

PRICE \$8.99

THE

DEC. 20, 2021

THE NEW YORKER



VIVA

- [A Critic at Large](#)
- [American Chronicles](#)
- [Annals of War](#)
- [App推荐-英阅阅读器](#)
- [Books](#)
- [Comment](#)
- [Crossword](#)
- [Dept. of Technology](#)
- [Fiction](#)
- [Louisiana Postcard](#)
- [Mental Notes](#)
- [Missed Connections Dept.](#)
- [Monsters of Rock Dept.](#)
- [Poems](#)
- [Profiles](#)
- [Shouts & Murmurs](#)
- [Tables for Two](#)
- [The Current Cinema](#)
- [The Theatre](#)

A Critic at Large

- [What's So Great About Great-Books Courses?](#)

The humanities are in danger, but humanists can't agree on how—or why—they should be saved.

By [Louis Menand](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Roosevelt Montás was born in a rural village in the Dominican Republic and immigrated to the United States when he was eleven years old. He attended public schools in Queens, where he took classes in English as a second language, then entered Columbia College through a government program for low-income students. After getting his B.A., he was admitted to Columbia's Ph.D. program in English and Comparative Literature when a dean got the department to reconsider his application, which had been rejected. He received a Ph.D. in 2004 and has been teaching at Columbia ever since, now as a senior lecturer, a renewable but untenured appointment. He is forty-eight.

Arnold Weinstein is eighty-one. Although he was an indifferent student in high school, he was admitted to Princeton, spent his junior year in Paris, an experience that fired an interest in literature, and received a Ph.D. from Harvard in 1968. He was hired by Brown, was tenured in 1973, and is today the Richard and Edna Salomon Distinguished Professor of Comparative Literature. These two men started on very different life paths and ended up writing the same book.

They are even being published by the same university press, Princeton. Montás's is called "[Rescuing Socrates: How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why They Matter for a New Generation](#)"; Weinstein's is "[The Lives of Literature: Reading, Teaching, Knowing](#)." The genre, a common one for academics writing non-scholarly books, is a combination of memoir (some family history, career anecdotes), criticism (readings of selected texts to illustrate convictions of the author's), and polemic against trends the author disapproves of. The polemic can sometimes take the form of "It's all gone to hell." Montás's and Weinstein's books fall into the "It's all gone to hell" category.

Both men teach what are called—unfortunately but inescapably—“great books” courses. Since Weinstein works at a college that has no requirements outside the major, his courses are departmental offerings, but the syllabi seem to be composed largely of books by well-known Western writers, from Sophocles to Toni Morrison. At Columbia, undergraduates must complete two years of non-departmental great-books courses: Masterpieces of Western Literature and Philosophy, for first-year students, and Introduction to Contemporary Civilization in the West, for sophomores. These courses, among others, known as “the Core,” originated around the time of the First World War and have been required since 1947. Montás not only teaches in the Core; he served for ten years as the director of the Center for the Core Curriculum.

Although Montás and Weinstein are highly successful academics at two leading universities, where they are, no doubt, popular teachers, they feel alienated from and, to some extent, disrespected by the higher-education system. As they see it, they are doing God’s work. Their humanities colleagues are careerists who have lost sight of what education is about, and their institutions are in service to Mammon and Big Tech.

It will probably not improve their spirits to point out that professors have been making the same complaints ever since the American research university came into being, in the late nineteenth century. “Rescuing Socrates” and “The Lives of Literature” can be placed on a long shelf that contains books such as Hiram Corson’s “The Aims of Literary Study” (1894), Irving Babbitt’s “Literature and the American College” (1908), Robert Maynard Hutchins’s “[The Higher Learning in America](#)” (1936), Allan Bloom’s “[The Closing of the American Mind](#)” (1987), William Deresiewicz’s “[Excellent Sheep](#)” (2014), and dozens of other impassioned and sometimes eloquent works explaining that higher education has lost its soul. It’s a song that never ends.

So, although Montás and Weinstein seem to think that things went wrong recently, things (from the point of view they represent) were wrong from the start. The conflict these professors are experiencing between their educational ideals and the priorities of their institutions is baked into the system.

That conflict is essentially a dispute over the purpose of college. How did the great books get caught up in it? In the old college system, the entire curriculum was prescribed, and there were lists of books that every student was supposed to study—a canon. The canon was the curriculum. In the modern university, students elect their courses and choose their majors. That is the system the great books were designed for use in. The great books are outside the regular curriculum.

The idea of the great books emerged at the same time as the modern university. It was promoted by works like Noah Porter’s “Books and Reading: Or What Books Shall I Read and How Shall I Read Them?” (1877) and projects like Charles William Eliot’s fifty-volume Harvard Classics (1909-10). (Porter was president of Yale; Eliot was president of Harvard.) British counterparts included Sir John Lubbock’s “One Hundred Best Books” (1895) and Frederic Farrar’s “Great Books” (1898). None of these was intended for students or scholars. They were for adults who wanted to know what to read for edification and enlightenment, or who wanted to acquire some cultural capital.

The idea made its way into universities after 1900 as part of a backlash against the research model, led by proponents of what was called “liberal culture.” These were professors, mainly in the humanities, who deplored the university’s new emphasis on science, specialization, and expertise. For the key to the concept of the great books is that you do not need any special training to read them.

In a great-books course of the kind that Montás and Weinstein teach, undergraduates read primary texts, then meet in a classroom to share their responses with their peers. Discussion is led by an instructor, but the instructor’s job is not to give the students a more informed understanding of the texts, or to train them in methods of interpretation, which is what would happen in a typical literature- or philosophy-department course. The instructor’s job is to help the students relate the texts to their own lives. For people like Montás and Weinstein, it is also to personify what a life shaped by reading books like these can be. “The teacher models the still living power of the book,” as Weinstein puts it.

You can see the problem. Universities like Brown and Columbia make big investments in training scholars and researchers in their doctoral programs, and then, after they are credentialled and hired as professors, supporting their work with office and laboratory space, libraries, computers and related technology, research budgets, conference and travel funds, sabbaticals, and so on. Why should an English professor who got his degree with a dissertation on the American Transcendentalists (as Montás did), and who doesn't read Italian or know anything about medieval Christianity, teach Dante (in a week!), when you have a whole department of Italian-literature scholars on your faculty? What qualifies a man like Arnold Weinstein, who has spent his entire adult life in the literature departments of Ivy League universities, to guide eighteen-year-olds in ruminations on the state of their souls and the nature of the good life?

It's not an accident or a misfortune that great-books pedagogy is an antibody in the "knowledge factory" of the research university, in other words. It was *intended* as an antibody. The disciplinary structure of the modern university came first; the great-books courses came after. As Montás says, "The practice of liberal education, especially in the context of a research university, is pointedly countercultural."

Montás is using the term "liberal education" mistakenly. Virtually every course at an élite school like Columbia, from poetry to physics, is part of a liberal education. "Liberal" just means free and disinterested. It means that inquiry is pursued without fear or favor, regardless of the outcome and whatever the field of study. Universities exist to protect that freedom. But Montás is right about the countercultural part. Great-books courses tend to be taught against the grain of academic disciplinary paradigms.

This has obvious educational value. Many students who take a great-books-type course enjoy encountering famous texts and seeing that the questions they raise are often relevant to their other coursework. And some students experience a kind of intellectual awakening, which can be inspiring and even transformational. For students who are motivated—and motivation is half of learning—these courses really work. They are happy to read Dante in translation and without a scholarly apparatus, because they want to get a sense of what Dante is all about, and they know that if they don't get it in college they are unlikely to get it anywhere else.

Undergraduate teachers, whatever their training, can play a role as a transitional parent figure, someone students can talk to who is not privy to their personal or social lives, someone who will let them have the keys to the car no questions asked. And students profit from learning how universities operate and arguing about what college is for. It opens up the experience for them, gives the system some transparency and the students some agency.

So why the tsuris? At this point, great-books-type courses—that is, courses where the focus is on primary texts and student relatability rather than on scholarly literature and disciplinary training—are part of the higher-education landscape. Few colleges require them, but many colleges happily offer them. The quarrel between generalist and specialist—or, as it is sometimes framed down in the trenches, between dilettante and pedant—is more than a hundred years old and it would seem that this is not a quarrel that one side has to win. Montás and Weinstein, however, think that the conflict is existential, and that the future of the academic humanities is at stake. Are they right?

Between 2012 and 2019, the number of bachelor's degrees awarded annually in English fell by twenty-six per cent, in philosophy and religious studies by twenty-five per cent, and in foreign languages and literature by twenty-four per cent. In English, according to the Association of Departments of English, which tracked the numbers through 2016, research universities, like Brown and Columbia, took the biggest hits. More than half reported a drop in degrees of forty per cent or more in just four years.

The trend is national. Some departments have maintained market share, of course, and creative-writing classes seem to be popular everywhere. But, in general, undergraduates have largely stopped taking humanities courses. Only eight per cent of students entering Harvard College this fall report that they intend to major in the arts and humanities, a division that has twenty-one undergraduate programs.

The decline in student interest affects doctoral programs as well, and this fact is crucial, because doctoral programs are the reproductive organs of the entire system. Fewer graduate students are admitted, because the job market for humanities Ph.D.s is contracting. More important, no one is sure how to teach the students who do get in. If courses in the traditional subfields of

literary studies (medieval poetry, early-modern drama, the eighteenth-century novel, and so on) are not attracting undergraduates, shouldn't new Ph.D.s be trained differently? If so, given that faculties are mostly trained in the traditional subfields themselves, who is going to do it?

And, even if you could completely redesign doctoral education, it takes at least six years to get a Ph.D. in the humanities (the median time is more than nine years) and another six years, minimum, to get tenure. An academic discipline is a big ship to turn around, especially when it is taking on water.

Montás and Weinstein don't cite these figures. They don't cite any figures, actually, because even if business were booming it would make no difference to them. But this is the real-world context in which they are publishing their books. This is the moment they have chosen to inform readers that academic humanists are not doing their job. "Liberal education is impaired and imperiled," Montás reports. "Too often professional practitioners of liberal education—professors and college administrators—have corrupted their activity by subordinating the fundamental goals of education to specialized academic pursuits that only have meaning within their own institutional and career aspirations." "Corrupted" is a pretty strong word.

What humanists should be teaching, Montás and Weinstein believe, is self-knowledge. To "know thyself" is the proper goal. Art and literature, as Weinstein puts it, "are intended for personal use, not in the self-help sense but as mirrors, as entryways into who we ourselves are or might be." Montás says, "A teacher in the humanities can give students no greater gift than the revelation of the self as a primary object of lifelong investigation." You don't need research to learn this. Research is irrelevant. You just need some great books and a charismatic instructor.

For the advocates of liberal culture a century ago, the false god of literature departments was philology. Today, the false god is "theory." Montás complains that contemporary theory—he calls it "postmodernism"—subverts the college's educational mission by calling into question terms like "truth" and "virtue." A postmodernist, in his definition, is a person who believes that there is no capital-T truth, that "true" is just the compliment those with power pay to their own beliefs. "This unmooring of human

reason from the possibility of ultimate truth in effect undermines all of Western metaphysics,” he tells us, “including ethics.” (He blames this all on Friedrich Nietzsche, whom he calls “Satan’s most acute theologian,” which is an amazing thing to say. Nietzsche wanted to free people to embrace life, not to send them to Hell. He didn’t believe in Hell. Or theology.)

Weinstein’s criticism of theory is somewhat less apocalyptic. For him, theory represents a desperate and wrongheaded attempt—he calls it “the humanities’ ‘last stand’”—to introduce rigor and objectivity into literary studies. He doesn’t think rigor and objectivity have a place in an undergraduate literature course. “You won’t find very much of them in my classroom,” he assures us. “In my crazier moments I think that rigor may be akin to rigor mortis.”

But questioning the meaning of accepted values has been a major theme in Western thought since Socrates, and “truth” and “virtue” were never exempt. Postmodernism is not a license to shoplift. People who see “truth” and “virtue” as functions of power relations tend to be hyperethical, because they see power disparities everywhere. Postmodernists do not run more red lights than evangelicals do.

And if, as these authors insist, education is about self-knowledge and the nature of the good, what are those things supposed to look like? How do we know them when we get there? What does it mean to be human? What exactly is the good life?

Oh, they can’t say. The whole business is ineffable. We should know better than to expect answers. That’s quant-thinking. “The value of the thing,” Montás explains, about liberal education, “cannot be extracted and delivered apart from the experience of the thing.” Literature’s bottom line, Weinstein says, is that it has no bottom line. It all sounds a lot like “Trust us. We can’t explain it, but we know what we’re doing.”

In the creation of the modern university, science was the big winner. The big loser was not literature. It was religion. The university is a secular institution, and scientific research—more broadly, the production of new knowledge—is what it was designed for. All the academic disciplines were organized with this end in view. Philology prevailed in literature

departments because philology was scientific. It represented a research agenda that could produce replicable results. Weinstein is not wrong to think that critical theory has played the same role. It does aim to add rigor to literary analysis.

For Montás and Weinstein, though, science is the enemy of ethical insight and self-knowledge. Science instrumentalizes, it quantifies, it reduces life to elements that are, well, effable. Weinstein can see that students might think that science courses are useful for a successful career, but he thinks that “success” is just another false idol. He writes, “One has read a great deal about ‘quants’ being gobbled up by investment firms, hired on the strength of their mathematical prowess, hence likely to add to bottom lines. What actually does a bottom line mean? Is anyone asking about judgment? Does any university or graduate school transcript even whisper anything about judgment? Values? Priorities? Ethics?”

Weinstein won’t even call what students learn in science courses “knowledge.” He calls it “information,” which he thinks has nothing to do with how one ought to live. “Life is more than reason or data,” he tells us, “and literature schools us in a different set of affairs, the affairs of heart and soul that have little truck with information as such.”

For Montás, the trouble with science is that it answers the important questions—Who am I? How shall I live?—in “purely materialistic terms.” He blames this on a writer who died in 1650, René Descartes. “Today, the heirs to Descartes’s project are perhaps most visible in Silicon Valley,” Montás says, “but the ethic that informs his approach is pervasive in the broader culture, including the culture of the university.”

What did Descartes write that set us on the road to Facebook? He wrote that scientific knowledge can lead to medical discoveries that improve health and prolong life. Montás calls this proposition “Faustian.” He says that it implies that there is “no higher value than the subsistence and satisfaction of the self,” and that this is what college students are being taught today.

Humanists cannot win a war against science. They should not be fighting a war against science. They should be defending their role in the knowledge business, not standing aloof in the name of unspecified and unspecifiable

higher things. They need to connect with disciplines outside the humanities, to get out of their silos.

Art and literature have cognitive value. They are records of the ways human beings have made sense of experience. They tell us something about the world. But they are not privileged records. A class in social psychology can be as revelatory and inspiring as a class on the novel. The idea that students develop a greater capacity for empathy by reading books in literature classes about people who never existed than they can by taking classes in fields that study actual human behavior does not make a lot of sense.

Knowledge is a tool, not a state of being. Universities are in this world, and education is about empowering people to deal with things as they are. Students at places like Brown and Columbia want to make the world a better place, and they can see, as Descartes saw, that science can provide tools to do this. If some of those students make a lot of money, who cares?

Isn't it a little arrogant for humanists like the authors of these books to presume that economics professors and life-science professors and computer-science professors don't care about their students' personal development? The humanities do not have a monopoly on moral insight. Reading Weinstein and Montás, you might conclude that English professors, having spent their entire lives reading and discussing works of literature, must be the wisest and most humane people on earth. Take my word for it, we are not. We are not better or worse than anyone else. I have read and taught hundreds of books, including most of the books in the Columbia Core. I teach a great-books course now. I like my job, and I think I understand many things that are important to me much better than I did when I was seventeen. But I don't think I'm a better person. ♦

New Yorker Favorites

- How we became infected by [chain e-mail](#).
- [Twelve classic movies](#) to watch with your kids.
- The [secret lives of fungi](#).

- The photographer who claimed to capture the [ghost of Abraham Lincoln](#).
- Why are Americans still [uncomfortable with atheism](#)?
- The enduring romance of the [night train](#).
- Sign up for our daily [newsletter](#) to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.

American Chronicles

- [An Education While Incarcerated](#)

What Eddy Zheng taught himself—and me—when he was in prison.

By [Hua Hsu](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

As a child, Xiao Fei Zheng did not understand want. He was born in Guangzhou, in southern China, in 1969, and grew up in a quiet neighborhood. Walking home from school, he often heard parents disciplining their children. But he was pampered. His father was a political officer in the Army, and his mother, a former professional basketball player, was an accountant. Their apartment was large, with a dining room spacious enough for his parents to host parties where couples would dance to tango and cha-cha records. In the rest of the building, apartments of this size were divided among three families. On many nights, the Zhengs' neighbors patiently waited for the family to finish dinner. Then they would invite themselves over, stools in hand, and watch the Zhengs' color television.

Xiao Fei's father had little family in China, and his mother's siblings were all in Hong Kong or the United States; her parents encouraged the family to come to California's Bay Area, where they had lived for decades. In 1982, the Zhengs decided to make the move. Xiao Fei was twelve, his sister was seventeen, and his brother was twenty.

It was the first time Xiao Fei had ever flown, and he couldn't stop throwing up. On arriving in the U.S., the family stayed with his grandparents, seven people sharing a two-bedroom apartment in Oakland's [Chinatown](#).

His sister remembers watching "Star Wars" in the late seventies and assuming that it was a story about America. She expected their new homeland to be full of robots and levitating cars, but she found it eerily desolate. After the sun set, their neighbors in Oakland stayed inside and locked the doors. Occasionally, they heard gunshots. Xiao Fei's father was used to telling people what to do. Now he worked at Burger King, where he needed only three English words: "lettuce," "tomato," and "cheese." Xiao Fei's mother worked as a live-in nanny in San Jose, seeing her own family on weekends. Xiao Fei spent a lot of time with his grandfather, who took

him aside one day and asked him to pick an English name out of the dictionary. He chose Eddy—he liked that it also referred to flowing water.

Perhaps the greatest change was that they were suddenly in a world of Black and white. Even the Chinese Americans felt unfamiliar. On Eddy's first day of school, he approached two women wearing earrings and makeup and shyly asked which one of them was his teacher. They laughed; they were thirteen, too.

Eddy's parents were preoccupied with work. His brother, who went by Peter, studied English and worked at Burger King with their father. His sister, Lili, waitressed and attended community college. Eddy's grandparents took home expired food from the grocery store. "In China, I had whatever I wanted," Eddy recalled. "In the U.S., we had nothing."

Eddy, who had been a decent student in China, recalls a day, during his first year of high school, when his teacher asked everyone to bring in a newspaper clipping. He didn't understand what that was or where to find one. He began skipping class and hanging out at Lincoln Square Park, playing kickball with Chinese immigrant boys and girls. Other teen-agers referred to them as "Vietcong" or "Ching-Chong Chinaman." San Francisco gangsters offered Eddy and his friends pocket money to run errands. At first, they weren't interested. But they eventually graduated from kickball to slick clothes and elaborate hair styles modelled on Duran Duran and Hong Kong pop idols.

Eddy was fourteen when he fell in with a group of local criminals, most of whom were in their twenties and thirties. He stopped going to school completely, and he rarely slept at home. He remembers going to see "Year of the Dragon" at a theatre full of Chinatown gangsters wearing black trenchcoats. Everyone cheered on the bad guys. When he was fifteen, he was arrested for shoplifting a jacket. Undeterred, he and his friends started stealing car stereos. There was no vision of the future beyond a family-style feast in Chinatown if they scored a good one.

Eddy wanted to prove that he was tough. He and another teen robbed a gambling house in broad daylight. He worked nights as security at a brothel in San Francisco, sitting at the window with a walkie-talkie and a shotgun.

He remembers watching one of the sex workers seated at the bar between shifts. She was bathed in red light, hunched over, long hair flowing down her back, writing a letter to her boyfriend in prison. It was one of the first times Eddy thought about what it would be like if something went wrong.

On January 6, 1986, Eddy and two other teen-agers invaded the home of a family who owned and operated shops in San Francisco's Chinatown. They ambushed the parents at gunpoint when they returned to the house at night, and locked the children in a bathroom. They tied up the husband and hit him. They tore off the wife's clothes, threatened to rape her, and pretended to take compromising photos of her with an unloaded camera. They spent hours in the family's house. At one point, Eddy wandered into the living room and noticed a toy robot. He began playing with it, momentarily forgetting where he was. He was sixteen.

Eddy and one of his accomplices drove the wife to the couple's shops, ending up at one on Jackson Street, where they took anything that looked valuable. The police pulled them over as they were driving the wife home—Eddy had forgotten to turn on the headlights.

His parents had no money to hire a lawyer. A behavioral analyst described Eddy as a "lost soul," incapable of making any decisions on his own. Older criminals had assured him that, as a minor, he wouldn't receive serious punishment. His family was ashamed of what he had done. His father thought that he should just admit wrongdoing and beg for forgiveness. "It was very Chinese," Lili recalled. Eddy was tried as an adult and convicted of sixteen felony counts, including kidnapping. He was sentenced to seven years to life.

"I was a follower," he told me. "I wasn't a leader."

Eddy spent much of 1986 in juvenile-detention centers; when he turned eighteen, he was sent to San Quentin, which held the state's most violent offenders. Eddy was told that he was the facility's youngest inmate. California's prisons were not as crowded as they would become, and he moved into a single cell.

Eddy was welcomed by a Samoan inmate named Tuffy, who gave him a basket with chips, instant ramen, soy sauce, and some magazines. At the time, inmates at San Quentin were separated according to race or affiliation, groups referred to as “cars.” There were biker cars, neo-Nazi cars, and cars for specific street gangs; Asians and Pacific Islanders were a small enough group to constitute a single car, marked “Other” on the prison’s intake form. Joining a car was a matter of pragmatism, necessitated by safety and camaraderie. Each car placed members in useful positions within the prison bureaucracy—the kitchen and the commissary, the laundry, and processing.

Being Other meant that it was easier to avoid turf wars. And the rules laid down by elders like Tuffy kept Eddy largely insulated from the drugs and the violence around him. Eddy and his cohort rarely fought with other cars; during lockdowns, they often picked up extra work shifts. “Model minorities,” Eddy joked. He was constantly attempting to befriend volunteers and find pen pals. “You’re always trying to get someone,” he explained—friends and also potential lovers. “If you don’t have connection or hope, you think to yourself, Why should I be good?” Older inmates told him he would likely do only seven years, maybe a couple more.

Visitation policies were relatively lax at the time, and his parents came as often as they could. They would bring crab and eat it with Eddy in the open fields inside the prison walls. They never told Eddy’s grandparents why he was no longer around. At first, his parents had assumed that he would be released after not too long; in time, the situation simply became too hard to explain. They would stage photographs that made it look as if Eddy were studying or working out of state. His grandparents died without learning the truth.

Eddy experienced many firsts while incarcerated: the first time he wrote a letter, the first time he saw a man stabbed, the first time he ate an apple fritter. His friends in Oakland had been mostly Chinese. Now he recognized similarities between Chinese and Samoans, Asians and African Americans. He participated in a sweat-lodge ceremony. An older Black inmate he called Pops talked to him about philosophy, and taught him how to play handball. Pops encouraged him to read Hermann Hesse’s “[Siddhartha](#),” and Eddy found a copy in Chinese. Eddy got into bodybuilding, then yoga, and then Pilates. He fell in love for the first and second times—the result of his letter-

writing with women on the outside. It was while he was incarcerated that he first told his father he loved him.

He learned English and began writing poetry. He learned to type and became a Toastmaster. He watched many, many episodes of “The O.C.” He picked up the guitar. He learned about the *AIDS* epidemic and educated other inmates in sexual health. He sang in the church choir. He joked around with bikers and skinheads. He read “*Siddhartha*” again, this time in English. He never once cried.



“Let’s take an excruciatingly awkward two minutes for people to trickle in.”
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

In September, 1998, Eddy’s petition for parole was approved. His parents got a room ready for him at home. He had job offers from a Chinatown youth center and a law firm, and he planned to enroll at San Francisco State. All that remained, one of the parole-board commissioners explained, was for the governor to sign off. The commissioner told Eddy, “Wait until everything is over and done with before you pack your suitcase.” But he began giving away his cassette tapes and books.

“I remember the four of you—you, Alicia, Momo, Jeanne—came into the door, into the study hall,” Eddy told me recently. “I was just very surprised. This was the first time I seen four Asians coming in.”

I met Eddy in the winter of 1998, as he awaited news of his release date. I was volunteering as part of a program administered by Patten College. Most of the volunteers were Berkeley undergraduates, and we were drawn to the program for various reasons. Earlier that year, I had volunteered at a conference of activists, scholars, and artists in the emerging prison-abolition movement. I was already working with so-called at-risk youth in the East Bay. Now I saw clearly what it meant for there to be a pipeline from underserved schools to prisons.

Most of us were middle-class kids walking into a prison for the first time. We couldn't wear blue (the color of the inmates' uniforms), but the searches of our backpacks and jackets were perfunctory. The inmates took college-level courses, and we talked them through their assigned readings about due process, Emma Goldman, the bicameral system. We told them about innovations in pizza and computing. They taught us about Stevie Wonder, the power of poetry, the bus systems of Los Angeles, the importance of looking someone in the eye when you spoke to him. We never asked what any of them had done to end up in prison.

I was not expecting to meet as many Asian inmates as I did. Statistics about the number of Asians and Pacific Islanders who are incarcerated are imprecise, but it is estimated that during the nineteen-nineties this population increased by two hundred and fifty per cent. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, men in the Other category are imprisoned at three times the rate of white men. The Other female category has the highest imprisonment rate of any ethnic or racial group.

At first, Eddy seemed serious and formal. But I was drawn to him. He was so desperate to learn. I'd sometimes ask him questions in Chinese, and, wary of making the guards uncomfortable, he would answer in English. He shared poems and scraps of memoir with us, and his questions about politics and history were so wide-ranging that I had no idea what classes he was actually taking.

On our last day as tutors, Eddy passed me an envelope containing a bracelet he had made out of tiny beads. The beads spelled out "*Hard Boiled*," the name of Berkeley's Asian American newspaper; we often brought issues for

the inmates to read. I gave him a small rock that I had picked up while visiting the Great Wall of China, years before.

We wrote letters after I graduated; I grew familiar with Eddy's tiny, compressed cursive. Around this time, he also befriended a volunteer named Shelly Smith, with whom he struck up a romantic, largely epistolary relationship. His letters to me always began with a few encouraging lines about whatever minor personal stresses I'd relayed to him. In June, 1999, he wrote to tell me that his parole request had just been turned down by the governor, Gray Davis, a Democrat who had taken office in January. In 1994, California voters had passed the Three Strikes law, increasing sentencing for people with multiple felonies, and Davis frequently turned down parole requests from life-term inmates. "You must be wondering how I must be feeling right now," Eddy wrote. "Well, you might not believe this, but aside from feeling relief I also feel a sense of excitement. Relief because I am no longer drifting in an endless sea, excitement because I'll have even more accomplishments and support when I go to my next hearing. I don't feel sad at all. Or maybe it just hasn't hit me yet."

