ashley Judd, an assistant named Emily Nestor, a literary scout named Lauren O'Connor. Kantor and Twohey reported that Weinstein "enforced a code of silence" by

insuring that accusers signed nondisclosure agreements, and that employees signed contracts prohibiting them from criticizing the company or its leaders. Five days later, Ronan Farrow published the first in a series of reported pieces about Weinstein in this magazine. Thirteen women, including the actresses Asia Argento, Mira Sorvino, and Rosanna Arquette, asserted that Weinstein had sexually assaulted or harassed them. Three of the women told Farrow that he'd raped them. Four actresses said that they suspected Weinstein of working to ruin their careers after they rejected his advances.

The allegations set off a movement whose impact few could have imagined. On October 15th, the actress Alyssa Milano tweeted, "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet." Seventeen thousand women would ultimately respond—effectively joining a "me too" movement that had been founded a decade earlier, by the activist Tarana Burke. By the end of October, more than eighty women had claimed that Weinstein had sexually assaulted them, a figure that would eventually rise to more than a hundred.

In the months after the allegations against Weinstein became public, dozens of men in prominent positions were accused of sexual misconduct and fired or forced to resign. Among them were the "Today" host Matt Lauer, who denied allegations of sexual harassment and was never charged, and the chef Mario Batali, who admitted, "My behavior was wrong," but was recently acquitted of charges of indecent assault and battery. In November, Larry Nassar, the team doctor for U.S.A. Gymnastics, who had been fired earlier, pleaded guilty to first-degree criminal sexual misconduct.

In Weinstein's case, the consequences were immediate. On October 8th, he was fired by the board of the Weinstein Company, with a decisive vote from his brother, Bob. Weinstein insisted to the board that the stories in the press were untrue, that the sex had been consensual. To the public, he issued a statement acknowledging only that he had anger-management issues. Despite these denials, Weinstein was soon expelled from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; his honorary doctorate from his alma mater, the University of Buffalo, and his French Legion of Honor award were revoked.

Weinstein was determined to fight back—he had been doing so for years. Farrow revealed that in 2015, after the Italian model Ambra Battilana Gutierrez reported Weinstein to the police for assaulting her—and got him on tape saying, "I will never do another thing to you"—he had hired investigators to cast doubt on her character. She was persuaded to renounce her claim and to sign an N.D.A., in exchange for a million dollars. Cyrus R. Vance, Jr., the Manhattan District Attorney, dropped the prosecution of Weinstein, in part because his office privately professed concerns about Gutierrez's credibility.

What Weinstein didn't realize, two years later, was that the balance of power had shifted. This time, women would be believed.

Soon after Bob Weinstein voted to fire his brother, he publicly denounced him as a "predator" and wrote to him in an e-mail, "U have hurt so many innocent women, your family, mine, me, your former employees, disgraced the Weinstein name." Harvey Weinstein, meanwhile, believed that Bob was a primary source for Kantor and Twohey. Bob, in a series of interviews with me, acknowledged speaking to them, but said he did so only later, for a book they wrote about their reporting, "She Said." Bob insisted that he was unaware of the abuse at the time, though he did write checks on behalf of his brother to secure N.D.A.s from two of Weinstein's former assistants, Zelda Perkins and Rowena Chiu, with payments totalling two hundred and fifty thousand pounds, or nearly five hundred thousand dollars today. He did this, he said, because Weinstein told him the women were threatening to tell his first wife, Eve Chilton, that he had been unfaithful to her; Bob later told me that he'd thought Weinstein was a philanderer with anger issues, not a rapist. In the last five years of their business partnership, he said, they had grown apart—even sometimes coming to blows.

Bob, who had entered rehab for alcohol addiction in 2004, now urged his brother to enroll in a forty-five-day treatment program for sex addiction at the Meadows of Wickenburg, a rehabilitation center outside Phoenix. The program, called Gentle Path, is for men and was founded by Patrick Carnes, who first suggested that sex addiction is akin to dependence on drugs or alcohol, and that "healing" requires acknowledging guilt. Weinstein agreed to go to Arizona but showed little inclination to participate. He stayed in a hotel and was spotted strolling around town, having meals at a diner, and

talking on his cell phone. As was later revealed in court, he did compose a statement in which he admitted to being a "sex addict" and an "anger addict":

> I have only despair. I have lost my family. I have daughters that will not talk to me. I have lost my wife. I have lost the respect of my exwife and generally almost all of my friends. I have no company. I'm alone.
>
> And I will be honest with you: I'm suicidal.

Weinstein sent drafts of his statement to a sobriety coach, as if he were contemplating releasing it publicly, but he never did. He did not complete the program.

Weinstein was now living alone in his vast house in Westport, Connecticut. His second wife, Georgina Chapman, had moved to northern Westchester County with their two young children. There were no longer cars waiting to whisk him to premières; no one to carry the small locked Zero Halliburton case that, according to his former assistants, was filled with prescription pills and supplements—Weinstein took twenty medications daily, for ailments including diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, glaucoma, and spinal stenosis from a recent car accident. "I don't know of anyone who is still in touch with him," a former close friend of his told me. One exception was the producer Paul Feldsher, who dismissed critics as conformists sitting "atop Mt. Moral High Ground." Another was Weinstein's old college roommate, William Currao, a retired pediatrician. (Although Weinstein, whom I profiled for *The New Yorker* in 2002, would later respond to some of my e-mailed questions, he directed Currao at one point not to speak to me.)

In early 2018, as an indictment loomed, Weinstein arranged to have lunch with the New York attorney Benjamin Brafman, at the Lambs Club, in Manhattan. Born in Brooklyn to Holocaust survivors, Brafman, like Weinstein, had gone to a state school, and he thought of himself as a "tough Jew." He had represented another alleged sex offender, the French economist and politician Dominique Strauss-Kahn—whose charges had also been dropped by Vance's office for credibility reasons concerning the alleged victim—and such mobsters as Vincent (the Chin) Gigante and John Gotti.

Brafman, who arrived first, saw Weinstein walk in—a slow-moving man in a crisp white linen shirt, with shadows under his eyes. He recalled that Weinstein ordered a hamburger, fries, and a Diet Coke. As Weinstein spoke about the allegations, ketchup dripped from his fingers, and Brafman warned, "Harvey, you're ruining your shirt."

Weinstein was notoriously impatient. When he wanted a cigarette, he ripped the top off the pack. Assistants often lined up three Diet Cokes for him in a row, to avoid keeping him waiting. He objected to Brafman's hourly rate of fifteen hundred dollars, but he was impressed that *New York* magazine had called him the city's "Best Criminal Defense Lawyer," and hired him as his defense attorney.

That spring, Weinstein tried to persuade Brafman to arrange a meeting with Vance and Governor Andrew Cuomo. He hoped that Vance could be talked into making the possible indictment disappear. Brafman thought that this plan would never succeed, and assured Weinstein that he could win the case if it went to trial. Yet, according to several sources, Weinstein continued to press for the meeting.

On the morning of May 25, 2018, Weinstein was ordered to surrender at the New York Police Department's First Precinct station house, in lower Manhattan. Weinstein arrived with Brafman, limping slightly from his back injury and holding a biography of Elia Kazan. Reporters and photographers, who were standing behind metal barricades, shouted questions at him as he walked past. He was arrested and charged with first- and third-degree rape and a criminal sexual act in the first degree. The charges involved two women, later identified as Jessica Mann, an aspiring actress, and Lucia Evans, a college student who also aspired to be an actress. Weinstein left the station with his hands cuffed behind his back, and was escorted to the Criminal Courthouse on Centre Street, where he was ordered to pay a million dollars in bail. A metal tracking device was fastened to his right ankle, and he forfeited his passport, agreeing to restrict his travel to New York and Connecticut.

"Thank God! I am never learning anything ever again!"
Cartoon by William Haefeli

The prosecution asserted that Weinstein had abused his power as the head of Miramax, and later of the Weinstein Company, to entrap actresses, models, and other women in the entertainment industry. After he coerced women, sometimes brutally, to have sex with him, he kept them silent by compelling them to sign N.D.A.s or threatening to sabotage their careers.

Brafman, for his part, intended to prove that the accusers had consented to sex with Weinstein—and that this could be demonstrated by the fact that they continued to have relationships with him. He sought to portray Weinstein as a man manipulated by women who were eager to leverage his power to promote their careers, and argued, using language from another era, "Mr. Weinstein did not invent the casting couch." The alleged crimes were never reported to the police, Brafman noted; there were no corroborating witnesses, and there was no forensic or DNA evidence to demonstrate Weinstein's guilt.

But even if Brafman persuaded a New York jury to exonerate his client, Weinstein still faced potential criminal charges in Los Angeles, London, and Dublin. Multiple civil lawsuits had been filed against him by women who claimed that he had sexually abused them. And unlike a criminal case, in which jurors must be convinced that the defendant is guilty "beyond a

reasonable doubt," a civil case typically requires only a "preponderance of evidence" to prove the defendant's liability.

When Weinstein arrived for one of his first public court appearances, on October 11, 2018, he was using a walker. Joan Illuzzi, an Assistant District Attorney who was leading the prosecution, said in court that she thought Weinstein was faking a more noticeable limp, presumably to win the sympathy of a jury. Vance had chosen Illuzzi from six hundred lawyers in his office. She had successfully prosecuted the former bodega clerk Pedro Hernandez for the kidnapping and murder, nearly forty years earlier, of six-year-old Etan Patz. And she was known for her skill in drawing out witnesses' testimony.

Justice James Burke, who had served for a dozen years as an Assistant District Attorney in Manhattan, was selected by lottery to preside over the case, which was being tried in the State Supreme Court. A reserved man with a steady gaze, he was described by a former senior colleague as a "journeyman"—neither a star nor a stumbler.

In the indictment, the prosecution had charged that Weinstein forced Lucia Evans to perform oral sex on him. The prosecution then discovered that a detective had withheld evidence relating to Evans's account, and both sides petitioned to remove her from the indictment. Justice Burke agreed to dismiss Evans from the case. At the defense table, Weinstein nodded to Brafman. He later learned that the Justice's decision would cost him. Because the alleged incident relating to Evans happened in 2004, when the Walt Disney Company owned Miramax, Disney's insurance had been paying Weinstein's legal bills. But the incidents with Mann occurred after the Weinstein brothers left Miramax, in 2005, and formed the Weinstein Company. Weinstein now had to pay all his legal costs himself.

Brafman filed numerous motions to dismiss the case, but on December 20, 2018, Justice Burke affirmed the indictment. On the steps of the courthouse, Brafman said, "We remain confident in the outcome of the trial."

Though Weinstein and Brafman presented a united front in public, behind the scenes they had been sparring for months over the details of the defense. Against his lawyer's advice, Weinstein insisted that his defense team needed

to work the press and hire a "skirt"—a female attorney who would soften his image before jurors. He called Brafman at all hours, treating him like an assistant or a therapist. As a producer, Weinstein had routinely renegotiated the terms of a movie deal after they had been set, and sometimes had stiffed venders. Now he wanted to switch from an hourly rate to a flat fee; he withheld payment and even suggested, Brafman told friends, that the lawyer should represent Weinstein for free, because the publicity would attract more clients. (Through a spokesman, Weinstein denies suggesting this.)

By the end of the year, Brafman was exhausted. He told an associate, "Harvey is a difficult guy"—more difficult, it would seem, than some of the mobsters he'd represented. A few weeks later, Brafman notified Justice Burke that he wished to step aside as Weinstein's attorney. Both he and Weinstein issued public statements claiming that the split was "amicable."

In January, 2019, Weinstein hired two new lead attorneys: Jose Baez, a Florida-based lawyer known for taking on high-profile cases, and Ronald S. Sullivan, Jr., a professor at Harvard Law School. Baez and Sullivan had won an acquittal for Aaron Hernandez, a former tight end for the New England Patriots, on double murder charges—even as Hernandez was serving a prison term for another murder. (He died by suicide in 2017.) Other members of the team included Duncan Levin, a former federal and New York state prosecutor, and Arthur Aidala, a Brooklyn native who had counselled both Anthony Weiner, the former New York congressman, and Roger Ailes, the ex-C.E.O. of Fox News, against claims of sexual misconduct. Weinstein thought he had put together a "dream team" that would appeal to city jurors. It didn't last six months.

The first to go was Sullivan, who left on May 10th, citing heavy teaching responsibilities. In 2009, Sullivan had become the first Black person to be appointed a faculty dean at Harvard College, and he presided over Winthrop House, an undergraduate residence. Dozens of students protested his defense of Weinstein and called for his resignation as dean. Although a majority of the law-school faculty signed a petition defending Sullivan, Harvard College conducted what it referred to as a "climate review" of Winthrop House, and on May 13th announced that Sullivan's position as dean would not be renewed, adding that his dismissal was not directly caused by his representation of Weinstein.

Baez exited in June, after writing a scathing letter to Justice Burke explaining that Weinstein had threatened to sue his law firm.

And so Weinstein made another casting decision: he chose the Chicago-based attorney Donna Rotunno to lead his defense. A former prosecutor, Rotunno boasted that she'd defended forty sex-crime cases and lost only one. She told reporters that her gender gave her an advantage in cross-examining women. If a male attorney "goes at that woman with the same venom that I do, he looks like a bully," she said. "If I do it, nobody even bats an eyelash." Rotunno was joined by Damon Cheronis, a law-school classmate and an accomplished criminal lawyer. Only Aidala remained from Weinstein's previous team.

In August, 2019, Justice Burke granted the prosecution permission to call on three Molineux witnesses—people whose testimony about incidents outside the indictment might help establish patterns of behavior by the defendant or support the claims of the accusers. Weinstein's lawyers strenuously opposed the inclusion of such witnesses, knowing that a jury could find them especially prejudicial. (Bill Cosby's first trial, in June, 2017, ended in a mistrial, but he was convicted in a subsequent trial after the judge allowed the equivalent of five Molineux witnesses. Cosby's conviction for sexual assault was overturned last year owing to prosecutorial misconduct.) The Molineux witnesses in the Weinstein trial would be three aspiring actresses: Lauren Young, Dawn Dunning, and Tarale Wulff, all of whom alleged that Weinstein had assaulted them.

Justice Burke, in a further blow to the defense, allowed testimony by a production assistant named Miriam Haley (formerly Mimi Haleyi) and the actress Annabella Sciorra, both of whom had testified in July before a grand jury. Haley alleged, among other things, that Weinstein sexually assaulted her at his SoHo apartment in 2006. Sciorra testified that Weinstein raped her at her Gramercy Park apartment in the early nineties. The grand jury issued a new indictment with five charges, ranging from predatory sexual assault to rape in the first degree, concerning three women: Jessica Mann, Miriam Haley, and Annabella Sciorra.

In September, Governor Cuomo was photographed with activists from Time's Up—an anti-harassment coalition of more than three hundred

prominent women in Hollywood—as he signed a bill extending the statute of limitations for rape in New York from five to ten or twenty years, depending on the degree, making the state's rape laws among the strictest in the country. The alleged attack on Sciorra remained too far in the past to be prosecuted on its own, but, by adding her to the new indictment against Weinstein, prosecutors could call her to the stand to provide evidence for the charges of predatory sexual assault.

"I'm an intensely private person," Sciorra told Farrow about coming forward. "And this is the most unprivate thing you can do." Sciorra hired the attorney Gloria Allred—who had represented women who alleged that they had been sexually abused by Cosby, Weiner, and Jeffrey Epstein—to represent her in a civil case. The prosecution said that Sciorra had a horrifying story to tell. The defense argued that the prosecution was merely trying to titillate jurors with a celebrity. Both sides requested more time to prepare, and Justice Burke announced that the trial would start early in the new year.

The charges against Weinstein came at a moment of decline in his career. It had been a long time since Miramax's heyday, in the nineteen-eighties and nineties, when films such as "My Left Foot," "Pulp Fiction," "Good Will Hunting," and "Shakespeare in Love" earned international acclaim. Disney bought Miramax in 1993, but Michael Eisner, Disney's C.E.O., had wearied of Weinstein's overextended budgets and profligate investments, which included *Talk* magazine, a book imprint, and television shows. Although corporate documents confirm that Eisner and Disney decided to separate from the Weinsteins in 2005, Weinstein publicly denied this, announcing that, in fact, it was the other way around.

Weinstein and his brother formed the Weinstein Company, and for the next twelve years Weinstein burned through almost a billion dollars of investors' money. Between 2005 and 2008, the company produced or distributed sixty-five films, with too few successes. Even their hits—films such as "Django Unchained," "The Silver Linings Playbook," and "The King's Speech"—were threatened by upheavals in the movie business. In the following years, studios and networks, eager for quick revenue, sold their movies and shows to Netflix and Amazon, creating powerful digital competitors. Movie theatres were imperilled, including small theatres that once welcomed the

sort of independent films Weinstein had built his career on. In 2017, Rupert Murdoch announced that he was selling 21st Century Fox's film and TV studios, along with the majority of its cable channels, to Disney. If Murdoch could no longer afford to compete against the digital giants, how could the Weinsteins?

Weinstein had always been adept at using the press to his advantage. As his friend Cindy Adams, a gossip columnist for the New York *Post*, liked to say, "He's always available for a quote, whether you want one or not." Now Weinstein thought to employ the *Post*, which had typically seemed friendly toward him, in his public fight to discredit his accusers. (Years earlier, after Weinstein dragged Andrew Goldman, then a writer for the New York *Observer*, out of a party in a headlock, the *Post* blamed the scuffle on "a couple of pushy reporters.") In September, 2019, Weinstein helped seed one of Adams's columns, which suggested a comeback in the making:

> The question is, how is Harvey Weinstein.
>
> The answer is: He's coping.
>
> The man's watching his weight. Working out. Taking care of himself physically, feeling healthier, lessening the intake of medication. Staying in, out of any spotlight, not risking paparazzi. . . . Playing the role of available dad, he's seeing the children regularly. . . . He's getting signals from Europe. The realization is he'd be OK working abroad. Think fugitive Roman Polanski. Bum here/star there.

The ploy didn't work. When Weinstein asked Justice Burke to allow him to go to Italy to make a play based on "Cinema Paradiso," which had won him an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film in 1990, Burke forbade him to travel.

In December, Weinstein underwent back surgery and again turned to the *Post*. Without informing his lawyers, he invited Rebecca Rosenberg, then the paper's Manhattan Supreme Court reporter, to his private hospital room at the NewYork-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Medical Center a day after the operation. "I feel like the forgotten man," he told Rosenberg. "I made more movies directed by women and about women than any filmmaker, and I'm

talking about 30 years ago. I'm not talking about now, when it's vogue. I did it first! I pioneered it!" The ensuing front-page headline read "*WHINE STEIN: HARVEY TELLS POST: I HAVE BEEN GREAT FOR WOMEN*." The paper devoted two pages to an "exclusive," noting the marble bathroom, Italian bed linens, and cucumber-infused water in the hospital's V.I.P. wing. The photographs showed Weinstein wearing a T-shirt and looking dazed, tubes dangling by his side.

In response, twenty-three women who claimed to have been sexually abused by Weinstein released a blistering statement. "He will be remembered as an unrepentant abuser who took everything and deserves nothing," they wrote. The actress Rose McGowan tweeted, "I didn't forget you, Harvey. My body didn't forget you. I wish it could."

Weinstein didn't seem to understand that he could no longer control the story. Two members of his team told me that, just before the start of the trial, Weinstein once again pressed for a meeting with Vance and Governor Cuomo to try to get the case dismissed. Weinstein figured that he was owed a favor since he had raised more than a hundred thousand dollars for Cuomo's campaigns. But, weeks after Weinstein was accused of sexual assault in 2017, Cuomo had announced that he was donating all of Weinstein's campaign contributions. (In 2021, Cuomo resigned from office after he was accused of sexual harassment, allegations that he denies.)

Weinstein's trial began on January 6, 2020, at 100 Centre Street, in lower Manhattan. For the next eight weeks, Weinstein appeared in court dressed like a mid-level businessman in drab, boxy suits, white shirts with crumpled collars, and bland neckties. His health had deteriorated. He had lost seventy-five pounds since the allegations broke, and uneven stubble showed on his face.

Weinstein was usually flanked by Rotunno and his four other lawyers, at a table facing Justice Burke. The prosecutors—Illuzzi, the Assistant District Attorney, and her deputy, Meghan Hast—were seated at a table to Burke's right, close to the jury box.

The contrast between the competing lead attorneys was stark. Illuzzi wore dark jackets, her hair in a blunt, shoulder-length cut. Courtroom sketches

often showed her standing with her finger pointed at the defendant. Rotunno, who owns a gold chain that reads “Not Guilty,” strode past the paparazzi every day in Jimmy Choo heels and skirt suits from Dolce & Gabbana or Ferragamo. She told me that her presentation was tactical. “I saw what the media did to Marcia Clark in the O. J. Simpson trial,” she said. “Every day, there was commentary on her appearance.”

Day one was dominated by procedural questions. On day two, Justice Burke arrived angry. A security officer had spotted Weinstein texting, a violation of the rules of the court. Burke asked the defendant, “Is this really the way that you want to end up in jail for the rest of your life?”

One of the considerations for the defense in selecting a jury was to seek out older men and women, who might be more likely to empathize with someone of Weinstein’s generation. It was vital, Rotunno often said, to locate jurors with the “courage” to resist what she portrayed as a rush to preëmptively convict Weinstein. The prosecution sought, among others, educated jurors who, they believed, might be less likely to blame women for claiming to be victims of sexual assaults.

In the end, the twelve jurors consisted of six white men, two white women, three Black women, and one Black man, who served as the jury foreman. Neither side seemed to have a clear advantage.

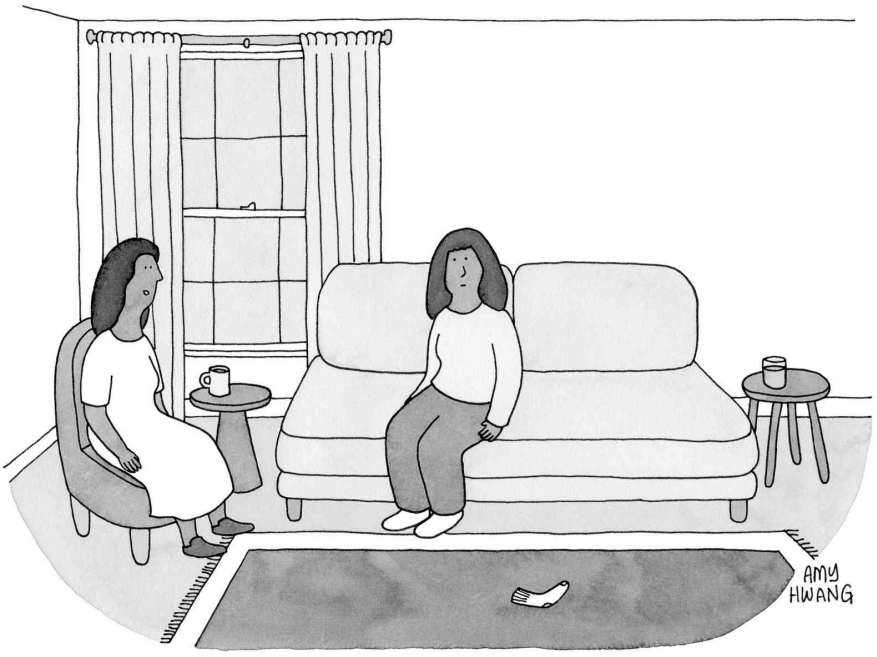
Illuzzi turned the opening arguments over to Hast, who pointed to Weinstein. “The man seated on that side of the courtroom, despite what your eyes are looking at, is not a harmless old man,” she said. She pressed a remote control, and a picture appeared on two large screens of a beaming Weinstein with Bill Clinton. She described the defendant as “a powerful Hollywood producer living a lavish life style” who had carried on a parallel career as a predator, “sexually assaulting these women when they refused to comply with his desires and his orders.”

Weinstein looked down at the defense table, scribbling on a yellow legal pad as Hast went on to describe in detail the alleged assaults of the six women who would testify in court. Standing at the lectern, Hast showed photographs of each woman and recounted the toll that Weinstein’s acts of violence had taken on them. To head off a potential vulnerability in the

prosecution's case, she said that she would offer testimony from a forensic psychiatrist to dispel rape myths, including the belief that victims don't keep in touch with their rapists. Hast also suggested that some of Weinstein's employees helped enable his assaults. Female staffers ferried women to Weinstein's hotel suites, she asserted, and Weinstein used these employees to lull victims into a false sense of security before they were left alone with him.

After Hast's presentation, Cheronis, Weinstein's attorney, strolled in front of the jury box, casually invoking the names of Weinstein's accusers. He made the same case that Weinstein's other lawyers had made: that these had been consensual relationships. He reminded jurors that they should not convict Weinstein based on press reports or on the premise that all women must be believed. "Use your common sense," he told them. "Be strong, be analytical." And he said that when they looked at the evidence—he clicked on his laptop to show an e-mail from Jessica Mann to Weinstein reading, "Miss you big guy"—they should ask themselves if a woman could really write such a tender e-mail to her rapist. Jurors, he said, had to hold women accountable for their behavior.

Since the spring of 2017, Weinstein had been worried that Annabella Sciorra and other women were sharing negative stories about him with the press. He had hired an undercover security firm, Black Cube, to spy on them. Now Sciorra was the prosecution's first witness.



"I used to be incredibly neat, but now I'm unfazed by the occasional stray sock."
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

Under direct examination by Illuzzi, Sciorra said that in late 1993 or early 1994 she attended a Miramax dinner in New York. She was thirty-three years old and had recently starred in one of Weinstein's movies, "The Night We Never Met," a romantic comedy about three people living in the same Greenwich Village apartment on different days. When she got up to leave the dinner, Weinstein offered to drop her off at her apartment, at Gramercy Park. She rode home with him, and said goodbye. But later that night she was startled by a knock on her door.

What happened when you opened the door? Illuzzi asked.

After a long pause, Sciorra said that "the defendant" had pushed the door open and brushed past her, inspecting each room, she thought, to be sure that no one else was there. He started to remove his shirt and ignored her demands that he leave. He then shoved her on the bed. "I was punching him, I was kicking him," she remembered, but he outweighed her by more than a hundred and fifty pounds. According to Sciorra, Weinstein climbed on top of her, held her hands down, and raped her. He then said, "This is for you," and began performing oral sex.

"It was just so disgusting that my body started to shake. . . . It was like a seizure or something," Sciorra said. Weinstein silently got up from the bed

and left the apartment.

Illuzzi asked what she did next.

“I wanted to pretend it never happened,” Sciorra said. She stopped working and began to drink heavily. When a friend invited her to another Miramax dinner, some weeks later, she went, hoping to confront Weinstein. She testified that, at the event, he warned her, “This remains between you and me.” She continued, “It was very menacing. His eyes went black.”

The defense knew that cross-examination would be difficult. Sciorra’s testimony had engaged the jury, and her answers had been concise, offering limited targets for rebuttal. Rotunno walked to the lectern and asked why Sciorra hadn’t called the police.

“At the time, I didn’t understand that that was rape,” Sciorra answered. She had earlier explained that she thought rape was something that happened in a back alley, and was committed by a stranger—another rape myth.

Rotunno continued to press Sciorra, looking for inconsistencies in her testimony. How did Weinstein know her apartment number? Why couldn’t she remember the exact month and year the rape had occurred? Didn’t she later tell her friend Paul Feldsher, the producer, that she had had consensual sex with Weinstein? Sciorra said no to the last question, answering calmly.

Two friends of Sciorra’s were cross-examined next. The actress Rosie Perez testified that Sciorra had told her, in a telephone call, “I think something bad happened to me. I think it was rape.” But she had refused to identify the culprit. When Perez later guessed that it was Weinstein, she encouraged Sciorra to report the crime. She said that Sciorra replied, “I can’t . . . he’s going to destroy my career.”

Another friend, a model named Kara Young, was grilled by Aidala about Sciorra’s alcohol intake and self-harm; she became increasingly upset. Aidala went on so long that Justice Burke ordered him to sit down and excused Young, who left the courtroom crying.

Weinstein seemed pleased. As Aidala recalled, “He told me at the end of the day, ‘I really liked the way you fought for me in front of the judge. That’s real New York. You got to teach Chicago that’ ”—presumably referring to Rotunno and Cheronis.

Miriam Haley was summoned to the stand on January 27th. She described meeting Weinstein in 2004, at a film première in London, and running into him again, two years later, at Cannes. There, Weinstein invited her to his hotel suite. She hoped for a job; he asked for a massage. Haley refused, but at some point they exchanged contact information, and they kept in touch. She was eventually brought on to help out on the set of one of his TV shows, “Project Runway.”

Months later, she testified, he invited her to his loft in SoHo. After she arrived, she said, he tried to grab her, pushed her into the bedroom, and pulled off her clothes. She told the courtroom that she screamed she was menstruating. He held her down, she said, yanked out her tampon, and forced his tongue in her vagina. Her memory of the assault was so acute that she recalled the children’s drawings on the wall of the room.

The day of the assault, Haley went on, she told a roommate what had occurred, but did not call the police. Weeks later, Weinstein invited her for drinks at the Tribeca Grand Hotel, and she accepted. She was directed to go up to Weinstein’s suite. Once she was in the room, she said, Weinstein pulled her onto the bed, and she went numb as he forced himself on her.

Anticipating the defense’s line of questioning, Hast asked why Haley had stayed in contact with Weinstein. The first incident was “deeply embarrassing,” Haley recalled. After the second, “I blamed myself.” She said later, “I just put it away in a box, as if it didn’t happen.” Hast had observed in her opening remarks that it was as if Haley were trying to “almost normalize the situation.”

In cross-examination, Cheronis treated these remarks as a confession that the relationship was consensual. He produced an e-mail in which Haley asked Weinstein to fly her to Los Angeles; she signed another message “Lots of love.” If he came on to you, Cheronis asked, referring to the first request for a massage, why did you keep in touch with him?

“I needed a job,” she said.

Illuzzi at one point called to the stand Barbara Ziv, a forensic psychiatrist and Temple University professor who had served as an expert witness in the Cosby trial. Ziv told the jury that only twenty to forty per cent of victims of assault verbally resist their assailants, and that scholarly research confirmed that for “complex” reasons—which might include shame, fear, denial, or financial pressure—most women keep in touch with their assailants. “Contact can range from having text messages or e-mail exchanges with them to continuing in a relationship with them,” she said.

In cross-examining Ziv, Cheronis suggested that she had neglected to mention another important reason: these women had wanted Weinstein to advance their careers. And now, he implied, they wanted to enrich themselves by filing civil lawsuits. He had noted during Sciorra’s testimony that Gloria Allred represented her in the civil case. Allred also represented Miriam Haley and Lauren Young; if civil charges were brought against Weinstein and he lost, she would receive a substantial portion of the settlement.

The prosecution called a total of twenty-eight witnesses. In any trial, lawyers attempt to craft a persuasive narrative using telling details, provocative questions, and memorable opening and closing arguments. Weinstein had proved his skill at storytelling in the movie business. But trials are not movies, shot under controlled conditions and revised in the editing room. They are live productions, dependent on the chemistry of their participants, and on luck. The witnesses do most of the talking, supplying the facts, the emotions, the drama. And sometimes just one witness, or even just one moment, can define a trial.

That witness was Jessica Mann, whose claims were crucial to three of the five charges in the indictment. The prosecution called her to the stand on January 31, 2020.

Illuzzi invited Mann to tell the jury about her early years. She described living in a trailer park near a dairy farm in Washington State. Her parents, Pentecostalists, divorced when Mann was four, and she moved in with her grandparents. She left for Los Angeles when she was twenty-five, hoping to

become an actress. In late 2012 or early 2013, she said, she and her friend Talita Maia went to a Hollywood party where she met an "old man" in a tuxedo who "looked really jolly." Weinstein was in his early sixties at the time.

"Do you know who I am?" she recalled him asking.

She had no idea.

"I'm Harvey Weinstein," he said, and mentioned some of his movies.

At the end of the party, he grabbed her arm. "I want to talk to you," he said. "I like how you look, I'm very interested in you as an actress." He took her number and soon invited her to dinner at the restaurant in the Peninsula Hotel. "He asked a lot of just personal questions," Mann testified. "I was excited to tell him about who I was."

They were interrupted at dinner by a fan of Weinstein's, who approached the table and lingered. Weinstein became irritated, telling a waiter, "We're going upstairs." As soon as they entered his suite, he began insisting on giving her a massage. She refused. "He was making me feel stupid, like I was making a big deal over nothing," she said. He asked her to give him one instead. She agreed. "He has a lot of blackheads," she said. "And the texture of that was uncomfortable." After several minutes, she left.

When Weinstein was back in Los Angeles, he invited Mann and Maia to late-night drinks at the Montage Hotel bar. Weinstein told them that they would be good fits for a vampire film, and that he could share the script in his suite. Mann said that she was wary, but that Maia was enthusiastic.

Upstairs, the women sat on a couch until Weinstein called Mann into the bedroom, slammed the door behind her, and began forcibly trying to kiss her. The more she resisted, the more irate he became.

Mann recalled that she tried to calm him down. But Weinstein persisted, saying, "I am not letting you leave until I do something for you." Her voice trembling, Mann described a sequence of events that was by now familiar.

