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Annals of Psychoanalysis

- **The Therapist Remaking Our Love Lives on TV**

By Alexandra Schwartz

Content

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In this oversharing, overshared age, the psychotherapist's consulting room may be one of the last purely private sanctums left. Sessions happen behind firmly closed doors, the sound of patients' voices masked by the whirr of white-noise machines. The promise of confidentiality is sacred. What happens in treatment is meant to stay there.

A few years ago, though, the documentary filmmakers Josh Kriegman and Elyse Steinberg decided that it might be worth trying to peek under the Freudian slip. Kriegman and Steinberg both grew up in upper-middle-class Jewish families on the East Coast, a milieu that does not so much condone therapy as consider it a part of functional adult life, as routine as filing your taxes or brushing your teeth. Steinberg's father-in-law is a therapist, as are both of Kriegman's parents. "I was visiting home, and my father busted out of his office, kind of freaking out about this session he had just been through with a couple," Kriegman recalled recently. "He said that it would be not only incredibly captivating to watch but meaningful to share what it looks like for people to engage in this way—to go from speaking to each other in cold fury to rage, to tears, to ultimately ending up hugging and reconciling."

Kriegman and Steinberg had experience getting subjects to bare uncomfortably intimate details of their personal lives on camera. Their first project together, edited and co-written by their creative partner, Eli Despres, was "Weiner" (2016), a fly-on-the-wall documentary that followed Anthony Weiner's disastrous campaign for mayor of New York in 2013 and the simultaneous implosion of his marriage to Huma Abedin. This time, the three filmmakers had in mind something more salutary. They began to devise a concept for a television show. They would put real couples in a consulting room with a real therapist. Cameras would roll. Whatever happened would happen. The trick was finding the right person to build the show around: someone who possessed both sterling professional credentials and a magnetic, binge-worthy charisma.

They began to interview possible candidates, hundreds of them. “If I saw you on the street, I’d be, like, ‘Who’s your therapist? Do you like her?’ ” Steinberg said. Some seemed eager to embrace the limelight, but most therapists don’t go into the business dreaming of pop-culture celebrity. Among the professionals the team approached was Virginia Goldner, a widely admired psychoanalyst who has written papers with titles like “Romantic Bonds, Binds, and Ruptures” and “When Love Hurts.” “I wouldn’t do it in a million years,” Goldner said. “I was thinking, Oh, my God, who *would* ?”

To the Israeli American therapist Orna Guralnik, the thought didn’t sound so crazy. Her career had already taken some unusual turns. In the early two-thousands, after getting a degree in clinical psychology, she had co-founded a consulting firm, providing psychological insight for companies like Dell, Xerox, and Goldman Sachs. When she could no longer avoid the nagging sense that she was using her expertise not to improve lives but to help keep exploited workers productive, she decided to train as a psychoanalyst, a pursuit that took a decade. As an undergraduate in Tel Aviv, she had studied filmmaking; the prospect of cameras didn’t faze her. Plus, her daughter was about to go to college, and she had a feeling that she’d need something to take her mind off her semi-empty nest. She responded to an ad that the filmmakers had distributed at the N.Y.U. Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis, where she now teaches, thinking that she might consult on the project.

The filmmakers had a different idea. “It’s kind of like when you meet your partner—you know right away,” Steinberg said. “I knew right away when I spoke to Orna.”

Guralnik is fifty-eight, with olive skin and dark hair. She has great glasses, a forearm tattoo, and the casual poise of the dancer that, as a teen-ager, she considered becoming. Since 2019, she has starred on the Showtime series “Couples Therapy,” the fruit of Kriegman, Steinberg, and Despres’s labors. Each season of the show features a handful of couples as they are given fifteen to twenty sessions’ worth of treatment, a process that unfolds over weeks and is then edited into nine half-hour episodes, creating a patchwork portrait of love in distress. The format has proved a hit; the show’s third

season just premièred, and production has already begun on the next batch of episodes.

The chance to gawk at the splayed viscera of other people's lives would surely attract viewers no matter who occupied the therapist's chair. But Guralnik makes the show. "She's like the Napoleon of human emotion," Despres told me—able to rapidly discern the reasons for a couple's stalemate and devise a plan of attack before viewers, or the patients themselves, have any read on what might be going on. Guralnik speaks in a gently accented murmur, but there's a hint of the hawk in her gaze; with her chin tilted sharply down and her brows knitted, her eyes seem to bore into her patients' very souls. "If you're ever in the presence of an élite athlete, you notice that they have a physicality that's kind of overwhelming," Despres said. "I have that response to Orna. The focus of her attention is really quite intense."

"Couples Therapy" has turned Guralnik into that rare thing: a famous analyst. Her closest peer in this regard is Esther Perel, the Belgian-born psychotherapist who pioneered the couples-therapy-vérité genre with her podcast "Where Should We Begin?" Perel, something of a self-marketing maven, has two best-selling books, a viral *TED* talk, and even a mildly erotic card game ("Where Should We Begin? A Game of Stories") to her name. Guralnik, by contrast, has no tie-ins, no merch, no catchphrase—at least, not yet. Her popular reputation rests entirely on what "Couples Therapy" reveals of her frank, probing clinical style, which involves nudging patients to the edge of a terrifying emotional precipice, then encouraging them to jump. "One of the graceful things about Orna's work is that she slides you into the setting in a warm and casual way," Goldner told me. Goldner, who is also on the faculty at N.Y.U., is one of Guralnik's closest mentors, and Guralnik eventually persuaded her to come on the show in the role of clinical adviser—the "all-knower," Goldner joked—with whom Guralnik refines her approach to patients' dilemmas. It was Guralnik's idea to make supervision, as the practice is known in psychoanalysis, central to the show. Her authority rests, in part, on her willingness to admit what she doesn't know.

In the show's new season, Guralnik is stumped by a couple named Ping and Will. (Despite its commitment to radical exposure, "Couples Therapy" doesn't divulge its subjects' last names.) When they got together, seven

years ago, they shared a desire for exclusive emotional commitment, but happily included other people in their sex life. Then Ping began to see a lover on her own, and Will panicked. He drew up a set of rules to govern Ping's trysts: no long walks, no cuddling. But sex severed from flirting, from intimacy, wasn't sexy to Ping. Soon, Will, too, started to date other people, and Ping found herself mobbed by the same anxieties that had tormented Will. "I feel fucking left out," she tells Guralnik, at their first session.

That, Guralnik learns, is hardly the problem's extent. Ping is mean to Will. She derides and belittles him. Will, big and boyish, cries easily, and when he says something particularly heartfelt—that nothing he does seems good enough for Ping, that she refuses the affection he proffers—Guralnik asks Ping what she hears. "Honestly," Ping answers, "just a whole lot of whining."

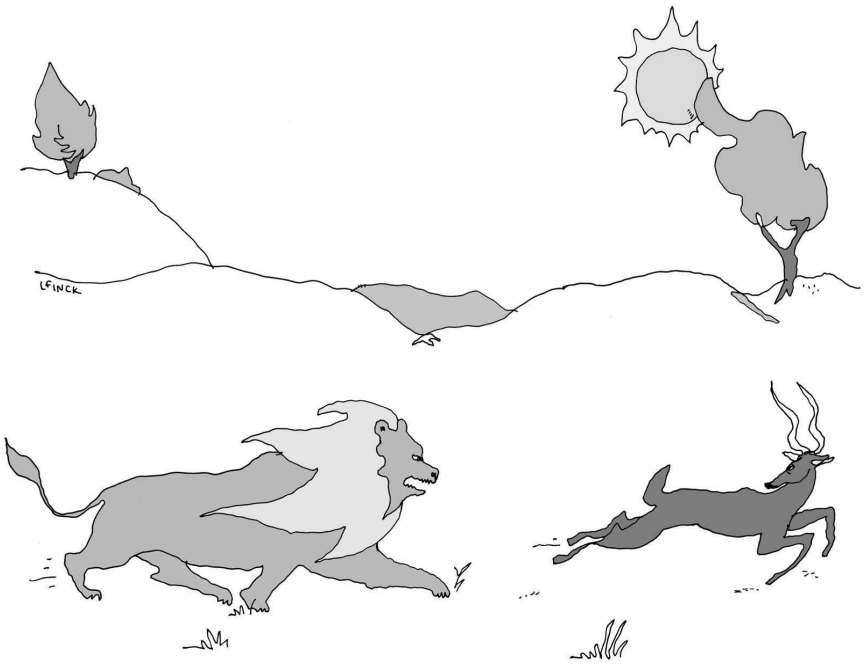
Guralnik, troubled, visits Goldner at her apartment, where, surrounded by her impressive collection of African statuary, they discuss the couple's deadlock. There is something sadomasochistic in it, Guralnik feels. "I'm finding that my regular toolbox is not totally relevant," she says. She wants to address the problem, but "I have to listen in as to when the timing is right."

At their next session, Will confesses that he feels hopeless. "We've been to so many therapists, and it's just going through the same thing again and again," he says, in a choked voice.

"Where are you?" Guralnik asks Ping.

"I'm trying not to come up with a snide remark," Ping says.

"But you have an impulse to do that?"



"What do you mean, you don't know how many calories you are?"
Cartoon by Liana Finck

"I do. I feel there's a lot of 'he said, she said,' right?" Ping says. "But what's missing is—"

"Is some kind of theory that will help you understand 'What's the dynamic?' " Guralnik breaks in.

"Yeah, exactly," Ping says.

Guralnik seizes her moment. "So one of the things we've talked about is you're already deeply stuck in the groove where you'll start with an assault," she begins. "Now, we know already that underneath the assault there's all sorts of feelings of hurt, vulnerability, betrayal." She turns to Will. "And your response to that is to enter some state of helplessness, and trying to comply, trying to appease, but really you're retreating." Will makes a noise of assent.

"Which leaves you further abandoned," Guralnik tells Ping. "So that's your dance at the moment. And you're exhausted by it. But something's keeping you together."

"I don't know what!" Ping says. "This is what I keep digging for."

Guralnik lays out the options: “You can tell me that you’re tired of it, you want to break up. We can try to understand how each of you got so deep into this particular position. I’d want to hear something about your family histories.”

“I feel like everyone always wants to talk about my family,” Will sighs. He doesn’t have a good relationship with them, but he’s made his peace with it.

Fine, Guralnik says. But “you’re too good at this role for it not to be well rehearsed.” Looking at the past might help them understand why they’re so stuck in the present. “Is that of interest to you?”

There’s a pause. Even Ping is quiet. Here is the cliff. Will they leap?

“O.K.,” Will says. “So where do we start?”

Early on a rainy morning in March, I went to visit Guralnik at her duplex apartment, which occupies the garden-level and parlor floors of a brownstone in Park Slope. The show had already given me a tantalizing glimpse inside; when the pandemic disrupted the filming of the second season, Guralnik, like therapists the world over, took to Zoom, and the cameras followed her as she conducted sessions from home, occasionally stopping to ask her preteen son, Jasper, to hush. Watching Guralnik as she peered at her laptop in front of a handsomely loaded bookcase, I had concluded that she was working from a luxurious home office, some hallowed room of her own. Projection! What I had taken for a desk was in fact one end of the dining-room table, fully exposed to the domestic elements.

“It’s complete public space,” Guralnik told me as she fired up the espresso machine. “I was shutting my son into his room. My daughter and her boyfriend were living here, so they had to go upstairs to another apartment to work.” Now the mood was calm. Guralnik shuffled around in red felt slippers. Her dog, Nico, a gregarious Klee Kai named for the Velvet Underground singer, sprawled on the floor, diligently chewing an action figure. Guralnik has lived in the apartment for sixteen years—“the longest I’ve lived anywhere”—and it has acquired the rich patina of family life. Board games were piled next to the fireplace, shoes strewn about the

entryway. Propped in front of the TV was a Cubist-inflected portrait by an artist friend who's also an analyst, showing Guralnik in a white hoodie, an enigmatic look on her angled face.

During her foray into consulting, Guralnik made the kind of money that does not generally come to mental-health professionals, even those who charge heftily by the hour. She owns the whole building; the film director Darius Marder, a friend of hers, lives on the top floor, and she rents the other two apartments to Israeli musicians, the kids of her best friends from home. "No one locks their doors," she told me. "I have a little kibbutz in the house."

Psychoanalysts generally keep their personal lives hidden from patients, the better to encourage transference: the phenomenon, described by Freud, in which a patient directs the intense feelings generated by a formative relationship onto the blank slate of a therapist. Even before the pandemic, Guralnik had made the surprising decision to allow cameras to follow her outside the consulting room, as she took walks with Nico, or headed into the subway, coffee in hand. Then *COVID* struck, and there she was, serving her kids breakfast and kissing them on the top of the head. Was there a partner in the mix? If so, such a person was kept out of sight.

When Guralnik and I first met, I asked if she would discuss her own romantic life on the record. She declined, reconsidered, then declined again. "It's a little tedious for me, but it's just not right for my patients," she said, meaning not only those on the show but the ones she sees in private practice. "There's so much that people gain from being able to not know about me, or from being able to imagine me as one way or another. Am I a conservative straight person? Am I gay? Am I queer? The moment I start talking about myself, I'm robbing them of all that."

We moved to the living room, where Guralnik settled into a swivel chair big enough for two. I wanted to know about couples. Why do humans persist in pairing off, even though doing so often causes terrible pain? Guralnik herself has voiced skepticism on the subject. In the show's first episode, she confessed to Goldner that she was kept up at night by the pressure to repair her patients' relationships, when she saw all too clearly the limits of what one could deliver.

Now she talked about the species-level imperative to reproduce and protect the young, about the economic and ideological pressure from the state. The word “neoliberalism” made an appearance. Outside the consulting room, Guralnik can have a sardonic edge, a matter-of-fact briskness. “I’m not stupid,” she said. “I know the cost of it for people. If it’s not working, get out.” But that was only part of the story. For all her tart realism, Guralnik is a romantic. “Falling in love, being in love, learning how to love better and bigger with more responsibilities is an amazing thing,” she said. Those transformative possibilities give her faith that coupledom can not only restrict and derail lives but radically expand them. “I’m biased,” she said, “but I think people need me to be.”

Guralnik is a proponent of systems theory, an approach to psychology that looks both at a person’s interior world and at the way interpersonal dynamics affect behavior and identity. A couple is a system. So is a family. One member might be called upon to serve as the “identified patient,” the scapegoat for all the problems; another might become the designated therapist. Growing up, Guralnik played the second role. Her parents’ marriage was tumultuous, and she found herself mediating between them during moments of conflict. “I was developing my analytic mind very early,” she told me. “I always joke that they were my first couple to be treated.”

Guralnik was born in 1964, in Washington, D.C. Her parents worked at the Israeli Embassy while pursuing their studies—Guralnik’s mother, Nehama, in art history, and her father, Daniel, in aeronautical engineering. “They were very typical Ashkenazi Israelis of that generation,” she said. “Super secular. Idealists. They believed in a certain kind of socialistic, Zionistic struggle, and they bought into it very early.” When she was two years old, Daniel got an offer from Lockheed Martin and moved the family to Atlanta. “I was the only Jewish kid in my class,” Guralnik told me. “I remember sitting on Father Christmas’s lap, asking if it’s O.K. for Jews to get gifts.”

When Guralnik was seven, her father was recruited by the Israeli airline El Al, and the family, which now included a younger brother, relocated to Tel Aviv. The result was culture shock. Not long after they arrived, the Yom Kippur War broke out, and Daniel was called up from the reserves. “The men disappeared,” Guralnik said.

Other, more mundane changes were equally startling. The Zionist collectivist ethic, defined partly in opposition to the temptations of the individualist West, still held sway in early-seventies Israel, and the conveniences of the American suburbs were nonexistent. Israeli TV had one channel. Horse-drawn carts tootled around Guralnik's neighborhood, selling watermelons and ice. "You had to wait seven years until you got a phone line," Guralnik recalled. In Atlanta, she had attended a private school, "very cushy." Now she was tossed into a classroom with forty kids, all running wild. "I became acquainted with the Israeli way of being," she said. "You're with a gang of kids, all afternoon long, while the parents are at work. In a way, we were raising ourselves. It was very communal living."

As Guralnik got older, she began to notice a shift within her parents' relationship. Nehama had a major career as a curator at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, but Daniel was accustomed to taking priority. The family had one car; he drove it to work. Nehama started to push back. "I really watched them go through a rearrangement of a very patriarchal understanding of their marriage to a more feminist one, which was not easy," Guralnik said. "I didn't have the language for it yet. But I could see it."

Guralnik, too, began to rebel against the established order at home. When she was sixteen, her parents negotiated a truce: they would give her some space if she agreed to see a therapist. Guralnik was wary. "I didn't trust any grownup on earth," she said. But the therapist her parents found rapidly won her over. She was cool, rolling cigarette after cigarette as her black cat wandered in and out of the consulting room. She was also an activist, "the first person to make me think about my automatic assumptions about Arabs, about Palestinians, about authority." And she treated Guralnik as an equal, a person worthy of respect. "People are so afraid of teen-agers, of girl teen-agers," Guralnik said. "She was just: 'Interesting!' " Guralnik started to immerse herself in psychoanalytic writing: Freud, Winnicott, R. D. Laing.

Still, it took time for her to realize that she might have a similar talent. She had begun to study dance with the choreographer Rina Schenfeld, and was serious enough to think of pursuing it. But she soon embarked on her obligatory two-year Army service—she was assigned to intelligence work, and hated every minute of it—and by the time she was done her commitment had waned. She went travelling, the twentysomething Israeli's

rite of passage, then enrolled in film school, where “it turned out that I couldn’t write a fiction script for the life of me.” Adrift, Guralnik found her thoughts turning to her former therapist. In 1990, she moved to New York with a group of friends and enrolled in the clinical-psych program at the Ferkauf Graduate School of Psychology, at Yeshiva University.

In the two decades since she’d left Atlanta, Guralnik had lost her grasp of the nuances of American life. “We would end up every evening coming back home and discussing American culture, trying to crack the code,” she said. “If they say, ‘Let’s meet for lunch,’ what do they mean? If you start a sentence with ‘No,’ the way every Israeli starts a sentence, why do they get offended?” In graduate school, Guralnik was working with patients suffering from severe mental illness, and learning to recognize the specific social forces that helped shape pathologies—“the way that poverty and race play here, which is so different from Israel.”

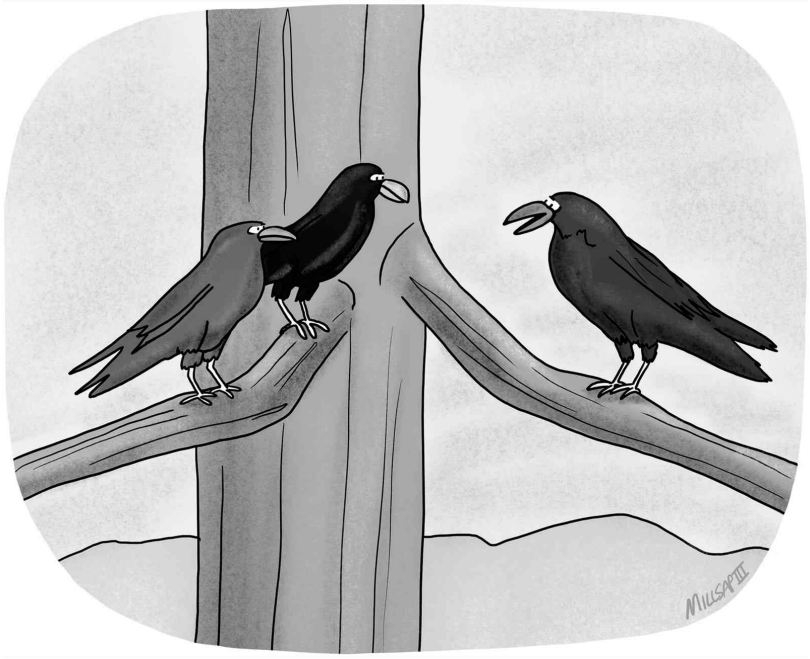
After her consulting stint, Guralnik entered the postdoc program at N.Y.U. There, she gravitated to an influential group of faculty known as the “gang of four”: Goldner, Adrienne Harris, Jessica Benjamin, and Muriel Dimen, women who had been instrumental in applying feminist theory to psychoanalysis. “People who do psychoanalysis, they’re not just interested in change,” Guralnik told me. “They’re interested in meaning, and making meaning. You’re always trying to listen to what *hasn’t* been said.” For years, the unsaid thing, in the field itself, had been the influence that culture has on the psyche. Particularly in postwar America, psychoanalysis had been hermetically focussed on the private, the interior—but wasn’t the interior indelibly marked by the exterior world? Members of the Frankfurt School had thought so, and so did Guralnik. Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Frantz Fanon, and Judith Butler became as important to her thinking as Melanie Klein and Wilfred Bion.

In 2001, Guralnik met Stephen Hartman, who edits the journal *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, at a conference in Miami, where he was presenting a paper on psychoanalysis and social class. Hartman was a fellow Dimen acolyte, and Guralnik was thrilled to find someone whose interests rhymed with hers. Over time, they joined up with other like-minded peers to form their own gang of six, an intellectual family who now vacation together and discuss their writing in biweekly Zoom sessions, and who have become

part of the psychoanalytical establishment. Some of them even appear on the show's new season, as part of a diverse group of analysts who advise Guralnik, giving viewers a sense of psychoanalysis as a field that looks and sounds like the world it interprets. "Orna's work has been really important for people who want to bring an awareness of the political world into the consulting room," Hartman told me.

For Guralnik, that awareness begins, necessarily, with herself. In a striking 2014 paper, "The Dead Baby," she writes about treating a woman whose grandparents were Nazis, and the "burnt landscape" that stretched between German patient and Jewish analyst. On the show, Guralnik interrogates what it means, as a white analyst, to treat patients of color, and to be thrown into an entirely different relation to history and power. That Guralnik's own sense of herself can change in response to who enters the room is, to her, one of the excitements of her work. "You have to account for where you're speaking from," she told me.

Guralnik's "Couples Therapy" office is the Platonic ideal of a therapist's consulting room: big and airy, filled with books, stylish baubles, and Moroccan-inspired textiles. Nico snoozes in a dog bed tucked underneath built-in shelves. The walls are upholstered with an expensive-looking ecru fabric. When Guralnik is ready to start a session, she turns over an hourglass and ceremonially slides open the frosted-glass door to the waiting room, where her patients have been marinating in front of an abstract painting that bears a notable resemblance to a Rorschach blot.



"You might recognize me as the 'Nevermore' guy."
Cartoon by Lonnie Millsap

On a recent evening, I met Kriegman and Steinberg in Greenpoint, at the building where the show is produced. In the office, Guralnik greeted us, grinning. "When I first arrived here, I was, like, 'Holy shit! They did it!' " she said. The show's set designers had drawn inspiration from her actual office—even the distance between her chair and the patients' couch is the same—and from mood-board images that she had compiled (a lot of Frank Lloyd Wright). But where were the cameras? In the light fixtures? Hidden in a potted plant?

"No one ever guesses accurately," Kriegman said. "We went through a whole bunch of different ideas for how to conceal them, and ultimately settled on kind of the oldest trick in the book." He turned to Steinberg. "Outside first?"

We passed through a door placed unobtrusively at the room's far end. It took me a second to realize that what I had believed to be an ordinary office in a normal building was, in fact, a set, constructed within a vast warehouse. Kriegman introduced me to a man dressed in black pants, a black hoodie, black gloves, and a black mask: a camera operator, stationed outside what I had believed to be a solid wall. Now I could see that it had a wide rectangular window cut along its length. Through a contrivance of angled mirrors and canny lighting, the gap is undetectable from inside the room.

This brain-bending optical illusion is what gives "Couples Therapy" its sumptuous look, with its eyeline shots and closeups that seem to capture patients' every passing thought. Dressed like ninjas, the camera operators, working mere feet away from their subjects, must act like ninjas, too: no coughing, no sneezing, no vibrating phones.

Guralnik's seven-fifteen session was about to start. The light filtering through the windows dimmed. ("Night mode," another illusion.) I followed Kriegman and Steinberg upstairs, where the rest of the show's crew was assembled, and we put on headphones and sat in front of four monitors. On one, the couple entered the waiting room. On another, Guralnik shuffled papers on her desk, took a deep breath, and moved to open the door.

An hour and twenty minutes later, the three of us trooped back into the office to debrief. The session had run long, but the couple wouldn't be on the hook for the extra time; all participants are treated gratis.

"How are you feeling?" Kriegman asked.

"Very moved," Guralnik said. The couple, who will appear on future episodes of the show, had hit upon a major breakthrough when their time was almost up. Something had come undammed; the momentum of the session had surged. "I love their emotional honesty. It's just—*wow*."

Kriegman asked me what I had thought. I had been moved as well, and also a little unnerved by my "Truman Show" vantage point up in the rafters. A number of former participants told me that, in the force field of Guralnik's presence, the sense of being observed simply vanished. But I had got the impression, more than once, that the couple we had just seen were speaking not just to Guralnik but beyond her, to a broader audience of friends and even family members who they imagined—whether anxiously or eagerly—might watch the show.

The relationship between the patients and the viewing public is undeniably charged. Hannah Zeavin, a historian and the author of "The Distance Cure," a recent study of teletherapy, told me that she sees Guralnik as "running and convening a kind of broadcast clinic." Stationed on our own couches in our own homes, we tune in to gain insight into our own conflicts—or to project

our frustrations and fantasies onto the figures exposing themselves to us. Some of the show's couples, like Elaine and DeSean, fan favorites from the first season, take heart at the prospect of such an exchange. "Aside from us being able to save our marriage, the highlight would be if we could help someone," Elaine told me. Elaine is Latina, and DeSean is Black; their exploration of their respective notions of racial identity constituted a revelatory thread in their treatment. "A lot of Latinos and Black people, they don't believe in therapy," Elaine said. "So it was, like, Let me show you that it can help you."

The producers of "Couples Therapy" insist that what they have made is pure documentary, not a reality show. "It's the 'Star Trek' prime directive: Do not interfere," Despres told me. "We just happen to have set our duck blind in a place that's rich with conflict and deep human emotion." Of course, they have handpicked the ducks, selecting for diversity of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, as well as for the je ne sais quoi of watchability.

For the most part, viewers have responded to the show's participants with good will. But anyone who appears as himself on a television show, even one as sensitively produced as "Couples Therapy," runs the risk of being flattened into a character. During one of our conversations, I asked Guralnik about Mau, the show's closest thing to a villain. When he appeared on the first season with his wife, Annie, Mau struck viewers as arrogant, noxious, and tyrannical. (He was also charismatic and soap-opera handsome, perfectly cast as a rogue.) He insisted that his needs were not merely straightforward but rational, normative. He considered sex to be a daily necessity. He had been displeased with a birthday orgy that Annie had planned for him and, after Annie said that he disrespected her, responded with sophistic, "I'm sorry if you feel that way" reasoning, resisting Guralnik's interventions at every turn.

"I actually enjoyed working with him a lot, even though he wouldn't enter my field," Guralnik said. "I really respected him. People became kind of obsessed with ragging on him. It was a little upsetting, actually."

Annie and Mau left after only eleven sessions, but the show's viewers hadn't finished with Mau—or he with them. He popped up on a Reddit thread called "Somebody smack Mau please" to confront the haters. "I was told

that the purpose of the show was to demystify and destigmatize therapy," he wrote. "To that end the seemingly purposeful editing, omissions and cuts reflect at least to me, the desire to push a narrative." (He has since deleted his posts.) He had been trying, he went on, "to express complex and interconnected dynamics," looking for underlying causes rather than for superficial symptoms. "The underlying cause is you're a dick," one Redditor responded. Another diagnosed him as having narcissistic personality disorder. It *was* upsetting. Whatever Mau's sins, people seemed to have forgotten that this was a real person, with real troubles. The audience had demanded vulnerability, growth, and a satisfying finale. When it got intransigence, out came the pitchforks.

Guralnik's actual office is in a converted factory building in Tribeca, in a suite shared with a trio of friends, Hartman among them. In April, I met her there, after her last patient of the day had left. She had just got screeners for the new season, and would soon be heading home to watch—only a few episodes for now, though her trust in the show's producers is absolute. "How do they take what's inside my brain—the movie that's going on in there—and put it on the screen?" she marvelled.

Toward the end of the season, Guralnik tells Goldner that many of her patients are showing symptoms of "transference cure." Knowing that their time with her is nearly up, they subconsciously try to prove to themselves, and to Guralnik, that they are "all better"; like the viewers, they crave the resolution of a well-plotted story. Still, the pressure applied by the show's artificial constraints can produce real transformations, remarkable to witness. Couples who had begun by complaining of a sexual impasse, or wrestled with feelings of resentment and rage, or dealt with histories of infidelity and addiction ended up turning toward each other in relief, tenderness, even playfulness and joy. "Now that the treatment is ending, I notice myself feeling a mixture of sad and worried about letting them all go," Guralnik tells Goldner. The best she can do is hope that the foundation they have built together holds.

Then, there were Ping and Will. After weeks of effort, Guralnik had at last managed to pierce Ping's caustic veneer, revealing a person more sad and disappointed than furious—the neglected child hidden within. "She became so much softer over time," Guralnik told me. And yet, released from the

vortex of Ping's spite, Will only receded further into himself. Their dance had come to an end, but they were struggling to find new steps. Concluding a relationship entails its own kind of transformation. If that was where Ping and Will were heading, Guralnik would have to find a way to shepherd them there.

Guralnik told me that she thinks of documentary and therapy as two sides of the same coin. "These are traditions that are after the same thing," she said. "Everyone's trying to grasp, What's the actual story here? What's the truth? What's going on?" The answer, if there is one, implicates not just her patients but herself. "It's made me accountable for my work," she said. "You can't hide behind jargon. You can't refer to other people's theories. You just have to say what you mean." ♦

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Art

- **“Set It Off,” from Deux Femmes Noires, at Parrish Art Museum**

The group exhibition “Set It Off,” opening on May 22 at the **Parrish Art Museum,** in Watermill, New York, is curated by Deux Femmes Noires, a.k.a. the collector Racquel Chevremont and the artist Mickalene Thomas (pictured above). The show’s six participants—Leilah Babirye, Torkwase Dyson, February James, Karyn Olivier, Kameelah Janan Rasheed, and Kennedy Yanko—are unified by their dynamic approach to a wide range of mediums, from painting and sculpture to sound and installation.

Books

- **How to Build a Twenty-first-Century Tyrant**
- **Briefly Noted**
- **The War on Economics**

By Adam Gopnik

Content

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Meet the new boss, same as the old boss, as the song has it—and now let us meet the new dictators and see whether they are the same as the old. Are the authoritarians who grace, or disgrace, our world, from Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to Vladimir Putin, more like or unlike their twentieth-century predecessors? This is not an academic question—well, actually, it *is* an academic question, but a good kind of academic question. Its answer has consequences for our actions.

If the run of dictators is approximately the same as it has always been, we might conclude that our strongman problem is not traceable to a specific ailment but to a constant, bellows-like oscillation of societies that move toward openness and then close down. In one standard account, the successes of a liberal society—taking in alien influences, expanding individual rights, and profiting from pluralism—spur a backlash among a threatened segment of the population (usually an odd coalition of underclass and overlord), who yearn for some phantasmal, *völkisch*, organic community. A tyrant rises to fulfill that need.

Another account says that, in times of violent social change, the most militant of factions tend to triumph, and then the leader of the faction becomes the dictator of the land. Something like this happened twice during the French Revolution, first with the rise of the Jacobins and then with Napoleon's coup d'état; the same pattern occurred with the Communist revolutions in Russia and in China. Though it most often makes a left turn, the process can turn right, as with Franco, in Spain. In either case, a period of turbulence is followed by a period of terror.

But it's also possible that dictators represent an ever-changing category, shaped by local specifics. In the twenty-first century, the story would be that, say, globalization produces inequality (or that immigration produces panic), and that the resulting anxiety intersects with the siloing of social media. This account has continuities with the old ones, but insists that the particulars of a moment matter, and create authoritarian leaders of a specific mold. We find

ourselves using the same names—dictator, tyranny, fascism—to designate very different people and processes.