In April, 2000, Eddy became one of the first inmates in the program to earn an associate's degree. He continued taking classes. That year, some Berkeley students arrived at San Quentin wearing yellow armbands. One of them explained that there was a strike on campus to defend Berkeley's ethnic-studies department against proposed cutbacks. "I think that's where I first really tried to understand more" about Asian American history, Eddy said. These students were free, and yet they wanted more. He was reading bell hooks and encouraging younger inmates to do the same. He exchanged writing with poets like Ishle Yi Park and published his own zines. He had ascended to the status of O.G.—original gangster—defusing tensions with other cars. Anmol Chaddha, a Berkeley undergraduate, was teaching a class in the prison on apartheid-era South Africa. One student asked why Blacks, who made up a majority of South Africans, acceded to minority rule. Eddy turned to the student. "Look at us," Chaddha remembers him saying. "Look at our situation. We vastly outnumber the guards. But we're sitting here, generally complacent with the situation."

There was never a golden age of [incarceration](#). Yet there were moments in the recent past when institutions made greater gestures toward rehabilitation.

In the early nineties, nearly twenty per cent of federal inmates had taken a college course while incarcerated. But a provision of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 banned incarcerated people from accessing Pell Grants. By 2004, the figure had dropped to around ten per cent, as programs that offered associate's or bachelor's degrees to inmates closed.

Eddy wanted more from San Quentin's classes, so, in 2002, he and three other inmates, Stephen Liebb, Viet Mike Ngo, and Rico Riemedio, circulated a petition to have ethnic studies incorporated into the prison's curriculum. Eddy had managed to avoid getting into serious trouble for sixteen years, but now he, Mike, and Rico were put in solitary confinement. Eddy was guilty of sharing his writings with outsiders without prison approval.

Eddy sent a letter to *Hard Boiled*, the Berkeley newspaper, inquiring about its submissions policy. Chaddha, an editor, agreed to print whatever Eddy sent in. He asked if there was anything else he could do. Eddy requested help finding a lawyer.

Chaddha recognized that Eddy needed not just a lawyer but a political campaign. Chaddha started the Asian Prisoner Support Committee with Yuri Kochiyama, a longtime activist who had been a confidant of Malcolm X in the sixties. The committee's immediate aim was to support Eddy, Mike, and Rico, who became known as the San Quentin Three. Mike and Rico were eventually transferred out of solitary. But Eddy, who was technically still eligible for parole, remained in isolation for eleven months.

Chaddha consulted Victor Hwang, a civil-rights lawyer he had learned about in an Asian-American-studies class. Hwang introduced him to a network of lawyers, community leaders, and local politicians, all of whom were, in a sense, alumni of the nineteen-sixties social movements that had birthed [Asian American identity](#). Chaddha needed to persuade state legislators to support Eddy the next time he was up for parole.

In May, 2003, Eddy was sent to the California State Prison in Solano. As a teen-ager, he had been processed at an inmate-reception center; from the yard, he could see Solano being constructed, just across the street. Since

he'd entered the system, in 1986, California had built three new universities and nineteen new prisons. The state's prison population had more than doubled.

A campaign slowly arose to support Eddy. Paul Dosh, a Berkeley graduate student who had taught Eddy in San Quentin, performed poetry in the streets to raise money for Eddy's lawyers. Eddy wrote as many as ten letters a day to friends, former volunteers, politicians, activists, and college students. Ben Wang, an undergraduate at the University of California, Davis, who began corresponding with Eddy, said, "From inside a state prison, he was able to network and build a community." Jeanne Loh, another Berkeley tutor Eddy had grown close to in the late nineties, helped him set up a blog. In his posts, he would muse about prison food, shout-out friends, share poetry, and even campaign for political candidates whom he'd befriended through the mail. At one point, he asked people to stop sending him books; he'd received more than he could possibly read.

"At the beginning, we didn't tell anyone, because we lost face," his father recalled, from the family home in Oakland. "We were ashamed. We couldn't face the Chinese community." But, after hearing Kochiyama speak at a rally, he realized that he needed to do the same. Chaddha took Eddy's parents to Sacramento, where they went door to door, talking to legislators. "They were the closers," Chaddha told me. He remembers a meeting of Asian American community leaders where Eddy's mother, once too mortified to admit that her son was in prison, gave an impromptu speech to a ballroom full of strangers about her family's journey from Guangzhou to San Quentin.

Eddy began studying meditation. In one exercise, he had to count to ten. If any thoughts intruded, he had to start over. The exercise resembled his struggle for parole; he applied more than a dozen times. In November, 2004, the board voted in favor of his release. Gray Davis had been recalled by California voters, and the governor was now Arnold Schwarzenegger, who did not object to the board's recommendation. One day, in March, 2005, a prison official summoned Eddy and said, "Hey, Zheng, type out this ducat"—a pass that inmates need to move freely. It was for Eddy's release.

But the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 had expanded the categories that made noncitizen felons subject to

deportation. On Eddy's release from Solano, he was handed over to *ice* agents, who drove him to a field office in San Francisco. As the van made its way through the city at lunchtime, Eddy looked out the window. He hadn't seen so many free people in nearly twenty years.

He spent almost two years detained by *ICE* in Marysville, north of Sacramento. While in custody, he married Shelly Smith, the volunteer he had befriended in the late nineties. "There is nothing traditional about our marriage," he reflected on his blog. "We're just two pieces of a giant puzzle finding our places to complete and fulfill our mission."

As more people learned about Eddy's situation, the movement to free him intensified. The family he'd victimized had largely been silent throughout the parole process. But, while Eddy was in Marysville, the daughter, Jenny Tam, submitted a letter to the immigration court. "My family is no different from his," she wrote. "It saddens me to see so many people rallying for Eddy." Tam went on to describe the isolation and paranoia that had come to define their home life: "Part of me is afraid that I will feel like the one who has done something wrong. . . . To me, any achievements he claims were done to sway the court to rule in his favor. My firm wish is that Eddy be deported."

In July, 2006, an immigration judge ordered Eddy deported to China. But the case was appealed to the Ninth Circuit, and in February, 2007, Eddy was allowed to leave *ICE* custody while awaiting the ruling. As he signed the paperwork for his release, his mother combed his hair. He was greeted outside the detention center by supporters and a swarm of journalists. After thanking everyone, Eddy walked to his sister's Lexus and put a box with the battery for his ankle monitor in the trunk. He reached up to pull the lid of the trunk down, as people did in 1986. "Stop," his sister said. She pushed a button, and the trunk closed by itself.

Eddy's friends from Lincoln Square Park, now leading law-abiding lives, took him out for a Chinese banquet—an elevated version of what they had done, in the eighties, after stealing a car stereo. "Everybody's taking me out to eat," Eddy said. "Every time they ask me what I want, I say, 'I don't know.' 'Sushi? What is that?' I'd never been to a sushi restaurant. 'What do you want to order?' I don't know. I'm not from this world."

Last June, I visited Eddy in Oakland, where he lives in the hills with his second wife, Lisa, a Chinese American social worker, and their eight-year-old daughter, Abella. (He and Smith separated in 2012. “She’s still one of my closest friends,” he told me.) Eddy drives his daughter to school along the route he used to walk when cutting class.

Eddy is fifty-two. He has broad shoulders and sharp cheekbones, and his gaze is piercing and alert. There’s a small, faded tattoo of the Chinese character for “tiger” on his left hand—a reminder that he entered prison during the Year of the Tiger. A corner of the living room is cordoned off as an office, which contains the possessions that have defined his life since he was sixteen. In addition to boxes of letters and photographs, there are thick binders with his trial and parole documents. There’s a giant photograph of him as a fifteen-year-old with slicked-back hair, dressed all in white. Behind his desk are the books he was given while incarcerated. There’s a tiny statue of Bruce Lee, plaques, and photographs from Eddy’s bodybuilding days, when he was alarmingly muscular. His desk faces a garden, where he planted artichokes—a reminder of a fellow-inmate from San Quentin, who concocted a way to cook the vegetables in his cell. There was a Porsche out front, a hand-me-down from his sister. When Eddy was imprisoned, Lili made her way from community college to Berkeley, mastering English while working three jobs. She studied accounting and became the first woman from mainland China to make partner at Deloitte. She cites her path as an example of the American Dream. But she sees it in Eddy’s story, too. “I would say he’s more successful than me,” she said.

Eddy and I drove to San Francisco on the day that California lifted its ban on in-person gatherings. At Portsmouth Square, a park at Chinatown’s eastern edge, neighborhood elders played cards wearing surgical masks and gloves. Eddy tried to find the site of the gambling house he stuck up in the mid-eighties—his graduation from petty theft and shoplifting to armed robbery. He recalled the door being ajar, the shape of a victim’s pendant, what they ate afterward. But he could not remember what he’d felt.

On his release from detention, Eddy had got a job with the Community Youth Center of San Francisco, where he mainly worked with Asian American youth. His team would walk through Chinatown, checking in on store owners and the kids posted on street corners. We passed a storefront,

and Eddy stiffened. This was the site of the shop he had robbed after the home invasion. When C.Y.C. was doing its neighborhood walks, he whispered, he never had the courage to go down this block.

A lot of Eddy's post-incarceration work is animated by a belief in restorative justice, which seeks to put victims and perpetrators of violence in conversation with one another. It's an alternative to traditional models of retribution, and, when it works, the victim and the perpetrator come to understand each other's history and recognize their membership in a shared community. In the years after Eddy's release, he, his mother, and his brother were each mugged, on separate occasions, outside his parents' home. Each time, Eddy explained contexts that can compel people to crime, trying to disabuse his family of their "anti-Blackness." "It's so much easier to be on the other side," he said. "To hate. To lock these people up. It's easier than trying to convince people that's not the way." When he contacted the police after his mugging, he told them that it was not to press charges against his assailant but, rather, to pursue a restorative-justice session if they ever found him.

In 2015, a mutual friend delivered a letter of apology from Eddy to the woman he had kidnapped. David Tam, her son, told me, "It's something that we are all actively trying to cope with in our daily lives. The more press he gets, the more he brings up some of these unresolved emotions. It's difficult. And, you know, I'm not rooting for the guy." As he pointed out, his family can't appeal the governor's pardon. "I could save a thousand people," Eddy said, but it would not erase the family's "life sentence of suffering."

This summer, Eddy and I went to the Ping Yuen Houses, popularly known as the Pings, a four-building public-housing complex along Pacific Avenue in Chinatown. The population is largely Asian, with an increasing number of Black families. Outside, we were met by members of C.Y.C. and of United Playaz, another San Francisco-based violence-prevention organization, and by Guy Hudson, a fifty-seven-year-old Black organizer and the self-described "mayor of Hunters Point," one of the last strongholds of the city's African American population.

A C.Y.C. leader took Hudson aside and told him about a Cambodian teenager they'd been working with, whose family had recently moved to Hunters

Point. A group of local kids had been bullying him, but the family didn't want the police involved. "Get me their names or a photo," Hudson said, "and I'll handle it."

In 2010, after a string of assaults against Asian Americans, Eddy persuaded C.Y.C. to open a branch office in Bayview–Hunters Point, to provide outreach to the Asian American, Black, and Latinx youth there. "I done told my fellas—they're over here in the community to help their people, just like we help our people," Hudson explained. "If you need help, Eddy and his people will help you."

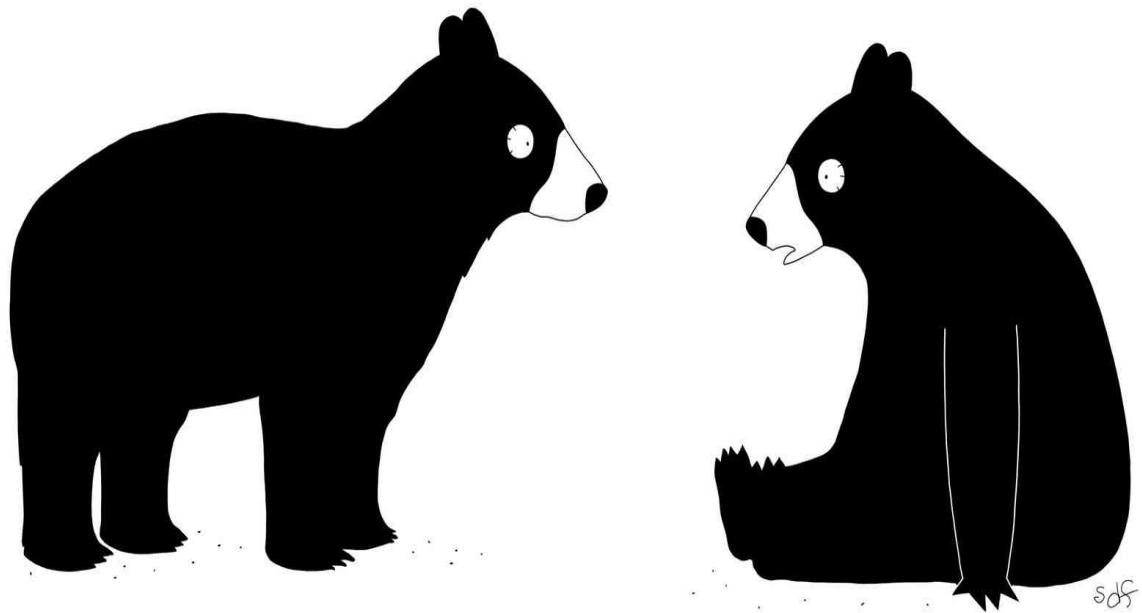
In the past year, numerous videos in which older Asian Americans are assaulted by strangers have gone viral. Although the majority of [anti-Asian bias incidents](#) are committed by white people, many of the videos have Black assailants. Several were filmed in the Bay Area, and, though their circulation brought new attention to anti-Asian racism, they also inspired a new, influencer-driven style of social-media activism. The hashtags and Instagram infographics occasionally complicate the work of longtime organizers and community workers. "Media blows that Asian-and-African-American thing way out of proportion," Hudson said. He pulled out his phone to show me the youth basketball team he coaches, which is evenly split among Black, Latinx, and Asian kids: "When we come running out, they think they're gonna whup us. But we're beasts."

The Ping Yuen staff had invited the groups to discuss ways to bring residents together. Everyone was trying to figure out if there was significant tension between the Asian and the Black residents, or if they just needed more occasions to socialize. A staffer observed that bingo was a great way to bring community elders together. But they needed to reach young people, too. Eventually, they settled on a daytime party, with Black and Chinese m.c.s alternating songs. Someone volunteered Hudson's son, a local rapper. Hudson stared intently at his phone before holding it up for everyone to see. His son just wanted to know where and when to show up.

It was the kind of mundane, detail-oriented meeting necessary to build alliances. Out of context, the questions people asked might have sounded funny. A Black community organizer wanted to know if there was a word "in Asian" that meant the same thing in English, since the party needed a

catchy name. Eddy leaned forward and said that the name of the housing project, Ping Yuen, means “Peaceful Garden”: “What if we call it the Peaceful Garden jam?” Hudson started working on a chant: “Say it loud / Ping Yuen and I’m proud.” As we were leaving, Hudson said goodbye to all the C.Y.C. volunteers in Chinese, and then turned to Eddy with one of the few other phrases he knows in Chinese: “You owe me money.”

In 2015, after a series of rulings in Eddy’s legal cases, Governor Jerry Brown pardoned him. Two years later, he became an American citizen. Within the Asian American community, he has an unusual kind of credibility. He can talk openly about his experience as both a perpetrator and a survivor of violence, and as someone at ease with his contradictions.



“I wasn’t hibernating. I was resting my eyes.”
Cartoon by Seth Fleishman

One afternoon, he Zoomed with an Asian American reading group that had invited him to speak on a panel about [prison abolition](#). “Happy new breath,” he began. He talked about his personal history, but he kept his answers brief, ceding his time to the other panelists, who were women. At one point, he extolled the virtues of chi, the Chinese belief in breath. He said that “chi” was also an acronym for “culture, history, and identity,” explaining that the roots of abolitionist politics are in personal revolution. “Ethnic studies saved my life,” he said. After the call, I told him I was surprised by how deferential he had been—most people in the group had likely never had the

chance to speak with someone who'd served time. He said that he was conscious of being a "cis het male," and he didn't want to "take up space." I asked where he had learned this language. "Inside, you have to be macho and show no fear," he replied. "Out here, you start changing your perspective."

On another Zoom, he addressed a gathering of philanthropic funders, who operated in a different register—the pieties of nonprofit-speak. "Happy new breath," he said again. Eddy has spent much of the past year launching the New Breath Foundation, which raises money for progressive Asian American and Pacific Islander groups. "When I was in solitary confinement, I really understood how breath could change everything," he told me. "I saw how I took breath for granted."

Having spent decades building relationships with Bay Area gangsters and politicians, he was turning to grant-making. Only 0.2 per cent of philanthropic dollars go to organizations specifically serving the Asian American and Pacific Islander communities; Eddy's goal was to raise ten million dollars for New Breath. The first disbursement, of a hundred and thirty thousand dollars, came in March, shortly after a white man killed eight people, six of them Asian women, at three Atlanta-area spas and massage parlors. By the end of summer, New Breath had given more than two million dollars in grants to groups including the Center for Empowering Refugees and Immigrants, which provides mental-health services to Southeast Asian refugees, and Red Canary Song, which organizes sex workers.

On the Zoom, Eddy warned that philanthropy often appeared to be a "money-laundering machine" that let wealthy funders feel good about themselves and their largesse. "The sooner philanthropy is aware of that, the sooner you're gonna feel even better in having that wealth," he said.

One evening, Eddy and I went to the Far East Café, one of the oldest restaurants in Chinatown, where the Reverend Norman Fong, a prominent Bay Area community leader, had organized a "solidarity dinner" honoring Jesse Jackson. Fong was distressed by the year's viral videos, and by the stories circulating about tension between Black and Asian American communities.

In 1982, Vincent Chin, a twenty-seven-year-old Chinese American, was murdered in Detroit by two white men who allegedly blamed the Japanese auto industry for a decline in American jobs. The attack on Chin, and the leniency of the sentence—neither attacker went to prison—was a catalyzing event for Asian Americans. Jackson was one of the first national civil-rights leaders to speak about Chin’s killing, hosting a press conference with Chin’s mother at Cameron House, a Christian community center in San Francisco’s Chinatown. Fong and others had raised money to fly Jackson out from Chicago, for the dinner at the Far East Café and an event the following day at Cameron House.

In the banquet hall, everyone negotiated the new, and temporary, freedom of post-mask life—the awkward handshakes, the lunges that never materialized in hugs. Leaders from various Bay Area Asian American civil-rights and activist groups were there, as were graying activists from the social-justice organization the Rainbow *push* Coalition, the original incarnation of which Jackson founded in the seventies. Fong, who has a kind of throwback energy, kept pumping his fist and shouting, “Reverend Jackson is in tha house!” Fong and Jackson sat at a table with Mayor London Breed. Another table was crowded with state senators and city officials. Chesa Boudin, San Francisco’s district attorney, took Eddy aside to get advice on a case.

“There’s nobody quite like Eddy in San Francisco,” Boudin told me later. “Someone who has both caused tremendous harm and paid a serious price for that, and somehow found redemption.” Boudin’s tenure as D.A. has been defined by an openness to rethinking criminalization. He described a recent case, in which a video of an Asian American getting robbed went viral. The D.A.’s office had charged the perpetrator but wasn’t sure what to do with the person who’d filmed and posted the crime. Boudin contacted Eddy, who persuaded the victim to meet with the filer. “Eddy’s been someone who has dived in head first to alleviate harm and build bridges,” Boudin said.

At the dinner, Butch Wing, a Chinese American organizer for the Rainbow *push* Coalition, began weeping as he recounted Jackson’s 1984 Presidential run. Jackson, weakened by Parkinson’s, slowly rose from his table and shuffled toward him. Everyone began cheering. When Jackson finally reached the podium, he wrapped his arms around Wing.

Jackson speaks in a hoarse whisper, but his familiar sing-song cadences are intact. Everyone leaned in as he recalled Vincent Chin's murder, connecting it to the more recent killing of George Floyd. "Your struggle is our struggle," he told the largely Asian American crowd.

After the dinner, Eddy stepped out onto an empty Chinatown street. He had been invited to take a quick photo with Jackson, and was still buzzing about the fact that local leaders, many of whom once advocated for his freedom, had come to our table to say hello or to ask him for help. "It's all about timing," he said. The way *guai ren*—fortuitous people who help you along the way—have reappeared throughout his life. Above us, red lanterns crisscrossed the sky. He took a picture to remember the night.

When Eddy first reentered society, it was easy to go wherever he was needed. He would talk to any audience, never thinking to ask for an honorarium. If there was a territorial dispute between rival Chinatown factions, he would rush to defuse it. He became a co-director of the Asian Prisoner Support Committee, the organization that Chaddha and Kochiyama had founded to support him. Eddy and other formerly incarcerated men attended hearings for people like Ny Nourn, a Cambodian American refugee who was incarcerated for sixteen years for her part in a murder perpetrated by an abusive ex-boyfriend. She was paroled in 2017, but, like Eddy, she was remanded to ICE custody. Last year, Governor Gavin Newsom pardoned her, effectively ending her deportation proceedings. Today, she codirects the A.P.S.C., which the New Breath Foundation funds. "He's a leader who knows the roots," she told me, of Eddy.

Eddy says that when he was in prison he had a "narrower range of emotions." "He had a kind of intensity to him," Wang, the former U.C. Davis student, recalled. People who knew him back then still sense it sometimes. These days, he is often seen as famous or well off; after all, he's a philanthropist. "That's a certain image," Eddy told me. "But in daily life I have issues—family issues, marital issues. I have my own life, the traumas that come with post-incarceration."

I asked Eddy if, when he was in prison, it was hard to imagine life on the outside. "It wasn't difficult," he said. "The sky did not change much. The clouds, the mountains, they did not change. But the people, the life style, the

technology, everything changed. Even though we get access to television and radio, people from the outside, we're not part of it. I'm not part of that world anymore. To look beyond the wall to see the mountains—you see the razor wire, you see the wall, the paint is peeling. You got to look beyond that to see the mountains.”

In prison, he explained, you lose your perception of time. Routine keeps you sane, and yet you live with a constant sense of anticipation, subject to institutional whims. You keep secrets for guards or officers, and then one day they turn on you for being overfamiliar.

At times, it feels as if the only people who truly understand Eddy are those with whom he experienced the “fellowship” of incarceration. Eddy, Mike, and Rico—the San Quentin Three. They once stood in the yard and looked up at Mt. Tamalpais, in Marin County. “Freedom is close enough,” Eddy remembers saying to himself. “It’s torture.” They promised one another, “One day, we gonna climb up there.” More often, they focussed on the yard, to avoid putting themselves through that anguish.

This summer, they finally did it. Eddy, Mike, Rico, and Stephen—the ethnic-studies petitioners—hiked up Mt. Tam. They couldn’t find San Quentin. Eddy looked up and saw three butterflies—I got a picture to prove it,” he assured me. The men followed the butterflies until they came to a clearing. From there, San Quentin was so close that they started identifying the tower blocks and the quadrants of the yard.

They spent twenty minutes looking at the prison from the mountain. Eddy handed his phone to one of his friends, who took a picture of him perched on two large rocks. His face is clenched, the prison is behind him, between his legs, and he is pretending to shit on it. ♦

New Yorker Favorites

- How we became infected by [chain e-mail](#).
- [Twelve classic movies](#) to watch with your kids.
- The [secret lives of fungi](#).

- The photographer who claimed to capture the [ghost of Abraham Lincoln](#).
- Why are Americans still [uncomfortable with atheism](#)?
- The enduring romance of the [night train](#).
- Sign up for our daily [newsletter](#) to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.

Annals of War

- [The Secret History of the U.S. Diplomatic Failure in Afghanistan](#)

By [Steve Coll](#) and [Adam Entous](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

On April 14th, President Joe Biden ended the longest war in United States history, announcing that the last remaining American troops in Afghanistan would leave by September 11th. In the following weeks, the Taliban conquered dozens of rural districts and closed in on major cities. By mid-June, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan—the brittle democratic state built by Afghan modernizers, *NATO* soldiers, and American taxpayers after the 9/11 attacks—appeared to be in a death spiral. Yet its President, Ashraf Ghani, insisted to his cabinet that the Republic would endure. In every meeting, “he assured us, and encouraged us,” Rangina Hamidi, the acting minister of education, said. Ghani reminded them, “America didn’t make a promise that they would be here forever.”

On June 23rd, Ghani and his advisers boarded a chartered Kam Air jet that would take them from Kabul to Washington, D.C., to meet with Biden. As the plane flew above the Atlantic, they sat on the cabin floor reviewing talking points for the meeting. The Afghan officials knew that Biden regarded their government as hopelessly fractious and ineffective. Still, Ghani recommended that they present “one message to the Americans” of resilient unity, which might persuade the U.S. to give them more support in their ongoing war with the Taliban. Amrullah Saleh, the First Vice-President, who said that he felt “backstabbed” by Biden’s decision to withdraw, reluctantly agreed to “stick to a rosy narrative.”

Biden welcomed Ghani and his top aides to the Oval Office on the afternoon of June 25th. “We’re not walking away,” Biden told Ghani. He pulled from his shirt pocket a schedule card on which he’d written the number of American lives lost in Afghanistan and Iraq since 9/11, and showed it to Ghani. “I appreciate the American sacrifices,” Ghani said. Then he explained, “Our goal for the next six months is to stabilize the situation,” and described the circumstances in Afghanistan as a “Lincoln moment.”

“The most important ask I have for Afghanistan is that we have a friend in the White House,” Ghani said.

“You have a friend,” Biden replied.

Ghani asked for specific military assistance. Could the U.S. provide more helicopters? Would American contractors continue to offer logistical support to the Afghan military? Biden’s answers were vague, according to Afghan officials in the room.

Biden and Ghani also discussed the possibility of a peace agreement between the Islamic Republic and the Taliban. American diplomats had been talking with the Taliban for years, to negotiate a U.S. withdrawal and to foster separate peace talks between the insurgents and Kabul. But the talks had fallen apart, and the Taliban seemed determined to seize Afghanistan by force. The likelihood of the Taliban “doing anything rational is not very high,” Biden said, according to the Afghan officials present.

While Ghani and his aides met with Biden, Shahrazad Akbar, the chair of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, conferred in Washington with Americans working in human rights, democracy, and development. She recalled being stunned to hear that many of the Americans had already “concluded that Afghanistan was a lost cause, and had sort of made peace with themselves.” They asked her what contingency plans she was making to flee Kabul and go into exile. After the official visit, she stayed in the U.S. through July 4th, and listened to Biden’s speech marking the holiday, in which he said, “We’re about to see our brightest future.”

“I ended up crying a lot that evening,” Akbar said. She returned to Kabul and went from embassy to embassy requesting visas for her staff.

On May 10, 1968, in Paris, the United States opened peace talks with North Vietnam. President Richard Nixon, who regarded the negotiations mainly as political cover for America’s withdrawal from the war, knew that the terms under discussion would leave South Vietnam, America’s ally, vulnerable. In October, 1972, Nixon asked Henry Kissinger, his national-security adviser, about the likelihood of South Vietnam’s survival. “I think there is one chance in four,” Kissinger told him.

“Well, if they’re that collapsible, maybe they just have to be collapsed,” Nixon said. In January, 1973, the United States signed a pact called the

Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam and withdrew all its combat forces. Two years later, North Vietnam and Vietcong guerrillas conquered South Vietnam. Helicopters evacuated the last American personnel from the rooftop of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon.