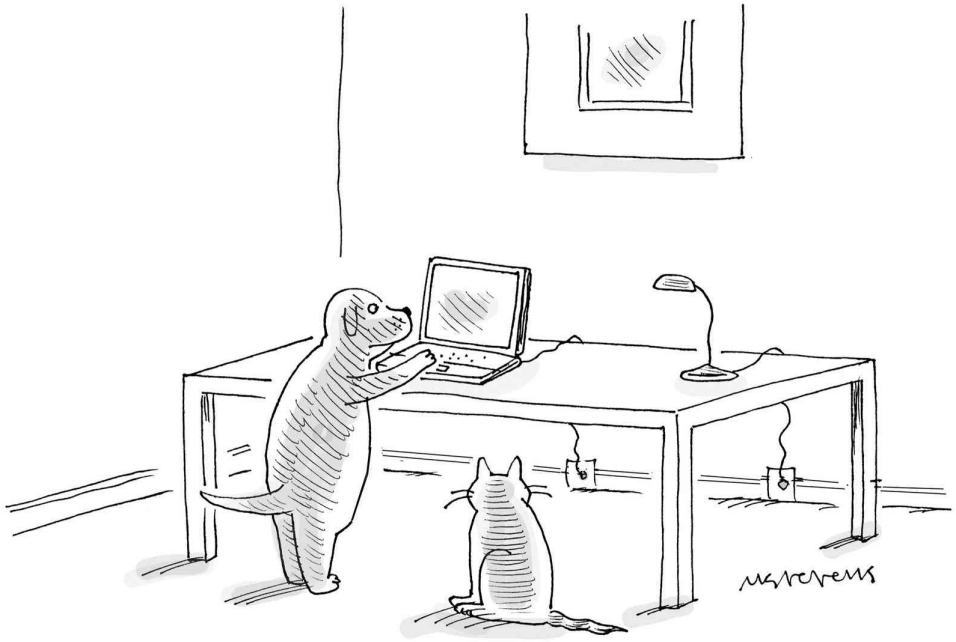
“He went down on me,” she said. “I started to fake an orgasm to get out of it.” Illuzzi asked if she stayed in contact with Weinstein after this incident.

“I made the decision to be in a relationship with him,” Mann answered. “I entered into what I thought was going to be a real relationship with him, and it was extremely degrading.”

Illuzzi asked if she had feelings for Weinstein.

“I saw him the way that I saw my father. . . . My dad had similar anger.”

Later, Illuzzi asked, “Did you begin a relationship with someone else?”



“ ‘Woof-woof’? That’s your idea of a secure password?”
Cartoon by Mick Stevens

Yes, with an actor, Mann said. She worried about Weinstein’s reaction. He had set rules for her, and one was, as she recalled, “You cannot date anyone in the industry. I won’t have it.” A short time later, she worked up the nerve to tell him, and they met in his suite at the Peninsula. Recalling the conversation, Mann began to cry uncontrollably, and Illuzzi asked Justice Burke if they could break for lunch.

At the start of the afternoon session, Illuzzi asked what Weinstein’s reaction had been. Mann said that he started screaming, “You owe me, you owe me

one more time." She said that he dragged her into the bedroom, threw her on the bed, and yanked off her pants, leaving three prominent scratches on her legs. "He put his mouth on my vagina. . . . And then he came at me to get on top of me, and then he penetrated me." He forced her to give him oral sex. Afterward, she retreated to the bathroom.

He thanked her, Mann said, and then he added, "Now you can go have your relationship, and what you can do is you can bring me other girls."

Rotunno began her cross-examination by asking if Mann had been manipulating Weinstein to get invited to parties.

"I was not manipulating him, but I was invited," Mann responded.

Rotunno asked her why she didn't walk away.

"That could have been death to any attempt of a career," she said. Soon afterward, the trial recessed for the weekend.

On Monday morning, as Rotunno resumed her cross-examination of Mann, it became clear that Weinstein was struggling to stay awake. Just after noon, his head dropped to the table, then jerked back up.

Rotunno asked Mann to read a letter she'd written to her boyfriend on May 22, 2014, in which she tried to explain her relationship with Weinstein. "I feel met with hate," she wrote. Rotunno later argued that the letter demonstrated how confused and unstable Mann had been.

Mann read slowly, tears sliding down her cheeks. As she continued, Weinstein sat with his eyes closed, his head resting on his chest. Aidala gently poked him awake, but his head soon dropped again.

When Mann reached a part of the letter where she confessed that she had been sexually assaulted as a child, she started to hyperventilate. Justice Burke ordered a short break. Sequestered in an adjoining witness room, Mann sobbed, and her cries rang through the quiet courtroom. This, a member of the prosecution team said later, was maybe the most nerve-racking moment of the trial, because they feared that Mann "was so distraught she could not continue."

When Mann returned to the witness stand, Illuzzi walked over to her. “Sit back,” she said. “Take a deep breath.”

Justice Burke called recess before 4 *P.M.* With a tissue pressed to her mouth, Mann walked past the defense table, Weinstein’s eyes following her all the way.

When he pushed his walker to the corridor, which was crowded with reporters, Weinstein offered a half smile and said, “Hi, guys.” He clearly thought that this had been a good day for the defense. A reporter shouted, “Why did you fall asleep in court?”

“Oh, please,” Weinstein said, moving toward the elevators. Aidala, who was several steps behind, said that Weinstein’s drowsiness had been caused by his back medication. “I wasn’t nodding off,” Weinstein later insisted to me in an e-mail. “I took tramadol and Lyrica in the morning. . . . I was in severe pain, severe back pain.” (A couple of days later, the *Post’s* Page Six reported that he had hosted a Super Bowl party the previous night.)

The next morning, Mann carried a small orange ball that she squeezed throughout the day. She was subdued, her voice hushed.

Rotunno had Mann finish reading the letter, and then reviewed a large collection of e-mails between her and Weinstein spanning five years. An e-mail that Mann wrote on April 27, 2016, four hours after being alone with Weinstein in his hotel suite, read, “I feel so fabulous and beautiful. Thank you for everything.”

By the afternoon, Mann had spent the better part of three days on the witness stand, and Justice Burke was eager to move on. He began to interrupt Rotunno, urging her to reframe her questions. After Rotunno noted that Mann had sex with Weinstein a final time in November, 2016, she stepped back from the lectern, as if she had concluded her cross-examination. Then she stepped forward and said, “There was a plethora of e-mails and conversations between you and Mr. Weinstein that lasted the entirety of your relationship with him, correct?”

The jurors looked at Mann. She began by acknowledging that she was not a perfect victim, having made questionable, even humiliating decisions. Then, her eyes again filling with tears, she said slowly, “I know the history of my relationship with him. I know it is complicated and different. But”—her voice rose—“it does not change the fact that he raped me.”

Rotunno had made a classic cross-examination mistake—asking one question too many. As a prosecutor later recalled, speaking of Mann, “Her raw frankness was a beautiful moment for any prosecution.”

After the day’s proceedings were over, a gloomy member of Weinstein’s legal team told me, “My best hope is a hung jury.”

Those who knew Weinstein well were shocked by how frail he appeared in the courtroom. An even bigger shock was how passive he seemed, detached and only half listening to his own trial, as his accusers described his body odor, his pimpled physique, his deformed genitals. To demonstrate that his accusers’ descriptions of his body were accurate, the prosecution had obtained a warrant requiring him to pose naked for photographs, five of which were shared with the jury; in court, the jurors quickly passed the prints along.

The defense called only seven witnesses. “There was a problem getting people to come forward,” Cheronis admitted. Paul Feldsher was subpoenaed by the defense; he denied that Sciorra, from whom he was now estranged, had been traumatized, but then he called Weinstein a “sex addict.” Another witness was Talita Maia, who contradicted Mann’s account before revealing that they had had a falling out.

The defense’s most effective witness was Elizabeth Loftus, a professor of cognitive psychology at the University of California, Irvine, who testified about the unreliability of memory. Another member of the defense team, Diana Fabi Samson, alluding to Sciorra’s testimony, asked about what happens to memory after twenty-seven years have passed. Loftus said, “That’s an extraordinarily long period of time where there can be substantial fading of memory.”

The defense rested, and the jury began deliberating on February 18th. It would take just one dissenting juror to declare Weinstein not guilty.

Five days later, the jury announced that it had reached a verdict. Within minutes, Vance, the District Attorney, had arrived from his nearby office, at 1 Hogan Place. Four Supreme Court officers in bulletproof vests stood behind the defendant, who had arrived with his friend William Currao. The jury entered the courtroom just before noon. Over the weekend, Weinstein had confided on the phone to a longtime associate that he believed the jury would convict him.

The jury foreman, Bernard Cody, rose to announce the verdict. Weinstein had been found guilty on count two, a criminal sexual act (pertaining to Haley), and count five, rape in the third degree (pertaining to Mann). The court clerk polled the jurors by number. Each juror, without displaying emotion, confirmed the guilty verdict. All that the rest of the court could see of Weinstein was his motionless back.

In the press box, reporters turned to one another, surprised that the jurors had seemed to discount the testimony of Sciorra. They had acquitted Weinstein on two counts of predatory sexual assault, which in New York requires at least two victims and an established pattern of sexual assault. Three jurors later told the *Times* that, however credible Sciorra's testimony was, it did not establish Weinstein's guilt "beyond a reasonable doubt."

Justice Burke ordered that Weinstein be remanded to Rikers Island, recommending that he be admitted to the medical facility at the jail because he was still recovering from his back operation.

Weinstein, lifted from his seat by the armed court officers, said to his lawyers in a low voice, "But I'm innocent. I'm innocent. I'm innocent. How could this happen in America?"

Vance and Illuzzi left the courtroom. At the end of the corridor, Vance conducted a brief press conference, his first of the trial, thanking Illuzzi and Hast and the witnesses who had "changed the course of history in the fight against sexual violence."

Outside the courthouse, Debra Katz, an attorney who has represented many women in sexual-assault cases, was standing on the steps, elated. (One of her clients, Christine Blasey Ford, testified in the 2018 Supreme Court nomination hearing for Brett Kavanaugh that he had assaulted her decades earlier; he denied the charges.) "This was a watershed verdict," Katz told me. "The jury repudiated the argument Weinstein's lawyers made that this was transactional. . . . Because of this verdict, prosecutors will be less reluctant to take on a hard case."

Mira Sorvino tweeted, "I literally cried tears of amazement, gratitude that the justice system has worked on behalf of all of his victims today." Ashley Judd tweeted, "For the women who testified in this case, and walked through traumatic hell, you did a public service to girls and women everywhere." Tarana Burke, a leader of #MeToo, praised "the silence breakers in and outside of the courtroom." But she added a cautionary note: "Though today a man has been found guilty, we have to wonder whether anyone will care about the rest of us tomorrow. This is why we say MeToo."

After being placed in a car to Rikers Island, Weinstein was seized by chest pains; his blood pressure shot up. He was diverted to the prisoner section at Bellevue Hospital, where a stent was inserted into a coronary artery to avert blockages. A week later, he was transferred to Rikers.

Weinstein returned to the courtroom, in a wheelchair, for sentencing on March 11, 2020, just before *COVID*-19 shut down New York. There was an audible gasp in the courtroom when Rotunno announced that her client wished to speak.

Cartoon by Roz Chast

Weinstein began in a conciliatory tone. “I’m not going to say these aren’t great people,” he said, turning to the six women in the first row who testified against him. “I had wonderful times with these people, you know.”

Then he veered in another direction: “I’m totally confused, and I think men are confused about all these issues.” He cited “men and women who are losing due process.” A #MeToo lynch mob was responsible for this, he suggested. He worried about “a repeat of the blacklist there was in the nineteen-fifties,” and compared himself to men from that era.

He challenged the prosecution’s assertion about his immense influence: “I had no great power in this industry. Miramax at the height of its fame was a smaller company by far than any Walt Disney, any Sony, Paramount. I could not blackball anybody.” He went on to describe himself as a man whose “empathy has grown over the last two and a half years.” He continued, “I understand things, I empathize, I feel things, and I was not that person until this crisis started.” (His stilted words reminded me of a vow that Weinstein made when I profiled him in 2002, to live a kinder, calmer life that was more centered on family and “human things.”)

As a producer, Weinstein had excelled at anticipating what would move an audience. But now he was clearly blind to the feelings of the women before

him, and to the way that the public would react to another self-involved statement.

Looking up at Justice Burke, Weinstein described his years of philanthropy, saying that he had raised millions for the families of 9/11 victims and first responders, for victims of Hurricane Sandy, and for amf*AR*'s *AIDS* work. He concluded, "I feel emotional . . . really caring and really trying to be a better person. Thank you, Your Honor, for the time."

Justice Burke briskly thanked Weinstein and the attorneys, then looked down at the defendant and declared, "Although this is a first conviction, it is not a first offense." As it happened, on March 6th, Vance had submitted to the court a report detailing dozens of additional instances in which Weinstein had allegedly sexually assaulted women. Now Burke said that he had looked at the "evidence before me of other incidents . . . all of which are legitimate considerations for sentence." He sentenced Weinstein to twenty years for criminal sexual assault and three years for third-degree rape.

Outside the courtroom, Rotunno told the press, "This severe sentence was obscene."

Rosanna Arquette, one of the first women to confirm that they had been sexually harassed by Weinstein, tweeted, "Please shut up Donna Rotunno. The only obscene person here is you. He got what he deserved."

A week later, Weinstein was taken to the Wende Correctional Facility, a fifteen-acre maximum-security state prison twenty miles east of Buffalo. He was sent to the hospital ward, where he occupied his own cell but ate in a mess hall with other hospital inmates. He was allowed out of his cell three hours a day. He was denied Internet access and was permitted calls with only a few preapproved individuals, including his two youngest children and his lawyers.

That spring, the district attorney of Los Angeles County, Jackie Lacey, announced the beginning of "the process of extraditing defendant Weinstein to California," to face felony charges for sexually assaulting five women there between 2004 and 2013. In October, 2020, the D.A. added six new charges. In the summer of 2021, a New York judge approved Weinstein's

extradition to L.A., where he is now imprisoned at the Twin Towers Correctional Facility, awaiting trial later this year. He has pleaded not guilty. If he is convicted on all eleven charges, he could be sentenced to a hundred and forty years in prison, to be served after completing his twenty-three-year sentence in New York. In January, 2021, he settled a civil case in New York with more than forty women for seventeen million dollars.

Weinstein continued to hope that he could overturn his criminal conviction in New York. On April 5, 2021, his lawyers filed an appeal, which was argued before the Appellate Division of the State Supreme Court in December. It hinges on assertions that Justice Burke made biased decisions, by, among other things, allowing Molineux witnesses to testify, a move that may have "violated his Sixth Amendment right to be tried only upon charges brought by a Grand Jury," and not dismissing Juror No. 11, who had written a novel about young women navigating their sexual relationships with older men, and whose presence denied Weinstein's "right to be tried by an impartial jury." Neither side knows when the appeals court will rule.

Mark Gill, a former president of Miramax in Hollywood, said in a BBC documentary that Weinstein's success in the film industry had been driven by an incessant need for more: "You'd see it in everything he did. He was always wanting more. More press. More sales. More good reviews. More movies. More movie stars. More parties. Just more, more, more."

Zelda Perkins, Weinstein's assistant in London in the nineteen-nineties and the first woman to break one of his N.D.A.s, said in an interview, "He's a power addict. . . . He put an enormous amount of energy into humiliating men and an enormous amount of energy into getting women to submit."

Bob Weinstein, who stopped speaking to his brother in early 2018, told me that in recent years he had been struggling to understand what made Weinstein behave as he did. He even spoke to medical professionals who study sexual abuse. Bob said of his brother, "He's doing this thing that you and I can't imagine, and you're applying logic to something that is illogical." In the end, he decided that the reasons behind Weinstein's behavior didn't matter: "He should just be judged on his actions. Which is what the jury did."

Still, upon learning from news outlets in March, 2020, that Weinstein had the coronavirus, Bob tried to reach out to him through various channels. “I worried that my brother could die without my having had a conversation with him. I wanted a conversation, to be able to say goodbye,” he said.

Weinstein, in an e-mail dictated to me from prison, denied that his brother had tried to contact him: “Bob has been antagonistic since this all happened. Nothing but antagonistic. I tried to reach out to him, and he’s not receptive. I just got cursed at and dismissed.”

Bob insisted that this wasn’t true. He described a March 27, 2020, phone call from William Currao, Weinstein’s friend: “He called me and said, ‘Bob, you probably wonder why I’m calling you.’ My first thought was: Perhaps he’s calling to tell me my brother died? Instead, what he said was ‘Harvey heard that you reached out and wanted to speak to him. He asked me to find out: What is it Bob wants?’ ”

Bob continued, “Even though I should not have been surprised, it still shocked me. Harvey was treating his brother, me, as if I was bothering him, as if he were in a meeting in his office—what was it I wanted to disturb him about?

“It was a reminder for me: There is no Harvey, no real human being there.” ♦

This is drawn from “Hollywood Ending: Harvey Weinstein and the Culture of Silence.”

An earlier version of this article misstated when Ambra Battilana Gutierrez signed an N.D.A. The article has also been updated to clarify the aftermath of Governor Cuomo’s resignation.

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Books

By Hilton Als

Content

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The Victorian house, in the Upper Haight neighborhood of San Francisco, where the British-born poet Thom Gunn lived for more than thirty years and where he died, in 2004, at the age of seventy-four, is as pretty as all the other houses on Cole Street. It was purchased in part with a Guggenheim grant that Gunn received in 1971, and he shared it with his long-term partner, the theatre artist Mike Kitay, and various of their respective lovers and friends. In his queer home, Gunn, who is best known for his profound 1992 collection "The Man with Night Sweats," a series of meditations on the impact of *AIDS* on his community, established a discipline of care that was a source of stability and comfort to him during the seismic changes in gay life that occurred during his years there. "Three or four times a week someone cooks for the whole house and guests," Gunn wrote to a friend not long after moving in. "I have cooked for 12 several times already. . . . So things are working out very well: it is really, I realize, the way of living I've wanted for the last 6 years or so."

One's experience of Gunn's poetry—which is, by turns, conversational, formal, and metaphysical, and often all three at once—is deeply enhanced by the life one discovers in "The Letters of Thom Gunn" (expertly co-edited by Michael Nott—who provides a heartfelt and knowledgeable introduction—and Gunn's close friends the poets August Kleinzahler and Clive Wilmer). Gunn's letters are a primer not only on literature (he taught a rigorous class at U.C. Berkeley on and off from 1958 to 1999) but on the poet himself, who had a tendency to hide in plain sight. "I'm the soul of indiscretion," he once told his friend the editor and author Wendy Lesser, but he had an aversion to being seen, or, more accurately, to confessional writing that said too much too loudly. (In a 1982 poem, "Expression," Gunn made droll sport of his exasperation: "For several weeks I have been reading / the poetry of my juniors. / Mother doesn't understand, / and they hate Daddy, the noted alcoholic. / They write with black irony / of breakdown, mental institution, / and suicide attempt. . . . It is very poetic poetry.")

“The deepest feeling always shows itself in silence; / Not in silence, but restraint”: so wrote Marianne Moore in 1924, and those lines came to mind again and again as I read Gunn’s letters, where he reveals himself, intentionally or not, by not constantly revealing himself. “You always credit me with lack of feeling because I often don’t show feeling,” he wrote to Kitay in 1963. “I’m sure that my feeling threshold is also much higher than yours, but also I don’t particularly want to show it. . . . I admire the understatement of feeling more than anything.”

Born in Gravesend, Kent, in 1929, William Guinneach Gunn—he added Thomson later—was the first child of Herbert and Charlotte Gunn. (A younger brother, Ander, to whom he was close throughout his life, was born in 1932.) His parents, who were both involved with words, met in 1921, at the offices of the *Kent Messenger*, where they were trainee journalists. Herbert became the northern editor of the conservative *Daily Express*, while Charlotte stayed at home and took care of the children. Gunn’s childhood, which he maintained was a very happy one, was traditional; he learned humility, gratitude, and political awareness in equal measure. (The first letter in the collection, dated 1939, was written to Gunn’s father: “Thank-you for the lovely toy theatre, we have played with it from early morn till sunset. . . . I go to a garden party to help ‘poor Spain’ on Saturday. Ander wants a pistol you shoot little films out of, you get them from Selfridges if this is not too spoily.”)

In one of his very few autobiographical essays, “My Life Up to Now” (1979), Gunn wrote, of Charlotte:

> She was once seen at a party wearing an orchid pinned by a brooch in the shape of hammer and sickle. From this distance the combination sounds like a cliché of the thirties, but it wasn’t: other women wouldn’t have done something so outrageous. I see behind it an impudent and witty proclamation that she wanted to get the best of both worlds, and at the same time I can see the half-rueful self-criticism.

For middle-class English women of Charlotte’s generation (she was no Bloomsbury aristocrat), calling attention to oneself was just not done. Charlotte was a voracious reader, and inspired a love of language in her elder son. “The house was full of books,” Gunn wrote in “My Life Up to

Now." "From her I got the complete implicit idea, from as far back as I can remember, of books as not just a commentary on life but a part of its continuing activity." In a 1999 interview with James Campbell, Gunn recalled how when he was eleven, during the Blitz, living at the boarding school Bedales, he asked his mother what he should give her for her birthday. "Why don't you write me a novel?" she replied. He did, composing a chapter a day during the school's afternoon siesta time.

We learn to make art by refracting and rearranging what we intuit about the emotional atmosphere we live in: Gunn's novel, which involved adultery and divorce and was titled "The Flirt," may have been a reimagining of what he saw at home. Between 1936, when Charlotte and Herbert separated for the first time, and 1944, when she died by her own hand, Charlotte had an affair with a friend of Herbert's, Ronald (Joe) Hyde, returned to Herbert, separated from him again, divorced him, married Hyde, broke up with Hyde, reconciled, and then separated again. It was in December, four days after Christmas, that Charlotte barricaded herself in the kitchen and put a gas poker in her mouth. Her sons found her the next morning. The morning after that, Gunn wrote this in his diary:

> She committed suicide by holding a gas-poker to her head, and covering it all with a tartan rug we had. She was lying on the sheepskin rug, dressed in her beautiful long red dressing-gown, and pillows were under her head. Her legs were apart, one shoe half off, and her legs were white and hard and cold, and the hairs seemed out of place growing on them. . . . Ander began to scream "Mother's dead! She's killed herself," before I could even realize that she was. . . . There was a smell, but not a very great one, of gas. It haunted us for the whole day afterwards. I turned the gas off and Ander took the gas poker out of her hands. . . . We uncovered her face. How horrible it was! Ander said afterwards to me that the eyes were open, but I thought they were closed. . . . But oh! mother, from the time when I left you at eleven on Thursday night until four in the morning, what did you do? She died quickly and peacefully, they said, but what agonies of *mind* she must have passed through during the night. . . . I kissed her legs.—Then called the police.

The image of fifteen-year-old Gunn kissing his mother's legs is like a Pietà in reverse: he's Jesus offering Mary a caress. Grief separates the body from itself. You can be in a room with the most terrible thing you'll experience and not be there at all. Gunn's anguish here doesn't detract from his photographic powers of description. His diary entry is not included in the "Letters"—it appears in the British edition of Gunn's "Selected Poems"—but it should have been. Marvelling at the horror of this scene and Gunn's control in the midst of it helps prepare you for what comes later: all the dead bodies he describes, examines, and kisses goodbye in "The Man with Night Sweats."

After Charlotte's death, Gunn and his brother were cared for by a cousin and her husband. Eventually, Ander moved in with Herbert and his second wife, but Gunn never lived with his father again. "Neither of us ever invited each other into any intimacy," he wrote in "My Life Up to Now." "From my mid-teens onward we were jealous and suspicious of each other, content merely to do our duty and no more." "Duty" is the operative word here. You want Gunn's stiff upper lip to tremble a bit more in the letters he wrote in the aftermath of Charlotte's death, but for the most part they are recountings of his actions, a litany of "I did this, I did that"—the kind of thing that helps train a writer's eye. From a 1945 letter to two of his aunts: "Last Sunday I went to the Holgates for John's birthday party: There was a lovely cake, and on top of it . . . a little red flag (like those that are stuck in war maps). . . . The next day I went out with Holgate in the afternoon. We went to Piccadilly and then walked up with immense crowds to Buckingham Palace." Sometimes the façade would crack and something like truth would come out. Gunn wrote to an aunt in 1945, "We are very happy, though once I woke up in the morning feeling quite prepared to follow Mother to the grave!"

There's a reason for Gunn's distanced, uninflected tone in these years, and it's alluded to only briefly in the letters: depression. In an illuminating interview with Wilmer in *The Paris Review*, in 1995, Gunn said that, after his mother's death, "I was devastated for about four years. I very much retired into myself. I read an enormous number of Victorian novels and eighteenth-century ones, too . . . it was an escape into another time when I didn't have to face this problem of a suicided mother. I gradually came out of it, but it was a difficult four years or so. I don't think I knew how difficult they were at the time—luckily—so maybe originally I wrote as a way of

getting out of that." Reading was what Gunn had shared with his mother; it was one way of holding on to her, as was writing. "I tried writing short stories," Gunn told Campbell. "And I tried writing novels, and I tried writing plays. . . . I tried writing poetry as well—it was all *dreadful* stuff—but eventually, round the age of twenty or so, I realized I was more enthusiastic about poetry than the other forms, so that was what I wrote."

At twenty-one, after finishing his National Service, Gunn went to Cambridge to read English. University opened him up in remarkable ways. He thrilled to Shakespeare and the Elizabethan poets. John Donne, he wrote in "My Life Up to Now," gave him "the license both to be obscure and to find material in the contradictions of one's own emotions." He went on, "Donne and Shakespeare spoke living language to me, and it was one I tried to turn to my own uses." It's exciting to watch Gunn grow in the letters: at Cambridge, he was writing poetry constantly, intent on learning his craft and on making a name for himself as a writer. He began by adopting Charlotte's maiden name, Thomson, and spelling his name Thom (Tom had been his nickname since childhood). "The new combination," Wilmer writes in an essay on the poet, "with its two strong syllables and its evocation of 'tom cat' and 'tommy gun,' suggests a highly masculine self-image that was probably at this stage at odds with much in his overt behavior. He was introspective, highly sensitive and beginning to be aware of his homosexuality."

In the summer of 1951, Gunn went on a hitchhiking holiday in France, and in a postcard to an aunt he wrote about how some soldiers had given him a ride: "They insisted that I *shared* lunch with them, & gave me *piles* of meat and wouldn't let me pay!" Nowadays, that kind of message might cause a raised eyebrow and a knowing smile, but this was the early fifties, and men were being arrested for sodomy. It took Gunn some time to understand that he was gay. "I was extraordinarily dishonest with myself in my late teens," he told Campbell. "All my sexual fantasies were about men, but I assumed I was straight. I think it was partly because homosexuality was such a forbidden subject in those days. . . . I didn't want to be effeminate, either."

Cambridge was where Gunn met Kitay, a twenty-one-year-old from New Jersey, who was there on a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship. Early in 1953, they became involved. That May, Gunn wrote Kitay a letter of such personal

honesty that it outshines his poems of the time, in which his love could not be named:

> Heaven
>
> 21st May
>
> My darling,
>
> You are working, so I cannot speak to you. I hope you're not cross that those people came in, or, if you are, only that they prevented you from working. Because I was thinking of you while they talked and didn't look at you, for loving you so much I'd have looked too tenderly. I love you, Mike Kitay, and not only because you're handsome and beautiful-voiced and graceful; I love you wholly, so much with all of myself, that I don't know what to do or say when there are other people by. And I *am* in love with your looks as well, because they're a part of you almost as much as what you say and think, but I'm so permanently in love with you that I'll love them whatever they became.

What Kitay became was one of the poet's major subjects. In "Tamer and Hawk," from his first book, "Fighting Terms" (1954), Gunn wrote about him this way:

> I thought I was so tough,
> But gentled at your hands,
> Cannot be quick enough
> To fly for you and show
> That when I go I go
> At your commands.
>
> Even in flight above
> I am no longer free:
> You seeled me with your love,
> I am blind to other birds—
> The habit of your words
> Has hooded me.

It's like reading Donne by way of Smokey Robinson, which is to say that a rock-and-roll feeling infuses the poem's structure. (Kleinzahler has called Gunn "an Elizabethan poet in modern dress.") Popular culture turned Gunn on. Movies, in particular. His love of leather, motorcycles, and "masculinity" was, in part, inspired by Marlon Brando. "I'm a timid little soul myself," Gunn told Campbell. "But an interesting thing happened in the movies, didn't it, in the early 1950s? In the '30s you had these gentlemen heroes, like Cary Grant and Leslie Howard. . . . And then, suddenly, you got this wave of people, people like Marlon Brando and James Dean. There was a new kind of ideal: it was a blue-collar hero, it wasn't the gentleman hero. There were no more scarlet pimpernels then."

From Cambridge—the land of scarlet pimpernels—Gunn and Kitay travelled to Europe. That summer, "Fighting Terms" came out, and the reviews were laudatory. Like Baudelaire, one of his favorite authors, Gunn used "old-fashioned" modes of writing verse to talk about dirty, complicated, modern times. Strong meter can temper hot subjects, such as homosexual desire, domination, the need for speed. (As he matured, Gunn learned a great deal about blank verse from William Carlos Williams.)

Not long after that, Gunn sailed to America to do a fellowship at Stanford, where he studied with Yvor Winters, a neoclassicist and an anti-Romantic. In 1958, Gunn became a lecturer at Berkeley, and he and Kitay lived in and around San Francisco for most of the rest of Gunn's life. The shape of their relationship changed over the years, but the idea of parting from Kitay was spiritually and mentally pulverizing to Gunn. He was less concerned about the loss of physical intimacy than about the potential loss of their emotional closeness. Kitay was not really interested in promiscuity, but, he says, Gunn took to it with great gusto. The poet was frank about his dalliances, and the ethics underlying them. In a 1961 letter to Kitay, he describes meeting "a queer, colossally big London Jew called Wolf, a medical student, and friend of Jonathan Miller, who says my poetry changed his life—it caused him to get a bike and wear leather, and he tears around like a whirlwind—and came out here to be a doctor, here because *I* live here. And he really means it, too." (Wolf was Oliver Sacks's middle name.) Then, a month or so later:

> Yes, I did make it with Wolf, & it was indefensible, since I find him extremely unatt. Well, not extremely, and some people go mad crazy

about him, but I like something (a) more beautiful and (b) more subtle. But for the first time in my life I did what I consider so wrong, i.e. slept with someone because he was so devoted, which I find immoral, really, the one form of sexual immorality.

"Free range is great! I met you, didn't I?"
Cartoon by Liza Donnelly

Bikes and leather were in Gunn's poetry at the time, notably in "On the Move":

> On motorcycles, up the road, they come:
> Small, black, as flies hanging in heat, the
> Boys,
> Until the distance throws them forth, their
> hum
> Bulges to thunder held by calf and thigh.
> In goggles, donned impersonality,
> In gleaming jackets trophied with the dust,
> They strap in doubt—by hiding it, robust—
> And almost hear a meaning in their noise.

But his sexual life, or, more specifically, the development of his sexual tastes, could not be acknowledged in his work. Writing to Kitay in 1961, he said:

> I have a strong desire to write openly queer poems, not for publication —or else for publication under a pseudonym. Subject: the sailor on leave, innocently unscrupulous, his debauches not showing in his appearance. Subject: "Driving to Florida"—Mother & the truckers. Subject: orgy. Subject: the successful queer marriage. Subject: trade. At the same time I haven't been able to find a good style; I don't want them to be pornography, but I want them to have sex in them. Maybe these subjects are really for essays & not poems.

Gunn told Campbell, in 1999, "People say 'Why didn't you come out of the closet, publicly, sooner than you did?' I would never have got to America, for one thing. I would never have got a teaching job, for another thing. And I would probably not have had openly homosexual poems published in magazines or books at that time."

Part of the enormous debt I feel to the editors of Gunn's letters has to do with the way they have expanded my understanding of his work. In the letters, I have discovered the person Gunn left out of the poems. For years, I wasn't drawn to his work. "I'm a *cold* poet, aren't I?" he said half-jokingly in the Campbell interview. (He describes his customary remove in the 1967 poem "Touch": "You are already / asleep. I lower / myself in next to / you, my skin slightly / numb with the restraint / of habits, the patina of / self, the black frost / of outsideness.") But it wasn't a lack of warmth that distanced me from his poetry so much as his subject matter. I couldn't always get into his version of America, with its leather boys, drugs, and male fraternity, its desire to be free of the flesh while fetishizing its apparel. Poems like "Elvis Presley," from 1957—"The limitations where he found success / Are ground on which he, panting, stretches out / In turn, promiscuously, by every note. / Our idiosyncrasy and our likeness"—shut me out. Elvis wasn't my likeness; his slicked-back hair and leather jackets felt hollow, like a costume. I wanted artifice to reveal truth, and for a long time I wasn't sure if Gunn was telling the truth about anything other than the joys of living a prolonged adolescence.

His 1971 collection, "Moly," which was inspired by his experimentation with drugs—"Something is taking place. / Horns bud bright in my hair. / My feet are turning hoof. / And Father, see my face"—put me at a further remove: drugs don't make you transcendent; they create false narratives

about vision, power. His poems from this period, unlike, say, the films of Kenneth Anger, that other great artist of motorcycles and leather, feel like the work of a man who wants to say something he can't quite bring himself to say. I see now that leather, and its associated toughness, was both a layer of protection for Gunn's porous skin and a way to join a community—to be part of a family—that he longed for but always stood outside of because he was also something else: a writer.

Stephen Spender, reviewing "Moly," noted:

> What distinguishes his poetry is the contradiction between its conventional form and its often Californian "with it" subject matter of Hell's Angels, the psychedelic culture, "pot" and "acid," etc. It is as though A. E. Housman were dealing with the subject matter of "Howl," or Tennyson were on the side of the Lotus Eaters. This is poetry of the will written by the will to celebrate the will even in its perversity and negation.