Whichever position you adopt comes with optimistic and pessimistic takeaways. If you conclude that the situation was ever thus, you will believe that it will likely be righted at last, but also that the cycle will never end. If you believe that this time is different, you can search for a durable fix—a more equitable economy, a gentler form of globalization, the tempered restoration of national identity—while knowing that the fix may not fix it. The unexciting truth is probably that authoritarians are a permanent feature of human existence, and that an array of circumstances allows them to flourish. Cancers all have a family resemblance, and each has a specific pathology. Although we refer to them by the same name, some are caused by cigarettes and some by UV radiation and many have no traceable cause at all.

But which pathology is which, and how do you tell them apart? Two new books, each with virtues of its own, take on the question. Moisés Naím's "The Revenge of Power: How Autocrats Are Reinventing Politics for the 21st Century" (St. Martin's) is a foreign-policy maven's account of how recent demagogues have come to power and used the tools of our time—social media, television, the society of spectacle—to promote one-man rule and the suppression of dissent. Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman's "Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century" (Princeton) offers a social-scientific perspective on the mechanics of the new autocrats and their common world view. And these two books follow a marching band of others. Narendra Modi plays a limited role in both, but is studied in K. S. Komireddi's "Malevolent Republic," while Ruth Ben-Ghiat's "Strongmen" is a cross-historical study, with a focus on gender politics: tyranny and masculinity are tightly allied.

The special virtue of Naím's book lies in the mordant detailing of its profiles, particularly those of certain second-tier autocrats—less famous than Putin and Erdoğan, but exemplary of the rise of what he calls "3P" (populist, polarizing, and post-truth) politicians. All of them follow a similar, and, to Americans, depressingly familiar route: after improbable success as loudmouth entertainers, not taken seriously by the political establishment, they attract a passionate minority and then suddenly, often by oddities of the

electoral system or the management of parliaments, they're in power. Their apparent clownishness disguises their potency. Take Italy's Beppe Grillo, please. Naím writes, of one of his rallies, "Stalking his audience with his manic, rapid-fire delivery, Grillo drips scorn on Italy's political elite, on the West's mania for overconsumption, on consumer rip-offs, on the haplessness of the political left and the corruption of the right, ranting and raving as he grabs random audience members by the lapels." Grillo was unable to come directly to power, owing to a party rule against nominating anyone with a criminal conviction. (He was found guilty of vehicular homicide in the eighties.) Grillo's followers, his Grillini, "adhere to a confusing mismatch of an ideology—part radical environmentalism, part nativism, part heterodox economics, part anti-vaxxer hysteria." His Five Star Movement, vaguely on the left, formed a coalition with a far-right party, the League, whose leader, Matteo Salvini, outsmarted Grillo and came into his own as another sort of populist role-player, the tough guy, the pseudo-gangster boss, promising to deport half a million immigrants and, well, make Italy great again.

Naím was once, in a happier day, the finance minister of Venezuela, and Hugo Chávez, who took a troubled but essentially prosperous country with a long democratic tradition and turned it into an international basket case, comes in for close study. Naím says that Chávez is wrongly seen as a Castro throwback. He is, in fact, a Berlusconi sideways toss: "From the Italian tycoon-cum-politician, Chávez had grasped that ideology matters less than celebrity status, and that with television you can create a world where style is substance." Using his TV show, "Aló Presidente," he modelled himself on Oprah Winfrey, listening empathetically to the difficulties of the people in his audience and pledging change. "He'd fulminate against the rising price of chicken and then hug a woman teary-eyed over her trouble finding the money for school supplies for her children," Naím recounts. Chávez, of course, had no idea how to make school supplies or chicken cheaper. His was a retinue of fans, not followers, and they could be contented with theatrical gestures. Chávez once walked down the streets of Caracas, pointing at successful businesses and crying out, "Expropriate that!" As economic policy, this worked no better than one might think. Still, as with Evita Perón, not even catastrophic failures (a country that had been one of the world's largest producers of oil ended up with gas shortages) could shake his fans' faith. Naím reports that, after Chávez's death, from cancer, in 2013, his devotees incorporated him into the Santería pantheon of gods.

On the bigger historical question, though, Naím is a little unsatisfying. What's the difference between Beppe and Benito? Between Chávez and the Peróns? Mussolini, too, depended on charismatic, extra-political exchanges with his countrymen, and Juan and Evita had the haziest of ideologies, apart from a set of repeated populist gestures. Their performances were rooted, as befitted the time, in newsreels and still photographs and tabloid mystique, but were more than a bit "3P"-ish. *Are* we seeing a genuinely new phenomenon, or just a variant of an essentially unchanging one? For that matter, are we even justified in calling men like Salvini or Chávez or Bolsonaro "dictators" and making them part of the history of autocracy? They often get booted out, after all, by the same electors who welcomed them in.

Guriev and Treisman's book, on the other hand, takes the contrast between old and new as its singular subject, drawing a yin-and-yang distinction between "fear dictators," the classic kind, and "spin dictators," the contemporary kind. Its central observation is that the new generation of authoritarians, whether fully fledged or still aspirant, as in the U.S., usually exploit the apparent levers of democratic politics but use more discreet forms of manipulation to extend their rule. Rather than cancel elections, they rig them; rather than outlaw opposition media, they marginalize them; sooner than start a gulag, they put constraints on Google. They are autocrats in their hatred and contempt for liberal institutions other than the one that helped them into power. (Guriev and Treisman trace the ancestry, surprisingly, to Lee Kuan Yew, the seemingly benign Prime Minister of Singapore for three decades, who was, they believe, the first modern leader to combine an authoritarian core with a civil surface.)

The two social scientists pack their account with meaty graphs and well-organized evidence. Some of what they say is familiar to anyone who reads the papers: new dictators use social media (including bots or fake accounts) and typically arrest their opponents for nonpolitical crimes that make their convictions less obviously persecutional. But Guriev and Treisman advance subtler arguments, as they show that authoritarian rulers can come to power by democratic means and stay there. Some of it is simply the workings of fear: the intimidation of private firms by government threats, and the cynical erosion of what are still exasperatingly called norms. (A norm is a standard social expectation, like the audience wearing evening clothes at the opera;

submitting to the peaceful transfer of power is a *premise*, like the cast singing at the opera.) Yet "Spin Dictators" also suggests that the very forces that temper authoritarian power can accelerate its ascension. As globalization and the rise of the Internet make it harder to exercise absolute power, dictators may deploy more limited power that allows space for unthreatening dissent without allowing real opposition.

Once again, there are more historical continuities here than are first apparent. Napoleon, the very model of the nineteenth-century autocrat, ruled constitutionally and by plebiscite, however rigged the voting might have been. And he was immensely shrewd in his efforts to marginalize or co-opt his opposition—wooing a liberal philosopher like Benjamin Constant or allowing the Marquis de Lafayette to retire to the countryside unmolested, even offering him the recently invented Légion d'Honneur.

The over-all arc that Guriev and Treisman present is in any case surprisingly positive: we learn that, in the nineteen-eighties, fully ninety-five per cent of countries with newly authoritarian rulers were alleged to be torturing political prisoners; in the two-thousands, that share fell to a mere seventy-four per cent. In 1981, the constitutions of "non-military dictatorships" enumerated an average of 7.5 liberal rights; by 2008, the number had risen to 11.2. The rights are not secured, of course, but they exist. As the level of violence in the world has decreased, the rhetoric of authoritarianism has become, worldwide, necessarily less militaristic and more consumerist. Guriev and Treisman detail the malevolent strategies that spin dictators use against their critics—having them framed for sexual and business misdeeds is a common one—and the way in which they may enlist Interpol as a bureaucratic collaborator in targeting enemies. But they also emphasize that being marginalized is not the same as being murdered, the typical recourse of fear dictators. The bayonet is blunted, though a hundred blunted bayonets pointed at a single throat is enough to silence a speaker.

How to reconcile their thesis with the madness of the moment? In some ways, their work is already in need of an update. Vladimir Putin plays a significant role for them: at one point, his cult of personality in Russia is distinguished from earlier, Stalinist cults and likened instead to something as wholesome and fan-generated as Obama ornaments sold on the sidewalks of D.C. "There is no Putin salute, dance, or other enforced ritual, no bible of

Putinism that all must study and recite," Guriev and Treisman write. "Most Putin merchandise comes not from central propagandists but from street-level hucksters eager to cash in." Putin is seen as illustrative of the new era in his ability to assert authority without ever invoking absolute power.

"Is all analog play this sandy?"
Cartoon by E.S. Glenn and Colin Nissan

Within days of the invasion of Ukraine, though, "violent repression and comprehensive censorship"—the hallmarks of the fear dictator, per Guriev and Treisman—made a quick comeback, with people being arrested just for holding blank pieces of paper as a protest, while the Russian government fought a war on civilians in finest Stalinist style. Two years earlier, Putin had tried to assassinate his leading political opponent, Alexei Navalny, and, when the effort failed, left him to languish in prison. When push comes to shove, it seems, the spin dictator stops pushing and starts shoving. In an instant, the new dictators will forgo soft and confusing action and go back to the hard stuff, like a reformed drunk who isn't all that reformed.

Yet reviewers risk overreacting to a current event as much as social scientists risk overgeneralizing with their graphs. That people are not entirely different from earlier primates does not mean that people are not different. We have, as these books illustrate, a strong common intuition that a new type of authoritarianism surely does exist, one that exploits electoral politics, even if its impulses balance uneasily between genuinely dictatorial and painfully

democratic. Hungary's Orbán, Turkey's Erdoğan, Venezuela's Chávez and Maduro, Poland's Kaczyński and Duda: they all do seem to belong to a class that's distinct from the illiberal leaders of the previous century. Is it possible to construct a short taxonomy of the generational differences between dictators, and to say what's new about the new ones?

First, there's their dependence on accessibility and the embrace of forms of entertainment, even grotesque and burlesque entertainment. Though Benito and Evita played on a public stage, they sought an aura of remote mystery. The history of how Napoleon was depicted typifies this kind of progression: from popular imagery of him as a soldier to heroic Romantic imagery of him as a conqueror to hieratic figuration as he became emperor. By contrast, Grillo and Chávez and the rest remain here among us: they don't mind being familiar, chuckling, confidential, as long as they can be omnipresent. They understand that omnipresence is key in an era of round-the-clock television and social media. "Triumph of the Will," Leni Riefenstahl's propaganda film for the Third Reich, depends on the Olympian grandeur of Hitler's descent directly from the clouds into Nuremberg on the day of the rally. That kind of rock-star mystique is now reserved for actual rock stars. Populist politicians, arrived or ascendant, appear haphazardly and then stay on camera for hours.

This is not entirely new—nothing ever is—but the crossbreeding of clownishness and politics has never been so intense. The Russian dissident literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin taught us to cherish "carnival" culture as a liberating force in social life. It's in the authority-mocking brio embodied by the comedian Volodymyr Zelensky, or, for that matter, by the self-deprecating clowning of Alexei Navalny, unashamed to play video games and to make lip-synched TikTok videos. Yet the social-subversive impulse can serve different masters. As Emanuel Marx points out in his book "State Violence in Nazi Germany" (2019), Kristallnacht, in November of 1938, occurred during a carnival season that Catholics traditionally celebrated: "For the mass of participants and bystanders, the Kristallnacht was a noisy and rowdy carnival that suspended for a few hours the ordinary standards of behavior." Breaking the windows of Jewish merchants could be as much a gleeful, subversive, Rabelaisian activity as mocking the overlords. Indeed, the Nazis in power gently chided, and even tried, a handful of the rioters for overdoing it.

Today, a rollicking carnival vibe still has the capacity to blunt the most sinister side of the authoritarian to his critics (Oh, come on, he's just having fun!), and to encourage his followers to express previously censored emotions: You can say (or do) that now! Cultural historians of the future will doubtless note the resemblance of Donald Trump's manner to that of the insult comic, from Don Rickles to Don Imus, and even the pre-reformed Howard Stern. We were not to take him entirely seriously, until it all became entirely serious.

Another feature of the new despots is how they typically enlist religion as an ally. The classic dictators often had a troubled relationship with the religious establishment, recognizing that their own ideologies were a new, rival form of faith. This got settled in negotiated but uneasy concordats. The new dictators, whatever their personal beliefs, typically make common cause with believers. For some, the move seems purely a matter of calculation; Orbán, raised an atheist, embraced Christianity as he embraced power.

Finally, today's autocrats tend to have a changing rather than a fixed series of villains. Anti-Semitism was always central to Hitler's world view. Stalin, too, was a man of cemented antipathies. As the historian Simon Sebag Montefiore's work has shown, Stalin was a genuine Marxist intellectual who believed in class warfare and the evils of the bourgeoisie as much as any student at the Sorbonne. By contrast, Berlusconi and Erdoğan and Orbán and the rest are essentially opportunists of hatred; one day their villain is the multinational corporation and the next it's socialism. Cosmopolitan liberalism is their chief hatred, but they draw it as a monster of many faces. In general, there's an overt quality to the new authoritarians, cynicism turned into irresistible candor. With them, what you see, and what they say, is what you get.

Beyond the specifics of what is newly emerging and what's neatly recidivist in our generation of dictators, one might turn to the disheartening possibility that dictators of any vintage are merely variants of the larger, permanent type of gangster government. The brilliantly incisive hypothesis of the late sociologist Charles Tilly was that the tyrant merely represents, in more vivid plumage, the nature of leadership in any modern state. In his view, all states, far from being derived from some social contract, arise as protection rackets and largely remain so. In the real world, Tilly insisted in his classic study

"War Making and State Making as Organized Crime" (1985), there's never any "consent of the governed," just submission of the frightened. The state and its actors are not a security service designed to protect you from invaders but a scheme designed to make you pay to protect yourself from them. John Gotti's Ozone Park is the model of a modern state. You have not ceded a certain amount of freedom in exchange for protection from violence, since the violence is coming from the same people you ceded your freedom to. Our attempt to come up with a special category of dictators is like distinguishing the *caporegime* of a Mafia family from the Mob boss of the Commission. They're *all* gangsters.

The liberal faith in modernization—the idea that education, the growth of civil society, and the need for a managerial class will eventually limit and lame whatever gangsters may gain power—seems a study in failure, reinforcing the evidently intractable nature of the problem of tyranny. In truth, the technocrats and the managers are almost always impotent in the face of the authoritarian state. Defiance requires extraordinary courage; obedience merely requires default behavior.

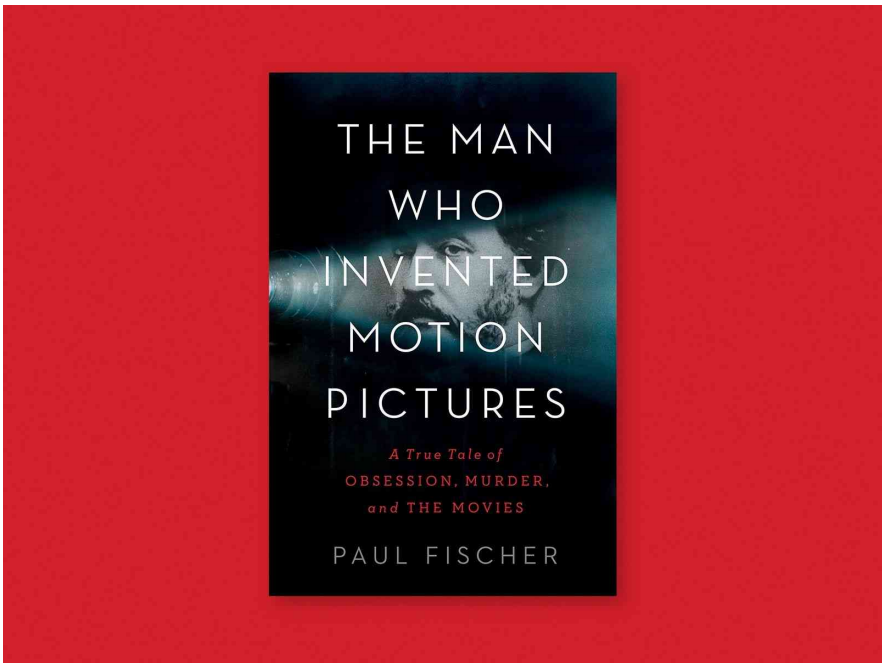
If there is something that distinguishes modern dictators from the general depressing run of gangster strongmen in human history, it's that they make their way through the specific negation of existing liberal principles and institutions. They live to own the libs. Not very long ago, we often heard that the disease of populism rose from within liberal pluralism rather than being a cancer attacking it. Things are marginally clearer now. Guriev and Treisman end their book on a defiant note. Would-be autocrats have, they say, been foiled by liberal institutions, those legendary guardrails: "In more developed, highly educated societies, what holds back aspiring spin dictators, we have argued, is the resistance of networks of lawyers, judges, civil servants, journalists, activists, and opposition politicians. Such leaders survive for a while, lowering the tone and eroding their country's reputation. But so far they have all been voted out of office to face possible corruption prosecutions."

What's more, the authors insist, the ideals of liberal institutions remain potent. "Spin dictators would like their citizens to trust them and distrust the West," Guriev and Treisman write. "They thrive in a world of cynicism and relativism. But the West has something they do not: a powerful idea around

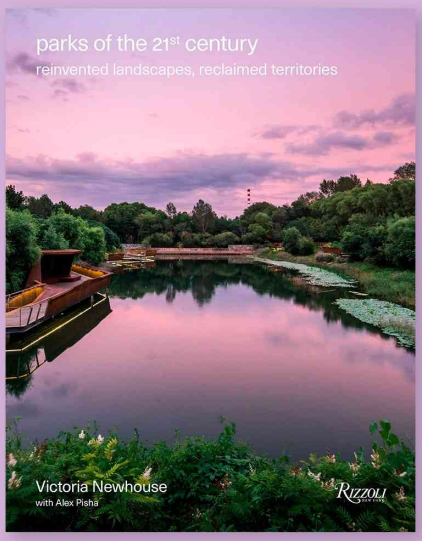
which it can unite, the idea of liberal democracy." Even Komireddi, a mordant critic of Indian politics, ends *his* book with an appreciation of what the Congress Party had built before. The rise of Modi, he concludes, "belatedly awakened us to what we may be poised forever to lose. It has revealed to us that the Republic bequeathed by the founders was not a sham. It was an instantiation of ideals worth fighting for: rising from the inferno of Partition, it defiantly rejected the baleful idea that national unity could not be forged in the crucible of human multiplicity." For all the corruption and abuses, and an exasperating history of missed promises, India's inherited parliamentary democracy turned out to be infinitely preferable to all else that was on offer.

Tilly himself admitted that liberal democracies—with their "minimum set of processes that must be continuously in motion for a situation to qualify as democratic"—finally transcend the gangster character of state formation. Freedom is not an illusion; tolerance is not repression. A historically unprecedented spectrum of opinion is openly available in Western liberal democracies, and opinion still drives political action. If sophisticates sometimes treat the value of free speech as a mirage, nobody in a truly autocratic society would make that mistake. Meanwhile, our own populist demagogues lie in wait.

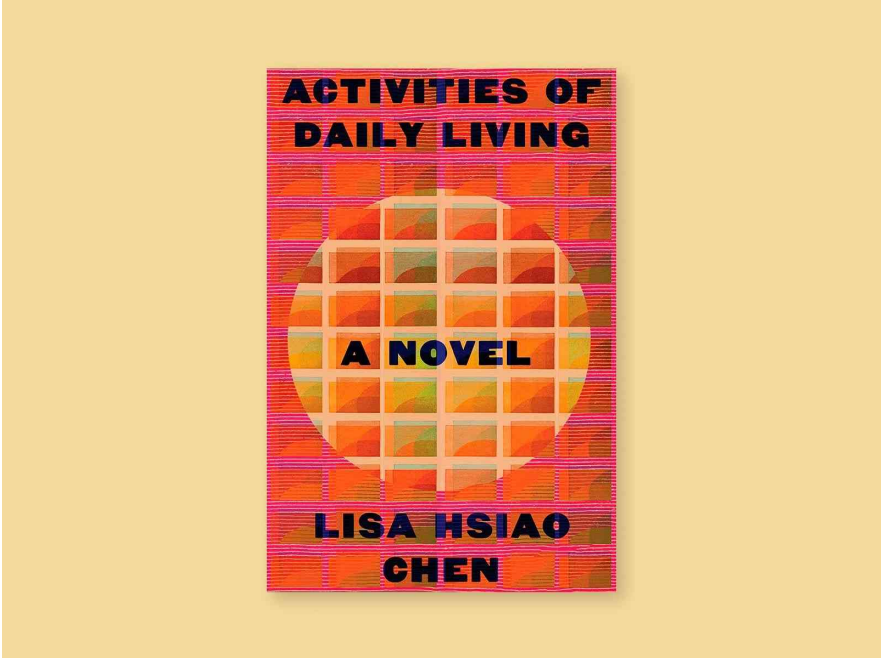
What is easy to miss in the work of generalizing analysis is just how oppressive daily life under the new dictators can be. Many people in Russia today, as in the Soviet Union before, struggle to communicate to their counterparts in liberal democracies how brutalizing and simply draining it is to have to live among lies and treachery and the exercise of arbitrary power—how it becomes impossible to register a protest to any specific indignity or absurdity, because the next one is already on its way. Perhaps it helps to have lived through a repressive regime to understand that liberal democracy, not dictatorship, is the elusive, hard-won thing to be analyzed and anatomized. Unlike the proverbial butterfly of happiness, which vanishes when you pursue it, liberal democracy vanishes when you stop chasing it—or, as with Tinker Bell, when you stop believing in it. Oddly, this most secular of political credos requires the most sustained transfusions of faith. The ones who clap loudest for it to live are the ones who've watched it die. ♦



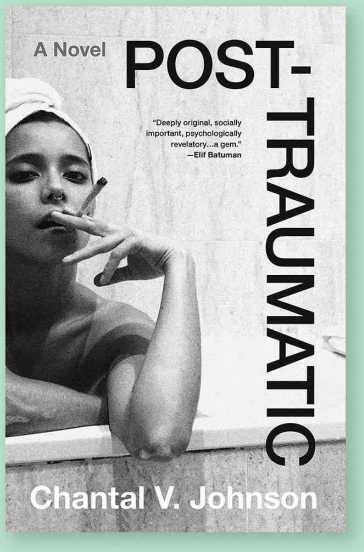
The Man Who Invented Motion Pictures, *by Paul Fischer (Simon & Schuster)*. On the strength of a twenty-frame, 1.66-second film, shot in 1888, the French inventor Louis Le Prince might have become known as the creator of movies. But he mysteriously vanished, in 1890, and a few months later Thomas Edison unveiled the kinetograph, which was similar to Le Prince's camera. As Fischer writes in this biography, some people, including Le Prince's wife, speculated that "one of the world's most famous men had him assassinated." Fischer sifts other, more plausible theories, and gives a compelling sense of Le Prince's visionary confidence that "much of what men called impossible was merely not yet visible, a latent image waiting to be seen."



Parks of the 21st Century, *by Victoria Newhouse, with Alex Pisha (Rizzoli)*. Examining forty-one recently built parks around the world (plus five still in development), this incisive and richly illustrated survey traces the emergence of a contemporary style. Environmental concerns and an abundance of "derelict industrial properties" have forged an aesthetic (and ethic) based on reclamation and "adaptive reuse." Grouping their examples by "previous use" (docklands, railways, quarries), the authors interview landscape architects and ordinary park visitors, describe technical and bureaucratic hurdles, and discuss political ramifications. As engines of gentrification, parks can be exclusionary, but they also have democratic potential, including as protest sites, and Newhouse writes feelingly about the vital role they played for people during the pandemic.



Activities of Daily Living*, by Lisa Hsiao Chen (Norton)*. In this beguilingly elliptical début novel, Alice, a Brooklyn-based video editor, is equally preoccupied with "the Father," who has begun to suffer from dementia, and "the Artist," the real-life provocateur Tehching Hsieh, who made his reputation in the New York art scene of the eighties with yearlong performance pieces featuring extreme inactivity. Alice embarks on "the Project," which involves visiting the sites of his signature performances. She occasionally wonders "if projects were an antidote to wasting time, an elaborate manifestation of it, or both," and the steady accretion of vignettes reflects her obsession with time—something the Father is running out of and the Artist is, according to his credo, committed to frittering away.



Post-Traumatic*, by Chantal V.* Johnson (Little, Brown). This sharp psychological novel tracks the obsessive ruminations of an attorney at a New York City psychiatric hospital named Vivian, who is "the only upwardly mobile person" in her Black Puerto Rican family. A victim of violent rape as a child, she is "proud to have survived, took it as a measure of her strength, insisted she was over it." And yet she restricts calories until she's close to collapse, fixates on men after a single date, and becomes convinced that strangers will assault her on the subway. As Vivian's behavior increasingly contradicts her own intellectual convictions, a series of minor disasters prompts her to reconsider her need for control.

By Idrees Kahloon

Content

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There has always been something irresistible about advice in mathematical form. When, in the Book of Genesis, Joseph was plucked from prison to interpret the dreams of the Pharaoh, he offered some Biblical budgeting: To survive the seven years of famine that will come after seven years of abundance, the Egyptians must save exactly a fifth of their harvest. Sun Tzu's military counsel in "The Art of War" depends on ratios: "It is the rule in war, if our forces are ten to the enemy's one, to surround him; if five to one, to attack him; if twice as numerous, to divide our army into two." Alexander Hamilton, arguing for a national bank in 1790, presented the appeal of fractional-reserve banking in quantifiable terms. "It is a well-established fact, that Banks in good credit can circulate a far greater sum than the actual quantum of their capital in Gold & Silver," he wrote in a letter to the Speaker of the House of Representatives. "The extent of the possible excess seems indeterminate; though it has been conjecturally stated at the proportions of two and three to one."

Where leaders once turned to sages and pols for such wisdom, they now turn to the guild of economists. The most powerful states in the world are accustomed to outsourcing the management of their crucial macroeconomic decisions to committees of central bankers. Nowadays, no arena of public policy is untouched by economic guidance, solicited or unsolicited. Economists influence the way that children are cared for and schooled; the way that citizens are housed, treated in hospitals, and policed; the way that countries regulate industry and manage climate change. Public policy is now conducted in the language of budgets, cost-benefit studies, regulatory-impact analysis, and mathematical models of dazzling beauty and complexity.

Yet we're not close to consensus on central questions of economic statecraft. Can the cycle of booms, bubbles, and busts be moderated? How much money can a welfare state redistribute to the poor without encouraging dependency? Economists, for all their hardcore mathematizing, still disagree with one another on basic issues. Which raises a question: Was it a mistake to entrust them with public policy in the first place?

Elizabeth Popp Berman, a sociologist at the University of Michigan, certainly thinks so. In her new book, "Thinking Like an Economist: How Efficiency Replaced Equality in U.S. Public Policy" (Princeton), she argues that the mid-century turn toward "the economic style of reasoning" had devastating consequences for progressive Democrats. Back in 1934, Franklin D. Roosevelt came away from a meeting with John Maynard Keynes, the most important British economist of the twentieth century, baffled and appalled by his "whole rigmarole of figures." Economists were once relegated to the basement, inglorious actuaries to the lawyers on top, but they've steadily gained in prominence, influence, and office space. Since 1946, the President has retained a Council of Economic Advisers. Last year, President Joe Biden elevated the chair of that council to the White House Cabinet. There exists no comparably august advisory body of anthropologists, political scientists, or sociologists.

This conquering new style of reasoning, Berman argues, was insidious. "It portrays itself merely as a technical means of decision-making that can be used with equal effectiveness by people with any political values," she writes. "This, though, is a ruse: efficiency is a value of its own." And the dominance of economic thought has scuttled ambitious policymaking. Why, she asks, "did the Obama Administration not produce, or even seek, more fundamental change? Why did it remain committed to an incrementalist, modestly ambitious vision of government, even as the country faced unprecedented challenges?" The answer, she says, is that the new technocrats, fixated on incentives and choice, undermined "some of Democrats' most effective language—of universalism, rights, and equality." Under their malign sway, as cost-benefit analysis became codified in government bureaus and standards of jurisprudence, previously bold Democrats reduced their dreams for betterment to feeble meliorism. The dominion of economics has, Berman says, resulted in "forty years of neoliberalism."

The indictment comes with a long bill of particulars. Because Berman believes that a fixation on efficiency has undermined political progress, her account shines a harsh light on the British economist Nicholas Kaldor, who, along with his colleague John Hicks, devised what became a standard test for assessing the costs and benefits of public policy. Berman writes that, "while the virtues of these kinds of efficiency may seem self-evident, the

pursuit of efficiency frequently conflicted with commitments to competing values," and she faults the Kaldor-Hicks test for undermining the moral case for national health insurance.

More recently, antitrust enforcement was narrowed to businesses that violated the consumer-welfare standard—the achievement of Robert Bork and members of the "law and economics" school fostered at the University of Chicago. Transportation markets for flights, freight, and railroads were deregulated. The Environmental Protection Agency moved away from regulating pollution through inflexible, strict limits, adopting instead market-inspired emissions-trading programs. Public housing was phased out in favor of rental vouchers. Anti-poverty policy was reformulated to respond to worries about moral hazard and dependency. And health care never got the overhaul that it needed: rather than refashioning it into a single-payer system like the British National Health Service, Congress has only built annexes for a great Rube Goldberg machine formed of interlocking government subsidies, private insurance, and opaque hospital pricing. Again and again, Berman maintains, hapless progressives have been overrun by brigades of economists armed with slide rules.

Berman is at her best as an archeologist of ideas, digging through archives to excavate the origins of the economic style of reasoning and its takeover of federal policymaking. In the waning days of the Second World War, American military leaders, intent on preserving the impressive statistical and logistics machine they had built to win the war, created an organization that would eventually become the *RAND* Corporation, a central figure in Berman's account. The group, which prided itself on "empirical, nonpartisan, independent analysis," quickly rose in stature. A big boost came from the Kennedy Administration, with its legendary appetite for experts, especially of the Harvardian variety. And when John F. Kennedy's defense secretary, Robert McNamara, surrounded himself with a coterie of "Whiz Kids," many were supplied by *RAND*. McNamara embarked on a grand scheme to bring "scientific management" to government business, the Planning, Programming and Budgeting System, and Berman argues convincingly that the initiative, though now forgotten, had an important legacy. It brought economic reasoning to the executive agencies and then to Congress, and helped develop "a new academic discipline of public policy." She goes on to catalogue the penetration of various governmental bureaus by

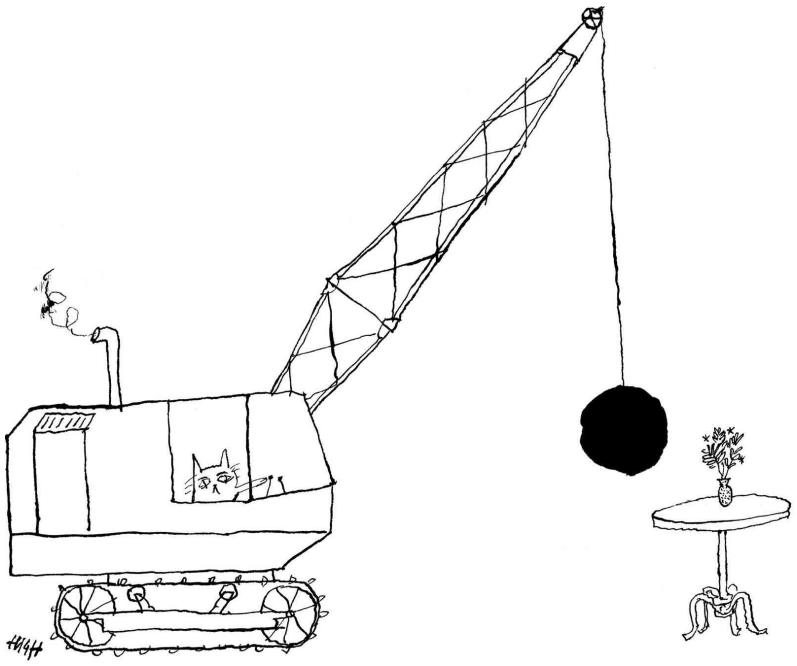
practitioners of the economic style, who, within a few decades, created permanent planning and policy offices. Obsessed with cost-benefit analysis, randomized experiments, and policy evaluation, these technocrats, many of them Democrats, scaled down the vision of the Great Society types.