The Islamic Republic's last chapter followed a strikingly similar course. For years, peace talks were stalled by the Taliban's refusal to speak with the Afghan government. But in 2018 President Donald Trump, determined to end the war with or without the Afghan President's involvement, appointed a special envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad, to negotiate directly with the Taliban, which had representatives in Doha. Khalilzad was a sixty-seven-year-old Afghan-born diplomat, who had earned a doctorate in political science at the University of Chicago and had served in several Republican Administrations. From 2003 to 2005, he was George W. Bush's Ambassador to Afghanistan. His instructions were clear: make a deal with the Taliban that would allow for a quick American military withdrawal.

In February, 2020, the U.S. and the Taliban signed an accord called the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan: the U.S. pledged to pull out all its combat troops by May of 2021 if the Taliban repudiated Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups, entered into good-faith talks with the Islamic Republic, and sought to reduce violence in the country. The Taliban also promised not to attack U.S. and *NATO* troops who were preparing to leave. They could continue to attack Afghan forces, however. Many of the provisions were not made public, and the Islamic Republic was not a party to the agreement.

By then, the alliance between Washington and Kabul—once bathed in the aspirational language of democracy, women's rights, and nation-building—had become embittered by recriminations and mutual exhaustion. The peace accord between the U.S. and the Taliban made things dramatically worse. It contained a series of secret written and verbal agreements, including a contentious provision barring the U.S. from helping Afghan troops in their offensive operations against the Taliban. Ghani, who was largely cut out of the process, struggled to understand what the United States had agreed to and why, and, even when he did understand, he objected vigorously. Later, when the Taliban failed to deliver on commitments that it had made to the U.S., the Trump Administration ignored the violations. "Ghani felt lied to,"

Hamdullah Mohib, his national-security adviser, said. “He was undermined.”



“Congratulations! You’ve told the same joke one thousand times!”
Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

Throughout the negotiations, Ghani maintained back channels to American politicians who were supportive of the war, such as the Republican senator Lindsey Graham, who had long called for America’s continued presence in Afghanistan. After Ghani’s talks with Graham, the senator would regularly call Mike Pompeo, Trump’s Secretary of State, who at one point accused Ghani of “mobilizing Washington against” the Trump Administration. The view of many State Department officials, including nonpartisan career diplomats, was that Ghani had little interest in negotiating with the Taliban. “He preferred the status quo,” Khalilzad said. “It kept him in power.”

In January, Biden inherited this fragmenting compact. He could prolong America’s military deployment, regardless of the deal, or he could continue down the exit ramp that Trump had built. Biden, who as Vice-President under Barack Obama had opposed sending large numbers of troops to fight in the war, was openly doubtful that Afghanistan could ever become a secure and governable nation. At times, he seemed as cold-blooded about the Islamic Republic as Nixon had been about South Vietnam. His decision to abruptly withdraw the remaining U.S. forces in Afghanistan, culminating in the Taliban’s rapid takeover of the country—and the chaotic evacuation of

more than a hundred thousand people from Hamid Karzai International Airport—is an indelible part of his record. For Afghanistan’s population of about thirty-eight million, the defeat has been incomparably more consequential. The Taliban are reimposing strict Sharia law on the country, which has lost billions of dollars in foreign aid, and the nation is now gripped by a spreading famine.

The debates and decisions in Washington, Kabul, and Doha that preceded the Islamic Republic’s fall took place largely in private. Hundreds of pages of meeting notes, transcripts, memoranda, e-mails, and documents, as well as extensive interviews with Afghan and American officials, present a dispiriting record of misjudgment, hubris, and delusion from the very start.

The first serious attempt to negotiate with the Taliban began in November, 2010. Nine years earlier, the U.S. had overthrown the Taliban’s government, which had harbored the Al Qaeda terrorists who were responsible for the 9/11 attacks. The Taliban had mounted an insurgency to try to return to power, and Richard Holbrooke, Obama’s envoy to the region, hoped to persuade them to stop fighting and to enter Afghan politics. American diplomats and Taliban negotiators engaged in talks about a possible peace settlement. But the Taliban refused to work with the Afghan President, Hamid Karzai—the country’s first-ever democratically elected head of state—seeing him as an illegitimate puppet. Karzai, in turn, objected to America’s conferring legitimacy on extremist rebels bent on overthrowing his government.

“You betrayed me!” Karzai shouted at Ryan Crocker, the U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, during a meeting in late 2011. Obama ultimately deferred to Karzai, and by mid-2013 serious discussions with the Taliban about power sharing had ended. Before Obama left office, he drastically reduced the U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan from its peak of about a hundred thousand. But he left eighty-four hundred American soldiers on a mission of indefinite duration, to strike Al Qaeda and a branch of the Islamic State, and to aid Afghan forces fighting the Taliban.

In 2017, President Trump appointed General H. R. McMaster as national-security adviser. McMaster recommended more U.S. airpower and intelligence aid to support Afghan forces, and a tougher approach to

Pakistan, the Taliban's historical protectors. Trump agreed to the strategy, and seemed to accept that peace between the Taliban and the Islamic Republic might not be achievable. "Nobody knows if or when that will ever happen," he said that August. He promised that U.S. troops would remain in Afghanistan until they had defeated Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. "The consequences of a rapid exit are both predictable and unacceptable," he said.

But when the strategy failed to quickly turn the war around Trump began looking for a way out. (Later, he complained, "I should have followed my instincts, not my generals!") The following year, Trump fired McMaster and replaced him with John Bolton, an ardent conservative and Fox News commentator who had served in previous Republican Administrations. He also appointed Mike Pompeo, his C.I.A. director, as Secretary of State. During the summer of 2018, Pompeo consulted with Khalilzad, who, in September, became the Administration's envoy to negotiate with the Taliban. "It was thought that nobody knows the Afghan situation, the Afghan players" better than Khalilzad, Charles Kupperman, then one of Bolton's top advisers, said. Also, "there weren't a lot of other candidates." A diplomat on Khalilzad's staff was told that Trump wanted to leave Afghanistan in six months, but that perhaps he could be persuaded to wait as many as nine months.

Khalilzad is a little more than six feet tall and has the quick, expressive smile of an ace salesman. "Zal is extremely likable," Elliott Abrams, his colleague in the George W. Bush Administration, said. "Great sense of humor. Jokes all the time." Other officials found him evasive, particularly when he was involved in complex diplomacy. "No shortage of talking, but a lot of difficulty in figuring out exactly what he's talking about and why," Crocker said, adding that Khalilzad reminded him of "a Freya Stark version of an Arab proverb: 'It is good to know the truth and speak it, but it is better to know the truth and speak of palm trees.' " According to Bolton, Trump once remarked of Khalilzad, "I hear he's a con man, although you need a con man for this." Khalilzad brushed off such insults, citing an adage often attributed to Harry S. Truman: "If you want a friend in Washington, get a dog."

In October, 2018, Khalilzad flew to Kabul, where he met Ghani at the Arg palace, an eighty-three-acre compound housing the Afghan President's

offices and residence. They had known each other for nearly fifty years. As teen-agers in Kabul during the late nineteen-sixties, they had joined the American Field Service high-school exchange program. (Ghani went to Lake Oswego, Oregon, and Khalilzad to Ceres, California.) Throughout the years, according to American diplomats who worked with them, their relationship began to resemble a sibling rivalry. When Ghani ran for President in 2014, he bridled at indications that Khalilzad might be exploring his own bid, which Khalilzad denied. In meetings, they bantered in a patois of Dari and English. In private, each seemed convinced that the other suffered from excessive ego and ambition.

Ghani was once a planner at the World Bank and a naturalized American. After the Taliban fell, he returned to Afghanistan, where he served as Hamid Karzai's finance minister. He left government in 2004, and five years later, after giving up his American citizenship, he ran for President against Karzai and lost. When Karzai was ineligible for another term, in 2014, Ghani ran again, and he narrowly beat Abdullah Abdullah, a former foreign minister, in an election marred by allegations of fraud. After negotiations, Abdullah became Afghanistan's Chief Executive.

Ghani earned a doctorate in anthropology at Columbia, and he sometimes seemed to approach his Presidency as if it were graduate school. Between his two residences in Kabul, he cumulatively maintained a personal library of about seven thousand books, and during meetings he often referenced academic literature. He sought to empower those whom he referred to as Afghanistan's "stakeholders"—human-rights activists, Islamic scholars, media companies, and businesses. He populated his wartime administration with other technocrats who had graduate degrees from universities abroad, and spurned traditional Afghan politicians and strongmen, who he thought had brought the country to ruin. American diplomats and military commanders continually pressed Ghani to align with Karzai, Abdullah, and figures such as Abdul Rashid Dostum, who had an armed following and a record of alleged human-rights abuses. Much of the strength of the military opposition to the Taliban resided with such individuals, and it was hard to see how Ghani could strike a deal without them.

"He's just not a good politician," James Cunningham, who served as the U.S. Ambassador in Kabul during Ghani's first term, said. "There are lots of

things I do admire about him, but he wasn't able to find the political skills necessary to build coalitions and partnerships with people who disagreed with him."

During his initial meeting with Khalilzad at the Arg palace, Ghani delivered a long PowerPoint presentation about the obstacles to peace. He envisioned that the Islamic Republic and the United States would negotiate together, sitting across from the Taliban, an idea that Khalilzad found plainly unrealistic. For nearly a decade, the Taliban had insisted that they wanted to talk only to the U.S., to secure the withdrawal of *NATO* troops, which they regarded as an occupying force. Khalilzad and many other diplomats believed that peace negotiations between Ghani's government and the Taliban would have to come after the U.S. had agreed to leave and the Taliban had pledged, in return, to engage in such talks.

After the meeting, Khalilzad flew to Pakistan, where he met with guerrilla leaders. When Ghani heard about the meeting, after it was over, he exploded. He was known for having a temper. "He would become emotional and start shouting," Yasin Zia, a four-star Afghan general who was appointed chief of Army staff in 2020, recalled. "In a war, this type of behavior will not help you." American diplomats sometimes regarded these flareups as manufactured outrage, designed to slow down any negotiations that might undermine Ghani's authority.

The mutual distrust between Khalilzad and Ghani shaped—and distorted—U.S.-Afghan relations for the next three years.

The United States and the Taliban opened formal negotiations on January 22, 2019. The participants met in downtown Doha, in a cylindrical glass tower that houses Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Khalilzad led the American delegation; Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, a diplomat who briefly participated in talks with Obama Administration negotiators, in 2011, helped lead the Taliban team. "War has gone on too long," Stanikzai said, in an opening statement. "We have shed millions of gallons of blood. We want peace in Afghanistan through negotiations." Abdullah Amini, a veteran adviser to U.S. military commanders in Kabul, who had lost many relatives during the long conflict, audibly wept as he translated Stanikzai's remarks for the American delegation.

Khalilzad had conceived an accord that consisted of four parts: the U.S. would withdraw from Afghanistan; the Taliban would guarantee that Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and other terrorist groups would not operate against the U.S.; the Taliban and the Islamic Republic would negotiate a power-sharing agreement; and there would be a ceasefire. The four parts were interdependent—or as Khalilzad often put it, “Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.”

At first, both sides were deferential. “We can withdraw half by the end of April,” Khalilzad said, referring to U.S. forces. Stanikzai was just as quick to offer assurances about counterterrorism: “We will guarantee that we will not allow Al Qaeda to attack you.” But when Khalilzad proposed a nationwide ceasefire and power-sharing negotiations between the Taliban and Kabul, Stanikzai balked. “We understand that we cannot rule Afghanistan alone and we need help in reaching a negotiated settlement,” he said. But he first wanted a deal ratifying a U.S. troop departure in exchange for the Taliban’s counterterrorism promises.

They went back and forth for days. “Washington insists on a comprehensive ceasefire,” Khalilzad said, in the final session. Eventually, the Taliban envoys said that if the U.S. pledged to withdraw they would stop attacking U.S. and allied *NATO* forces, but that the Taliban’s war to overthrow Ghani’s government would continue. The Taliban would consider a ceasefire with Kabul only as an agenda item in future talks among the Afghan parties.

This was far from what American negotiators had wanted. U.S. forces were in Afghanistan partly to defend the Islamic Republic from its armed enemies; their mission’s name was Resolute Support. American commanders believed that it would be both dangerous and dishonorable to leave the war without a political settlement among the Afghans and a durable ceasefire. But Khalilzad was worried that a hard-line approach would stall the talks and encourage Trump to abandon the Islamic Republic even more abruptly. He suggested that they return to the dispute later.

Toward the end of February, Khalilzad arrived in Doha, at the Sharq Village and Spa, a whitewashed Ritz-Carlton hotel on the Persian Gulf. Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a founder of the Taliban, met him for lunch. Baradar had been the deputy defense minister in the Taliban government before it

fell. After Hamid Karzai was elected President, Baradar, who had gone into hiding, engaged in back-channel talks about political reconciliation between the Taliban and the new Islamic Republic, according to Afghan and American officials. In 2010, a joint C.I.A.-Pakistani team arrested Baradar in Karachi, and Pakistan imprisoned him, later transferring him to house arrest. After Khalilzad became Trump’s envoy, he persuaded Qamar Javed Bajwa, Pakistan’s Army chief, to release Baradar as a gesture of good will.

“I’ve studied you,” Khalilzad told Baradar, according to Lisa Curtis, an Afghanistan specialist on Trump’s national-security staff, who was present at the meeting. “I know you’re a man of peace.”

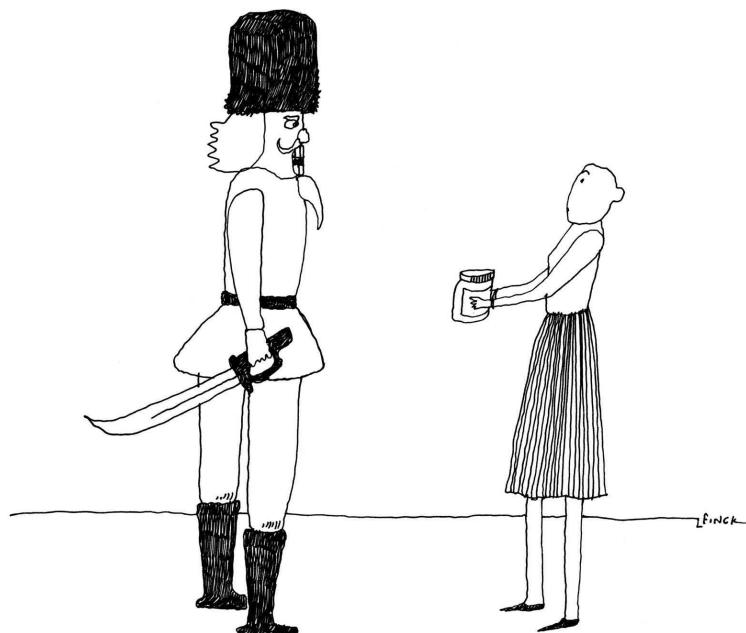
“I realize that I would not be sitting at this table if it weren’t for you,” Baradar replied.

Khalilzad and Pompeo saw Baradar’s role in Doha as a sign that the Taliban were serious about the talks. (As Pompeo once told Ghani, Baradar is “a very sophisticated player.”) The day after their lunch, Khalilzad joined Baradar in his hotel room, which overlooked a swimming pool where women were lounging in bikinis. “You must feel like you’re in Heaven,” Khalilzad joked, invoking the commonly held Islamic belief that the afterlife offers a paradise of water and virgins. Baradar walked to the window and pulled the curtain shut.

Negotiations between the Americans and the Taliban continued through the spring, first at the Sharq and later at Doha’s Diplomatic Club. Baradar did not attend regularly, but Khalilzad occasionally visited him privately in his hotel room. Khalilzad also maintained separate WhatsApp threads with members of the Taliban delegation and a few of Ghani’s aides, and occasionally messaged Ghani using Signal. His rapid diplomatic maneuvering made it hard for other officials at the Pentagon and the White House to follow what he was doing. One Pentagon official said that members of the negotiating team used to joke that “the most interesting exploitable piece of hardware in the world is Zal’s cell phone,” because he was constantly having discussions that no one else was privy to. “He called it improvisational,” the official said. “To the rest of us, it seemed more like chaos.” On April 19th, Ghani sent a letter to Pompeo complaining that he was being cut out of Khalilzad’s talks with the Taliban, and that Khalilzad

had spoken to him for a total of only six minutes during a sixteen-day stretch of negotiations.

The official sessions were attended by Stanikzai and other Taliban negotiators, including former Guantánamo detainees released around the time of the Obama-era negotiations. Morning meetings were scheduled to begin at ten-thirty; the Americans arrived early, and the Taliban usually drifted in late. By the beginning of the summer, however, the two sides were exchanging drafts of a final agreement. Khalilzad set July 14th as the date to announce the signing, and he began planning for immediate follow-up negotiations, in Oslo, between the Taliban and representatives of the Islamic Republic, to decide Afghanistan's political future.



"I'm a nutcracker, Sarah. Not a jar opener."
Cartoon by Liana Finck

The Americans still hadn't determined whether the Taliban would accept a ceasefire in its war against the Islamic Republic. In early July, Molly Phee, Khalilzad's deputy, pressed Stanikzai on this topic, which she described as an issue "of extreme importance" to the "most senior American leadership." Stanikzai would not budge, and he introduced a new demand: he wanted thousands of Taliban prisoners held by Ghani's government released.

The Taliban envoys insisted that they needed the concession to convince their most hard-line factions of the benefits of peace talks. Khalilzad said

that the U.S. would try to persuade Ghani to agree to this, and when U.S. military officers in the room realized that the Taliban might get their prisoners without the Americans getting a ceasefire, they wanted to walk out, Andru Wall, a Navy commander at Resolute Support, recalled. Khalilzad “plainly wanted a deal and seemed willing to give the Taliban almost everything,” Wall said. “It was not clear if we had any true red lines.” On July 3rd, the draft agreement was updated to include the release of “up to” five thousand Taliban prisoners. (In return, the Taliban would release a thousand Afghan government detainees.)

A week later, General Austin S. Miller, the commander of *NATO* forces in Afghanistan, flew into Doha, and Khalilzad met him for breakfast. They were joined by Nader Nadery and Abdul Matin Bek, two young advisers to Ghani, who had spoken with Taliban envoys. Nadery and Bek reported that several Taliban had boasted contemptuously about defeating America. “They’re running with their tails between their legs,” one of the Taliban negotiators had exclaimed. Bek later told Khalilzad to “wake up.” “Please, for God’s sake, the Taliban are not in favor of negotiations, they are not in favor of a political settlement,” he said. “They’re really on a victory march.”

Khalilzad told him not to worry. “I’ve cornered them,” he said. “There will be a political settlement.” (Khalilzad denied that this exchange took place.)

There was nothing to announce on July 14th. On August 7th, at the Diplomatic Club, the negotiating teams discussed two secret “annexes” to the main draft agreement, to resolve the remaining disputes. One would detail the Taliban’s commitments to suppressing Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. The other would attempt to link a U.S. withdrawal to a reduction in the war’s violence. Recognizing that the Taliban would not end its military campaign against the Islamic Republic, Khalilzad proposed that all sides temporarily halt fighting in five of the country’s thirty-four provinces so that the U.S. could safely begin its withdrawal. In the rest of Afghanistan, the war would continue, and, if the Taliban attacked Afghan units, American forces could intervene. If the Taliban stopped attacking Afghan units in any area, the U.S. would reciprocate, and there would be a local ceasefire. But since the U.S. had an “obligation” to defend its Afghan allies, Phee, Khalilzad’s deputy, explained, the scope of this reduction in violence would be determined by the Taliban. “You have the power,” she said. “If you don’t

attack,” then “we won’t attack.” She acknowledged that the proposal was complicated. “We’d prefer a ceasefire everywhere,” she said.

The proposal was a prescription for confusion and further conflict. Both sides accepted that the U.S. would no longer engage in “offensive” operations against the Taliban. But the U.S. and the Taliban disagreed about the circumstances in which the U.S. could come to the defense of its allies. The Taliban argued that Miller’s forces could strike only guerrillas who were directly involved in attacks on Afghan forces, whereas Miller considered this interpretation too narrow, and concluded that he was also allowed to act in other ways, including striking preëmptively against Taliban fighters who were planning an attack.

Either way, the U.S. concessions to the Taliban would clearly be a blow to Ghani’s military. For years, Afghan forces had relied on U.S. bombers and artillery to back up their ground attacks, and to strike Taliban encampments and supply lines. Now Afghan troops would be on their own during offensive campaigns, and, if they were attacked, they would face uncertainties about whether or when U.S. forces would go into action.

But Khalilzad believed that he had forged sufficient common ground to close the deal. He shared a draft text with Ghani—although, initially, not the proposed annexes, because he was worried about those sections leaking. Ghani, predictably, objected to the draft, and he marked up the document with changes. Pompeo and Khalilzad ignored most of his edits and arranged to brief Trump on the deal on August 16th, at his golf resort in Bedminster, New Jersey.

Khalilzad joined Trump in a conference room, along with Vice-President Mike Pence, Bolton, and other national-security officials. He described the Taliban’s promise that they would not allow Al Qaeda to attack the U.S. When it was noted that Ghani was unhappy with the deal, Trump said, “Why are you wasting your time going to talk to Ghani? He’s a crook.”

Trump then asked Khalilzad if he could give the Taliban “something to make them coöperate.”

“What are you talking about, Mr. President?”

“Like money.”

“No,” Khalilzad replied. “They’re on a terrorism list. We can’t give them money.”

Trump moved on to other topics before Khalilzad could explain that the Taliban’s war against Kabul was likely to continue.

On August 25th, in Doha, the Taliban accepted final annex drafts on counterterrorism and restrictions on fighting. The language prohibited the Taliban from attacking U.S. and *NATO* troops as they withdrew. “If one American dies after the deal is signed, then the deal is off,” Miller told the Taliban envoys, according to an official who was present. As for the Taliban’s ongoing war against the Islamic Republic, Miller would take “necessary and proportionate measures” to defend Kabul’s troops when they came under attack, without engaging in “offensive” operations.

The Taliban envoys also offered verbal commitments that the American officials documented for their record. On counterterrorism, the Taliban representatives said that they “welcome continued U.S. operations” against the Islamic State and Al Qaeda. If the U.S. bombed the Islamic State, “we will hang flowers around your neck,” they said; as for Al Qaeda, they told the Americans, “Kill as many as you want.” In a concession to Miller, the Taliban also agreed not to attack major Afghan cities or any diplomatic facilities.

In the end, the terms prioritized a safe American withdrawal. This was at a time when U.S. casualty numbers in Afghanistan had long been on the decline. U.S. and *NATO* troops seldom participated in on-the-ground fighting; their main jobs were to protect the government, train the Afghan Army, and provide air support. These roles were critical to the war effort, but they were also relatively low-risk. Since 2015, fewer than a dozen American soldiers had died annually in combat in Afghanistan. The yearly death toll suffered by the Islamic Republic’s soldiers and police was estimated at more than eight thousand. According to the United Nations, the war also claimed the lives of several thousand civilians each year.

At the end of August, Trump came up with a plan to invite the Taliban to Camp David to sign the agreement. Then, on September 5th, a car bomb detonated in Kabul, killing about a dozen people, including Elis Angel Barreto Ortiz, a thirty-four-year-old U.S. Army sergeant. That weekend, Trump ended the peace talks with a tweet blaming the deaths on the Taliban: “If they cannot agree to a ceasefire during these very important peace talks, and would even kill 12 innocent people, then they probably don’t have the power to negotiate a meaningful agreement anyway.”

Pompeo told Khalilzad, “You should come home.”

When Trump pulled out of the agreement, “I literally jumped for joy,” a senior White House official recalled. “I was thrilled when that tweet came out.” Many officials throughout the government, including Bolton and other national-security aides, thought that the terms of the deal wildly advantaged the Taliban, and some were opposed to compromising altogether. (“The idea that we could negotiate ourselves with the Taliban, excluding the Afghan government, was lunacy,” Charles Kupperman, who had become Bolton’s deputy, said.) But their victory was short-lived. Two months later, Khalilzad’s team secured the release of two professors from the American University of Afghanistan—an American and an Australian—who had been kidnapped in 2016 and held by the Taliban’s Haqqani faction, a group with ties to Al Qaeda. Earlier, Ghani had freed Anas Haqqani, a young member of the network. In the aftermath of these prisoner releases, Pompeo told Khalilzad to try to re-start peace talks.

On December 7th, Baradar met Khalilzad again in Doha, still seeking an American commitment to promptly leave Afghanistan. “Our main goal is the designation of a date and an announcement” for signing the agreement, Baradar said. They decided to sign the deal negotiated the previous summer. The Taliban promised to reduce violence for seven days before the deal was official, to demonstrate their commitment. Pompeo called Ghani to inform him that an accord was again at hand, and only then did Ghani learn that few of his objections had been taken into account.

On February 29, 2020, at the Sheraton Grand Doha Resort, Khalilzad and Baradar, sitting on a makeshift stage, signed the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan. The accord stated that on March 10, 2020, “the

Taliban will start intra-Afghan negotiations” to seek an enduring peace, and the United States pledged to pull out its combat forces by May of 2021. Ghani, who concluded that he had no choice but to coöperate, issued a “joint declaration” with the Trump Administration, in which he endorsed the deal’s general goals while making it clear that he disagreed with the terms. At the ceremony in Doha, Pompeo told attendees that the agreement “will mean nothing” unless all its parties “take concrete action on commitments and promises that have been made.” Haibatullah Akhundzada, the Taliban’s reclusive supreme leader, issued a statement from an unknown location, calling the American commitment to withdraw “the collective victory of the entire Muslim and Mujahid nation.”

The next day, Trump called Ghani. “We’re relying on you to get this done,” he said, meaning a power-sharing deal with the Taliban. The accord was “popular among the American people,” Trump went on. “It’s popular among my enemies as well.” Ghani replied that the key would be “verifiable action” by the Taliban to reduce their violence, but he said that he was prepared to send a team to negotiate with them.

“Great step,” Trump said. “We need to get this done. Call me if you need anything.”

Two days later, Trump called Baradar. According to an official who listened to the exchange, Trump told him, “You guys are tough fighters.” Then Trump asked, “Do you need something from me?”

“We need to get prisoners released,” Baradar said, adding that he had heard Ghani would not coöperate. Trump said that he would tell Pompeo to press Ghani.



Cartoon by Will McPhail

Later that month, Pompeo met with Ghani in Kabul and urged him to be flexible about releasing the Taliban's prisoners. But he also gave him an assurance: "The United States is your leverage. If we do not get what we want, we will not leave," he said. "We will only leave when there is a political resolution."

"This clarity that you will stand with us in the negotiation is something that we have never had," Ghani told him.

Then Pompeo qualified his earlier statement: "The only thing that will change that is if we have no progress." Ghani did not appear to absorb this warning. Later, he quoted Pompeo's comment to a European diplomat, calling it a "turning point"—evidence that the U.S. truly would not abandon the Islamic Republic until there was a negotiated peace.

That spring, the Taliban submitted the names of the five thousand prisoners for whom it was demanding release before power-sharing talks could begin. A group of U.S. intelligence officers and other officials reviewed the Taliban names and produced an "objection list," which contained several convicted murderers, including Nargis Mohammad Hasan, an Afghan police officer born in Iran who, in 2012, had killed Joseph Griffin, an American police trainer, at the Kabul police headquarters. Also on the list was a prisoner

known as Hekmatullah, a former Afghan soldier who had killed three off-duty Australian soldiers while they were playing poker and the board game Risk. Their cases were just two of dozens of “insider attacks”—killings of off-duty soldiers and civilians, typically by Taliban recruits—that had come to shadow the American war.