That will to negate, to kick at society's glass jaw and not call it a tantrum, changed when the romantic death wish became actual death, and Gunn had to see that beloved figure, dead on the kitchen floor, over and over again. Gunn grew up in his last two books, "The Man with Night Sweats" (1992) and "Boss Cupid" (2000). In the former, the poet evinces a sense of responsibility—of closeness—to other bodies that feels more real and vivid than all his fantasies about renegade youth. Gunn remained H.I.V.-negative throughout the plague that decimated the life he had known and shared with Kitay and others, and I think the vastness of the devastation, the enormity of the loss, shook him out of his fancies and made him a whole, living adult—one who could clearly see and imagine bodies that were not his own. From the title poem of "The Man with Night Sweats":

> I wake up cold, I who
> Prospered through dreams of heat
> Wake to their residue
> Sweat, and a clinging sheet . . .
>
> I have to change the bed
> But catch myself instead

Stopped upright where I am
Hugging my body to me
As if to shield it from
The pains that will go through me,

As if hands were enough
To hold an avalanche off.

I think we are still trying to find a language for what Gunn and others of his and my generation survived, if that is the word. Withstood. There is no comprehending that feeling of being morally degraded by one's times—of having to change the shitty drawers worn by the going, and then gone. "The Man with Night Sweats" was one of the first, valiant attempts to find words to express how death on a mass scale can cut you off from life, even when you are still among the living. When I read the collection and other great works about the period, including the *AIDS* activist Sarah Schulman's "The Gentrification of the Mind" (2012), now, I think that we survivors are starting to get somewhere in terms of describing to younger people what it's like to walk down a familiar street and have your chest start to heave because of a memory that no one alive can share. Poetry can't defend the dying from death, but it can give them a voice, make them sing. "The Man with Night Sweats" is as much about the people in its poems as it is about Gunn's belief in writing as an act not only of remembrance but of social conscience, an act that binds the living to the dead forever.

We read about death in Gunn's letters, too. In a poignant 1987 missive to his brother, Gunn describes his losses in a tone of measured anguish that recalls his letters after his mother's death:

> It has been a difficult August. First my friend Norm in NY died, my friend who owned a gym. Then, on the same day, Allen Day and Lonnie Leard. You should especially have met Lonnie—great friend . . . of all of us. . . . And we shall be losing Charlie very soon, he is in hospital, shockingly thin, and gone blind, poor baby. It seems sadder to die at 30, as he is, than at my age. I have done so many things that I wanted to, and have had such a full life, and he's still only at the start of it.

A similar tone shows up in other poems in “The Man with Night Sweats,” particularly “In Time of Plague,” in which Gunn asks himself the question that haunted every gay man at the time: What is desire if it is synonymous with death?

> My thoughts are crowded with death
> and it draws so oddly on the sexual
> that I am confused
> confused to be attracted
> by, in effect, my own annihilation.

By facing his own mortality, or, more precisely, his attraction to the possibility of death—by being his mother, perhaps—he was able to understand that we can never fully say goodbye to those we’ve loved. It took Gunn more than four decades to write poetry about his mother. His final collection, “Boss Cupid,” contains two of his greatest poems: “My Mother’s Pride” and “The Gas-poker.” In both, Gunn brilliantly marries his technique to his subject. From “The Gas-poker”:

> The children went to and fro
> On the harsh winter lawn
> Repeating their lament,
> A burden, to each other
> In the December dawn,
> Elder and younger brother,
> Till they knew what it meant.
>
> Knew all there was to know.
> Coming back off the grass
> To the room of her release,
> They who had been her treasures
> Knew to turn off the gas,
> Take the appropriate measures,
> Telephone the police.

After the poem was published, Gunn said that he hadn’t been able to write it until he’d understood that he could write it in the third person. To be sure that he had it right, he sent it to the only other witness to that pivotal

moment. In a 1991 letter that speaks beautifully to his tenderness for and formality with his sibling, Gunn gently offers his brother the poem, saying, "Enclosed is a poem I wrote this summer which might be of interest to you." It's the qualification—the Pimpernel-ish "might"—that breaks your heart: Gunn doesn't want to assume. Reading this letter, I thought of one that Gunn had written in 1985 to his friend Douglas Chambers:

> Every now and again I have sex—*always* "safe," I may say—but not as often as I could. Lots of people here are still nuts, & the bathhouses that are still open have reverted to what they were. People find it very difficult to stop doing what they like best, which I completely understand—but you'd think they'd try to [modify?] it when it will lead almost certainly to a painful and drawn-out death. Promiscuous sex is no longer political, just suicide.

Suicide. Another word that catches you by the throat.

Gunn's true self both is and isn't in these letters. How could he not split off, given what he had seen and what he had survived? The "Letters" sent me back to Gunn's poetry to find what I had been missing all along: his often unspoken understanding of the agonies of the mind and heart, as well as the joys, his sometimes childlike reach for the ecstatic. If death is the most vivid, indelible thing life offers us, Gunn's writing asks again and again, how do we make the best of both life *and* death? He did the best he could with what life gave him, and I love him for it. ♦

By Thomas Mallon

Content

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

One reaches page 388 of Paula Byrne's new biography, "The Adventures of Miss Barbara Pym" (HarperCollins), before the subject's career as a published novelist begins. It appears to end on page 482, after a single decade (1950-61) during which six witty books achieved some modest success. Two years later, the author, about to turn fifty, was dropped by her editor, and she quickly disappeared from the reading public's consciousness.

It makes a certain brutal sense that in 1963 this spinster (a term Pym embraced) would be sheared away from British culture, along with Harold Macmillan and below-the-knee hemlines. Pym's novels are filled with the arrivals of new curates, the struggles of "decayed gentlewomen," the ditherings of clerical and academic wives. Each self-denying single woman, like the heroine of "Some Tame Gazelle," Pym's first novel, is deemed "fortunate in needing very little to make her happy," though the blunt, truthtelling housekeeper generally knows better. Life in Pym's world is spiced up by the occasional emergence of an exotic or a rogue: the Hungarian businessman in "Civil to Strangers" (written in 1936 and published posthumously), the womanizing widower of "Jane and Prudence" (1953). But there are always altars to be decorated, charitable jumble sales to be organized, improving lectures to be attended. Anyone in 1963 who still wanted fiction set in the vicarage, publishers thought, could go back to Jane Austen, the writer to whom Pym has ceaselessly, and often wrongly, been compared. Her novels may seem to come down, like Austen's, on the side of sense, but the inner life from which they sprang was a maelstrom of sensibility, a confusion of disproportionate feelings lavished upon badly chosen men.

Pym's characters form a splendidly skilled stock company, each assuming basically the same role in one production after another. Nothing momentous occurs, but there is still "too much happening," an estimation that holds more truth than irony. Even if the results are "inevitably an anticlimax," everyone is busy, busy, busy with to-ing and fro-ing. It takes a village to keep the books in motion, whether the setting is somewhere in Pym's native

Shropshire, an Oxford suburb, or one of the various neighborhoods in and around London where the author lived after the Second World War. Pym cherished Donne's poetry, and each of her rendered locales is, to use his words, "a little world made cunningly." Yet her great skill when it comes to actions and persons is not to individuate but to typify.

Pymland is less a realm of hope and glory than one of modesty and mild deprivation. The "boiled chicken smothered in white sauce" that's served to the new curate provides the same nutritional mortification as the powdered eggs on offer from a London restaurant after the war, or the tinned beans preferred by a working spinster decades after rationing has ended. There is always Ovaltine before bed. Some of Pym's heroines may have a taste for stylish clothes, but what a reader remembers is the minginess of things; any attention-seeking display smacks of shortsightedness and presumption. In "Crampton Hodnet"—an early novel that remained unpublished until after Pym's death—a North Oxford clothing store knows better than to offer customers any items in tune with their briefly raised spirits on an early spring day. Instead, "out would come the old fawn, mud, navy, dark brown, slate and clerical greys, all the colours they always had before and without which they would hardly have felt like themselves."

Above all, the novels display everyone's preoccupation with everyone else. "Jane and Prudence," Pym's third novel, concerns, in part, the condescension that married people display toward single ones. Wed or unwed, however, characters are usually thinking—with curiosity and suspicion—about someone who threatens to breach their thin membrane of privacy, or who seems to be inviting a breach of her own. Prudence, single and approaching thirty, is a sentimental misanthrope: "Disliking humanity in general, she was one of those excessively tender-hearted people who are greatly moved by the troubles of complete strangers, in which she sometimes imagined herself playing a noble part." One incipient fantasy, arising at lunchtime in a restaurant, is smothered by the sight of a young male colleague. The paragraph in which Prudence takes note of him exhibits Pym's brilliant, almost overactive precision when it comes to how we whip up tempests in our own teapots:

> He was eating—perhaps "tucking into" would describe it better—the steamed pudding which Prudence had avoided as being too fattening.

> She had never seen him eating before and now she averted her eyes quickly, for there was something indecent about it, as if a mantle had fallen and revealed more of him than she ought to see. Of course the women in the office had known that he lunched somewhere—indeed, they had even speculated on where he went; perhaps the vastness of the Corner House swallowed him up or the manly security of a public-house lapped him round. Prudence hurried out of the restaurant feeling disturbed and irritated. Had he ever been there before, she wondered? She hoped he wasn't going to make a habit of frequenting the places she went to. It would be annoying if she had to change her own routine.

Pym's novels rarely identify an exact year; they are more heavily textured with place than with time. Broad references to postwar "austerity" or the "welfare state" do most of the work of creating a period. "A Few Green Leaves," set in the nineteen-seventies (and published in 1980, the year of Pym's death), doesn't feel terribly different from stories she set in the thirties and fifties. Seasonal cycles persist in importance over the clanging progression of historical eras; the daily trumps the dramatic. In "No Fond Return of Love," from 1961—the last of Pym's novels before her banishment from publication—Dulcie, who works as an indexer from her home in suburban London, notes, "People blame one for dwelling on trivialities, but life is made up of them. And if we've had one great sorrow or one great love, then who shall blame us if we only want the trivial things?"

Religion, not faith, is central to Pym's Britain, and it feels both essential and irrelevant. The parish is perpetually shrinking, its congregants forever aging beneath the Victorian Gothic steeple. The church's rituals don't set souls aloft; they keep communicants tethered to the earthly round. The bodies buried in the churchyard never seem gone to Heaven or Hell; they just seem dead. Evensong, contemplative and resigned, provides the real recurring music of Pym's world, however fewer ears may be inclining toward it. We learn from "A Glass of Blessings" (1958) that Father Bode now "does a great deal of visiting in the afternoons. . . . If he does it in the evenings he finds that people are looking at the television and don't like to be interrupted."

The novels' humor is so sly that a reader sometimes gets halfway into a new sentence before starting to laugh at the one before. In "Jane and Prudence," Prudence recalls "other houses where Jane and Nicholas had lived and the peculiar kind of desolation they seemed to create around them." Given the smallness of the action, there is something mock-heroic about the comedy. (The main character of "Some Tame Gazelle" is called Belinda, perhaps for the heroine of "The Rape of the Lock.") The cutting is gentle, but it cuts. In "No Fond Return of Love," Mrs. Beltane is described as "an elegant, blue-haired, stiffly-moving woman of about sixty, who imagined herself to have seen better days." Such wit depends more on telling than on showing, and Pym was one of the twentieth century's great practitioners of the distant third-person voice. Some of the observations we hear are wistful—Miss Vereker, the aging former governess of "A Few Green Leaves," has "nothing to complain of in her present life, except that it was not the past"—but the most devastating are comical, as when Miss Jessie Morrow, of "Crampton Hodnet," reflects upon unrequited love "that lingers on through many years, dying sometimes and then coming back like a twinge of rheumatism in the winter, so that you feel it in your knee when you are nearing the top of a long flight of stairs."

More than thirty years ago, Hazel Holt, Pym's close friend and literary executor, published a biography of her. This new one by Paula Byrne, whose previous subjects have been Jane Austen, Kathleen (Kick) Kennedy, and Evelyn Waugh, is a fatter, bolder affair. Its judgments are mostly sound, but for all its heft there's something headlong about it. The arch titles of its short chapters ("In which Miss Pym is sent away to Boarding School") make no tonal sense. Whatever fantasy exercises Pym may have indulged in, it is hardly apt "to imagine her life as a picaresque adventure, with a Fieldingesque narrative," as Byrne insists on doing. The dust-jacket photograph of a young Barbara Pym sitting on a rock is even cropped in such a way that she appears to be taking a pratfall.

She was born in 1913, a solicitor's daughter. She left the town of Oswestry for boarding school near Liverpool, and in 1931 went up to St. Hilda's College, Oxford. From the time she arrived, however literary-minded she may have been, romantic pursuits occupied her more than academic ones. Photographs show Pym looking jolly and perspicacious, with charmingly crooked English teeth. Openhearted and game for experience, she pushed

herself to slightly desperate extremes, trying on various personae, including a red-nailed young woman called Sandra, whose brazen personality Pym often deployed in public and in the pages of her diary. Byrne describes a "tendency for self-punishment" and a compulsion to respond to the mild interest of young males with obsessive ardor.

Pym gave her lengthiest devotion to Henry Harvey, a handsome student of C. S. Lewis's who had, Byrne says, an "air of superciliousness and arrogance." Anyone who imagines that Pym was undersexed should consider that, on her first date with Harvey, "she leaned over and bit him hard on the cheek," pre-creating Sylvia Plath's legendary first encounter with Ted Hughes. Harvey went on to use Pym as a sexual convenience, while she typed his papers, darned his socks, and brought him flowers. He "set the pattern," according to Byrne, "for Pym's relationships with other men: the more badly they treated her, the more deeply in love she felt." Instead of reciprocal intensity, Harvey promised her, in a letter, "Respect and Esteem," in the end providing little of either.

Pym could turn even rebound romances into addictions. "Twenty hours—but perhaps twenty years of memories," she wrote in her journal about Julian Amery, a future Member of Parliament, whom she occasionally stalked in the late nineteen-thirties. During that decade, Pym also made several trips to Germany, where she became involved with Friedbert Glück, an S.S. officer who treated her better than Henry Harvey had. "Thrilled" by Nazi pageantry, Byrne writes, Pym was slow to develop skepticism toward the regime, let alone the "horror and guilt" Byrne assures us she later felt. For part of the war, Pym lived in Bristol, having secured a job with the German division of the U.K. Censorship Office. (When applying for the position, she sharpened her language skills by rereading Glück's letters.) In short order, she became involved with Gordon Glover, the estranged husband of her housemate. Glover quickly discarded her in a charade of noble "renunciation," but for Pym the emotional aftermath outlasted the affair itself. Later in life, she felt humiliated by a lingering attraction to the much younger Richard Campbell (Skipper) Roberts, a privileged colonial son of the Bahamas. Roberts was a gay man who teased her with a nude photo of himself, and who once struck her cat in a moment of annoyance.

Almost all these objects of unfortunate desire eventually found unappealing versions of themselves (though maybe better than what they deserved) in Pym's novels. In "Some Tame Gazelle," Henry Harvey is refracted into the puffed-up Archdeacon Hoccleve, whose socks Belinda darns while still carrying a torch. Pym's foibles also come in for fictional drubbing. The books contain several instances of stalkerish behavior by female characters, including Dulcie's spying on a set of brothers in "No Fond Return of Love."

Many novelists allow prominent characters from one book to make a cameo in another. Archdeacon Hoccleve turns up again in "A Glass of Blessings," and we keep getting news of Mildred Lathbury long after her service as the heroine of "Excellent Women" (1952). Such recurrences can be a treat for a novelist's faithful readers, or a playful pleasure for the novelist herself, new trimming for the ever-growing model railroad of a fictional œuvre. But in Pym's case the practice may suggest something more. In "Crampton Hodnet," the character closest to Pym herself is Barbara Bird, a lovely poetry student who turns Professor Cleveland's head and nearly prompts him to leave his wife. A decade and a half later, Miss Bird, rude and slightly cracked, shows up at a London literary gathering in "Jane and Prudence." We see her "pushing herself forward, knocking against a novelist of greater distinction than herself and seizing a plate of sandwiches." Salutary self-mockery, perhaps, but also a possible instance of how Pym sometimes, according to Byrne, "played her pain for laughs." At this point, in 1953, readers had never seen the dewy and appealing Barbara Bird; her more youthful incarnation was still in a drawer with the rest of "Crampton Hodnet."

Pym's healthiest gay-male attachment was to Robert (Jock) Liddell, whom she initially exasperated with her lopsided ardor for his friend Henry Harvey. But Liddell, himself a novelist, came to offer Pym *actual* respect and esteem, as well as affection. He encouraged her through long, fitful literary striving that was marked by false starts (Pym even tried a spy novel) and derailed by personal misadventures, war work (after the censorship-office job, Pym went to Italy with the Women's Royal Naval Service), and a loss of confidence caused by rejection. Liddell knew that "Some Tame Gazelle" was distinguished, but sixteen years passed between his reading of its first version and the book's publication, in 1950, the year Pym turned thirty-seven. After the war, he de-Nazified the long-aborning manuscript (a "little

swastika brooch" became a "little seed-pearl brooch"), and, in order to get the book over the finish line, he urged Pym to take "quite seriously" Jonathan Cape's advice to "make it more malicious." With added piquancy, the novel's more indefinable qualities stood in sharper relief. Upon the book's publication, the *Guardian* pronounced it "delightfully amusing, but no more to be described than a delicious taste or smell."

Pym was on her way. She could now successfully practice her art while continuing the day job she had secured as an editor of anthropological publications produced by the International African Institute. She would toil there for nearly thirty years, and although the connection between novel-writing and anthropology was hardly lost on her—field researchers abound in her books—she herself never seems to have visited Africa.

During the nineteen-forties, Pym began discovering what Byrne regards as her principal theme, "male incompetence"—something that constantly requires self-sacrificing, usually unmarried, "excellent women." That last phrase became the title of Pym's second novel, which, like the later "No Fond Return of Love," makes reference to the Biblical Martha, who served Jesus behind the scenes without recognition. In "A Glass of Blessings," Wilmet Forsyth, a tepidly married variant of the excellent woman, thinks there might be "some justification for [her] life after all" if she can succeed in setting two clergymen up with the right housekeeper. But it is Mildred Lathbury, of "Excellent Women," who remains Pym's most extreme and famous Martha. An active parishioner and a part-time employee at "an organisation which helped impoverished gentlewomen," Mildred admits that she is "exhausted with bearing other people's burdens." Still, her real complaints are against herself. She feels "useless" even as she's being used; can see "really nothing outstanding" in herself; speaks, in her own estimation, "fatuously." Byrne quotes Philip Larkin's observation that Mildred "is suffering but nobody can see why she shouldn't suffer, like a Victorian cab horse." (The Biblical Martha had no trouble telling Jesus off, more than once.)

Mildred understands that "practically anything may be the business of an unattached woman with no troubles of her own, who takes a kindly interest in those of her friends." Such a posture would seem to make the excellent woman an ideal narrator. And yet, for all the praise that "Excellent Women"

has received, the character of Mildred is too self-suppressive for Pym's humor and observational powers to run at full steam. She's one of only a few first-person narrators in Pym's works, the novelist no doubt having realized that her own best fictive opportunities lay in the omniscient entitlements reserved for the third person. When Pym employs those, she darts in and out of a host of perspectives, retaining control over characters' thinking and using narrative attributives ("thought Cassandra"), lest the reader make the mistake of believing it's the author who is having the faulty insight. Pym also remains free to overrule dialogue: " 'I do not think it is really our business,' said Miss Doggett. 'We will let the matter drop,' she added, having no intention of doing anything of the kind."

The novels do contain occasional bursts of action—in "Less Than Angels" (1955), one character embezzles and another gets shot—but the range of human activity is mostly circumscribed and muted; adultery and marriage are avoided as well as committed. The books' real excitement lies in the sentences, with their marvellous economy and their hospital corners: "After dinner the three of us had got rather drunk in the senior common room, the lecturer because his ordeal was over, Coco from force of habit, and I weakly led by their example."

Line-by-line musicality and precision allow a reader to overlook some ramshackle aspects of the novels' construction. Characters shift affections or propose marriage with a suddenness that has more to do with the author's needs than it does with their own. The fact that Pym's stories sometimes end nowhere can be viewed as verisimilitude, but an awful lot depends on contrivance. When Pym, directing that stock company, needs a character to move things forward, she just has her drop by a house where agon awaits, or has her run into friends and foils on the street, or on a train, or in a restaurant. In "No Fond Return of Love," the narrator excuses this practice by observing, "The concentration of one's thoughts on a particular person can sometimes have the effect of making him appear in the flesh, and so it was on this occasion." The recourse also stems from Pym's real-life behavior: one of her stalking tactics was to fabricate chance meetings with her quarry.

Pym's books always practice as much fidelity to literature as to life. Poets are referenced and quoted again and again—Wordsworth, Donne, Rossetti—

sometimes just to mock the quoter. Characters take behavioral cues from verses they recall. Belinda sees a dead caterpillar on a luncheon plate, and despairs: “It needed a modern poet to put this into words. Eliot, perhaps.” Fiction, too, provides a frame of reference. Novelists from Charlotte Brontë to Graham Greene, quickly mentioned, become Austin Mini metaphorical vehicles that define or clarify some incident or personality. If anything, it’s life that lets literature down. Even Dulcie, the character who defends triviality in “No Fond Return of Love,” feels, when looking at her friend Viola, “as if she had created her and that she had not come up to expectations, like a character in a book who had failed to come alive.” But, if Pym’s characters don’t explode, it’s because people usually shouldn’t and, back then, generally didn’t. In “Civil to Strangers,” Mr. Paladin’s thoughts are “always bolder than his conversation.” The well-lived outer life consists mostly of repressing the inner one, even if for the past sixty years this has been a truth more universally denied than acknowledged.

It was the manuscript of “An Unsuitable Attachment” that Pym’s publisher turned down flat. Its subsequent rejection everywhere else suggested that she was becoming obsolete. Subscription-based circulating libraries, like those run by the druggist firm Boots, had long sustained modestly successful British literary careers, and Byrne notes that their closure added to the unlikeliness that Pym would ever regain her footing. The biographer also points out that a piece on how to deal with publishers’ rejections, which Pym submitted to *The Author*, was itself rejected.

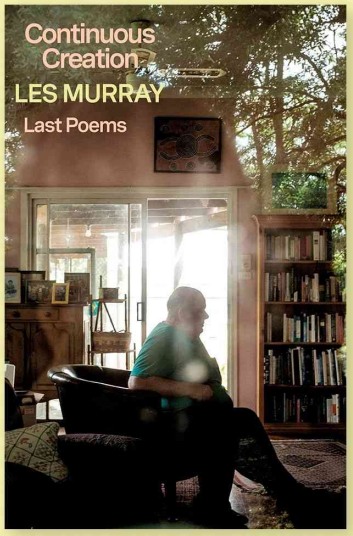
But Pym continued to write, producing if not publishing books that were in some cases even better than those that had come before. Byrne wisely judges Pym’s masterpiece to be not “Excellent Women,” the conventional choice, but “The Sweet Dove Died,” a fictionalization of the author’s longing for Skipper Roberts. That book was turned down, too. A university caper called “An Academic Question” was mostly intended for friends. In 1974, after a mastectomy and a stroke, Pym left London, moving with her sister to a cottage they had in the Oxfordshire village of Finstock. And she kept writing.

The real achievement of these years was “Quartet in Autumn,” a fearless novel about the bleak aging of four office workers, all single, whose jobs, shrewdly undescribed, are as empty as the retirements that lie ahead. Edwin,

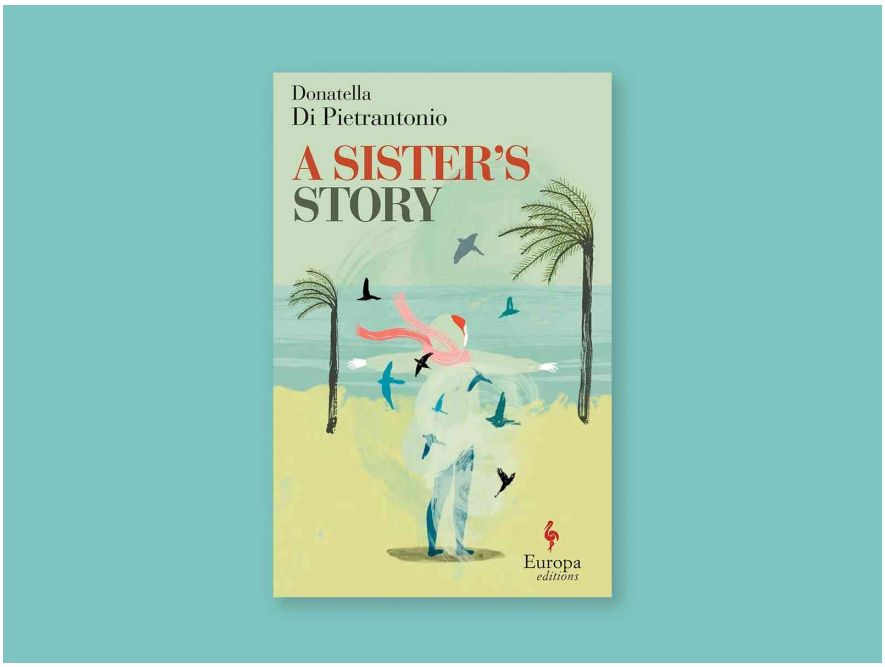
a widower, subsists on the delusive "freedom that loneliness brings"; Norman, "an angry little man whose teeth hurt," takes pleasure in "the sight of a wrecked motor car, with one side all bashed in." Marcia hoards plastic bags, while Letty seeks dignity in the maintenance of standards: "One did not drink sherry before the evening, just as one did not read a novel in the morning." The humor is mordant and chilling, the characters denied even the thrillingly perverse whims of the God who may be taunting the geriatrics in Muriel Spark's "Memento Mori." Not at all to Pym's surprise, "Quartet in Autumn" was rejected by Hamish Hamilton in 1976.

The following year, however, everything suddenly came right side up, with an anniversary issue of the *Times Literary Supplement* that asked contributors to name over- and underrated writers of the past seventy-five years. Pym was the only author to get two mentions in the latter category. One came from Philip Larkin, whose poetic Little England can make Pym's look flamboyant. Years earlier, Larkin had begun an epistolary friendship with a fan letter to Pym, and he relentlessly championed her work when she could no longer get it published. The *T.L.S.* boost set off a reparative juggernaut. "Quartet in Autumn" was in stores within months, quickly followed by "The Sweet Dove Died." Her old publishing house shamelessly reprinted her earlier books; American editions began to proliferate; the BBC aired a Barbara Pym program.

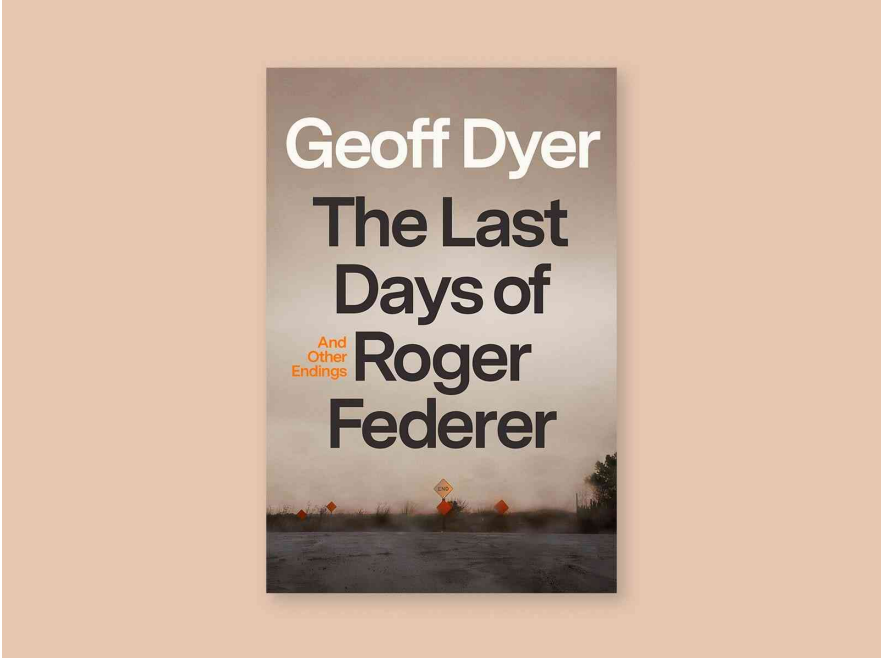
Had taste improved? Had the times come back into joint? It was mostly, one feels, a sort of temporary, false nostalgia, a round of sporting applause for Vera Lynn in the time of Johnny Rotten, and a chance for those clapping to feel big and discerning. Pym, soon to be dead from cancer, at the age of sixty-six, enjoyed it thoroughly, despite knowing that she would never have given any of her books such a gaudy happy ending. ♦



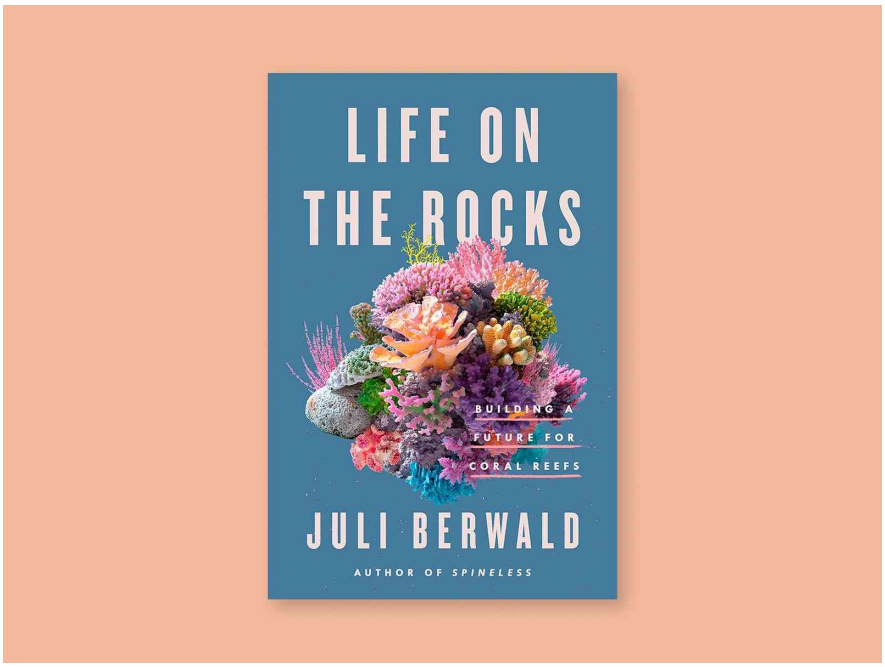
Continuous Creation, *by Les Murray (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. This final collection by the great Australian poet, who died in 2019, encompasses archness, reserve, lament, and tenderness. Murray's reflections on political and social subjects, including Brexit, bushfires, and his country's neglect of literature, swing from the charmingly reserved to the jarringly detached. His nature poetry is more charged: there are poems about pippies, green catbirds, Australian pelicans, and a weebill caught in the grille of Murray's car. The earth's physical landscape—especially that of rural Australia, one of Murray's lifelong preoccupations—is rendered with extraordinary, often strange, beauty. Swallows in flight are "whipping over glass"; a willow tree is "jammed / with soft white pearl-shell // a cascade of faces / down tiers and staircases / becoming a shatter."



A Sister's Story, *by Donatella Di Pietrantonio, translated from the Italian by Ann Goldstein (Europa)*. The sisters from the author's previous novel, "A Girl Returned"—a stoic narrator and her fiery younger sister, Adriana—reappear in this unsettling companion tale. The narrator, now a professor in France, returns to her home town, on the coast of Abruzzo, after Adriana has a mysterious accident. Her renewed immersion in the town's social rhythms, particularly in the gritty fishermen's quarter, brings back powerful memories—of the end of her marriage to a gentle yet duplicitous husband, of Adriana's harried arrival at her house with a baby. "I felt intensely the unease of being her sister," the narrator says of Adriana, as she moves fluidly between the past and the present, sifting years of unarticulated emotions.



The Last Days of Roger Federer, *by Geoff Dyer (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. The twilight of careers underpins these kaleidoscopic musings on artistic and sporting endeavors. Dyer considers the late phase of Bob Dylan, the mythology surrounding Nietzsche's decline and death, and the drive of talented people to keep going. Andy Murray, hobbled by injury, "persisted in coming back for more even if more meant less and less"; Willem de Kooning, blind and suffering from dementia, made paintings in which "the obstacle *became* the path." An irony of endings, Dyer writes, is that "lastness is oddly self-perpetuating. For a while at least, one last thing generates and leads to another."



Life on the Rocks, *by Juli Berwald (Riverhead)*. This book on the plight of coral reefs spikes the normally glum discourse about ocean conservation with a measure of capitalist techno-optimism, arguing that a combination of marine science and smart business could yet bring salvation. The heroes here are various public-private partnerships: commercial coral farms in Bali; a reef-restoration project in Sulawesi; debt swaps and "blue bonds" for ocean protection in Seychelles; even a geo-engineered "cloud brightening" plan for the Great Barrier Reef. Berwald interweaves the insights of conservationists and entrepreneurs with a parallel narrative of her daughter's struggles with O.C.D., suggesting that complex problems call for radical solutions.