Berman's central thesis—that the implicit values of economics clash with and crowd out progressive aims—is more familiar. It arises from the widespread idea that neoliberalism, or its even woollier cousin "late capitalism," is to blame for many of the ills and inadequacies of the American state. An influential version of this view is captured in the title of the 2019 book "The Economists' Hour: False Prophets, Free Markets, and the Fracture of Society," by Binyamin Appelbaum, an editorial writer for the *Times*. An essay titled "Against Economics," by the late scholar and social critic David Graeber, contended that people who manage large economies have come to realize that the discipline isn't "fit for purpose." Or, in the brisk formulation of Philip Roscoe, who teaches at the University of St. Andrews school of management: "Economics is itself one of the biggest problems we face." The charge that economists are more than occasionally guilty of excessive self-confidence is incontestable. The more serious charge is that a moral and intellectual tension exists between equity-conscious progressives and efficiency-fixated economists. How much harm has this discipline done?

A fuller accounting reveals a more complicated story. Some economists were indeed hostile to the social-welfare state; others designed it. In 1910, Henry Rogers Seager, an economist at Columbia University, published a book titled "Social Insurance: A Program of Social Reform." Between the bland covers was a blistering denunciation of American economic conditions, which Seager claimed "make the program of individualism little better than a program of despair," and a call to create or expand unemployment insurance, workers' compensation, and social security. In building his argument, he drew freely from the research of the neoclassical economist and statistician Irving Fisher. "Social Insurance" not only augured the New Deal but also provided intellectual justification for another sweeping effort: "I believe that we shall devise means for exterminating poverty as we have devised means for exterminating other evils," Seager wrote. Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty would not fire its first salvos for another half century. Not that Johnson could have waged his war without a

precise definition of poverty—and the thresholds his Administration used were formulated by an unassuming number cruncher at the Social Security Administration, the economist Mollie Orshansky.

Perhaps the most consequential counterpoint to the "economists vs. progressives" narrative comes from across the Atlantic. In 1941, William Beveridge, a British economist with a habit of irritating government ministers busy with the war effort, was dispatched with the unenviable task of examining the country's social-insurance schemes. Beveridge decided to exceed his mandate. "A revolutionary moment in the world's history is a time for revolutions, not patching," he declared when he returned, a year later, with a three-hundred-page report in hand. It was a radical document with almost preposterous ambitions—to vanquish the "five giants" of disease, idleness, ignorance, squalor, and want by crafting a cradle-to-grave welfare state. At least some of the grandiloquence proved justified. Few white papers are properly read even once. But the British public, lining up outside government offices, eventually purchased six hundred thousand copies of this one. Here was a report that laid out a set of universal national-insurance schemes for disability, unemployment, and retirement, in addition to "a national health service for prevention and comprehensive treatment to all members of the community . . . without a charge at any point." Was it too good to be true?



Cartoon by Roland High

Some critics insisted that it was, claiming that the plan would bankrupt the country. The task of mathematically defending Beveridge's ideas was taken up by one of the most influential and quantitatively gifted British economists of the century—Nicholas Kaldor, that bugbear of Berman's. Kaldor assembled an economic model that forecast the effects of Beveridge's plans, presaging the kind of costing exercise that is routinely undertaken by modern-day institutions like the British Office for Budget Responsibility and the American Congressional Budget Office. Kaldor's sums demonstrated that Beveridge's plan could be financed for a pittance of a tax increase: "6 pence on income tax and a penny a pint on beer." Buoyed by such analyses —firmly within the economic style of reasoning—Beveridge's plans became reality after Clement Attlee became Prime Minister and established National Insurance and the N.H.S.

In fact, a great deal of what we think of as progressive policy is indebted to Kaldor, who happens to have been a lifelong socialist. He strenuously advocated for higher taxes on non-labor income, including capital gains, corporate profits, and inheritances. A. P. Thirlwall, his biographer, credits him, too, with influencing the design of the universal child benefits instituted in 1975, by Harold Wilson's Labour government. So it's curious that in both Appelbaum and Berman's histories Kaldor figures only as an unhelpful catalyst for the economic style of thinking. If this style of thinking is inherently at odds with progressive policy, how was it that in the U.K. it propelled and sustained progressive policy on such a vast scale?

Nor does the tension between economic and progressive values seem so clear in recent decades. Governments rarely invite wholesale policy redesigns by economists. On the few occasions that they have done so, the results have varied widely. In the nineteen-seventies, after Augusto Pinochet seized power in Chile, the Chicago Boys remade the Chilean economy into a laissez-faire playland of Milton Friedman's dreams; in the nineteen-eighties, the Princeton economist Uwe Reinhardt persuaded the Taiwanese government to implement an N.H.S.-inspired single-payer health-care system. (Reinhardt considered efficiency in health care too important to leave to the market.) When a generalization about economic thought is ventured, it's worth taking a look at what's omitted from the data set.

Dunking on the discipline won't help progressives get what they want, because partisanship-induced gridlock is a far greater obstacle than technocratic caution is. Barack Obama's proposal for a public health-insurance option was felled by the realities of Republican filibustering in the Senate, not by dissenting economists. Consider, for that matter, the Biden Administration's agenda. It calls for the federal government to provide, among other things, generous child tax allowances to fight poverty, a program of universal pre-kindergarten, new subsidies for child care and family leave, stricter enforcement of antitrust rules to limit corporate power over wages and prices, and much more ambitious reductions to carbon emissions in order to halt global warming.

There is no dearth of economists willing to endorse these proposals. Last year, more than four hundred eminent economists—including several Nobel laureates—signed an open letter calling for Congress to make permanent the pandemic policy of near-universal child tax benefits launched as part of Biden's American Rescue Plan. Their arguments, with references to "long-term fiscal payoff" and "parental labor supply," fall solidly within the economic style of reasoning whose values allegedly clash with the progressive ideal of equity. Although the policy was hugely successful while it was in effect—reducing, according to researchers at Columbia University, the number of American children in poverty by forty per cent—it lapsed in January. The problem had nothing to do with the economists' veto, and much to do with legislative vote-wrangling. Build Back Better, Biden's plan for transforming America in a Johnsonian manner, has been stalled by maverick Democrats like Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema. How does Berman reconcile her story about technocratic paralysis with the fact that the contemporary Democratic Party is quite comfortable with expanding the state? It's an issue she mainly skirts, save when she cryptically credits "economists not committed to the economic style."

Of course, the limitations of economics should not be papered over. Borrowing from other fields has improved the discipline, albeit slowly. The Black-Scholes model for pricing certain assets derives from Einstein's study of the Brownian motion of particles in a fluid. Contemporary behavioral economists are using psychological experiments to update unrealistic stipulations about rational actors; Nobel Prizes are being awarded to economic empiricists who test the ways in which textbook theories fail in

the real world; and the Big Data types are hyping machine learning. But economic models are still sensitive to assumptions—as the duelling cost-benefit analyses of Republican and Democratic administrations plainly demonstrate. It is naïve to think that these analyses are immune to political influence and shoddy workmanship in the form of bad starting data, unsound modelling techniques, and poorly qualified findings.

Politics aside, some important things are simply harder to price than others. A measurement of the "social cost of carbon," the negative effects of an additional ton of carbon-dioxide emissions, may one day underpin a national carbon tax. But arriving at this measurement requires modelling changes in global temperatures, ocean acidification, sea level, extreme weather, agricultural losses, and human population for the next few decades. That leaves a lot of room for discretion informed by political considerations.

Epistemic humility, though, is distinct from epistemic nihilism. Berman's approach to economic analysis is essentially to disregard it unless it confirms what she already thinks. "When our political values align with those of economics, we should embrace the many useful tools it has to offer," she writes. "But when they conflict, we must be willing to advocate, without apology, for alternatives." After all, she says, that's what conservatives do. Ronald Reagan "led with his values," and "unapologetically embraced ideology over technocracy"; his Administration "used the economic style when convenient, and ignored it when not." Progressives ought to learn from the Gipper, she thinks, and demote economics to something like actuarial cheerleading. It would be tempting to follow Berman's lead and supplant economic analysis with moral certainties —why not just assert that "bigness is badness" when it comes to antitrust policy, and that free health care is simply a right?

Put aside for the moment the problem that people may be gripped by moral suppositions that are not aligned with progressive statism. Even well-intentioned policy can carry unintended consequences—ones that would be harder to detect if economic analysis were forsworn. Certain policies that Berman mourns as casualties of the economic style may have been deservedly jettisoned. Public-housing projects in America have too often devolved into pits of concentrated poverty; after the federal government demolished some of them between the mid-nineteen-nineties and the early

two-thousands, outcomes for former residents actually improved. Or take the Community Action Program, a Great Society initiative that Berman says fell victim to the economic style. It sought to encourage the "maximum feasible participation" of the poor in the democratic process and in the distribution of anti-poverty relief money by setting up hundreds of local Community Action agencies. Those are laudable aims, but there's lots of evidence that the program, heavily paternalist in practice, was a chaotic failure.

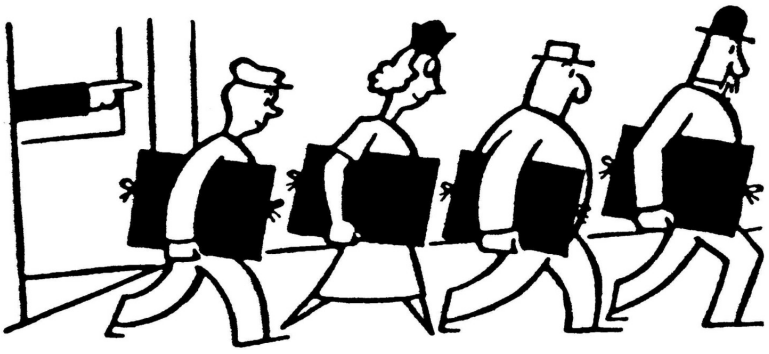
If Berman is quick to admire programs for having admirable objectives, she's quick to dismiss reforms that make use of markets in ways she associates with her detested *RAND*-style technocrats. The fact remains that the cap-and-trade program to limit sulfur-dioxide pollution reduced emissions by ninety-four per cent over three decades. Deregulation of trucking and freight substantially reduced prices for consumers, without jeopardizing the "rough equity in access to, and pricing of, services" which she prizes. The tantalizing central question her book prompts—whether or not the economics revolution in governance has been for the greater good—goes unaddressed. For obvious reasons, Berman does not attempt a cost-benefit analysis of cost-benefit analysis.

And yet purging the Poindexters could hinder the crafting of policies that actually achieve their aim. True progressives will wish to know whether their ideas for rent control backfired in the form of pricier housing, deeper segregation, and more homelessness. They'll want to know whether charter schools have improved outcomes for poor Black and Hispanic students in American cities. Economists aren't oracles; all theories have to undergo refinement and reinvention. Measurements and modelling have their limits. But the tools of economics are what built the social-welfare state in the first place; we'll need them if we want to build it back better. ♦

Comeback Dept.

- **How Some Movers Rediscovered a Neglected Abstractionist**

By Emma Allen



In 2019, the octogenarian artist, poet, and educator Yvonne Pickering Carter—who once showed alongside Romare Bearden, Alma Thomas, Martin Puryear, and William T. Williams—was living alone in a big house on Wadmalaw Island, in South Carolina, which her father built. She had a ride-on lawn-mower for cruising between the massive azaleas he'd planted. It had been Carter's home for twenty years, but her daughter, Cornelia Carter Sykes, noticed that her mother was forgetting to take her medication, and so moved Carter closer to her, in Washington, D.C.

Some aesthetically discerning movers tipped off Joanna White, a Charleston gallerist, who offered to show Carter's work. Meanwhile, Selena Parnon, at the Hunter Dunbar Projects gallery, in Chelsea, came across Carter's name in a book, which led her to White's Facebook page, which led her to drive through the night to pick up a handful of Carter's sculptures and paintings to include in a show titled "Ninth Street and Beyond: 70 Years of Women in Abstraction." All this Kismet led, on a recent Friday, to a visit from Carter, Sykes, and White to Hunter Dunbar, in New York.

The gallerist Benjamin Hunter guided the tour, gesturing toward a muted geometric painting by Lee Krasner from 1950 that was possibly included in the original Ninth Street Show, in 1951. "If it's not *the* painting, it's one of a

very similar ilk," he said, adding, "These women often subjugated their own well-being for that of their husbands"—in Krasner's case, Jackson Pollock. "We're trying to show them on their own merit."

"Isn't that something," the soft-spoken Carter said. "Joe, my husband"—an economist for the United States Postal Service—"he wouldn't let my daughter come *near* my studio. He was a stickler about that. And I would slide out to make sure she wasn't in some dire need."

Carter continued to reminisce: "My father was a dentist, but he told me, 'You might not even be able to find a job,' because, well, first of all, being Black excluded people very fast, and being female just as fast. So he felt sorry for me, but he kept sending me to art school every semester." She smiled. "Though he never hung any of my work up in his house, only in his office. Now, my one nephew just got married, bought a house, and he asked, 'Auntie, may I have some of your work?' I said, 'Just go help yourself.' He just went and helped himself. His mother was so angry at him." (The gallery is selling her works for upward of twelve thousand five hundred dollars.)

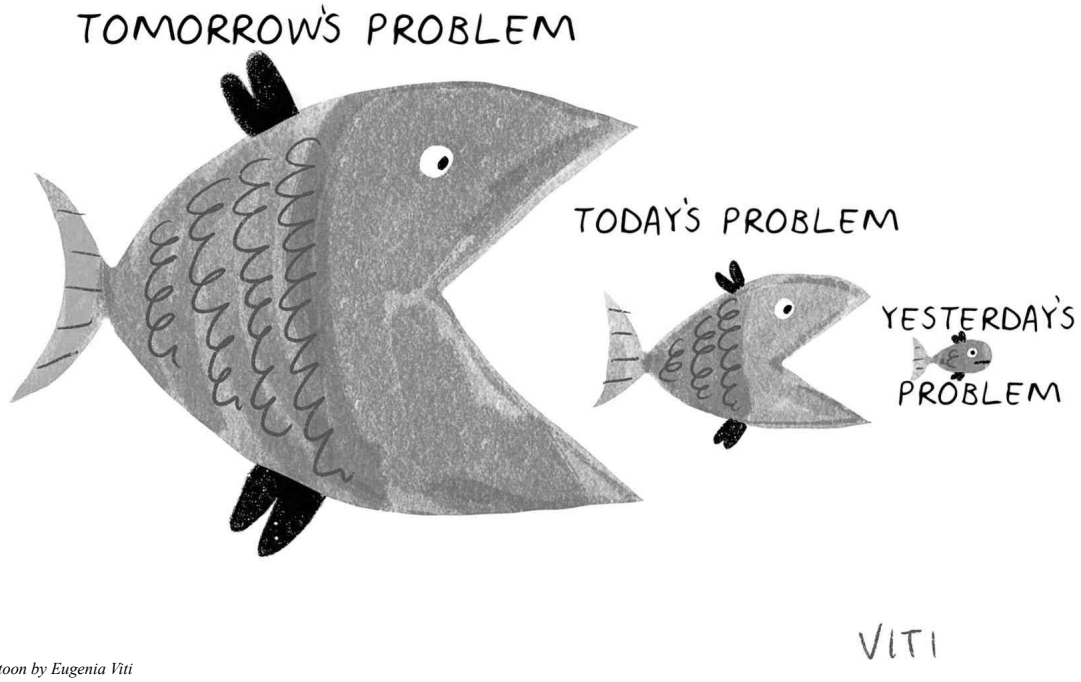
The group proceeded to a large red canvas by Alma Thomas, from 1976. Carter said, "Alma was a very dear friend of mine, and her sister was my boss in the library at Howard"—where Carter received a B.A. and an M.F.A. "Their father wanted a son, so when Alma's sister was born he named her John Maurice."

They came to one of Carter's pieces, a Lucite box filled with scraps of paper that had been painted on, torn, and sewn back together into a pale totem.

Sykes recalled that whenever her mother would go on a paper-buying spree, in New York, "weeks later, these panel trucks would show up at our house on Tenth Street and deliver paper by the ream." They had to be hoisted through the second-story windows.

The party ended up in the gallery's offices, where a colorful painting of Carter's was on display.

"When I made this, my husband liked it a lot," she said. "That's probably the only reason I still have it, I don't think it's very good."



Cartoon by Eugenia Viti

“We all love it!” White said.

“Well, I’m glad,” Carter said. “I thought it was a nightmare. And my mother had all of these visions about this whale in it.”

“I thought it was a bowl of fruit,” Parnon confessed.

“I fought hard to make abstractions,” Carter noted.

Parnon began unpacking a box of ephemera that documented Carter’s prolific and under-recognized career. “In order to get grants, to get promoted, you had to prove you were doing all this,” Carter said. “People always thought art people weren’t doing anything.”

Hunter asked when she realized she was an artist.

“I haven’t recognized it yet,” Carter responded. “Because I should now have a stack of poetry, published, at least this high.” She gestured near her nose.

A 1973 artist statement, for Carter’s first solo show, read, “No world you will not destroy me nor my children.” Carter handled a yellowed clipping from the Washington *Post*, titled “Life After Death,” about the funeral parlor

she and Joe had converted into a home, in D.C. Her studio space was where they'd built caskets.

"It had a hand-pulled elevator so that when the materials for the caskets were delivered, they could be taken up," Sykes said. She was nine when they bought the place, and her mother brushed off concerns that it might be haunted. "It's now a bed-and-breakfast," Sykes said. "I think it's one of Oprah's favorites." ♦

Comment

- **After the Failed Senate Bill on Abortion**

By Jill Lepore

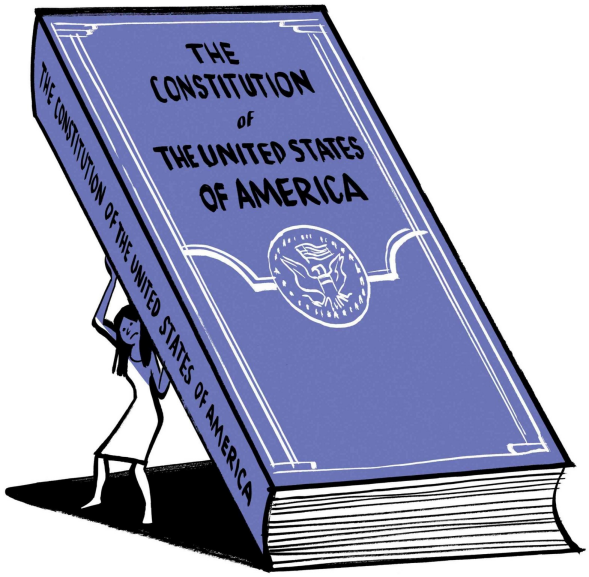


Illustration by João Fazenda

"Every American will see where every senator stands," Chuck Schumer, the Senate Majority Leader, said last week, in calling for a vote on the Women's Health Protection Act. The bill would have banned nearly all restrictions on abortion, making it the most permissive abortion bill ever to be considered in Congress. There was no chance that it would pass. In September, it passed only narrowly in the House, and along party lines. (No Republican voted for it, and only one Democrat, Representative Henry Cuellar, of Texas, voted against it.) And on Wednesday, as expected, it failed in the Senate, 49-51, short not only of a simple majority but, more important, of the super-majority of sixty votes required to overcome the inevitable filibuster.

Why hold the Senate vote? The roll call didn't, in fact, reveal anything about where every senator stands; it showed only how hardened the parties have become, which everyone already knew. (Only the West Virginia Democrat Joe Manchin crossed party lines.) But Schumer is eying the midterm elections. Democrats hope to entice voters to the polls, and to their side of the ballot, in the aftermath of an expected Supreme Court decision, this summer, overturning its landmark 1973 ruling in Roe v. Wade. The Senate vote came barely a week after the leak of a draft opinion in the case of Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, written by Samuel Alito and evidently joined by four other G.O.P.-appointed Justices, which argues

that no right to abortion can be found in the Constitution or read into the Fourteenth Amendment, and that, therefore, no such right exists. Alito's draft is so shabby and benighted that it might just be the straw that breaks originalism's back. Politically, the consequences are less clear.

Unfortunately for Schumer, the Senate vote on the Women's Health Protection Act serves Republicans in addition to Democrats, because the bill is out of step with public opinion on abortion; the majority of Americans favor keeping abortion legal, but with some restrictions. You can't be a little bit pregnant. But you can be something other than uncompromisingly pro-life (opposed to abortion even in cases of rape, incest, or danger to the life of the mother) or unwaveringly pro-choice (permitting abortion into the last weeks of a healthy pregnancy). And in that place in between—a haunted place of difficulty, anxiety, relief, and grief—is where most Americans stand.

Politicians hoping to raise money off this latest battle are keen to depict it as a contest between the two parties, even though the people who have suffered most during this long war are poor women, poor families, and poor children. Structurally, the contest isn't between Democrats and Republicans but between the people and the Constitution. Women have been trying to gain equal rights since the founding of this country, including by constitutional amendment. The last meaningful amendment to the Constitution—lowering the voting age to eighteen—was ratified in July, 1971. That December, the Court heard arguments in Roe. In March, 1972, Congress passed the Equal Rights Amendment and sent it to the states, where it was expected to be quickly ratified. That May, John George Schmitz, a Republican congressman representing California, introduced on the floor another proposal, the first right-to-life amendment, which would bar the states from depriving any individual of life "from the moment that he is conceived." In the fifty years since, versions of this amendment have been introduced in Congress more than six hundred times.

If constitutional amendments were ratified by a simple majority of the popular vote (rather than by a two-thirds majority in each chamber of Congress and three-quarters of the states), the Equal Rights Amendment would have passed in the nineteen-seventies, and the right-to-life amendment would have failed. The people, as the political scientist Austin

Ranney observed, “are considerably more receptive than members of Congress to constitutional change.” Americans polled in the seventies and eighties supported nine of eleven proposed constitutional amendments, including the direct election of the President, congressional term limits, and prayer in schools. The right-to-life amendment was the only one they absolutely rejected. The numbers have remained steady ever since, with a little under two-thirds opposed, and about a third in favor. Meanwhile, since the seventies, well more than three-quarters of Americans have consistently favored the E.R.A., including through its seeming failure, in 1982.

“All of America will be watching,” Schumer said, ahead of the abortion-bill vote, predicting that Republicans who opposed it would “suffer the consequences electorally.” The *Times* carried the vote live. Fox News didn’t bother. “Sadly, the Senate failed to stand in defense of a woman’s right about decisions about her own body,” Vice-President Kamala Harris, who presided over the roll call, told the press. “This vote clearly suggests that the Senate is not where the majority of Americans are on this issue.” Except that the legislation, as written, is not exactly where the majority of Americans are on this issue. And, although Senators Lisa Murkowski and Susan Collins, centrist Republicans, gestured toward possible compromises, Democratic leaders, with the exception of Virginia’s Tim Kaine, have shown little interest in working together on narrower legislation. A compromised version, people evidently figured, would just die by filibuster.

If the Democratic response to the Alito draft was largely rhetorical—“Do something, Democrats!” anguished protesters chanted, outside the Supreme Court—was it also a missed opportunity? Republican officials at the federal and state levels have opposed government funding for child care, parental leave, sex education, and contraception, and for reproductive, maternal, neonatal and pediatric health services. In Republican-run Mississippi, where the Dobbs case originated, the rates of child poverty and infant mortality are the highest in the nation. (The U.S. maternal-mortality rate is the highest among developed nations.) Hours before the Senate vote on the Women’s Health Protection Act, Senator Ben Sasse, a Nebraska Republican and sometime Party renegade, implored Democrats to use the moment to press for maternal, infant, and child care. Could they have persuaded Republicans to support measures aimed at helping poor women and children? Unlikely, given the all-or-none state of politics. “Let’s do it,” Sasse said. Here, and

only here, is where Democrats and Republicans agreed last week, both answering, in effect, “No, let’s run on this in November instead.” ♦

Crossword

- **The Crossword: Tuesday, May 10, 2022**

By Brooke Husic

Feed the World

- **José Andrés Feeds Ron Howard, Then Feeds Him Some More**

By Patrick Radden Keefe

José Andrés and Ron HowardIllustration by João Fazenda

Ron Howard was famished when he met the chef José Andrés on the High Line the other morning. “Are we eating at this place of yours?” Howard asked, as Andrés came barrelling over, a little bleary from travelling but revving up to his standard tempo of volubility. He steered Howard down some stairs and across Thirtieth Street to his restaurant, Mercado Little Spain.

It was still closed, so Andrés hammered on the door with the assurance of a man who owns the place. A staffer opened up, and Andrés guided his guest to a booth.“You want eggs?” he asked.

Sitting down, he said, “It’s been a complicated seventy days.” Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February, Andrés—who is built like a bull, with a trim white beard and mirthful eyes—has been on the ground in the region with his relief organization, World Central Kitchen, serving meals to people affected by the war. But a previous commitment meant that he had to commute from the war zone to Spain, where he was making a TV show. “I’m an expert on in-and-out-of-Ukraine,” he said. “Nobody crosses the border quicker.”

Food arrived: platters of eggs and *pisto* (an earthy tomato stew), sliced Manchego, Catalan tomato bread, slivers of Ibérico ham. “The ultimate ham,” Andrés said. Howard, who is rail thin, with a resting face that projects a boyish geniality, seemed delighted with the spread. But Andrés assured him, “Is more coming.”

Howard met Andrés six or seven years ago. He said that he was taken with the chef’s charisma, and also fascinated by his expanding efforts with World Central Kitchen. He was struck by the speed with which Andrés and his collaborators could parachute into a place after a flood or an earthquake and start serving hot meals. “They’re built almost like a fire department,” he said. A colleague had suggested to him that Andrés should win the Nobel Peace Prize. Howard wanted to make a documentary about the chef’s philanthropy. Andrés was skeptical at first. His relief work requires speed and autonomy (“The war in Ukraine started February 24th,” he said. “On the twenty-fifth, we were serving meals”); a camera crew would slow him down. But as he got to know Howard he softened. “A lunch here, a dinner there, a glass of wine under the moon,” Andrés recalled, adding, “How can you not like Ron Howard?”

Howard, who has directed more than thirty movies, sees some affinities between filmmaking and the work that Andrés does, even if the stakes are lower in Hollywood. “I love collaborators. So does he,” Howard said. “He wants to work with people and build on their energy.” In the documentary, called “We Feed People,” which premières on Disney+, on May 27th, Howard captures Andrés’s ability to step off a plane into chaos, find some resourceful locals, and organize them into a relief army. “Every restaurant in the world, they’re part of World Central Kitchen,” Andrés said. “They just don’t know it.”

As filming began, Howard learned that several of Andrés’s collaborators from the earliest days—in Haiti, after the 2010 earthquake—had been chronicling everything on video. “They had so much great footage,” he said. The spirit of friendly collaboration was infectious. When Howard’s crew arrived in the Navajo Nation to document Andrés’s *Covid*-relief efforts, they found themselves distributing truckloads of supplies rather than filming.

Mercado's staff began raising the garage-style doors, and sunlight and customers streamed in. More food arrived: sandwiches of smoked salmon and scrambled egg. Andrés is an irrepressible raconteur, and he's always moving when he talks. He jabs you in the arm to make sure he has your attention; he lifts the top from your salmon sandwich and stuffs in some Ibérico and Manchego, because he feels strongly that it tastes better that way. Each time a plate hit the table, he said, "Is more coming."

On his phone, he showed Howard a map of the Ukraine operation. "We are doing three hundred and fifty to four hundred thousand meals a day," he said. W.C.K. has spread into eight countries, to contend with the widening outflow of refugees. By its count, twenty million meals have been served since February. He pulled up a photo of a food truck he'd commandeered: "It was secondhand, parked in Kyiv, a food truck nobody was using." After some repairs, the truck was churning out meals. "We are machines for that shit," he said.

What impressed Howard most was the spirit of volunteerism on the ground, even from those whose lives had been devastated. "It's very therapeutic for people to activate," he said. "But they need structure. They need somebody to say, 'Hey, we could use some help.' " A plate of *xuixo* (fried cream-filled croissants) arrived, and a round of *ensaïmada*, a Majorcan sweet bread. Howard asked Andrés about a potato dish that he had encountered while scouting "In the Heart of the Sea," in the Canary Islands.

"*Papas arrugadas*," Andrés said, and flagged down his chef, to see if the restaurant had any. No dice.

"That's O.K.!" Howard said, relieved. "I'm full." ♦

Fiction

- **“Occupational Hazards”**

By Jamil Jan Kochai

Content

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

Audio: *Jamil Jan Kochai reads.*

1966-69: SHEEPHERDER, DEH-NAW, LOGAR

Duties included: leading sheep to the pastures near the Black Mountains; measuring the distance between the shadows of chinar trees on dirt roads; naming the sheep after prophets from the Quran, who, according to Hajji Atal, were all sheepherders at one point in their lives; reciting verses from the Quran to dispel djinns; borrowing fruit from neighbors' orchards for sustenance; watching sheep; counting sheep; loving sheep; understanding the nature of sheep; protecting sheep from bandits, witches, wolves, rapists, demons, and half brothers (nicknamed the Captain and the King); taking younger brother, Watak, along to the pastures; swimming in a stream with Watak instead of watching sheep; losing two sheep; getting beaten by the Captain for losing sheep; leaving Watak at home, and never taking eyes off sheep again.

1969-75: GRADE-SCHOOL STUDENT, DEH-NAW, LOGAR

Duties included: sneaking away from home on the first day of school to sign up for classes without permission from Hajji Atal, who thought school was for Communists and Kafir; registering identity with the government minister at the local school office; existing for the first time in the official records of King Zahir Shah's modernist regime; begging Hajji Atal for forgiveness; walking two miles to school, barefoot, without a notebook or a pencil or Hajji Atal's forgiveness; sitting on the bare clay of a small room filled with dust and dirt and the eager panting of fifty pairs of lungs; fashioning a pen out of chinar branches; mixing white clay from the riverbeds with water and berries to create ink; dabbing and swirling and turning *alifs* into trees and

nuns into boats and *mims* into blossoms; gradually learning to read and write in Farsi and Pashto; excelling at arithmetic; attempting to avoid trouble with the schoolboys; fighting with the schoolboys; earning a reputation as a brawler; earning the nickname Atal's Wolf; earning Hajji Atal's forgiveness; studying the auspicious and honorable kings of Afghanistan; coming home from school to discuss the auspicious and honorable kings of Afghanistan, and hearing from Hajji Atal that almost all of them were traitors, sadists, cowards, pompous weaklings, and servants of the English; returning to school to question the honor of kings; arguing with Malam Sahib; standing up before the class of fifty boys—some of them ragged and dirty, some of them still bleeding from rock fights in the yard—hand outstretched, palm open, and accepting the thrashing from Malam Sahib, who was so malnourished and whose arms were so slender and whose switch was so flimsy it didn't even break skin; rubbing calloused flesh and smiling; returning home, triumphant; bidding farewell to the Captain when he was sent to America for military training by President Daoud Khan, who had recently overthrown Zahir Shah—the last King of Afghanistan.

1971-82: FARMER, DEH-NAW, LOGAR

Duties included: plowing fields; scattering manure; planting seeds; insuring the fair and equal distribution of water throughout the village by maintaining a series of interconnected canals extending from the Logar River; picking apples and tomatoes; shucking corn; harvesting wheat, rice, onions, potatoes, beets, carrots, and gandana; avoiding beatings from half brothers; hiding Watak from half brothers; teaching Watak the tricks of the plow, the shovel, the hammer, the sickle fork, and the fist; laboring alongside Watak in the wheat fields and apple orchards; watching him try to keep pace; laughing at his failures; chopping down chinar trees with Hajji Atal, and ignoring his calls to slow down; clearing twenty chinar trees in a day, impressing Hajji Atal, and injuring left wrist in the process, not knowing that the wrist was broken until two days later, when it swelled to the size of a cantaloupe; receiving permission from Hajji Atal to travel to Pul-i-Alam to see a doctor, who fashioned a brace with sticks and tape and shreds of cloth; resting broken arm for several weeks; slowly mending, healing; hearing word of the return of the Captain; climbing up onto the roof of Hajji Atal's compound to

gaze at the spectacle of the Captain flying an F-4 Phantom above Deh-Naw; dreaming of jets for years afterward.