Ghani’s advisers were developing their own list of several hundred prisoners who they said were problematic—murderers, kidnappers, and drug traffickers, some on death row. In late May, Ghani released just under a thousand prisoners, whom his advisers had identified as low-risk. But the Taliban held firm: release all five thousand or no negotiations. “The Talibs became adamant,” Khalilzad recalled. “They knew that we were so desperate that the intra-Afghan negotiations begin.”

Rather than put more pressure on the Taliban, the Trump Administration continued to focus on getting Ghani to bend. As they wrestled over the prisoner problem, Khalilzad visited Ghani at the Arg palace, carrying a message from Trump: “We are ready to work with President Ghani, but if there is a perception that the big picture is being sacrificed for small matters then we are ready to change our relationship.”

Ghani was unmoved. “The U.S. doesn’t owe us anything,” he told Khalilzad. “If you want to leave, then leave—no hard feelings.”

Ghani clearly preferred a long-term military alliance with Washington, and he spent much of his Presidency pleading with American envoys for more support. But the Afghan President chafed at the expectations placed on him by the U.S. Notionally, he was the sovereign leader of a constitutional democracy. He considered this a matter of high principle, and annoyed diplomats by often falling back on “legalistic and formalistic expressions of Afghan legitimacy,” as a senior State Department official put it. In reality, the state that Ghani led was deeply dependent on American money and military power. “They would give us hints about what they wanted us to do, but if we did not do those things then we would get heavy pressure,” Mohib, Ghani’s national-security adviser, said. Ghani’s suggestions that the Republic would be fine without the U.S. were either shows of bravado or simply wishful thinking.

That July, Trump decided that he would cut U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan by roughly half, to about four thousand. Khalilzad was disappointed: he had expected the Trump Administration to conduct a formal review of the Taliban's compliance with the Doha deal before withdrawing more troops, but it hadn't. At that point, Khalilzad's assessment was that Taliban compliance was mixed. They had refrained from attacking U.S. forces, as promised, and had reduced fedayeen-style assaults and truck bombings in cities and large district capitals. They delivered a three-day ceasefire over Eid al-Fitr in late May that mostly held up well. Yet they continued to attack Afghan forces, costing hundreds of Afghan lives.

Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, met with Ghani in Kabul and assured him that the pullout didn't mean that the U.S. was giving up on Afghanistan. "We have signed up for a conditional drawdown," he said, using language that had been given to him by Pompeo: U.S. troops would stay until certain conditions had been met, and one of those conditions was that the Taliban and the Islamic Republic engage in negotiations. And yet it was obvious to everyone by now that Trump could overrule his generals at any time.

On July 29th, Khalilzad and Miller, the commander of U.S. and *NATO* forces, met with Ghani at his residence, with new assurances from Baradar. They conveyed to Ghani that, if he released everyone on the Taliban list, the Taliban would very likely "reduce violence significantly" and start power-sharing talks right away. Ghani recoiled at the proposition. "If the U.S. wants to release people who have death sentences, and the biggest drug traffickers in the world, then you should take responsibility for it," he said. "I'm not."

Eventually, Ghani found a compromise that gave the Americans what they wanted. He called a *loya jirga*, a traditional consultative assembly, to decide the fate of the most problematic Taliban prisoners. In early August, the *loya jirga* approved the release of everyone on the Taliban's list, including Hasan and the other prisoners on the "objection list." (An Afghan intelligence official said that, weeks after Hasan was released, someone from the F.B.I. asked if she could be recaptured, but she had already fled to Iran.)

On September 12th, at the Sharq resort, intra-Afghan talks were formally inaugurated, six months after the Doha accord had specified. The group of twenty-one delegates sent by Kabul had been preparing for months, like athletes training for a big season perpetually delayed, and a German foundation had delivered seminars on how to negotiate for peace. But, at the Sharq, the Kabul team found that the Taliban were exceedingly stubborn. It took more than two months to resolve one agenda item. The Taliban “were feeling a kind of pride that they had defeated the United States,” Habiba Sarabi, one of the delegates, recalled.

At the same time, the guerrillas mounted offensives in Kandahar and Helmand that were clearly “violations in spirit, if not the written word” of the Doha accord, Miller said. During the last three months of 2020, after the prisoner releases, violence spiked across Afghanistan, and civilian casualties rose by forty-five per cent, compared with 2019. The onslaught “exacerbated the environment of fear and paralyzed many parts of society,” the U.N. reported. The Taliban also protested many American strikes carried out in support of Afghan forces, calling them a violation of the Doha accord’s annex on managing combat. Like aggressive corporate litigators seeking to drown their opponents in paper, the guerrillas filed more than sixteen hundred complaints to Khalilzad’s team, and used them to justify their intensifying military campaign against Kabul.

When Joe Biden ran for Senate in 1972, at the age of twenty-nine, he campaigned on his opposition to the Vietnam War. He did not claim that the war was immoral; rather, he believed that it was “merely stupid and a horrendous waste of time, money and lives based on a flawed premise,” as he later wrote in his memoir. Biden has approached the Afghan war with similar skepticism. In 2009, as Vice-President, Biden met Karzai, the Afghan President at the time, who urged him to work harder to end Pakistan’s support for the Taliban. “Mr. President,” Biden replied, according to Karzai and another Afghan present, “Pakistan is fifty times more important to the United States than Afghanistan.” In 2015, Ghani and Abdullah joined Biden for breakfast in Washington, where he told them that the Afghan war was “unwinnable.” According to Mohib, Ghani’s national-security adviser, Afghan officials were left convinced that if Biden were ever President “he will probably want to withdraw.”

After Biden was elected, in November, 2020, he named Jake Sullivan as national-security adviser and Antony Blinken as Secretary of State. Both men had years of experience working in government, and they were well acquainted with the miserable set of policy options in Afghanistan. It was unclear whether Biden would follow Trump’s deal to the letter, abandon it, or make adjustments in response to the Taliban’s violence. During the Presidential transition, Sullivan, Blinken, and other advisers sent Biden a memo reporting that the talks with the Taliban weren’t going anywhere. Khalilzad had apparently failed to get the Taliban and the Islamic Republic to work together, but Biden asked him to stay on as special representative at least through the spring. He knew all the players, and if the Biden Administration wanted to meet the Doha accord’s May 1st deadline for a full U.S. troop withdrawal, it would have to work quickly.

As soon as Biden took office, Mohib sought a meeting at the White House, but was told that only a phone call would be possible. Mohib, who had earned a doctorate in electrical engineering in Britain and had served as Afghanistan’s Ambassador in Washington from 2015 to 2018, had been Ghani’s national-security adviser for three years. Methodical, calm, and hard to read, he was intensely loyal to Ghani, whose ideas inspired him, but he was increasingly seen as the instrument—if not the instigator—of Ghani’s micromanaging.

On January 22nd, Mohib spoke on the phone with Sullivan. The new Administration sought to preserve Afghanistan’s social and economic gains, Sullivan said, including “democracy, rights of women, and rights of minorities.” If the Taliban did not engage in “meaningful and sincere negotiations” in Doha, “they will bear the consequences of their choices.” He added that he did not mean this with “a view to escalate the conflict but to take a hard-nosed look at the situation.”

Sullivan inaugurated an interagency policy review at the National Security Council: briefings and debates that would inform Biden’s decision on Afghanistan. The U.S. troop presence had fallen to twenty-five hundred. Miller, the Resolute Support commander, felt strongly that Biden should keep these troops in place beyond the deadline, pessimistic about what would happen to the Afghan military if U.S. forces left. Much of the

discussion came down to whether it made sense to keep trying to forge a deal between the Taliban and the Islamic Republic, and, if so, for how long.

“Sir, we’re not for staying forever,” Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and Austin, the Defense Secretary, told Biden during the policy review. But they proposed extending the U.S. troop presence for up to a year, hoping to pressure the Taliban to take power-sharing negotiations more seriously. It was not clear why a short extension of the American deployment might facilitate talks that had repeatedly failed to advance. White House officials regarded the Pentagon’s scenario as just another way of recommending that the troops stay indefinitely. If the Taliban attacked *NATO*, Biden might have to commit more troops or order a withdrawal under pressure. The Pentagon proposals were set aside, and the discussion shifted to what would happen if the U.S. pulled out.

Meanwhile, at the Sharq, in Doha, the talks between Taliban envoys and Kabul’s team offered little evidence that any diplomatic breakthrough was possible. Ghani’s delegates lived at the resort and had few ties to Qatar. The Taliban envoys, who had homes in Doha, as well as families and businesses, generally turned up at the resort “every two or three days,” and then only at night, Sarabi, the delegate from Kabul, recalled. “The time management was not good.” In early January, the Taliban delegations did not even appear for talks as scheduled.

By now, many of the Kabul delegates had lost any remaining faith that they had in Khalilzad. Sarabi accused him of “taking the side of the Taliban.” She said it was “very clear” that Khalilzad “wanted the Taliban to be the head of the government” as part of a transitional, power-sharing arrangement, and that he wanted Ghani to leave office. Khalilzad did believe that Ghani would have to give up power for a transitional government to be formed, but he said that he “never, ever” supported putting a Taliban leader in charge. To some extent, he blamed the impasse on Ghani’s intransigence. Later, Khalilzad said that his biggest mistake was failing to put even more pressure on Ghani to compromise.

In early 2021, Khalilzad and Blinken came up with a work-around. They would jump-start an “accelerated” peace process that would set aside the negotiations in Doha in order to leap to a final power-sharing deal between

the Islamic Republic and the Taliban. Khalilzad helped write an eight-page draft of a so-called Afghanistan Peace Agreement, which was breathtakingly ambitious: it imagined a new constitution; a transitional government with an expanded parliament, to accommodate many Taliban members; reconstituted courts; a new body, the High Council for Islamic Jurisprudence; and a national ceasefire. He hoped that the Taliban and the Islamic Republic would agree to attend a peace summit in Turkey.

On March 22nd, Blinken met with *NATO* foreign ministers, who insisted that the U.S. should be doing more to try to forge a political settlement in Afghanistan. Blinken called Biden and said that he wanted to explore whether a troop withdrawal could be delayed until after the summit in Turkey, even though the Taliban had not yet agreed to participate. This would show *NATO* allies that the U.S. was listening, Blinken argued, but it would also mean breaking the Doha agreement.

Khalilzad met with the Taliban and argued that, if they wanted Afghanistan to enjoy international aid and recognition, they should accept a delay in the U.S. withdrawal so that a power-sharing agreement could be negotiated in Turkey. When Taliban negotiators observed that the Americans were talking about breaking the Doha accord, they did not directly threaten to renew attacks against U.S. and *NATO* forces. But they made clear that “bad things would happen,” a State Department official involved said.

On April 5th, Jon Finer, Biden’s deputy national-security adviser, called Mohib and said it was unlikely that the U.S. would withdraw from Afghanistan before May 1st. But any extension, he said, would be “for a limited time.” The White House continued to hope that talks with the Taliban might ease the transition. “It’s important that the Afghan government speak with one voice,” support the peace process “unambiguously,” and adopt a “constructive and mindful attitude” toward talks with the Taliban, Finer said. Mohib shared the news with Ghani: the American era in Afghanistan would end soon.



"Do you have an ant? He prefers ants."
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

Ghani and Mohib both assumed that Biden would schedule a withdrawal for after the summer fighting season, when winter snows would likely limit Taliban mobility. Nine days later, when Biden announced his decision, he described the Trump Administration's deal with the Taliban as "perhaps not what I would have negotiated myself," but proceeded to order a full withdrawal by September 11th. Ghani posted a statement on Twitter expressing "respect" for Biden's decision. "Afghanistan's proud security and defense forces are fully capable of defending its people and country," he wrote. Within days, the Taliban made clear that they would not participate in Khalilzad's peace summit in Turkey. The years-long diplomatic effort by the United States to broker peace between the Taliban and the Islamic Republic had failed.

For years, the Taliban had been operating shadow governments in various rural areas, but they had never conquered and held a sizable Afghan city. NATO and, later, the Afghan Air Force had a monopoly on air power. The Taliban had no warplanes and no effective high-altitude anti-aircraft missiles, although they could bring down helicopters and low-flying planes with smaller arms. Whenever the Taliban massed for a major assault, or on the few occasions when they temporarily seized a city, they were vulnerable to devastating air strikes. After 2018, when Miller took command of

Resolute Support, he had encouraged Ghani's forces to redouble the use of élite Special Forces backed by air power. By 2021, the Afghan Air Force had eight thousand personnel and more than a hundred and eighty aircraft.

After Biden's announcement, Miller began to pull U.S. soldiers from the country. As he did, the international contractors who maintained Afghanistan's helicopters and fighter planes departed, too. "The companies are not going to keep people there if they don't have blanket protection either from the U.S. or the *NATO* forces," Miller said.

This past May, Yasin Zia, the chief of Army staff and acting minister of defense, learned that Central Command, the U.S. headquarters in charge of the Afghan war, would attempt to provide aircraft "tele-maintenance" by video, on iPads, employing specialists in Qatar. "They said the mechanic from our side would sit in front of the Zoom and the person from Qatar would advise him to do this or do that," Zia recalled. Central Command also planned to open an aircraft-repair shop in the United Arab Emirates, about a thousand miles from Afghanistan, but Afghan helicopters could not fly that far, and Afghan airplanes had to traverse Pakistani airspace, requiring complicated negotiations with the Pakistani military. A senior State Department official involved said that by June "you could see there wasn't going to be anything there" to keep Afghan aircraft flying. Maintenance aside, the essential problem, according to a senior Defense Department official, was that "we were leaving." The entire Afghan military was designed to operate around U.S. systems and expertise, and when that was gone the Afghan forces unravelled.

In recent years, the Afghan military had inherited dozens of bases. According to Saleh, the First Vice-President, the bases were "defendable but not easy to supply." They were especially so as the Taliban captured more territory and closed off highways. That spring, Saleh wrote, in an e-mail, "There were days when I would get up to a thousand messages on my WhatsApp or phone from these besieged [bases] asking for help." Many stranded soldiers posted stories of desperation on social media. "The desertion rates increased up to seven hundred per day, due to hunger, thirst, lack of medivac, lack of logistics and air support," Saleh said.

In early July, Ghani and his advisers returned from their visit to Washington, where they had made a show of their fortitude and optimism. But, Mohib recalled, “we were quite desperate.” When the U.S. troop withdrawal had started, the Taliban controlled around eighty of Afghanistan’s approximately four hundred administrative districts, according to estimates by the Long War Journal. By July 10th, the Taliban controlled more than two hundred. They quickly seized border crossings leading to Iran and Pakistan, and with them lucrative customs revenue. Then they choked off major cities and conquered new districts close to Kabul. “We couldn’t control the flow of it, and we weren’t entirely sure what the Americans could or could not provide,” Mohib said. “And the collapse started very quickly.”

On July 23rd, Biden called Ghani. “I need not tell you the perception around the world, and in parts of Afghanistan, I believe, is that things are not going well in terms of the fight against the Taliban,” he said. American generals had been trying to persuade Ghani to devise a new military plan that concentrated airpower on the defense of major population centers, such as Kabul. Biden proposed that Ghani hold a press conference the following week with well-known Afghan politicians, including Abdullah, Dostum, Karzai, and Mohammad Mohaqiq, a leader of Afghanistan’s Hazara minority. Biden envisaged “all of you standing together” with Bismillah Khan, the minister of defense, “backing up this new strategy” to defend Kabul and major cities.

“I’m not a military guy,” Biden continued, “so I’m not telling you what a plan should precisely look like,” but, if Ghani agreed to this idea, “you’re going to get not only more help” from the U.S. military but foster a change in perception. “We will continue to provide close air support, if we know what the plan is and what we are doing,” Biden added.

Ghani said that he would hold the press conference, but that his forces needed more American planes to conduct air strikes on the Taliban: “What is crucial is close air support.”

“Look, close air support works only if there is a military strategy on the ground to support,” Biden replied. He said that he would have one of his top generals call Ghani immediately, to synchronize military plans.

Two days later, the Pentagon announced that it had begun to carry out intensified air strikes against the Taliban, which would continue in the “coming weeks.” Ghani staged an appearance with political leaders and travelled to provinces and military bases to rally the armed forces. On August 2nd, as he presented his government’s new military strategy to parliament, he lashed out at the Biden Administration. “The reason for our current situation is that the decision was taken abruptly,” he said. Still, he forecast that his government would have matters “under control within six months.”

Ghani decided to travel to Tehran to attend the inauguration of Ebrahim Raisi, the new Iranian President, on August 5th. For some years, Ghani had been negotiating a security and economic agreement with Iran. Before he departed, he talked with Blinken. They spent the first ten or fifteen minutes reviewing the potential consequences for U.S. foreign policy of an agreement between Kabul and Tehran. Blinken warned Ghani, “If U.S. laws are violated, that would jeopardize our support.” The discussion presumed the Islamic Republic’s prolonged existence.

When they turned to the war, Ghani launched into a soliloquy about American mistakes, particularly the long pursuit of negotiations with the Taliban. Ghani’s negotiators in Doha had informed him, he told Blinken, that “all the Taliban want is military victory. With enormous respect, our international colleagues have misread the intentions and character of the Taliban. . . . The current posture of the Taliban is ‘Submit, submit, submit.’ . . . Do your colleagues and your staff have any other sense?”

Blinken said that there still might be a way for Ghani to find a deal “without compromising yourself.” Khalilzad was working on a new proposal: a one-month ceasefire in exchange for both sides releasing three thousand prisoners. Ghani rejected this outright. If he released thousands more Taliban prisoners, “the country will break. . . . Our security forces will not fight ever again.”

On August 6th, the Taliban captured Zaranj, in Nimruz Province, in the south, the first provincial capital to fall. The next day, the U.S. Embassy urged all American citizens to leave Afghanistan. Ghani’s office continued to post progress reports on social media about Afghanistan’s modernization

drive. The press releases conveyed more than a whiff of unreality. “Maybe it was a coping mechanism,” Akbar, the chair of the human-rights commission, said, but the daily pretense of normalcy “just seemed like a parallel universe.” On August 10th, Ghani’s official Facebook page announced new infrastructure projects, including one in the northern city of Kunduz, where the Taliban flag now flew.

When the Taliban conquered Afghanistan during the mid-nineteen-nineties, they sometimes seized Afghan cities with minimal fighting, accepting the surrender of enemies without inflicting immediate reprisals. Quick, bloodless changes of power were a recurring pattern in the Afghan civil war, reflecting combatants’ sense of kinship, even amid merciless violence. Surrender, parole, and temporary local truces were established practices, alongside revenge killings and summary executions. Last summer, Bismillah Khan reported that the Taliban were offering Islamic Republic soldiers money, and a letter of passage, to protect them from harassment after they surrendered and went home. By August, “money was changing hands at a rapid rate,” a senior British military officer said, with Afghan security forces getting “bought off by the Taliban.”

For weeks, the U.S. and its European allies had tried to avoid evacuating their personnel or Afghans who worked for them, for fear that this would look like a rush to the exits, but by early August the British military had evacuated an Afghan intelligence outfit that intercepted communications by the Taliban. Provincial capitals now toppled one after another; on August 12th, Ghazni fell. That evening, Blinken and Lloyd Austin, Biden’s Secretary of Defense, called Ghani to inform him that three thousand U.S. troops would fly in to seize the Kabul airport. The troops were not being sent to defend Kabul against a Taliban assault; they were meant to protect evacuating American personnel. The next day, the Taliban took the major cities of Kandahar and Herat. Dostum, under siege, left the country for Uzbekistan, as did Ata Mohammad Noor, another powerful and independent leader in the north.

Khalilzad and his team, still grasping at a deal that might halt a Taliban assault on Kabul, asked Ghani to appoint a delegation led by Abdullah and Karzai that would fly to Doha and work out an orderly transition with Baradar and his colleagues. The idea was that Ghani would accept whatever

this delegation negotiated—including his own departure from office. Ghani said that he was willing to give up power, but only if there were elections to identify his long-term successor. The Americans dismissed this as wildly unrealistic. On Saturday, August 14th, amid reports that Taliban units were already inside Kabul, Ghani dropped his demand. Now he simply hoped for an orderly transfer of power endorsed by a *loya jirga*.

He told Blinken that he was ready to accept whatever his envoys and the Biden Administration agreed on with the Taliban. Blinken asked him to “get the delegation to Doha” as quickly as possible, “to show the Taliban this is a serious process. We need a ceasefire to process this.”

“Please lean as much as you can on a dignified process,” Ghani said. He remained adamant that any transfer of power should be endorsed by the Afghan assembly. “Please convey to the Taliban that this is not a surrender.”

“Dignified is exactly what we want as well,” Blinken said.

Ghani told him that if the Taliban rejected this last effort to bring about an orderly transition, or did not negotiate in good faith, “I will fight to the death.” He appointed the delegation that Blinken had requested—thirteen people, including a son of Dostum, and Karzai, Abdullah, and Mohib—and announced that they would decide the Islamic Republic’s fate in discussions with the Taliban. Ghani told Mohib that, with this decision, he felt the Islamic Republic had all but ceased to exist.

In the world’s failed states, Ghani wrote, in a book published in 2008, “vicious networks of criminality, violence and drugs feed on disenfranchised populations and uncontrolled territory.” That problem lies “at the heart of a worldwide systemic crisis.” Afghanistan was poor but stable and peaceful for much of the twentieth century, until the Soviet invasion of 1979, which ignited forty-two years of continual warfare, much of it caused by outside powers. Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the U.S. funded and armed Afghan extremists fighting the Soviet occupation of the eighties. Pakistan armed and funded the Taliban’s rise to power during the mid-nineties. The U.S.-led invasion after 9/11 empowered corrupt warlords around Afghanistan in the name of counterterrorism and, after the Taliban’s fall, failed to prevent Pakistan from fostering the movement’s revival. By the time Ghani became

President, in 2014, the resurgent guerrillas had enjoyed a decade of sanctuary and covert aid from Pakistan’s Army and intelligence service, and they had badly shaken the Islamic Republic’s capacity to govern and defend itself. In the U.S. and Europe, public opinion had soured on the war, leading to reductions of troops and aid. For all of Ghani’s efforts to bolster Afghanistan’s young democracy, it was never likely that he would overcome this history, certainly not after 2017, when the Islamic Republic had to cope with the reckless decisions of Donald Trump.

Ghani’s last decision as President, to leave his country, is difficult to fully assess. Last August, a former Afghan Ambassador to Tajikistan accused Ghani of stealing more than a hundred and fifty million dollars while fleeing Afghanistan, although the Ambassador offered no evidence to back up his claim. Ghani has described these allegations as “completely and categorically false.” In the U.S., the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction has opened an inquiry, but the accusations remain a mystery.

It was in late July that Ghani and Mohib first discussed the possibility that they would be forced to flee. One of Ghani’s priorities was to remove his book collection from harm’s way. His preference was to retreat from the capital to eastern Afghanistan, where he had political and military allies. Mohib thought that if it became necessary to go abroad Tajikistan and Uzbekistan seemed the most plausible initial destinations, since both could be reached in a single flight aboard one of the Afghan President’s four Mi-17 helicopters. In August, Mohib asked Qahar Kochai, the director of the Afghan President Protective Service, to develop an emergency plan along these lines. But as the Taliban arrived at the outskirts of Kabul and the U.S. accelerated its evacuation of American and Afghan allies, Mohib didn’t know whether he and Ghani figured in Washington’s evacuation.

On the fourteenth, Mohib learned that one of his colleagues at the Presidential palace was on a list of at-risk Afghans approved by the U.S. Embassy for evacuation. That afternoon, Mohib spoke by phone with a contact at the State Department. During a discussion about peace talks, Mohib paused to ask, “Is there an evacuation plan for us, for me and Ghani?” The official asked for something in writing.



"Aren't you overdoing the chiaroscuro over there?"
Cartoon by Mick Stevens

"I would like to request that I and PG be included in your evacuation plan in case the political settlement doesn't work," Mohib texted, referring to President Ghani.

"Received."

The indefiniteness of the exchange unsettled Mohib. "I thought, My partners are not going to rescue us," he recalled. He contacted a senior official in the United Arab Emirates, who assured him that the U.A.E. would provide for Ghani and his top aides. He said that the kingdom would dispatch an executive jet to Kabul on Monday the sixteenth, and that the plane would stand by at the airport, with pilots ready to fly on short notice.

Mohib belonged to a Signal group chat that included some of the country's top intelligence and security officials. On the night of the fourteenth, bad news poured across the channel. Nangarhar had fallen to the Taliban, as had several other provinces. On Sunday morning, the fifteenth, Mohib walked from his official residence to Ghani's office, for their daily staff meeting, at nine o'clock. The channel now reported that members of the Taliban had reached Kabul. The gunmen might be local Taliban who had decided to show themselves, they might be criminals posing as Taliban, or they might be the vanguard of an invasion force. There were also many reports that

Kabul policemen, soldiers, and guards were taking off their uniforms and going home.

In Doha that morning, Khalilzad recalled, he met Baradar at the Ritz-Carlton. During their discussion, Baradar “agreed that they will not enter Kabul” and would withdraw what Baradar described as “some hundreds” of Taliban who had already entered the capital. Based on Ghani’s concessions the previous day, Khalilzad hoped to arrange a two-week ceasefire and an orderly transfer of power in Kabul, to be sanctified by a “mini *loya jirga*.” Khalilzad was in WhatsApp contact with Abdul Salam Rahimi, an aide to Ghani, and informed Rahimi of this plan. Rahimi told Ghani that the Taliban had pledged not to enter Kabul. Yet this was based on assurances from Khalilzad and the Taliban, and Ghani regarded both as unreliable sources.

The Arg palace and the U.S. Embassy were in Kabul’s so-called Green Zone, protected by blast walls and armed guards. Resolute Support monitored the streets from a surveillance blimp equipped with high-resolution cameras. At around nine that morning, Ross Wilson, the U.S. chargé d’affaires in Kabul, concluded from a variety of reports that so many police and guards had abandoned their posts that the Green Zone’s web of security on the streets had effectively collapsed. He consulted with Washington and ordered the immediate evacuation to the Kabul airport of all remaining U.S. personnel at the Embassy compound. To protect against leaks that might reach the Taliban or the Islamic State, Wilson did not inform Ghani that the Green Zone was no longer safe or of the decision to vacate the Embassy. Defense Department officials maintained a list of Afghan generals and high-ranking defense officials who would be evacuated from the country if necessary, but the Pentagon regarded Ghani’s possible evacuation as an issue for the State Department. According to State officials, the matter was never formally considered.

August 15th was a hot morning. At around eleven, Mohib joined the President and a diplomat from the U.A.E. at an outdoor meeting area, on a lawn beside the President’s office. As they discussed their possible evacuation plan, they could see a swarm of American Chinook and Black Hawk helicopters on the horizon, their motors thumping in the distance like muffled drums. Then they heard gunshots coming from somewhere outside the palace grounds. Ghani’s bodyguards hustled him inside.