Comment

- **The Atrocity of American Gun Culture**

By Jelani Cobb

Illustration by João Fazenda

May, a month we traditionally associate with spring, Mother's Day, and graduations, was defined this year by a far different rite: funerals. In a single ten-day stretch, forty-four people were murdered in mass shootings throughout the country—a carnival of violence that confirmed, among other things, the political cowardice of a large portion of our elected leadership, the thin pretense of our moral credibility, and the sham of public displays of sympathy that translate into no actual changes in our laws, our culture, or our murderous propensities. In the two deadliest of these incidents, the oldest victim was an eighty-six-year-old grandmother, who was shot in a Tops supermarket in Buffalo, New York; the youngest were nine-year-old fourth-grade students, who died in connected classrooms at Robb Elementary School, in Uvalde, Texas.

In the interim, there were other mass shootings, in Indiana, Washington State, Florida, California, Louisiana, Illinois, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and elsewhere. Less than one per cent of gun deaths in the United States are the result of mass shootings. But the data are less salient than another element of the month's tragedies: the images posted of the children who died, many of them smiling, blithely unaware of the flawed world they were born into. The knowledge that they are no longer alive—that any future

iterations of those smiles have been permanently forestalled—is an indictment that we all have to live with.

Some of the victims of the shootings were killed evidently because they were Black; others were killed for reasons that are as yet indiscernible. The shootings in Buffalo and Uvalde, though, bore notable similarities. Both were carried out by eighteen-year-olds who had legally purchased semi-automatic rifles shortly before their killing sprees. Both shooters began their attacks before entering the respective buildings. (The assailant in Uvalde shot and critically wounded his grandmother before going to the school.) And both shooters were confronted by armed defenders who failed to stop them. In Buffalo, Aaron Wallace Salter, Jr., a fifty-five-year-old retired police officer who worked security at the supermarket, was killed after firing multiple rounds and striking the shooter's body armor. The Buffalo police commissioner, Joseph Gramaglia, noting that Salter's engagement with the gunman gave people time to hide, said, "He undoubtedly saved lives." Reports that an officer had confronted the Uvalde gunman outside the school were subsequently refuted, though the shooter apparently exchanged gunfire with multiple officers early on in his rampage. (There was initial confusion and a delay, during which a large number of law-enforcement agents arrived at the school; some of them restrained parents who wanted to storm the building themselves. On Friday, a Texas state official said that a "wrong decision" had caused the delay.)

These facts are significant. Ten years ago, in the aftermath of the horror in Newtown, Connecticut—where a twenty-year-old with a semi-automatic rifle entered Sandy Hook Elementary School and fatally shot twenty children and six adults—Wayne LaPierre, the C.E.O. of the National Rifle Association, said, "The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun." The idea of vigilant protectors subduing armed antagonists spoke to a vision of a society in which firearms are as commonplace as cell phones, and where more guns mean more safety. If the idea seemed absurd then, the passage of time has only made it empirically so.

Two years ago, a study published in the journal Justice Quarterly examined the effects of gun laws in every state. Emma Fridel, an assistant professor of criminology at Florida State University, looked at gun-ownership rates and the proliferation of concealed-carry laws between 1991 and 2016. State

lawmakers pushing for laxer laws have tended to argue that a more broadly armed public would serve as a deterrent to violence. Fridel found the opposite: gun-homicide rates in states with more permissive carry policies were eleven per cent higher than in states with stricter laws, and the probability of mass shootings increased by roughly fifty-three per cent in states with more gun ownership.

The most obvious indicator of the absurdist thinking on this subject can be seen in the fact that the latest massacre happened in Texas, a state that has more than eight thousand gun dealers, and where an estimated thirty-seven per cent of the population owns firearms. Last year, Governor Greg Abbott signed a bill that allowed most Texans to carry handguns without a license or mandatory training. This legislation did not prevent the Uvalde carnage any more than previous legislation allowing easier access to guns prevented the 2019 shooting that killed twenty-three people at an El Paso Walmart, or the 2017 attack in the town of Sutherland Springs, which took the lives of twenty-six worshippers in a rural church.

All this was the context when Beto O'Rourke confronted Abbott during a press conference in Uvalde last Wednesday. "The time to stop the next shooting is right now, and you are doing nothing," he said, adding, "This is on you." O'Rourke, the former Democratic congressman and Presidential candidate, whose angry pledge to take away guns after the killings in El Paso was widely thought to have damaged his political prospects, is running for governor against Abbott this year. That likely explains, in part, why Don McLaughlin, the Republican mayor of Uvalde, who has appeared on Tucker Carlson's show, called O'Rourke a "sick son of a bitch" and accused him of making the shooting "a political issue." Senator Ted Cruz, who was also at the press conference, later said, "I get tired of all the politicking. It happens every time there is a mass shooting." That Cruz used the phrase "every time there is a mass shooting" spoke volumes about how commonplace these abominations have become. Two days later, Cruz addressed the annual N.R.A. convention, in Houston.

O'Rourke did not politicize the shooting. The circumstances that make a mass murder of fourth graders possible are inherently political. The legal access to the weaponry involved is political. The most visible people refusing to see these things as political happen to be elected to political

office. But O'Rourke was only partially right. Some of this is on Second Amendment fundamentalists and the politicians who translate their zealotry into law—the rest is on every one of us who has yet to find the courage, the creativity, or the resolve to stop it. ♦

Crossword

- **The Crossword: Thursday, May 26, 2022**

By Paolo Pasco

Dept. of Transportation

- When Shipping Containers Sink in the Drink

By Kathryn Schulz

Content

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

There is a stretch of coastline in southern Cornwall known for its dragons. The black ones are rare, the green ones rarer; even a dedicated dragon hunter can go a lifetime without coming across a single one. Unlike the dragons of European myth, these do not hoard treasure, cannot breathe fire, and, lacking wings, cannot fly. They are aquatic, in that they always arrive from the sea, and they are capable of travelling considerable distances. One was spotted, like Saoirse Ronan, on Chesil Beach; another made its home on the otherwise uninhabited Dutch island of Griend, in the Wadden Sea. Mostly, though, they are drawn to the windswept beaches of southwestern England—to Portwrinkle and Perranporth, to Bigbury Bay and Gunwalloe. If you want to go looking for these dragons yourself, it will help to know that they are three inches long, missing their arms and tails, and made by the Lego company.

Cornwall owes its dragon population to the Tokio Express, a container ship that sailed from Rotterdam for North America in February of 1997 and ran into foul weather twenty miles off Land's End. In heavy seas, it rolled so far abeam that sixty-two of the containers it was carrying wrenched free of their fastenings and fell overboard. One of those containers was filled with Lego pieces—to be specific, 4,756,940 of them. Among those were the dragons (33,427 black ones, 514 green), but, as fate would have it, many of the other pieces were ocean-themed. When the container slid off the ship, into the drink went vast quantities of miniature scuba tanks, spearguns, diving flippers, octopuses, ship's rigging, submarine parts, sharks, portholes, life rafts, and the bits of underwater seascapes known among Lego aficionados as *LURP*s and *BURP*s—Little Ugly Rock Pieces and Big Ugly Rock Pieces, of which 7,200 and 11,520, respectively, were aboard the Tokio Express. Not long afterward, helicopter pilots reported looking down at the surface of the Celtic Sea and seeing "a slick of Lego." (As with "fish," "sheep," and "offspring," the most widely accepted plural of "Lego" is Lego.) Soon enough, some of the pieces lost overboard started washing ashore, mostly on Cornish beaches.

Things have been tumbling off boats into the ocean for as long as humans have been a seafaring species, which is to say, at least ten thousand and possibly more than a hundred thousand years. But the specific kind of tumbling off a boat that befell the nearly five million Lego pieces of the Tokio Express is part of a much more recent phenomenon, dating only to about the nineteen-fifties and known in the shipping industry as "container loss." Technically, the term refers to containers that do not make it to their destination for whatever reason: stolen in port, burned up in a shipboard fire, seized by pirates, blown up in an act of war. But the most common way for a container to get lost is by ending up in the ocean, generally by falling off a ship but occasionally by going down with one when it sinks.

There are many reasons for this kind of container loss, but the most straightforward one is numerical. In today's world, some six thousand container ships are out on the ocean at any given moment. The largest of these can carry more than twenty thousand shipping containers per voyage; collectively, they transport a quarter of a billion containers around the globe every year. Given the sheer scale of those numbers, plus the factors that have always bedevilled maritime travel—squalls, swells, hurricanes, rogue waves, shallow reefs, equipment failure, human error, the corrosive effects of salt water and wind—some of those containers are bound to end up in the water. The question, of interest to the inquisitive and important for economic and environmental reasons, is: What on earth is inside them?

A standard shipping container is made of steel, eight feet wide, eight and a half feet tall, and either twenty or forty feet long; it could be described as a glorified box, if there were anywhere for the glory to get in. And yet for one of the world's least prepossessing objects it has developed something of a cult following in recent years. A surprising number of people now live in shipping containers, some of them because they have no other housing option and some of them because they have opted into the Tiny House movement, but a few in the name of architectural experiments involving several-thousand-foot homes constructed from multiple containers. Others, preferring their shipping containers in the wild, have become passionate container spotters, deducing the provenance of each one based on its color, logo, decals, and other details, as delineated in resources like "The Container Guide," by Craig Cannon and Tim Hwang, the John James Audubons of shipping containers. Other volumes on the increasingly crowded container-

ship shelf range from Craig Martin's eponymous "Shipping Container," which forms part of Bloomsbury Academic's Object Lessons series and cites the likes of the French philosopher Bruno Latour and the American artist Donald Judd, to "Ninety Percent of Everything," whose author, Rose George, spent five weeks on a container ship, bringing to life not only the inner workings of the shipping industry but also the daily existence of the people charged with transporting the world's goods across dangerous and largely lawless oceans.

Viewed in a certain light, all this attention makes sense because, during the past half century or so, the shipping container has radically reshaped the global economy and the everyday lives of almost everyone on the planet. The tale of that transformation was recounted a decade and a half ago by Marc Levinson in "The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger." Before the rise of the container, moving cargo over water was an expensive, labor-intensive business. To minimize the distance between products and the vessels that transported them, ports were crowded with factories and warehouses, as well as with the stevedores and longshoremen tasked with loading and unloading goods. (The distinction was spatial: stevedores worked on the ship, while longshoremen worked on the dock.) Some of those goods were bulk cargo—a commodity like oil, which can be poured into a tank for relatively easy storage and transport—but most of them were "break-bulk" cargo, which had to be loaded item by item: bagged cement, wheels of cheese, bales of cotton, you name it. All this unrelated stuff had to be packed together carefully, so that it wouldn't shift in transit, breaking valuable items or, worse, capsizing the ship. For the workers, the labor involved required skill, brawn, and a high tolerance for pain. (In Manchester, in a single year, half of all longshoremen were injured on the job.) For the shipping companies, it required money. Between wages and equipment, up to seventy-five per cent of the cost of transporting goods by water was incurred while a ship was in port.

All of this changed in 1956, because of a man named Malcom McLean. He was not originally a shipping magnate; he was the ambitious owner of a trucking company who figured he would be able to outbid his competitors if he could sometimes transport goods by waterway rather than by highway. When his initial idea of simply driving his trucks onto cargo ships proved

economically inefficient, he began tinkering with removable boxes that could be stacked atop one another, as well as easily swapped among trucks, trains, and ships. In pursuit of that vision, he bought and retrofitted a couple of Second World War tankers, and then recruited an engineer who had already been working on aluminum containers that could be lifted by crane from truck to ship. On April 26, 1956, one of the tankers, the SS Ideal-X, sailed from New Jersey to Texas carrying fifty-eight shipping containers. On hand to witness the event was a higher-up in the International Longshoremen's Association who, when asked what he thought of the ship, supposedly replied, "I'd like to sink that son of a bitch."

That longshoreman clearly understood what he was seeing: the end of the shipping industry as he and generations of dockworkers before him knew it. At the time the Ideal-X left port, it cost an average of $5.83 per ton to load a cargo ship. With the advent of the shipping container, that price dropped to an estimated sixteen cents—and cargo-related employment plummeted along with it. These days, a computer does the work of figuring out how to pack a ship, and a trolley-and-crane system removes an inbound container and replaces it with an outbound one roughly every ninety seconds, unloading and reloading the ship almost simultaneously. The resulting cost savings have made overseas shipping astonishingly cheap. To borrow Levinson's example, you can get a twenty-five-ton container of coffeemakers from a factory in Malaysia to a warehouse in Ohio for less than the cost of one business-class plane ticket. "Transportation has become so efficient," he writes, "that for many purposes, freight costs do not much affect economic decisions."

In another sense, those costs, in their very insignificance, do affect economic decisions. They are the reason that manufacturers can circumvent wage, workplace, and environmental protections by moving their plants elsewhere, and the reason that all those elsewheres—small cities far from ports, in Vietnam or Thailand or the Chinese hinterlands—can use their cheap land and cheap labor to gain a foothold in the global economy. Thanks to McLean's innovation, manufacturers can drastically lengthen the supply chain yet still come out on top financially. If you have ever wondered why a shirt you buy in Manhattan costs so much less if it came from a factory in Malacca than from a tailor in midtown, the answer, in large part, is the shipping container.

Like the plastic dragons of Cornwall, a fully loaded container ship looks like something that might have been made by the Lego company. The effect comes from the fact that the containers are painted a single solid color—blue, green, red, orange, pink, yellow, aquamarine—and resemble standard Lego building blocks, especially when stacked atop one another. Those stacks begin down in the hold, and aboveboard they can run as wide as twenty-three abreast and loom as tall as a ten-story building.

The vessels that carry those stacks start at a size that you and I might regard as large—say, four hundred feet from bow to stern, or roughly the length of a baseball field from home plate to the center-field wall—but that the shipping industry describes as a Small Feeder. Then things scale up, from a regular Feeder, a Feedermax, and a Panamax (nine hundred and sixty-five feet, the maximum that could fit through the Panama Canal before recent expansion projects there) all the way to the aptly named Ultra Large Container Vessel, which is about thirteen hundred feet long. Tipped on one end and plunked down on Forty-second Street, a U.L.C.V. would tower over the Chrysler Building. In its normal orientation, as the whole world recently learned to its fascination and dismay, it can block the Suez Canal.

The crews of these ultra-large ships are, by comparison, ultra-tiny; a U.L.C.V. can travel from Hong Kong to California carrying twenty-three thousand containers and just twenty-five people. As a result, it is not unheard-of for a few of those containers to go overboard without anyone even noticing until the vessel arrives in port. (That's despite the fact that a fully loaded container is roughly the size and weight of a whale shark; imagine the splash when it falls a hundred feet into the ocean.) More often, though, many containers shift and fall together in a dramatic occurrence known as a stack collapse. If fifty or more containers go overboard in a single such incident, the shipping industry deems the episode a "catastrophic event."

How often any of this happens is a matter of some debate, since shipping companies are typically under no obligation to publicize the matter when their cargo winds up in the ocean. In such instances, the entity that paid to ship the goods is notified, as is the entity that's meant to receive them. But whether any higher authority learns about the loss largely depends on where it happened, since the ocean is a patchwork of jurisdictions governed by

various nations, bodies, and treaties, each of them with different signatories in different states of enforcement. The International Maritime Organization, which is the United Nations agency responsible for setting global shipping standards, has agreed to create a mandatory reporting system and a centralized database of container losses, but that plan has not yet been implemented. In the meantime, the only available data come from the World Shipping Council, a trade organization with twenty-two member companies that control some eighty per cent of global container-ship capacity. Since 2011, the W.S.C. has conducted a triennial survey of those members about container loss, and concluded, in 2020, that, on average, 1,382 containers go overboard each year.

"All anyone ever talks about at these things is 'Waah, I'm hungry' and 'Waah, I'm tired' and 'Waah, I have gas.'"
Cartoon by Liana Finck

It is reasonable to regard that number warily, since it comes from a voluntary survey conducted by insiders in an industry where all the incentives run in the direction of opacity and obfuscation. "No one reports fully transparent figures," Gavin Spencer, the head of insurance at Parsyl, a company that focusses on risk management in the supply chain, told me. Insurance companies don't like to report the individual losses they cover, because doing so would make them seem less profitable, and shipping lines don't report them, either. ("That would be a bit like airlines declaring how many bags they lose.") Spencer's best guess concerning the actual number of

containers lost in the ocean is “far more than you can imagine,” and certainly much more than the figures reported by the W.S.C.

The W.S.C. disputes the idea that its data are in any way inaccurate. But, whatever the number, container loss seems to be growing more common. In November of 2020, a ship called the *ONE* Apus, on its way from China to Long Beach, got caught in a storm in the Pacific and lost more than eighteen hundred containers overboard—more in one incident than the W.S.C.’s estimated average for a year. The same month, another ship headed to Long Beach from China lost a hundred containers in bad weather, while yet another ship capsized in port in East Java with a hundred and thirty-seven containers on board. Two months later, a fourth ship, also on its way from China to California, lost seven hundred and fifty containers in the North Pacific. The past few years have been characterized by a steady stream of reports about some other quantity of containers lost in some other patch of ocean: forty off the east coast of Australia; twenty-one off the coast of Hawaii; thirty-three off Duncansby Head, Scotland; two hundred and sixty off the coast of Japan; a hundred and five off the coast of British Columbia. On and on it goes, or, rather, off and off.

One reason incidents like these are on the rise is that storms and high winds, long the chief culprit in container loss, are growing both more frequent and more intense as the climate becomes more volatile. Another is the trend toward ever-larger container ships, which has compromised the steering of the vessel and the security of the containers (in both cases because the high stacks on deck catch the wind), while simultaneously rendering those ships vulnerable to parametric rolling, a rare phenomenon that places extreme stress on the containers and the systems meant to secure them. More recently, the steep rise in demand for goods during the *Covid* era has meant that ships that once travelled at partial capacity now set off fully loaded and crews are pressured to adhere to strict timetables, even if doing so requires ignoring problems on board or sailing through storms instead of around them. To make matters worse, shipping containers themselves are in short supply, both because of the increase in demand and because many of them are stuck in the wrong ports owing to earlier shutdowns, and so older containers with aging locking mechanisms have remained in or been returned to circulation. In addition to all this, the risk of human error has gone up during the pandemic as working conditions on container ships,

already suboptimal, have further declined—particularly as crew members, too, have sometimes been stuck for weeks or months on a ship in port or at anchor, stranded indefinitely in a worldwide maritime traffic jam.

People who work on oil tankers or aircraft carriers or commercial fishing boats know what they are transporting, but, as a rule, those who work on container ships have no idea what's in all the boxes that surround them. Nor, for the most part, do customs agents and security officials. A single shipping container can hold five thousand individual boxes, a single ship can offload nine thousand containers within hours, and the largest ports can process as many as a hundred thousand containers every day, all of which means it is essentially impossible to inspect more than a fraction of the world's shipping containers—a boon to drug cartels, human traffickers, and terrorists, a nightmare for the rest of us.

It is true, of course, that some people do know the contents (or at least the declared contents) of any given shipping container transported by a legal vessel. Each of those containers has a bill of lading—an itemized list of what it is carrying, known to the shipowner, the sender, and the receiver. If any of those containers go overboard, at least two additional parties swiftly learn what was inside them: insurance agents and lawyers. If *many* of those containers go overboard, the whole incident can become the subject of what's known as a general average adjustment—an arcane bit of maritime law according to which everyone with cargo aboard a ship that suffers a disaster must help pay for all related expenses, even if the individual's cargo is intact. (This illogical-seeming arrangement was codified as early as 533 A.D., of logical necessity: if sailors had to jettison cargo from a vessel in distress, they couldn't afford to waste time selecting the stuff that would cost them the fewest headaches and the least money.) In theory, if you were sufficiently curious and dogged, you could request the court filings for container losses that result in such legal action, then pore over them for information about the contents of the lost containers.

If there are wonderfully obsessive souls who have dedicated their lives to pursuing this kind of information and making it broadly available, I have yet to find them. As a rule, if the public learns about the contents of lost containers at all, it is only in a haphazard fashion—as when those contents make headlines. Back in January, for instance, a ship sailing from Singapore

to New York lost sixty-five containers overboard, triggering a wave of news coverage and a bunch of recipe-for-disaster jokes, since the ship had been carrying tens of thousands of copies of two freshly printed cookbooks: Melissa Clark's "Dinner in One" and Mason Hereford's "Turkey and the Wolf."

More often, though, the contents of lost containers become obvious only if they start washing ashore, where they attract the attention of residents and beachcombers, as well as that of regional authorities and environmental organizations, which together often end up funding and coördinating cleanup efforts. The Cornwall dragons, for example, are famous in large part because of a local beachcomber, Tracey Williams, who began tracking them and other ocean-borne Lego pieces on dedicated social media accounts, which proved so popular that she has produced a book on the subject: "Adrift: The Curious Tale of the Lego Lost at Sea," a charming if desultory stroll through the history and aftermath of the Tokio Express accident. Similarly, when those hundred and five containers were lost off the coast of British Columbia last fall, local volunteers quickly surmised some of the contents, since they found themselves ridding the region's beaches of baby oil, cologne, Yeti coolers, urinal mats, and inflatable unicorns.

What else has started off on a container ship and wound up in the ocean? Among many, many other things: flat-screen TVs, fireworks, *IKEA* furniture, French perfume, gym mats, BMW motorbikes, hockey gloves, printer cartridges, lithium batteries, toilet seats, Christmas decorations, barrels of arsenic, bottled water, cannisters that explode to inflate air bags, an entire container's worth of rice cakes, thousands of cans of chow mein, half a million cans of beer, cigarette lighters, fire extinguishers, liquid ethanol, packets of figs, sacks of chia seeds, knee pads, duvets, the complete household possessions of people moving overseas, flyswatters printed with the logos of college and professional sports teams, decorative grasses on their way to florists in New Zealand, My Little Pony toys, Garfield telephones, surgical masks, bar stools, pet accessories, and gazebos.

Every once in while, some of this lost cargo proves beneficial to science. In 1990, when a container ship headed from Korea to the United States lost tens of thousands of Nike athletic shoes overboard, each one bearing a serial number, an oceanographer, Curtis Ebbesmeyer, asked beachcombers all over

the world to report any that washed ashore. (Alongside the former BBC journalist Mario Cacciottolo, Ebbesmeyer collaborated with Tracey Williams on "Adrift.") As it turns out, Nikes tolerate salt water well and will float pretty much until they run out of ocean—although, since the two shoes in a pair orient differently in the wind, one beach might be strewn with right sneakers while another is covered in left ones. Ebbesmeyer used the reported location of the shoes to pioneer a field that he calls "flotsametrics": the study of ocean currents based on the drift patterns of objects that go overboard. In the past three decades, he has studied everything from the Lego incident to a 1992 container loss involving almost twenty-nine thousand plastic bath toys sold under the name Friendly Floatees, from classic yellow duckies to green frogs, one of which took twenty-six years to wash ashore.

As important as the study of ocean currents may be, it is slim recompense for all those containers going overboard—as Ebbesmeyer well knows, since he helped give the Great Pacific Garbage Patch its name. Shipping-industry insiders like to point out that the problem of container loss is a comparatively small one, by which they mean that the number of containers that end up in the ocean is a tiny fraction of the total shipped. That percentage may be useful as a business metric, but it is irrelevant to manatees and crabs and petrels and coral, not to mention all the rest of us who—like it or not, know it or not—are affected by the accumulation of containers and their contents in the ocean.

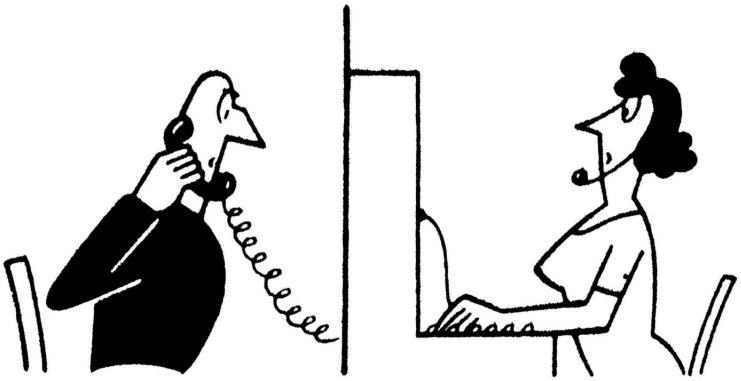
If those contents include any goods that the International Maritime Organization defines as dangerous (among them, explosives, radioactive substances, toxic gases, asbestos, and things prone to spontaneous combustion), the carrier is obliged to report the incident to the relevant authority. That's a useful but limited requirement, partly because once the carrier has done so it often has no further responsibilities and partly because a great many items that don't meet this definition are nonetheless destructive to marine and coastal environments. The Tokio Express might not have been the Exxon Valdez, but five million pieces of plastic are hardly a welcome addition to the ocean. Nor are flyswatters or bottles of detergent or Christmas decorations, to say nothing of their packaging—most of it plastic or, worse still, Styrofoam, which, when buffeted by waves, breaks into pebble-size pieces that are extremely hard to clean up and look, to certain birds and aquatic animals, enticingly edible.

For an object that is fundamentally a box, designed to keep things inside it, the shipping container is a remarkable lesson in the uncontainable nature of modern life—the way our choices, like our goods, ramify around the world. The only thing those flat-screen TVs and Garfield telephones and all the other wildly variable contents of lost shipping containers have in common is that, collectively, they make plain the scale of our excess consumption. The real catastrophe is the vast glut of goods we manufacture and ship and purchase and throw away, but even the small fraction of those goods that go missing makes the consequences apparent. Six weeks after the Tokio Express got into trouble at Land's End, another container ship ran aground sixteen nautical miles away, sending dozens of containers into the sea just off the coast of the Isles of Scilly. Afterward, among the shells and pebbles and dragons, residents and beachcombers kept coming across some of the cargo: a million plastic bags, headed for a supermarket chain in Ireland, bearing the words "Help protect the environment." ♦

Endangered Species Dept.

- **Reports of the Pay Phone's Death Are Greatly Exaggerated**

By Zach Helfand



"E*ND OF AN ERA: NEW YORK CITY'S LAST PAYPHONE TO BE REMOVED*," the city announced a week ago, in a press release. A person might be forgiven for believing that the city's last pay phone was about to be removed. A ceremony was held in Times Square, in front of the pay phone in question. City officials gave little eulogies. Tributes were offered to the phone booth's replacement, the Link: those tall, silver, monolith-like things that offer Internet access and speaker-phone calls and, in years past, were taken over by men who used them to watch porn. Television cameras captured a crane hoisting the pay phone onto a flatbed truck. Remembrances were penned. "*CITY YANKS LAST BOOTH*," the *Post* declared.

Buried in the city's announcement, however, was an odd bit of backpedalling: this was the last public phone booth—except for four others, along West End Avenue. Here was a strange matter of metaphysics—Schrödinger's phone. Apparently, the phone booth is both extinct—a relic of bygone days—and also somehow still around, like Rudy Giuliani or the Knicks.

The mystery ran deeper. "I know where you can find at least five more in Manhattan," a guy named Mark Thomas said the other day. "I don't want to say where." Thomas, perhaps the city's foremost pay-phone ace, is a pianist

who runs a Web site called the PayPhone Project. (Recent headlines include "*The SEX Payphones of 42nd Street are Finally Gone*.") Thomas had recently spied a city-owned pay phone in Flushing and heard rumors of others in the Bronx and Coney Island. A couple of days after the city's ceremony, he'd visited two public pay phones within blocks of Times Square.

An amateur telecommunications sleuth set out to get answers. But how to contact the persons of interest? "Because of the copper landline, call quality is so good on the pay phones compared with anything we have now," Thomas advised. "You can really tell a difference." Bingo. The sleuth deputized Thomas as a guide and headed north, toward West End Avenue.

The Upper West Side booths, which are of the Superman variety, survived in part owing to the agitations of a phone-loving Upper West Side curmudgeon, who persuaded political allies to grant the phones protected status. They'd recently been renovated, with new glass enclosures. Thomas found them lacking a certain je ne sais quoi. "All the phone booths in New York were generally characterized by smelling like pee and poop," he said. But would they work? The phone on Ninetieth Street had a dial tone. "Please deposit. Twenty-five cents. For. Three. Minutes," an automated voice said. Thomas plopped a quarter into the slot. "Please deposit. Twenty-five cents. For. Three. Minutes," the voice said again. A second quarter was summarily eaten. A final try yielded progress. "Thank you!" the voice chimed. Thomas looked excited. Then: "There's a problem processing your call."

The pay phone on 100th Street was no better, but the one on 101st Street showed signs of life. The operator voice asked for a credit card. After about six minutes of button pushing, a "phone plan" was purchased. Cost: fifteen dollars. Length: indeterminate. "You have. Two hours. Sixty minutes," the voice said.

The first call was to the city's Office of Technology and Innovation, which had co-organized the farewell ceremony. A spokesperson answered. "Aside from those four you're at, all the pay phones under our purview have been removed," she explained. As to how, then, the Times Square ceremony had counted as the removal of the city's last pay phone, she said, "We were marking the end of one era and the beginning of another. We wanted to do a

public event." A dog came by the booth sniffing. A car honked. "I can't understand you very well," the spokesperson said. "You're breaking up every other syllable."

Foiled. Perhaps a Link would offer a better connection. At a kiosk a block over, outside the Metro Diner, a call went in to Mark Levine, the borough president. He'd attended the ceremony and hailed Link as the future. A woman answered. Trucks rumbled down Broadway. In order to be heard, the sleuth stood with his nose almost touching the machine, screaming into the speaker. The exasperated woman on the other end couldn't make out everything. "Sir, this is a busy line," she said.

A kiosk call to the City Council member Gale Brewer—shouted, again—seemed to be clearer. But then the line suddenly went dead. The Link had timed out the call. "That's my fault," Thomas said. "Long story short, as a prank I found a way to blast really loud music out of these things." Specifically, he'd loop the Mister Softee jingle from multiple kiosks, then walk away. "You could hear it for, like, three blocks," he said. "I still don't know how this happened, but it started playing back at half speed: duh-*ding*, duhhh-duhhh-duhhh, duhhh-*ding*, duhh-*ding!* ' Some of those calls lasted four hours." As a countermeasure, in 2018 CityBridge, the company that operates pay phones and Links for the city, added a timer feature.

Before calling it a day, the sleuths tried Nick Colvin, CityBridge's C.E.O. After one call failed, two went straight to voice mail. A spokesperson for CityBridge called back the next day, via cell phone. "I'm sorry that your quarters got eaten up!" she said. She couldn't explain how the Times Square pay phone was the city's last remaining one, but she had good news. She'd checked with the maintenance team, who'd reported that all the phone booths, including the quarter-eaters, were, as a matter of fact, working. ♦

Fiction

- **“The Boy Upstairs”**

By Joshua Ferris

Content

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

Audio: *Joshua Ferris reads.*

She was often tempted to be done. She was tempted, but she would never do it. She had principles, and she had pleasures, too, sources of dumb joy. She had her husband and her dog. She had her books. True, books were also a source of anguish, as was her husband. But, on the whole, there was more upside than downside to books and husbands. She taught two classes a semester, and in her spare time made sense of her thoughts in papers submitted to journals of philosophy. She despaired over her low acceptance rate. The adjuncting gig was necessary but paid next to nothing. With her husband, she owned a small clapboard house with green shutters and a decaying front porch where sat a pair of teal Adirondack chairs made of plastic. They had no children.

She was tempted, but never would. To her, the temptation was not a sign of despair but a sane acknowledgment of the world we live in, and sane acknowledgment was its own source of comfort. She would carry on. She would put gas in the car. She would park and feed the meter. When she couldn't find any coins under the floor mats to feed the meter, she would go from shop to shop with her dollar bill, asking the clerks to make change. Life was made up of these little hassles—and of big tragedies, too, incalculable cruelties, things that no right-thinking person should abide.

She was not a stoic, and far from a saint. She was willful and morally pliable, her thoughts and actions half unknown to her even now, at forty. That was no excuse for bad behavior, but it was an explanation, and she was more interested in clarity than in forgiveness. Under the right circumstances she was capable of anything, as are we all. She had no respect for the small-minded comfort thinkers who believed in the essential and immutable self, the one that would never war or pillage or eat another human being because it had been born a Christian in Buffalo. Let's not be naïve, she liked to say. That was her favorite phrase. Let's not be naïve.

Joshua Ferris on the will to believe.

She had eight credit cards. She could remember applying for maybe two of them. They all had different interest rates and payment due dates and fee schedules, and one day it occurred to her that she could quit her adjuncting job and dedicate herself entirely to managing the payment of her monthly debt. And managing her debt was child's play compared with keeping her house clean. The minute she folded the laundry, which was like one of the twelve labors of Hercules, another slag heap of dirty clothes appeared in the bathroom hamper. Overnight it appeared, and here she would think of a second mythical figure, Sisyphus, and of Camus, her hero. She could never find a fucking stamp when she needed one.

Her weight, her hormones, her minor addictions to sex and alcohol and marijuana, her brain's requirement that her body assume the pose for twenty minutes and go as quiet as possible, her desire to punch men's faces when they pissed her off—any one of these things might get the better of her. Was she in grave peril, or was she just a modern girl? She suspected that people were more or less the same everywhere, and she wasn't likely to be the only one hostage to a dark and dangerous mind. Still, her fringier thoughts distressed her, because even dickheads were probably suffering, and the prospect of going to jail struck fear in her heart.