Jamil Jan Kochai on résumés as stories.

1972-76: MERCHANT'S ASSISTANT, MANDAI, KABUL

Duties included: waiting sleeplessly for three days and nights before the trip to Kabul; accompanying Hajji Atal on the short walk to the market village of Wagh Jan, where buses from Kabul showed up every few days at Fajr; tugging along a donkey strapped to the limit with goods to barter or sell; sitting with Hajji Atal on the steps of a shop in Wagh Jan, in the cold of the morning, wrapped up together in a shared patu; watching the headlights of the bus float through early-morning mist; journeying from Logar to the Mandai markets in Kabul; following Hajji Atal through enormous crowds of shoppers and sellers and servants and guards; learning Hajji Atal's haggling technique; selling wheat, corn, fat, oil, sheep's wool, vegetables; buying flour, cloth, linens, shoes, jackets, and chaplaks; hauling supplies; inspecting quality of supplies; eating freshly grilled shish kebab on the street; seeing the lights of the shops in Kabul glimmer like fairies; rushing to catch the second-to-last bus back to Logar; resting head on Hajji Atal's wiry arm; returning home at night; meeting up with Watak on the roof of the compound; telling him Hajji Atal's stories; falling asleep with Watak beneath the starry sky.

1976-78: MERCHANT, MANDAI, KABUL

Duties included: receiving instruction from Hajji Atal to head to Kabul (alone) with an allotment of cash; waiting in Wagh Jan (alone); journeying to Kabul (alone); haggling with merchants (alone); purchasing necessary supplies for no more than half the asking price (alone); sneaking into the latest Amitabh Bachchan film (alone); hearing word of political strife among the Communists in Kabul (alone); cursing the Communists in Kabul (alone);

fighting a pack of college students (alone); barely escaping a terrible beating by rushing through streets and alleys and open sewers (alone); staining new clothes with sewage (alone); bathing, clothed, in the Kabul River (alone); sitting on the edge of a bridge above the Kabul River to dry in the setting sun (alone); returning home on the last bus out of Kabul (alone); resting head against window of bus and dreaming it was the bony shoulder of Hajji Atal (alone).

1976-79: HIGH-SCHOOL STUDENT, DEH-NAW, LOGAR

Duties included: studying history, algebra, chemistry, biology, English, Pashto, Farsi, Arabic, physics; discussing Communism, Stalinism, Maoism, Islamism, Salafism, Wahhabism, and Jihad with distressed peers; pledging loyalty to Daoud, then Taraki, then Amin, then Karmal; marching to the tune of Communist chants; hearing word of purges and coups in Kabul; hearing word of the murders of imams and elders in Pul-i-Alam and Baraki Barak; noticing the disappearance of dissident students and teachers from school; seeing Communist soldiers arrive in Deh-Naw in the middle of the night to arrest the Captain because of his military training in America; listening to the lamentations of his wife and daughters; praying for the Captain to live after years of praying for him to die.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice
Listen to Jamil Jan Kochai read "Occupational Hazards."

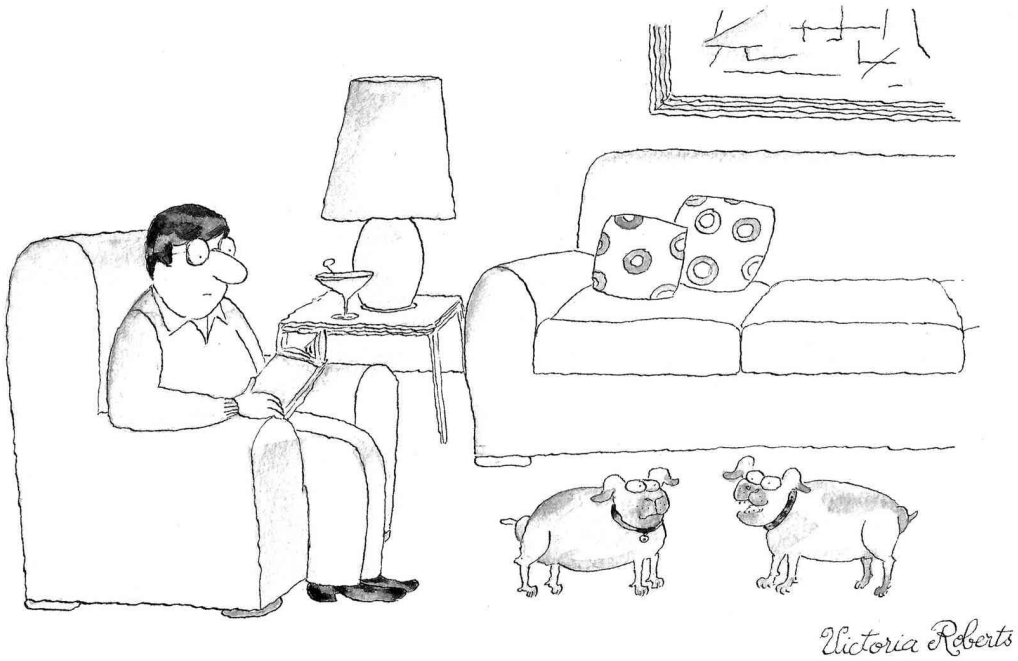
1977-79: MUJAHID RECRUIT, DEH-NAW, LOGAR

Duties included: gathering old English rifles with cousins and neighbors and travelling up to the Black Mountains; meeting with mujahideen forces recently arrived from as close as Baraki Barak and as far away as Bamyan; guiding mujahideen fighters through the mountains of Logar all the way to Peshawar; climbing cliffs and sleeping in caves and mosques and the homes of friendly villagers and waking up repeatedly throughout the night to make

sure rifle was still there and listen for wolves; heading to Kabul with the King to retrieve the Captain upon his reported release from prison, ordered by Chairman Karmal after the Soviets had executed Chairman Amin for the execution of Chairman Taraki; waiting with thousands of other Afghans—lined up from Ghazi Stadium to Pul-e-Charkhi Prison, ten miles down the road—searching for their disappeared sons or brothers or fathers; witnessing the release of only a few hundred prisoners, the Captain, *alhamdulillah*, among them; journeying back to Logar and listening to the Captain's harrowing tale of prisoners buried alive in a mass grave, which wriggled and moaned for three whole days; continuing to attend the high school overrun by Communists while secretly assisting the mujahideen; dropping out of high school in twelfth grade after a failed sickle-fork ambush; growing out hair and beard; joining the forces of Maulana Mohammad Nabi; waiting for the call to action, to ambush, to kill and die for the sake of Allah.

1980-81: MUJAHID, DEH-NAW, LOGAR

Duties included: transporting a rewired Soviet bomb that had landed in the center of Hajji Atal's compound without exploding; avoiding Communist kill squads and Soviet air power; planting the rewired Soviet bomb near the bridge above the Logar River, where Soviet patrols often crossed; waiting in the branches of a mulberry tree for the arrival of enemies; watching a tank approach the bomb; hearing but not seeing the bomb explode; smelling the stench of cooked flesh; returning home and sniffing wheat, flowers, dirt, leaves, shit, wood, gunpowder, anything, anything else; firing on Russian tanks and patrols; firing and missing; firing and never killing; surveilling the skies for Soviet helicopters from the roof of the compound with Watak; warning family when air raids approached; huddling in a bomb shelter with Watak and mother and little sisters; breathing bomb smoke and shattered earth; burying the tattered remnants of neighbors and friends and women and children and babies and cousins and nieces and nephews and a beloved half sister named Khoro; refusing Watak his right to jihad by referring to the twentieth Hadith from the Book of Jihad in the Sunan an-Nasa'i, because someone must live for mother and little sisters.



"He doesn't really feel like going out. Let's run around the room like banshees."
Cartoon by Victoria Roberts

1982: REAPER, DEH-NAW, LOGAR

Duties included: cutting wheat in the dark of pre-dawn with Watak so that the family would not starve to death while waiting out the occupation; dodging Communist patrols and Soviet helicopters; hiding among stalks of grain with Watak as the headlights of tanks and armored trucks cascaded above; seeing a searchlight float closer and closer; considering Watak's plan to split up and take different routes home to divert the Communists; wavering; wavering; wavering; agreeing to Watak's plan; splitting up; rushing home; getting spotted by a patrol; dodging a hundred bullets and two rockets; making it home only to find out that Watak had been caught by a patrol and executed on the bank of a canal in the shade of a mulberry tree; learning that five other family members had also been murdered; spending all of the next night digging graves and collecting limbs; seeking blood; seeking death; seeking the solitude of gunfire; watching little sisters, twelve and three, search for roots in the dead garden; deciding to live, to leave; asking Hajji Atal to abandon Logar; arguing with Hajji Atal about abandoning Logar; leaving Hajji Atal in his bombarded compound; gathering the rest of the family, along with a number of donkeys and horses; fleeing.

1982: REFUGEE, PESHAWAR, PAKISTAN

Duties included: travelling on horseback through the White Mountains toward Peshawar; hiding in bushes and caves and canals to avoid Communist patrols; looking after aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, mother, and sisters; getting caught up in the middle of a firefight between Soviets and mujahideen on a desert road; losing track of sisters in the chaos; searching for them on horseback and hearing the echoes of their voices in the mountains; finding sisters on a stony trail of junipers, with their feet bleeding and their throats dry, eager to return home; reaching the camps in Peshawar; sleeping in a dried canal on a barren plain; setting up tents nearby; gradually building up walls of mud around the tents; searching for work; cutting and hauling wheat for twelve hours straight, for fifty rupees a day, at a local farm; breaking stones in the Kirana Hills, where General Zia was obliterating mountains to build a testing facility for Pakistan's first atomic bomb; working two weeks at a time, thirteen hours a day, no breakfast, no lunch, only one huge meal in the work camp at night; filling a dolly behind a huge tractor with as many of the dynamited mountain stones as possible; breathing dust and earth; breathing stone and tar; never coughing, never tiring, never hurting; turning mountains into roads; saving up enough money to hire a donkey to retrieve Hajji Atal, after any hope for the salvation of Deh-Naw had been lost; finding Hajji Atal in his wreck of a home, still brandishing the ancient sword he'd used to chop down English invaders during the third Anglo-Afghan war; assuring the old man that the men in the family would return to fight off the Soviets just as soon as the women were settled; trekking back to the tents in Peshawar, not knowing that Hajji Atal would never see Logar again; receiving word that the Captain's military connections in America had finally come through; flying on a passenger jet, across the ocean, to a distant land called Alabama.

1984-89: ASSEMBLY LINE, MONTGOMERY, ALA.

Duties included: renting a small trailer in Mobile, right beside the trailers of the Captain and the King; finding work at an auto-parts factory, along with half brothers and half nephews and Korean, Chinese, Hmong, Laotian, Cambodian, and Vietnamese immigrants; replacing local Black workers because the white factory owner seemed eager to be rid of them; assembling harness wires for Dodge, Chrysler, and Volvo vehicles for three dollars and fifty cents an hour, ten hours a day; purchasing groceries and medication for Hajji Atal, who, at ninety-three years old, wouldn't stop asking after Watak's whereabouts; promising Hajji Atal that he would be able to return home any day now; driving youngest sister to and from grade school; keeping the fact of youngest sister's education hidden from Hajji Atal; slowly picking up English from "Three's Company" and "Wheel of Fortune" and "Sesame Street" and friendly co-workers; hearing about a community of Afghan refugees in California; tiring of the ghosts of Alabama; saving up enough money to buy a Chevy Astro minivan; hauling Hajji Atal and mother and sisters across the country and leaving the Captain and the King behind forever.

1989-91: PLUMBER'S ASSISTANT, RYCOLE ENGINEERING, SAN FRANCISCO, CALIF.

Duties included: moving into a small apartment in Hayward, California, across the street from another Afghan family torn apart by the killings in Kabul; maintaining boilers in buildings in San Francisco for twelve dollars an hour; driving a nineteen-fifties Ford F1 from work site to work site, through the chilly fog of the city by the sea; filing citizenship paperwork; visiting the Golden Gate Bridge with mother and sisters but not the bedridden Hajji Atal; searching for a wife in Fremont; passing citizenship exam; failing to find a wife in Fremont; quitting job as a plumber's assistant in order to fly back to Pakistan to find a wife in Peshawar because civil war was still raging in Afghanistan between the mujahideen warlords and the puppet President Najibullah; roaming the dirt roads of the refugee camps; hearing word of a family from Logar, old neighbors, with an eligible daughter; visiting said family with two old aunts; meeting the girl's father, a pharmacist, once jailed and tortured by the Communists for giving medical

aid to mujahideen; impressing the girl's father with stories from the jihad; receiving the Shireeni; seeing fiancée for the first time in a room of flowers and mirrors on wedding day; realizing she was only eighteen years old; promising her a good life and all her Islamic rights; beginning the paperwork for her visa; spending a few short weeks together at her father's home; learning that she had left Logar when she was only six and that she hardly remembered Afghanistan; wondering if it would have been better to have forgotten; heading back to America to search for more work.

1991-92: NEWSPAPER DELIVERYMAN, HAYWARD DAILY REVIEW, HAYWARD, CALIF.

Duties included: filling the trunk and back seat of a Nissan Maxima with copies of the Hayward *Daily Review*; delivering papers from 3 *A.M.* to 6 *A.M.*; calling wife every other night with shitty phone cards that always ate two minutes out of every five; finding out wife was pregnant; learning that the pregnancy would delay the visa process; delivering more papers; completing wife's visa paperwork after she passed her interview at the embassy in Peshawar; quitting job as a newspaper deliveryman in order to fly back to Pakistan to pick up wife and child.

1992-94: RUG MERCHANT, CARAVANS, SAN FRANCISCO, CALIF.

Duties included: showcasing rugs; lifting two-hundred-pound rugs onto racks mounted along walls; cooking and cleaning for Agha Sahib, a wealthy Hazara businessman from Kabul; coming up with absurd plans to sabotage Agha Sahib's brother and main rival, Sayeed Sahib, who owned a different rug shop one block away; hosting parties at the store; serving the legendary Ustad Mahwash; hearing her sing in person; witnessing the birth of a second son and the death of Hajji Atal; escorting Hajji Atal's body back to Pakistan because the mujahideen were now at war with the Taliban, and there was no way to enter Logar; locating a graveyard atop a steep hill in Peshawar,

where Hajji Atal was born a hundred and four years earlier, the eldest son of the nomad Lahore, who was the son of the nomad Sayed Akbar, who was the son of the nomad Mahdat, who was the son of the nomad Azmat, who was the son of the nomad Shahee, who died attempting to kill a tiger with his bare hands; losing job as a rug seller in the process.

1995-99: CONVENIENCE-STORE CLERK, 7-ELEVEN, SAN LORENZO, CALIF.

Duties included: riding the *BART* every morning to the unincorporated county of San Lorenzo; manning the cash register from 6 *A.M.* to 11 *A.M.*; heading home for an hour-long nap before travelling back to the store to work from 2 *P.M.* to 11 *P.M.*, for fifteen dollars an hour, cash; witnessing the birth of a third son; watching older sons ransack the store for candies and chips with almost total abandon; paying for their snacks when they left; watching an episode of "The Simpsons" for research and noting the unrealistic depiction of the cashier named Apu, who has neither a wife nor children to keep him working through the long graveyard shifts at the Kwik-E-Mart; watching youngest sister graduate from San Lorenzo High School; paying for her books and fees at the University of California, Davis; getting robbed at gunpoint four times in one year; receiving a tip that a tax on tobacco would raise the cost of cigarette packs across the state; buying five thousand dollars' worth of cigarettes and selling them six months later for a profit of fifteen thousand dollars; saving enough money for a trip back to Logar; quitting job as a cashier; taking wife and three sons to Logar; walking the trails and fields and orchards of Deh-Naw for the first time in seventeen years; visiting the graves of Watak and Khoro and all the other martyrs; telling sons to pray for their souls, to name their names, to remember where they died and how and why.

2001-07: LAWN TECHNICIAN, WEST SACRAMENTO, CALIF.

Duties included: moving into a small house in Broderick, only twenty minutes away from youngest sister's apartment at the University of California, Davis; passing the G.E.D. exam; applying for positions that required a verifiable high-school education; driving a chemical truck to clients' homes in Roseville, Rocklin, Auburn, Grass Valley, Colusa, Georgetown, and Stockton, including the house of all-star power forward Chris Webber; hauling chemicals; spraying chemicals; breathing chemicals; searching for pests or decay in grass and gardens and trees; becoming a top technician by the end of the first year; receiving a topnotch health-insurance plan with dental and vision coverage; purchasing a two-story home in Bridgeway; opening door of new home one morning—shortly after 9/11—to discover a pair of F.B.I. agents on front porch; inviting them inside and answering their questions about the Afghan jihad in the eighties; telling the truth; escorting the agents outside and never seeing them again; spraying up to four hundred thousand square feet of land per year; winning Employee of the Year award for 2002 and 2003; witnessing the birth of first daughter; training new lawn-care recruits; winning Employee of the Year award for 2004; working every hour of overtime offered; waking up at six in the morning and returning home at six in the evening; witnessing the birth of a second daughter; being passed over for a promotion in 2005 and 2006 and 2007; getting rear-ended by a semitruck toward the end of a shift in 2007; tearing nerves in neck and shoulder and spine; losing the ability to walk for several days; receiving workers' compensation for exactly one month; suffering impossible pain in neck and shoulders; seeing a doctor and being accused of exaggerating pain; getting denied further workers' compensation; losing job; hiring a lawyer.

2007-present: UNEMPLOYED, WEST SACRAMENTO, CALIF.

Duties include: filing a suit against former company for workers' compensation; filing a suit against trucking company for pain and suffering and medical bills; applying for disability insurance, Medi-Cal, food stamps, and welfare; paying court costs and mortgage and electricity and gas and water and car insurance and medications out of savings account and with maxed-out credit cards; seeing a second doctor; being prescribed medication

for pain, for migraines, for muscle aches, for extreme pain, for acid reflux, for blood pressure, for insomnia, for unbearable pain, for drowsiness, dizziness, constipation, diarrhea, swelling, stiffness, and sadness; selling gandana and fruit at the mosque for extra income; obsessively keeping track of plummeting home value; watching neighbors move out of foreclosed houses; allowing wife to sew and sell Punjabi kali, earning an income for the first time in her life; accepting cash from sons, who landed part-time jobs in high school and then college; going to the emergency room because of pulsing fire in neck and shoulders; lying in a hospital bed, begging doctors for help; weeping into burned, calloused, broken, punctured, hardened, torn, useless hands; passing out; receiving injections directly into the spinal cord; settling into a routine of medication; finally winning the case against trucking company eight years after the initial injury; receiving a one-time payment of a hundred thousand dollars, twenty per cent of which went to the lawyers, another twenty per cent to pay off old debts, and the rest cut into the mortgage, hopefully insuring that the wife and kids would always have a home; watching oldest son finish college; attempting to persuade him to pursue law school; gradually accepting that he planned to study writing; watching second son finish college with a degree in history (of all things); learning that he planned to become a teacher; attempting to do a bit of yard work before a sudden movement triggered the lightning bolts in neck and shoulders; collapsing during Tarawih prayers; reapplying for disability insurance, with the backing of several doctors of various specialties; standing before a wealthy white judge who'd never labored a day in his life; pleading for justice; being rejected for disability; hearing word of the death of the King; returning to Alabama for his funeral; finding an entire town filled with hundreds of cousins and nieces and nephews; visiting the family of the King and leading the Janaza prayer; running into the Captain, who, at ninetysomething years old, was still determined to fight over his inheritance, though his land in Logar was unreachable, though all the old memories were becoming unclear and meaningless, though oblivion was approaching; leaving Alabama until the next death; waiting for sons to begin their careers; waiting for daughters to begin college; waiting for wedding days and funerals; waiting for good grades and graduations; waiting for sleep and food and time and joy; waiting for the pain to ebb.

2016-19: WITNESS, WEST SACRAMENTO, CALIF.

Duties included: answering oldest son's questions regarding the history of Afghanistan, of Logar, of the family, the deaths of uncles and aunts and cousins, the flight from Logar, the years in Pakistan, the nature of migration; recording the story of Watak's death for the first time; speaking him alive again; whispering for him to stay there in that field, amid the wheat, with the searchlights floating, illuminating dust, specks of earth, swirling, just swirling; grasping Watak's hand, his beautiful, slender fingers; feeling for his wrist, his pulse; counting the beats of his heart; counting the beats of his heart to slow down time; slowing down time; suspending the gaze of the searchlights, the approach of the Communists, the ascent of the sun, the pulse of Watak's heart; then, allowing it all to continue once more. ♦

This is drawn from "The Haunting of Hajji Hotak and Other Stories."

By Deborah Treisman

Letter from Ukraine

- **A Ukrainian City Under a Violent New Regime**

By Joshua Yaffa

Content

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

It was still dark on the morning of February 24th when Ivan Fedorov, the mayor of Melitopol, a midsize city in southern Ukraine, awoke to the sound of explosions. He thought it was a thunderstorm and went back to sleep. “I couldn’t wrap my head around the idea that in the twenty-first century some sick mind would think to start firing missiles in the center of Europe,” he said. A duty officer called, waking him again, and told him the city was being bombed.

The attack was directed at a military base for the Ukrainian Air Force’s 25th Transport Aviation Brigade. In recent years, the unit’s aircraft have flown in support of a U.N. peacekeeping mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and to deliver fuel to a Danish-run scientific station in Greenland. Russia wanted to seize the base and fly in personnel and equipment for its ground campaign. Cruise missiles crippled the control tower and a fuelling station. Ukrainian pilots scrambled to get their planes airborne before they could be destroyed. Within minutes, an aviation technician was killed as a blast hit the IL-76 transport plane he was preparing for takeoff.

At daybreak, a hundred or so men went to the local branch of the Territorial Defense Forces, a volunteer military corps, to join up. A Ukrainian commander took out his pistol and laid it on the table. “This is the only weaponry we have,” he said, and sent the volunteers home. That afternoon, the 25th Brigade was ordered to pull out of Melitopol entirely, a tactical retreat. “It was painful,” Marina Rodina, one of the unit’s medics, told me. “We knew the city was counting on us.” But the brigade’s mission is transport logistics; the five hundred or so airmen at the base had no heavy weaponry, just Kalashnikovs and rocket-propelled grenades. Rodina and the others could only hope that, if Ukrainian forces evacuated, Melitopol would be spared further assault.

Fedorov, who had gone to his office at city hall, was informed about the pullout by phone. “Imagine the situation,” he told me. “I’m a mayor of a city with a hundred and fifty thousand people, three hundred thousand if we

include the surrounding region. It's four in the afternoon and already getting dark. Russian tanks are at the entrance to town and all I have are five garbage trucks, three tractor trailers, and, I don't know, a metal shovel. That's it. There's not a single armed person left."

The next morning, Russian tanks and armored personnel carriers were in the streets. Soldiers seized city hall, the regional administration building, and the headquarters of the Ukrainian security service, the S.B.U. "Russian units were on the march and, without encountering any resistance, entered Melitopol," the Russian Defense Ministry declared. The troops posted flyers around town, which included a message from Vladimir Putin to the citizens of Ukraine: "Today's events relate not to the desire to curtail the interests of Ukraine and the Ukrainian people but to the defense of Russia itself from those who have taken Ukraine hostage and are using it against our country and its people. I call for your coöperation so that we can quickly turn this tragic page and move forward together."

Russian troops also distributed leaflets with instructions on how locals should behave during the "special military operation." Ukrainians were told to keep away from Russian soldiers and their armored vehicles, to give them the right of way on the street, and to remain unarmed. To avoid "propaganda and disinformation from Kyiv," the leaflets said, Melitopol's residents should tune in to Russian state television, and to the Telegram channel of one of Moscow's most famous and bombastic propagandists, Vladimir Solovyov. People driving around town discovered that the local radio airwaves had been taken over by Russian broadcasts, including one that aired a speech by Putin over and over.

Melitopol is an agricultural center, known for its honey and deep-red cherries, and its population is largely Russian-speaking. But in recent years, Fedorov told me, as the city attracted funding from the European Union and unveiled a series of urban-renewal projects—a new ice rink and public swimming pool, a state-of-the-art infectious-disease clinic—its identity had become less and less tied to Russia, let alone to the long decades of Soviet rule. Fedorov himself, a triathlete with a boyish smirk, close-cropped brown hair, and jutting ears, embodied a new generation of democratic leaders in Ukraine. He won a seat on Melitopol's city council in his early twenties; in

2020, at the age of thirty-two, he was elected mayor. “People stopped living in the past and started to believe in the future,” he said.

Now Russia had occupied the city. A little more than a hundred miles away, Russian forces were pummelling Mariupol, destroying whole residential districts; in Melitopol, the offensive was nowhere near as savage but still all-encompassing. The city was effectively blockaded: there were no shipments of food or medicine, except from areas already under Russian control, and no cash for A.T.M.s. Russian soldiers were everywhere, patrolling the streets and questioning people at random. One afternoon, Serhii Pryima, the head of Melitopol’s district council, was driving near the outskirts of the city when he was stopped at a checkpoint. Pryima asked one of the Russian soldiers, who looked no older than twenty, what he was doing there. “We’ve come to liberate you,” the soldier replied. “From whom?” Pryima asked. The soldier had no answer.

After the Russian Army invaded, Fedorov set up temporary headquarters in the Soviet-era House of Culture, on Melitopol’s main square. The occupation had put him in an odd position. Russian troops controlled the city, but he was still mayor. Initially, they told Fedorov that he’d be left alone to run city business. He was summoned at gunpoint to a meeting with a group of senior Russian officials. He told them, “You won’t be here for long.” One replied, “We’re here forever.” Another said, “You carry out your functions, we’ll carry out ours.”

"I think we'd both agree, wouldn't we, Clara, that a babysitter's worth can best be determined by her ability to be discreet?"
Cartoon by Emily Flake

Fedorov began recording daily video addresses for his constituents, rattling off locations where they could find groceries and access cash. When city buses stopped running, he called on residents to give rides to medical workers. Much like the Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, who, in the early days of the Russian assault, rallied people across the country with defiant videos posted to social media, Fedorov tried to project an upbeat spirit. On March 1st, he filmed himself at a social-services center that offered free food and clothes to people in need. "Melitopol did not surrender," he said. "Melitopol is temporarily occupied."

When Putin set out to invade Ukraine, he expected an easy victory. Many experts predicted that, within a week, his fearsome army would overcome all resistance; arrest or, if necessary, assassinate Zelensky; and establish a pro-Russian puppet regime in Kyiv. Instead, with the help of Western arms and intelligence, the Ukrainian military fought back and inflicted heavy losses on Russia.

And yet the Russian military has made advances in the Donbas, in eastern Ukraine, and, with its naval superiority, threatens to form what amounts to a land bridge to Crimea, which the Kremlin annexed in 2014. It has also occupied a number of cities and towns in the southeast, Melitopol among them. In Berdyansk, on the Sea of Azov, Russian troops took control of the

port and began docking their own naval vessels. During a short but fraught battle in Enerhodar, missile and rocket fire came perilously close to the city's nuclear power plant, the largest such facility in Europe; after Russia captured the city, the plant's managers were informed that they now worked for Rosatom, the Russian state nuclear-power company. Kherson fell on March 2nd, the first major city to be seized, with a population of two hundred and eighty thousand. Andrey Turchak, the head of the main pro-Putin party in Russia's parliament, recently visited Kherson, where he declared, "Russia is here forever. There should be no doubt about this."

The cities of southeastern Ukraine, by dint of geography and history, tend to be overwhelmingly Russian-speaking. But their vulnerability had little to do with cultural ties. The proximity to Crimea meant that Russia could efficiently transport armor and equipment into the region, with few of the logistical barriers it faced in the north. And the landscape, which is dominated by steppe, made it harder for Ukrainians to mount the kind of ambushes that so mangled Russian forces around Kyiv. In Kherson as in Melitopol, Ukrainian commanders retreated rather than risk losing units with little chance of victory.

"If Russian troops had come to Melitopol in 2014, they would indeed have been welcomed with bread and salt," Fedorov told me, using a Russian expression that means to be greeted with hospitality. Putin's acts of aggression since then have changed public attitudes. Melitopol was once a hub for visitors headed to Crimea, but that connection was all but severed following Russia's annexation of the peninsula. The war in the Donbas, where Russia stoked a separatist conflict for eight years, further soured residents' feelings toward their neighbor. "We didn't want to see Melitopol become a banana republic," Vlad Pryima, Serhii's twenty-two-year-old son, who works in I.T., said. "And it became clear that's what one should expect under Russian rule."

The first mass protest against the Russian takeover of Melitopol was held on March 2nd. Several hundred people gathered in Victory Square, in the center of the city, chanting "Melitopol is Ukraine!" At first, Russian troops "seemed confused, as if they hadn't been expecting such a situation," Evhen Pokoptsev, a Melitopol resident who participated in the protest, told me. But, as protesters marched on the S.B.U. headquarters, soldiers positioned inside

fired warning shots. One protester was struck in the leg. The following day, Russian armored vehicles drove along Melitopol's central avenues with loudspeakers blaring, "The military-civilian administration of Melitopol, in order to prevent law-breaking and to insure public order, temporarily prohibits rallies and demonstrations." A curfew was declared from 6 *P.M.* to 6 *A.M.*

The protesters were undeterred. They gathered every day at noon to march around the city, singing the Ukrainian anthem and calling on the invaders to leave. Russian soldiers responded by firing off smoke grenades and chasing people through the streets. Pokoptsev told me of a day when, amid the chaos, Russian soldiers grabbed a dozen protesters from the crowd, then drove them fifteen miles out of town and left them in an open field. "The goal was to maximally frighten people," Pokoptsev said.

Fedorov was heartened by the protests but worried for the well-being of those who took part. "I know perfectly well how the Russian Federation reacts to protests and those who attend them," he told me. In one of his video addresses, Fedorov appealed to the city's residents to remain peaceful and not confront the soldiers. "Our task is to save your life," he said.

Every few days, Russian officials came to Fedorov's office to demand that he stop the demonstrations. It was a case of projection: protests in Russia are either nonexistent or imagined to be the work of outside forces. But in the modern political culture of Ukraine, Fedorov said, demonstrations are "part of our DNA." If a person doesn't like her President, or her mayor, for that matter, she takes to the streets and says so. "They couldn't believe that I wasn't organizing these protests and paying for them," Fedorov told me. "They said, 'Stop the protests!' And I answered, 'I can't.' "

On the afternoon of March 11th, two weeks into the occupation, Fedorov was sitting at his desk in the House of Culture when a dozen Russian soldiers carrying Kalashnikovs, their faces covered by balaclavas, burst into his office. They tied his hands behind his back and put a black bag over his head. He was told that a criminal case had been opened against him in the Luhansk People's Republic, a Russian-backed territory in the Donbas. He was accused of financing Right Sector, a nationalist faction that often serves as a bogeyman in Russian propaganda—the "Nazis" of Kremlin legend.

“Are you joking?” Fedorov asked.

“We’re not joking,” one of the soldiers told him. They dragged Fedorov outside and into a waiting van.

As they sped through town, Fedorov kept track of how many turns they made, and when. “I know the city well,” he said. Even with his eyes covered, he guessed that he’d been brought to police headquarters, which Russian forces had taken over on the first day of the occupation. When the soldiers removed the bag from his head, he found himself alone in a jail cell. “Ten steps in one direction, four in the other,” he recalled.