At noon, Mohib joined Ghani in his library. They agreed that Rula, Ghani's wife, and nonessential staff should leave for the U.A.E. as soon as possible. Mohib's U.A.E. contacts offered seats on an Emirates Airlines flight scheduled to depart Kabul at four that afternoon. Ghani asked Mohib to escort Rula to Dubai, then join the negotiating team in Doha, to finalize talks with Khalilzad and Baradar about the handover of Kabul.

At roughly one o'clock, Mohib received a text message that Khalil Haqqani, a leader of the Taliban faction named for his family, wished to speak with him. He took a call from a Pakistani number. Haqqani's message, Mohib recalled, was, essentially, "Surrender." He said that they could meet after Mohib issued an appropriate statement. When Mohib proposed that they negotiate first, Haqqani repeated himself and hung up. Mohib called Tom West, a deputy to Khalilzad in Doha, to inform him of the call. West told him not to go to any meeting because it might be a trap.

Mohib returned to Ghani's residence at around two. He escorted Rula in a motorcade to a helipad behind the Dilkusha palace. They were to fly to Hamid Karzai International Airport, to make the Emirates flight. Three of the President's Mi-17s were now at the Arg; the fourth was at the airport. He learned that the pilots had fully fuelled the helicopters because they wanted to fly directly to Tajikistan or Uzbekistan, as soon as possible, as other Afghan military pilots seeking refuge had done in recent days. The pilots did not want to hop over to the airport with Rula, because they had received reports that rogue Afghan soldiers were seizing or grounding helicopters there. Kochai, the head of the Presidential guard, approached Mohib.

"If you leave, you will be endangering the President's life," he said.

"Do you want me to stay?" Mohib asked.

"No, I want you to take the President with you."

Mohib doubted that all of Ghani's bodyguards would remain loyal if the Taliban entered the palace grounds, and Kochai indicated that he did not have the means to protect the President. Mohib helped Rula onto the President's helicopter and asked her to wait. With Kochai, he drove back to the residence.

He found Ghani standing inside and took his hand. “Mr. President, it’s time,” Mohib said. “We must go.”

Ghani wanted to go upstairs to collect some belongings, but Mohib worried that every minute they delayed they risked touching off a panic and a revolt by armed guards. Ghani climbed into a car, without so much as his passport.

At the helipad, staff and bodyguards scuffled and shouted over who would fly. The pilots said that each helicopter could carry only six passengers. Along with Ghani, Rula, and Mohib, nine other officials squeezed aboard, as did members of Ghani’s security detail. Dozens of other Arg palace staffers—including Rahimi, who was still talking with Khalilzad about a ceasefire, and had no idea where Ghani or Mohib had gone—were left behind.

At about two-thirty, the pilots started the engines. The three Mi-17s lifted slowly above the gardens of the palace, banked north, and flew over Kabul’s rooftops toward the Salang Pass and, beyond that, to the Amu Darya River and Uzbekistan. ♦

(This is the first story in a two-part series.)

New Yorker Favorites

- How we became infected by [chain e-mail](#).
- [Twelve classic movies](#) to watch with your kids.
- The [secret lives of fungi](#).
- The photographer who claimed to capture the [ghost of Abraham Lincoln](#).
- Why are Americans still [uncomfortable with atheism](#)?
- The enduring romance of the [night train](#).
- Sign up for our daily [newsletter](#) to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.

App推荐-英阅阅读器

- [安利一个英语专用阅读器](#)

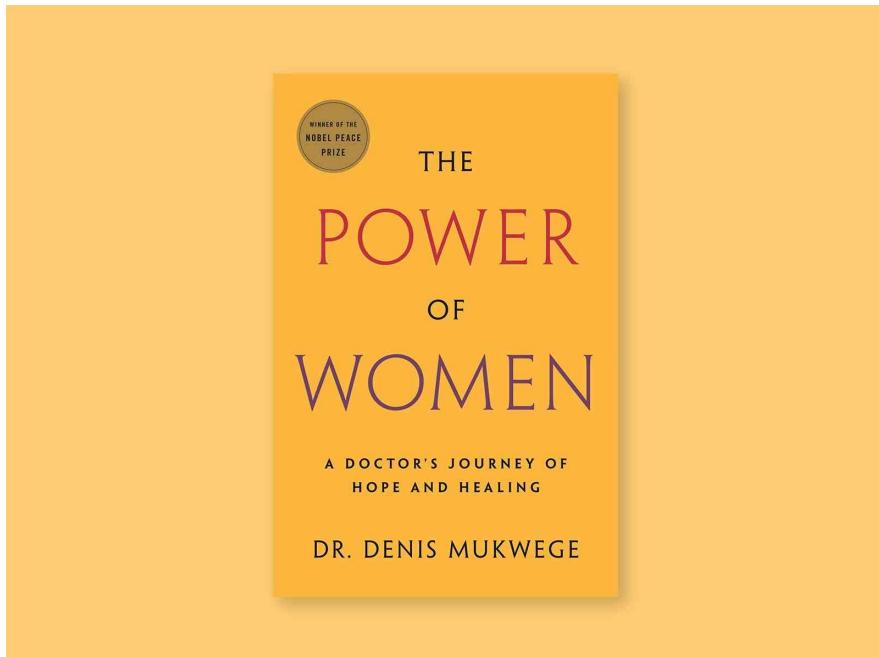


1. 可阅读海量英文原著、经济学人等英文杂志
 2. 支持四、六级、考研、专四、专八等词汇分析
 3. 支持mdx字典以及css样式
 4. 笔记功能包含单词所在原文句子，支持笔记导出
-
1. 可阅读海量英文原著、英文杂志(经济学人、纽约客等), 支持自定义OPDS书库;
 2. 单击可查询单词释义、句子翻译, 高效、便捷;
 3. 支持四、六级、考研、专四、专八等词汇透析;
 4. 支持新牛津、柯林斯等英汉-英英MDict字典;
 5. 支持划线、高亮笔记、笔记导出;
 6. iOS、Android客户端全支持。

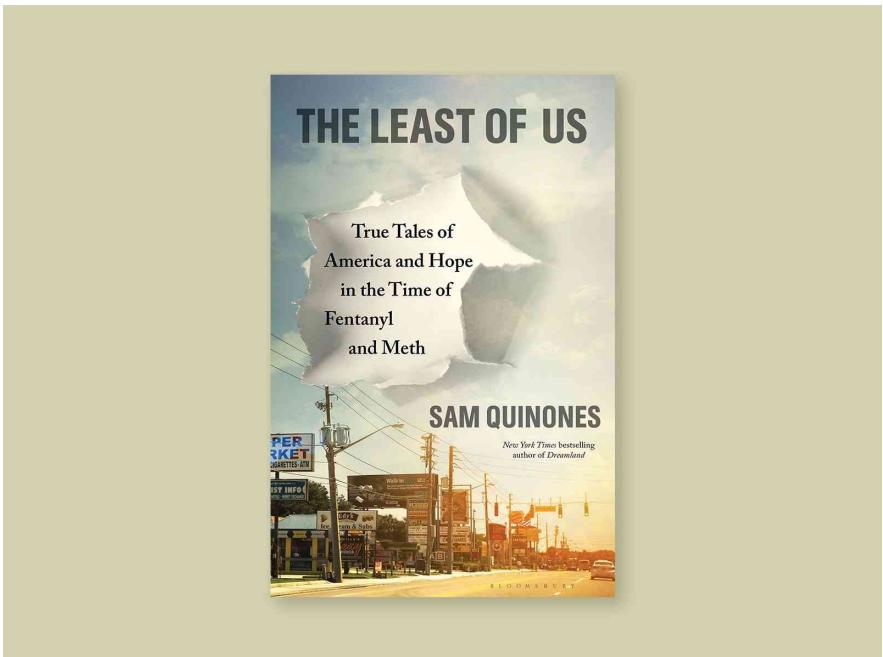
[点击进入英阅阅读器官网](#)

Books

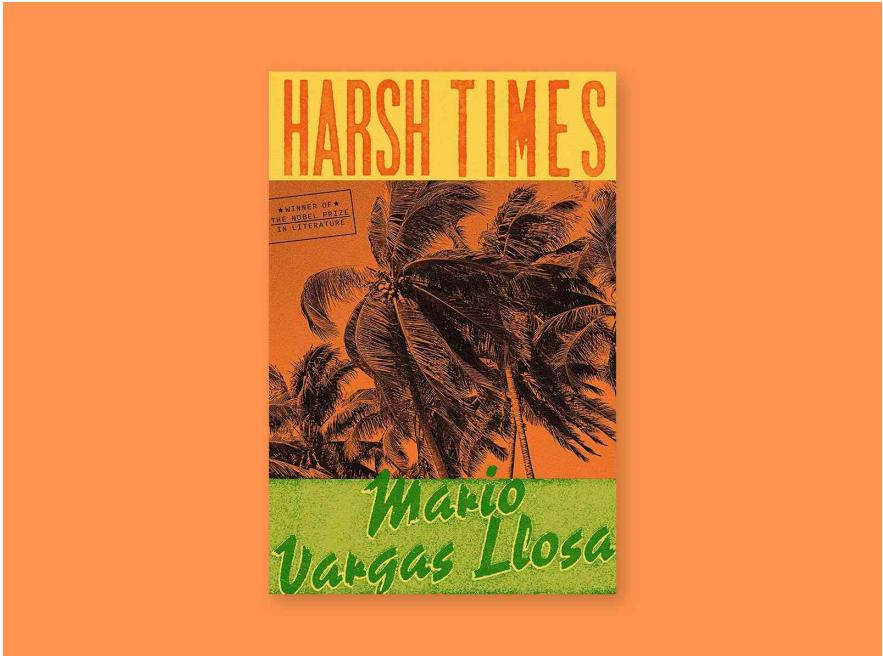
- Briefly Noted



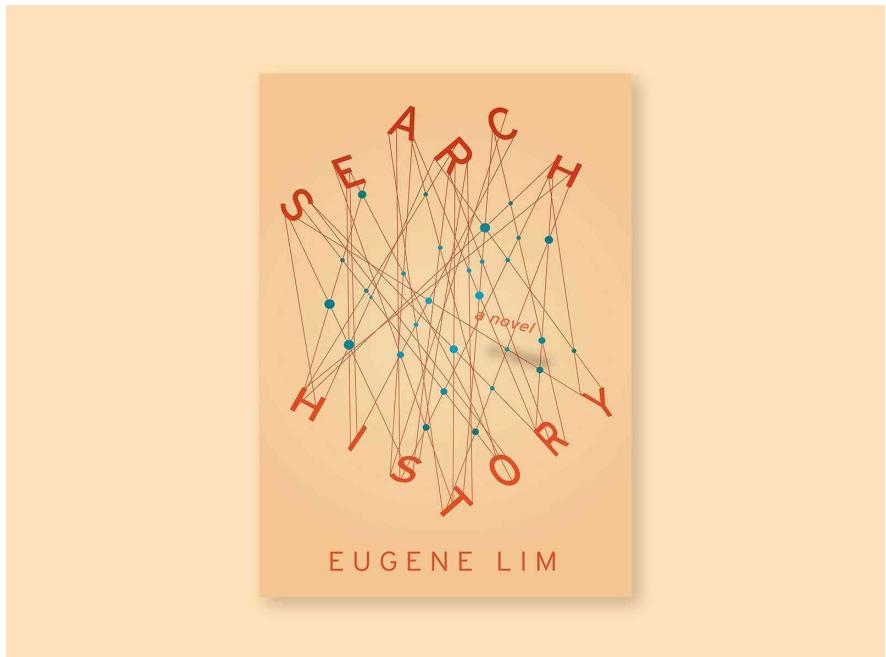
The Power of Women, by *Denis Mukwege* (Flatiron). In the past twenty-five years, conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo have created an epidemic of sexual violence. In 1999, the author, who trained as a gynecological surgeon, founded the Panzi Hospital, in one of the country's most troubled areas; since then, the facility has treated the rape injuries of sixty thousand women. Mukwege, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2018, recounts his story and offers resonant portraits of the women who have most affected him. One of them is Wamuzila, a teen-ager who was kidnapped by a militia, forced into sex slavery, and then abandoned in the rain forest, before arriving at the Panzi clinic. Her experience was one among many that inspired Mukwege's campaign for gender equality and nonviolence.



The Least of Us, by Sam Quinones (Bloomsbury). This layered chronicle traces how methamphetamine and fentanyl became scourges of American life. Beginning in the nineteen-nineties, doctors and drugmakers overprescribed and oversold opioids, creating a population primed for addiction; later, these people would turn to stronger, deadlier substances. Quinones places the narrative in a range of illuminating contexts, including the brain chemistry of addiction; how an overdose in Akron, Ohio, led investigators to dealers based in China; and the decline of America's deindustrializing towns and cities. He also finds moments of resilience, in which families, local governments, and former addicts overcome stigmas to support people in recovery.



Harsh Times, by *Mario Vargas Llosa*, translated from the Spanish by *Adrian Nathan West* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). The Nobel-winning Peruvian writer's latest novel is a partly fictionalized retelling of the overthrow of the Guatemalan President Jacobo Árbenz, who wanted the United Fruit Company to pay taxes and respect labor laws. The anti-government agitators use such weapons as public relations and C.I.A. connections, and spend the rest of their time getting drunk at brothels and chasing one another's wives. Their machinations are complemented by invented family scandals. "If you want me to tell you the truth," one character, bedridden with cancer, says to a visiting friend-cum-rival, "I couldn't give less of a damn about politics. I was just trying to provoke you."



Search History, by *Eugene Lim (Coffee House)*. An unnamed narrator goes looking for a friend who has been reincarnated as a dog in this humorous philosophical novel, which entertains questions about the nature of narrative and the aesthetic implications of technology. Subversions of the conventional structure of the novel abound. One character builds a neural net that will produce award-winning books; another notes that, as “narrative animals,” humans are “oriented toward the sharp turns, the plot twists. . . . And yet most of life is the drift itself, as when a rock glides over a frozen lake.” As the book toggles between the narrator’s autobiography, a meandering quest for the friend, and conversations among the search party about grief, selfhood, and Asian American authorship, Lim evokes the disorienting idiosyncrasy of an Internet search history.

Comment

- [What Has Omicron Changed?](#)

By [Dhruv Khullar](#)

The *COVID-19* pandemic, like every pandemic before it, is a story of equilibriums: between viral biology and human immune response; between news of the pathogen and fear of it; between the damage it inflicts and the social, economic, and political choices we make. A disease persists as a pandemic as long as these forces remain in flux; it becomes endemic when the balance is, more or less, set. The morning after Thanksgiving, Americans awoke to an unsettling revelation: Omicron, a highly mutated version of the coronavirus, with an unprecedented number of genetic changes, had been detected in southern Africa. Since then, it has appeared in dozens of countries across six continents and in at least twenty-two states. Our equilibrium has shifted again. But what, exactly, has changed?

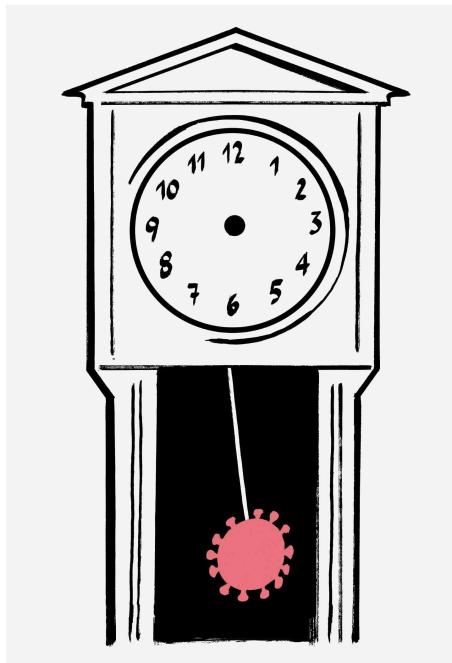


Illustration by João Fazenda

An early sketch of the Omicron variant is coming into focus. It is, almost certainly, more transmissible than the Delta variant, which itself spreads more than twice as fast as the original strain. In mid-November, South Africa recorded an average of three hundred coronavirus cases a day; only about two per cent of tests returned positive. The country now routinely logs fifteen thousand cases a day, and the test-positivity rate has soared more than tenfold. But Omicron hasn't overwhelmed the South African health-care system, even in Gauteng Province, where it first started to spread.

Earlier this month, doctors at the Steve Biko/Tshwane District Hospital Complex, a major medical center in Pretoria, released a report describing the clinical condition of *COVID* patients admitted during the current surge. On December 2nd, there were forty-two patients, of whom just fourteen required supportive oxygen (and not all necessarily because of the virus), and only one was admitted to the I.C.U. In recent weeks, the average length of hospitalization was three days, compared with about nine in the past; the mortality rate has been roughly a third of what it was. “I’ve never seen this picture before,” Fareed Abdullah, the report’s lead author, said. “At this stage of the beginning of the fourth wave, the main presentation is incidental *COVID*”—patients who came in for other reasons and happened to be carrying the virus.

Although these findings are encouraging, it’s important not to place too much stock in them. Most recent patients at the Tshwane District Hospital have been under the age of fifty—a group with a relatively low risk for severe illness, and, in South Africa, a very low immunization rate. It’s also possible that some of Omicron’s perceived “mildness” is a reflection of its immune-evasiveness: early evidence suggests that it may be nearly three times as likely as other variants to cause repeat infections. If Omicron leads to milder symptoms in people who haven’t previously been infected or vaccinated, that would be reason for comfort; if, instead, it produces illness requiring hospitalization in those who’ve survived a prior infection, that’s cause for concern.

Yet, even if Omicron does inflict less severe disease, we’re still left with a complicated picture. The damage a virus causes is the product of its virulence and its transmissibility: a small reduction in the former coupled with a sharp rise in the latter can be more devastating than the reverse. (The *COVID-19* pandemic, compared with the *SARS* or *MERS* outbreak, is itself an example of such a phenomenon.) Omicron’s contagiousness could mean that it homes in on vulnerable people—the elderly, the immunocompromised, the unvaccinated—and unleashes a fresh round of misery. On the other hand, a very mild, hyper-contagious variant—the most hopeful, perhaps unrealistic scenario—might be a good thing: huge swaths of people would develop some level of immunity while facing a low risk of serious illness.

The Biden Administration has introduced several efforts designed to place the nation on a surer footing this winter. It has implemented restrictions on travel from a number of countries in southern Africa—which may allow a few extra days or weeks to prepare—and will require all international travellers to present proof of a negative test taken within a day of departing for the United States. It has also extended mask mandates on buses, trains, and planes, which were due to expire in January, and plans to set up hundreds of additional vaccination sites around the country. In the meantime, the U.S. has purchased millions of courses of antiviral pills from Merck and Pfizer; the Food and Drug Administration is expected to authorize their use later this month. The F.D.A. has also indicated that it will fast-track the authorization of Omicron-specific vaccines, which could be ready in March.

By then, however, Omicron will, in all likelihood, have displaced Delta as the dominant variant in much of the world, including here, and a central concern has been that its abundant mutations will render current vaccines ineffective. Indeed, some studies suggest that two doses of the Pfizer vaccine produce dramatically fewer antibodies against Omicron than they did against previous variants. But antibodies are only one part of the immune system. They specialize in preventing infection, while T cells, which appear undiminished in the face of Omicron, focus on terminating it. This could mean that, though Omicron may cause many more breakthrough infections, vaccines will still help our immune systems avert serious illness. (Breakthrough infections were already on the rise, but, for the most part, they remain comparatively mild.)

And that's before a booster shot. Last week, Pfizer announced that a third shot of its vaccine produces a level of protection against Omicron comparable to that against previous variants. This finding is consistent with a study from South Africa, which found that the antibodies of people who'd been fully vaccinated *and* had a prior infection remained robust against the new variant. Being “fully vaccinated” may now require two shots plus a booster. It’s regrettable, then, that while the emergence of Omicron has sparked a surge in vaccinations in this country, just sixty per cent of Americans are immunized, and only a quarter of adults have received a booster.

Omicron is poised to take off just as the nation confronts a new Delta wave. More than fifty-five thousand people are currently hospitalized with *COVID-19*, and there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand recorded new cases a day—both substantial increases since Thanksgiving. The federal government is sending health-care workers to support overwhelmed hospitals in Michigan; the governors of Maine and New York have deployed the National Guard to provide assistance. There may still be time to shift the new equilibrium in our favor—to compress the pandemic and start the endemic. But that time is running out. ♦

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Monday, December 13, 2021](#)

By [Kameron Austin Collins](#)

Dept. of Technology

- Can “Distraction-Free” Devices Change the Way We Write?

The digital age enabled productivity but invited procrastination. Now writers are rebelling against their word processors.

By [Julian Lucas](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

For a long time, I believed that my only hope of becoming a professional writer was to find the perfect tool. A few months into my career as a book critic, I'd already run up against the limits of my productivity, and, like many others before me, I pinned the blame on Microsoft Word. Each time I opened a draft, I seemed to lose my bearings, scrolling from top to bottom and alighting on far-flung sentences at random. I found and replaced, wrote and rewrote; the program made fiddling easy and finishing next to impossible.

I'd fallen into the trap that the philosopher Jacques Derrida identified in an interview from the mid-nineties. "With the computer, everything is rapid and so easy," he complained. "An interminable revision, an infinite analysis is already on the horizon." Derrida hadn't even contended with the sirens of online life, which were driving writer friends to buy disconnected laptops or to quarantine their smartphones in storage bins with timed locks. Zadie Smith touted Freedom, a subscription service that cut off the user's devices —a chastity belt for procrastinators.

I tried "distraction-free" writing apps that encouraged mindfulness, disabled the backspace key, or, in a few extreme cases, threatened to delete everything if I took my hands off the keyboard (Write or Die). Later, I tried coding my own writing tools, a hobby as rewarding as it was ineffective. The experiments gradually meshed into a literary Rube Goldberg machine, a teetering assemblage of Scriveners and SimpleTexts that left me perpetually uncertain of which thought I'd written down where. Longhand was a luxury I couldn't afford: Wendell Berry boasted in *Harper's* that he didn't need a computer, because he had a wife, but I was a mere urban freelancer, whose boyfriend had a job. So I continued the search for word processing's Excalibur, a perfect union of consciousness and composition.

Then, in the late twenty-teens, focussed writing tools started cropping up everywhere. Distraction-free text editors stormed the productivity section of the Apple Store. The *Times* recommended a Tom Hanks-sponsored typewriter simulation for National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo). A Detroit company Kickstarted a “smart” typewriter that cost more than five hundred dollars. The movement seemed to crest in the first months of the pandemic, as writers newly intimate with the routines of spouses and roommates—or with their own restlessness—sought peace with newfound desperation. I was suddenly deluged with ads for “the world’s thinnest tablet,” which promised not only to replace pen and paper but to help you “Get Your Brain Back.” The company’s Lovecraftian promotional ad, which has racked up nearly three million views, begins with a hissing demon-child clinging to her iPad and proceeds through an animated hellscape complete with attention-sucking brain tubes and notifications circling like sharks. The narrator quavers an ominous warning: “We have to modify technology, or else it will modify us.”

The tools of writing have seldom been designed with writers in mind. Most early cuneiform inscriptions were works of accounting, not poetry; a few millennia later, typewriters sprang to success largely as aids to clerical work. Even so, new inventions have always influenced literary production, as Friedrich Nietzsche, who struggled with a semi-spherical typewriter, once lyrically observed: “The writing ball is a thing like me: made of / iron / yet easily twisted on journeys.” Few advances have twisted us more than word processing. Matthew Kirschenbaum’s “[Track Changes](#)” (2016), a study of the technology’s advent, notes that the first mass-market writing software promised to emancipate writers from the inconveniences of revision: cutting and pasting with scissors, retyping drafts to fix typos, and losing entire manuscripts in the mail. “Writing on glass” swept America between the late nineteen-seventies, when personal computers first became widely available, and the mid-eighties, when writing with them became the norm. Kirschenbaum uses Stephen King’s fiction to dramatize the transition. Where King’s novel “[The Shining](#)” (1977) linked killing sprees to typewriter drudgery, his story “[Word Processor of the Gods](#)” (1983) featured an author made omnipotent by software, which he uses to delete his bingo-addicted wife.

The magic faded with the universal adoption of word processing, especially after the “word wars” of the early nineties, when Microsoft Word, having shoved aside WordStar and WordPerfect to attain a ninety-per-cent share of the market, was, as Kirschenbaum writes, “fully naturalized as the No. 2 pencil of the digital age.” Google Docs has since challenged its dominance, but the consolidation of writing technology has only continued. These days, we don’t just write, revise, and lay out our work in one program; if so inclined, we can go all the way from gathering research to monitoring reception without leaving our browsers. (Medium, a writing app that is also a publishing platform and a social-media network, represents the logical extreme of this vertical integration.) Some thrive on the streaming of a previously sequential process; for others, it’s like being forced to write with an Instant Pot. Could the new wave of Zen editors and e-ink tablets, tempering tech solutionism with analog nostalgia, reverse this trajectory—and give writers a dedicated device of our own?

My first experiment with focussed writing was iA Writer, a minimalist word processor designed by the Swiss-Japanese firm Information Architects. I bought it in 2014, when I was starting research for a college thesis in literature, supervised by a charismatic graduate student with perfect handwriting who warned me that I spent too much time revising my work. He encouraged me to start writing each day without looking at what I’d written the day before—advice I followed about as effectively as Lot’s wife. If I was ever going to stop rewriting opening paragraphs, it would take more than a commandment.

The main feature of iA Writer is not having many features. The program is, essentially, a white rectangle, where the user can do little else but type in a custom monospaced font. There are no headers, footers, drawing tools, or chatty paper-clip assistants. The bare-bones interface uses special characters in a simple formatting language called Markdown to bold, italicize, or otherwise transform text—a way of encouraging writers to keep their hands on the keyboard and their minds on their work.

The app’s key innovation is “focus mode,” an option that vertically centers the sentence or paragraph being written and grays out everything else. The feature sounded silly when I described it to friends—like horse blinders for writers. Soon after installing it, though, I became an evangelist. My anxieties

about how much had yet to be written, cut, revised, or restructured evaporated with everything else that wasn't the sentence onscreen. The program's mobile version, which synched files over the cloud, allowed me to write anywhere—bathrooms, crowded subway cars—with meditative ease, as though I were carrying a small study in my pocket. The impact was as much emotional as functional. With its otherworldly blankness, iA Writer created the illusion of leaving life's mess for an ideal realm of words.

“Plato says that philosophy starts with wondering,” Oliver Reichenstein, the Swiss developer who created iA Writer, told me during a recent Zoom. “And I was wondering, Why is Microsoft Word as it is? And why does it feel so bad?” Reichenstein first had the idea for a focussed word processor in the early nineties, while teaching high-school composition to earn extra money as a graduate student in Basel. He noticed that his students were distracted by the fonts, macros, and superfluous menus in Word; at the same time, he was struggling with the suffocatingly dense layout of his philosophy texts. He began to study typography, then quit Switzerland for Tokyo. In 2005, he founded Information Architects, where he advised media companies on their Web sites—his clients included Wikipedia and Condé Nast—before releasing iA Writer, in 2010.