She knew she was difficult. She tried to ease up. She remembered herself as someone different, happier, more innocent. As a little seventh-grade Socrates, she had asked her social-studies teacher to define the concept of cynicism, and the reply she got back was so much unreal abstraction, so much adult gobbledygook, that she felt sure she never had to worry about it. Now those abstractions determined her moods, her mornings, the running commentary in her head. It was dreadful. She looked in vain for a way out.

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Why, if tempted, would she never? Squeamishness. Inertia. Some curiosity. Only a few bold souls will walk out on even the most deplorable production before the curtain closes. Sometimes it's worth sticking around just to see who might flub a line. She loved two things more than anything else in the world: socks and milkshakes. The one kept your feet warm and the other warmed your heart. These were trite adages, bumper-sticker slogans, but if she didn't indulge in one or two such things she would lose all connection to

other people, forget her sympathies, and be done with love. And so: socks and milkshakes. But she didn't need any more socks, and God knows she didn't need another milkshake, so she decided to buy the socks for Chad and to make him the milkshake.

She bought the socks—the first pair clocked with lollipops and the second with pinecones—at a favorite boutique in uptown Kingston, then swung around the roundabout to the ShopRite along the strip to gather the ingredients for a milkshake, which she would top with whipped cream and leave as a surprise in the fridge. She had just paid for her groceries when she got a text from her friend Andy.

Andy was currently in Antarctica, where, until very recently, it had been impossible to continue his research on the depauperate floras of the subantarctic islands into the winter months of May and June, because of whiteouts and lunacy, but, conditions having irrevocably changed, he would be at it this year until the first of July. He was, she gathered, something like ten thousand miles away in a near-permanent night—why was he texting?

Podcast: The Writer's Voice
Listen to Joshua Ferris read "The Boy Upstairs."

It read, "Can we talk? Somebody needs to tell you."

Her stomach dropped. When it lurched back into place, it was knotted with dread.

"Ma'am?"

She turned. The pale checkout girl with jet-black hair was holding one of her eight credit cards in the air.

"Thank you," she said—she would have left it behind otherwise—and taking the card in hand she walked out with her groceries in a daze.

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What was it, what rumor had Andy got wind of? What was out there, finally? Her mind raced. Was it something not even her husband knew

about? How badly would it embarrass her? Would it finish off her so-called career? Andy had written, from so alarmingly far away as Antarctica, to say: *Somebody needs to tell you*. He didn't want her to hear the details of her ruin from anyone else.

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Her fears were unfounded. Andy reached her by satellite phone at four dollars a minute and quickly revealed that his bad news had no direct bearing on her. But the news itself was deeply distressing.

"I think Nicky hanged himself," Andy said.

"Nicky?" she said.

"Anna's son."

"Anna's son? Anna's son is eleven."

"He's twelve."

She was in the ShopRite parking lot, on a little bluff overlooking the busy road. She had the windows cracked and could hear the manic rattle of shopping carts riding over the pavement and the blithe patter of a couple as they packed away their groceries in a shiny new Volvo. Her shitty red sedan was like an engorged pimple next to such a beautiful car. She didn't care to know that a twelve-year-old could willfully end his own life.

"You think Anna's son hanged himself?"

She had met Nicky twice, once when he was about a year old and again when he was seven. On the second occasion, he had wandered off, squatted low on the sand at a remove from the other, wildly active children on the playground, and proceeded to stare at them fixedly for the next hour with longing but without hope. He looked perplexed, as if visiting from an alien planet. He had been born at a loss. These were brute facts evident to the most casual observer, but Anna made no mention of them, only saying late in the otherwise breezy conversation that Nicky's doctors had placed him on

the spectrum. “Doctors,” she reported back to her husband that night, after parting from Anna and her furtive, dark-eyed child. “Plural.”

She had always wondered if Anna, who had been a good friend for many years, had withdrawn because she had wearied of her insistence on acknowledging the shit of life, that set of facts which would deter a thinking person from recommending it to others. Anna’s own disposition was very different. She rode horses. She owned a china cabinet. Her diet consisted mostly of leafy greens. She spent her summers on the coast of Maine and was married to a man who sold imported fabrics. The closest she and Anna came to having it out was when Anna said to her, “You’ve given up.” She knew that to be both broadly true and wholly inaccurate. It was not lost on her that Anna had been pregnant when she began to distance herself—had withdrawn from her to protect the child who had, apparently, now taken his own life.

“Why do you only *think* he hanged himself?” she asked Andy. “Why aren’t you a hundred per cent certain?”

“Because I didn’t hear it from Anna,” Andy said. “I heard it from Gary. But that was five days ago, and there’s been nothing but radio silence from Gary since then. And I’m far away. I’m not in any position to get all the facts. Maybe I’ve misunderstood something, maybe I’ve *really* misunderstood. Which is why I’m reaching out to you. Have you heard anything?”

“Me? No.”

Andy sighed. His voice was remarkably clear for someone very near the South Pole. “I need to confirm it somehow, I just don’t know how,” he said. “And I’m not sure why. What will I do then?”

“Please let me know the minute you do,” she said.

“What will we do then?” he asked.

They were both silent.

“I should probably go,” he said.

“Those poor people,” she said. “Poor Anna.”

“Yes,” he said. “If it’s true, I’m not sure how she will survive.”

After the call ended and the carefree Volvo couple had driven off, she sat in her car looking out on the day’s traffic as it washed past. She had been tempted—but never as a child of twelve. At twelve, despite a difficult tonsillectomy and her parents’ divorce, she was warmly housed, lovingly tended, doted on by grandparents and adored by older cousins. She was left alone for hours in her bedroom to dream of Bono and eighth-grade boys. A suicide at twelve would know nothing of the endless trifles she had enjoyed at that age. They included socks and milkshakes, of course, and a dog that rivalled in tenderness the dog she had now. Her delight in ballet was coming to an end, but books and fast-pitch softball had filled the void, and it was the gift of sleepaway camp, the fact of koalas and the bright burning filament inside copper bulbs that brought her around to philosophy. Why was she something and not nothing? Why this bliss, this abundance, this mind-boggling being called by her name? When these questions appeared, when she was twelve, so too did the palpable sensation that she was on the cusp of grasping the answers—a cusp that had widened to a chasm by the time she turned forty. Nicky had had no such brief idyll. He was born as she was now, thwarted, disillusioned, and very obviously tempted. The poor child, the poor, unfortunate child.

The question that had quickly formed and then been filed away during her conversation with Andy now came back to her fully articulated. Knowing Andy’s news, was she relieved that it had nothing to do with her? Or would she have welcomed the public disclosure of, oh, say, half a dozen squirmy things, if it meant the child might still be alive and his mother forced to stop what she was doing, even with a little irritation, to make the boy a turkey sandwich with pretzels and a cold glass of milk?

She was in transit again when the answer arrived. Yes: she would accept public scandal, she would happily invite ruin in exchange for that boy’s life and her once dear friend’s release from Hell. What pact was this, what power did she have? Who did she think she was talking to—God? She didn’t know. But she would go further. She would trade places with Anna. She would replace the cynicism of the barren philosopher with the howling

sorrow of the bereft mother. She could do it—she was prepared. She, the cynic, the expectant, was deserving. She would swap fates in an instant.

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She risked the ice cream for Chad's milkshake melting to stop by campus, where final grades for the spring semester were due with her signature. The assistant in the department office informed her that the chair wished to speak to her.

"Me?" she said. "The chair?"

"Eventually, he wants to change the climate."
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

The chair was a phenomenologist named Marvin Philips, a plump man of collared shirts and timeworn corduroy who, it was rumored, had run aground in philosophy and now spent his days writing haiku. When she popped her head in the doorway, he was sitting behind his desk with his shirtsleeves hiked to his elbows, raking a back scratcher through his copious salt-and-pepper arm hair. "Yes," he said, halting his self-care when she announced herself. "Yes, come in . . . and shut the door."

He stood and swiftly unfurled his shirtsleeves, buttoning the first with rapidity but the second only with terrific, time-consuming struggle. She

became self-conscious and offered to help, but he waved her off with the hand held upright and captive to its busier counterpart. Through sheer force of will, his face reddening, he lodged the stubborn button in place at last, sat down, and handed a term paper across the desk. “Do you remember this student?” he asked.

The name didn’t ring a bell. Was it any wonder? The paper was perfectly unmemorable. But the handwritten notes along the margins were hers. Where a different professor might have voiced encouragement (“Promising idea”) or demanded more rigor (“Your logic is iffy”), she had written “Fuck off” no fewer than nineteen times along the snowy-white fringes of Adam Carter’s eight inept pages.

“I returned it to him like this?”

“Unless our eyes deceive us,” the chair said.

She did this sort of thing from time to time. As a joke, a coping mechanism. But then she always went back and erased. Had she not erased?

“Do you realize how unacceptable it is to profane a student in this manner?”

“I have a pretty good idea,” she said. “I’m so very sorry.”

“More importantly,” he said, and to her surprise handed her the iPad that had been sitting on a stack of papers on his desk. The browser was open to Facebook. “Are these photos of you with a student?”

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Finding her tenuous affiliation with the institution that had employed her for nine consecutive semesters abruptly terminated, she fled the building.

She had made it to the faculty parking and was unlocking her car when the police cruiser pulled up. The officer inside, a meathead in sunglasses and mustache, powered down his window and identified her by name, which disconcerted her. The car keys began to tremble in her hand, so that unlocking the door became much harder. She had that irrational fear of going to jail. He inquired into the last time she had visited the Panera Bread

on Ulster Avenue. Then he put the cruiser in park and stepped out, which disconcerted her further.

“Was it this morning?” he asked. “And did you walk out again without paying?”

“Without paying?”

“Did you serve yourself at the coffee station without paying in advance, and then walk out?”

She stalled, then shook her head. “That doesn’t sound like me.”

“Ma’am,” the cop said. “Management has the footage.”

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She agreed to follow the cop back to Panera, where, before a few rabidly curious onlookers and a majority of the staff, she apologized to the manager on duty and agreed to “make things right.” As they had days of security footage available for review, she proposed that she purchase fifty medium coffees, which in all likelihood underestimated by half the number of cups she had pinched in a stupid and long-running scheme. The first card the manager swiped was declined, she didn’t dare attempt four of the others, one had been cancelled by the bank and another had expired, and so she walked out with only one working credit card, now a hundred and fifty dollars nearer its limit, and with no source of income but her husband’s standing between her and bankruptcy. But at least she had avoided arrest.

By the time she got back in her car, the ice cream had melted. She returned to the ShopRite for another pint and was standing on the porch with groceries and two pairs of socks attempting to unlock the many confusing locks when someone opened the door from the inside. It was Chad’s wife.

“He’s not home,” the wife said.

She stared at her dumbly. She had never felt so caught or so accused. The woman was much older than she had thought, almost grandmotherly, with

flowing white-gray hair and a severe underbite. Chad had said that she was leaving for Lansing that morning on a business trip.

“I’ve just posted some of your texts to my husband on Twitter,” the wife said. “I also DM’d your husband. I think you should leave now.”

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The voice mail awaiting her when she returned to the car was from her husband. He wasn’t sure which to discuss first: the tweets, the photographs circulating on Facebook, the direct message from Chad’s wife, or the voice mail he had received from the Kingston police inquiring into her whereabouts. All together they served to shake him out of his stupor, and he announced that he would be initiating divorce proceedings while staying at his cousin’s, in Rhinebeck.

•

She was still parked outside Chad’s house.

That budding Socrates in love with Bono and trifles had suffered a series of shocks as she entered adulthood: an episode of sexual assault in college; the swift death of her mother; the second Bush Administration; the gender imbalance at grad school and its attendant misogynies and inequalities, which also warped hiring practices in philosophy departments the year she went on the market; a million more structural injustices seemingly unnoticed by everyone else; the geologic pace of political change; the creep of addictions; compromised ideals. These disillusioning shocks wised her up to a corrupt and corroding world that, in the view of the empiricist she always tried to be, had been there all along, lurking just under the appearance of things. But at what point had she given herself permission to live as corruptly as the world?

She had never felt so rebuked as when she looked down at the passenger seat and saw the socks and ice cream. She drove home. She found the house desolate, as her husband had arrived before her and hauled off more than she would have thought possible, including the Adirondack chairs. It was even

more desolate a minute later, when she realized that he had also taken her dog.

Olivia was her name. She was a mutt with a lot of bluetick hound in her, mournful eyes, and daily petitions to be accepted as an equal among humans. Olivia longed for contact. She liked to snuggle. She stood on two legs and made herself tall for human embraces. Her husband had taken Olivia to punish her, and he had succeeded. It was not the disgrace of being terminated for gross misconduct, or her mortifications at the Panera Bread, or Chad's wife's scorn, or the rebuke she felt at the sight of a pair of socks, but the absence of Olivia that reminded her that the world, no matter how corrupt, required careful tending, and even deserved it. She sat down in the middle of the kitchen and wept. Late-spring sunlight filled the windows. Birdsong came through, as did an early-spring breeze. But she buried her head in her hands and streamed such tears as could not have been her own, inconsolable tears, tears of protest and tears of guilt. They were the tears of someone still connected to the distant dreams of childhood and the heart's reckless affections. Why was she something and not nothing? She would never know! She wished she could believe she ever would. Then she might never be tempted again, as she was now. She should do it, she should just do it. That made her think of Nicky, the twelve-year-old. Then she remembered Anna.

She stopped crying. She heard, for the first time, a noise coming from upstairs.

She stood, found her phone on the counter, and called Andy's cell phone. It went straight to voice mail. She sent him four quick texts. "Have you confirmed that Nicky hurt himself?" she asked. Andy didn't reply. He had stepped away, or was sleeping. What time was it in Antarctica, anyway? "Andy, please, I need to know. Might Nicky still be alive?"

She stood in her kitchen waiting for a response. There was nothing. Of course there was nothing. He was in Antarctica! But when he wrote back—if he wrote back—and if he said that he had misunderstood something, that the boy was still alive . . .

But that was insane. Did she really believe that some pact she made to try and bring the boy back to life—

She thought of calling Anna. But she quickly thought better of it. What would she say? She didn't know where she would even begin.

The rigor and logic of her academic training fully reasserted itself, and she realized that she was being foolish. She couldn't restore the natural order of things by secretly striking some fantastic bargain with a nonexistent God. There was no discriminating between the innocent and the guilty in this world. Both risked everything, both suffered. The one could not pay a moral cost for the other, especially after the fact, thereby restoring things to the way they had been. It was just a coincidence that Andy's news and her dumb pact and sentimental hopes and actual disgrace came on the same day.

But if he wrote back . . . if he was mistaken . . . *if!*

She texted again. "Andy?"

Still nothing.

Then she heard the noise again. Faint at first, it might have only been the house shifting. But, no, there it was. She stood still, her ears pricked. A sudden rustle. A hush. It faded in and out. She listened intently to what, over time, sounded to her like a child at play.

It must be Olivia, she thought. The dog was here, after all.

But, no, the dog would have come bounding down to greet her.

She left the kitchen and went to the foot of the stairs. She peered up at the second-floor landing. It was still, shrouded in shadow. But what was that sudden thump, and those low, faint, whispering sounds?

She mounted the stairs slowly. She was being stupid. She knew it, too. She had swapped fates with no one, she had saved no one's life. Her own life in tatters, she was being swept up in wishful thinking. It was the scrabble of a trapped squirrel, or an intruder. Much more likely an intruder than a child. She could not summon a child back to life!

But if someone or something had agreed to the pact?

She reaches the top of the stairs. The door is closed to the room from which the faint scrabbling is coming. She knows in her mind that she will soon be mauled by a rodent, or clobbered by a maniac, or locked in a passionate embrace the minute she releases her dear dog from confinement. But it is Nicky she wants, Nicky she hopes to find. The possibility of Nicky would redeem her crimes, restore whole worlds that have fallen away.

She stands outside the door and listens. There it is again! Her eyes fill with tears of an entirely different order than the ones she shed in the kitchen. She pictures Nicky crouched in some corner, only not as he was on that playground, dark and unsmiling. No, he is whispering to himself, indulging his whims, dreaming. She imagines a toy airplane in a hand held aloft, now in a sudden nosedive. It is absurd. She takes the doorknob in hand. She pauses before turning it. She stands a moment in sheer wonder. Why not? Why not? There is something in her, however briefly, that is alive again to the possibilities. And, with that, she opens the door. ♦

By Willing Davidson

Letter from Los Angeles

- **The L.A. County Sheriff's Deputy-Gang Crisis**

By Dana Goodyear

Content

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

“I had always heard stories—‘Don’t go to East Los Angeles Station,’ ” Rosa Gonzalez, a deputy with the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department, told me. “ ‘You’re a hard worker. Go somewhere else. East L.A., it’s different from all the other stations.’ ”

But Gonzalez, who is Mexican American and was raised in what she calls “the inner city,” was drawn to East Los Angeles, a historically Latino neighborhood that has long contended with gang violence. “It’s a way to give back to my own community,” she said. In 2011, after finishing the academy and a mandatory turn through the custody division, Gonzalez reported for training at East L.A. She was one of three female trainees, working alongside approximately a hundred men.

She was naïve at first, she said. But a detective told her, “Just pay attention. You’ll find out who’s *really* in charge.” Officially, stations are run by captains, with the help of an operations staff. At East L.A., Gonzalez discovered, there was a shadow government: a secretive group of sheriff’s deputies known as the Banditos.

Deputy gangs, or “subgroups,” with names like the Grim Reapers, the Regulators, and the Vikings, have plagued the sheriff’s department for fifty years. Members have been accused of serious breaches of department policy and violations of constitutional rights, of terrorizing the public and harassing their fellow-deputies, and of retaliating against whistle-blowers.

According to a lawsuit filed by eight East L.A. deputies and the A.C.L.U., the Banditos gang “controls the East Los Angeles station like inmates running a prison yard.” Leaders, known as “shot-callers,” determined deputies’ hours, promotions, even days off. On patrol, they operated in the gray areas of law enforcement. Gonzalez said that they perpetuated “the code of silence, the culture of the ghetto gunslinger.” She added, “What makes East L.A. so unique is it’s embedded within the Hispanic machismo culture and the Hispanic street gangs.”

The mark of a Bandito is a secret numbered tattoo: a skeleton wearing a thick mustache, a bandolier, and a sombrero, and brandishing a smoking gun. (Deputy-gang tattoos are typically on the leg or the ankle.) Families of those killed by deputies allege that the deputies were "chasing ink"—trying to earn a tattoo. In a recent exposé on CBS News, anonymous whistle-blowers at East L.A. Station said, "If you get in a shooting, that's a definite brownie point" with the Banditos.

Gonzalez was assigned a training officer, Noel Lopez, who went by "Crook" and who, she understood, was a Bandito. (Lopez did not respond to requests for comment.) As her T.O.—her "daddy," in station lingo—he was meant to scrutinize her every decision, to make sure that she internalized protocols. "When somebody would ask me to do something—*anything*, a menial task or favor—I would first have to run it by my T.O.," Gonzalez said. "He'd say, 'Who asked you?' I would tell him the name and he'd say, 'O.K., no. They don't matter. Don't do it.' If I'd say certain names, 'O.K., yeah.' You learn real quick that the tail wags the dog at the station."

Gonzalez's connection to a Bandito offered a measure of protection. "I was never forced to do any type of sexual activity to get off training, but you would hear that rumor," she said. "I talked to a female who got hit across the head during training. Who had all her things thrown out. Who was called a bitch constantly."

While Gonzalez was at the station, a woman named Guadalupe Lopez was training under Eric Valdez, an alleged Bandito known as the Godfather of East L.A. (Valdez could not be reached for comment.) She filed a lawsuit in 2014, claiming that his cronies had subjected her to relentless sexual harassment and innuendo. She was told that female deputies performed oral sex on Banditos and was cautioned to "submit" if she wanted to complete her training. When she refused, her suit alleged, the Banditos began a campaign of physical intimidation, and after she complained they left a dead rat by her car. The county settled for $1.5 million.

Because Gonzalez was older—in her thirties, with kids—she was known affectionately around the station as Mama G. But her T.O. indicated that she wasn't necessarily safe from harassment. She said he warned her about another training officer, an alleged Bandito named Rafael Munoz. Years

earlier, Munoz had been arrested and charged with assault with a deadly weapon—accused of pointing a gun at his wife, while kneeling on the hood of the car she was in. The department had fired him but, after he was found not guilty, brought him back on.

“Lopez told me, ‘Hey, if you’re ever called by Munoz, or any of the other guys, if they ever ask you, Hey, can you bring beer?, or, Hey, can you come over?—*don’t do it*,’ ” Gonzalez said. “ ‘Tell them you’re busy. You can’t. You have a family.’ ” When Munoz did eventually call and ask her to bring beer, she begged off.

Gonzalez managed to evade the Banditos again, when Valdez and another alleged member, Manny Navarro, summoned her to meet at a doughnut shop and asked her to join them on the early shift. Gonzalez knew that the early shift, a crew of wee-hours hunters who roamed the streets looking for troublemakers, was dominated by Banditos. Pretending to be flattered, she demurred.

Later, Gonzalez was herself put in charge of a trainee. This, she believes, is what turned the Banditos against her. Her supervisors and the station captain had approved the decision. “But, remember, they’re not really in charge,” she said. “It’s Valdez. And I never got his approval. I never would have, because of my gender. And they already had someone in mind for it, one of their male prospects.”

In a lawsuit that Gonzalez filed in 2015, she claims that a sergeant—who admitted under oath to being a tattooed Bandito—removed her trainee and threatened to sabotage her career if she objected. She filed a grievance, and then punishment began. Fellow-deputies, she alleges, refused to provide her with backup. Once, responding alone to a burglary at a grocery store, she radioed for help repeatedly, but no one came to her aid.

“I went from being a shining star at East Los Angeles Station to, less than twenty-four hours later, walking down the hall and people just turning their heads and looking the other way,” Gonzalez said. “When they’re retaliating against you, you become like the plague. You’re untouchable.” Superiors determined that her life was in danger and transferred her to another station.

"I just don't know if I have the energy to meet new people."
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

The county settled Gonzalez's lawsuit, for a million dollars, and she eventually became a sergeant. But, dismayingly, neither her suit nor Guadalupe Lopez's weakened the Banditos. Gonzalez allowed herself a measure of hope in 2018, when Alex Villanueva won the election for sheriff. He had come up at East L.A. Station, but he was an outsider to the deputy-gang culture, and he had championed a message of reform. Throughout the campaign he told deputies, "Help is on the way."

Villanueva's victory was an upset. It had been a century since an incumbent sheriff was unseated, and even longer since a Democrat had won the office. He'd positioned himself as a whistle-blower, emphasizing his history of holding the sheriff's department to account. The incumbent, Jim McDonnell, was a Republican turned Independent, who had spent most of his career with the L.A.P.D.

Mark Gonzalez, the chair of the Los Angeles County Democratic Party, told me that Villanueva met all his members' criteria. "Everyone felt he was thinking and preaching the word of the Party," he said. "He was about reforming the sheriff's department, cleaning house, raising standards, doing community policing, and restoring trust."

The sheriff's department polices unincorporated L.A. County, forty-two contract cities, and the country's largest jail system. With more than fifteen thousand employees and an annual budget of $3.6 billion, the sheriff runs one of the largest law-enforcement agencies in the United States.

The deputy gangs were an embarrassment and, increasingly, a matter of urgent concern to civilian leadership. "L.A. is ground zero of all things gang. The street gangs themselves. Gang injunctions. Punitive gang enforcement. And law-enforcement gangs," Sean Kennedy, a former public defender who teaches law and chairs the Civilian Oversight Commission, a county watchdog organization, told me. According to a report that Kennedy and his students published last year, roughly one deputy in six is in a gang. The problem is so deeply entrenched that it may exceed any sheriff's capacity to eradicate it—if he even wanted to.

In 2020, Villanueva announced a policy of zero tolerance on "deputy cliques," and he also supported legislation that prohibits gangs in law-enforcement agencies. But, Kennedy and other critics say, the department has made no systematic attempt to determine which of its members have tattoos, and has yet to fire anyone for connection to a deputy gang. Instead, according to people who know the department well, the Banditos are thriving under Villanueva. The East L.A. deputies' lawsuit claims that Villanueva put an alleged Bandito in charge of the department's communications office; he was subsequently promoted to captain of the Homicide Bureau and then made a commander of the Detective Division. Manny Navarro, who had invited Rosa Gonzalez onto the early shift, became Villanueva's driver. (The department says any suggestion that Navarro and the commander are gang members is "false and defamatory.")

Villanueva's time in office has been marked by a string of scandals and lawsuits implicating him—and his wife, Vivian, a retired deputy—in abuses of power. He has responded by attacking whistle-blowers and refusing to submit to oversight. The state attorney general opened a review of Villanueva's pattern of investigating critics and rivals. The Los Angeles County Democratic Party and the local chapter of the A.C.L.U. have called on him to resign. Andrés Dae Keun Kwon, a human-rights attorney with the A.C.L.U., told me that Villanueva, who campaigned as a reformer, "really pulled a bait and switch."

As a frequent guest on Tucker Carlson's Fox News show, railing against "the woke left," Villanueva has been called the Donald Trump of L.A. This year, he is running for reëlection in a crowded field: eight opponents, all claiming that they will address deputy gangs. The primary is on June 7th.

In March, I went to see Villanueva at his office, on the eighth floor of the Hall of Justice, in downtown Los Angeles. Villanueva, who is part Polish and part Puerto Rican, has light eyes and slicked-back salt-and-pepper hair. He wore a corduroy jacket, a chambray shirt, pressed jeans, no tie. He walks stiffly, with a slight limp from old injuries. (For years, he was a cycling and CrossFit buff, and he and Vivian have co-owned a gym.) We sat down in his conference room just after lunch. Leaning back in his chair, he took a swig from a bottle of Dr Pepper and told me that the era of tattooed deputies dominating stations was over. "They want to combine fifty years of department history into my three years, and now suddenly I'm responsible for something that was happening when I was in second grade," he said.

There are no deputy gangs in his department, Villanueva insisted. "A gang is three or more people united with a common name or tattoo or any kind of thing who engage in criminal acts," he said. According to him, the Banditos are not a gang, because it has not been demonstrated in court that they have engaged in criminal activity on the group's behalf. "You can allege all you want, but we operate in the world of what you can prove or not prove," he said. There is no correlation between wearing a deputy tattoo and bad behavior, he argued: "People engage in misconduct without the tattoo, and people have the tattoo and they walk on water. Because they have the tattoo, are they a gang member?"

A few weeks earlier, Villanueva had sent the county Board of Supervisors, five elected officials who control the county budget, a "cease and desist" letter, demanding that they stop using the term "deputy gangs." "As the first fluently Spanish speaking Latino Sheriff in over a hundred years, who supervises a majority Latino workforce, I hope you can see the blatant racial inferences your conscious bias displays every time you choose to attack our Department with this derogatory term," he wrote. On Facebook Live, a forum he uses regularly to address the public, he compared the inked deputies to a group of *Covid* nurses who got tattoos to commemorate their efforts to save lives.

Villanueva characterized the outcry over deputy gangs as cynical political maneuvering. “Remember, the crowd that is pushing for the deputy gang is the very same crowd that’s trying to defund the sheriff’s department,” he said. “They’re using the deputy gangs as their vehicle.” I asked him if, as the leader of the department, he would denounce the Banditos. He said, “I don’t have a group to denounce.”

East L.A. Station, a low-slung mid-century structure in Belvedere Park, faces a lake populated with ducks and migrating birds. The oldest station in the county, it is also home to the earliest known tattoo clique, the Little Red Devils.

The Red Devils started in the nineteen-seventies, when East L.A. deputies, most of them white men, called the station Fort Apache, after the John Wayne movie about a mostly white cavalry unit at war with Native Americans. It was a period marked by civil unrest and police violence. During a particularly heated protest, a journalist named Ruben Salazar was fatally struck by a tear-gas cannister fired by a deputy. Hoping to ease tensions, the sheriff ordered East L.A. deputies to adopt a “low profile,” an instruction they resented.

These ideas—East L.A. Station as an outpost in enemy territory, defended by seething, subversive deputies—soon took graphic form. The words “Fort Apache” were laid in tile on the station floor, along with the image of a helmet sitting on a boot (the lowest possible profile) and the motto “*Siempre una patada en los pantalones*” (“Always a kick in the pants”). According to Sean Kennedy, of the Civilian Oversight Commission, the ethos of East L.A. Station is steeped in “the us-against-them narrative.” The dynamic has persisted, even as the demographics of the station personnel have shifted from majority white to Latino.

During my meeting with Villanueva, he invited me to see his private office. It was decorated with East L.A. memorabilia. A trophy case displayed a Fort Apache mug and a statue of the boot and helmet. Villanueva’s predecessor had banned references to Fort Apache, which infuriated deputies, who saw the symbol as an expression of station pride. Villanueva seized on this conflict, and shortly before winning the election was photographed wearing

a Fort Apache T-shirt. Since then, the symbol has been added to a station door, and a Fort Apache flag has flown from the flagpole outside.

As Villanueva showed me framed photographs of station gatherings and reunions, he said that the place held deep significance for him. “This is where I cut my teeth in patrol,” he told me. “There’s a lot of rich, rich history there.”

By the time he got to East L.A., in 1991, the Red Devils were in decline, and a new group, the Cavemen, had taken shape. A retired deputy who worked at the station in the nineties told me that back then the clique was relatively innocuous, a social club with a cartoonish mascot. “The Caveman was the station’s symbol,” he said. “They had a big one in the briefing room. There were a few guys with tattoos. It was a popularity contest more than anything else. Some of the guys earned tattoos because they bought beer for everyone.”

Villanueva, who wore thick glasses and had a studious demeanor, was known as a *flecha derecha*, a straight arrow. In his first position, at inmate reception, he helped get smoking banned in county jails. “He pushed the envelope,” a former insider told me. “He’d take stuff on, regardless of the consequences.”

According to the investigative Web site Knock LA, Villanueva once said publicly that, back in the nineties, “we were all Cavemen.” But contemporaries say he was a wannabe, definitely not tattoo material. “He’s a goober,” the retired East L.A. deputy told me. “He wasn’t hated or anything—they just kind of laughed at him.”

In the aftermath of the L.A. riots, Villanueva announced that he was running for sheriff, but didn’t pursue it. As part of the Clinton Administration’s community-policing initiatives, he became a bicycle cop, assigned to a large housing project. He saw it as an opportunity to engage. “Get out of the car,” he told me. “Talk to people—business owners, residents. Understand the context in which we enforce the law.”

In 1993, Villanueva met his wife, Vivian, at East L.A. Station. One day, he told me, he was alone on patrol: “I see a van rush into a parking lot,

following another car, and then guys with beards jump out, with guns, and they're in civvies. I pull in behind them, draw my gun, then I recognize one of them. Oh, it's the narco crew. They're supposed to tell us, the dispatch, but they just kind of forgot that part."

Vivian, it turned out, was on a ride-along with the cops. A student at Cal State L.A., she had grown up a few blocks from the station and was volunteering with the narcotics unit. "She tells them, 'Hey, who's that nerd with the glasses? He's going to ruin our operation,' " Villanueva recalled. " 'Course, no one told her, 'That's your future husband.' " They were married in 1997. Villanueva has a son, Jared, from a previous marriage. He and Vivian don't have children; they rescue Labradors. He calls her Sweetpea.

Vivian is small, with a tough affect and weary eyes. Online, she is a dogged supporter of victims' rights and police causes, and posts pictures of her yellow Lab with the words "Got your six"—cop lingo for "Got your back." Her family still lives in East L.A., and she identifies closely with the neighborhood. For a time, her Facebook profile picture was the Fort Apache logo.

According to several deputies, Vivian suffered from her husband's failure to gain acceptance at the station. A deputy who worked with Alex Villanueva told me, "She always wanted to be East L.A.—that bravado, 'We're here doing the Lord's work, everyone be damned.' But throughout his career he never got the attention he was seeking from them. Neither did she." (That deputy, like others I spoke to, requested anonymity for fear of retaliation.) Vivian retired from the department in 2018, never having been promoted above the rank of deputy. The former insider said, "She felt once people knew she was married to Alex she had no chance."

As Villanueva sought to advance, he earned a doctorate in public administration, writing a dissertation that addressed underrepresentation of Latinos in the upper ranks. He told me, "The department was the ultimate good-old-boys club. It doesn't matter how many degrees you have, how well you did on a test. I was the living proof."

In 2005, Villanueva sued the department, claiming that he was being passed over because of his race. “I smoked every promotional exam, and I could not get promoted to save my life,” he said. The county eventually settled with him, and he made lieutenant, but he went no further. He became sheriff having never run a station or served in an executive role. He told the press, “That’s the one job they forgot to safeguard against.”

Villanueva entered politics idealistic, largely friendless, and naïve. “The Sheriff and Vivian did not have a following,” a mid-career deputy told me. “They didn’t leave a footprint of relationships with their co-workers.”

Cartoon by Maddie Dai

When he announced his candidacy, standing outside East L.A. Station, the former insider told me, “the joke was that there were more ducks than reporters.” The East L.A. deputies were dismissive, too. Eli Vera, a former adviser to Villanueva who is now running against him, said, “The deputies from that station and the deputies that he worked with wouldn’t even throw him a fund-raiser. They had no respect for him.”

During the campaign, Villanueva and Vivian became close to a political operative named Caren Carl Mandoyan. Known around the department as Creepy Carl, Mandoyan was a former deputy who had been fired in 2016. According to documents related to his dismissal obtained by the L.A. *Times*,

Mandoyan admitted to being a tattooed member of the Grim Reapers, a deputy gang whose emblem is a death's head. His tattoo was not a deciding factor in his termination, though. The case centered on domestic violence, stalking, and lying about his conduct in an internal investigation.