The next day, the local Russian military command named an interim mayor, a city-council deputy named Galina Danilchenko. Danilchenko had been a close aide to a local pro-Russian politician named Evgeny Balitsky, who was famous for wearing a Soviet military uniform around town. (In May, Russian authorities made Balitsky the region’s governor.) Danilchenko recorded a video address for the residents of Melitopol. “Our main task now is to adapt all mechanisms to the new reality so that we can begin to live in a new way as soon as possible,” she said. In an oblique reference to the protests, she added, “Despite all our efforts, there are still people in the town who try to destabilize the situation. I urge you, please, be sensible and do not fall for these provocations.”

Few listened. Later that day, more than a thousand people gathered in front of the regional administration building, chanting “Freedom to the mayor!” By then, the Russian troops in town had been joined by a contingent from the riot police and the state security service, the F.S.B. One guard confided to Fedorov, “After every single protest, we get it upside the head from Moscow.” As Fedorov explained, “In their picture of the world, if there are rallies, they should be in support of Russia.”

Two days after Fedorov was imprisoned, eight armed Russian soldiers came to the home of Serhii Pryima and accused him of organizing the protest. Pryima had been expecting such a visit, telling his family, “They’ll probably come for me, too.” The soldiers searched the apartment. They told him to gather a change of clothes, his personal documents, and his cell phone,

which they promptly confiscated. Then they tied his hands behind his back, put a bag over his head, and drove him away in a military van.

"I wish just once I could pay someone a compliment that doesn't go wrong."
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

For more than a month, Pryima's wife, Natalia, visited the police station, city hall, the regional administration building—anywhere that had been taken over by Russian forces—in search of her husband. "Write a missing-persons claim," she was told. She did so, many times, but got no reply. After a week, one of the Russian soldiers in the mayor's office told her to give up writing her appeals. "We're sick of reading them," he said.

Natalia was eventually granted an audience with the newly appointed Russian military commandant of Melitopol. He introduced himself as Saigon, a nom de guerre, and told Natalia that his troops had nothing to do with her husband's disappearance. "This is a matter for those higher up," he said.

Natalia also reached out to her husband's former deputy in the district council, Andrei Siguta, who had switched sides and was now working with the occupying administration. In fact, he had taken Pryima's job as head of the council; Pryima's son, Vlad, called Siguta a "pure collaborator." Siguta came to the courtyard of the family's apartment building to meet with Natalia. He began by saying that he had tried to warn Pryima, telling him

that he needed to have a “not so aggressive” attitude toward the Russian forces in town. “I made the right choices, and look, everything is fine with me,” he said. “But Serhii did not make the right choices, and now he’s in a cellar.” Siguta could offer only a vague assertion: “The decision about when and how to release him has not yet been made.”

Back at the police station, Fedorov endured long interrogation sessions. His captors pushed him to resign and transfer his authority to Danilchenko. Fedorov took the opportunity to ask what they were doing in his city. They had three explanations, he remembers: to defend the Russian language, to protect Ukrainians from Nazis, and to stop authorities from mistreating veterans of the Second World War. “It was all funny and absurd,” Fedorov said. He told the soldiers guarding him that ninety-five per cent of Melitopol’s residents speak Russian; that he has lived in the city all his life and has never seen a Nazi; and that, by his count, thirty-four veterans live in Melitopol, and he knows just about all of them personally, has their numbers saved in his phone, and tries to visit them often. But his captors seemed to take their imagined picture of an anti-Russian, fascist-ruled Ukraine seriously. “They repeated it like a mantra, over and over, as if they were zombies,” Fedorov told me.

An air of menace, even violence, was never far away. At night, Fedorov could hear the screams of people being tortured. The Russian soldiers said that they were Ukrainian saboteurs who had been captured in the city after curfew. At one point, Fedorov listened as a man in an adjoining cell shouted in agony; it sounded as if someone was breaking his fingers. “This was happening one metre away,” Fedorov said. “What would stop them from coming to my cell and doing the same thing?”

But after a couple of days the tenor of his interrogations changed. Among Ukrainians, Fedorov had become a symbol of oppression and resistance, an example of courage in the face of invasion. In a video address, Zelensky declared, “The seizure of the mayor of Melitopol is a crime not only against a specific person and not only against a particular city and not only against Ukraine. It’s a crime against democracy as such.” Fedorov sensed that his captors were aware of the uproar: now, instead of pressuring or threatening him, they asked about practical matters of administering the city. “They

realized they had created a problem for themselves that they wanted to get rid of," he told me.

On the evening of March 16th, as darkness was settling over Melitopol, Russian soldiers came to Fedorov's cell. He was being freed in a prisoner exchange. A soldier put a bag over his head and led him to a waiting jeep. He was driven to the village of Kamianske, near the front line where Russian and Ukrainian forces were battling for control of the Zaporizhzhia region, and let out of the jeep. An officer from the S.B.U. stepped forward to identify him. As Fedorov was led back to Ukrainian-held territory, nine Russian prisoners of war walked in the other direction—the price the Zelensky administration had agreed to pay for Fedorov's freedom.

Kidnappings have become a hallmark of the invasion. In Melitopol alone, at least three hundred people have been detained by Russian forces. "The aim is to extract a certain benefit from this person while frightening the local population, to send the message that 'We are the power now, we decide all questions,' " Olena Zhuk, the head of Zaporizhzhia's regional council, said. Zhuk has tried to keep track of those who are kidnapped or go missing, but she is certain the Ukrainian authorities are aware of only a fraction of such cases. "We didn't understand what was going on in Bucha until Russian forces left," she said, referring to the suburb of Kyiv where, in the wake of Russia's withdrawal, in early April, evidence surfaced of torture, rape, and the summary execution of hundreds of people. "We will only know the real scale of atrocities and violence when we get our territory back."

In Melitopol, the primary targets for arrests and kidnappings have been elected officials, activists, business owners—anyone seen as influential or capable of shaping local opinion. Pryima was eventually released, at the end of April, but others haven't been as lucky. The owner of a grocery store, for instance, was arrested after handing out free food; the distribution of humanitarian aid was considered the prerogative of the Russian military. Soldiers seized his car and the keys to his store. A month and a half later, he remains missing.

The occupiers seem especially interested in local military-recruitment offices, where they have gathered the names of veterans who they fear might pose a threat. "All you have to do is find a janitor and order him or her at the

barrel of a gun to unlock the room where the records are kept," Zhuk said. In Melitopol, the records were even easier to access. A Ukrainian officer at the city's recruitment office switched sides and gave the Russian soldiers lists with hundreds of names.

A local veteran of the war in the Donbas, who asked to be called Oleksa, told me that, after Melitopol was occupied, he felt certain that his military service would make him a target. "If southern Ukraine stays under their control," he recalled thinking, "I won't survive." He hid at the homes of friends and relatives, until he could secure a ride out of town. But, as he was fleeing, the car was stopped at a checkpoint manned by troops from the Donetsk People's Republic, another Russian-backed territory in the Donbas. They ordered him out of the car at gunpoint.

The soldiers marched him to their nearby base, where they slapped and kicked him, and fired a gun next to his ear. They brought him out to a field, handed him a shovel, and told him to dig a grave. Once he was several feet deep, a soldier shot him in the leg. Another soldier slammed him in the head with a rifle butt, knocking him to the ground in the pit he had dug. He briefly lost consciousness.

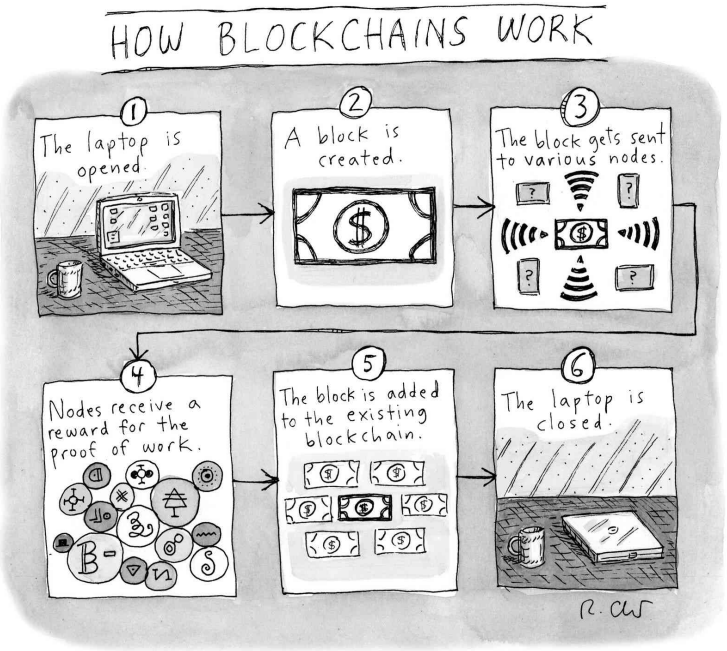
After he came to, he was brought to the former base of the 25th Brigade, in Melitopol. Russian soldiers there were carrying out a process known since the Chechen wars of the nineties as "filtration," a dark euphemism for separating prisoners into categories, with varying degrees of violence applied to each. As Oleksa remembered, interrogators at the airbase were intent on sniffing out anyone they considered a Ukrainian nationalist. Prisoners from Ukrainian military units such as Azov, which has attracted fighters with far-right sympathies, were subjected to regular beatings and torture. Some were locked in a metal safe until they lost consciousness and had to be revived by Russian Army doctors. Oleksa got off relatively lightly: a Russian officer told his soldiers that Oleksa's head was already smashed in, and not to hit him too hard.

After about a week, Oleksa was driven east to a Soviet-era prison colony outside the city of Donetsk. He was held there with dozens of Ukrainian soldiers who had been captured during fighting; he also met a man who had been detained while driving to Mariupol to pick up family members trapped

in the siege. His car had caught the attention of Russian forces, who arrested him and kept the car for themselves. Oleksa spent several days there before he was moved again, this time across the border into Russia, where he was deposited at a military jail in the Rostov region. This was perhaps the harshest stop of all, he said: “They beat us during interrogations. They beat us because we were standing the wrong way. They beat us for pleasure. They beat us just because.”

Oleksa’s captors broke his ribs and rendered his feet so bruised and swollen that they wouldn’t fit into his boots. His journey continued to a prison in Voronezh, a Russian city nearly four hundred miles away. There, he was given forms to fill out, with questions ranging from his political allegiances (“Nationalist/Patriotic/Indifferent”) to what he thought of Russia’s annexation of Crimea. Finally, a Russian official showed him another document, which was dense and complicated but with a clear enough conclusion: a tribunal that Oleksa had never heard of had convicted him of war crimes and sentenced him to thirty years in prison.

But just as quickly Oleksa’s fate shifted again. He and a number of other imprisoned Ukrainians were hustled aboard a military transport plane and flown to Sevastopol, a port city in Crimea and the site of a major Russian base. The next day, he was driven two hundred and thirty miles to a bridge in Kamianske, the same spot where Fedorov, the mayor, was freed, and let go in a prisoner exchange.



Cartoon by Roz Chast

Svetlana Zalizetskaya is a one-woman media institution in Melitopol, a gadfly and a muckraker who has worked as a journalist in the city for two decades. She's been a television news anchor and the editor-in-chief of a local newspaper, and, for the past nine years, has overseen her own news site, RIA-Melitopol, which reports on everything from local crimes to the cherry harvest.

RIA-Melitopol has also become the main source for news on the occupation. When Russian troops first took over the city, Zalizetskaya tried to figure out their intentions. "No one explained anything—they basically just stuck to themselves," she said. The site has since tracked who among the local population has agreed to collaborate with the Russian-installed administration, and exposed multiple cases of corruption and theft, such as the three million Ukrainian hryvnia—around a hundred thousand dollars—that Russian troops carted away from a post office in April.

Before Danilchenko was announced as interim mayor, she invited Zalizetskaya to a meeting. Danilchenko seemed eager to aid the Russian military command. "The old city administration didn't give me a chance," Danilchenko said. She also told Zalizetskaya to think about collaborating with Russia: "If you join us, you'll have a brilliant career. You can rise all the way to Moscow." Zalizetskaya balked. "I love Ukraine," she said.

Nevertheless, Danilchenko replied, Zalizetskaya should meet with the Russian commandant, who wanted to see her. “If I entered that meeting, I would not have come out,” Zalizetskaya told me. “I understood it was time to leave.”

Zalizetskaya slipped out of Melitopol unnoticed, decamping to a Ukrainian-controlled city that she asked me not to name. She has managed to keep RIA-Melitopol going, scanning social-media posts and relying on a network of sources in Melitopol. But even from a distance Russian authorities moved to silence her. On March 23rd, a week or so after she left town, Russian soldiers showed up at her parents’ apartment, ransacked the rooms, confiscated the couple’s cell phones, and arrested her father. At around ten that evening, Zalizetskaya got a call from him. She asked where he was. “In some basement,” he answered.

Zalizetskaya could hear the voice of a man with a Chechen accent. (Many of the Russian troops in Melitopol are Kadyrovtsy, so named for their allegiance to Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of the Chechen Republic, and known for their violence and brutality.) “Tell her that she should be here,” the Chechen said. Zalizetskaya was terrified, but also furious. “You are holding a pensioner in ill health,” she said. Her father had a heart condition and had recently suffered a stroke. “I won’t come back and I won’t collaborate with you.” The Chechen hung up the phone.

Two days later, Zalizetskaya got another call from her father. He started to recite what sounded like a prepared text: “Sveta, no one is beating me here, they treat me well, everything is fine.” She asked if he had access to his medication; he said no. She pleaded with his captors to release him. She heard a soldier in the background saying, “Tell her not to write any more nasty things.” Later that evening, she got a call from a man who introduced himself as Sergey. From the tenor of his questions, Zalizetskaya assumed he was from the Russian secret services. He was interested in the workings of her news site: who owned it, what interests it represented, and who her sources of information were. Sergey said that Zalizetskaya should coöperate with Russian forces or, barring that, hand over the site to them. “You know that what you are writing about Russian soldiers is not true,” he told her. “They’re not like that.”

Finally, Sergey offered a compromise: if Zalizetskaya wrote a public post saying that the site did not belong to her, her father would be released. “The site belongs to Ukraine, then and now,” Zalizetskaya told me. “I didn’t coöperate with the occupiers, and don’t plan to.” But she wrote the post, and thirty minutes later she got a text message asking where she wanted her father delivered. Home, she answered. The next morning, Zalizetskaya received a photo of her father standing in his front garden.

By early April, as Russia’s occupation of Melitopol stretched into its second month, Danilchenko was trying to project an air of normalcy, reopening the ice rink and resuming municipal services. In an interview with a Crimean news outlet, she thanked the Russian Army for entering the city “so gently and carefully” and freeing it from the “Kyiv regime.” She often spoke to residents in a tone that resembled a parent trying to sound sensible and convincing to her children. In one video address, she announced that the city was replacing Ukrainian television channels with Russian ones. “These days, we feel an acute shortage of access to reliable information,” she said. “Reconfigure your TV receivers and get accurate information.”

Nearly all supermarkets were closed, not to mention cafés and restaurants. Pharmacies were running low on drugs. Ukrainian authorities tried to dispatch humanitarian convoys with food and medicine, but Russian soldiers intercepted them and seized their contents. An open-air market still operated every day, offering fresh meat and produce, but access to cash was almost nonexistent, a particular problem for pensioners who get their monthly payments on bank cards. Danilchenko promised a transition to Russian rubles, but little of the currency was available in town. Gasoline was scarce and expensive; Russian soldiers and speculators moved to corner the black market, selling cannisters of fuel by the side of the road.

Local businesses, especially those in the city’s agricultural sector, began to report significant theft. Russian troops broke into the showroom of one company, Agrotek, and made off with more than a million euros’ worth of farm equipment, including two advanced combines, a tractor, and a seeding machine. A few days later, G.P.S. trackers showed that the stolen items were in a rural part of Chechnya. According to Fedorov, the new authorities have been forcing grain producers to give up much of their harvest, and moving it across the border to Russia by the truckload.

Communications slowed. Mobile service cut in and out. Residents took to standing with their phones outside long-closed cafés whose Wi-Fi connections were still active. One afternoon, I reached Mikhail Kumok, the publisher of a local newspaper called the Melitopol *Vedomosti*. He, too, had been held briefly by a contingent of armed Russians. He was taken from his apartment to the Russian military headquarters for a talk with officers from the F.S.B. "They asked me for 'informational coöperation,'" he remembered. For the next several hours, the F.S.B. officers pushed Kumok to use his newspaper to produce "favorable coverage of events" in town. He declined. "I don't see anything favorable going on here," he said. "And you won't allow me to write about what is actually happening." Rather than publish lies, he closed the paper down. "They made it clear that, whatever I thought was going on now, things could get even worse for me," he said.

Days later, the Russian occupiers began printing counterfeit copies of Kumok's paper, which they used to distribute propaganda around town. One issue featured a portrait of Danilchenko on the front page. "Melitopol is getting used to peaceful life," she said in an accompanying interview.

The occupying authorities devoted particular attention to the city's schools, which had been closed for in-person classes since the first day of the invasion. Many students and their families had left town; others were studying online, joining lessons conducted elsewhere in Ukraine. The basements of a number of schools had been turned into bomb shelters. Reopening the facilities would be a way to signal to Melitopol's residents that life was returning to normal. It would also provide a forum for a central aspect of the invasion—namely, installing Russia's preferred version of Ukrainian history and ideology.

Artem Shulyatyev, the director of a performing-arts school in Melitopol, told me that he was visited by an officer from the F.S.B., who introduced himself as Vladislav. The conversation began politely enough. "You are governed by fascists," Vladislav told him. "They oppress Russians. But this is wrong, and we are Slavic brothers." Shulyatyev replied that he didn't think there were any fascists in Melitopol. "You don't understand anything," Vladislav said. "You don't know about the global plans of fascists." He then asked if the school had a library, and whether it carried the collected writings of Lenin. "These are very important works," he said. Shulyatyev said that there wasn't

any Lenin on hand, but, then again, why should a performing-arts school have his works? “Lenin didn’t dance or sing.”

Vladislav moved on to his main point: it was imperative that the school resume in-person classes. Shulyatyev said that this wasn’t possible—it wasn’t safe, and many families had left. Vladislav grew frustrated. “It doesn’t interest us what you want,” he said. “What matters is what we want.” Vladislav urged Shulyatyev to think about the proposal: “We will be waiting for you to inform us of your decision.” Shulyatyev, his wife, and their two children packed their things and left Melitopol.

The first destination for families fleeing southern Ukraine is the parking lot of a big-box store in the city of Zaporizhzhia, a regional capital eighty miles north of Melitopol.

Danilchenko appointed Elena Shapurova, the head of a local technical college, as Melitopol’s education chief. In late March, Shapurova assembled the city’s school principals for a meeting at the college. The educators who attended had conferred beforehand and decided to submit their resignations—none of them were willing to work with the city’s occupying authorities. From the building’s front steps, Shapurova implored them to resume classes and repeatedly motioned for them to come inside. The principals refused. Suddenly, Danilchenko appeared, trailed by men in masks carrying Kalashnikovs, and tried to herd the group inside the building.

“We just turned around and left,” one of the principals told me. This seemed to enrage Danilchenko. She chased after them and, as the principal remembered, yelled, “Then we’ll have you all sent the fuck out of town!”

The educators planned to meet the following day to decide how to respond. “We were in shock,” the principal said. But, the next morning, news went around: four of the principals had been taken from their apartments. One of them later told me that they were held in an unheated garage, where they could hear the sounds of a man being beaten through the walls. After two nights, they were driven twenty miles outside of town. “You refused to coöperate with us, so therefore you are punished,” a military officer told them. “You are deported from Melitopol and prohibited from returning.”

In the end, Danilchenko got her way, at least to a degree: Melitopol’s schools were officially reopened in April, but only a few of them have actually held any classes. Attendance levels have been paltry. Shulyatyev said he heard that around twenty students are coming to his school these days, compared with more than five hundred before the invasion. Meanwhile, Danilchenko has announced that “pseudo-historical books propagating nationalist ideas” would be removed from Melitopol’s central library, and only “books that tell the true version of history will appear on the shelves.” In a segment that aired on pro-Russian propaganda channels, Shapurova’s husband, a onetime powerlifter who had been appointed head of a grade school, held up a copy of “Ukraine Is Not Russia,” written by the former Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma, as an example of the kinds of books that should be banned.

By most estimates, nearly half of Melitopol’s population has left the city. “I understand those who are leaving perfectly well,” Fedorov told me. “We are used to living in a different city, with a different mentality, and a different set of freedoms and values. And they are trying to force new ones on us.”

For those who flee, the first destination is the city of Zaporizhzhia, a regional capital eighty miles north of Melitopol. Since the start of the war, an Epicenter—a Ukrainian big-box store specializing in home improvement and gardening supplies—has served as a one-stop welcome-and-processing center for those coming from occupied territories in the south. Volunteers hand out tea and snacks, medics help the sick and injured, and police roam

among the new arrivals, looking for pro-Russian collaborators and saboteurs.

Leaving cities under Russian occupation has been a tricky affair. From Mariupol, where as many as ten thousand people have been killed, Russian forces guarantee safe passage in only one direction: to Russia. Those travelling to Ukrainian-held territory are forced to brave roads under constant shelling, with Russian troops frequently shooting in their direction. I saw a number of cars arrive at the Epicenter parking lot with shattered windshields and bullet holes strafing the sides. But even the route out of Melitopol passes through the front line, with tank shells and rocket fire occasionally striking cars. At each checkpoint, Russian soldiers make male passengers lift up their shirts, looking for nationalist tattoos and bruises from the recoil of a Kalashnikov.

While hanging around the Epicenter's parking lot, I met the members of a convoy of buses and cars that had managed to depart Melitopol. Space on the buses was so limited that some people rode in the cargo holds of tractor trailers. Just about every car was stuffed with more people than it could sensibly fit; parents had held their children in their laps as they jostled along the road. Many drivers had taped handmade signs reading "*CHILDREN*" to the windows.

Bogdan and Yulia Shapovalov, who made the drive with their two kids, were initially from Donetsk, but in 2014, after the Russian-backed militias took over, they fled to Melitopol. They came to like the city's parks and schools, its European feel. "We didn't want to leave, but it became hard to breathe," Yulia told me. They were now planning to head to western Ukraine. "We're ready to go back to Melitopol," Yulia said. "But only if it's part of Ukraine."

Nearby, I came across two mothers and their teen-age daughters, drinking tea and having a bite to eat. I asked what made them decide to leave. "It's like the nineties have returned," Larisa, one of the mothers, said. Instead of driving to the supermarket, she hauled bags back from the open-air market. Lines were everywhere. She had adopted a nickname for the armored vehicles that Russian soldiers drove around town, often with a big letter "Z"—the symbol of the Russian invasion—painted on the side: *zalupa mashiny*, or "dickhead mobiles." "We understood that it won't be like this

for one or two months, but for much longer," Larisa said. For three days they had tried, unsuccessfully, to pass a checkpoint on the outskirts of Melitopol. Finally, on their fourth try, soldiers let them through.

Fedorov had also made his way to Zaporizhzhia. He set up an office at the headquarters of the regional administration, a concrete Soviet-era structure on the main square. Inside, I found him in a vast ministerial office, plain and bureaucratic, with a Ukrainian flag standing in a corner. He hadn't done much to make the space his own; he was only going to be there a short time, he insisted. "Our next interview will be in Melitopol—Ukrainian Melitopol," he said, a mantra that sounded not all that dissimilar to the traditional prayer from Passover Seder: "Next year in Jerusalem."

In a way, Fedorov spends his days as he previously did. There are meetings with the water department, the gas company, local business leaders, concerned citizens—only now they take place by phone or videoconference. Hundreds of city employees still technically report to him; a number of municipal expenditures require his signature. And yet keeping up services in Melitopol, without aiding the occupation, he said, is a peculiar challenge: "We do everything we can so that our enemies don't ever feel comfortable, but so that regular people, who aren't guilty of anything, don't suffer."

Fedorov continues to record video addresses to the residents of Melitopol, sharing news of the city's occupation and the wider war effort. The Ukrainian Army has managed to recapture some villages near occupied Kherson. In Melitopol, as many as a hundred Russian soldiers have been "liquidated" by partisan fighters, Fedorov claimed, citing the Ukrainian intelligence service. But, given the geography and the military realities of the region, it may be some time before a full-scale operation is mounted to retake the city.

Russian forces and their local proxies, meanwhile, have tried to entrench their hold on Melitopol. In advance of Victory Day, which commemorates the Soviet Union's defeat of Nazi Germany, Danilchenko announced, with great fanfare, that the Ukrainian flag on the main square would be replaced with a Soviet Red Army flag. Red Army stars appeared on buildings in the city center; a banner declaring "Glory to the Victors" went up on the city's historic archway. The aim, Danilchenko said, was to undo Ukraine's policy

of “de-Communization,” in which, following the outbreak of fighting in the Donbas, Soviet emblems, monuments, and street names were removed from cities across the country. “The Nazi Ukrainian regime has sabotaged our ability to celebrate this holiday,” she said in a video address. “Everything that we loved and held dear—they have destroyed it. But we will restore it all again to how it was.”

On the morning of Victory Day, May 9th, Danilchenko, accompanied by a camera crew, brought a bouquet of white roses to the city’s memorial for the Second World War. During a brief speech, she told Melitopol’s residents, “I wish you joy, happiness, and a peaceful sky above your head.” Later that day, the city held an “Eternal Regiment” procession, in which hundreds of people marched with portraits of their relatives who fought in the war. Soviet flags in the crowd were interspersed with the Russian tricolor; many attendees wore an orange-and-black St. George’s ribbon, originally a symbol of the Soviet victory over Nazism, which, in recent years, has been co-opted as a talisman for Russian nationalism and militarism. That evening, residents were treated to a fireworks salute. Once again, the sound of explosions echoed across Melitopol’s dark sky. ♦

Musical Events

- **How the South Dakota Symphony Became One of America's Boldest Orchestras**

By Alex Ross

The South Dakota Symphony Orchestra, the musical pride of Sioux Falls, has an annual budget of $2.3 million, which is microscopic by the standards of America's leading orchestras. The Chicago Symphony spends more than that each year on Riccardo Muti's salary. Nevertheless, the South Dakota Symphony is bolder and savvier in its programming than all but a handful of American ensembles. Delta David Gier, the S.D.S.O.'s music director, recently won the Ditson Conductor's Award, which Columbia University gives to notable advocates for American composers. The citation called Gier "the model of an engaged conductor." His group is the model of an engaged orchestra.

The S.D.S.O. celebrated its centennial this season, in ambitious style. The roster of composers included not only Beethoven, Grieg, and Tchaikovsky but also Stephen Yarbrough, David M. Gordon, Jessie Montgomery, Anna Clyne, George Walker, Jerod Impichchaachaaha' Tate, and Malek Jandali. One concert was given over to Bach's St. Matthew Passion; another featured works by student composers from Lakota and Dakota tribes. (The orchestra has a series called the Lakota Music Project.) The season ended with a program that consisted of Strauss's "Also Sprach Zarathustra"; "The Great Gate of Kiev," from Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition"; and "An Atlas of Deep Time," a sprawling new score by John Luther Adams. I flew in for the occasion, having long admired the group from afar.

The program would have tested any top-rank orchestra. The S.D.S.O., which deploys nine full-time musicians and a large array of freelancers, struggled in spots. Yet the performances were never less than creditable, and the focussed energy of the playing overrode any worries about precision. Furthermore, I've experienced very few concerts at which a classical-music organization seemed so integral to its community. During some announcements from the stage, Jennifer Teisinger, the orchestra's executive director, asked former members of the ensemble to stand up. In a crowd of more than a thousand people, dozens rose to their feet. Nothing of the sort could have happened in New York, Los Angeles, London, or Berlin.

The founder of the S.D.S.O. was the conductor, violinist, and composer Marie Toohey, who launched it when she was still in her twenties, after a period of study in Germany. One of very few female conductors who have

ever played such a role, Toohey died tragically young, at the age of thirty-two. At first, the orchestra was made up of students from Augustana University, in Sioux Falls; later, it was known as the Augustana Town & Gown Symphony and then as the Sioux Falls Symphony, before settling on its current name in 1977. In 1999, it took up residence at the Washington Pavilion, an arts venue and science center downtown.

Gier, who is sixty-two, arrived in 2004. He had attracted early attention at the New York Philharmonic, serving as an assistant conductor and leading Young People's Concerts. When he was trying out for the S.D.S.O. job, he gave an interview to the Sioux Falls *Argus Leader* in which he expressed enthusiasm for living composers. The headline was "*orchestras need contemporary music, conductor says*." Gier thought that he had doomed his chances, but he was hired nonetheless. During his first season, each concert featured an American composer who had won the Pulitzer Prize. As Gier told me, he reasoned that skeptical listeners might feel assured by the Pulitzer imprimatur. "The idea was 'You don't have to take *my* word for it,' " Gier said.

There was resistance all the same. When John Corigliano's uncontroversial Second Symphony appeared on one program, a donor threatened to pull his money. Gier, uncertain how to proceed, called Chad Smith, who was then the artistic administrator at the Los Angeles Philharmonic and is now that orchestra's chief executive. The L.A. Phil had faced similar pushback during its decades-long drive to renovate its repertory, especially in the early years of Esa-Pekka Salonen's tenure. Smith told Gier that he shouldn't retreat from his convictions; rather, he should make sure that the staff and the orchestra were speaking the same persuasive language. Gier told me, "You have to know how to answer complaints. Because people are going to complain. They're going to complain about your Berlioz!" It's a philosophy of ingratiating stubbornness, and, over time, it tends to disarm opposition. In Sioux Falls, audiences began falling in love with some of the novelties and learned to tolerate the rest.

Adams first visited Sioux Falls in 2016, when the orchestra offered his symphonic work "Become Ocean," which had won the Pulitzer two years earlier. Although Adams is now based in New Mexico, he lived for decades in Alaska and played percussion in the Fairbanks Symphony. In a public

conversation with Gier, Adams said that the spirit of the S.D.S.O. had won him over and had also reminded him of his own past: “I’m used to audacious orchestras outside the cultural capitals who don’t know what they’re not supposed to be able to do.”

“An Atlas of Deep Time” is the latest in a series of large-scale pieces in which Adams evokes elemental landscapes; in addition to “Become Ocean,” these include “In the White Silence,” “Become Desert,” and “Ten Thousand Birds.” The new work conjures the vastness of geological time—“deep time,” as John McPhee dubbed it in his book “Basin and Range,” which grew out of articles that appeared in this magazine in 1980. “Atlas” lasts around forty-five minutes; if the score were mapped against the life span of Earth, each minute would be equivalent to a hundred million years. The formal structure is modelled on the basin-and-range topography of western North America, with its relentless alternation of mountain uplift and desert flats. Five orchestral aggregations unfold in sequence, gathering force and then subsiding.

The ensemble is divided into six spatially distinct choirs. At the Washington Pavilion, strings and percussion were placed together onstage; four groups of brass and winds occupied balconies to the right and to the left; trumpets and trombones thundered from the rear. An ever-changing scheme of superimposed tempos conveys the complexity of geological layering. The harmony, likewise, is governed by mutating stacks of intervals. At the midpoint of each “range” section, the chords assume a snow-capped tonal grandeur. The “basins” are interludes of tremulous repose, with bursts of drumming breaking through shimmery string textures.

Many of these elements are familiar from “Become Ocean,” which has hypnotized audiences around the world. “Atlas” is a craggier, denser, more unsettling score, too charged with seismic tension to send listeners into a trancelike state. It may take time to figure out how best to present it. At the dress rehearsal, I sat in the orchestra; at the performance, I was in the mezzanine. Neither perspective was ideal. Down below, the choirs in the balconies seemed a bit distant. Up above, the sound was more immersive, although a phalanx of eight French horns kept blotting out everything else. Both times, murk prevailed at the climaxes. A recording was made in the hall the following day; this will undoubtedly provide clarity.