“I just wanted to have a writing app that did one thing right, and that’s writing,” Reichenstein told me. “I didn’t care if anyone was interested or not in buying it—I just felt it was needed.” He drew inspiration from mechanical typewriters, especially for the app’s focus mode and signature font. While most books are typeset using proportionate typography, allotting each character space in accordance with its width, monospaced fonts give each character, whether a lowly period or an initial capital, an equal span. “When you write in a monospaced font, you get a feeling of moving forward,” Reichenstein said. “Even if you don’t click away like crazy, you feel that your text is growing.” His biggest priority, though, was eliminating the agony of choice, the paralysis of “Preferences.” In an early promotional video, a space invader attacks Microsoft Word, strafing icons and toolbars until only a white rectangle with a blinking blue caret remains.

The app was surprisingly successful, landing a coveted spot as an “Editor’s Pick” at the Apple Store. Though some users demanded more features, Reichenstein confidently ignored them; in the world of distraction-free

writing, the customer is most certainly not always right. Today, iA Writer has more than half a million active users, mostly designers, programmers, and journalists. It has also spawned numerous copycats and competitors, from blatant ripoffs like iWriter to more fully featured Markdown editors like Ulysses and Bear. The ultimate compliment was Microsoft’s rollout, in 2011, of a “focus mode” for Word, which Reichenstein dismisses as “hilarious”; its only improvement, he said, is to “put away all the toolbars.” The feature vanishes with a touch of the Escape key.

Other rivals attempt not only to eliminate distraction but to reënchant digital writing, dispelling the workaday atmosphere of the digital cubicle. OmmWriter, a “mindful” writing app with lo-fi music and gauzy background visuals, attempts to lull the writer into a creative flow—an experience akin to being trapped inside an inspirational quote. A more rugged alternative is the Tom Hanks-sponsored Hanx Writer, a skeuomorphic indulgence that displays the smartphone keyboard as a vintage typewriter, complete with carriage-return bells. Neither offers much more than a change in atmosphere, but sometimes vibes are enough: here are apps that nobody would use to prepare a memo or an invoice.

But focus mode on an everything device is a meditation room in a casino. What good is it to separate writing from editing, formatting, and cluttered interfaces if you can’t separate it from the Internet? Even a disconnected computer offers plenty of opportunities for distraction: old photographs, downloaded music, or, most treacherous of all, one’s own research. And so, just as savvy entrepreneurs have resuscitated the “dumb” phone as a premium single-tasking communication device, it was perhaps inevitable that someone would revive the stand-alone word processor.

Released in 2016, the Freewrite Smart Typewriter is a hefty little lunchbox of a machine with a noisy mechanical keyboard and an e-ink display the size of an index card. The user can type and backspace but not much else, and, with the default settings, only ten lines of text are visible at a time. (Even Vladimir Nabokov, who studied butterfly genitalia under a microscope, was less zoomed-in; the famous index cards he used to write *“Lolita”* had fourteen lines each.) Documents automatically sync to the cloud for later editing; you can try to revise, but—without a mouse, a touch screen, arrow keys, or the ability to select—the only option is to backspace and rewrite,

which quickly grows annoying. The writer is conditioned to simply keep going, typos and non sequiturs be damned, and to experience these constraints as a form of liberation: “Set Your Story Free,” the display commands when asleep. Portraits of Shakespeare, Agatha Christie, Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, and Isaac Asimov take inspirational turns looming over the injunction.

The Freewrite’s creators, Adam Leeb and Patrick Paul, aren’t writers themselves, but they quickly caught on to the appeal of focussed apps for professionals trying and failing to get their words out. Everyone seemed to want to unplug, but without sacrificing the convenience of digital text. After meeting at a Detroit incubator in 2013, the two imagined a machine that would keep writers’ minds off the Internet while maintaining a discreet back channel to the cloud. “People didn’t even need to see what it looked like,” Leeb told me from the company’s office, in Michigan. “They were just, like, ‘Wait, I think I need that.’ ” He and Paul created the Freewrite as a “conceptual piece” for a hardware competition, but when news of the device went viral they decided to establish Astrohaus and manufacture it. Their Kickstarter campaign earned two hundred thousand dollars in the first twenty hours.

Now, thousands of units later, Astrohaus has added a miniaturized Freewrite Traveler and a “Hemingwrite” special edition for the writer who quipped that “the first draft of anything is shit.” Leeb tailored the machine to the M.F.A. workshop dictum that you have to get it all down before you can fix it all up. “Anything that was not critical to helping people write more, we just left out,” he said. “You draft top to bottom and then edit later.” He considered omitting the backspace key but decided that would be a step too far. Another consideration was comfort, particularly the reduced eyestrain of e-ink and the tactile feedback of a mechanical keyboard. The final touch was a dash of fancy; Leeb calls the device’s appearance “retrofuturist”—it looks a little like a console torn from the cockpit of a steampunk biplane.



"Are we childhood best friends or do we just know too much about each other to break up?"
Cartoon by Sarah Akinterinwa

The stylized appearance has often been mocked. Mashable described the Freewrite as “pretentious hipster nonsense,” and even enthusiastic reviewers have admitted that they would be embarrassed to use the device in public. The hefty six-hundred-dollar price tag has only reinforced its dilettantish aura. “Oh, you’re gonna buy something that you can replicate by just turning off your Wi-Fi?” Leeb said, paraphrasing the naysayers. “You need to buy this expensive gadget to control yourself?” But he’s found that consumers are increasingly willing to shell out for single-purpose tools. “If you want to be in control of your life, then you have to be in control of the things that you’re interacting with on a daily basis,” he explained.

My own trial run with a Freewrite was, if not quite liberation, at least a reprieve from various distractions and loops. To begin this essay, I set it up on a small folding table, a ritual that felt more like getting on a rowing machine than like opening a laptop. It created a boundary: I’d bang out words on the device, then return to the computer to find a draft already waiting, as though it had been filed by someone else for my disinterested consideration. The aluminum body and spring-loaded keys made each word feel weighty and propulsive—an antidote to writing on glass.

Perhaps the authors who first used word processors felt emancipated from the typewriter’s linearity, but I began to wonder if they hadn’t been

mistaken. [Ralph Ellison](#) and [Octavia Butler](#), I learned from Kirschenbaum, never finished the novels they started on computers. “Intensive iteration could create ‘magic,’ ” he writes. “But it could also prove devastating.” The era of touch screens and predictive text has only made it easier to slip and stumble; without friction, we lose our footing.

The most venerable form of literary friction may be the scratch of pen on paper. Computers have largely failed to replace the original focussed word processor, which is not only cheap and abundant but uniquely conducive to the forms of spatial thinking—arrows, scribbles, doodles, and diagrams—that writing often demands. Physical mark-making also quickens the memory, which is one reason that handwritten notes are so much easier to recall than their typed equivalents. Yet paper can also fail us in the heat of composition, when the time comes to search notes and splice sentences. The two indispensable systems square off. For years, I’ve switched between them in what can feel like a war of attrition: scribbling until my hand cramps, typing until dazed by the screen, and wasting time with scanners to translate between mediums.

Then, in the early days of the pandemic, I began seeing targeted ads for the reMarkable, an e-ink tablet that resembles an A5-size Kindle. The product, created by the thirty-seven-year-old Norwegian developer Magnus Wanberg, was a subtly transformative update of a very old technology. Wanberg, who studied engineering at M.I.T., describes himself as a lifelong “paper person.” Before founding reMarkable, in 2013, he worked at Boston Consulting Group, where he noticed that his colleagues, though surrounded by expensive technology, nearly all took handwritten notes. Wanberg shared their preference, but also found paper messy and difficult to organize. He wondered if there might be a way to digitize the medium without ruining it. “Paper is a five-hundred-year-old invention,” he told me. “Why haven’t we fundamentally improved upon that?”

For many years, he knew, e-ink displays were too slow to effectively mimic pen and paper. Waiting half a second for an e-reader to turn the page may not bother anyone, but a pen-stroke lag is enough to break the illusion of writing and disrupt hand-eye coördination. So in 2015, when Wanberg débuted a prototype tablet with a “latency” of only fifty-five milliseconds, it was a major step toward eliminating the “slow-ink problem.” Now, with

more than a hundred million dollars in annual revenue, reMarkable has evolved into the most successful enterprise in the world of distraction-free writing.

The reMarkable is “digital paper,” a sheet of imitation loose-leaf that approximates the precision, friction, and immediacy of the real thing. Its slightly rough, resin-coated display can detect more than four thousand gradations of pressure, applied using a special stylus equipped with a replaceable nylon felt tip. The device can decipher handwriting in thirty-three languages, according to the manufacturer’s Web site—albeit only by sending it to a secure cloud server. With one button and no apps, it’s a computer disguised as a non-computer: the stick bug of devices.

The company’s promotional “Get Your Brain Back” video, a masterpiece of camouflaged advertising, left many commenters asking why an anti-tech manifesto was trying to sell them a tablet. But Wanberg sees no contradiction in fighting gadgets with gadgets. “Can you sit down for three hours and just think about one thing deeply?” he asked me. “Because I can’t. And this device helps me.”

A growing cohort of writers agree. The reMarkable evidently has particular appeal for academics—in a survey recently conducted by the company, more than a quarter of users identified as “researchers,” employing it to grade papers, prepare lecture notes, and annotate the scanned book excerpts and journal articles that constitute the lifeblood of academe. (Tressie McMillan Cottom, a MacArthur-winning author and sociologist, is scholarship’s most visible reMarkable influencer. “What writer doesn’t want less?” she asks. The reMarkable “turns off the voices inside the house.”) But to succeed the device will have to fend off a growing number of e-ink competitors, such as Supernote, Papyr, and Onyx, which sells not only tablets but a full-sized e-ink computer monitor. And, with a paper-textured screen cover and an Apple Pencil, even iPad users can mimic the reMarkable experience. Then, there’s the question of its almost four-hundred-dollar price tag. Wanberg dismisses that concern. “The appeal of focussed tools in a very unfocussed world is massive,” he said. “What’s the price of thinking better?”

The targeted ads for reMarkable caught me at a vulnerable moment. During lockdown, several publishers stopped mailing physical review copies of

forthcoming books—and so, like many other critics, I found myself staring endlessly at PDFs. The eyestrain was terrible; worse, I missed scribbling in the margins, a form of intimate backtalk that no comment bubble could replace. I held out for a few months before my boyfriend and my mother, pitying my long nights with Adobe Acrobat, jointly bought me a second-generation reMarkable.

After I received my tablet, it quickly became my preferred way of reading anything that wasn't in print—and occasionally of drafting articles, which it transcribed with the accuracy of a tipsy stenographer. Ironically, it also helped me address bad habits created by other distraction-free experiments. After years of iA Writer's myopically zoomed-in sentence highlighting, I'd become a faster and more careful writer, but at the expense, I worried, of my intuitive grasp of a text's over-all shape. The tablet gave me a fuller view of what I'd already written, without forcing me back on analog inconvenience.

Many focus seekers remain skeptical of expensive devices that purport to fix problems created by other expensive devices. When I surveyed writers on Twitter, I was surprised to learn that many were using a stand-alone word processor from the early two-thousands called the AlphaSmart. Originally marketed to schools as a cheap alternative to laptops, they are little more than durable keyboards with built-in LCDs, which, unlike computers, kids couldn't play games on or easily destroy. The final version, AlphaSmart Neo 2, displays six lines of text at a time, and boasts seven hundred hours of battery life. Although AlphaSmart was discontinued in 2013, the devices, which sell for about sixty dollars on eBay, enjoy a flourishing afterlife among a small but growing cult of "AlphaSmarties," including journalists, screenwriters, scholars, romance novelists, and NaNoWriMos. Diehards outfit them with backlights, wild paint jobs, and expensive mechanical keyboards; an aspiring horror novelist who likes to write in the dark told me that he wears a headlamp while operating his model. The zealous online community around the device treats it not only as a tool but as a toy or collectible—typewriter mania meets millennial nostalgia for nineties homeroom homeliness. Tracy Clayton, the host of the Netflix podcast "Strong Black Legends," sent me a picture of her model mid-script at a bar in Brooklyn, next to a glass of rosé. "I just asked my ig friends if they think I'm hipster trash for using it in public," she wrote to me. "Twenty per cent said yes."

It's tempting, even for enthusiasts, to dismiss the renaissance of dedicated word-processing hardware as just another superficial vintage fetish. Alongside the AlphaSmarties are subcultures devoted to the Pomera, a folding Japanese pocket writer, and to the USB Typewriter, a conversion kit that uses gold-plated sensors to digitally capture typewriter keystrokes. (The product's Web site describes it as "a groundbreaking advancement in the field of obsolescence.") The more tech-savvy rig up focussed writing devices from old e-readers, computer keyboards, and discarded phones, then showcase their inventions online.

These extremes of life-hacking whimsy are also illustrations of the ways in which many writers feel alienated from their tools. When Frank O'Hara typed his "[Lunch Poems](#)" on a floor-sample Lettera 25 in Olivetti's showroom on Fifth Avenue, it was a cute stunt. Now writing on apps and devices owned and actively managed by corporations is the default, leaving us ever more vulnerable to subscriptions, algorithms, proprietary formats, and arbitrary updates.

A minor literary doctrine holds that great writing should be platform-independent. Let amateurs mess around with gadgets and gizmos; Wole Soyinka wrote "[The Man Died](#)" in a Nigerian prison with Nescafé for ink and a chicken bone for a stylus. Yet the ability to write with anything and the drive to experiment with everything likewise reflect the fact that the means, no less than the matter of writing, should adapt to our selves and to our circumstances. The quest to match writer and machine may be as necessary, in its way, as literature's unending effort to reconcile experience and expression—or so I tell myself as I sign for the latest delivery. My AlphaSmart, hurriedly unboxed, comes to life with a flash last seen by a high-school student in the mid-two-thousands, and I feel, not for the first time, that it might just be the final Word. ♦

New Yorker Favorites

- How we became infected by [chain e-mail](#).
- [Twelve classic movies](#) to watch with your kids.
- The [secret lives of fungi](#).

- The photographer who claimed to capture the [ghost of Abraham Lincoln](#).
- Why are Americans still [uncomfortable with atheism](#)?
- The enduring romance of the [night train](#).
- Sign up for our daily [newsletter](#) to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.

Fiction

- “[Lu, Reshaping](#)”

By [Madeleine Thien](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Audio: Madeleine Thien reads.

There were three pages to go, and it was already past midnight. Lu had asked her big daughter to edit her report for tomorrow's Purchasing meeting. This daughter, who was eleven, excelled at things like that.

"Mom," the girl said, "why did you ask if a ghost hit the back of my head?"

"Because you told your father I was home late, and I specifically told you not to do that. So why did you? Did a ghost hit the back of your head?"

[Madeleine Thien on immigrants' loneliness.](#)

"Oh, ha."

They were whispering back and forth in two languages, the girl in English and Lu in Cantonese. Tomorrow was a school day, and Lu could guess what Husband would say if he woke up and found them still working.

The girl yawned and made further corrections to the page. "This part here, where you say ten teapots and nine lids? That's funny, and I get what you mean, but I think you should just say supply doesn't equal demand. You know way too much about sales tax, and now I do, too."

"Don't be sarcastic."

"Like you?"

"Me? I'm not sarcastic. Life is sarcastic."

"We're almost done. The English is all O.K. now."

"Talk, talk! Just finish my work already!"

"Mom?"

Would this girl never be quiet?

“What’s good about being my age?”

This particular daughter already seemed to be bending under life’s troubles, and it might be Lu’s fault. All these late nights the girl had spent helping her find the right words. Regret washed over Lu. “You tell me.”

“If I knew, I’d be happy.”

Lu rubbed her eyes, reached for the teapot, and refilled both their cups. “You’ll have to pee all night,” she said apologetically.

“I hate people,” the girl burst out, her eyes reddening.

“What happened? Who’s bothering you?”

“Can’t I just stay at home and read books and learn about the world that way? In books things happen for a reason, and everything ends as it should.”

Lu smacked the table. “Should! What is ‘should’?”

“If I could give you a pill that would change your whole life, let you go back in time and fix things, and maybe be a whole other person, would you take it?”

“Of course.”

“Seriously?”

“All my life I’ve wanted to change shapes. Change skins. That was my dream when I was your age.”

Brightening now, her daughter said, “Oh, my God, Mom. You’re so weird.”

“You’re the one who just said you want to learn about life from books. I wanted to learn from living life. But then I got married and had you. So thanks a lot.”

The girl giggled.

“Look, 1 a.m.,” Lu said. “Stop kicking tangerines around.”

“What?”

“You know exactly what I mean. Stop wasting time.”

The next morning, Lu was late for the department meeting. She hurried through the swinging glass doors, an apology on her tongue. Her coat was wet with rain, copies of the report slid from her arm, and the doughnut box was crushed on one side.

But the conference room was empty. A fountain pen gleamed at the head of the table: Sheila’s expensive Parker, with its marbled green shell.

It was Tuesday. Lu checked her watch: 8:43. Not a single soul. Bewildered, she placed the Duffin’s box on the table, turning the mangled side to the wall.

After a moment, she put the reports down, pulled off her coat. A seaplane was descending toward Burrard Inlet, seeming to accelerate even as it slowed. This view from the twenty-seventh floor could hardly be believed. The plane’s nose was tilted up very slightly, as if it disliked getting its face wet. Down it went, hurrying to meet the water. Lu felt as though someone had punched her in the chest. Really? she wondered. That old panic, here, now? *Big ball of wax. Messed-up string. Crushed lungs.* Sweat matted her forehead. She slid into the nearest chair and, just as she settled, the seaplane touched down. It seemed to rush effortlessly forward, the curl of dark sea in its wake reminding her of the fold of an ankle.

The white walls, the massive table, the twelve swivel chairs, her two hands seemed like objects recovered by someone else’s memory.

As unexpectedly as the panic had arrived, it fled. She breathed. Breathed again without pain. *Neither wax nor string.* No explanation.

It felt strange to be alone in the conference room. Two walls, from floor to ceiling, were entirely glass. Lu gazed out at Stanley Park and the North

Shore mountains, at the morning sky reflecting in the water. A thread of traffic, no more than a series of tiny lights, crossed the Lions Gate Bridge. Yellow sulfur hills glowed on a distant dock.

On her first day at the company, she'd felt the unstoppable joy of rising past floor after floor and stepping out into a floating world: the Purchasing Department. She'd entered another life. That was fourteen years ago.

The door opened.

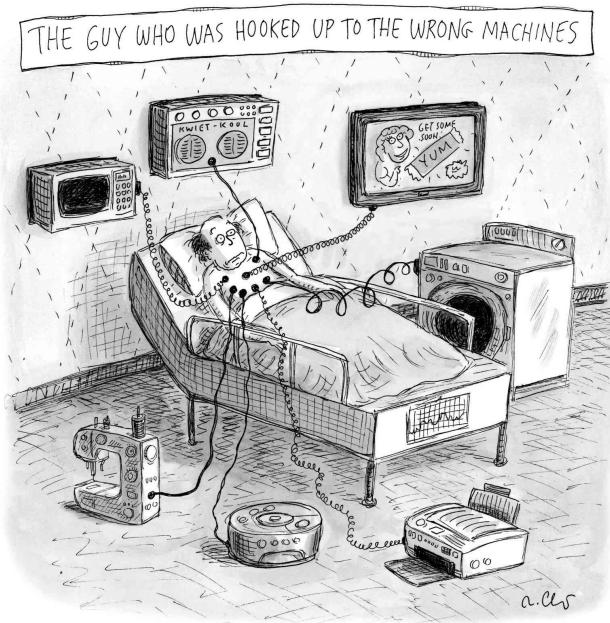
"Lu?"

She turned. Antoinette peered at her. Lovely thick hair tousled on top of her head. Gray jacket and slacks, soft pink blouse. Lu said hello, relieved that there was a meeting, after all.

"I saw you rush by," Antoinette said. "Didn't you hear?"

"What do you mean?"

"Everyone got a call this morning. There's no meeting. Because of the investigation."



Cartoon by Roz Chast

Lu, uncomprehending, said, “Oh.”

“I mean . . . you won’t be surprised, I guess?” Antoinette was still holding the glass door, which caught the light with each small movement she made. “Are you surprised?”

Lu looked at her and wondered what this meant for her report. “Oh, well,” she said, and then, “Here are the doughnuts. My turn, this week.”

Antoinette studied her curiously, impatience, amusement, and also derision passing across her face. Or that was what Lu sensed. “Sheila was looking for you,” Antoinette said. “You should probably go to your office, not wait around here.”

Such was life, Lu thought, standing in her windowless office. Or, at least, her current life. Waiting in line for the dangled carrot of understanding.

She watered her three plants. They had been bequeathed to her when Bob Jarvis retired in 1980. Lu had been promoted to his position—Senior Purchaser—the same title she held now, almost a decade later. At the time, Bob told her, “If the plants keel over, let them die, got it? Stand up to the team or they’ll fritter your time away with pointless work. Conquer that exam and get P.M.A.C.-certified! None of them bother, so if you excel sky’s the limit. Got it, Lu? Sky’s the limit.”

Ten years was a long time for plants to stay alive in a windowless room. They must have been living off their memories of the sun. All three were snake plants, otherwise known as mother-in-law’s tongue. She thought of the plants, always, as the Mothers-in-Law. Lu had warned the three of them that they all had to share this space. Everyone’s leaves would be cut back so that no one keeled over. Light and air were precious, supply-chain management was crucial—and, *if all goes well, you will outlive me. Maybe you will be promoted to the corner office. Or even the atrium.*

Lu had a habit of keeping her car keys in the soil: she stuck them in the pot on arrival, fished them out at day’s end.

Those keys gave her a rush of happiness whenever she handled them. Husband called the car her second home, but she called it Mrs. Benchi. Hands down, the only thing she'd ever bought that gave her pleasure every day. Mrs. Benchi was an emerald-green Mercedes, used but dignified. She'd bought it for six thousand dollars. Big improvement on the rattling copper-colored van she had when her side job was as a delivery driver. That had started about a year after she joined the Purchasing Team. Her friend Arduous Wu, a florist, had given her the extra work and paid her cash.

Arduous's father had swum from China to Hong Kong in 1957. Wu Father had told his wife, "We've got no future here. You know what that means, don't you? It's like dying before you're born." Eight hours in Deep Bay, then crawling on hands and knees over oyster beds to freedom. Wu Father survived, but his wife did not. Broken, he adopted the son of a distant relative, adding an English name, Arduous, to the baby's Chinese one, Kin Hei. Arduous grew up working in his father's plastic-flower business. Wu Father sold the business sometime in the seventies, and he and Arduous immigrated to Canada. Arduous started his own fresh-flower emporium, and swam regularly at the Hastings community pool. He had attractive shoulders and hands that smelled of lilies.

When Arduous died suddenly, four years ago, Lu and her copper-colored van—what was it her big daughter called it? "The Flower Coffin"—made their final delivery to his funeral. First stop, St. Francis Xavier Church. Last stop, Ocean View Cemetery, where she arranged the flower stands in rings around his grave. Arduous's wife and small children held Wu Father tightly in the rain.

Lu returned a week later to collect the flower stands. The wind had toppled them. So many flowers face down in the dirt. She cried despite herself, pouring Arduous three shots of Cognac, straight into the soil. *Arduous Wu, you old playboy, see your brokenhearted lilies?*

"You're a wrapped candy," Arduous had liked to tell her, when they lay naked in bed, occasionally, happy. "There's something sweet and all too soft in your center."

"Take your time," she would encourage him. "Good things want to last."

“Bless you, Wang Luk. You’re that kind of pleasure.”

He was married, she had Husband and two girls—she was a mother. What kind of thing was a mother? *A balloon tied to a wrist.* If too much time passed, the balloon would lose pressure, descend.

“The way you watch men,” Arduous had once said playfully. “I see what you’re looking for. Life doesn’t ask us to pay a debt of shame, Wang Luk. I see everything you feel.”

Lu enjoyed the feel of different lovers, the newness of strangers. Her present interest was a former prosecutor from Shanghai, now working in a warehouse in Port Moody. He had a disrespectful look in his eyes. His skin, the softest she had ever touched, had an addictive fragrance. But he was not what she’d hoped he’d be. Dissatisfied with other aspects of his life, he needed to control everything in bed, which was why, she already knew, it would have to end.

Sheila was in the doorway, watching her. “Here you are, Lu. I called this morning, but you’d already left.”

Lu nodded, holding up the Duffin’s box.

Sheila chose the Honey Dip, a popular option, resting it on a square white napkin. “So,” she said, nudging the door closed behind her. “How are things, Lu?”

“Not too bad.”

“There’s something we need to talk about.” In a roundabout way, as if sewing on a button, her boss disclosed the situation. Expense reporting, Campbell River, and dinners. *Dinners?* Lu did not follow. Then: Complaints against a senior manager. Financial irregularities on the Campbell River file. Inappropriate behavior. A matter for Personnel. They had brought in an External Investigator. All members of the Purchasing Team, plus clerical support, would have to be interviewed.

The Mothers-in-Law were doing something strange. As if their leaves had glimpsed something. The door had slid open, and the hallway lights

beckoned. Nutrients? Their stems swivelled almost imperceptibly toward the opening.

“The Investigator will likely want to see you this afternoon. But things could move faster or slower.”

“I understand. Thank you.”

“I know this will be a difficult process. You were . . . well, friendly with John Sadler.”

“Yes, he is everyone’s friend.”

The leaves fluttered, wriggling as if they were wearing something itchy, but it was only a draft from the vent.

Sheila cast her eye over Lu’s office—the stack of reports, the framed P.M.A.C. certificate on the wall, the Arduous Flowers desk calendar beside the beige phone. She paused, seemingly nostalgic. “You’re an invaluable member of our team, Lu. You were hired the year before me, right?”

“Right.” She nodded. “In seventy-five.” Most of the team had been together for more than a decade.

Sheila shifted the Honey Dip to her other hand. “Even when someone is our friend,” she said, “even when we care about him, or hope he cares about us, we have to act in a principled way when he does wrong. Especially if there’s a pattern to this kind of thing. . . . Now we’ve got a mess on our hands.” She reached for the door and hesitated, surprised to see it already open.

“I am not sure I know anything.”

Sheila turned back to her, and Lu felt as if Sheila were laying a hand on her cheek, the way one might caress a child’s face—with a mix of wonder and benevolence—but she was actually standing three feet away, her gaze radiating understanding. “You feel as I do, I know. As we all do.”

Wishing neither to agree nor to disagree, Lu tilted her head to indicate *I’d rather not get involved*. Or, *I prefer to eat peanuts while watching the movie*,

but she didn't think Sheila would understand this idiom.

"I'm relying on everyone to pull together. Especially you, Lu." Sheila smiled gently before turning and going out.

Late afternoon and Lu still hadn't been summoned. While waiting, she'd updated the preferred-vender list and readied herself for Wednesday's operational-efficiency briefing. Spreadsheets sat freshly printed on her desk.

She called home. Her two daughters had a new game, making Holy Communion by crushing circles of Wonder Bread between a Bible and a dictionary. That was probably what they were doing now, and why it was taking them so long to answer.

At last, they picked up. The big one told her they were just reading.

"Just reading?" Lu said doubtfully.

"Oh, Mom!"

They were snickering.

"How's tricks, Ma?" the small one said, her voice garbled.

Lu knew the child was squishing her face into the germ-laden phone. "Pull your face back," she cried. How troublesome they were.

"Huh?"

Lu sighed. "Stop with the tricks."

They bounced her words around for fun: "Mom doesn't miss a trick! There she goes, up to her old tricks!" The big one shouted something about their father, about ordering Hawaiian pizza—it was Two-for-One Tuesday and Dad said it was cool.