Mandoyan, who had been a training officer, had dated one of his former trainees. In the course of a two-year relationship, the woman alleged, he grew increasingly abusive and controlling, threatening to derail her career and that of her father, who also worked for the department. In a taped phone call, he harangued her for attending a station briefing, in defiance of his instructions.

"It's gonna be real funny when you fuckin' see just how much influence I have," Mandoyan said, according to a transcript of the call. The woman said mockingly: " 'I'm a Reaper, they're all afraid of me, they'll do whatever I want them to do.' "

"Yeah, you're absolutely right," Mandoyan responded. "This is what happens to fucking disrespectful fucking bitches. You'll see."

In September of 2014, the woman said, Mandoyan attacked her, choking her and tearing her clothing. Twice, he attempted to break into her home. Mandoyan told a department investigator that he was trying to retrieve his backpack and keys, and then trying to apologize to her. Both times, she made videos, and can be heard yelling, "Get the fuck out of my house."

The district attorney's office declined to file charges against Mandoyan, citing insufficient evidence. He appealed his termination to the Civil Service Commission, an appellate body for government employees. Addressing the allegation that he used his gang status to intimidate the woman, Mandoyan's appeal referred to his death's-head tattoo as "innocuous skin art." He denied any domestic abuse or stalking. The woman, he insisted, was conning the department.

In our meeting, Villanueva vehemently amplified Mandoyan's arguments. The woman, he said, "has a prior history of making outrageous allegations not supported by facts. Kind of a—what's that, the lacrosse players that were accused?" He was referring to the case at Duke in which three lacrosse

players were accused of rape, in 2006, and later exonerated. “Kind of like that. She needs help.” Regardless, he said, “it’s not a termination case. It’s a toxic relationship between two deputies. Not suitable for each other, for sure. But, as an employer, at what point can I intervene?”

Villanueva said that the videos were missing large segments, which he had not seen. “They’re trying to execute a guy they know is innocent,” he said. “But they don’t care, because they have people like you who say, ‘Oh, my God, I saw the video, what a horrendous thing to do. That Villanueva, he’s such an anti, woman-hater, hashtag MeToo hashtag cancel culture hashtag whatever.’ They’re playing it very, very well.”

In May of 2018, the Civil Service Commission upheld the decision to fire Mandoyan. Two weeks later, Villanueva advanced from the primary to the general election, and Mandoyan, who had been working for another candidate, offered his services. That summer, he became Villanueva’s driver, accompanying him on long days of campaign events. Mandoyan was in the midst of suing over his termination, and he harped on his situation constantly. “You know how they say ‘Misery loves company’?” the former insider told me. “Carl saw himself as a victim. Sheriff saw himself as a victim, too—the thumb put on him, his career being held back by various people for various reasons. Vivian saw herself as a victim, by sheer association with Alex. I call it the triangle of misery. And they bonded over that.”

During the 2018 campaign, as Villanueva was impressing liberal Democrats with talk of reform, he also began signalling deputies that he would preside over a restoration. He talked about creating a Truth and Reconciliation Panel, through which fired deputies could have their cases reviewed. The union that represents rank-and-file deputies endorsed him, and contributed $1.3 million to his campaign. In its publication, the vice-president explained why the union supported Villanueva. One reason, he wrote, was that “Alex said tattoos are not a big deal, they are a cultural norm.”

The first fired deputy Villanueva wanted to rehire was Mandoyan. The process began quietly, on the day McDonnell conceded the election. Alicia Ault, a former chief, testified in a sworn deposition that reinstating Mandoyan was Villanueva’s “No. 1 priority.” She believed that her job

depended on it, but, she said, she felt that it was unethical. Aside from Mandoyan's misconduct, he was technically ineligible, because more than two years had passed since his termination. Uncertain how to extricate herself from the situation, Ault retired.

Mandoyan boasted about manipulating Villanueva by exploiting his sense of loyalty and making himself pathetic. "He'd say, 'It's better if I'm not around. Better if I go away and no one ever hears from me again,' " the deputy who worked with Villanueva told me. At the same time, he played to Villanueva's insecurities. The former insider said, "Carl made Alex believe, 'You're a rock star, you're the sheriff, you can do whatever you want. You can wave your magic wand and I'll have my job back.' "

Several former Villanueva advisers told me that they had been deeply uncomfortable with Mandoyan's influence, and they were aghast when Villanueva invited him to the swearing-in, to help pin on his new insignia. "We're, like, *what*?" Eli Vera, the former Villanueva adviser who's now running against him, told me. "Anybody knows that's a horrible look. What message are you sending?" Vera went on, "He said, 'Well, he should be exonerated—there's nothing here.' I remember telling him specifically, 'Alex, you've just heard his side of the story. None of us has read the case. We have no idea what's in this investigation.' " At the ceremony, Mandoyan held the box for the insignia, while others pinned them on.

As the Truth and Reconciliation Panel got under way, Mandoyan became the test case. According to Vera, who participated, it was a sloppy process, whose rules were rewritten to insure the outcome Villanueva wanted.

Mandoyan was reinstated, with back pay, in December, 2018. He had his badge and his gun back, and soon a job in logistics, but his main role, insiders say, was helping the Villanuevas adjust to a life in politics. Mandoyan started calling Vivian the First Lady and the Queen. According to the deputy who worked with Villanueva, Alex and Vivian would binge-watch "House of Cards" and "Designated Survivor" with Mandoyan. "They took a lot from those shows," he said. "They learned how to be political, how ruthless politics are. Their whole mind-set was, Wow, look at how the Kevin Spacey character was able to coördinate certain things and still come out on top."

Some who once supported Villanueva trace his present troubles to Mandoyan. The former insider said, “He may have had a little of this evil in him before, but Carl has ruined him.”

The Banditos emerged at East L.A. Station some twenty years ago. If the Caveman symbol had fostered camaraderie, the new clique thrived on exclusion and intimidation. Recalling the first time he saw the Bandito tattoo, the retired East L.A. deputy said, “I thought, Dude, that looks like shit—that looks like a prison tattoo. I didn’t want to be associated with it.” In the time of the Cavemen, deputy nicknames were lighthearted, he said; under the Banditos, they seemed menacing, hinting at aggressive or illegal behavior.

By the time Villanueva was elected, in 2018, the station was embroiled in a civil war, between the Banditos and the “rats” who resisted them. According to the lawsuit brought by eight deputies and the A.C.L.U., the station’s shot-callers conducted a campaign of bullying and harassment against deputies they didn’t consider “East L.A. material.”

Rafael Munoz, the deputy Rosa Gonzalez was warned about, had allegedly become the Banditos’ top shot-caller. He was aided by Gregory Rodriguez, who, in 2016, was tried for perjury and filing a false police report. The jury deadlocked and the case was dismissed; Rodriguez, who had been suspended, returned to work. He and Munoz had a history—they’d been in a shooting together in 2013—and they shared a reputation for unruly behavior. A county report says that they each had “numerous suspensions” for violating department policies. (A lawyer representing Munoz and Rodriguez acknowledged that the two have Bandito tattoos, but said that they were marks of professional pride, not of gang membership.)

One of the plaintiffs in the suit was a training officer named Benjamin Zaredini. A former Bandito prospect, he had become disillusioned and would no longer take orders. He alleges that members of the gang routinely withheld backup, endangering his life. Finally, the lawsuit says, Zaredini complained to a lieutenant, who recommended an investigation, but it was never carried out. The hazing included confrontations of noncompliant deputies behind the station or at a nearby bar. The suit claims that the

Banditos were focussed on ousting Zaredini's trainee, Alfred Gonzalez. (He's not related to Rosa.)

In September, 2018, the East L.A. deputies threw a party at Kennedy Hall, a venue near the station, to celebrate deputies who had finished training. The Villanuevas made an appearance, and Alex delivered his campaign reassurance: "Help is on the way."

After the Villanuevas left, the Banditos started picking on Gonzalez, calling him a "pussy" and a "rat." In what the lawsuit characterizes as a premeditated gang assault, Rodriguez confronted him in the parking lot, at around 3:30 *A.M.*, after the hall had closed. When other deputies tried to intervene, Munoz body-slammed Gonzalez, the lawsuit says. A melee ensued, with Munoz knocking another deputy he disliked to the ground and pummelling him in the face. When the deputy got to his feet, Rodriguez struck him again, knocking him unconscious, and then began kicking him, while others cheered or stood by. At one point, Rodriguez allegedly reached for his gun. According to the lawsuit, "a female deputy yelled at G-Rod to stop, 'Are you serious?! You just got your job back!' "

In the months that followed, the Banditos' intimidation campaign continued, the lawsuit says. Dead rats were left outside Zaredini's house, and the ammunition was removed from his shotgun. During the same period, administrative retaliation began, the suit maintains; Zaredini got a seven-day suspension for an unsubstantiated complaint that he had used a homophobic slur against another deputy. He was also denied an earned promotion to sergeant. Munoz and Rodriguez, conversely, were put on paid leave. (Their lawyer disputed the plaintiffs' claims of harassment and bullying, and said that their descriptions of the brawl were "fabrications.")

When Villanueva took office, two months after the incident at Kennedy Hall, he made a show of reforming East L.A. Station. On his first day, he replaced the captain, telling the L.A. *Times* that the Banditos "ran roughshod" over him. But, according to Eli Vera, Villanueva's first idea was to bring Daniel (Batman) Batanero—an alleged founder of the Banditos, whom the Sheriff had served with at East L.A.—out of retirement, advance him two ranks, and make him station captain. When advisers dissuaded him, they say, he instead put Batanero in charge of his personal security. (The department denied that

Batanero led the security team, and said that when he served with Villanueva "there was no talk of Banditos.")

At a press conference in the spring of 2019, Villanueva addressed misbehavior at the station, saying, "We're taking a very aggressive role in tamping this down." He went on to fire the shot-callers who had instigated the violence at Kennedy Hall, including Munoz and Rodriguez. In Facebook Live addresses, he enumerated reforms that he had made, including the transfers of Banditos and those who had failed to stand up to them—thirty-six deputies in all.

But, in a sworn deposition, Ernie Chavez, the new station captain, said that these were "general transfers," unconnected to any investigation of the Banditos. Vera, who was part of the discussions, told me that the transfers were not a radical purge; the deputies moved voluntarily or were promoted. "How did we move thirty-six people without a grievance?" Vera said. " 'Cause they all agreed to it."

To rid East L.A. Station of Banditos, the department would have needed to know who belonged to the gang—which, a spokesperson told me recently, it was largely unable to do. "It is very difficult for anyone, including the Sheriff, to know who members of these alleged 'secret societies' are, since they are not open about their group membership," the spokesperson explained. "We are prohibited by the law from compelling deputies to show or identify any personal markings without probable cause." But the Kennedy Hall incident had provided an unusual opportunity. Within hours of the fight, an internal criminal investigation was launched. The first interview took place in the hospital, where one of the deputies who had been beaten was recovering.

"If you don't make this right, I'll never fly your airline again unless it's the cheapest option!"
Cartoon by Asher Perlman

At the beginning, the investigators seemed intent on gathering information about the Banditos. In mid-November, 2018, the lead investigator questioned a deputy. Had she seen a Bandito tattoo? Were Banditos sexually harassing women? Were Munoz and Rodriguez Banditos? The deputy claimed ignorance on all counts, saying that the women at the station stayed out of it.

As the inquiry continued, and Villanueva was sworn in as sheriff, the investigators seemed to lose interest in the Banditos. According to a county report, they identified seventy-three witnesses, but they didn't compel testimony, and twenty-seven, including some alleged Banditos, declined to participate. In only one instance did investigators ask about the Banditos without the witness bringing it up first. The district attorney, guided by the internal investigation, decided not to file charges, citing the drunkenness of the brawlers and a lack of video footage, among other factors.

Last week, at a public hearing, the Civilian Oversight Commission presented new evidence to suggest that the investigators' diminishing focus on the Banditos was directed from above. (Villanueva denies giving any orders that discouraged investigation.) Throughout the inquiry, the lead investigator kept a detailed log of his work. While votes in the election for sheriff were still being counted, in early November, he wrote that he was told to ask

witnesses “additional questions about subcultures at East LA.” In a deposition for the case of the eight deputies, parts of which were read into evidence at the hearing, the investigator said that, after Villanueva’s victory, his supervisor had mentioned needing to “check with the sheriff” about the Banditos inquiry. Ten days later, the investigator noted a new instruction from his supervisor: “I do not need to ask about subculture groups at ELA Station.” He explained in his deposition, “We’re a paramilitary organization. He gives me an order; I follow through.”

Villanueva has already seen a sheriff taken down over protecting problematic deputies. In 2014, Lee Baca resigned, after sixteen years in office, and was subsequently charged in a federal obstruction case. He and his under-sheriff, Paul Tanaka, had conspired to block the F.B.I. from investigating deputy abuses and gang behavior in the county jails. In the process, they had confronted the lead agent at her home and threatened her with arrest. Baca was given a sentence of three years, Tanaka five. During Tanaka’s trial, he revealed that he had a tattoo associated with the Vikings, a deputy clique once described by a federal judge as a “neo-Nazi, white supremacist gang.”

In response, the Board of Supervisors created the Office of the Inspector General to “promote constitutional policing and the fair and impartial administration of justice.” In late February, I met with Max Huntsman, a career public-corruption prosecutor, who has served as inspector general since the role’s inception. Huntsman is lanky, with sharp blue eyes and a pair of fierce dachshunds. He told me that his office is intended to be an “early-warning system” if the sheriff’s department is going out of control. In Huntsman’s view, it is.

When Villanueva reinstated Carl Mandoyan, the Board of Supervisors claimed that he’d exceeded his authority, and the county sued him. In the course of a legal battle that has cost taxpayers more than three million dollars, Mandoyan lost his job again. He is contesting the decision; meanwhile, a state filing from 2021 lists him as the C.F.O. of a cannabis business.

The Mandoyan affair turned Villanueva into an enemy of the board, and of anyone he sees as doing its bidding. He has refused to coöperate with the

Civilian Oversight Commission. Huntsman says that, from his first inquiries about deputy gangs and about Mandoyan's rehiring, Villanueva has rebuffed and thwarted him. The inspector general is supposed to have access to all sheriff's department documents, but he says that Villanueva has restricted his viewing of personnel records. Huntsman was forced to sue Villanueva to get him to answer questions about deputy gangs under oath. "If you have the military in control, and you don't have civilian control of them, you've got a problem," Huntsman told me. "We've got a problem." The A.C.L.U. lawyer Andrés Dae Keun Kwon said, of Villanueva, "We do think he's worse than Baca, and that's saying something. There's an imminent threat to civil liberties."

Villanueva has assembled his own team of special investigators, directed by his under-sheriff, Timothy Murakami. A veteran of East L.A. Station, Murakami has been said to have a Caveman tattoo, which he denies. According to a deputy who saw Murakami's tattoo, this is technically true: the tattoo, now inked over, was of a Red Devil. (The department says that Murakami does not belong to any deputy gang.) The team also includes a former homicide detective who, the L.A. *Times* reported, was temporarily banned from county jails for sneaking contraband to an inmate while working on an investigation for the D.A.'s office. Officially named the Civil Rights and Public Integrity Detail, the team is colloquially known as Villanueva's secret police. Though the department says that Villanueva is "walled off" from the unit, it has opened multiple investigations of his perceived enemies, starting with Huntsman.

In response to Villanueva's public complaint that Mandoyan had been treated unfairly, Huntsman produced a report analyzing the attempts to return him to the department. Before publishing it, Huntsman met with Villanueva to share a draft. "He used that meeting to say, 'Max, you're a political hack, you're an attack dog for the board—if you release that report there will be consequences,' " Huntsman told me. "And after I did release it is when he publicly announced that I was under criminal investigation and sent a letter to the board asking that I be removed." Officially, Villanueva accused Huntsman of illegally accessing his personnel files before he took office. No charges have been filed against Huntsman, and he was not removed. But, under the California penal code, intimidating a public officer into an official act would constitute extortion. Huntsman told me, "The

system is not designed to deal with the head of law enforcement committing a crime." (The department did not comment, except to note that the case has been passed on to the state attorney general.)

Villanueva has started referring to Huntsman, insinuatingly, by his birth name, Max-Gustaf Huntsman. In April, he announced that he had information that Huntsman is a Holocaust denier—an unfounded accusation that appeared connected to Huntsman's father, a German, who did not raise him.

Villanueva has also targeted other public officials, searching the offices of a domestic-violence-prevention nonprofit, whose executive director served on the Civilian Oversight Commission, and pushing for an inquiry into Sachi Hamai, the county C.E.O., to determine if her pro-bono service on the board of the local United Way had been a conflict of interest, because the organization backed a county ballot initiative to fund social services. She filed a defamation claim, and won a settlement that included money for personal security.

Failing to eradicate the deputy gangs creates financial liability for the county. Since 1990, according to the Office of the Inspector General, settlements involving deputies with gang affiliations have cost taxpayers at least fifty-four million dollars. There may also be a less visible cost. Sean Kennedy, of the Civilian Oversight Commission, told me that deputy gangs threaten the integrity of the criminal courts. "If nearly twenty per cent of the department is gang-affiliated, that means that every day there are investigating officers and gang experts testifying in L.A. Superior Court against accused people who are gang members," he said. "And yet no one is telling the accused or the public defender representing them that this person testifying is known to be, or believed to be by the department, a Bandito." When he was in private practice, Kennedy represented at-risk juveniles with "gang enhancement" charges, which can add ten to fifteen years to a sentence for anyone convicted of committing a crime while in a gang. Kennedy's teen-age clients pointed out the absurdity of the situation, he said: "They'd be, like, 'The gang expert against me is in a gang himself!' "

Last year, the mid-career deputy told me, Carl Mandoyan approached her as she was coming due for a promotion to explain how she could gain

advancement. Though he was no longer employed there, he was lingering around the sheriff's department, trading on his relationship with the Villanuevas. "He said I needed to call Vivian, take her to lunch, buy her a nice gift, and ask her for career advice," she said. "He told me about other people getting her expensive tequila, 'cause she likes tequila, and also getting her personalized gifts about their dog, Alvin, that had died—shadow boxes with the dog's picture and all kinds of memorabilia." (Mandoyan's lawyer says that he has not been involved with the department since he was removed in 2019, and claimed that complaints about him were motivated by professional rivalries, adding, "There should be no doubt, Carl Mandoyan was seen as a threat by some.")

In a recent story, the L.A. *Times* described Vivian as a power broker, working outside traditional channels to influence transfers and promotions. Several sources with direct knowledge of the situation told me that she makes critical personnel decisions, according to her sense of political expediency and personal loyalty.

The deputy who worked with Villanueva said that in the early days of the administration a promotion list was sent out to the department, according to protocol. "Alex was livid," the deputy told me. "He said, 'From now on, every list has to come through me.' We soon realized that it was something that had to be taken home and vetted, and Carl was part of that discussion." At times, the deputy said, these informal consultations could upend normal decision-making: "You can have the top five people in the department in the room, and they'll convince him one way, and then he goes home and he'll come back and completely reverse it." Before long, the deputy said, Villanueva started calling Vivian from meetings and giving a thumbs-up or thumbs-down based on her opinion: "He'd say, 'Hey, babe, we're talking about this.' You could hear her voice on the phone."

The deputy who worked with Villanueva said that he tried to protect the Sheriff from incriminating himself. "They didn't want to hear it," he said. "They were the rainmakers and they wanted to be involved in every decision." When Vivian was angry at someone, the deputy said, she'd demand that Alex "send them to Siberia!" The deputy was tasked with explaining the constraints. "I'd say, 'Ma'am, I get you're upset, but we're

not going to do that,' " he told me. "She finally said, 'Get him out of here.' " The deputy was removed from his position.

At some point, the East L.A. deputies figured out that Vivian was accessible. "She started building her network," the mid-career deputy told me. "People associated with East L.A. have gotten promotions multiple times." The deputy who worked with Villanueva said, "I call it the secret formula—get an introduction from someone in the inner circle, text her, and tell her your sob story." The arrangement helps Vivian advance loyalists. According to the former insider, Vivian boasts, "I've got spies everywhere," keeping tabs on those who might undermine her husband.

In a recent civil complaint about retaliation and workplace harassment, a recruit-training officer alleges that, when she dismissed an unqualified friend of Vivian's, Vivian verbally abused her and sullied her reputation, saying, "I will go off on that bitch." (The department disputes this account, and denies that Vivian has improper influence, noting, "Her input is always welcomed and taken from the perspective of a devoted wife supporting her husband in defending their community.")

One particular friend of Vivian's, Carrie Robles-Placencia, seems to have had her career saved by her proximity to power. One evening in November of 2017, Robles-Placencia, a trainee at East L.A. Station who reportedly had previously worked under Vivian, was driving a department S.U.V. to a call. Without turning on her siren, she ran a red light and collided with another car. In the resulting multi-car accident, Robles-Placencia accelerated onto the sidewalk, where she struck and killed two children, aged seven and nine, who were standing with their mother.

The L.A.P.D., which responded to the accident, found Robles-Placencia at fault, and the county has paid out more than $22 million in settlements. But the district attorney declined to file criminal charges, and Robles-Placencia has reportedly received no discipline. After Villanueva took office, he made her part of his Executive Projects Team, a group, made up largely of Vivian's friends, that plans town-hall meetings and other events. Robles-Placencia still drives a county car and has often been seen with Vivian, whom she calls Mom.

Some deputies are discouraged by what they see as the corruption of Villanueva's administration. The sheriff's department is not "a criminal organization," the retired East L.A. deputy said. "I'm not a crook. And it does a disservice to me and all the other good men and women. At East L.A., you've got a group of people there who need to be rooted out, and he's an executive who won't do it."

At the recent Civilian Oversight Commission hearing, a current deputy from East L.A. testified under oath that the Banditos continue to disrupt the operations of the station. Fearing retribution, the witness called in, using voice alteration. Ten deputies, the witness said, had received Bandito tattoos eighteen months ago. Unprofessional and illegal behavior was going unpunished: Banditos and their associates loosened lug nuts on unpopular deputies' vehicles; one associate pointed a gun at another deputy's head in the locker room. After the hearing, Villanueva released a statement describing talk of deputy gangs as a "racist dog whistle" and the hearing as a "kangaroo court."

At this point, Villanueva's critics say, he is no longer an outsider to gang culture. "His conduct protects the gang, and in that sense he now has a gang affiliation," Huntsman told me. "Anybody who believes in democracy or the rule of law should be very scared. Having a shadow government that actually controls what happens on the street can cause all the laws you write to have no impact on whether you get shot dead."

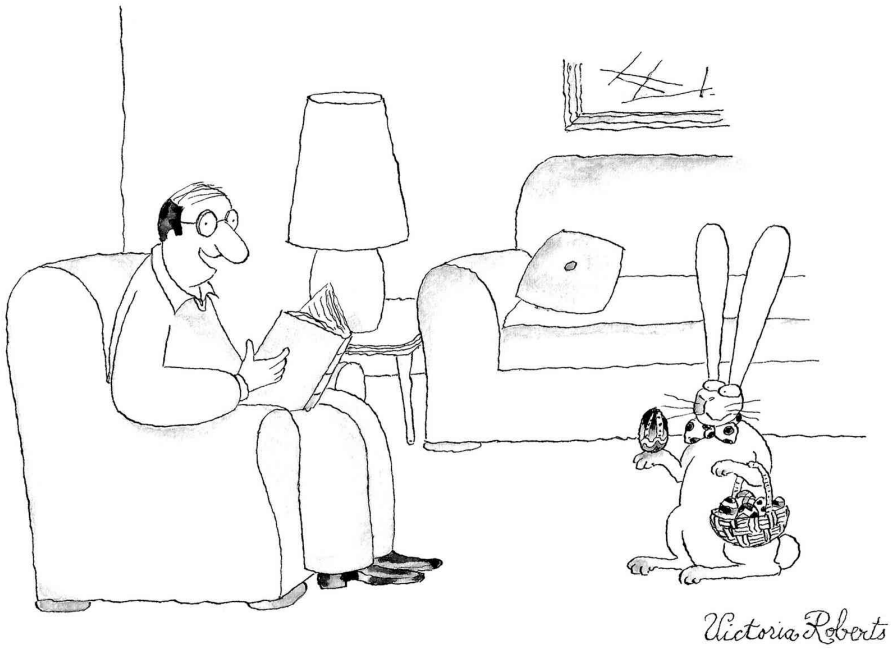
Not long ago, I went to a rally outside Villanueva's office at the Hall of Justice—or, as the organizers of the event call it, the Hall of Injustice. Operating under the banner of the Check the Sheriff Coalition, the activists were calling on the Board of Supervisors to introduce an amendment to the county charter that would allow them to impeach Villanueva. People filled the sidewalk, wearing buttons with slogans like "Cancel the Sheriff" and "Google LASD gangs."

One woman, slight and pale, with neat center-parted hair, wore a jacket with large lettering on the back that read "*Fuck the East L.A. Sheriff's Department.*" As she approached the microphone, she was introduced as Stephanie Luna.

“I am the aunt of Anthony Vargas, who was murdered in August of 2018,” she said. “My nephew was murdered by two deputies that were chasing ink, from the East L.A. sheriff’s station.”

The deputies, looking for an armed robber, had come across Vargas, who was twenty-one, walking through the Nueva Maravilla housing community. He ran away, stumbling; when they tackled him, they said, he refused to show his hands. One of the deputies said he saw a gun in Vargas’s hand and thought that he was about to kill them. They shot him twelve times in the back and the head, and once in the arm. A semi-automatic handgun was reported found under Vargas’s body. According to the district attorney, who ruled the shooting lawful, “the gun was registered to an unknown party in the state of Arizona.” DNA analysis of the gun was inconclusive: there were fragments from two men, one of whom could have been, but was not definitely, Vargas. The gun, which the deputies maintained he’d held in his hand, had no prints on it.

At the rally Luna said, “Villanueva has failed, he has failed miserably, to hold the two deputies that murdered my nephew accountable.” Afterward, she explained to me what she thought had happened. “We had begun looking up how many settlements the county had paid out to families within the East L.A. community for similar shootings like what happened to Anthony—kid shot in the back, kid running,” she said. “And we had pieced it together that maybe Anthony was killed in a deputy-gang initiation.”



"You're late, but who am I to turn down chocolate?"
Cartoon by Victoria Roberts

In the CBS exposé, the whistle-blowers from East L.A. Station confirmed that the deputies who killed Vargas were aspiring Banditos, and said that there are methods for making shootings appear justified. "There's been multiple occasions where they say, 'Hey, we got a guy that's got a gun and he's running from us," one says. "In reality, that person never had a gun. And they would say, 'Oh, it was a phantom gun.' It was something that really wasn't there."

Luna believes that the deputies planted the gun on her nephew. "Banditos are known to do that out of East L.A.," she said. "They go around confiscating guns from people. . . . They're known to take them to the station and clean them so they have weapons to plant on individuals that they're shooting and killing. The fact that this gun has no fingerprints on it and has none of Anthony's blood on it, that speaks for itself." Lisa Vargas, Anthony's mother, has filed a civil claim against the county for his death. The two deputies, Luna said, have been denied qualified immunity. "That will allow us to have a day in court with them," she said. (The two deputies could not be reached for comment. They have denied any connection with the Banditos.)

Luna told me that she continued to encounter the deputies on the street. "We see them at the local 7-Eleven when we take the kids for slushies," she said.

“We see them at the hamburger stand. We see them every day.” Luna, who lives a few blocks from the station, said that officers had pulled into the driveway and waved to her kids. “I don’t understand how they’re still employed,” she said. “I don’t understand how they’re able to intimidate my family when we’re in pending litigation.”

A week later, I went to East L.A. to see another grieving family, Leah Garcia and her daughters Jaylene and Janae, who are twenty-four and seventeen. We met on the sunbaked median of a major avenue, where, in June of 2019, Garcia’s son Paul Rea was shot and killed during a traffic stop. Garcia was wearing a T-shirt that said “Warriors 4 Our Children.” On her neck was a fresh tattoo that read “Forever my son Paulie.” By the curb was a small shrine: a row of saint’s candles, a deflated foil balloon, and some carnations Garcia had placed there the night before. “This is very sacred to me,” she said. “This is where he took his last breath.”

On the night of Rea’s death, Garcia told me, he was in the passenger seat of a friend’s Audi when they were stopped by a deputy named Hector Saavedra-Soto and his partner, for failing to observe a stop sign. Across the street, at a pale-yellow stucco house, I could see a security camera. It had captured footage of Rea trying to run away, while Saavedra-Soto held him. Seconds later, there were muzzle flashes, as Saavedra-Soto fired his gun.

Rea was eighteen, about five feet two and a hundred and fifteen pounds. In a statement to the Homicide Bureau, Saavedra-Soto said that Rea punched him in the head, causing him to black out briefly. As he struggled to keep Rea from running, he said, he felt a weapon in his waistband.

Saavedra-Soto told the homicide investigator that, in the tussle, Rea turned, reaching for his waistband. “He looked at me, and that look in his eyes. I could just tell,” he said. “He was gonna fucking kill me.” The district attorney, while conceding that much of this was not visible in the footage, decided that the shooting was justified.

In testimony, Saavedra-Soto gave a pointed description of grasping a gun in Rea’s waistband. “The grip was distinct,” he said. “It was a lot of detail into it. There’s a lot—it’s like a thick grip.” According to the police report, though, investigators found the weapon not in Rea’s waistband but tucked

into his pants cuff. There were no fingerprints—neither Rea's nor Saavedra-Soto's—on it. Rea's family believes that someone planted the gun.

According to the lawsuit brought by the eight East L.A. deputies, Saavedra-Soto was a protégé of Rafael Munoz, the station's top shot-caller. The suit refers to the two men cruising the neighborhood, looking for civilians to beat. (Their lawyer denied this.) By 2019, when Saavedra-Soto killed Rea, he may have had an even greater measure of protection. Munoz's training officer from East L.A. Station back in the nineties, Alex Villanueva, had become sheriff.

Saavedra-Soto is back on patrol in East L.A. "They don't have no heart out here," Jaylene said. "When have you heard them getting any discipline? They could get terminated, but what's Villanueva gonna do? Rehire them!"

Jaylene believes that Saavedra-Soto killed her brother to earn a Bandito tattoo. Saavedra-Soto's lawyer denies this, and says that he has no affiliation with the gang. Jaylene wants proof. "What we're trying to get in court is for us to see, does he have any tattoos?" she said. "Just like they would if they're putting a gang enhancement on a gang member in court. They're going to ask to see that damn tattoo. So we need the tattoo. Just like those guys would hold anybody else accountable, they need to hold him accountable."

In Villanueva's office, I asked if he still considered himself a progressive. He said, "I didn't change. I think the progressive wing of the Democratic Party changed, and they rebranded themselves as social-justice warriors." The Party decided not to endorse anyone for sheriff in the forthcoming election; Villanueva didn't even make it to its second round.

With homelessness, homicides, and armed robberies on the rise, he is betting that the electorate will vote their anxieties. In a recent campaign ad, he presents an image of Los Angelenos oblivious of the dystopia they are living in—a woman in a halter top and cutoffs rollerblading past a tent encampment, a mother and child playing with hypodermic needles in a sandbox. "I fear for my home's future," Villanueva says in a voice-over. "The California Dream has turned to a nightmare."

In recent weeks, Villanueva has faced a new crisis. In late March, the L.A. *Times* published a video showing a deputy at a county courthouse kneeling on an inmate's neck for more than three minutes, after the inmate started a physical altercation. (The deputy, Douglas Johnson, who could not be reached for comment, was previously investigated for taking and sharing photographs of Kobe Bryant's remains after his helicopter crashed.) The kneeling incident had taken place the previous March—two days into the trial of Derek Chauvin, the Minneapolis police officer who murdered George Floyd, using the same method. The inmate wasn't seriously injured, but the *Times* reported that Villanueva's administration, fearing an outcry, had orchestrated a coverup.

Since the leak, a series of whistle-blowers have come forward. According to a spate of new claims, a commander saw the video shortly after the event and grew concerned. He shared it with the assistant sheriff, Robin Limon, who was also disturbed. She alleges that, five days after the incident, she showed the video to Villanueva, who bemoaned the timing, saying, "We do not need bad media." He said he would "handle the matter." But, Limon maintains, he did not release the video or start an inquiry, nor did he seek to charge the inmate, which could have opened the video to discovery.

Months later, according to the claims, a captain came upon the video, and was surprised to learn that it had never been turned over to the department's internal criminal investigators. Finally, in November, 2021, they began looking into the case; the district attorney is currently reviewing it.

When the video was leaked this spring, Villanueva moved to defend himself. He claimed that he had seen the footage last November and had immediately called for a criminal investigation. Under pressure to explain the delay, he placed blame elsewhere. He announced that he was changing out his senior command, including Limon, who held the third-highest rank in the department. She is suing for retaliation. Max Huntsman, the inspector general, has issued a subpoena, seeking all documentation of the event and communication surrounding it.

Villanueva denied the allegations of a coverup, and, citing a grand political conspiracy, threatened to investigate his opponent Eli Vera, Huntsman, and the L.A. *Times* reporter, Alene Tchekmedyian. To many observers both

inside and outside the department, the scramble to contain the crisis is reminiscent of the Baca and Tanaka affair, nearly a decade ago.

The former insider said, “We’re at 2014 all over again”—the moment that Baca’s scheme to obstruct the F.B.I. probe of deputies’ mistreatment of inmates was exposed. “I think Alex is going to be forced to resign. But his pride is not going to allow him to.”