Still, the première had the air of a major occasion. As often with Adams, I had the sense of entering a physically palpable space, one in which the mind can go roaming. Gier pictured the rugged expanse of the Black Hills, in western South Dakota. My thoughts went to Willa Cather, who grew up in Nebraska, about two hundred and fifty miles to the southwest. In a famous passage in "My Antonía," Cather contemplated the unending vistas of the plains and wrote of the joy of being "dissolved into something complete and great." The sounding immensity of "An Atlas of Deep Time" afforded the same uncanny pleasure. ♦

On Television

- **The Spiritual Conflicts of “Atlanta”**

By Doreen St. Félix

Four years have passed since the second season of “Atlanta” aired, on FX. Do we remember how Robbin’ Season ended, with the gun hidden and a bad fate averted? Does it matter? Ever since “Atlanta” débuted, in 2016, the series has been training viewers to eschew narrative logic. Over the years, the show’s premise—the burgeoning stardom of Alfred, a.k.a. Paper Boi (Bryan Tyree Henry), a melancholic street rapper, who is aided by his hapless cousin/manager, Earn (Donald Glover, the show’s creator)—has receded farther into the background. In Season 3, the hustling is over. Paper Boi has made it. He’s the headliner on a European tour. When the rapper ends up in a Dutch jail, where he is treated like a king, Earn easily secures a twenty-thousand-euro advance to pay his bail. Everybody is dripping in Gucci, in Bode. “Atlanta,” too, has made it. Henry and other series regulars, such as LaKeith Stanfield, who plays Darius, the mystic sidekick, and Zazie Beetz, who plays Van, Earn’s on-again, off-again girlfriend, have become movie stars, and Glover has emerged as his generation’s preëminent multi-hyphenate. The latest season feels meta: it’s a sardonic exploration of Black commercial success as oppression.

“Atlanta” does a lot—drama, satire, criticism, Vonnegutesque humor, Lynchian noir—but it doesn’t do virtue signalling. So in the Season 3 première, which draws from two real-life tragedies, Glover and his brother, Stephen—the writer of the episode—present us with a horror story featuring none of the usual cast members, a technique the show has used throughout its run. The opening vignette establishes the surreal tone. A white man and a Black man are fishing together on a lake, after dark. The white man—who is referred to, interchangeably, as White and Earnest—tells his companion, who is simply named Black, that the water is haunted. A Black town had once thrived on the land, and it was flooded by a white government, as punishment for challenging the hierarchical order. (The story alludes to that of Lake Lanier, in Georgia.) It’s a bizarro reversal, with White informing Black of the racial situation—a dynamic we’ve seen in “Atlanta” before. “With enough blood and money, anyone can be white,” White says. Then his face morphs monstrously, and Black is pulled underwater by disembodied arms. His drowning might be another punishment, perhaps for his bungling racial innocence.

A child named Loquareeous (Christopher Farrar) also has a lesson to learn. He is a fictional avatar of a boy named Devonte, one of six Black children adopted by Jennifer and Sarah Hart, a white-savior couple who, in 2016, drove their S.U.V. off a cliff, killing everybody inside. The episode—and Loquareeous himself—is an amalgam of pop-cultural references. When his teacher announces that the class will be going on a field trip to see "Black Panther 2," Loquareeous dances on his desk, doing the Nae Nae, just like the boy in that meme we've all seen. He gets into trouble for disrupting the class, and his mother and grandfather—named Mom and Grandpa—are summoned to the school. Grandpa doles out a punishment, slapping Loquareeous three times, referencing another viral video. A guidance counsellor witnesses this, and Loquareeous is removed from his home and placed with a new family: Amber and Gayle, a couple of white hippies, and their adopted children, all of whom are Black, and mute.

Amber and Gayle, the stand-ins for the Harts, are stereotypes, lacking in dimension, as are Mom and Grandpa. "Atlanta" likes to make its viewers confront the way our culture of suspicion turns us all into caricatures, always straining to prove our authenticity. Amber and Gayle cook fried chicken in the microwave, and call Loquareeous "Larry" because it's easier to pronounce. At night, an earlier warning from Loquareeous's mother, that white people will kill him, reverberates in his brain while he sleeps. Here is where the writing becomes speculative: when Loquareeous and his foster siblings are on the road to their deaths, he devises an escape, and they jump —practically flying—out of the vehicle before it plunges into the haunted lake. "Atlanta" cannot give Devonte justice, but it places the tragedy of his life in the only container that can hold it: cold absurdity.

The next episode transports us to Amsterdam. We're back with the usual cast, on the concert tour. "Atlanta" has honed its sensibility so acutely that it no longer needs its titular city, the lodestone of rap stardom, to signify Paper Boi's malaise. "Atlanta" can be Atlanta anywhere. So why Europe, and Amsterdam in particular? The show's creators have said that the third season is about "the curse of whiteness." Now they've taken the plot to the cradle. Among the Dutch, the Americanness of the characters stands out, as does the peculiarity of an identifiably "foreign" whiteness. The writers want to do more than say that white people are bad; they want to explore how the race became so broken.

“Atlanta” ’s minor-key misadventures are what keep the show from seeming pompous. In the second episode, Earn and Paper Boi are disturbed by Zwarte Piet, a Dutch blackface tradition, but the proliferation of Black faces ends up saving Earn when, in a case of mistaken identity, a white man in face paint gets pummelled by someone who was pursuing Earn. Elsewhere, Van and Darius attend the assisted suicide of a Black man, who may or may not be Tupac.

The Zwarte Piet mess drives Paper Boi to bail on his gig, a moment of defiance that only underscores how trapped his character is. (It makes sense that “Atlanta” made Paper Boi, its Odysseus figure, a rapper: what type of modern artist better represents the clash of authenticity and performance, commodification and resistance?) Paper Boi can be the gangster if he needs to be—such as when he takes a chainsaw to a white billionaire’s tree, as a kind of payment for a debt—but he’s not inclined to action. And he hasn’t been able to make his art. Terrifyingly, this doesn’t matter. In Season 3, his music is almost never heard, and is experienced chiefly through the obsession of white-boy devotees. A crowd chases him down, evil in their steps, “Clockwork Orange” style. In one oddly affecting scene involving a deranged white fan, Paper Boi delivers a soliloquy about his block. “It’s like I don’t know what’s good or bad anymore,” he says. Wherever “Atlanta” goes, it will circle around the fear of fraudulence that plagues this Black artist-not-artist.

The series has a complicated relationship to its Black audience. Recent episode descriptions ventriloquize viewer complaints, as in “I’ve definitely seen this before on a better show,” for “White Fashion.” It breaks the fourth wall by casting figures like Chet Hanks and Liam Neeson, who are known for wild racial faux pas, as exaggerated versions of themselves—a move that might feel genuinely anarchic, or cheap, depending on the viewer. Haters, imagined or real, are integral to the “Atlanta” posture. The show is spiritually conflicted, attuned to the equivocations that Black artists must make in the process of creation, and that Black viewers must make in the course of consumption.

The standout episode of this season is “Trini 2 De Bone.” It stars a white family previously unknown to us. The father wears Nike sweatsuits and listens to Sada Baby. The mother is named Bronwyn. One morning, the

family's Trinidadian nanny, Sylvia, is late, and the parents are annoyed. Then they find out that Sylvia has died. They struggle to explain her absence to their young son, Sebastian; they also struggle to accept how close Sebastian has grown to Sylvia. At Sylvia's funeral, Sebastian is comfortable in the choreography of Black Caribbean mourning, shouting his "amen"s right on cue. The funeral is staged, in the theatrical sense; the Black characters perform movements of grief and ecstasy, all to bring forth a catharsis in Sylvia's daughter, Princess. She interrupts the festive remembrance to admonish her mother for not being there for her own children. It's a strange scene, played not so much for pathos as for irony. The episode can work as political commentary, offering arguments about the outsourcing of mothering in the racialized economy of upper-crust New York City. But it works best as a haunting, bringing to mind the legacy of the mammy in life and on the screen. It's impossible to forget the closing image, of Sylvia and Sebastian, posing for a family picture, dressed in the colors of the Trinidadian flag, smiling. ♦

Onward and Upward with the Arts

- **Jack Antonoff's Gift for Pop-Music Collaboration**

By Andrew Marantz

Content

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

The producer and songwriter Jack Antonoff could be described with equal accuracy as a self-sufficient front man or a restless serial collaborator, a high-strung nebbish or a hyper-confident rock star, a flinty ironist or an earnest try-hard, a musician's musician or a crowd-pleasing hitmaker. Some critics complain that his sound has become predictable; others find him too protean. He makes hyperpop synth loops, crooner piano ballads, woozy hip-hop beats, operatic pop hooks, minimalist folk tunes, maximalist funk bangers, and a whole lot of hefty kitchen-sink rock anthems. Sometimes he writes and performs these songs himself; just as often, he makes them for, or with, another artist. "It's called one thing—'being a musician'—but it's actually a few different things," he told me recently. "There are people who will go into a zone writing songs alone in their bedroom but have no interest in performing. There are people who will play the shit out of a song in the studio but don't wanna sweat the details of how it's produced. There are people who will make a killer record but can't stand touring. I happen to like all of it."

Since 2013, Antonoff has been the lead songwriter, guitarist, and singer in the band Bleachers. Objectively, it's a pretty successful band. In January, Antonoff and his bandmates were the musical guests on "Saturday Night Live"; on tour this summer, they will play the Forum, in Los Angeles, and Radio City Music Hall. "The dream, when I was eighteen, was to get a couple hundred people to come out to the shows, and to sell enough merch to be able to eat and keep buying gas for the van," he said. "That was the absolute mountaintop. Anything else is bonus."

This sentiment seems genuine, and it would be uncomplicated enough if not for the fact that Antonoff now spends much of his non-Bleachers time collaborating with some of the most acclaimed pop musicians in the world. Taylor Swift fans know Antonoff, who has produced ten of Swift's Top Thirty singles, as the approachably rumpled guy who's often in the background of her videos, just out of focus. (A representative reaction from a Swiftie subreddit: "I love his face and especially his glasses, just in

general.") Lorde fans know Antonoff, who has produced and co-written two of her three albums, as her go-to muse, although the boundaries of the muse-bard relationship are the subject of ongoing, gender-inflected debate. ("I haven't made a Jack Antonoff record," Lorde told the *Times,* of her 2021 album, "Solar Power." "I've made a Lorde record and he's helped me make it and very much deferred to me.") Antonoff has produced two albums for Annie Clark, who performs as St. Vincent, and two for Lana Del Rey—all quite different, all critically lauded. "Jack is special," Del Rey told me. "His chords are so classic that I could sing anything to them."

Antonoff is now thirty-eight and well past keeping-the-van-gassed-up status—more like keeping-the-studio-stocked-with-his-preferred-brand-of-bottled-water, owning-property-in-multiple-states status. As a producer, he has worked with Diana Ross, Harry Styles, Sia, Grimes, Carly Rae Jepsen, Kevin Abstract, the (formerly Dixie) Chicks, and plenty more—not quite every pop star with artistic inclinations or artist with pop aspirations, but not far off. He has been nominated for seventeen Grammys, but it can't have escaped his notice that none of those nominations has been for his work as a front man. When Antonoff puts out a Bleachers album, the world responds nicely: decent, if occasionally snippy, reviews; enough sales to make a living. When he produces an album by one of his heavy-hitting collaborators, the world wobbles on its axis, and admirers throw around words like "genius" and "icon" and "king." It's hard to imagine receiving that much praise for something and choosing to do anything else. Yet Antonoff continues to record and tour with Bleachers, which could indicate, depending on how you look at it, either intransigence or fortitude.

The third Bleachers album, "Take the Sadness Out of Saturday Night," was released last summer. It's filled with allusions to interpersonal squabbles and intergenerational trauma, but Antonoff told me that the most confessional track on it may be "Big Life," which is about an intrapersonal struggle; namely, the struggle between the generative kind of ambition and the corrosive kind. "I've worked on things that were small and ignored, things that were big and divisive, things that were big and universally adored," he said. The latter category includes Lorde's "Melodrama," from 2017, and Lana Del Rey's "Norman Fucking Rockwell!," from 2019—albums that topped both pop charts and best-of-the-decade lists, on which he produced and co-wrote nearly every track, but that did not, ultimately, bear his name.

“Obviously, it’s intoxicating to get that unanimous high five from the culture,” he went on. “But if that’s *why* you’re doing it—if that’s what you’re thinking about when you’re in the studio—then you’re fucked.”

Last year, in a greenroom with a few hours to kill before a Bleachers performance, Antonoff sat on a couch, fiddling with an orchestral remix of a Taylor Swift song on his laptop. When he was done, he stood up, stretched, skeptically regarded a lukewarm Dunkin’ Donuts breakfast sandwich, made several jokes at the sandwich’s expense, then picked it up and ate it anyway. He attended to a few stray details about album promo (including, for reasons not worth getting into, the rollout of a custom Bleachers tomato sauce), ducked into a private room for a telephone therapy session, and then joined his bandmates in another greenroom.

They were crowded around a phone watching a YouTube review of “Sling,” the first major-label album by the singer-songwriter Claire Cottrill, who performs as Clairo. To make it, she and Antonoff, who produced the album, spent a month living at Allaire, a remote mountaintop studio in the Catskills. The first time they had lunch, they talked about their experiences with depression, and he listened so intently that she cried. (Cottrill wrote “Blouse,” the album’s lead single, about all the music-industry gatekeepers who’d sexualized her; central to Antonoff’s allure was the fact that he never did.) “He makes you feel seen,” Cottrill told me. “You’d be toying around on piano, or fiddling with guitar, and he’d be the first person to hear its potential.”

The review was by Anthony Fantano, a YouTuber whom the *Times* has called “the only music critic who matters (if you’re under 25).” It wasn’t an unmitigated swoon, but it was precise and admiring. Fantano referred to one track’s horn and flute arrangements as “heavenly,” and concluded that the album “feels like growth, it feels like advancement.” Antonoff, standing in the doorway, nodded and smiled faintly. Half a minute later, Fantano added, “And, of course, on the production side, Jack Antonoff totally kills it.” The band members glanced toward the doorway, hoping to share the moment. But Antonoff was already gone—back in his greenroom, mussing his hair, getting ready to take the stage.

Traditionally, there has been a fairly solid boundary between producer and pop star. George Martin may have been called the fifth Beatle, but no one was clamoring for his solo record, and there was little confusion about his role: the boys arrived at the studio with a new song, and Martin, sitting in the control booth in a suit and tie, helped them bring it to life. An Antonoff session is a looser, more intimate thing. You walk into a studio and sit and schmooze for a while, on the same side of the glass. You drink or smoke whatever you feel like drinking or smoking. (Antonoff, who has a history of drug-induced panic attacks, is more of a matcha-latte-and-oatmeal sort of guy.) At some point, without drawing too much attention to it, he might drift toward a Wurlitzer, or start messing with a drum machine. Maybe you lean back on the couch and share a feeling you've been having, or a throwaway lyric, or a general vibe, and he builds on that. "There's craft and there's magic," Antonoff said. "I've got craft out the ass, but all that really matters is finding those rare magic moments."

Late last spring, Antonoff sat behind a drum set in a rehearsal space in Brooklyn, tapping out snare fills with his fingers and evaluating his bandmates' clothing. "The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon" had just brought back its studio audience, and Bleachers would be the first musical guest since the beginning of the pandemic to play in front of a live crowd. Lined up against a wall were a few suitcases brimming with thrifted outfits selected by Carlotta Kohl, a photographer and director who introduced herself to me as the band's "unofficial stylist." (She was also, at the time, Antonoff's girlfriend.) Kohl dressed Mikey Freedom Hart, a multi-instrumentalist, in a double-breasted navy blazer and wide-legged khakis. Hart, long-haired and agreeable, glanced in a mirror and grinned. "I dig a loose pant," he said.

Antonoff squinted a bit before issuing his verdict: "Too zoot-suit-y." He didn't solicit any opinions about his own outfit—Doc Martens, Edith Head-style glasses, and a gray T-shirt, tucked into his pants, advertising a motel in Needles, California. This was the third day I'd spent with Antonoff, and he'd worn the same shirt each time. I couldn't decide whether to interpret this as a sign that he did a lot of laundry or that he didn't. Lorde once said, fondly, that Antonoff "wears the worst clothes." When I brought this up, he smiled and said, "I know how she means it. But, if I'm being honest, I think my clothes are awesome."

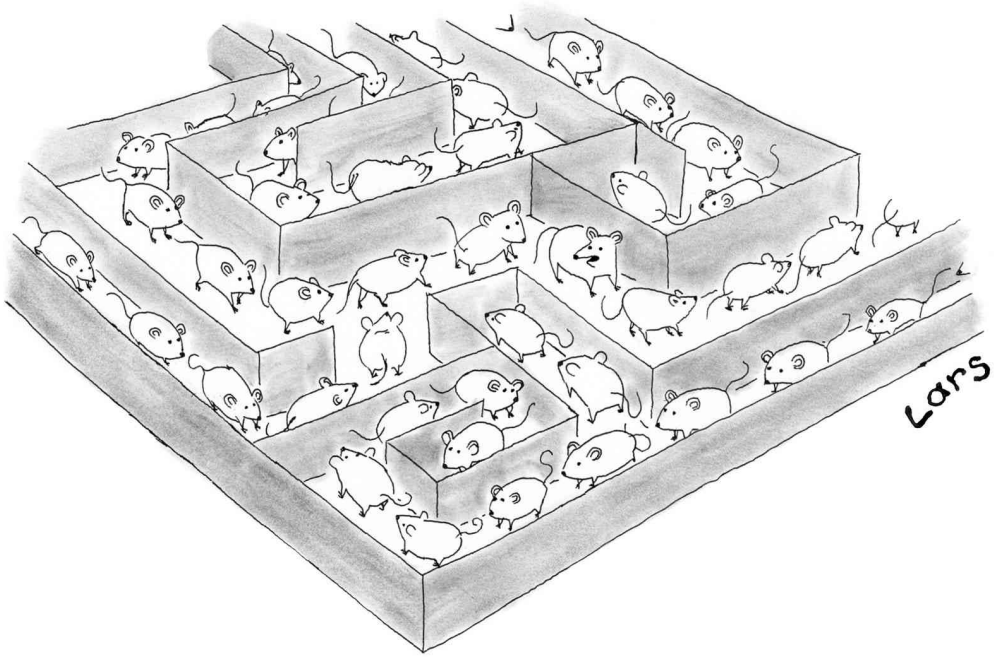
Kohl tried again: Western shirt, cuffed jeans, Converse All-Stars. “Like, don’t love,” Antonoff said. He used a rising intonation, but it wasn’t a question. It was a testament to his innate likability that he could issue stark appraisals of his friends’ appearance and his girlfriend’s taste—a situation practically designed to piss everyone off—without eliciting more than a few strained glances. In an industry dominated by dead-eyed connivers, Antonoff comes off as unusually personable—mostly well adjusted, and winningly open about the ways in which he isn’t. (He was a germophobe before it was cool.) He is described by almost everyone, including people who might have reason to resent him, with accolades like “a legitimately nice person,” if not “the nicest.” Somehow, even this has become a knock against him: last year, Pitchfork ran a think piece called “Jack Antonoff, Polarizing Nice Guy.”

I had a hard time imagining that my enjoyment of the “Tonight Show” performance would be much affected by the cut of the bass player’s pants. And yet forming strong opinions about small details—whether a vocal should be stacked and panned, whether a gated snare is the right or the wrong kind of cheesy—is the essence of a producer’s job. Antonoff applies this sort of discernment to everything Bleachers-related: the group’s album-cover typeface, its Instagram color palette, its between-songs banter. He sweats the small stuff. “People have come to expect the rock-star pretense of ‘Oh, I just effortlessly shit out my songs, and I don’t give a fuck, and it all just falls into place,’ ” he said. “My wavelength is more ‘I’m not hiding how much I care or apologizing for how good I want it to be, and I really hope you like it.’ ”

For all this self-awareness, Bleachers is an unironic rock band. The front man of such a band, Antonoff said, gesturing toward himself, “doesn’t usually come in a package like this.” His build, by his own description, is that of “a guy who goes to the gym, like, *very* occasionally.” He has variously characterized his look as “your Jewish camp counsellor” and “Rick Moranis’s more congested son.” All the same, Antonoff wears muscle shirts onstage and jumps off stacks of amps and pumps his fist in the air and plays windmill chords on his Gretsch Princess guitar. Most up-tempo Bleachers numbers are straightforward rock songs—four or five chords, a shout-along refrain, maybe a saxophone solo—about love and loss, ennui and transcendence, and, more often than not, New Jersey, where Antonoff grew up. The whole shtick may sound suspiciously Springsteenian;

Antonoff's tactic has been to lean into that. The first single from Bleachers' latest album is "Chinatown," a duet with Bruce Springsteen. In the video, which Kohl directed, Antonoff drives a Cadillac convertible around the Jersey suburbs, wearing a leather jacket, while the Boss sits shotgun.

The band members put in earpiece monitors and started running through "How Dare You Want More," the song they would play on "The Tonight Show." ("How Dare You Want More" is also about ambition.) They were joined by Rick Antonoff, Jack's father, on acoustic guitar. "Dad, you keep missing that downbeat right at the end," Jack said, demonstrating on his own guitar. Rick nodded, then took an incoming call on his cell phone. "Seriously, Dad?" Jack said. "Now?" Between takes, to keep themselves amused, the musicians played parody covers: "A Hard Day's Night" in the style of Lou Reed, "Just Can't Get Enough" in the style of the National, Megan Thee Stallion's "Body" in the style of Eric Cartman.



"Of course—first nice day and everybody's out."
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

In addition to the performance, Antonoff was scheduled to join Fallon for a chat segment. If writing about music is like dancing about architecture, then interviewing a musician can be like trying to tango with a block of concrete. Antonoff is a rare exception: eager to talk about the work, able to take a joke, adept at reading the room. He set his iPhone down on a folding table, waiting for a producer to call him for a pre-interview. "They're gonna ask

something about Taylor and the Grammys for sure," he predicted. A few weeks earlier, Swift, Antonoff, and others had won Album of the Year, for Swift's record "Folklore." "And they're gonna want to talk about Bruce." He affected a bright-eyed Fallonesque lilt: " 'You did a track with the Boss! Oh, my God! How did that happen?' "

Antonoff, despite his professed aversion to rock-star pretense, rarely answers such questions directly. "Bruce and Patti are really important people in my life," he might say. "I played them a rough version of 'Chinatown,' just to see what they thought, and Bruce ended up wanting to sing on it. It was the most organic thing." A magician never reveals his tricks, and Antonoff's business depends on keeping A-listers' secrets. But such evasions can also seem like humblebrags. For the song "91," which appears on the latest Bleachers record, Antonoff collaborated with the writer Zadie Smith. "I bumped into Zadie and asked her to come by the studio," he told me. "I showed her some lyrics I was struggling with, and she fixed them for me because she's a genius, and she actually ended up laying down some background vocals, too." This is a just-so story that might strain credulity if it showed up in one of Smith's novels, but she confirmed it.

The "Tonight Show" producer started with an open-ended query about recording during quarantine. Antonoff attempted a high-level overview of his creative process which included a few unconnected abstract similes. "I don't feel like I'm articulating this very well," he said.

"No, you are!" the producer responded, but she didn't ask a follow-up question. Antonoff muted his phone. "So far, none of this is usable," he said.

Her next question was about Springsteen. Antonoff looked up and raised his eyebrows: Told you so. The following question was about Swift. Another eyebrow raise, and a triumphant finger point. When the clip of Antonoff chatting with Fallon made its way to YouTube, it was called "Jack Antonoff Reacts to Taylor Swift Folklore Grammy Win." "I can be a cynic and a purist all I want, but these people have a TV show to make," he told me. "Album of the Year is something anyone can understand."

With the possible exceptions of Springsteen, Kevin Smith, and Philip Roth, no one has made more of a meal out of being from New Jersey than Jack

Antonoff has. Every summer, he organizes a music festival, Shadow of the City, in Asbury Park. He hosts an intermittent podcast, "God and New Jersey," on which he and other notable members of the diaspora process their feelings about having cast themselves out of the Garden State. He recently bought land in Monmouth County with plans to turn it into some kind of farm, though he hasn't worked out the details. When Spotify offered to live-stream a Bleachers performance and provided a generous budget, Antonoff used the money to rent a bus and fill it with instruments, and the group played a set while being driven, through jerky George Washington Bridge traffic, to Jersey—some people's idea of a Sartrean nightmare, Antonoff's idea of a Proustian reverie.

He grew up in Bergen County, where his mother, Shira, the daughter of a rabbi, sent him to a Jewish day school. "My family had the classic three-generation immigration arc," he said. "Grandparents flee oppression, come here with nothing, scrape to get by. Parents work their asses off to provide what seems to them like security—suburbs, lawn, all that. Then they turn to my generation and go, 'You're free to do whatever you want, just don't fuck it up.' " What he wanted to do, always, was play music.

In tenth grade, he and a few friends formed a hardcore-punk band called Outline. Antonoff wore T-shirts that read "Meat Is Murder" and wrote lyrics like "Let's follow the hopes and dreams that I once dreamt of"—as high-school juvenilia goes, it's not as embarrassing as it could be. Daniel Silbert, an Outline bandmate, said, of Antonoff, "He just ended up being the one everyone listened to, because everything he touched got better." Outline toured the South in Antonoff's parents' minivan, playing a strip mall in Virginia and an anarchist bookstore in Florida. "We would drive fourteen hours, and no one would show up," Antonoff recalled. "Not, like, five or ten people—I mean literally no one."

He didn't take the hint. Instead, he started a new band, Steel Train, which transitioned away from punk and toward fingerpicking psychedelia. "I don't disavow any of it, but I will say that I was smoking way too much weed at the time," he told me. By then, he had transferred to the Professional Children's School, in Manhattan, for kids who spend most of their time onstage. Steel Train's first single was "Better Love," a raw breakup song: "Scars are in her name / And she scars me in blame / Hey, Scarlett, you're

not the same." It was written for—or, really, at—Antonoff's high-school girlfriend, a rising movie star named Scarlett Johansson. (His standard explanation for the unlikely, "Licorice Pizza"-style pairing is both self-deprecating and hyperbolic: "I was the only straight guy at our school.")

The second Steel Train album opens with the lyric "When I was eighteen, everything was alive. Then the planes hit the towers, then she died, then he died." "He" is Antonoff's cousin Mark, a marine who was mortally wounded in Iraq; "she" is Antonoff's sister Sarah, who died of brain cancer at thirteen. "They say the grief is supposed to get smaller over time, but in my experience that's bullshit," he said recently. One of the ways he deals with it is to draw his remaining family members closer. He lives in Brooklyn Heights; his older sister, Rachel, a fashion designer, lives in the apartment above his. Rick and Shira call him several times a day, and I never saw him screen their calls. During the most recent Bleachers tour, Rick and Shira went to every show in the tristate area, then tagged along for the Pacific Northwest leg, spending nights in bunks on one of the band's sleeper buses. One summer morning, Rick showed up at Electric Lady, a studio in the East Village, to pick up some weed from one of Jack's collaborators; another day, he sat on the studio roof, shirtless, while Jack gave him a haircut. "I don't really get the whole 'I'm not close with my family' thing," Jack told me. "Unless you have a good reason, like you're a queer kid and they'll never accept you for who you are, my feeling is: Whatever's keeping you from being close, you should probably work that shit out before it's too late."

In 2008, while on tour with Steel Train, Antonoff met a multi-instrumentalist named Andrew Dost and a tenor named Nate Ruess. They formed a band and called it fun. (lowercase, period); Antonoff was the guitarist with the faux-hawk, not quite in the spotlight. The group's hit "We Are Young" became the unavoidable earworm of 2012. Radio d.j.s loved it. Tastemakers did not. ("Their style is triumphalism without a subject," a critic wrote in this magazine.) These days, Antonoff almost never brings up fun. unprompted; when asked, he tends to talk about it at a remove—"You never forget your first big break"—avoiding the subject of whether he thinks the music has aged well. He is often asked how he manages to be so prolific, and has come to resent the question. ("Some people have hobbies. My hobby is taking a break from music to work on other music.") It's possible that,

consciously or not, his frenetic productivity is an attempt to decrease the chances that fun. will be mentioned in the first paragraph of his obituary.

In 2013, while on tour with fun., he started Bleachers as a side project. At the time, it consisted only of Antonoff, on his laptop, chopping up bass samples in an airport or laying down vocals from a hotel room. The first Bleachers album, "Strange Desire," came out in 2014, to mixed reviews. (*Rolling Stone:* "The bright ideas keep coming like mosquitoes at a backyard BBQ.") The same year, Taylor Swift, who had worked with Antonoff on a song for the film "One Chance," invited him to produce two tracks for her eighties-inflected album, "1989." "I'd been trying to produce for a while, but there was always some industry herb going, 'That's cute, but that's not your lane,' " he said. "Taylor was the first person with the stature to go, 'I like the way this sounds, I'm putting it on my album'—and then, suddenly, I was allowed to be a producer."

Not long ago, I spent a rainy Saturday afternoon at Antonoff's Brooklyn Heights apartment, which includes a home studio. An elevator opened directly into a big, airy space with wide, low tables and a grand piano. Rachel let herself in and out, first arriving in Lycra to use Jack's Peloton bike, then returning in a sweater to stand in the kitchen and eat handfuls of leftover challah. She told me, "He'll be in the studio with someone like Taylor, they'll pop out for a break, and the vibe is just pure excitement and coziness, like two kids on a playdate."

Antonoff put on "New Morning," the 1970 Bob Dylan album. "We usually think of the sneering, cynical Dylan, or maybe the sixties, political Dylan, but I'm interested in this version, where he's not too cool to be hopeful," he said. (In the background, Dylan sang, "Build me a cabin in Utah / Marry me a wife, catch rainbow trout.") "Obviously, the world is a garbage fire right now," he went on. "Instead of always taking that head on, clinically, my feeling is you let it percolate and keep focussing on the smaller, more human stuff."

There were no traces of the apartment's former occupant, the filmmaker Lena Dunham, whom Antonoff dated for five years. (Dunham had said that she and Antonoff wouldn't get engaged until same-sex marriage was legal. In 2015, after the Supreme Court decided Obergefell v. Hodges, she tweeted,

“@jackantonoff Get on it, yo . . .” In 2017, they broke up.) In conversation, Antonoff was evasive about Dunham, referring to her only as “my ex.” Yet the relationship, particularly its ending, is all over the most recent Bleachers record. The song “91” is about “my relationship to three women: my mom, my ex, and the person I was with when I wrote it,” Antonoff said. “Originally, in my head, I was calling it ‘Mother, Ex, Lover,’ until I said that out loud and realized it sounded like I was referring to my mother as my ex-lover, which—I mean, I dig Freud, but that’s too much even for me.”

As Antonoff’s relationship with Dunham was ending, he produced the album “Masseduction” with Annie Clark. The cover featured a photograph of a woman in a leotard, shot from behind. Some fans assumed that the woman was Clark, but she corrected the misconception on Instagram, thanking a friend, who modelled professionally, “for use of her wonderful ass.” The model was Carlotta Kohl, who soon started dating Antonoff.

Last summer, after Kohl and Antonoff broke up, I started to notice the actress Margaret Qualley stopping by the studio. By August, she and Antonoff were tabloid-official; this past winter, when Qualley was in Panama shooting a Claire Denis film, Antonoff joined her there. Her co-star in the film is Joe Alwyn, Taylor Swift’s boyfriend.

In a scene halfway through “Miss Americana,” a documentary about the creative life of Taylor Swift, she and Antonoff are alone in his home studio. (Swift is filming, in grainy selfie mode, on her phone.) They’re writing what will become “Getaway Car,” a single with a propulsive eighth-note bass line and a swirl of expansive synths. But, for now, they’re just trying to come up with a four-line stanza that will help them get from the bridge to the chorus. He sings a wisp of an idea over a rough track, trying out a fragmentary lyric: “I’m in a getaway car / And I’m losing my . . . something.” She gasps—that could work. He lunges for the space bar on his computer, pausing the track so that they can both spit out whatever they’re thinking before it slips away. She counters with a cleaner idea: “I’m in a getaway car / You’re in the motel bar.” She starts to second-guess herself (“or, like . . .”), but he presses on in that direction: “Left you in the motel bar / Took the money . . .” She immediately completes the quatrain, slapping her knee with breathless finality: “Put the money in the bag and I stole the keys / That was the last time you ever saw me!” The whole creative breakthrough takes about

twenty-five seconds. Cut to Swift, in full makeup and purple sequins, belting the finished song onstage at MetLife Stadium, as more than fifty thousand fans sing along.