"Fine," Lu agreed. "O.K., must go."

"O.K.! Wake me up before you go-go!"

Lu hung up.

Her daughters were mystified by her English. It was the one thing about her that seemed to both entertain and perturb them. They deployed her expressions to taunt her and the world at large. “I have eaten more salt than you have eaten rice,” they shouted at each other, at their dolls, at strangers on the street.

Would it be improper to leave early? She could take Mrs. Benchi for a spin to Spanish Banks, where she might do what others did, throw rocks repeatedly at the water. The Mothers-in-Law counselled against.

Her liaison with John Sadler had lasted three months. If lightheartedness were a species of happiness, those final months in 1988 had perhaps been her happiest in recent memory. Sadler had been a confident lover. He had wanted to luxuriate, while she, always behind schedule with something, professional or personal, felt pressed for time. “O.K., O.K.,” he’d said, after locking the door of their hotel room and turning around to find her half-undressed. “Nobody’s going to barge in.”

“I get carried away. I need to act quickly.”

“Come here. We have all the time in the world.”

Sadler, in his smooth way, seemed to believe his own assurances. But he was wrong. There were spouses, bills, dishes, and, in her life, the kids. Still, they agreed on other things, on the importance of seeking out risk and pleasure, and the joy of a temporary room with its own evolving rules.

I don't really know, Lu tells the Mothers-in-Law, whose command of Cantonese is exemplary, *why I rarely get attached. To Sadler or someone else, to the very good sex, to tenderness. I always feel that pleasure shouldn't become habitual.* By December, she’d found his jokes less original. When they lay spent on top of the sheets, she thought of faraway people and things.

“What’s up?” he would ask when she drifted off.

Lovely expression when it came from him, as if moments were an ascent, an unstoppable rise.

Lu knew enough to end an affair when it was at its most satisfying, when it gave her new senses, a different body, a changed reality, and, therefore, courage. Only with Arduous, who had read her so effortlessly, could she have kept going forever. He was the lover she would never have turned away from.

At her desk, she clicked open the year-end data sheet for Campbell River. Sheila had referenced financial irregularities. Lu began proofreading the document, entry by entry.

The jangling telephone made her jump. Lifting the receiver, she expected to hear the unhappy tones of the Shanghai man, but it was just Husband, fretting. “Wang Luk, you plan to sleep there? It’s already eight o’clock. I promised to work Kwun’s shift tonight and now I’m late. You don’t care enough to remember.”

She grabbed her bag and coat, shut the door, ran past the empty offices. In the underground parkade, Mrs. Benchi clicked open to welcome her. The car was fragrant. The car was peaceful. Mrs. Benchi purred her way from P4 to the surface. Lu drove on quiet roads, rain needling down, the beat of the wipers calming her thoughts. She had found nothing questionable in the financial documents. She felt it was impossible for there to be irregularities that she had missed. So what was the true accusation, and whose was the real guilt? A spreadsheet, she thought, was a set of conditions, with every cell holding a value, and each value recorded. Certain cells were products of formulas, of derivations upon derivations, of knowledge pieced together across the whole. Those cells were recipients of data, single circles in an ever-circling form.

She felt tall in her car and drove with confidence.

The truth was, even though she had reported to John Sadler for a time, even though Sadler had lobbied for her promotion when Bob Jarvis retired, he had barely entered Lu’s thoughts. He was handsome, yes, but he was a regular sort of person. Most of his being, Lu thought, sat easily on his surface, open to view.

At first, all of them—Lu, John, Antoinette, Miranda, and Billy—had been a group. Friday drinks had been fun. But after a while Lu had felt herself to be, as her mother might say, unfit for the occasion. Something appeared on certain faces each time Lu spoke, an expression—of forbearance, distaste?—that was difficult to name. It appeared in their eyes so quickly that they could hardly be aware of it. Recalling Bob Jarvis's advice, she paid for P.M.A.C. courses out of her own pocket and studied ferociously. Certification would be indisputable proof of her expertise and fitness for the job. In fact, she loved the technicality of procurement and supply chains, where optimal efficiency depended on exacting details. She enjoyed seeing goods move swiftly, painlessly, to where they could be properly utilized.

She thought of herself as reliable, a team player, but others mistook her for a natural subordinate. She didn't register the misconception until it was too late. As the others were all promoted, the years slipped away.

The rest of the group was, as Lu's daughters would say, *tight*. Others came and went, but the core group held. They blurred the categories of their lives, mixing private and professional needs. It was their way of belonging wherever they went. On the positive side, Lu did not feel obligated to socialize with them on Friday nights anymore. Without Husband's knowing, the evenings could be put to better uses.

A year ago, around the time of Campbell River, the team had settled on regular Friday-night dinners, which Lu attended once in a while, reluctantly. It unsettled her to see how the group could twist the way a crowd does, turning on one person and then the next.

After Antoinette returned from the Gulf of Thailand, where her favorite brother, Jared, had married a local woman, Miranda and Billy had teased her cruelly. Antoinette wanted to talk about snorkeling and tea plantations in the Cameron Highlands, but they wanted to discuss squat toilets. Also, pedophilia. Thai girls. "Women," Miranda corrected. They all shot a quick glance at Lu, who wasn't Thai or Malay, they reminded themselves, but had become, Lu thought, implicated. Lu had finished her supper, taking comfort in the restaurant's stunning view, the floating lights. John picked up his cigarettes and went out. Antoinette described in detail how her brother had gorged on spiky, hairy rambutans, and got sick. Billy, laughing, spluttered

out her drink. The team was smart, but acted otherwise, as if this kind of bravado were proof of freedom. It hadn't been like that in the beginning, but midlife dissatisfaction was what was new. The women joked about who loved Thai food the most. "John can't get enough of it," Miranda volunteered, then colored and stared down at her empty glass.

Lu thought she might take her leave. She had an exam coming up on Supply Chain Management for Major Projects, which was necessary to keep her certification up to date, and she wanted to go and study in Mrs. Benchi. Her presence felt superfluous.

Sadler returned and said he had another engagement. Antoinette began to cry, repeating, "God, I'm sorry, I'm so embarrassed," and Miranda squeezed her shoulder. Lu filled out the paperwork for everyone's meal reimbursement, minus the wine. Billy had already gone home. It was just another Friday.

The following Monday, Sadler came into her office and stood beside the Mothers-in-Law. "Forgive me, Lu. I shouldn't have abandoned you at that dinner. I'm sorry."

They agreed to have a drink together after work.

She was curious.

Was Sadler sorry the world was the way it was?

She knew he'd like to hear about how she had grown up at the end of the war, lost her father and brother when she was fifteen, immigrated to Canada on her own, and struggled with a language completely foreign to all her ancestors. But those weren't the stories she thought worth telling. People said all the right things until they didn't. Lu was accommodating until she wasn't. And yet she felt bonded to her colleagues in a hard-to-explain way, because co-workers were strangers upon whom she relied. And they seemed to want, in some intangible fashion, not her respect but her love. To know that she thought well of them.

Lu missed the retired managers, Mr. Gordon and old Bob Jarvis, who had seemed to genuinely care for her and want her to rise. Both came from blue-collar families and had considered her, perhaps, one of them.

At the bar, she and John Sadler both ordered spritzers. “You’ve been there, I guess,” she said as they waited for their drinks. Mrs. Benchi looked distinguished parked out front, as if she felt at home in this well-kept neighborhood.

“Malaysia? No. But I’ve travelled to lots of places.”

“Yes, I have, too.”

There were two women in the conference room with Lu. They were Susan Harris, the External Investigator, and the Clerk, Penny.

“I’m sorry we couldn’t meet with you yesterday, Mrs. Wang,” Susan said. “Thank you for your time now. My aim is to make every step of the process as simple and clear as possible.”

“Yes, Susan. Call me Lu.”

“Great. So, Lu, you’ve been with the company for—”

“Fourteen years.”

“Right, fourteen years.”

If the hand of fortune passes over you, Lu’s mother used to say, you should be grateful. To be overlooked is its own kind of fate and perhaps freedom. It was strange, Lu thought, how Mother rose in her thoughts every few years, as if memory had its seasons. Panic hovered in her chest. “You don’t worry enough about remembering,” Mother had often told her. She must remember to repeat this to her own daughters.

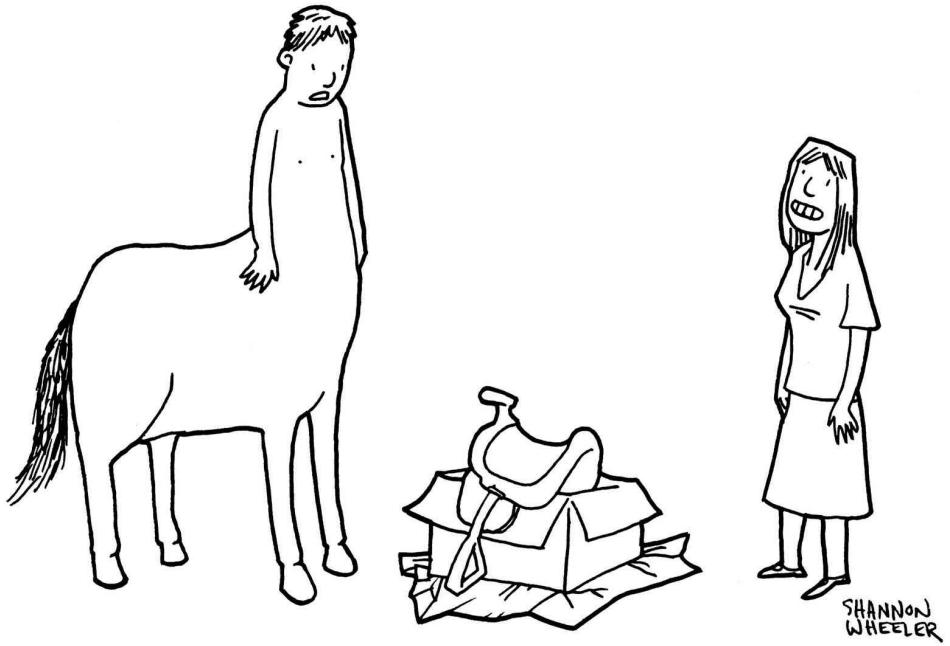
Susan asked a string of questions, almost none of which Lu felt she could, or knew how to, answer.

Susan's face softened as she came around the table and settled in the chair beside Lu. She rolled the chair backward to keep a small distance. "I've spoken to the Purchasing Director," she said, angling forward. "She told me you may not feel confident providing a verbal statement. She says that your written English is strong. Impressive, in fact."

Lu thought of her big daughter and smiled sadly.

Susan continued, "I have a Microsoft file you can work through on your own. Is that something you'd prefer?"

For a moment, she felt at a loss. She recalled the sensation of being inside a crowd searching for power within itself. You were transformed by such crowds when you were young, she thought. The crowd swallowed you up and gave you a common purpose. In Kowloon, she and her five sisters used to squeeze into the crowded tram on Nathan Road. Her sisters had been her life, a part of her own self. All five had emigrated, each to a different country, no one left in Hong Kong when Mother died quietly in her sleep. They had put all their savings together so that one of them could fly home. Over the years, Lu's colleagues had sometimes looked at her as if she were someone's forgotten coat, but it hadn't mattered to her all that much. Now she had a clear feeling that Sadler had protected her, or tried to. Long before that brief affair, John had lauded her. He had argued for her to be further promoted, which would have meant a better salary, an easing of financial burdens, a three-bedroom apartment for the family, but she had been left to twist in the same position for ten years. Despite her tireless efforts, Lu had stayed near the bottom of the ladder.



"Oh, gee. Thanks. A saddle."
Cartoon by Shannon Wheeler

A strange calm washed over her. Was that what Susan would now rectify, on her behalf? Her professional stasis, and all the reasons that things had turned out the way they had, all the lost chances for advancement and security? No.

Lu stared at Susan for a long time. The Investigator's growing discomfort was like a weight passing into Lu's hands. *Investigator Susan cannot read me, which makes her nervous, but also resentful because she's the one in charge.* But here Lu's powers of discernment ended. Lu now saw her colleagues laying nets she had to avoid lest she get entangled. She could not say why they drew lines between one person and another, or why they had to pity certain people in order to see them. It was true that their measure of Lu had never aligned with her worth, but when had she ever confused her worth with their opinions? Such self-effacing routes were not for her.

"I understand," Susan said, "that there is a history of behavior. Things said and done by someone in a supervisory position that should not have been said or done."

"Should not?"

Susan frowned. Lu couldn't help mirroring the expression and frowned back.

“As one of the people you report to,” Susan explained, “John Sadler is your superior.”

“We have an expression for this,” Lu said. “To eat from a bowl and then turn it over.”

Susan was thrown by Lu’s non-contextualized English, and responded by nodding seriously.

“It means to betray somebody. And play them for a fool.”

“Were you played for a fool, Lu?”

Oh, Susan was more alert than she let on. Lu liked the challenge. “We all were. Even John Sadler. That’s life.”

“No, that is *not* life,” Susan said. “Others have given statements. He took advantage of your position as an outsider and a subordinate on the Purchasing Team. You were not the only one. It’s not you who should feel ashamed.”

Lu couldn’t stop looking at Susan, couldn’t stop wondering.

Who was it who demanded shame? Fourteen years at the company. Where had all that time gone? Was John Sadler responsible for that?

“No,” she said. “No one takes advantage of me. If I lived that way, I would have vanished long ago.”

Susan was saying other things, but Lu had already floated free.

That night when the phone rang, Lu got to it first. No one responded to her irritated “What?” So she switched to Cantonese. *Hey, who’s there and what do you want, huh?*

“Lu?”

Oh, for heaven’s sake. John Sadler.

Husband was at the stove, making ketchup rice.

“What’s up?” Lu said, turning away from Husband and toward the girls. They were lying on the floor, pretending to be dead. It was always the holidays for them.

“I’m such an idiot. . . . I don’t know anymore. I don’t know. Lu, I’m so sorry.”

She waited.

“Wasn’t I fair to you? Wasn’t I good?”

“Yes, you were fair and good.”

She nudged her small daughter with her toe. There were crumbs in the girl’s hair. Motioned for her to get up off the floor. The girl just rolled over and looked at the ceiling with glazed eyes and a silly smile.

“We had an affair, that’s all. It’s over.” He began crying. “I wasn’t the one who ended it. I’m not . . . Lu? I’m truly sorry. But I didn’t do what Miranda is saying, what they’re all saying. I didn’t. I’m alone,” he said. “I’m all alone now.”

She didn’t have an answer for him and said nothing.

He cried harder.

“We’re having dinner now,” she said at last. “I must hang up the phone.”

The line clicked.

She stood with the receiver, comforted by the weight of it. A balloon tied to a wrist, she thought. What was it to live as a mother, as a wife, and as herself? A balloon that loves the ceiling, that floats away in order to touch it.

She must have muttered some of this aloud, because her small daughter giggled, shouting, “I’m ballooning!” She curled into a ball and opened in

beautiful slow motion, all her limbs reaching as if forced apart by the pressure of the tide.

Lu laughed, too, until her eyes became watery, thinking of the sea.

That night, Lu sat down at the family computer. She pushed the floppy disk Susan had given her into the drive and opened the file. She stared for a long time at the first question.

In this space, please tell us what you witnessed.

I saw other women grieving. [Delete]

In this space, please tell us what you witnessed.

I never grieved. [Delete]

Lu tried switching to Cantonese. She printed the page and wrote by hand.

In this space, please tell us what you witnessed.

I saw the lines of a long net in which we were all trapped, caught up. I saw men and women who had excelled within these lines, but also wanted to escape them. I saw my children growing up without their mother, and that's why I never left my marriage. And, for fourteen years, I came to know a power that was more shadow than substance. But wait: before you say that I know little about power, let me tell you that shadows have a strength. Nothing can dissolve these quiet things, which are nourished by what is within reach. And the other kind of power, the kind that kept me in my place, well, my co-workers say they do not see it. And do I? I have learned not to. I have learned to cross the street and look the other way, because you can't stop someone else's contempt. You can't change the earth, the sky above your head, the disrespect, you can't change the electrical wires in your path, but you have to teach your children to sense their presence, to step over them smoothly, *without a single note of fear*. They have to keep moving, after all. Why am I writing this in a language you can't understand? So that my dead mother can read it? She already knew.

Lu reread the paragraph. Only her big daughter would know how to translate it. But something turned over in her. It was out of the question to ask the

child. Was this something, after all, that a mother should do?

She crumpled the page and dropped it in the bin.

In this space, please tell us what you witnessed.

Lu returned to English.

Two people had an affair. Nothing more. But also nothing less. [Save.]

After the investigation ended, the Purchasing Department was reorganized. It took months for everything to be finalized. Fortunately, around this time Husband's firm offered him a good job in Silicon Valley.

Sometimes she was visited by an image or a memory. That stunning view from the twenty-seventh floor, the controlled landing of a seaplane in the blue of the inlet. It wasn't just the investigation that brought things to a head. It was the human nature that the investigation had revealed. Things Lu couldn't account for, all the sorrow and spite, the vitriol and piety, that suddenly had free rein. Sometimes when justice prevailed it left a bad taste. Sadler was hospitalized; no one knew exactly why. Some people in the company pitied him, others didn't. It wasn't about pity, anyway, Lu thought. It was the web of understandings and almost-loyalties that bound them together, lines quietly zigzagging through their legs, tied and retied in the same old ways. Miranda was promoted to John Sadler's position and became Lu's immediate supervisor. Lu was not surprised. The next day, she handed in her notice and took the Mothers-in-Law home. They flourished, half-hidden from the window. Soon afterward, she and Husband moved the family to San Jose. Lu started teaching night school. She taught Import and Export regulations, *nafta* trade rules, and supply-chain management to new immigrants. The course was at the community college, and her students had meagre incomes. Their ability to remain unfazed, combined with their original uses of English, their distance from the right words, made it hard for them to thrive as employees. They had little savings but were determined, still, to grow their own fortunes and be their own bosses. It was the only way to really live.

These were good years for Lu. The students' entrepreneurial spirit gave her comfort, and nothing felt wasted. She enjoyed the steep walk up to the college, and taking Mrs. Benchi, indulgently, on long drives to the Golden Gate Bridge, admiring the views of what others had named the Valley of Heart's Delight.

Overnight, it seemed, her girls went off to university.

Her panic attacks—that ball of wax, crushed lungs, and then a slow release, like forgiveness—recurred every few years. “You are reënacting your mother’s death,” she told herself. “Stop it.” By now, Lu was in her fifties. I want to change my shape again, she thought, but how? Morning could sink into nightfall without her noticing, as if while she gazed at the surface of her desk, at the shine of her screen, the supply of hours crept away behind her back. She did not dwell on her lovers. But sometimes she remembered a long rise of pleasure, a touch, a knowing look. She remembered how belonging and ecstasy mingled together.

She would die in her sleep one day. She would change shape quietly, without causing any inconvenience. She felt sure of it. Her husband would grieve his unfaithful wife and eventually remarry, and find a different species of happiness. That was life, she wanted to tell her daughters. You wanted to change it but it changed you, remodelled you for every age. One day, you were an immigrant, loaded down with inexplicable shame; the next you were middle-aged, a mother, and all the risks you’d taken—to live freely, to not be subdued—also made you feel ashamed, as if you’d done nothing but kick the tangerines around. But if, by then, you didn’t have it in you to explain the world away, to reduce it or be certain of it, maybe you never would. Lu accepted that in herself. She’d eaten from the bowl and turned it over; she had been unfaithful and yet faithful, wrong and yet right, lonely and yet beloved, and that was the bitter, that was the sweet quandary of it all. ♦

Louisiana Postcard

- [Touring Louisiana's Chemical Ghost Town](#)

By [Jeanie Riess](#)

Mossdale, an African American enclave outside Lake Charles, Louisiana, was founded by formerly enslaved people in the late seventeen hundreds. In its prime, it had its own high school and beauty salon; the streets were lined with fruit trees. But when Michael Regan, the head of the Environmental Protection Agency, visited Mossdale and met with a group of current and former residents recently, as part of his tour to investigate environmental injustice across the South, he saw concrete slabs and overgrown lots spread beneath a small city of industrial towers and gas flares.



“I just want you to imagine what it was like,” Carolyn Peters, the president of Concerned Citizens of Mossdale, a local advocacy group, said. Sitting next to Regan on his tour bus, she asked the driver to slow down, and peered out the window. “They had a little club on the corner, and families lived down that street. We had stores. We had churches for different denominations. We had filling stations. My memory is how beautiful it was. See, that’s what I cherish, and that’s been destroyed.”

Regan nodded solemnly. He wore a suit jacket with blue jeans. Someone asked whether the black mask he wore was for *COVID* or air pollution. “Both, in this case,” he said. Patches of air outside were hazy with gas, but

even Regan occasionally appeared not to grasp the extent of Mossville's destruction. "What's the population of children?" he asked.

"Here? Now?" Peters said.

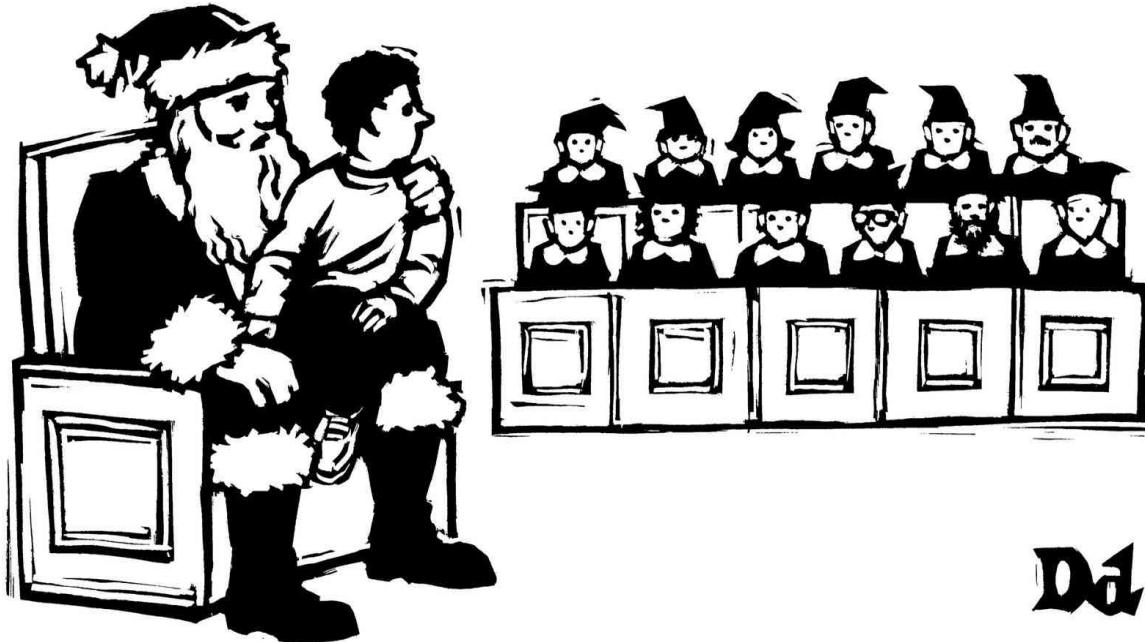
"There's no school!" Stafford Frank, whose family settled in Mossville in the nineteen-fifties, said from one row back.

In 2001, Sasol, a South African chemical company whose fuel-and-polymer plant ninety minutes outside Johannesburg is the biggest single emitter of carbon dioxide on the planet, moved into Mossville. The area had already been inundated by more than a dozen other chemical plants, and the people who lived there were sick. A study from 1998 found that their blood contained three times the average amount of dioxins—toxic compounds that cause cancer, infertility, and developmental problems. Most Mossville residents had sold their homes and left. Sasol bought out those who remained. Black families were offered less than white families who lived nearby. Many families didn't want to give up their land. One man, who became the subject of the documentary "Mossville: When Great Trees Fall," simply refused to leave; the plant was built around his property, his electricity and water were cut off, and he broke out in boils. Today, only a handful of people claim residence.

The bus pulled over on Bel Air Street, where a few boarded-up homes still stood. Peters gestured to a gas flare visible behind Sasol's gate. Regan asked, "What was the population here?"

"Back then, families were a little on the larger side," Frank said. "We had ten in our family! And our neighbors had twelve. So the population was probably five thousand at its height."

As the tour continued, with miles of industrial pipes and tubes passing by outside the windows, Peters pointed out the driveway of the old high school. "I played football there," Karl Prater, a Mossville resident, said. Regan asked what position.



"Technically speaking, they decide naughty or nice. I'm only responsible for the sentencing."
Cartoon by Drew Dernavich

“Halfback.”

“All right!” Regan said.

“We used to have Little League,” Peggy Anthony, Frank’s sister, added. “My brother played.”

“And I was good!” Frank said.

Peters sighed. “When they tell the stories about us, they want to make it look like we were just poor, uneducated people, all that kind of stuff. We’ve been trying to dispel that myth. We have professionals from Mossville. We have doctors, lawyers, professional athletes, all of that! I’m working on a doctor’s degree in counselling!”

“We had so many books in the Mossville school,” Prater said. “You know how, when you get your schoolbooks, you write your name in them? The books had been passed down for so long you couldn’t even write your name in them. But they were still new to us.”

The tour ended at the Mt. Zion Baptist Church. Regan stood in the parking lot, waiting to hold individual meetings with more residents. “A community

that was established pre-Civil War, that was once a thriving, majority African American community?” he said. “You maybe can put a price tag on property, but you cannot put a price tag on people’s lives.” He promised to report what he’d seen to Washington.

Nearby, Frank was smiling and shaking his head. “It’s kind of funny,” he said. “When I heard about his trip here, they had Jackson, they had two parishes, they had New Orleans, and they had Houston. And then they had this real small community named Mossville, Louisiana. And the first thing that came to mind was: how many millions of people will Google Mossville? You know? It was just a lot of pride.” ♦

Mental Notes

- [How an Impossible Steel Drum Gets Built](#)

By [Richard Preston](#)

Five years ago, Josh Quillen, a member of Sō Percussion, a Brooklyn-based music ensemble, spoke with a maker and tuner of steel drums named Kyle Dunleavy about building a potentially unworkable design. Musical steel drums, also called pans, are fashioned from industrial barrels of the type used for storing crude oil or hazardous waste. Pans come in a variety of different voices—bass, tenor bass, cello, guitar, double second, double tenor, and tenor. “I wanted a pair of double seconds that would have at least three octaves of notes on them,” Quillen said recently. “The drums would be fully chromatic, with all the sharps and flats, and would go down to the C below middle C.” No drums like them, with such a plenitude of notes, were then in existence. “That would require about a square foot of extra room on the drums, so Kyle would have to rearrange all of the notes to get them to fit. I was asking him to climb Mt. Everest.”



Kyle Dunleavy Illustration by João Fazenda

Dunleavy, who works out of his garage in the Philadelphia suburbs, began the project in 2017 and spent two years seeming to get nowhere. Then, suddenly, Quillen received a call saying that the drums were ready. On a rainy night near Christmas, 2019, Quillen, a soft-spoken man with a robust beard, Moscot eyeglasses, and a laid-back gravitas, knocked on Dunleavy’s garage door. He was accompanied by Kendall K. Williams, a doctoral

student in music composition at Princeton. The door rattled upward, revealing Dunleavy—tall, restless, with light-blue eyes and tendony hands.