Rosa Gonzalez, who is still employed by the sheriff’s department, sees a different peril ahead. Her attorney said that she worries about further retaliation, and believes she will never stop being victimized by the Banditos. She has never felt more vulnerable. If Villanueva gets reëlected, she fears, the Banditos will have won. ♦

An earlier version of this article misspelled the names of Rosa and Alfred Gonzalez.

Musical Events

- **Malcolm X and Hamlet Seize the Opera Stage**

By Alex Ross

In 1986, the novelist and critic Samuel R. Delany interviewed the composer Anthony Davis, whose opera "X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X" had just received a triumphant première at New York City Opera. Delany, lamenting the neglect of Black opera composers, said, "From 'Aida' and 'Otello' to 'Porgy and Bess' and 'Lost in the Stars,' we as blacks have been opera-ed, have been operated upon, have been operationalized by white composers so that there seems to be a kind of massive charge running from white musicians to us as black subjects." Davis's piece seemed to augur a significant shift. Andrew Porter wrote in this magazine, " 'X' is a work that deserves to enter the American repertory."

Malcolm X, a relentless critic of American myths of progress, would have been unsurprised to learn that the repertory was not quite ready for an opera about his life. Two decades passed before "X" received a full revival, at Oakland Opera Theatre; then it receded for another decade and a half. The George Floyd protests of 2020 finally induced major American companies to pay more heed to Black composers. Last fall, the Metropolitan Opera presented, for the first time in its history, an African American work—Terence Blanchard's "Fire Shut Up in My Bones." The same composer's "Champion" is scheduled for next season. And "X" has come back to life: Detroit Opera staged it in mid-May, and Odyssey Opera and the Boston Modern Orchestra Project will give a semi-staged performance in June. In future seasons, the Detroit production will travel to the Lyric Opera of Chicago, Opera Omaha, Seattle Opera, and, in the fall of 2023, the Met.

Davis, a true musical cosmopolitan, merits the attention. He was born in 1951, in Paterson, New Jersey, and grew up in State College, Pennsylvania. He explored twentieth-century classical music alongside jazz, studying at Yale while playing gigs with the likes of Wadada Leo Smith, George Lewis, and Gerry Hemingway. He also absorbed West African, South Indian, and Indonesian practices. When he turned to opera, in the eighties, he immersed himself in Wagner, Strauss, and Berg. What emerges from this swirl of impressions is a heterogeneous modernist style that mixes dissonant harmony with hypnotic repetition and integrated spells of improvisation.

The libretto for "X" is by the playwright and critic Thulani Davis, the composer's cousin; the story is by Christopher Davis, his brother. The

authors extract a tersely lyrical narrative from the phases of Malcolm X's evolution: his fraught childhood, his zoot-suit youth, his years in prison, his joining the Nation of Islam, his break with Elijah Muhammad, his pilgrimage to Mecca, and his assassination, in 1965, at thirty-nine. At the same time, there is a mythic resonance in Malcolm's momentous journey across the landscape of mid-twentieth-century Black life: his quest moves from the social to the sacred, the political to the eternal.

The most remarkable sections of the score are those in which Malcolm undergoes spiritual transformations: first his conversion to Islam, then his transcendent experience at Mecca. Hard-driving, jazz-inflected writing in the opening scenes gives way to episodes of entrancing stasis: sustained drones, intricately overlapping rhythmic cycles, choral chants of ritual simplicity. Davis's study of Indonesian gamelan is apparent; so is his admiration for Wagner. In conversation with Delany, Davis revealed that he took inspiration from the Grail ceremonies of "Parsifal," which he playfully called the "first minimalist opera." Murmuring string arpeggios that appear throughout the opera are redolent of the shimmering "Parsifal" prelude. The sum of these various elements is a kind of music that, as Porter observed, had never been heard before.

Robert O'Hara, who directed the staging in Detroit, further expanded the story's reach by infusing it with elements of Afrofuturism. Clint Ramos, the set designer, installed a swooping, spaceship-like structure above the stage; on it were projected words and images relevant to the story, including the names of Black people killed by police in recent years. During the Mecca sequence, dozens of sci-fi-ish lamps floated down from the rigging. This hovering between reality and fantasy warded off bio-pic clichés and gave the opera an otherworldly aura.

"X" needs a gifted singer-actor in the title role, and it found one in the bass-baritone Davóne Tines, who had mesmerized the audience before singing a note. In Malcolm's first scene, he emulates a blustering character named Street—a sly riposte to Gershwin's Sportin' Life. Through body language alone, Tines evoked the defensive swagger of a displaced adolescent. The sequence ends with Malcolm in prison. In the austere, smoldering monologue that follows—"I wouldn't tell you / what I know"—Tines

unleashed the expressive power of his voice, which combines precise diction with an acute sensitivity to the musical phrase.

Several principals sang dual roles, in a scheme akin to the ironic doublings of Berg's "Lulu." Victor Ryan Robertson brought his bright, focussed tenor to Street and to Elijah Muhammad; Ronnita Miller showed a richly billowing mezzo voice as Malcolm's sister Ella and as Queen Mother Moore; the soprano Whitney Morrison was warmly lyrical as both Louise Little, Malcolm's mother, and Betty Shabazz. Characterizations from the orchestra pit were no less striking. The original production of "X" featured improvisations by members of Epistēmē, Davis's own ensemble; in Detroit, stars of the local jazz scene ably filled those roles. A trumpet solo by Walter White brought another rapt layer to the time-suspending Mecca scene.

The opera comes to a brutally abrupt close. Malcolm, now known as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, addresses a crowd at the Audubon Ballroom, in Washington Heights. "As-Salaam Alaikum," he says. He stands before a painted backdrop of trees and mountains—an incongruous image that has been looming behind the performers throughout the evening. The music stops; shots ring out; the lights are cut. When I got back to my hotel, I opened my computer to find that a racist white teen-ager had killed ten Black people in Buffalo.

On the same weekend that "X" opened in Detroit, the Met mounted Brett Dean's "Hamlet," a deft stab at a play that has long defied operatic adaptation. Dean's two-act condensation, first seen at Glyndebourne, in 2017, avoids most of the obvious pitfalls of making opera out of Shakespeare. How can a composer set the words "To be or not to be" or "The rest is silence" without sounding faintly ridiculous? Dean and his librettist, Matthew Jocelyn, finesse the problem with a strategy of self-consciousness. When Hamlet enters, he's muttering bits and pieces of the famous phrases—". . . or not to be," "The rest is . . ."—while the orchestra revels in eerie effects. This "Hamlet" is aware of its "Hamlet"-ness, and is also aware that its audience is aware.

It's an absorbing spectacle, but ultimately an insubstantial one. The dismantling of most of Hamlet's soliloquies obscures his inner world, without which the bloodbath at Elsinore loses interest. In place of the

dreamer-philosopher Hamlet, we get an ill-tempered cutup, a tragic brat. The staging, by Neil Armfield, rarely lets the hero stand still: he paces, he slouches, he holds up bunny-ear fingers behind Polonius's head, he mincingly mocks the foppish Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Allan Clayton, a pungently eloquent tenor who will sing Peter Grimes at the Met next season, thrives on the assignment: he's nearly as fine a singer-actor as Tines. But the japery is so relentless that I found myself sympathizing more than once with Claudius, whom Rod Gilfry embodies in seedily charismatic style. The women, meanwhile, are reduced to modish caricature: Gertrude, sung by Sarah Connolly, assumes arch poses, while Ophelia, played by Brenda Rae, lurches from pitiful fretting to orgasmic writhing. Connolly's regal tone and Rae's nuanced passagework partly redeemed these regressive conceptions.

Dean, an Australian who played viola in the Berlin Philharmonic before turning to composition full time, has total command of the orchestra. He can generate hyper-complex, borderline-chaotic textures that remain cleanly etched in every detail. The soundscapes of "Hamlet" are a multifaceted wonder, incorporating abyssal electronic tones, instrumental stations in the balconies, an onstage accordion, and every extended technique in the modern-music textbook. The Met orchestra, under the baton of Nicholas Carter, delivered each squall of sound with immense virtuosity. Yet I struggled to hear an individual voice—the kind that is evident in just a few bars of Davis's "X." Nor could I divine what this "Hamlet" has to say about our time. It seems to emanate from somewhere in the middle of the late twentieth century.

The ending offers a release from the hurly-burly. Solo voices in the orchestra —cello, English horn, clarinet—intone downward-sighing lines over a quivering bed of sustained chords. Hamlet, collapsed in Horatio's arms, finally gets to complete his line "The rest is silence." It's a beautiful, almost sentimental close, and it ignores the play's valedictory irony: Hamlet dies amid "warlike noise," the ruckus of Fortinbras's arriving army. For a realization of that sonic crackup, one can turn to a "Hamlet" opera that has fallen into obscurity: a 1968 adaptation by the British twelve-tone composer Humphrey Searle, who studied with Anton Webern. Searle signs off with a dissonantly howling march, which might be either a reflection on what has

just happened or a premonition of what comes next. That ending would have better matched our moment. ♦

Onward and Upward with the Arts

- **Angel Olsen Sees Your Pain**

By Amanda Petrusich

Content

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

On a rainy afternoon in mid-April, the singer and songwriter Angel Olsen steered a Subaru through Asheville, North Carolina, while a cardboard box of VHS tapes clattered in the back seat. Olsen, who is thirty-five, had recently excavated them from her childhood home, in St. Louis. Some promised footage of significant events—"Angel's Graduation," "Angel's First Day of Preschool"—and others were labelled "*THE POKEMON*" and "*WORLD PREMIERE DARK HORIZON*." After pulling up at a video-restoration shop, Olsen did some hasty sorting in the parking lot, trying to decide which tapes were worth dusting off with a tissue and which ones she could toss. Olsen, who was adopted when she was three years old, has spent much of the past two years figuring out what to hold on to and what to surrender. In 2021, her adoptive mother and father died two months apart (her mother, from heart failure, at age seventy-eight; her father, in his sleep, at eighty-nine), shortly after she realized and told them she was gay. Ever since, Olsen has been sifting through the material and psychological aftermath.

"Big Time," Olsen's sixth studio album, will be released in June. It is in part a chronicle of her grief, though it's also a document of self-actualization, heartbreak, isolation, and the intoxication of new love. Olsen began recording it at Fivestar Studios, in Topanga, California, with the producer Jonathan Wilson, a few weeks after her mother's funeral. On her phone, Olsen showed me a few photographs of the scene. The studio compound was green, rustic, and artfully unkempt. I told her that it reminded me of pictures and paintings I'd seen of Joni Mitchell's home in nearby Laurel Canyon, a fantasy of woodsy bohemian glamour: unruly ferns in terra-cotta pots, colored glass, open windows, a distinguished house cat lounging on a Moroccan rug. "Everything's made of wood," Olsen said, nodding. "There's a creek in the winter that's full up, and a painting studio, and this old bar." She had chosen Wilson's studio in part because she recognized something in him and in the musicians who congregate there. "Everyone in this crew has a story," she said. "It was the first time I walked into a studio and I knew everybody there had endured hard shit and come out with a sense of humor."

These days, Olsen doesn't have much interest in anyone who has not at least briefly locked eyes with the void. "It's so easy to go to that place where you're romanticizing—Woe is me. But what does it symbolically mean when these things keep happening?" she wondered. On "This Is How It Works," a new song, Olsen sounds worn out, deflated. "I'm so tired of saying I'm tired," she sings. "It's a hard time again."

Olsen arrived in California to record without having rehearsed with her band. "She got here, and said something to the effect of, 'In the past, I would have had these songs prepped, and I would have been practicing them. But I've had to do all this other shit that's just been so fucking heavy,' " Wilson told me. "She was, like, 'I'm just *here*.' " Though she had considered postponing the sessions, delays at a vinyl-pressing plant and other scheduling concerns led Olsen to submit to the immediacy of the experience. "I was, like, my parents died . . . Fuck it," she said, laughing. "Give me a rollie and some tequila. We're making a record!"

The bassist Emily Elhaj, who plays on "Big Time," has known Olsen since around 2007, and they've been recording together for about a decade. "I've never gone into the studio with her without rehearsing," Elhaj told me. "I had no idea what to expect." In Topanga, Elhaj found subtle ways to express her support to Olsen. "I'd leave her a note. She'd find it and know, 'Hey, I see you, and if you want to talk I'm here.' " In recent years, Elhaj said, Olsen has "put in a lot of work to hash out whatever things she had going on personally. It's made her more communicative, maybe less anxious. She's more open, more comfortable with herself."

A few of the songs on "Big Time" were written years earlier, such as "All the Good Times," a loping country number with lap steel, hints of Mellotron, and a horn section that might have been airlifted out of Muscle Shoals circa 1965. Olsen considered offering "All the Good Times" to the country singer Sturgill Simpson, but her voice—gritty, sour, beautiful—carries the song. "I can't say that I'm sorry when I don't feel so wrong anymore," she sings. She sounds weary yet knowing—life has once again proved her right.

"Big Time" is more firmly rooted in country music than anything Olsen has done before; vocally, it nods to Dolly Parton, Nancy Sinatra, Loretta Lynn, and a "Landslide"-era Stevie Nicks, if Nicks had grown up listening to Can

LPs. “Have you heard ‘A Tender Look at Love,’ by Roger Miller?” Olsen asked me. “He’s known for being a jokester in his songs, but this is really different.” She cued up “Little Green Apples” on her car stereo. “Now, this isn’t country, but it is.” Miller became famous for goofy novelty songs like “King of the Road,” from 1964, but his cover of “Little Green Apples” is sentimental, dreamy, a deeply felt treatise on true, benevolent love. “And when my self is feelin’ low / I think about her face aglow / And ease my mind,” he purrs. I suggested that the song contained vague echoes of Townes Van Zandt—its narrator is desperate for comfort, companionship, shelter. Olsen nodded emphatically: “That’s the kind of country that I like.”

In 2021, Olsen and the singer-songwriter Sharon Van Etten released “Like I Used To,” a sumptuous, aching duet. Van Etten recalled feeling stunned when, a decade earlier, she first heard Olsen sing: “When you hear an artist that moves you so much, and you feel so connected to them, and you feel like they’re finding the words for you . . .” She paused. “It’s a special feeling. I thought, This is gonna change the way I think about writing and singing. I felt like she was someone who could embody emotions that I was learning how to communicate myself.”

Olsen and I first met in September, 2016, when she was performing at Basilica SoundScape, a music-and-arts festival held in a renovated nineteenth-century factory near the riverfront in Hudson, New York. Over lunch, her demeanor was careful and vaguely defiant. I immediately liked this about her. Olsen seemed exhausted by the fact that no matter how good the work was—how attentive she had been to the events of her life, how delicately she had pried them open to accommodate melody, rhythm, breath—she still had to sit down and explain the songs to reporters, or, worse, listen as they attempted to explain the songs to her. In the video for “Intern,” a single from her third album, “My Woman,” from 2016, Olsen, wearing a sparkly silver wig, sits across from a music journalist who looks about thirteen years old. “I don’t care what the papers say / It’s just another intern with a résumé,” Olsen sings, her voice cold.

Now Olsen picked me up at my hotel in downtown Asheville and drove us to a dimly lit bar in an industrial-looking corner of the River Arts District. We took cocktails outside to a concrete patio. Distillation is such an instinctive and central part of Olsen’s creative process that even her casual

conversations tend to proceed with a kind of urgency. She prefers to forgo watery chitchat. “I like driving aimlessly, and I like getting lost,” she told me. “But I don’t like small talk. That’s not the kind of lost I’m looking for.”

“For twenty cents more, you can miss the most pivotal scene in the movie while sprinting to the bathroom.”
Cartoon by Jeremy Nguyen

Olsen sometimes worries about the intensity of what she does, how her music might inadvertently magnify her suffering. But the process of transfiguration—denaturing her pain, turning it into song—can also be healing. Olsen has been harnessing her anger and sadness and making room for it in her work since at least 2012, when she put out her début studio album, “Half Way Home,” which was followed, in 2014, by “Burn Your Fire for No Witness,” the release that earned her widespread critical acclaim and a sizable audience. Pitchfork awarded it Best New Album upon its release; the *Times* described it as “parched and striking.” “Burn Your Fire” opens with “Unfucktheworld,” a tense and echoing song about disappointment. “Here’s to thinking that it all meant so much more,” Olsen sings. In late 2013, a few weeks before the album’s release, she sang the song, solo, for NPR’s Tiny Desk concert series. It’s a remarkable performance: her eyes are eerily still, almost stony, but her voice is bloody and sorrowful. It feels as if she were channelling something extraterrestrial—as if, in those moments, her body were on loan to some faraway consciousness.

After “My Woman,” a raucous meditation on love and resistance to love, came the dark and synthesized “All Mirrors,” in 2019. The following year, she put out a companion piece, “Whole New Mess,” which contained the same songs but recorded as haunting dirges. Olsen is often described as a folk singer, and though that doesn’t feel inaccurate, she is also a dedicated student of experimental music. Even when the hooks are sweet or seductive, her work is still dissonant and provocative.

With “Big Time,” the ferment of the past two years provided an almost uncanny amount of fodder. “The artists who I know who have had interesting lives or stories have also had a lot of hardship and a lot of change and a lot of adventure—I feel like I can relate to that,” Olsen said. “Something happens, and then you chisel your way through it, and then art is made. But it doesn’t always feel artistic. It feels like survival mode.” When it goes well, the experience can be triumphant. “If you can turn something that has been really disappointing and scary and weird in your life into something that sounds like a Dolly Parton song, and you sing it with a little wink, there’s nothing better than that feeling,” she went on. “Gotcha! You *almost* had me.”

That evening, Olsen was dressed in black trousers, a loose-fitting blazer, purple socks, and brown loafers. Her dark hair was cut bluntly, and her blue-green eyes—smart, pretty, beset by a swoop of black eyeliner—flashed. “When I sit down with my catalogue, the one thing I’m really grateful for is that I’ve only written about real-life shit,” she said. “Not everyone wants that in music, and not everyone’s like that in music. It’s taken me years to not have a chip on my shoulder about it, because I can be really intense. I’ll meet somebody new and they’ll be, like, ‘Whoa.’ ”

I mentioned that the impulse to write songs and the impulse to perform and promote them can seem diametrically opposed—that the former might require solitude and focus, whereas the latter is about being extroverted and oversized. “It’s like the eternal birthday party,” she said. “And it’s so meta, because it’s things that have happened to you, and they’re put to melody, and you’re performing them over and over again. It’s fun, though,” she added. Her voice took on the forced lightness of someone trying to convince herself of something. “I just wish that it only lasted a month and then it was over.”

When Olsen finished “Big Time,” Jagjaguwar, her record label, asked her for a bio, and she wrote a ten-page essay explaining what had led her to make the album. The label gently suggested that she consider sharing something shorter and more focussed on the music. Eventually, the novelist Catherine Lacey used Olsen’s essay and an interview with her to write something new. “Sum it up, bitch!” Olsen joked. She dug her phone out of her pocket and started reading aloud the original piece, which ends, “Yes, I agreed to all this, but it’s last on the list of my favorite part of making things. Making things is my favorite part of making things.”

“Through the Fires,” a new song, features piano and strings. Olsen’s vocal (“And walk through the fires / Of all Earthly desires / And let go of the pain / That obstructs you from higher, higher, higher, higher”) is delicate and precise but still throbbing with emotion. Olsen described the song as being about the end of her first queer relationship. “It’s weird to be in your thirties, come out, and have little experience with people who have been born with the same gender,” she said. “I felt so insecure about it at first. Like I was a little baby coming out of an egg.” When it ended (Olsen said the person told her that they felt the relationship had started out of convenience during the pandemic), it was abrupt and devastating. “When I was dating people before, I felt that I had to hide myself. In this relationship, I just was so real with this person,” she said. “So it felt like the first relationship I’d ever had.”

Heartsick and newly single, Olsen again turned inward, a process that was only amplified by the isolation of quarantine. “Everyone was reflecting and thinking, all of the time—thinking about themselves, thinking about other people, fixating on politics, fixating on certain events, fixating on their relationships, *fixating*,” she said. She felt called to activism. “I was just starting to get involved in community politics and social work. I was thinking about trying to work with the homeless. I felt really drawn to social work because of my adoption experience, and to homelessness because my [birth] mom was practically homeless,” she explained. “I’ve thought about what life would have been like if I had been homeless with her.”

Around the same time, Olsen started feeling a little funny when she was with Beau Thibodeaux, a friend of friends in Asheville. Olsen wasn’t looking to get into another relationship, but, she added, “we both needed the other person.” Their connection was sudden, immediate, and distracting. In April,

2021, Olsen posted a series of pictures of Thibodeaux on Instagram, with the caption “My beau, I’m gay.” (Thibodeaux identifies as trans and nonbinary.) It was a spontaneous decision for Olsen to share the nature of her relationship with her fans. “I was, like, What if I just came out right now?” she recalled. Thibodeaux is credited as a co-writer on the title track from “Big Time,” a sunny song about pausing to revel in a moment of happiness. “It was a big decision to write a song with them and have them in my videos,” Olsen said. “This person is really special to me.”

Olsen told her mother about the relationship over the phone. “My mom was really childlike in a lot of ways,” Olsen said. “She would leave me these voice mails like ‘Hi! I like what you were wearing on that one TV show! Well, I know you’re busy . . .’ It breaks my heart because I was really busy, and I wish I’d had more energy to talk to her all the time. She’d be, like, ‘Are you seeing anyone? I don’t want you to be lonely.’ I was hiding myself from her, so I wouldn’t call her. Eventually, I had to tell her why,” Olsen said. She wasn’t able to explain that her partner was trans, she said, “because I didn’t know how to do that to my mom, who doesn’t know the difference between heroin and weed.” In the end, her mother wasn’t particularly shocked. “She was religious, and I don’t think she agreed with the life style. But she said, ‘I just want you to be happy.’ That was good enough for me.”

Olsen grew up in a Victorian house in St. Louis that, she said, her parents could rarely afford to maintain: “We couldn’t turn the heat on, and I got pneumonia. I didn’t grow up around money or knowing how to take care of money.” She described herself as an outlier within her family, in part because she was the youngest by a significant number of years. “My dad had three sons in his first marriage. And then my mom had a son and a daughter in her first marriage. Then they met, fell in love, and had two kids. And then my mom became a foster parent while she also raised the kids at home. She adopted my brother, and then later, down the line, me,” Olsen explained. “Growing up, most of those people were out of the house. My brothers and sisters had kids, and some of them were the same age that I was. I called them my cousins, even though they’re my nephews and nieces.”

Before “My Woman” was released, Olsen included a semi-teasing “fact sheet” with her press kit, presumably to preëmpt certain predictable or uninteresting questions. (“She has never taken voice lessons and does not

read music"; "Her writing process changes from song to song.") It explicitly discouraged journalists from inquiring about her adoption, a narrative that she feared would drown out substantive discussion of her art. "It's not a thing that I think about every day," she told me. "I was raised by a family that loved me, and that was my family." She has few recollections of life with her birth parents and grandparents—mostly sensory details. "I remember cats," she said. "I remember strawberries. I remember animal crackers because the social worker always had them with her. And I remember the day that I got adopted. I remember the elevator, and the building, and I remember being, like, Why are all these people sitting at a big desk?"

I asked her if she remembered being scared. "No. I think that being scared came later," she said. "In my early twenties, I'd be out at a bar with friends, have one little shot of whiskey, and have a massive panic attack. I had them out of nowhere. I would lose my hearing. I would feel like I was gonna die." It has been hard for Olsen to fully unpack the emotional heft of the experience. "I think the feeling is just that you can't trust anyone," she explained. "I'm still working through that. You can trust someone to love you, maybe. But you can't trust someone to be your support system. That was the lesson that day. You are your own support system."

When Olsen was seventeen, she briefly encountered her birth mother. She remembers feeling disoriented when she was called Angie. Her parents, she said, "just weren't ready to have a kid. People who really want to be loved by someone can stay in a manipulative, traumatic relationship longer than they should because that's how they feel safe. I think she probably felt safe with him at the time. But I don't really know much about her, or about how she lives her life." Olsen is reluctant to linger on it. "I thank God every day that my life turned out the way it did, and that no one calls me Angie," she said.

Growing up in St. Louis, Olsen was closer to her mother than she was to her father. "My dad was kind of hard. He had a temper. I remember getting in trouble once and he told me to sit on the couch until I said I was sorry. And I said, 'Well, I'll be sitting on this couch forever, because you're never gonna hear me apologize,' " she recalled. "My dad loved 'Bonanza' and cowboy movies, and he would watch those endlessly. If ever I brought someone over,

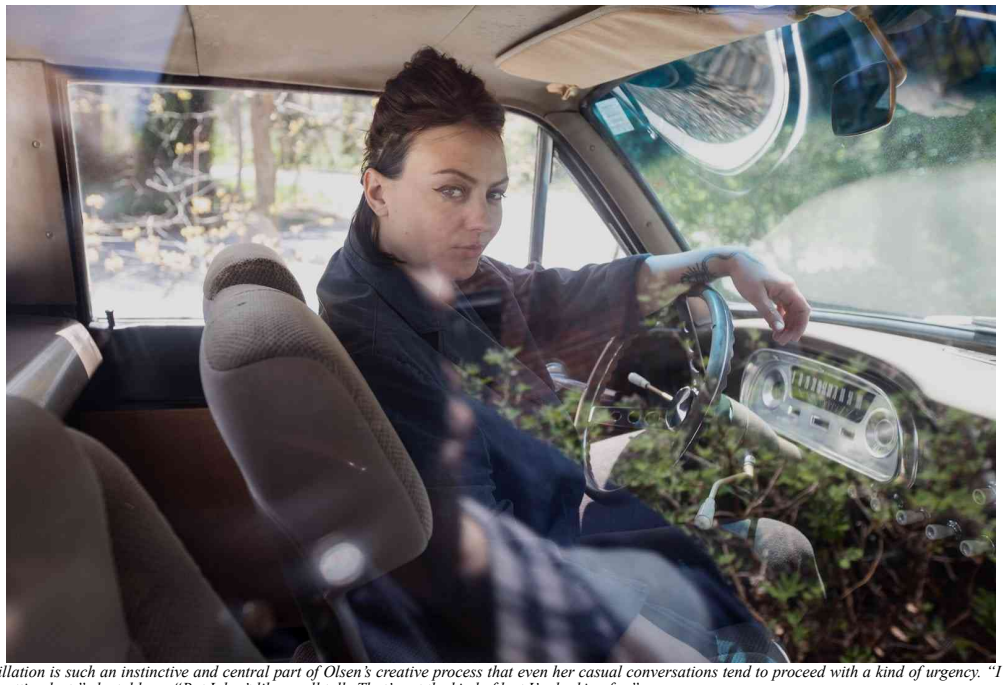
like a boyfriend, he'd love to missay their name, and then go back to the TV."

When Olsen was fifteen, her mother had open-heart surgery. "She was diabetic, and shortly after that they gave her the wrong cocktail of drugs, and she had a manic break that lasted for about a month. I thought she was never gonna come back. My dad and I got closer when that happened, because it was just so alarming. She kept saying, 'I love you, don't worry, everything's fine,' over and over." The lyrics of "Lonely Universe," a bony, haunted song from "Half Way Home," describe a feeling of terror and alienation. Olsen's voice was higher and wilder then, occasionally slipping into a kind of vaporous warble. ("Listening back to old stuff, I would yodel more," she said.) Yet the turbulence in her voice suits her language:

> Your hands were cold
> Your voice was shaky
> One morning not too long ago
> And at the time I was only a child
> About to lose my childlike mind
> The way you touched my hands
> Like you never had before
> It wasn't you anymore

After high school, Olsen was eager to begin her life. "I felt like I was gonna be stuck in St. Louis," she said. "I worked at a grocery store as the fruit-cup person. I cut cantaloupes and pineapples and shit—it was very Midwest. Imagine me going to work in my little outfit, cutting fruit in a walk-in refrigerator. All day. Listening to Can and Deerhoof and Mazzy Star. At night, I went to noise shows."

Olsen started writing songs when she was young—eight or nine, she guesses—but didn't start performing until she was about seventeen. She played in friends' basements and at the Lemp Neighborhood Arts Center, a nonprofit gallery and performance space founded in 1994 and steeped in the kind of anti-capitalist D.I.Y. ethos that fuelled many of the punk and hardcore bands of the eighties and nineties. Shows at the Lemp were all-ages, alcohol-free, and usually just five bucks.



Distillation is such an instinctive and central part of Olsen's creative process that even her casual conversations tend to proceed with a kind of urgency. "I like driving aimlessly, and I like getting lost," she told me. "But I don't like small talk. That's not the kind of lost I'm looking for."

Eventually, Olsen was invited to play a New Year's show in Chicago. She stuck around for a few days afterward and started to think that the city might be a good place to live. "I got a quick boyfriend, one of those, who wanted to go with me. It didn't work out, but I stayed. I slept on an inflatable mattress," she recalled. "I only had pictures, books, a keyboard, and a laptop with me. I didn't know how to do my own laundry, and I didn't have enough money to buy blankets. My roommates were annoyed because I would sometimes steal their cans of soup. I was struggling. I was working at a café while trying to go to massage-therapy school."

After three or four years in Chicago, Olsen met the singer and songwriter Will Oldham, who makes wry, idiosyncratic folk music as Bonnie "Prince" Billy. Oldham asked her to join him on tour as a backing vocalist. Around the same time, Olsen started dating Emmett Kelly, a guitarist in Oldham's band. "I didn't even think about it," she said. "I'd never been in a touring van, I didn't know how that would cause issues." The relationship was tense, and the situation became pressurized. "It was not a healthy environment for me. I wouldn't wish that upon anyone. Will paid me well. I kept my mouth shut. I did my job. I learned the songs, I performed them with him. Even when times were really hard, with my boyfriend, on the road, I still showed up and played the show and fucking nailed it."

Though Olsen was entranced by some parts of the experience—"I was so new to everything that I was just, like, Wow, we're playing in Italy, we're drinking amazing wine, we're going to Portugal, we're seeing live fado at 2 *a.m.*"—she was eager to work on her own songs. Before her relationship with Kelly ended, he played on and co-produced "Half Way Home." "It was hard. It was one of those relationships where you break up and still keep hooking up," she said. Ultimately, her frustration was generative. "Had I not been so angry, I wouldn't have been propelled to make 'Burn Your Fire.' "

I suggested that there might be no more potent motivation on earth than "I'll show you," directed at everyone and no one. "Exactly," she replied. "That's the energy that I had after I left that situation: You'll fucking see. You just wait."

Asheville sits near the southeastern edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains, at the confluence of the French Broad and Swannanoa Rivers. A Vanderbilt family estate just south of the city contains evidence that the land has been inhabited since 8000 B.C. In the nineteenth century, Asheville became known as a wellness retreat, and sanatoriums and grand hotels were constructed in the area. An 1892 pamphlet, "Asheville or the Sky-Land," written by Harriet Adams Sawyer, touts its curative properties: "Conditions which seem to favor germ propagation and prolong the species of the genus Bacterium do not exist here. Wounds heal kindly and operative procedures of the gravest character are rarely followed by septic infection." She describes the air over Asheville as "dry, tonic, invigorating, bracing."

Olsen moved there in 2014 after visiting friends. The legacy of wellness lingers. "In Asheville, everyone is a healer, or an acupuncturist, or a massage therapist, or a shaman, and there's a crystal shop right next to the brewery," Olsen said. One afternoon, we spent a few hours running errands (Olsen needed to buy a stack of white electrical-outlet covers and some paint at ACE Hardware, a spot she described as "the happy place"), eating tacos and chips in the rain, and briefly stopping by Drop of Sun, the studio where she recorded "Aisles," an EP of covers of songs from the eighties, many of which she had heard while grocery shopping. In the late afternoon, we drove along the banks of the French Broad to Marshall, where we snacked on pimento cheese in a boutique hotel that was once the longest continuously operating jailhouse in North Carolina. "There are all kinds of people here,

but it is Appalachian," she said. "You're going to a punk show one day, and you're going to a waterfall the next."

Olsen speaks fondly of Asheville and its environs; she can narrate the region's history with a kind of studied aplomb. The night before, my wallet had tumbled out of my bag as we were closing our tab at the bar; later, when I discovered it was missing, I was briefly seized by panic. Olsen was adamant that I would find it close to where I had left it. "This is Asheville," she said, as she paid for dinner and drove me back to the bar. (My wallet was sitting untouched on the floor, half-obscured by a snoozing dog.)

Early one evening, Olsen and I stopped by the Grove Park Inn, a historic hotel, to have drinks on a giant stone patio overlooking the Blue Ridge Mountains. The inn, which opened in 1913, was built on Sunset Mountain by Edwin Wiley Grove, a pharmaceutical entrepreneur who developed a supposedly flavorless quinine tincture designed to treat and suppress malaria. (In the late eighteen-nineties, Grove's Tasteless Chill Tonic regularly outsold Coca-Cola.)

The resort was designed in an Arts and Crafts style, and it looks like the sort of place a mythical creature might inhabit—rounded edges, mossy, lichen-covered stone, an undulating roof made of red clay tiles. It has been a frequent destination of American Presidents, from Taft through Obama. In 1935 and 1936, F. Scott Fitzgerald stayed there, as he struggled with alcoholism and tuberculosis. Fitzgerald's wife, Zelda, had been given a diagnosis of schizophrenia, and was periodically checked in and out of Highland Hospital in Asheville; in 1948, she was trapped on the top floor of the hospital when a kitchen fire spread through a dumbwaiter shaft, killing her and eight other women. A plaque erected in Zelda's memory offers a grim quote from a letter she wrote to her husband: "I don't need anything except hope, which I can't find by looking backwards or forwards, so I suppose the thing is to shut my eyes."