“I’m so glad that moment was captured,” Antonoff told me. “Most of the time, you’re just fumbling around in the dark, waiting, chipping away at it—and then you get these rare magic moments where something snaps into place.” In a *Times* video about the making of the title track of “Solar Power,” Lorde says, “There is no better feeling than pop alchemy building in real time.” According to the metaphor, Lorde can mine base metals on her own, but she needs Antonoff to help her turn them into gold. The idea for the song came to her in the summer of 2019: she worked out a few of the chords on a Yamaha keyboard, recorded a voice memo on her phone, and then played it for Antonoff, with such directives as “It has to sound like skateboarding.” But it wasn’t until Antonoff played it on a 1965 Fender Jaguar, which she said “sounded like sunshine,” that the song came together.

Antonoff often relies on vintage synthesizers, which can’t make a fraction of the sounds that digital plug-ins can. Like a Dogme 95 director, Antonoff finds such constraints liberating; some of his detractors, though, hear not consistency but homogeneity. Last year, after he co-wrote the Lorde song “Stoned at the Nail Salon,” listeners complained that it was similar to “Wild at Heart,” a song he’d co-written with Lana Del Rey. This led to a flurry of derisive memes (a panicked shopper facing empty shelves, captioned “jack antonoff at the new ideas store”).

The criticism of Bleachers can be even harsher. In the hours before “Take the Sadness Out of Saturday Night” was released, Antonoff did a live-streamed interview with Fantano, the online music critic. As a conversationalist, Fantano was easygoing, even a bit fawning. Closing his laptop afterward, Antonoff said, “It would be kinda funny if he was super sweet to my face and then trashed me after the album came out.”

Fantano reviewed “Take the Sadness Out of Saturday Night” on his YouTube channel a week later. “Look, there are some great tracks on this thing,” he said. “But the full potential of this LP is still severely kneecapped by a complete and utter lack of focus, consistency, and quality control.” He

gave it a 6 out of 10. One of the YouTube comments read “I wonder if Jack will ever agree to an interview again.”

“I’ve been writing and performing songs since I was fifteen, and for the first decade I absolutely ate shit,” Antonoff told me. “I really—and the tax returns supported this—did it because I felt compelled to, not because the universe was sending me any signal that it was ever going to work out.” He added, “It’s great if people like my stuff, truly, everyone’s welcome—but there were a lot of records before people gave a shit, and there will be a lot after people stop giving a shit.”

“Not to neg myself—I’m pretty good at the guitar—but I’m not the best guitar player in the world,” Antonoff told me one day, crossing the Brooklyn Bridge in a chauffeured S.U.V. “I’m less good at bass or keys, even less good on the drums.” His first-take instrumental style has become something of a trademark. “Solar Power,” the Lorde record, is full of Antonoff’s fingers squeaking across frets. On “Sling,” the Clairo album, he is credited with playing eighteen instruments, some of which he’d never picked up before. The Lana Del Rey song “Venice Bitch” has a shaggy, thrown-together feel; its ending includes seven minutes of Antonoff noodling semi-arrhythmically on various guitars and monophonic synthesizers and drumming in the style of a twelve-year-old who can’t quite reach the pedals. (The song is almost universally considered a masterpiece, and this does not constitute a dissenting opinion. Del Rey told me in an e-mail that Antonoff intuitively understood how to “give it that California sound or that I don’t give a fuck sound.”) “If what an artist wants in the studio with them is someone with off-the-charts technical shredding ability,” Antonoff said, “that’s not my value-add.”

So what is? Most of the musicians Antonoff produces could work with anyone. Why him? Last summer, when “Solar Power” was released to relatively lacklustre reviews, a skeptic tweeted, “jack antonof must be an incredibly good hang.” This was meant to be a backhanded compliment, if not an outright insult, but it was actually an astute guess. During our time together, I saw Antonoff navigate an impressive range of social situations—with famous rappers, jaded roadies, overeager high-school students, aloof retirees—always finding a way to charm the room, to act like himself without upstaging anyone else. “Other producers want to squeeze you into

some mold based on what has worked before," Carly Rae Jepsen told me. "He wants to hear you come up with something that's never been done, something that could only come from your brain." Natalie Maines, the lead vocalist in the Chicks, said, "He's one of the great conversationalists. You feel totally safe and comfortable sharing anything with him."

This may sound like faint praise, but it's not. Novelists and poets work in solitude. Film directors hone a vision and enact it by means of lights, lenses, locations, and other people. Standup comics use the crowd as an editor. There are musicians who work in similar modes, and then there are musicians who do something else—who go into the studio with a bunch of rough ideas, reveal those ideas to a trusted partner, and don't leave until they've emerged with something that sounds like what they were hearing in their head. For these musicians, an adept collaborator isn't nothing. It's everything. "Making records, even at their easiest, is a journey through some kind of personal-ego hellscape," Clark told me. Antonoff—having made many records, including his own—is the ideal companion: "He knows the journey so well."

Recently, at Electric Lady, I sat in on one of Antonoff's sessions with Sam Dew, a singer with such a euphonious falsetto that Antonoff has taken to calling him Angel Boy. Before he met Antonoff, Dew was a top-liner, writing hooks for Usher and Rihanna, among others. "With someone like Claire or Ella," Antonoff said, using Lorde's offstage name, "the process usually starts with a lot of talking, seeing where they're at emotionally, before you start writing or recording anything. With Sam, we just hit the ground running." In 2016, Antonoff, Dew, and Taylor Swift came up with the hook for "I Don't Wanna Live Forever," a chart-topping duet that Swift recorded with Zayn Malik. Songs from other sessions ended up on "Moonlit Fools," an alternative-R. & B. album by Dew that came out last year. The session at Electric Lady would be open-ended, Antonoff explained: "We just see what we come up with, then later we decide where it wants to live."

They were booked for 10 *A.M.*, and started right on time. (One of Antonoff's most unfashionable quirks is that he schedules his life as if rock stardom were a normal job; most nights, he's in bed by ten-thirty, drinking tea and watching a documentary on Netflix.) Also in the room was a sound engineer named Laura Sisk. She and Antonoff communicate with a near-telepathic

concision (“Kill that wonky one, then punch me in on that high thing?”) that resembles the shorthand language of twins, or of surgeons in an operating room.

Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein

Antonoff fooled around with some simple keyboard voicings on a warm-sounding vintage synth, then programmed a spare, mid-tempo track on a drum machine. “Could be the start of a vibe,” he said. After a few minutes, the synth chords began to jell into a languorous progression. Dew sat on a couch, eyes closed, humming under his breath.

The magic moment happened about fifteen minutes into the session. Dew started with descending triads—pleasant, but not particularly surprising. Then he switched to a stepwise melody, up to the minor third and back down to the root. “It’s so good,” he sang, using words for the first time all morning. It was a simple line, but there was something about it—the slight syncopation, the flash of dissonance—that made Antonoff’s eyes go wide. “That’s sick,” he said.

“I like the idea of it being, like, a come-to-Jesus moment, but about revenge,” Dew said. Antonoff threw out some revenge-themed lines in a pinched falsetto: “ ‘You’re not safe! In your home!’ That’s the cheesy version, but something in that zone.” After that, the session seemed to flow

effortlessly. The two didn't need sentences anymore—they just sang little overlapping phrases, editing themselves as they went ("No, but . . ."; "Closer"; "*That's* the one"). Sisk recorded twelve bars and looped them. Dew leaned back on the couch, typing out lyrics on his phone. Then he laid down his vocals—the main melody, followed by stacks of improvised harmonies. "Are you tuning that?" Antonoff asked Sisk. She said, "Nope, that's just his voice." "Angel Boy," Antonoff said.

For the next hour, Sisk kept recording as Antonoff darted from instrument to instrument—Mellotron, twelve-string guitar, live drums. He treated the looping track like clay on a potter's wheel, tweaking some tiny elements, removing others, proceeding by intuition, guiding the song as it changed shape. By the end of the session, all the instruments he'd started with were gone; the tempo and the chords remained the same, but the feel of the song had transformed almost entirely. He told Dew, "I think this is actually going in a more Jeff Lynne, George Harrison, English-countryside kind of direction, which I like for you."

I left the studio humming the melody, and I woke up with it in my head the next day, and the day after that. My instinct was to find it on a streaming service and play it right away. Each time, it took me a few seconds to remember that a rough draft of the song existed on one of Antonoff's hard drives, and nowhere else.

In April, Antonoff and I went for a walk in Brooklyn Heights. He told me that the song was still in a folder with a few dozen other tracks that "fit into the category of 'There's something about this I love, this will be out in the world eventually, it's just a question of the when-where-how.' " He'd recently finished producing a record by Florence and the Machine, which comes out this month, and he has been working with Zoë Kravitz on her first solo album. He'd just been in Los Angeles, recording with Lana Del Rey at Henson Studios. "We were tuning 808s, messing around," he said. "And then we had this one weird live take where she was singing along to a voice memo on her phone, with her headphones on, and I was playing piano latent to what she was singing, and we just both went, 'Yep, there it is—our one magic moment.' "

The previous weekend, he'd been in Las Vegas, at the Grammys. For the third year in a row, he'd been nominated for Producer of the Year, Non-Classical; this year, he'd finally won. On Instagram, Del Rey posted "Congrats from us!" beneath a photograph of herself, Antonoff, and Swift embracing. Del Rey drove from L.A. to Vegas to celebrate with Antonoff, Sisk, Qualley, and Annie Clark. "We rented out a place—my family, my band, Annie and her family, Lana and her family," he said. "We really did it right."

Antonoff knows that after a peak, almost by definition, there tends to come a dip. "Not saying I deserve to be in the same breath as these people, but you look back even at the greats—Bowie, Prince, Bruce—and you see lags, sometimes decades long," he said. "Living through it, I'm sure, is a much scarier thing." Some people insist that he's already entered a fallow patch. There are the perennial gripes about his production, but, as always, the criticisms about Bleachers cut closest to the bone. "Antonoff remains a curious case for a solo artist," Jeremy D. Larson wrote in his Pitchfork review of "Take the Sadness Out of Saturday Night." "His leather jacket says rock star, but his songs are mostly without danger or angst." Larson gave the album a 6.2. Pitchfork has given lower scores to records by Bowie, Prince, and Springsteen, but all three have also received perfect tens; by critical consensus, Antonoff hasn't yet made his "Heroes" or his "Nebraska," at least not for himself. Springsteen had Jon Landau in the studio with him, shaping his ideas. Bowie had Brian Eno and Tony Visconti. Maybe Jack Antonoff needs his own Jack Antonoff, someone to help him transform his ore into gold.

Last September 11th, after two pandemic postponements, Shadow of the City, Antonoff's music festival, made its triumphant return. On the outdoor stage at the Stone Pony, in Asbury Park, there would be five opening acts, including Claud and Japanese Breakfast, followed by the headliner: Bleachers. "I've been dreaming of this day for two and a half fucking years," Antonoff said backstage. His parents were there, and his sister, and a few of his closest friends. Qualley had travelled from Budapest. "I wanna show you something," he told her, half whispering. "It's . . . well, it's a lot, but I think you'll like it."

He led her through a security checkpoint, flashing his badge, then slipped through the crowd and into a cordoned-off area next to the stage. “My childhood bedroom,” he said. Not a simulacrum of his childhood bedroom—the actual bedroom, cut out of his family’s old house in Woodcliff Lake, loaded onto a trailer, and dropped off in the parking lot, as an interactive art exhibit. Qualley smiled and said nothing. “It was more on-theme with the last album,” he said.

They opened the door and walked in. Twin bed, mint-green carpet, stacks of CDs, posters taped to every visible surface (the Beatles, the Get Up Kids, Outline, Steel Train). “Were these your actual clothes?” she said, riffling through a drawer.

“Oh, yeah,” he said.

“I actually spilled salad dressing on the shirt I’m wearing,” she said.

“Take one,” he said. She picked out a “Where’s Waldo?” T-shirt. “So sweet,” she said.

The sun set over the boardwalk, and Bleachers took the stage. There was a crowd of more than four thousand blissed-out kids, some in Bleachers gear, some in Taylor Swift or Clairo T-shirts. “This is the first Bleachers show in almost three years,” Antonoff shouted. “This is a show that you will *never* forget!” ♦

Poems

- **“The Mercy Supermarket”**
- **“Landscape with Double Bow”**

By Campbell McGrath

Content

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

Audio: *Read by the author.*

Everything is alive, everything is shimmering
with vitality—the tomato rootlings
in their fragile sheaths
of soil, oil-colored worms in leaf mulch,
pollen from the burst-open, canoe-shaped pods
of the royal palms caught in the first
imperious shafts of sunlight
rising from the sea.
One flower resembles a puff of red lint,
another resembles a pig's ear,
every petal, in this light, painted with deep lucid
particularity. Seconds flare like fireflies
in a summer meadow
though they are illusory, time is
not a meadow but an ocean to be swum
endlessly by starlight. Days die
and so do we,
banal, tedious, futile to protest
yet still we argue, as if
death were a rental-car agreement
whose stipulations might be recalculated
by a helpful service representative.
Most days this silvery half-light is enough
to nourish the fledglings skyward,
to charge the battery
of the heart. And later
night will whisper
encouragements in a language
nobody really understands,
no drama or falsity, just the moon above

the Mercy Supermarket
and the city beating its heart for the numberless,
the unknowable, the unnamed.
Who's with me on Biscayne Boulevard tonight?
Who else is in the market for a pint
of papaya juice, a scruple of compassion?
Would it help if we could itemize
every lost or misbegotten soul,
enter every name in a vellum registry?
Would it summarize my life
to list every object
I have touched with these two hands?
Yesterday I held for the first time
an infant born two months ago in Chicago
with a tiny glitch
in the long arm of chromosome 17,
the slightest of clerical errors,
one skewed letter in an ever-cascading text,
so how useful
can any catalogue of particulars be?
Why do we even have them—
hands, thumbs,
a heart,
this jawbone I hear click
as the rusty joints
swing open and closed,
like a drawbridge.
I hear the *thunk, thunk, thunk*
of ideas rebounding like rubber balls
against the sturdy armor
of my skull, ideas tasting of iron
and childhood, like water from a garden hose.
We want so much before it's taken from us,
objects cry out, the things
of this world, they are magnificent,
they glow—the radiance archive,
everything that shines is in it.

Still, the lemon tree levies a tax upon my soul.
Flowers strike their tiny hammer blows.
The city makes its thousand demands,
the city is a honeycomb
of needs. Stepping over a man
curled like a fetus at the base of a light post
with a sign—*i have aids*
i am dying
i am hungry please help—
but the man, even if you wanted to help, is asleep,
or unconscious—not dead, surely?—
splayed amidst the overspill from a trash can
of filth and doughnut sacks,
entirely oblivious to the flood
of kids still pouring from the high school
around the corner
on 16th Street, the mind recoils
from their sizzling aura
of sass and young-ram bravado,
their cell phones and cartoon umbrellas and eyes
fixed on a future
that does not contain
this broken man, or you, or anyone
like you. But the man is
real, he is
here
right now,
wrapped in rain, and you
tuck a five-dollar bill beneath his arm
hoping for a measure of mercy
no larger, perhaps, than a coffee cup,
and though he does not move
he begins, as you turn away, to speak—
Thank you, you are a good person,
may God bless you forever.
Dearest god, I thank you
for this blessing,

though I cannot believe in it, or you.
Nonetheless I honor your name
for allowing me tenancy on this, your firmament,
and I accept its provision as my lot.
If sorrow is the sentence
I will serve it.
If pain is your message I receive it.
Leaves are trembling
in an otherwise imperceptible breeze,
I watch their dance of accommodation and delight,
moved by invisible forces.
So, too, do I tremble, so am I moved.
Right now, I tell you
I am listening to something that says
let it go, fear not, rise
along with me
into a sky the color of amethyst and copper dust.
It is not a voice, it is not even a bird,
but I am listening.
I believe it may be the light
itself speaking to me,
because the sun has arrived, robed in gold,
as the sun is continuously arriving
at one horizon only to depart from another—
it is perpetual daybreak, do you see,
it is time's corolla,
time's counterweight
to the pendulum of our grief, it is
that all-consuming journey into radiance, the dawn.

By Diane Mehta

Content

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

Audio: *Read by the author.*

Rondeau is what you really want, solo and refrain,
we and each the musical improvisation of the operatic day,
sonic scavenging and comedic jigging inside some Beckett
of one another; oh, wouldn't it be grand to be a whole note
dragged across the bridge of your singular, sound-expanding
double bow, to be orchestral, to be drunk, to drink the velvet sun

from the arbor trellis; fruit-of-purple grapes we plucked—
bunches of dolce to color our throats and that improvised
word-spun truth I, terrified, say I can't derive on cue: death,
light, blueprints that fit the choral codes of what music thinks
writing is about. We twisted grape notes so easily off their stems,
screw of death in cupped hands. We follow seductions of light—

You move above and underneath the strings in sea strokes.
One bow was not enough to match the warmth two bows create,
so you invented ways to get more harmony, upper bow and under bow
independent but close, staccato and legato, legato and staccato,
to choose a way to hear the world and harvest sound in it—
curve of bow, curve of earth, curves your eyes interpret as ultraviolet—

Still you want more color, more sound to harvest, more distortion.
Pale-blue resonators you sculpted in local clay, land-in-sky
blue above the land, distort the sound you widened already.
You are looking for a vibration lower than what the lowest string
is tuned to, pitched so low your ear can't find it—
imagination, lore, solo of magma, baritone of fantasia.

I cannot rogue my syllables and improvise around
temptation ears like yours but love the glut, the secret, the grand
distortions of your polyphonic heart, which believes in ghost tones.

What is true? Grapes chandelier from the arbor
and ripen on the tongue. We jammed the grapes inside a bowl,
so plentiful, and ate their tiny hearts at lunch.

Profiles

- **Paolo Pellegrin's Photographic Quest for the Sublime**

By Ben Taub

Content

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At 2:30 *A.M.*, on January 10th, Paolo Pellegrin, the Italian photographer and winner of ten World Press Photo awards, was loading his gear into the back of a Toyota truck on the edge of the Namib Desert. The sky was a void except for millions of stars. With the aid of a headlamp, Pellegrin fumbled through his bag. He pulled out a small plastic vial of medicine, broke off the top, and put a drop in each eye. “I almost never forget this,” he told me. There are days when he takes no pictures, but there are no days when he can afford to miss a dose.

Bag zipped, trunk closed, Pellegrin climbed into the passenger seat and gently shut his door. The driver, a guide named Anthony, shifted the Toyota into gear. But he didn’t turn on the lights until we were well out of sight of the ranger station at the entrance of Namib-Naukluft National Park. The darkness was a gift—not only for Pellegrin’s photographic objective but also for sneaking into the heart of the park at night. Windows down, eyes straining, Anthony set off slowly in the direction of the dunes, which were visible only by the absence of stars behind them.

“To find silence, you need silence,” Pellegrin had observed, and as we drove in darkness no one spoke. An hour later, Anthony parked in the sand. Pellegrin handed me a flash and a tripod, and we set off on foot into the dunes. Here there was no sky; a thick fog obscured it. Individual particles cascaded in front of us, refracting light from the headlamps—tiny droplets, seen but not quite felt. Nearby was a brown hyena, sensed but not yet seen.

After a half-mile hike, we reached the edge of the Deadvlei Pan. Here, a thousand years ago, a river snaked from the Naukluft Mountains, through the desert, to the Atlantic Ocean, fifty miles west. A grove of trees developed taproots, pushing a hundred feet down into the sand to search for water as the river disappeared. Then, six or seven hundred years ago, there was no more water to reach. The trees died, but the roots were so deep, and the air so dry, that they stayed standing, mummified, atop a layer of solid white clay, in a basin of bright-orange dunes.

Pellegrin hesitated for a moment at the edge of the clay. “It’s not a silent silence—it’s very pregnant,” he said. He crept toward the middle of the pan to study the shape of the trees. Jagged, broken, towering, ancient—“a sacred little graveyard for all time,” he said.

“There was this family imperative that you had to express yourself,” Pellegrin said.Photograph by Christopher Anderson / Magnum for The New Yorker

How to photograph this sacred darkness? He didn’t yet know, although he’d been grappling with some version of the problem for more than twenty years. Without his eyedrops, Pellegrin’s optic nerve would deteriorate under pressure inside his eyes; the blackness that occludes his peripheral vision would continue to encroach. For as long as Pellegrin has been doing his best work, he has been quietly battling glaucoma. But, for now, the challenge was the opposite. It was after 4 *A.M.*; he had less than ninety minutes before first light.

Pellegrin and I are friends. We met on assignment for this magazine, in Chad, almost five years ago, when I was twenty-six and he was fifty-three. Since then, we have worked together several times, once sharing a cabin on an expedition vessel for ten days at sea. We’ve had dinners in Rome and Lisbon, and I’ve played tag with his eight- and twelve-year-old daughters in a park in Lausanne. Last fall, he designated me as a “second photo assistant,” so that I could accompany him to a shoot on the floor of the Ferrari factory, in Maranello, Italy. For two days, I held an L.E.D. lamp as he

took portraits of mechanics and artisans in fire-retardant jumpsuits. It was a master class in craft, and he barked the names of the Dutch Masters whose paintings he sought to reflect. An order of “Rembrandt!” meant to cast the light diagonally down and across the face, so that one side was illuminated and the other was in muted shadow, hidden by the bridge of the nose, except for a streak of soft white light across the eye.

Pellegrin is six feet two “on a good day,” he says, and, as a young man, he trained in tennis and martial arts. But “with the full onset of maturity,” as he puts it, he is more focussed on “agility of the mind.” Last year, he cut short his graying hair, which for most of his life had curled past his ears. He is a voracious reader, obsessed with philosophy and death; often his most sincere arguments are expressed with a tinge of playful, self-deprecating irony. Although he is fluent in English, he reverts to Italian words when there is no precise equivalent. At home, he tinkers with puzzles and Rubik’s Cubes; some years ago, a Russian oligarch taught him how to construct memory palaces, placing individual thoughts in an imaginary, three-dimensional space, to be retrieved at will.

Pellegrin is also an avid chess player, and at some point last year he persuaded me to download a chess app on my phone. We now play against each other almost every day. Some games last for days, but I have never beaten him. Once, when I came close, he sent me a link to a humanities anthology, which noted that “there exists within the fields of mathematics and philosophy what is called the ‘infinite monkey theorem,’ stating that a monkey hitting keys at random on a typewriter given an infinite amount of time will eventually write the completed works of William Shakespeare.”

The Ferrari job was the first time we’d seen each other in two years, owing to the pandemic, and in that time Pellegrin had been commissioned by the Gallerie d’Italia in Turin to produce a new body of work. The museum didn’t yet exist; it is launching this week, with Pellegrin’s show. The initial concept was to focus on climate change—slow, unrelenting, difficult to depict—but Pellegrin had grown weary of the idea. “It’s been done,” he told me.

Still, the idea of documenting extremity in nature appealed to him. Pellegrin has devoted most of his career to photographing war and the human

condition. But in 2017 he spent a month flying over Antarctica, with a group of *NASA* pilots and scientists, and found that the scale, the emptiness, and the infinite took over his mind. The indifference of the planet to its own habitability was terrifying. It forced a recognition that one is "helpless against the might of nature, dependent, abandoned to chance, a vanishing nothing in the face of enormous powers," as one of Pellegrin's favorite philosophers, Arthur Schopenhauer, wrote, in "The World as Will and Representation," in 1818. Since his Antarctica trip, Pellegrin has walked among the burning embers of wildfires, floated on glassy waters in front of glaciers, climbed the steaming rims of volcanoes, and trudged through dreary coastal marshes. He has sweated through forests and jungles, and destroyed two cameras while photographing winter storms on a beach in Iceland, as huge, freezing waves crashed against the rocks at his feet. "It's such a privilege, really, to be so close to something so powerful, so raw, and to feel and get a whiff of it—even be touched by it—and still get away," Pellegrin told me.

On January 2nd, Pellegrin called me from Geneva with an invitation to accompany him to Namibia, where he would photograph the desert for his upcoming show. As with every project, he was filled with anticipation and doubt. "Yes, of course it's about landscapes and nature, but I have to transform it," he said. "It has to become something else, or else it doesn't really work for what I'm trying to do or say. You have to, in a sense, go beyond—especially when it's very beautiful." He cautioned that he might be in a foul mood until he solved this problem. "I'm really not going there to take pretty pictures," he insisted. "I'm looking for, well—I don't know what, exactly." He paused and exhaled slowly, and then the idea arrived. "I'm searching for the sublime."

Pellegrin and I took off from Frankfurt and landed to the force of the Namibian desert sun. It was peak summer in the Southern Hemisphere, and we were speeding toward the Kalahari. Anthony rolled down the windows. There was no air-conditioning; in place of amenities, we had a reinforced floor, a spare fuel tank, and off-road suspension and tires. Road signs warned of crossing antelope and warthogs.

Anthony grew up in Damaraland, a rocky desert area in the northern part of the country, and greeted Pellegrin with a "*Buongiorno*" at the airport. He had

started learning Italian in 2019, just before the pandemic hit and tourism revenue evaporated. Since then, he had absorbed what he could by streaming Italian television series. His wife was pregnant, he said, and he intended to name his son Gennaro, for the brash teen-age mobster in “Gomorrah.”

After a couple of hours of driving, we reached a point where the horizon was capped by the red sands of the Kalahari. We stopped at a lodge. There were animal hides for sale inside, and the entrance was flanked by small wooden statues of indigenous bushmen in loincloths, holding bows and arrows—a jarring sight in any context, amplified by the fact that there were a couple of local bushmen on staff. In the courtyard, an old man in a blue polo and a rumpled bathing suit was trying to coax a captive kudu—a species of large antelope, with corkscrew horns—into standing with him for a selfie.

Pellegrin sat down at the bar, and ordered a springbok sandwich. “What the fuck am I doing here?” he said. A few feet from our table, there was another captive antelope, an oryx; the lodge had fitted PVC piping over its horns, lest it impale guests. An hour before sunset, we set off with a local guide into the Kalahari dunes, stained red by iron oxide. The dunes begin in South Africa and extend beyond the Okavango Delta, in Botswana, he explained—but the patterns of the dunes hardly change. There were weavers and their nests, a few dozen wildebeests, four distant giraffes. I spotted a white rhinoceros, and the guide noted that it was a nine-year-old male. How did he know? The lodge had bought the rhino; an employee told me that the animals go for about thirty thousand dollars each. The tour ended atop a shallow dune, where lodge staff had set up a plastic table with a white tablecloth, gin, tonic, ice, and white wine, to toast the sunset.

Pellegrin grabbed a water. “What the fuck am I doing here?” he said again. The smoothness of travelling as a tourist seemed irreconcilable with the state of exertion and extremity that Pellegrin thought of as inherent to the creation of good work. There were all the conditions for viewing Namibian wildlife, but none for a submission to the elements which would leave him in a state of aesthetic contemplation.

That night, when we were alone in our cabins, the wind howled through the ancient red dunes. Primal, forceful, terrifying—it whipped sand against the walls and the windows. At breakfast, Pellegrin noted that to the wind it

didn't matter the name of the country we were in, the shape of the land, the borders. It was the indifferent form: wind the archetype, expressed in a specific instance—that wind on that night in the Kalahari. "Photography strives to be the opposite—to evoke the archetype through a specific instance," he said.

He showed me an image that he had taken during our sunset safari drive: a blue wildebeest, caught in motion. The photograph was blurred in such a way as to obscure any particular qualities of this wildebeest, and in that way it elevated the image to the abstract: wildebeest the species, wildebeest the idea. The image evoked the cave paintings of Lascaux, drawn by hunter-gatherers some seventeen thousand years ago. How had I not seen this distilled form, too? I'd been with him the whole time, chasing after the galloping herd.

Pellegrin was born in Rome, into a family of architects. His father, Luigi, was an internationally renowned designer of public buildings and schools, and his mother, Luciana Menozzi, was an architect and a professor who came from a family of faded aristocrats. The Pellegrin home was filled with art and poetry, classic works from the humanities, and artisanal tools—aprons, brushes, pencils, sketchpads, rulers, inks, cameras, paints. "There was this family imperative that you had to express yourself, either in the humanities or the arts," Pellegrin told me. "And there was this absolute disdain for anything that was related to office work—that would have been, you know, just unforgivable." His mother's family motto was *Etiam si ali omnes, ego non*—"Even if all others, not I."

Pellegrin's parents separated when he was little. He and his younger sister, Chiara, lived mostly with their mother, and Luigi treated his time with the children as an opportunity to impart his aesthetic world view. "He would expose us to art and history of art, and his references in the humanities and in science," Pellegrin told me. There were pilgrimages to the Met, the Louvre, and the Sagrada Familia, and to sites of great art and architecture all over Italy. "Borromini Sundays, Bernini Saturdays, the churches, Caravaggio," Pellegrin recalled. "My father introduced me to Senghor, Wole Soyinka, and Derek Walcott, and the things he was reading. He was very much a Renaissance man, with a wide range of interests. And I think he felt that there's a duty—his parental duty—to transmit these things to us, which

ultimately formed an ethical system." Through artistic expression, Luigi instructed his children, "you have to pay for the oxygen you breathe."

Chiara announced her intention to become a painter when she was thirteen years old, and today she teaches art in Rome. "I, on the other hand, didn't know what to do with myself," Pellegrin told me. "I was *schiacciato*"—flattened—"by this totemic father figure. I had not found my vocation. So I was kind of failing in expressing myself, failing in this absolute imperative for every person. It didn't descend upon me, like it did for Chiara. I was trying things—art, drawing, graphic design—and I was studying chess. I did a few tournaments. But, simply, I didn't know what the fuck to do with myself." When he turned nineteen, he enrolled in architectural studies at l'Università la Sapienza, in Rome. "I never knew how much I was trying to please my architect parents, or if it was the easy thing—a placeholder while I figured it out," he said. His notebooks from that period show meticulous sketches of Baroque arches. But, after three years, "it just became clear to me that it wasn't my calling," he said. "There was something wrong. It didn't coincide."

One day, when Pellegrin was twenty-two, he walked into his father's studio, "where my father was worshipped as a semi-divinity by his people," he recalled. Luigi lit a cigarette and sat in silence with his feet on his desk, as Pellegrin announced that he was terminating his architectural studies. "It was very painful for me, but, at the same time, absolutely liberating," he recalled. "The only certainty I had in this monologue was that at one point I realized that I could not get away with it without suggesting an alternative"—photography.

Luigi received the news, but said nothing. "It gave me an ulterior motive—to push myself even harder, to substantiate this decision," Pellegrin said. He enrolled at a photography school in Rome. "And in a matter of a few months it became absolutely crystal clear to me that this was it," he said. "I just knew. And, once you know, then everything else feels like a waste of time."

In 2019, Pellegrin joined me in documenting an expedition to send a manned submersible to the deepest point in each ocean. While at sea, he read Alfred Lansing's book "Endurance," about the Shackleton expedition. I noticed that he often crouched down to take pictures, but it was only after he had

finished the assignment that he told me why. He was shooting in a square format, black-and-white, from chest level, with tight framing and a shallow depth of field. The idea, he explained, was to evoke the documentary style and the equipment of expedition photographers from a hundred years earlier.

“There’s this Robert Capa quote—‘If your pictures aren’t good enough, you’re not close enough,’ ” he told me. “Very true! It always comes back to reducing or annulling distance. But that is only part of the equation. The other part is that if you’re not good enough, then you’re not reading enough. And the idea there is that photography is not actually about taking pictures—taking pictures is incidental. It’s a by-product, in a sense, of everything else. What you’re really doing is giving form—photographic form—to a thought, to an opinion, to an understanding of the world, of what is in front of you. And so if we think in these terms, then you have to improve the quality of your thoughts.”