While we sipped our drinks, Olsen told me that she was planning a vacation to Mexico. "I don't ever take vacations, because I think this is vacation," she said, gesturing toward the mountains, bluish and vibrant in the early dusk. The video for "Big Time," which was directed by Kimberly Stuckwisch, is based loosely on a dream that Olsen had the night she found out that her

mother had died. In it, she arrives at an elegant old hotel and begins preparing to perform. It's the first in a suite of three videos designed to work together as a short film. "I kept seeing all these people who were older, with sparkly eyes. They kept looking at me, 'Twin Peaks' style," Olsen said of the dream. She was eventually pulled out of a stalled elevator car and into what she described as a glistening, Narnia-like world; the people she met there told her that she had come to a place where time works differently. The video opens with a cacophony of clock chimes, church bells, loud ticking. Olsen shakily reaches her hand toward a wall clock, as if asking for help.

Many of the tracks on "Big Time" reference a dream state or suggest that time is fluid and nonlinear. (The phrase is also something that Olsen and Thibodeaux say to each other: "I love you big time.") "I was looking at old you / Looking at who you've become," Olsen repeats on "Dream Thing," a new song that features organ and pedal steel. She told me, "I've always had vivid dreams, but I think they happen more often when I'm processing stuff that I don't understand." She went on, "I kept having these dreams about time travel, and life just *felt* like time travel—losing my parents, going through the pandemic. Time expanded in a different way for me. I wasn't the same. I lost a lot of friendships and couldn't relate to people in the same way." Grief rearranges our insides, I offered. "I really am irreversibly changed," she said. "I am a very different person than I was in 2020. I'm always me. But I did lose. And I went forward, alone, with my experience." ♦

Poems

By Monica Ferrell

Content

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

Audio: *Read by the author.*

The gear in this jaw does nothing.
The muscle in her tongue unlooses only
Raw noise, but the machinery hasn't broken;
It's never been used. The baby doesn't even
Know yet how to sit. She just lies there,
Folded in herself, a scroll whose sutra is written
With still-invisible ink, portent no one can read
About some portion of sun I'll never see.
—But who smithed you, baby?
Who sewed this skin and found your name?
Who labored in dirt till it took the shape of a word?
Who walked the whole way to the orchard's end tree
And shook till you dropped to the earth?
I was the one who blew the trumpet when you came.

By António Osório

Content

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

Audio: *Read by Patricio Ferrari.*

Because there is a meaning
in the lily, let there be worship;
and in the poplar, let there be height;
and in the arborescent heather,
let there be growth;
and in the copper, first treatment
I give to the vine, let there be harvest.

And another meaning, I predict,
there is in memory,
so let there be outburst.
And another, immeasurable,
in love, so let there be surrender.
And another, definitive,
in death, let there be release.

—António Osório (1933-2021)

(Translated, from the Portuguese, by Patricio Ferrari and Susan M. Brown.)

Postscript

- **Remembering Roger Angell, Hall of Famer**

By David Remnick

In recent years, as his odometer headed toward triple digits, Roger Angell became known around our office for the way his cheerful longevity complemented his talent. He was not only the greatest of baseball writers; he had also lived long enough to see Babe Ruth, of the Yankees, at one end of his life and Shohei Ohtani, of the Angels, at the other. Age conferred authority. When Roger covered the Yanks in their late-nineties heyday, Joe Torre, the team's heavy-lidded chief, would sometimes interrupt one of his avuncular soliloquies to a clutch of young reporters and look to him for affirmation: "Roger, am I getting that right?" Sitting in his office, Roger, much like Torre, held court, telling stories about playing Ping-Pong with James Thurber, editing William Trevor and Donald Barthelme, and watching ballgames with the Romanian-born artist Saul Steinberg, who would put on a flannel Milwaukee Braves uniform before sitting down in front of the TV. I once came to him complaining about how hard it was to find writing that was truly funny, and Roger, as if recalling a recent Tuesday, replied, "Harold Ross said the same thing."

And yet Roger was hardly stuck in the past. When the Internet came along and climbing stadium steps no longer held much allure, he watched games late into the night and filed twenty-four-karat blog posts. Although he was insistently modern, he knew what some were thinking when they dropped by his office to see him, natty as always in crisp khakis, a blue Oxford shirt, and a Paul Stuart blazer: Holy shit—he's still vertical! When at ninety-five he published a collection of personal essays and other writing for this magazine, he gave it a characteristically wry and self-knowing title, "This Old Man: All in Pieces."

No one lives forever, but you'd be forgiven for thinking that Roger had a good shot at it. Like the rest of us, he suffered pain and loss and doubt, but he usually kept the blues at bay, always looking forward; he kept writing, reading, memorizing new poems, forming new relationships. When another versatile, sports-minded writer, Budd Schulberg, reached his nineties, he gave away his star-studded address book to a younger writer. He had no use for it: "Everyone in it is dead!" Roger kept replenishing his address book, and his life, with new and younger friends. He went to spring training in Arizona and Florida, full of hope, always on the trail of new prospects. His

thirst for the sensation of being alive survived the worst. Roger was married for forty-eight years to Carol Rogge Angell, but when she was dying she told him, “If you haven’t found someone else by a year after I’m gone I’ll come back and haunt you.” After Carol died, Roger followed her instructions, and his heart. He began a long and wonderful love affair with Peggy Moorman, whom he married in 2014, and who was by his side until the end.

“Getting old is the second-biggest surprise of my life, but the first, by a mile, is our unceasing need for deep attachment and intimate love,” he wrote in “This Old Man.” “I believe that everyone in the world wants to be with someone else tonight, together in the dark, with the sweet warmth of a hip or a foot or a bare expanse of shoulder within reach.”

Roger died on Friday. He was a hundred and one. But longevity was actually quite low on his list of accomplishments. He did as much to distinguish *The New Yorker* as anyone in the magazine’s nearly century-long history. His prose and his editorial judgment left an imprint that’s hard to overstate. Like Ruth and Ohtani, he was a freakishly talented double threat, a superb writer and an invaluable counsel to countless masters of the short story. He won a place in both the American Academy of Arts and Letters and in the Baseball Hall of Fame—a unique distinction. The crowd of friends from the magazine who drove four hours north to watch him receive the J. G. Taylor Spink Award at Doubleday Field, in Cooperstown, wore custom jerseys declaring themselves Roger’s “Angells.”

Roger was born to a very particular sliver of twentieth-century American society. His father, Ernest Angell, was a Harvard-trained lawyer who went on to lead the American Civil Liberties Union. His mother, born Katharine Sergeant, was educated at Bryn Mawr and became this magazine’s first fiction editor, a close editorial partner to Harold Ross. After divorcing Ernest Angell, she married another founding eminence at the magazine, E. B. White. Mrs. White, as she was known at the office, neglected to tell Roger the news of her wedding; Roger, who was nine at the time, heard about it only a couple of days later, through a relative who had read about it in Walter Winchell’s newspaper column. In a marvellous portrait of Mrs. White by Nancy Franklin, called “Lady with a Pencil,” Roger made it plain that, though both mother and son felt the pain and the disruption of the divorce,

he relished the hours he spent listening to her talk about the office in midtown and witnessing her limitless devotion to language and to her writers: “It was the main event of her life—*The New Yorker*, and *New Yorker* writers, and what was in the magazine. It wasn’t a matter of power. It was about what was on the page or what could be on the page if something worked out.” Roger followed suit. As a kid, he read endlessly and developed a mean party trick, memorizing the caption of every cartoon published in the history of the magazine.

After graduating from Harvard, Roger served in the Army Air Corps. He spent much of the Second World War stationed in the Central Pacific, where he was the managing editor of a G.I. magazine. He also found time to write fiction. In March, 1944, *The New Yorker* published a very short story called “Three Ladies in the Morning.” The author’s byline, which came at the end of the piece, was “Cpl. Roger Angell.” After returning home, he spent a long apprenticeship at *Holiday,* a distinguished travel magazine of the mid-century, and finally came to *The New Yorker* as an editor in 1956, after the Whites had moved to Maine. Eventually, Roger led the fiction department; he was, as he often said, “doing my mother’s job in my mother’s office.” Some of the writers Mrs. White had brought to the magazine—Thurber, Nabokov, Updike—eventually became her son’s writers. Roger, who may have carried on one of the longest engagements with psychotherapists in the city’s history, once said that a shrink told him his inheritance was “the greatest piece of active sublimation in my experience.”

As an editor, Roger was devoted, open-minded, and sometimes hard-knuckled. He did not just ladle out the superlatives. His proofs were littered with ziggy cross-outs, querulous question marks, aggressive arrows, and the occasional hard-won “Yes!” As a writer he was a “taker-outer,” not a “keeper-inner,” as he said, and that urge carried over to his editing. Clarity above all. Nothing thrilled him more than to bring in someone fresh and promising. In the early seventies, he knew to be patient when the work of a young graduate student named Ann Beattie was plucked from the “slush pile.” Even as he rejected story after story over nearly two years, he kept writing her encouraging, sometimes instructive, letters. He kept Beattie in the game. Then came this:

> Oh, joy . . . Yes, we are taking "A Platonic Relationship," and I think this is just about the best news of the year. Maybe it isn't the best news for you, but there is nothing that gives me more pleasure (well, *almost* nothing) than at last sending an enthusiastic yes to a writer who has persisted through as many rejections and rebuffs as you have. It's a fine story, I think—original, strong, and true.

Angell was also writing for the magazine: humor pieces, Talk of the Town stories, and the annual holiday poem, "Greetings, Friends!" In 1962, he and the magazine's editor, William Shawn, discussed the idea of his writing about baseball. Mr. Shawn was no baseball maven, but he was always curious. When Roger described to him the intricacies of the double play, his cheeks, Roger recalled, "grew pink with delight." Thus encouraged, Roger set off to Florida for spring training, and began writing the pieces that would form his first baseball book, "The Summer Game."

In the office and elsewhere, Roger was a complex character. The weather of his moods varied. He was funny, encouraging, vulnerable, but he was not without pride or temper. In his prime, he walked the halls jingling the change in his pockets like Molly Bloom's lover, Blazes Boylan. Was he steamed or jolly? Not always easy to know. Put it this way: you didn't want to disappoint him. He always had our affection *and* our respect.

On the page, Roger created—he *threw*—a voice that was utterly joyful, as buoyant as a lottery winner. He hated the poetical and the hard-bitten. The Roger Angell of the baseball pieces was a man at liberty, delighted to be in the stands on a long-shadowed afternoon, part of a vast community of fans. The sentences were ebullient but never decorous. An ur-Wasp, he was tickled to learn the Yiddish word for "over the top": *ungapatchka*. He took it as an immense compliment when a friend told him that he admired the "un-*ungapatchka*-ness" of his work. Roger's best baseball prose—his early piece on the struggles of the fledgling Mets, "The Old Folks Behind Home"; his profiles of the fearsome Bob Gibson, the vanquished Steve Blass, the submariner Dan Quisenberry; his chronicle of the epochal Boston-Cincinnati World Series of 1975, "Agincourt and After"—radiated a sense of wonder at the complexities of the game and those who play it. His enthusiasm for baseball was so immense that it could not be confined to a singular loyalty. In a given season, he was capable of giving his heart to anyone. He was a

Mets fan, a Yankees fan, *and* a Red Sox fan. In anyone else, this would have been unforgivable.

I had the privilege of witnessing Roger's joy in the game more than once, but never more so than in October, 2000, when we went together to Shea Stadium to watch the fifth and final game of the World Series, a Subway Series dominated by Torre's Yankees. Sitting in the left-field stands, Roger held forth on everything from Torre's understated generalship to the "premature decrepitude" of Shea to the best kind of notebook. (Mead notebooks: "They take ink perfectly.") He recited a Homeric catalogue of his favorite baseball names: Hack Wilson, Napoleon Lajoie, Mookie Wilson. They spanned the age—the age of Angell. I could have sat in the stands listening to Roger (and, incidentally, watching the Yanks and the Mets) forever. But there would be no extra innings that night. Mike Piazza's towering attempt to tie things in the ninth fell short and into the glove of Bernie Williams.

"That's it," Roger said, and led the way to the Yankees clubhouse. The Bombers were winners again. Roger entered the room under great arcs of foamy champagne. Happily soaked, he made his way to Torre, and listened in on yet another soliloquy to the young scribes. On some point of historical interest, Torre paused, and looked Roger's way for confirmation. Roger, sagely, nodded assent.

After a while, Roger said, "We should check in on the losers. The story's in there, too." We hustled over to the home-team clubhouse, where the Mets picked gloomily at a sad array of snacks and made the customary remarks about next year. Roger wrote that down, as well.

His Mead notebook now sufficiently inked, he led the way past the revellers and the mourners along the ramps and made it out to the parking lot. We found his Volvo station wagon and climbed in. Another gaudy night in Queens. Roger got behind the wheel and, driving alarmingly fast on the Grand Central Parkway, he talked about next year. Spring training was four months off.

Shouts & Murmurs

- **Maybe I Shouldn’t Have Ditched That Bullshit Detector**

By Ian Frazier

I do not have a bullshit detector. I used to have one, but I don't even know where it is anymore—maybe out in the garage. It was an awkward thing, like one of those little roll-aboard briefcases, but made of bright-orange high-impact plastic, and it didn't work very well. It was O.K. on ordinary, everyday bullshit, but it could not detect cant. It was also not too reliable on sanctimony or pomposity, and only so-so on hypocrisy. Supposedly, it could puncture self-importance, but I could never get that feature to turn on. Over all, the detector was more trouble than it was worth, so I quit using it.

I read recently about someone who had a "built-in" bullshit detector! I am completely unable to picture how that might work, but, then, I would not be the person to ask. Kids, I'm told, have built-in bullshit detectors, so maybe you need to be young. Like a lot of older consumers, I have not kept up on the technology.

Living without a bullshit detector can be peaceful and relaxing. As you know, there is a lot of bullshit out there, and I got sick of having the alarm go off all the time. On the other hand, I do feel a need for the ol' detector occasionally.

The other day, I was at Ikea (as we call it) with my wife when we had a disagreement. We had been there for a while, looking for a piece of furniture for our living room. As I waited for her to make up her mind about one chair or the other, I checked my phone and saw that I had received a solicitation from something called the Flat-Ikea Society. For some reason, I clicked on it. The Flat-Ikea Society is made up of people who believe, in defiance of science and logic, that Ikea is flat. Now, everyone knows that Ikea is round. We take that for granted. But, rather than dismiss the group as crazy, I read on to see what it had to say.

According to these folks, Ikea is a huge flat thing surrounded on all sides by asphalt. If you continue far enough in Ikea, they say, you will go through a sort of portal, and then fall off the edge, or curb, of Ikea. You will then find yourself on a vast asphalt sea, where, they believe, there are monstrous S.U.V.s, many of them a spectral white, along with white and other-colored vans and enormous trucks with rubbery, finlike mud flaps. This asphalt sea rests, in turn, on the back of a giant turtle, or tortoise, that they have named

the Planet. This turtle, or whatever, is a being of which they have only the fuzziest notion—so fuzzy, in fact, that they don't even concern themselves about it.

My wife scoffed when I told her of my e-mail discovery. She wouldn't even hear me out when I argued that this flat-Ikea theory made at least as much sense as the so-called settled science that tells us Ikea is round. I asked her, "How do we actually know that Ikea is round?" She said that, obviously, we know it's round because if we walk in any direction in Ikea eventually we will end up back at the point where we began. She pointed to Ikea's famous meatballs, which are round. If Ikea were flat, the meatballs would be flat, too, like sausage patties. And then there are the familiar pictures of Ikea—the beautiful shots that the astronauts took from space.

Later, in the Ikea parking lot, I wondered, Could this be the "vast asphalt sea" that the flat-Ikea people were talking about? In fact, there were a lot of white S.U.V.s, vans, and enormous trucks, just as in the description. If only I'd been able to crank up the bullshit detector then! Ask it about flat-Ikea-ism, let it shoot down this weird theory once and for all, and I could peaceably yield to the conventional wisdom.

Here is where things get strange.

We loaded the large, flat box containing our new, yet-to-be-assembled living-room chair into the back of the car and began to head home. I was driving. As we exited the Ikea parking lot, the car gradually began to turn upside down. You know that tortoiseshell stuff they make eyeglass frames out of? That is what the road we were now driving on seemed to be made of, as our seat belts kept us from falling and hitting our heads on the ceiling of the car. I can't explain any of it—I'm just telling you what I think I experienced.

I don't judge anybody. If you want to believe that Ikea is flat, fine with me. But just remember that if you think you can save a few bucks by going without a bullshit detector, your cheapness will catch up with you eventually. ♦

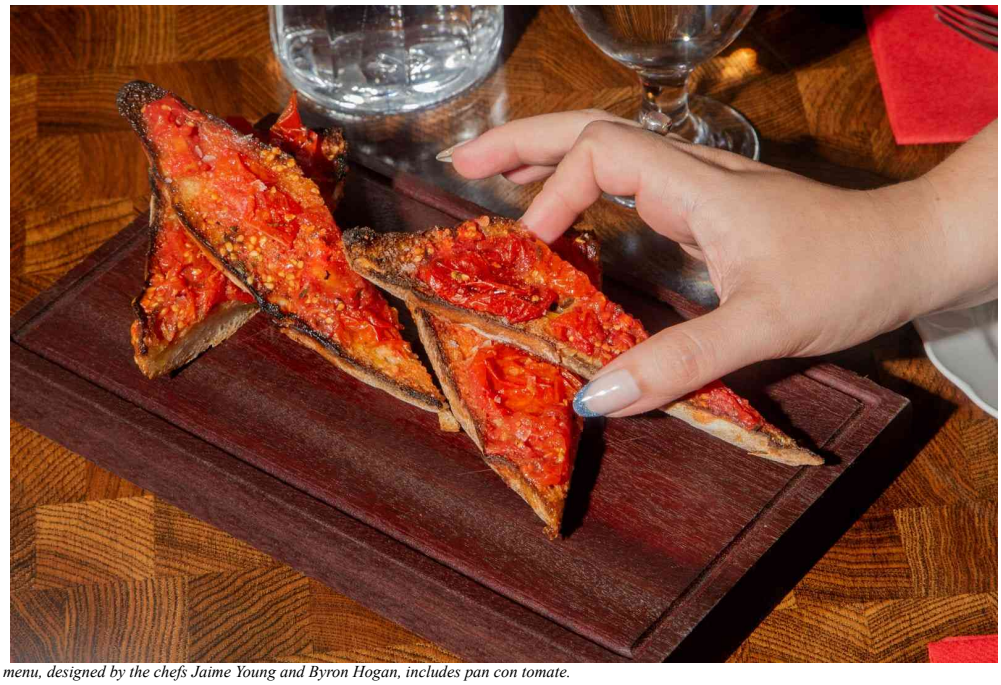
Tables for Two

- **El Quijote Rides Again**

By Shauna Lyon

In Patti Smith's dream-state memoir "Just Kids," from 2010, she devotes a chapter to the Hotel Chelsea, where she lived from 1969 to 1972: "like a doll's house in the Twilight Zone, with a hundred rooms, each a small universe. . . . I loved this place, its shabby elegance, and the history it held so possessively." Before her, Dylan Thomas, Thomas Wolfe, and Bob Dylan had all found creative expression there, and the young Smith and her roommate Robert Mapplethorpe fervently strove to manifest the same for themselves, even as they barely scraped together enough money to make rent. (To their consternation, the hotel manager, known for accepting art as payment, didn't go in for the portfolios they offered as tender.) They whiled away the hours in El Quijote—the hotel's aptly divey canteen, accessible from the lobby—which had been open since 1930 and dealt reliably in shrimp with green sauce, Pollo Villaroy (chicken breast coated in béchamel, then breaded and fried), all manner of steaks and seafood, and boozy sangria.

El Quijote was popular for decades as a stalwart cool place for a decadent night out, where you could eat and drink lustily and no one would mind. In 2018, the restaurant closed for renovations, and now El Quijote has reopened, spiffed up and fancified, under new management. (The hotel, closed since 2011, is now partially open, with plans to open fully in the late summer.)



The menu, designed by the chefs Jaime Young and Byron Hogan, includes pan con tomate.

The iconic red-neon marquee remains, as do an array of intriguingly mediocre vintage paintings and a room-spanning brown-and-white mural of Don Quixote and his windmills. The space has shrunk to less than half its earlier size, with just two rows of tables. They're adjacent to the handsome original bar, glowing crimson and most certainly attracting barflies once again, albeit with fancier cocktails: a Quijote G+T in a giant goblet, with pear, aloe, and celery; a fruity Kalimotxo, with rum, amaro, and iced grapes.

The old menu had scores of dishes; the new one, designed by the chefs Jaime Young and Byron Hogan, is a relatively concise list of Spanish hits. *Pan con tomate*, for which grilled bread is rubbed with tomato, included, on a recent evening, unwieldy tomato skins mixed in with the fruit's pulp. The cod croquettes were ideal, though, packed with the correct ratio of *bacalao*, or reconstituted salt cod, to potato (more cod, less potato), fried to a pleasingly shattering crunch, and served piping hot with copious aioli, making the case that every bite should include a generous swipe.

The original bar remains, now with fancier cocktails, including a Quijote G+T, with pear, aloe, and celery.

If only all salads were as fresh and alert as El Quijote's *ensalada mixta:* crisp leaves of Little Gem, radicchio, frisée, and dark-green spigarello, piled in a pyramid and studded with pine nuts and garlic chips. Tuna crudo, bathed in refreshing Cara Cara-orange juice and layered with pickled Fresno chilies, was unexpectedly lovely. *Patatas bravas*—mandatory when offered—resembled steak fries, overwrought but acceptable thanks to more aioli and a tomato-and-choricero-pepper sauce.

Gambas al ajillo arrived as four head-on jumbo shrimp in the shell—more work than they were worth unless you used your hands, a Catch-22 with no towelettes in sight. A delicious, earthy bowl of pork sausage, baby butter beans, and grilled bread in a tomato-pepper sauce was supposedly, undetectably (unnecessarily) laced with truffle, but it wasn't missed whatsoever. The paella, fortified with mussels, cockles, shrimp, and rabbit, benefitted from tableside dollops of yet more aioli. The highlight, a smoky and tender lobster special—which the genial waitress, in a formal red waiter's coat, said had been deemed "a religious experience" by one diner—was halved, grilled, and spread with roasted garlic, accompanied by drawn butter with a pimentón kick.

There's still sangria, red or white, but only by the pitcher, for fifty-four dollars. It would have cost closer to four back in Smith's day, when she and

Mapplethorpe would scavenge El Quijote's discarded lobster claws to make necklaces. Mapplethorpe would string them together, and Smith, she wrote, "would say a little prayer to thank the lobster." (Dishes $9-$58.) ♦

The Theatre

- **Daddy Issues in a Pair of Plays**
- **Isaac Mizrahi's Companion Piece to "Peter and the Wolf"**

By Vinson Cunningham

Wherever there's a sensitive young man, afraid of life, inexplicably angry, searching restlessly for an audience, you can be fairly sure that a story about his father is about to pour forth. That trope is as true in literature as in life: think of Telemachus, of Oedipus, of Hamlet, poor guys driven to distraction, or long-distance travel, or murder by the spectre of Dad. Patrimonial dysfunction—the kind of deep-rooted stuff that gets grown men singing along to "Cat's in the Cradle" and "Papa Was a Rollin' Stone"—is a classic theme, explored and stylishly transposed in a pair of recent plays featuring queer, questioning, father-haunted protagonists.

Juicy (Marcel Spears), the beguiling centrifuge of "Fat Ham," by James Ijames, and Édouard Louis, the autobiographical character in the one-man show "Who Killed My Father," adapted by Louis from his book-length essay, are in many ways an unlikely pair. Juicy is Black and Édouard is white; Édouard is French and Juicy is American. But they're both working class and alienated, and both try to find, and to rescue, their gentler takes on masculinity amid the admonishments of macho-acting father figures.

"Fat Ham," which won this year's Pulitzer Prize for drama, is a sometimes faithful, sometimes dizzyingly disruptive riff on "Hamlet," with Juicy as that excruciatingly ambivalent mourner, quick of wit but slow to act. He wears black overalls, a black mesh tank, black sneakers, and a tasteful stroke of black eyeliner: a kind of chic, contemporary funeral costume that would fit right in on the East Village streets near the Public Theatre, where this production is running, under the direction of Saheem Ali. But Juicy's no New Yorker—he's from North Carolina, which, as Ijames writes in an introductory note in his script, exists "in a kind of liminal space between the past and the present with an aspirational relationship to the future." (Juicy could also live in "Virginia, or Maryland or Tennessee," Ijames says. "It is not Mississippi, or Alabama or Florida. That's a different thing all together.") The way that Spears plays Juicy is similarly liminal: he's smart but a victim of brain fog, funny but ponderous, soulful but stuck.

Juicy's father, Pap (Billy Eugene Jones), was killed in prison, where he was doing a bid for an absurd crime: he killed somebody because the man's breath smelled bad. "Now . . . to be fair," Juicy says, in one of his frequent moments of direct address to the audience, "Boogie's breath smell like his

insides was decomposing." That kind of cartoonish reason for violence works well as a twisted joke, but it's also the crux of Juicy's problems with his family and with the world. His father calls him "soft" as a pejorative—homophobic danger thrums under the surface of Juicy's interactions with other men—but, in truth, soft is the texture that this big-boned kid wants for his life. What Pap sees as an evil, Juicy understands as an unmitigated good.

Pap visits Juicy, appearing as a ghost whose white clothes emit smoke in an extravagant display of otherworldliness, and demands vengeance: the man who shanked him in prison was deputized by Pap's brother, Rev (also played by Jones). Both men were expert barbecuers; now Pap wants Juicy to flay his uncle Rev like a hog. But Juicy's not interested in barbecue or in slaughter, or in revenge. Rev is a contemptible sort: after he had his brother killed, he immediately married Juicy's mother, Tedra (Nikki Crawford). And he's full of false religiosity. A prayer he issues at the postnuptial back-yard barbecue that serves as the play's setting is one of many humorous bits engineered by Ijames and executed by Ali.

Juicy, as we learn, can be cruel in his own way, and his tendency is to "ponder" rather than to participate, but it's also obvious that he aspires to love instead of war. Spears is a heart-first performer, who makes Juicy's moments of anguish rhyme with his shady asides, pointing out how both attitudes flow from a deep deposit of frustrated affection for the sensual world, and a hope for a life of his own making.

One of Ijames's considerable achievements in "Fat Ham" is to coax out the Oedipal underpinnings in the character of Hamlet: despite Juicy's indecisiveness and his insistence that he misses his father, it's clear that, on some level, he is also relieved to have the old man gone. Pap says that father and son should be "one beating heart," but Juicy and Tedra are a more natural pair. They've got tension over Rev, but the ease between them always shines through. She playfully chases him around the back yard, calling him "thicc" and grabbing at his backside. "Baby, people paying good money for an ass like that," she crows. When she insists on doing karaoke at the barbecue, it's Juicy who fetches the machine and—even while pleading, "Momma, no"—furtively accompanies her rendition of "100% Pure Love."

Prickly and soft in equal measure, Juicy reminds me of the late poet Essex Hemphill, a master of frank desire whose smart, melancholy, life-hungry speakers toss off lines like these:

> I am lonely for past kisses,
> for wild lips certain streets
> breed for pleasure.
> Romance is a foxhole.
> This kind of war frightens me.
> I don't want to die
> sleeping with soldiers
> I don't love.

With a fresh and vital force, Ijames and Juicy make the Hamlet saga more comedy than tragedy, taking a tortured story of father influence and turning it into a kind of party. They might, together, sing a couplet from a different Hemphill poem:

> I am beautiful.
> I will endure.

Like Juicy, Édouard Louis, in "Who Killed My Father" (at St. Ann's Warehouse, directed by Thomas Ostermeier), is caught up in memories, trying to resolve their contradictions before he can move forward into the future. The title of the play isn't missing a question mark: Louis's intention, achieved by way of a long, searching monologue, is to tell you, not to ask, who's done his father in. It's a memoiristic piece with one large fictional element—Louis's real father is still alive, a fact that the play never discloses. But, as Louis makes clear in his unwinding of their lives together, the twin disappointments of politics and prejudice have made his father the object of a kind of social death, well before the process of bodily decomposition begins.

The show opens on Édouard, alone at a cluttered desk, wearing a simple hoodie and jeans, peering into a laptop. Behind him is a stage-encompassing screen, on which moody photos and videos appear: snatches of a rainy drive on a highway; Édouard on a beach, his thin body reflected on a slick floor of sand, surrounded by clouds of foam from washed-up waves. He speaks in

French, and a translation appears on the screen. Early on, he offers the social theorist Ruth Wilson Gilmore's dictum that racism is "vulnerability to premature death." The bigotry here, though, is homophobia. Édouard wanted a DVD of "Titanic" as a childhood gift, and his father, he says, begged him to want something more boyish. Both his parents directed slurs at him, and the threat of violence was part of the ambience of their home, but he still dressed up as his favorite pop chanteuses and danced. Édouard lip-synchs some of these numbers for us, making "Who Killed My Father," at least in part, the saddest drag show ever put on.

The piece works slowly, and culminates in a condemnation of French politicians, such as Nicolas Sarkozy and Emmanuel Macron, whose austerity measures helped to break Édouard's father's body as well as his spirit. It's a good reminder that it's not only your father but your fatherland—your patria—that can foreclose your future. Just days after I saw these shows, nineteen children and two teachers in Texas were killed in a mass shooting, an occurrence now so common in America that it feels like an unwanted family heirloom, an inheritance of paternal debt. The questions are the same: How can we stop these recurring nightmares? How can we move on? To find answers means more truth, less filial piety, and God knows how much more time. ♦

The fashion designer and raconteur Isaac Mizrahi has narrated the Guggenheim's "Works & Process" production of Prokofiev's "Peter and the Wolf" for many years. Now he has imagined a companion piece, **"Third Bird."** To Prokofiev's ornithological menagerie, which includes a little bird and a duck, Mizrahi has added an ostrich on the lam from the local zoo. For "Works & Process," June 3-5, Mizrahi narrates his tale, set to music by Nico Muhly and illustrated with John Heginbotham's quirky and amiable choreography.

With the Band

- **A Haute-Cuisine Band Takes On the Music-Festival Circuit**

By Sheila Yasmin Marikar

Gaggan AnandIllustration by João Fazenda

Aware that the music lover cannot live on mushrooms alone, the organizers of this year's Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival enlisted a brigade of chefs to prepare haute cuisine in the Palm Springs desert. One of them was Gaggan Anand, formerly of the Michelin two-star restaurant Gaggan, in Bangkok. "Twenty years back, festivals had no food, only drugs," Anand said. He wore a black T-shirt and had a halo of salt-and-pepper hair. "Now they think food is important, too. They have at least ten options for coffee. Fucking coffee!"

Anand's offering, served to three hundred and fifty guests who'd paid two hundred and seventy-five dollars each (on top of the cost of the festival ticket): blue-corn tortillas stuffed with slow-cooked, stir-fried black-pepper duck, and cedar-grilled, turmeric-and-green-chili-rubbed barramundi.

"Everybody told us to precook things," he said, the day after the feast. "I told them no. I regretted it for the first six hours. But after that, when I landed in my fucking bathtub with hot water, I felt amazing, because I did it." He went on, "Chefs are not cooking anymore. I wanted to cook. I wanted to smell."

As a teen-ager in Calcutta, Anand, who is forty-four, dreamed of being a drummer like Dave Grohl. “It’s hard to survive in India like that,” he said. Cooking was a more reliable living, “but I couldn’t be a corporate-ladder chef.” Gaggan, his first restaurant, got him on best-of lists and on the Netflix series “Chef’s Table.” After a falling out with the Gaggan financiers, he opened a second restaurant, which was in operation for five months before the pandemic shut it down.

“Now I’ve made a crew of people, and we will go and cook wherever we want,” Anand said. “We’ll do events like Coachella and Tomorrowland”—a Belgian electronic-music festival—“or a fourteen-to-eighteen-seat intimate event. We’re a band. We’ll always be on tour. Me cooking for people who don’t even know me, providing them with an experience that’s not musical but is part of a festival and related to art—that’s my purpose.” He added, “Cooking when the wind is against you.”

Cartoon by Edward Steed

There are other lures. “I want to see Fatboy Slim,” he said, referring to the British d.j. “Which stage is he on?”

“Yuma,” Marko Kovac, Anand’s business partner, replied. An app was consulted. A route was mapped. The pair cut across a field, kicking up dust. On the right: a glowing red dome, a swelling crowd, a thrumming guitar riff

from the Italian rock band Måneskin. Anand stopped. “This is very good,” he said. “How much money are they making? Because Coachella is not cheap. You spend at least a thousand dollars a person.” His own fee pretty much just covered his expenses.

They set off again, past headbanded hordes, a neon-lit spiral staircase to nowhere, and stages named after far-flung deserts. “Gobi, Mojave, no, no—there we go,” Kovac said. Arriving at Yuma, they ducked into a cathedral-like tent strewn with lights. In the nave: a stage, thumping bass, a haze of smoke, and a shadowy figure at the pulpit, presumably Fatboy Slim. Anand bowed his head and periodically lifted his phone.

An hour later, sacrament received, he made his way out, passing a pizza stand with a line of customers thirty deep. “These people are hungry,” Anand said, shaking his head. “They need more food.” He trudged on.“I’m going to bed,” he said. “Getting out of here last night, it was crazy.” ♦

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