“If you’re going to Mars, then go!”
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

The photography school in Rome taught the craft almost as one might teach carpentry—here are the tools, here’s how to work with different materials, various iterations of film and light. “O.K., I learned the artisanal aspect, the métier,” Pellegrin recalled. “But in terms of the language—that, no one really taught. Photography is a foreign language, and I had to master this thing. I had to learn how to speak.”

Every day he went out shooting, and every night he went back to the studio to develop film and make prints. He read essays on photography by Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, and Susan Sontag, and noted the ways in which great authors and poets observed and refracted the world in front of them. Rilke's eighth elegy focusses on the gaze of animals; Derrida feels ashamed when his cat sees him naked. Pellegrin worked various odd jobs, and spent much of the proceeds on photography books: "Telex Iran," by Gilles Peress; "Gypsies," by Josef Koudelka. "One of the great lessons was to look at Koudelka's contact sheets, because he would go back to the same place and essentially take the same picture, again and again, day after day," he said. "And I completely understand that. That idea of looking for the exact position—that is the puzzle.

"I was trying to find my own voice in this," Pellegrin recalled. "For those initial years—for many years, in fact—I put myself through this, because it was absolutely necessary, in my mind, to re-create *la bottega*, the Renaissance workshop. You go in and you mix the colors for six months. Then for another six months you prepare the canvas. Et cetera, et cetera."

For five years, Pellegrin studied and practiced on the streets of Rome. He was drawn to the fringes and the forgotten, the lives of drifters, circus performers, Roma families, and the city's unhoused. After a well-paid gig as a set photographer for a film, he bought an old Mercedes, loaded it with his books and his photo gear, and set off for Paris. He had few friends there, no contacts, no meetings—just the addresses of two photo agencies. It was 1991. Pellegrin, who was twenty-seven, dropped off an envelope of pictures at Agence Vu, and was accepted by the agency by the end of the week.

The rest of Pellegrin's apprenticeship took place in the field—Uganda, Bosnia, Gaza, Cambodia, Haiti. "It was done by doing," he said, mostly in scenes of conflict, epidemic, and natural disaster. He became obsessed with the ways in which a photograph can shape and be shaped by history, as well as by the ethical and aesthetic relationships between an individual subject and the larger human condition. Often, he would make repeated or extended visits, drawing out projects over the span of years. "We have, as photojournalists, the ultimate desire of invisibility—to be able to shoot without being noticed, without the subject looking into your eyes," he said. "But you achieve that through presence—not surreptitiously, not on the go,

but by being there. By being there, you become part of it. And by becoming part of it you become invisible."

In 1999, he went to Kosovo. It was his first time working in an active-shooting war, and he stayed in the region for much of the next two years. Here the theoretical and the technical coincided with the real. Displaced Kosovar Serbs, marching in snow, appear as spectres through foggy glass; an Albanian refugee couple in a car look lost in anguish, as their windshield reflects the shadows of people grasping at a barbed-wire fence; the death of a Serbian man, murdered by Albanians, is shown not with his body but in the faces of the women who mourn what we understand to be the corpse laid out in front of them. "In photography, we have our little rectangle, through which we see the world," Pellegrin said. "But then sometimes you can go beyond it," suggesting a larger truth or horror by excluding the main event.

"Kosovo was my shadow line," he told me, referring to a Joseph Conrad novel about a young man who learns to become a ship's captain by enduring a series of crises at sea. "All the training, all the time, the effort, the doubt—it just came together. Now I was fully a photographer," he said. "But I'm a different photographer today than I was ten years ago, or twenty years ago. Everything informs and becomes vision."

One afternoon, Pellegrin was driving through Bosnia when he felt suddenly blinded by the force of the sun. "I couldn't understand what the fuck was happening to me," he said—he knew only that he was experiencing an abnormal sensitivity to light. "Later, when I went back to Rome, I had my eyes checked. And the indicators were there": an aggressive case of glaucoma. He was in his early thirties.

Glaucoma is one of the most common causes of blindness for people older than sixty, but it is rare in young people, and the factors that trigger it remain poorly understood. Pressure inside the eyes gradually erodes the optic nerve, creating blind spots—sometimes imperceptibly, at first. Often, people don't know that they have the condition until their peripheral vision is gone. Then the blackness moves inward; its march can sometimes be halted, with treatment and surgeries, but an optic nerve—unlike a cornea or the heart or a femur—is irreplaceable. No area of vision that is lost to glaucoma can be restored.

For Pellegrin, the onset of glaucoma coincided with the end of his photographic *bottega* and the beginning of his "doing the work as a kind of artisan—as it ought to be done." The visual effect was mild, at first, the psychological effect less so. Glaucoma filled him with "a rage to see," as he put it. "To see more, to see beyond—to see at the maximum."

In 1999, while Pellegrin was in Kosovo, he was invited by the photographers Susan Meiselas and Alex Webb to apply to the Magnum Photos agency, the pinnacle of photojournalism. But he declined, mostly out of deference to his agents at the time. His father, for his part, was suspicious of Magnum's prestige. "This is a cult," Luigi advised. Any such affiliation would be "inward looking, and your work should be expansive."

The next year, Meiselas and Webb extended another invitation. Pellegrin printed a portfolio, and went to the airport in Rome to catch a flight to London, where the agency was holding its annual meeting. But, when his flight started boarding, he didn't get up. Then the gate agent called his name over the intercom. He stood, and walked out of the airport.

By now, Luigi Pellegrin was seventy-five, and had smoked a couple of packs of Marlboros every day of Paolo's life. The Kosovo work moved him, deeply—he had seen his son succeed in self-expression, in creating meaningful work that would have an effect on the community. Shortly before he died, he invited Paolo to do an exhibit with him—his designs for construction, Paolo's images of destruction—and the show was launched in Rome. Soon afterward, Magnum invited Paolo to apply a third time, and, finally, he joined.

From that point forward, Pellegrin recalled, "I was gone for the world—I was just out there, three hundred days a year." Algeria, Mexico, Syria, Guantánamo, Kuwait. He was detained by Hamas in Gaza, shot at by Israeli troops in the West Bank, beaten up by Turkish police, and wounded by Israeli shelling in southern Lebanon. Through his lens—and through images often printed in *Newsweek* and the *Times Magazine*—viewers saw Yasir Arafat, Muammar Qaddafi, Kate Winslet, the body of the Pope.

"Most of Pellegrin's images are gritty and sooty, closer to charcoal sketches than properly taken pictures," Kathy Ryan, the director of photography at the

Times Magazine, wrote, in the prologue to one of Pellegrin's books. "They vibrate with anguish, fear, suffering; they are at the end of their tether, in mourning. Pellegrin long ago gave up the tools of the coolly detached documentarist, abandoning the clear and sharp in favor of this palette of light and shade."

Pellegrin never crops his photographs; what he frames in the viewfinder is what appears on the page. But outside the frame, in his travels, there have been many surreal moments. During the American invasion of Iraq, in 2003, he was driving through the desert with another photographer when a group of Iraqi deserters surrendered to them. Another time, he was trekking through a remote jungle in the Republic of the Congo with a local anthropologist in search of what they believed to be a tribe that had had almost no contact with the outside world; suddenly, a group of children ran toward them, shouting greetings in Mandarin. Later, Pellegrin and the reporter Scott Anderson, a longtime collaborator of his, spent several days in Siberia with two hulking Russian brothers, neither of whom spoke English. One night, after lighting a campfire, one of the Russians procured a short-wave radio. "Louis Armstrong," he noted, as "What a Wonderful World" rattled through the tiny speaker. "Yes, yes!" Pellegrin said. It was their first cultural touchpoint, the first moment of icebreaking camaraderie—and it was destroyed the next second, when the other Russian grunted the N-word.

Sufis in Cairo, extremists in Kenya, the tsunami in Indonesia, the nuclear disaster at Fukushima—home was wherever his girlfriend lived, Pellegrin supposed. When he was in his forties, he met and married the photographer Kathryn Cook, and they had two daughters, Luna and Emma. Still, Pellegrin was always on the road. Often, he would exert himself so completely on assignments that as soon as the project was over he collapsed, in sickness and exhaustion—even to the point of hospitalization. "I was never really able to pace myself—to measure the effort, and to calibrate it," he told me. "If one's objective is the maximum, one has to give the maximum.

"My first four years of Magnum, I was unstoppable," he continued. "But so was he—this darkness on the periphery." The glaucoma's progression mirrored his own, and he was too negligent or busy to address it. He used to shoot with his left eye, but as it deteriorated he trained himself to shoot with his right. Expensive surgeries and medicated eyedrops reduced the pressure

on his optic nerve, but every headache left him wondering if his eyesight would be worse when it lifted. His greatest fear, while working in conflict zones, was not the bullets or the bombs—it was the drawn-out hell of running out of eyedrops if he was abducted or thrown in jail.

“For twenty-five years, this Sword of Damocles has been hanging over me, and I have had to treat each project as if it is my last,” Pellegrin told me. But the blindness never actually materialized—the progression has slowed, and possibly halted, and to the extent that his field of view has narrowed it does not harm his work. If anything, he said, he has come to see glaucoma as an ally, a kind of secret weapon—“albeit a very tortured one.” It imbued his work with “a kind of finality,” he said. “It gave an urgency to everything I do.”

Today, Pellegrin speaks of blindness as a kind of spectral presence in his mind—not because it is imminent but because for nearly as long as he has been a professional photographer he has been grappling with the implications of what it would mean if it were. He found inspiration in a passage about a group of devoted calligraphers in Orhan Pamuk’s novel “My Name Is Red.” “They would copy the Quran with beautiful, meticulous handwriting, all of their lives,” he told me. “And to go blind, at the end of their lives, was seen as the completion of their opus, their life’s work. They had spent all of themselves and all of their vision.” He added, “They gave their eyes to God.”

The physical world is composed of mathematical constants, one of which is that the dunes of the Namib Desert collapse beyond a gradient of thirty-four degrees. Pellegrin and I were walking in the sand, at least fifty miles from the nearest village or town. To the north and the east, the dunes extended for dozens of miles; to the south, hundreds; to the west, they tumbled into the Atlantic Ocean, perpetually changing—and being changed by—the waves and the currents. I had brought sunscreen from Europe, but when I offered it to Pellegrin, on the morning of our arrival, he told me that he prefers “the old method, of just being a man”—and so now, having deferred to my friend’s better judgment, we were both suffering, our cheekbones raging and tender. Two days would pass before we reached a pharmacy where we could buy aloe vera, like men.

There was a boundless horizon—no animals, no plants, no sounds but the wind and the friction of sand in motion. “It’s so devoid of everything—it’s so severe that it doesn’t allow any distraction,” Pellegrin noted. “You’re just faced with it—and yourself in it.

“*Guarda l’eleganza e la perfezione del disegno, delle forme*,” Pellegrin said—“Look at the elegance and the perfection of the design, of the forms.” The slopes of the sand were in some places so smooth and evenly lit that you could not make out the shape of the curves. It was constantly changing, particle by tiny particle, and “yet it is always perfect,” Pellegrin said. Always a different shape, never a wrong one. The American poet A. R. Ammons observed in his book “Sphere,” from 1974, that “the shapes nearest shapelessness awe us most, suggest the god.”

The clouds shifted, and a mottled pattern of light and shadow drifted across the vast landscape. Something overcame Pellegrin. He went silent and lifted his camera, as expected, but in moments of intense concentration he looks like a different person. His eyes are still, his lips a little pursed. He moves deliberately, silently, his head scanning the scene—not smoothly but in sharp turns, like a raptor. My father is a concert pianist; I have always found it mesmerizing to observe someone who is among the best at something, doing it as it ought to be done.

For most of his career, Pellegrin sought to reflect the complexity of his subject matter in additive compositions, fitting into the frame “as many elements, as much world, as much life” as possible, he said. He admired the work of Gilles Peress, whose careful framing portrayed colliding scenes and contradictions—a collage in a single frame. “But now I find myself—let’s call it in the full maturity of my life—and I find myself doing the opposite, and that is that of subtraction,” Pellegrin told me. It wasn’t a conscious decision so much as “it just started happening, in my process, and then I became aware of it,” he said. “The thought arrives before the mind thinks it.”

In 2017, while flying with the *NASA* scientists over Antarctica, he was struggling to convey the enormous scale of the ice shelf, the glaciers, the mountains, and the sea. “Photography is ill-equipped to represent this,” he told me. So he decided to exclude from his frames the viewer’s only anchor:

the horizon. “How do you render an experience of the sublime? You address the idea of infinity,” he said. “Now the macro can become the micro, and vice versa. Space becomes a mental state.”

In one of the most striking images, a mountain ridge appears as a scar in the snow, a mere slice in the white vastness. “I wanted to make a picture like a Fontana cut,” he said, referring to Lucio Fontana, the Argentine-Italian painter who in the nineteen-fifties began slashing his canvases. Fontana’s process required gruelling preparation; the outcome looked as if it had been done in one stroke. “They think it’s easy to make a cut or a hole,” Fontana once said. “But it’s not true. You have no idea how much stuff I throw away.”

“Why do most great pictures look uncontrived?” Robert Adams writes, in his essay “Beauty in Photography,” from 1981. “Why do photographers bother with the deception, especially since it so often requires the hardest work of all? The answer is, I think, that the deception is necessary if the goal of art is to be reached: only pictures that look as if they had been easily made can convincingly suggest that Beauty is commonplace.” Form is beautiful, he notes, because “it helps us meet our worst fear, the suspicion that life may be chaos and therefore our suffering is without meaning.”

On our way out of the dunes, we entered into controlled falls, with the sand tumbling upon itself, past the thirty-four-degree angle. Then we reached the Atlantic and drove along the beach. At times, the margin between dune and water was narrower than the truck, and the ocean lapped at the tires, threatening to pull us in. There was a whale corpse, several shipwrecks, thousands of rotting seals. We must have seen seals in every stage of decay, from bloated to burst, furry and with faces to skeletons picked clean. Some were unavoidable; the sand cleaned flesh out of the tires and the smell didn’t linger. “These are not traces or symbols of death,” Pellegrin said. “This is just death.”

“Last month was the mating season,” our guide explained. “The males fight, and try to get a tooth through their rival’s skull, and the loser just dies right there.” Eight months later, the killers’ offspring are born. Pellegrin photographed the whale and the shipwrecks, and some jackals scavenging the seals. “One thing my dad told me is that he would rather be killed than

kill," he said. "That thought stayed with me for a long time. For him it was unthinkable, the act of killing." But Luigi Pellegrin, unlike his son, was never shot at or shelled. "I don't know that I agree," Paolo told me.

We set off north, through Namibia's desolate Skeleton Coast. More than a thousand shipwrecks litter these sands, from as far back as 1530. Local bushmen refer to this vast patch of desert and fog and surf as "the land God made in anger"; to Portuguese mariners it was "the Gates of Hell." Abandoned whaling stations rust in the sun, and jackals tread carefully amid the ruins of metal and shattered glass. Some bottles are still corked, with rancid booze.

We stopped a few times to photograph wrecks and to walk in the sand. "There are certain places that trigger the imagination, that just transcend time," Pellegrin observed. The waves rolled in, as they always have. "You could imagine this five hundred years ago or five million years ago," he said.

The next morning, we walked into a seal colony, at Cape Cross. Heaving, shrieking, growling, crying, shitting, croaking, dying. Only the sounds exceeded the stench in absurdity. The animals flopped about with no decipherable intent or purpose—some screaming out as if in existential pain, others rolling indifferently among their own rotting dead. Pellegrin snapped a double exposure—two overlapping frames, a half second apart—to reflect the chaos. The only seals that seemed untroubled by their own existence were those which had already expired.

Pellegrin did not expect to encounter the sublime in a visit to the seal colony; his interest in wild animals derived, instead, from a scene in a novel by the Albanian writer Ismail Kadare. In "Broken April," from 1978, a young man in a mountain village is caught up in a blood feud. Forced to commit a murder, to avenge his brother's death, he is now next in line to be killed by the opposing family. Before the "blood tax" is paid, however, he encounters a high-class woman passing by in a carriage, and for a moment their eyes are locked in gaze.

"He falls in love during this brief exchange of the gaze," Pellegrin said. "He is going to his death, but he has touched the pinnacle." Now, in encounters

with wild animals, Pellegrin sought to capture “that micro-instance,” in which we are looking at nature but are also looked upon by it. A landscape may be charged with symbolic or even literal magnetic properties, he said. “But it does not look at us. And the animal does.

“From an animal’s perspective, we are much more unpredictable than they are for us,” he continued. “We could shoot them, or we could pet them—we’re completely random. But there’s something around the idea of the gaze. In that exchange there is a fear, which we both have.”

Anthony drove us to Damaraland, his homeland. Walking among the red rock mountains, we encountered a hulking male rhinoceros. The animal was in the valley; we were trekking carefully downwind, so that it couldn’t smell us. When we were about ninety metres away, Pellegrin raised his camera. The rhino harrumphed, stared back, and pawed at the ground—but didn’t charge. We stood still; we’d been told that rhinos have poor eyesight. “Come to think of it, this really is about the encounter between two shortsighted animals,” Pellegrin whispered.

“Photographically, it’s not really working,” he continued. “We’re too far. But the experience is extraordinary, this point of contact with pure wilderness.” To surrender to the circumstances was no different, in a sense, from walking atop a glacier; a sudden change in the direction of the wind could bring about the end. “It’s like looking inside an abyss,” Pellegrin said. “And he is looking right back at us.”

In photography, light is perhaps the only absolute requirement: photons hit the film or the sensor for as long as it is exposed, and that is what makes the picture. A photograph memorializes not only the light shown in that instance but its effects, and all that it has affected, through all time.

Most photographs are taken with the shutter open for less than a hundredth of a second, and in that way a single, cumulative second of light against a photographer’s film or sensor might make up his hundred greatest works. A measure of a lifetime, all in one second.

It was five in the morning in the Deadvlei Pan, and, among the ancient, long-dead trees, Pellegrin was playing with the absence of light. Even with a

thirty-second exposure, his camera, affixed to a tripod, did not encounter enough photons to render an image.

He took out a flashlight and used it to paint the trees with the shutter open—sometimes from the side, sometimes from behind. The effect was ghostly and beautiful, but he felt that it was too unnatural, too contrived. Capturing the magic of the Deadvlei Pan shouldn't be an exercise in technique, he said. He had come to capture sublimity as it is.

At five-twenty-four, the fog was suddenly perceptible against the black dunes. Sunrise wouldn't come for almost an hour, but something had shifted. Pellegrin switched off his headlamp and his flashlight, and gasped. The trees appeared as a subtraction, reflecting their own death as a black void against a less black sky. It was still too dark to see color. But suddenly he could see. ♦

Tables for Two

- **Hungry House, an Improvement on the Ghost Kitchen**

By Hannah Goldfield

My kingdom for a torta, a style of Mexican sandwich I've long believed deserves broader adulation—puffy roll, *quesillo* (Oaxacan string cheese), avocado, fresh chili, onion, refried beans, and a main-event ingredient, such as *milanesa de pollo* (fried chicken cutlet), carnitas, or even chilaquiles with a fried egg, for a breakfast of champions. There are plenty of tortas to be found in New York City, but they're rarely afforded the spotlight. Is it possible that their moment is nigh, thanks to Tony Ortiz, the Brooklyn-based chef behind Chile Con Miel, a self-described "online platform and brand that explores ancestral Mexican food practices through a queer lens"?

Last month, two of Ortiz's Super Tortas were added to the roster at Hungry House, a platform that explores the possibilities of takeout and delivery. The other day, I ordered them both, a pair of beauties that nod to *cemitas,* as tortas are known in Puebla, named for their slightly sweet sesame-seeded rolls. Ortiz's *cemitas*—Orwashers hamburger buns, technically—were toasted and piled with guacamole, lemon aioli, pickled red onion, *quesillo,* a smoky tomatillo-and-morita salsa, leaves of the powerfully herbaceous cilantro-adjacent Mexican plant papalo, and arugula. Each featured *milanesa:* pleasingly oily breaded chicken thigh on one, and craggy, comparatively light fried maitake—from the Brooklyn organic mushroom farm Smallhold—on the other, no less superb.

Hungry House was founded last year by Kristen Barnett, the former C.O.O. of a company that managed so-called ghost kitchens, which prepare food solely for delivery apps. "I became frustrated with what I was seeing in terms of brand creation in ghost kitchens," she told me. "I felt like it was turning into this kind of commoditized, low-quality, chicken-wing universe. The potential was so much greater for chefs, and for storytelling." She had become friendly with Rawlston Williams, the chef-owner of the Food Sermon, a Caribbean-inspired counter-service restaurant that moved from Crown Heights to the Brooklyn Navy Yard in 2020 (and is now on hiatus). Williams invited her to use his kitchen; she facilitated the preparation and delivery of his food, and sought out other talented chefs and entrepreneurs in need of back-end support. For Season 1, she signed on Woldy Reyes, the Filipino American chef behind the boutique catering business Woldy Kusina; the Indiana-based power-restaurateur Martha Hoover and her

pandemic project Apocalypse Burger; and Rachel Krupa, of the Goods Mart, a "socially conscious neighborhood convenience store," in lower Manhattan, specializing in packaged products such as vegetable-pulp chips.

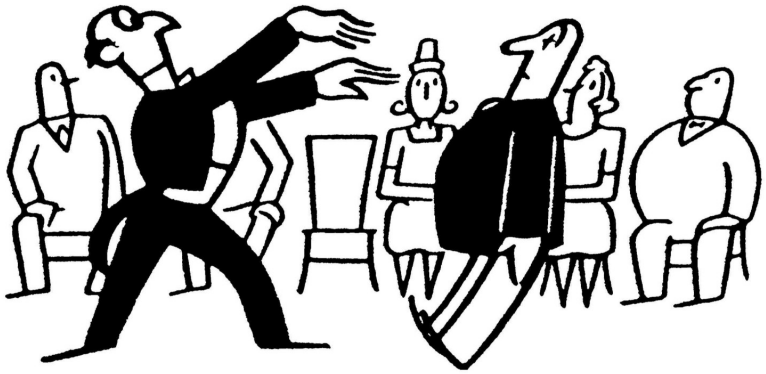
Barnett and her team work with each resident to devise a small set of offerings for pickup or delivery in Brooklyn (she plans to expand to Manhattan soon), via Hungry House's Web site, plus apps including Seamless. (There's also a customer-facing counter in the Navy Yard.) For Season 2, she added Chile Con Miel; Caffè Panna, Hallie Meyer's superlative Gramercy ice-cream shop; and Pierce Abernathy, a charming recipe developer with a large social-media following.

It's incredibly satisfying to watch Abernathy make a chopped salad on TikTok, in an A.S.M.R.-heavy video, and even more satisfying to have one delivered to your door—endive and radicchio tossed with crispy chickpeas, feta, Castelvetrano olives, pickled onions, apple, celery, and cucumber, in a bright mustard vinaigrette. Reyes's "chicharon," made from Smallhold oyster mushrooms and inspired by Filipino *chicharon bulaklak* (deep-fried pig ruffle fat), is truly spectacular: salty and sweet, crisp and juicy, dipped in coconut milk and dredged in rice flour and potato starch, then fried, and served with a rich yet zippy Fresno chili-coconut hot sauce. For his sisig, the usual pig parts are replaced with chewy cubes of fried tofu, coated in a "starter" from Omsom, a sauce-and-seasoning company founded by the Vietnamese American sisters Vanessa and Kim Pham: cane vinegar, garlic, calamansi purée, porcini powder, chili flakes—a murderers' row of potential, fulfilled. (Dishes $6-$14.) ♦

The Boards

- **Austin Pendleton Is Still on Broadway, Still a Babe Magnet**

By Henry Alford



Spend an hour talking with the actor and director Austin Pendleton in the lounge above Studio 54, and three slightly alarming things happen. First, the diminutive eighty-two-year-old, in the manner of a sleepy hedgehog, will gradually slouch down into the banquette, so that his head ends up where his shoulders once were. This will cause what Pendleton calls his "very excitable hair" to pouf up vertiginously. Finally, an extension cord under the table will somehow get wrapped around his ankles.

Pendleton is currently performing in a play at the theatre downstairs: Steppenwolf's production of Tracy Letts's dark comedy "The Minutes," which is a parody of a Midwestern city-council meeting that descends into bloody political chaos. Pendleton plays a querulous council member named Mr. Oldfield. "It's almost uncomfortable how readily I'm able to identify with this character," he said, explaining that in real life he's on the council of the Dramatists Guild. "Sometimes when I ask a question at a guild meeting it becomes clear that I haven't followed anything that was said in the last half hour."

Pendleton, best known for his supporting roles in movies—the nerdy musicologist Frederick Larrabee, in "What's Up, Doc?"; Charles Durning's shy sidekick, Max, in "The Muppet Movie"; Gurgle, in "Finding Nemo"—

has worked with Steppenwolf for forty-three years. But it's a relationship that almost didn't happen. In 1979, when the fledgling Chicago-based troupe asked him to direct "Say Goodnight, Gracie," he declined at first. He wasn't a Broadway regular at the time (though he'd originated the role of Motel the tailor, in "Fiddler on the Roof" and would go on to direct Elizabeth Taylor in "The Little Foxes"), but his wife was pregnant, and he didn't want to move. Also, the name bugged him: "Either they'd named themselves after a rock group, which is beyond pathetic," he said, "or after a novel by my least favorite novelist." But he ended up taking the gig and started auditioning the troupe—twelve relative unknowns. "For one role, I had to choose between Laurie Metcalf and Joan Allen," he said. A second role went to a guy named John Malkovich.

Anna D. Shapiro, who directed "The Minutes" and has known Pendleton for twenty-five years, marvels at his continuing interest in theatre. "He'll do, say, a part on Broadway, and then he'll play Lear in an elevator," she said. "For the rest of us, who are weighed down by our ambitions and by the narrative we want to write about ourselves? We're shamed. He's so pure." Meryl Streep, who performed with Pendleton in "Mother Courage and Her Children," has said of him, "There's no line between the man and his work."

Pendleton has been teaching acting at Greenwich Village's HB Studio for half a century. In 2011, an article in the *Post* described how many of his female students found their rumpled, married septuagenarian teacher sexy, calling him a "babe magnet." An accompanying photo showed Pendleton surrounded by fourteen attractive acolytes. Reminded of the "babe magnet" line recently, he thought for a moment, and said, "Still true."

Pendleton has been in show business for sixty years; married to the same woman, Katina Commings, for fifty-two; and at HB since the moon landing. This fall, he will bring to Broadway the production of Stephen Adly Guirgis's "Between Riverside and Crazy" which he directed Off Broadway in 2014.

"A lot of it is luck," he said, of his longevity. He recounted how, in 2000, his play "Orson's Shadow," which had had successful runs in Chicago and at Williamstown, landed with an unexpected thud at the Westport Country Playhouse, which was then being run by Joanne Woodward. At intermission

one night, Pendleton and Woodward watched, horrified, as audience members streamed toward the exits. Woodward graciously broke the silence, referring to her husband, Paul Newman. “Paul and I knew when we took over this theatre that, to build the kind of theatre we wanted, we’d have to drive away the audience they’ve had here for years,” she said. “And I can think of *no* play I’d rather drive them away with than yours.” ♦

Visiting Dignitary

- **The Stanley Cup Comes to Visit, Accompanied by a Handler in White Gloves**

By Nick Paumgarten and Sarah Larson

The Stanley CupIllustration by João Fazenda

Security (no surprise) is tight at 1 World Trade Center. “It’s a lot easier to get into the White House than it is to get in here!” Mike Bolt said the other day. Bolt, in a blazer and black pants, hair styled in a boyish coiffure, was escorting an A-list celebrity through the tower’s subterranean corridors. The entourage included a colleague of Bolt’s and the celebrity’s two hosts, who worked for a magazine upstairs. They were stopped by a pair of security guards.

“This,” one host said, pausing for effect and gesturing toward a trunk on wheels, “is the Stanley Cup.”

Guard No. 1: “Uh-oh.”

Guard No. 2: “Whoa, pretty cool.”

X-rays, metal detector, K-9 sniff-up: the trunk, plastered with airline stickers, got through with aplomb. Bolt’s blazer bore a patch from the Hockey Hall of Fame—Le Temple de la Renommée du Hockey—in Toronto, on whose behalf he serves as one of the Stanley Cup’s four minders. The Cup, for those whose hearts don’t flutter at its mere mention, is the giant silver chalice that is awarded each spring to the winner of the

National Hockey League championship. (This year's playoffs, with the New York Rangers in the bracket for the first time in five years, began earlier this month.) The Cup, with Bolt and last year's winners, the Tampa Bay Lightning, had just visited the Oval Office. (The President, in his remarks, referred to the N.H.L. boss Gary Bettman as "Commissioner Gary Batman.") Next stop was Las Vegas, for the N.F.L. draft, and then a state funeral, in Montreal, for the Canadien Guy Lafleur.

The Cup is usually on the road three hundred days a year. Each player on the winning team gets it for a day. It travels with a skirt and prefers to rest on a round table, three feet in diameter. "I can dress that table up and make it look real nice," Bolt said. He opened the trunk, pulled on a pair of white gloves, lifted the Cup out of its casket of blue velvet, and set it on the table. It did look real nice. Shiny and tall—even, to use this word just once, *iconic*. "Can we touch it?" someone asked. Hockey code says that you aren't supposed to until you win it. There were some (mostly ex-) amateur players in attendance, one wearing a vintage Philadelphia Flyers jersey—No. 8, Dave (the Hammer) Schultz—another in a Hartford Whalers T-shirt, and a third who had taken his two young sons out of school. They all—even the kids, who at least theoretically still had a shot—began to touch it anyway.

"You can hug it, you can kiss it, but if you feel the need to lift it, go win it," Bolt said. Every victorious player gets his name engraved on the Cup.

"Come on up here, buddy," Bolt said to the younger boy. "Who's your favorite player?"

"Vladimir Tarasenko."

Bolt helped the boy find him.

"Oh, yeah, I see him," the boy said.

"He lives near Mongolia, on the other side of Russia," Bolt said. "It's deep." The Cup, and Bolt, had travelled to Tarasenko's home town, Novosibirsk, in 2019, after his team, the St. Louis Blues, won the championship. "Took twenty-two hours to get back from there."

The Cup had taken Bolt to Japan, to the pit at Ground Zero after 9/11, and to Afghanistan. In Kandahar, it had come under a missile attack, during which Bolt, oblivious, sat on the trunk reading *Maxim*. He was later lauded for sticking by the Cup to protect it. "I'd missed the safety briefing," he said.

Employees were arriving at work.

"What's the Stanley Cup?"

"I'm a hockey moron, but I didn't expect it to look like a tiffin."

"I'm not exactly the demo. I was programming in *BASIC* and hanging out at the multiplex."

This being a magazine office, talk turned to typos. The Cup is lousy with them. The *Ilanders*. The *Maple Leaes*. The *BQSTQN BRUINS*. (A name from 2010 is x-ed out—that of a Chicago Blackhawks video coach who was convicted of sexual misconduct.)

There is a replica of the Cup, with corrections, in the Hall of Fame. And the original version of the silver bowl that crowns it, the Dominion Hockey Challenge Cup, purchased in 1892 for $48.67 by Lord Stanley of Preston, the governor-general of Canada, sits behind glass in Toronto, alongside the retired rings of names. To keep the trophy the same size, the band of silver inscribed with the oldest names is replaced every thirteen years with a new ring: dead hockey men, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

But this Cup, *the* Cup, had been through a lot. It had nicks and dents and repairs that looked like welds. After the Rangers won it in 1994, they ran wild. "They took it to Scores, " Bolt said. The league, aghast, having already considered no longer letting teams bring it home, instead settled on hiring minders. Still, every summer, it takes a beating: pool parties, Jet Ski parties, Scotch chug-a-thons, baby poop. One suture on the bowl's lip was the result of its being dropped last year by a Tampa grinder named Pat Maroon. Someone suggested that the dings gave it character.

Bolt said, "Let's see what *you* look like when you're a hundred and thirty years old and party as hard as the Cup." ♦

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