“Let’s see those bad boys,” Quillen said. Dunleavy’s garage was outfitted with a workbench, a tool chest, an air compressor, a stand-alone hot tub, and an array of empty steel industrial barrels stacked on their ends. On a stand inside a tuning chamber—a small room lined with sound-muffling carpet—sat Quillen’s finished drums. Each was twenty-eight inches across and plated entirely in chrome. Their shining heads were concave, like pasta bowls. Inside, the drums’ notes were bubbles of different sizes and shapes swelling outward. The metal gleamed with irregularities. Steel drummers claim that no two pans sound exactly alike.

Dunleavy took up a pair of mallets and struck the largest bubble. A resonant *moong* filled the chamber. “*That* is the low C,” he said. He handed the mallets to Quillen.

Quillen tested the low C, *moong, moong*, then struck a smaller bubble and got a higher note—*mung*. “That’s middle C,” he said. Then he sharply hit a small bubble and a tiny bubble—*ming, ping!*—high C and C-sharp an octave higher. “My goodness, you got four C’s onto these drums. It’s kind of massive.” Quillen floated the mallets over many notes—*mung ping-pong in loon and moon sang on a dumb tomb*. “There’s a warmth and darkness in this sound,” he said as he malleted around.

“They sound like an organ,” Williams added.

Dunleavy said that he’d spent two years imagining different layouts of notes, trying to hear them in his mind. It was a complex problem, because every note on a steel drum interacts with its neighbors. Finally, he rolled a new eighty-five-gallon barrel into his tuning chamber and spent several hours beating the bottom with a short-handled sledgehammer. “I was sinking the pan down, just going for depth and looking for a shape,” he said. “Then I started smoothing the pan with smaller hammers. That’s when I started hearing the notes.” But, he went on, “the notes weren’t alive yet.” Using a power tool called a metal nibbler, he nibbled the barrel down to the drumhead, which he placed in a back-yard bonfire until it turned iridescent blue.

After the drum cooled, Dunleavy said, he refined the notes, hitting the steel with an assortment of small hammers while he watched waveforms pulse on the display screen of a strobe tuner. He flipped the drum over frequently, hitting the bubbles alternately from the top and from the bottom: “‘I’m gonna get that note,’ you say to yourself.” Once in a while, Dunleavy climbed into the hot tub and soaked his aching deltoids. (“The hot tub is my secret weapon,” he explained.) It took him two weeks of obsessive hammering and regular hot-tub dips to bring thirty-eight chromatic notes to life from the bottoms of two hazmat barrels.

In the chamber, Quillen ran the mallets over the drums in a blur, releasing linns of notes. “What comes to mind is a teardrop sound,” he said as he played. “The note is really bright at first, and then there’s a decay, a spreading out and a softening. The sound is dark, but there’s a point to it. I always liked the sound of the harp.” He played sweeping, harplike arpeggios. He improvised until a melody formed. The notes—sweet, complex, loamy in timbre, and fully alive—seemed to take on the quality of a human voice, and it was singing “What a Wonderful World.”

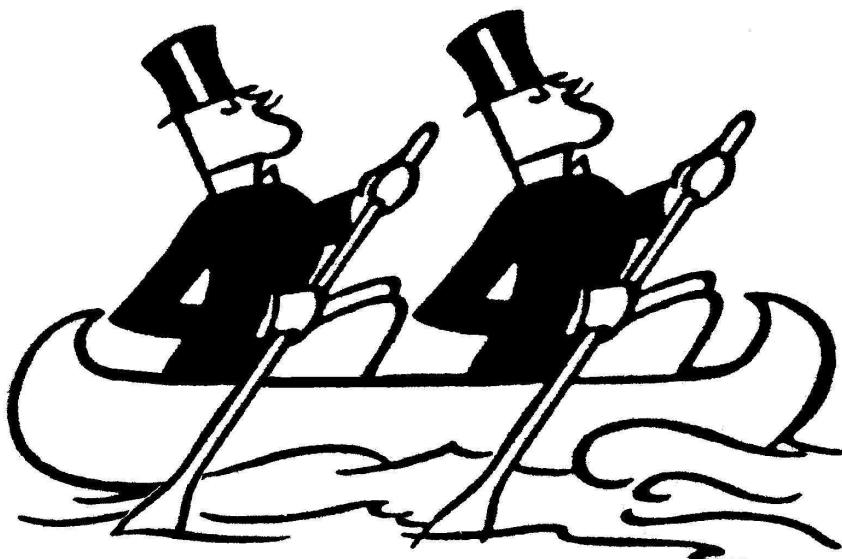
Weeks afterward, *COVID* arrived. Sō Percussion stopped doing in-person concerts. It wasn’t until last weekend, when a pan musician named Marc Brooks played them at a Sō Percussion concert at Carnegie Hall, that a live audience finally heard Dunleavy’s impossible drums. ♦

Missed Connections Dept.

- After Seventy-five Hundred Miles, a Long-Haul Paddler Floats Into Town

By [Ben McGrath](#)

Twelve years ago, on the banks of the Mississippi, a pair of thru-paddling canoeists, new acquaintances, made plans to meet for a gimlet at Nye's Polonaise, a Minneapolis dive identified by *Esquire* as the "best bar in America." One, named Neal Moore, was a non-practicing Mormon in his late thirties who had grown up in Los Angeles, his back yard separated by razor wire from Richard Pryor's. A former missionary, he called himself a "citizen journalist," curious in a Twain-tinged way about the effects of the Great Recession. The other was [Dick Conant](#), a Falstaffian vagabond in his late fifties who was "connecting rivers," as he put it, en route to Virginia, for no apparent reason. He offered Moore a couple of pieces of advice: one, slow down, and two, always tie your boat to high ground before going to sleep, because you never know when the water might rise. They were a hundred-odd miles north of Nye's when they agreed to reunite downriver. Both men showed up at the bar as promised, but not at the same time. They never saw each other again, although Moore later came to believe, after an overnight flood, that Conant's advice had saved his life.



Six years later, in 2015, Moore was riding in a taxi in Taipei, where he was teaching English, when he read an e-mail that left him sobbing. Conant, on another river-connecting adventure, had [disappeared](#) near coastal North Carolina. His canoe was found upside down. Moore was inspired to plot a

twenty-two-month, seventy-five-hundred-mile journey that will conclude any day now, weather permitting, with a loop around the Statue of Liberty: twenty-two rivers, from the Columbia, near Astoria, Oregon, to the Hudson, with some portaging—or “schlepping,” as Moore likes to call it—over the Continental Divide and alongside the Erie Canal. Think of it as the Anglo-American migration, more or less, in reverse—and during a pandemic and a contentious election cycle.

Soon after Moore launched, he was confounded by lockdown orders in Oregon and Washington. Where to shelter and in what place? He had a sixteen-foot red Old Town Penobscot, a bucket of freeze-dried food, and a tent. After some panicked phone calls, he secured the permission of the Nez Perce tribe, in Idaho, to move through its homeland along the Snake River. A Native man told him that he was going “the wrong way,” alluding to the white man’s path of destruction. In Montana, along the Missouri, some white men with whom he was playing darts suddenly grew hostile when he confessed his fondness for Joe Biden. (They share a stutter.) He was in Memphis on Election Day and in New Orleans for the Inauguration, where he watched Black kids popping celebratory wheelies on Bourbon Street. A bull shark bumped his hull in the Gulf; a pod of dolphins provided an escort. Moore carried a Sharpie with him so that well-wishers could inscribe messages in the canoe’s interior. A man named Carlos quoted a line that he misattributed to Barry Goldwater; another cited Ben Franklin on the value of friendship. Moore lingered for a full month in friendly Demopolis, Alabama, on the Tombigbee, and got vaccinated. He managed not to capsize until reaching Lake Erie, this October. (He almost swamped later, off the Upper West Side, where he got spun around, started taking on water, and summoned help from the N.Y.P.D.)

“In bright sun, you’re everybody’s friend in a red canoe,” Moore said last week, after beaching in Piermont, New York, twenty-four miles north of the Battery. “When the weather turns, people are suspicious: ‘Who would be out there in these conditions?’” The conditions on this day were cloudy and near freezing, but a stranger standing on a dock, upon learning Moore’s destination, responded with a shout of “Outstanding!”

Moore, now a boyish fifty, was wearing a windbreaker over a wetsuit. He had reason to expect a warm reception in Piermont: Dick Conant had

beached in that exact spot and befriended a local family in 2014, en route to his presumed demise. Moore billeted with the same family, where a boy who only vaguely recalled charming Conant as a toddler peppered the new visitor with questions about geography and wildlife. Moore mentioned the dolphin pod, and called up a video on his iPhone—“Let me see! Let me see!” the boy’s younger brother exclaimed—to prove it. “And then there was a gator, on Pontchartrain, but that’s another story,” Moore said.

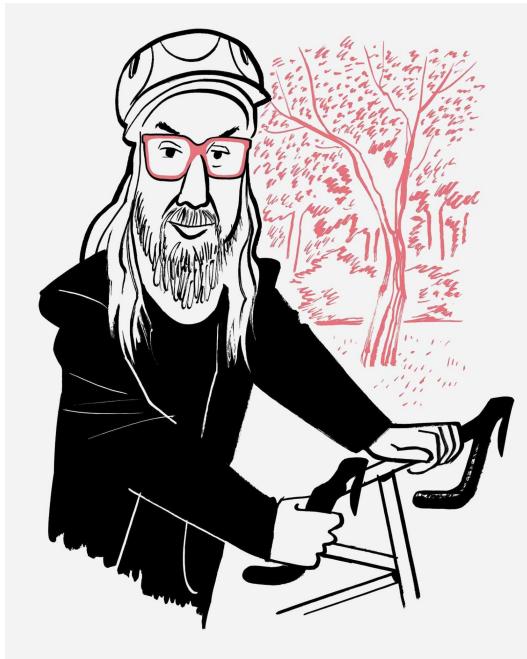
The boys went to bed, and their father retrieved a cocktail shaker and set about making gimlets. The best bar in America this was not, but it would have to do. Moore produced a couple of Montecristos in a ziplock bag, gifts from the husband of an Army Corps engineer in West Virginia that he’d been saving for the occasion. “Dick would have loved this,” he said, as a barge slid south in the distant channel. “I wouldn’t be here without him.” ♦

Monsters of Rock Dept.

- [J Mascis Puts Out Energy](#)

By [Nick Paumgarten](#)

When Dinosaur Jr. goes out on tour, J Mascis, the band's guitarist and principal singer and songwriter, takes along a bicycle. "Biking has helped me get through the pandemic," he said on a recent sunny Sunday afternoon, in his halting monotone. "My only social media is Strava. This year is my most miles ever. I'm approaching five thousand."



J Mascis Illustration by João Fazenda

He was standing with his bike on a patch of lawn near Strawberry Fields, in Central Park, while his wife, Luisa, and his fourteen-year-old son, Rory, played in the grass with a friend's miniature Dachshund. Passersby made a fuss over the puppy but not over Mascis, in spite of his glum-wizard bearing. He has long white hair and a gray beard, and wore pink-rimmed glasses that complemented his purple helmet. "I have lots of bikes," he said. "This is my tour bike." It was all steel—better for the wear and tear of the load-out—and had pedals patterned with images of doughnuts.

He and his family had spent the night in a hotel next to the Beacon Theatre. Bob Dylan was in town. "He seems like he doesn't ever want to go home," Mascis said. "I understand that now, as I get older. Being home for two years is hard. I'd never done it, not since high school."

Dinosaur Jr. (Mascis, the bassist Lou Barlow, and the drummer known as Murph) had performed in Brooklyn the previous night. “It feels weird but good,” he said, about playing in front of real people again. “Last night was the best one. There was even a stage dive.” Earlier in the year, after releasing the album “Sweep It Into Space,” the band had streamed a live performance from an empty park. “I was exhausted—putting out so much energy without any coming back.”

Mascis lives in Amherst, where he grew up. When he was a teen-ager, he sometimes came down to the city to see hardcore bands like U.K. Subs, Anti-Nowhere League, and Minor Threat. He had his own hardcore band, Deep Wound, but then formed Dinosaur, in 1984. The group quickly wore out its welcome at the clubs in Massachusetts. “We were really loud and had no fans,” Mascis said. “It was a bad combination.”

Eventually Mascis moved to New York, and the band began building a following. He enrolled at Hunter College—“only because my father would pay for me to exist if I went to college”—and later rented an apartment on East Twenty-second Street. “I had a good system,” he said. “Two days here, five in Amherst. It gave me the sensation of moving. I got more bored here, in the city. My friends were always working. They had to have too many jobs, to be able to afford to live here. I’d hang out all day watching TV, waiting.”

This time around, in the city, he’d done some cycling, using Google Maps to piece together viable routes, but not much else. “I don’t like museums,” he said. “I feel instantly tired. I check out guitar shops, but it’s weird now. Everything’s weird.”

Weird for sure. Travel, people, cities, the news—

“Just, guitar shops.”

Luisa and Rory left to get some pizza. Mascis set off on the Park loop, pedalling past clots of pedestrians and other cyclists. He had hardly ever spent time in the Park. “It always felt stupid,” he said. “It seems fake. I can just go to Amherst and walk in the woods.”

He may never have hung out at Strawberry Fields, but he remembered when John Lennon was shot, in 1980—or really just the relief of being let out of school early the next day, amid the grief of a hippie town. “Now everybody cries when they hear ‘Imagine,’ ” he said. “I don’t really feel anything. What makes me tear up is ‘Can’t Tell No One,’ by Negative Approach.”

Round and round went the doughnuts as he swung past the wreckage of Lasker Rink and around the top of the Park. Back on the West Side, a few miles closer to five thousand and within earshot of a man playing the “Godfather” theme on a *dan bau*, he stopped to rest.

In 1995, at the height of Dinosaur’s popularity and MTV ubiquity, he recalled, “I was just bummed out in general. Depressed. Jaded by music. It was the classic ‘I’ve got some money, but I still feel terrible.’ ” A friend told him to check out Mata Amritanandamayi, the Hindu spiritual teacher, known as Amma—the hugging saint. She had an audience at a Universalist church a few blocks from Strawberry Fields. “It was crowded and crazy. There was a really long line. I bailed and went to see her a week later in Boston instead. It was a lot more mellow.” He became a devotee. “In the late nineties, I followed her around on tour. I’d book shows to go where she’d be.”

He went on, “I’ve had over a hundred hugs. They’re all different. Sometimes I cry, sometimes I’m happy. It’s kind of whatever you need. Whatever you’re ready for.” ♦

Poems

- “[Winter Solstice](#)”
- “[Calypso Bean](#)”

By [Henri Cole](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Audio: Read by the author.

Claire says the day will be one second longer.
Darkness will no longer exceed light.
But the weather is abysmal,
so hatred of gloom is not an option. I want to live
to be ninety-five, too, and still be assembling
words into music and truth. For now,
I regard a conference of stars, with fast-moving clouds.
Sometimes my dreams are like explosion pits,
with scary lava. Yet the Earth remains constant,
tilting away from the sun and back,
like a robin to a bare branch.
Be somebody with a body, the stars command;
Don't be a nobody. I know them by heart,
as they sink and as they rise.

By [Melissa Ginsburg](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Audio: Read by the author.

I ordered the seeds months before quarantine
orca-marked yin-yangs
months before we found our black-and-white dog
spotted like a bean brought him home
between the planting and the harvest

shelling time he took a fallen bean in his mouth
and held it under his tongue all afternoon
crying to it as he does to his most precious possessions
dead hummingbird plush foot torn from the toy alligator
a bite of rib eye fallen to the floor

too good to swallow panic of holding
frenzied whimper no place safer than the mouth
but the mouth is not safe enough the mouth
cannot stop time he cries and paces with his bean
he digs frantic for a burial place

abandons the new holes cries in his keeping
the bean smooth on his tongue
and crucial I tell him
small dog: the seeds were already here

time is legume-smooth is meal and germ
time is high-contrast patterned like a whale
beneath which the interior winds around the future
in the form of a tendril

sun dirt it grows a copy of itself
which is also itself
the dirt is as safe as the mouth

Profiles

- [Alison Roman Just Can't Help Herself](#)

By [Lauren Collins](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Alison Roman approves of creamed greens, knobby lemons, and iceberg lettuce. She's a slicer of onions, not a dicer; a "ride-or-die corner person" when it comes to lasagnas and cakes. She doesn't sift flour, soak beans, or peel ginger. Instapots are a no, as are runny dressings, tomatoes on sandwiches, apples as snacks, and drinks served up. Breakfast is savory. Naps are naked. Showers are "objectively boring" and inferior to baths. The thing to do, according to Roman, is to start the water, put on a towel, and head back into the kitchen. The amount of time it takes to fill the tub is roughly equivalent to the time it takes to tear up a loaf of stale bread, for croutons fried in chicken fat.

"You either like my style or you don't, you're into the vibe or not," Roman told me, in October, sitting on a low-slung moss-colored velveteen chaise longue in a corner of her apartment, in Brooklyn's Boerum Hill. She had moved in a few months earlier, having outgrown a smaller nearby apartment and its snug, Internet-famous kitchen. FreshDirect bags that she had used to haul her belongings were still visible in a corner. The bones of the new place were industrial chic: exposed pipes, a brick wall painted white. Roman had added hanging plants, a rattan Papasan chair, and a modular sofa she got from Joybird, giving the loft-style living area a seventies-folksinger energy.

Dusk was falling. Marigolds sat on a coffee table in a green glass vase. Roman had just lit a candle and was playing moody music. Eighteen months after a disastrous interview and its attendant miseries—"I was single, I was cancelled, I was in a pandemic"—she was feeling reflective. "The only way I will be successful is if I'm myself, because (a) I can have a really shitty attitude if somebody asks me to do something I don't want to do and I can't be myself, and (b) there's so much noise out there, so many people that develop recipes, so many places that you can find one."

It's hard, even for Roman, to put a concise label on what she does. She's always a cook, often a writer, occasionally a performer, and never a pushover, even when she's getting in her own way. "In a world where

everyone feels the need to be excessively polite, she's excessively herself," David Cho, a business adviser who consults on her projects, told me. Roman made her name as a food columnist and the host of cooking videos for *Bon Appétit* and the *Times*. Her cookbooks, "Dining In" (2017) and "Nothing Fancy" (2019), have together sold around four hundred and fifty thousand copies. She also maintains a popular Instagram account ("Does broccoli undo alcohol? 🤔"), a YouTube channel (half a million views for a summer pasta salad), and a monthly newsletter (titled, somewhat pissily, "A Newsletter"). She is home cooking's most relentless polemicist, pairing a preference for high-acid, crunchy, creamy, herby, briny, chili-flaky food with salty takes.

Roman writes in the preface to "Nothing Fancy" that she has "always been allergic to the word 'entertaining.'" Yet teaching her audience how to entertain—even if she calls it "having people over"—is a large part of what she does. The distinction seems to be about the appearance of caring overly much. In Roman's world, an admission of effort must be offset by an ungiven fuck. "Roasting a nice chicken for people is such a good way to say, 'I love you,'" she writes. "I recently found this note to myself scrawled on the back of an electrical bill that I had probably forgotten to pay, written one night after a dinner party." If Roman is putting out little things for people to eat, she's calling them "snacks," not canapés. If she's batching up Martinis, she'll be serving them in a repurposed flower vase.

Roman's studied imperfectionism lowers the threshold for emulation, creating a strong sense of intimacy with her fans. "They have to care about you for them to care about the chicken," she told me. Ina Garten was half a century into her career before she publicly discussed her decision not to have children. Roman, who is thirty-six, will accompany a recipe for matzo-ball soup with her feelings about "injecting myself with hormones that will encourage my ovaries to produce more eggs than usual so that a nice doctor can go into my body, pluck them from my insides and freeze them for a later date." Garten gave us the dish that became known as Engagement Roast Chicken; Roman writes of Goodbye Meatballs, named after a dinner so bad it may have got her dumped.

This year, at least five American adults dressed up as Alison Roman for Halloween. In Roman's home office, she has a framed note hanging above

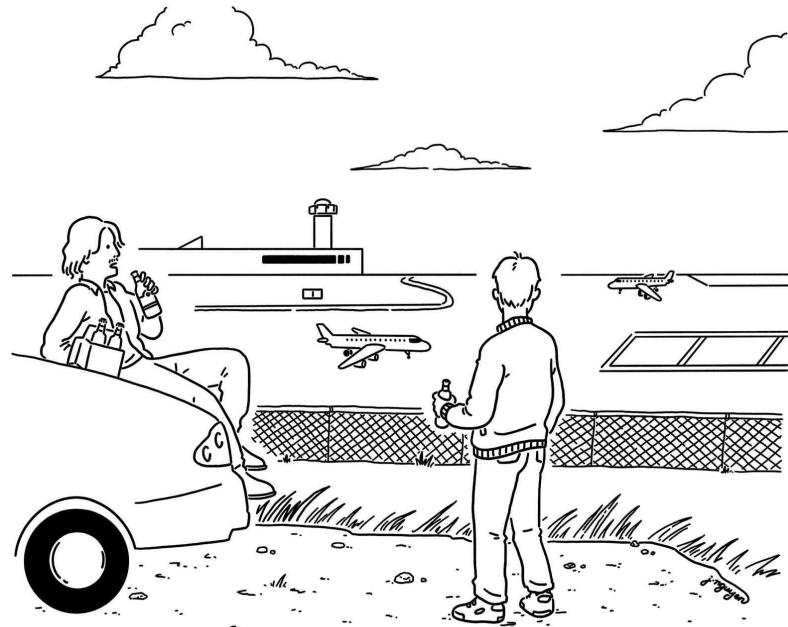
her desk. It's handwritten on thick card stock with a lengthy monogram: "*SENT WITH LOVE AND HUGS FROM THE DESK OF TAYLOR SWIFT.*" The note begins, "Full disclosure, this is a full fan letter." Swift's favorite Alison Roman dishes, it turns out, are Baked Ziti, Tomato-Poached Fish with Chili Oil and Herbs, and a Caramelized Shallot Pasta that became a viral hit early in 2020. The recipe for the pasta was simple: bucatini, if you could find it, with a jammy sauce of tomato paste, heaps of alliums, and a whole tin of anchovies. "The quintessential Roman recipe has an accessibility and a complexity, and, much like with all of Alison Roman, there are two things in direct conflict with each other that don't seem like they should work," Cho said.

Shortly after the recipe was published, the pandemic shifted Roman's field of expertise—dining in—to the center of the conversation. She seemed to be everywhere: drinking spritzes with Katie Couric during an Instagram pasta tutorial; comparing different types of tinned fish, remotely, on "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert"; cooking chicken with lentils on Zoom and popping a caramelized onion into her mouth as though she were taking a shot. Eventually, the shallot pasta would be NYT Cooking's most popular recipe of 2020, a tubular strand connecting social media to solitude and celebrity to civilian, with Roman occupying the charged territory in between.

"The shallot lady is about to get caught up in something," the comedian and actor Brittani Nichols tweeted, on May 8th. "There's simply no way a white woman can survive this kind of attention." The joke was apt: that week, an online publication called the New Consumer featured an interview with Roman in which she blasted the tidying expert Marie Kondo and the model and cookbook author Chrissy Teigen, making a mess of her own career in the process. Roman says she didn't realize that she had chosen two Asian women as the target of her criticism—Kondo is Japanese, and Teigen's mother is from Thailand—but plenty of people did, detecting in her comments mean-spiritedness or casual racism. Teigen, with more than twelve million followers, tweeted her disappointment.

Maybe because people were starved for scandal at the height of the lockdown, the back-and-forth between Roman and Teigen dominated various sectors of Twitter (food, feminist, antiracist, New York media,

celebrity gossip), and overflowed into the general press (“Good Morning America” devoted a segment to “Alison Roman’s foodie fight with Chrissy Teigen”). Maybe because in some corners Roman had a reputation for insensitivity, few of her peers leaped to her defense. She had lived by the social-media sword and was now dying a slow and gory death by it. “alison roman may be cancelled but the turmeric stain on my mattress from when i made one of her chicken recipes and threw up is forever,” Lauren Budd, a TV writer, tweeted, garnering more than a thousand likes. The social-media maelstrom eddied until everyone who went anywhere near it had been somehow damaged.



I like to come out here and watch planes sit on the tarmac for hours, then see everyone get kicked off and rebooked for tomorrow.
Cartoon by Jeremy Nguyen

When I met Roman, this fall, she compared the experience to that of a lobster in a pot of cold water. “You bring it up to a boil, they never know,” she said. “And then they’re dead.”

This fall, Roman was shooting a Thanksgiving special for her YouTube series, “Home Movies,” which she launched in January. The series is shot in a vérité style, with free-flowing banter from the sidelines, overlaid in production with cutaways and meme-friendly graphics. In the development phase, Roman had created a mood board; it referenced “High Maintenance” and “Broad City” rather than cooking shows. She wanted the videos to feel

“more lived-in, more real,” her personality less sanitized than “the really wholesome version” of herself in the videos she’d created for other outlets.

Roman sits awkwardly within the tradition of the “domestic goddess”: the expert on food and festive gathering who is always a woman and who has historically often been attractive, wealthy, and white. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation once noted that Roman has been called “the millennial generation’s Nigella Lawson”—a clichéd description that’s nonetheless helpful in understanding what categories Roman is operating within and against. The classic domestic goddess orients herself toward others; her register is the second person (“You take the Parmesan . . .”). Roman’s pedagogy, on the other hand, is proudly egocentric. Hospitality is foremost about pleasing herself. “And then to serve it, if I were having you over, which I’m not, I would probably just, like, bring this whole pot to the table,” she says in one video. “And then I would set out cheese, with a Microplane, and you can do it yourself, ’cause I’m not your mom.”

Embedded in Roman’s recipes, there is a lot of anxiety about money, class, success, travel, and real estate, and about staying true to some primal early-adult identity as she has gained access to those things. For all her renegade attitude, she is strongly concerned with perception. She often seems to be working away from things she finds off-putting, whether that’s Martha Stewart-esque chatelaine style (reminiscing about eating tomatoes at a “fantasy upstate house,” she’s sure to note that it “definitely did not belong to any of us”) or the earnest PBS travelogue voice (“Sure, I could tell a story about how this Very Good Salmon, smothered in a tangy dressing made from whole lemons, diced shallot and just the correct amount of fresh oregano, reminds me of a trip to Greece I once took. But I am an honest woman and I have never been to Greece, so consider yourself spared”).

In New York, Roman told me that she had a fraught history with Thanksgiving, having “spun every spin” over years of producing seasonal content for various employers. (She said that she’d decided to quit *Bon Appétit* during a meeting for a Thanksgiving issue. “Everyone was shitting on every idea: ‘How do we make it new? How do we make it different?’ ”) In 2020, she sat the holiday out. This year, fully freelance, she was doing it her way, which turned out to be pretty classical—a “regular-ass Thanksgiving,” she was calling it. The shoot was to take place over two days

at her apartment. She would prepare the entire meal by herself in sequential order—no sub-ins or switch-outs—and then serve it, on the second evening, to a group of friends.

Just before 10 A.M. on the first day of the shoot, Roman came home with the shopping, which she had done in her neighborhood, camera in tow. Now she was in her kitchen, barefoot, hydrating from a plastic pint container. Crumbs and garlic skins rustled underfoot. The atmosphere was orderly and relaxed, with the slightly slaphappy energy that comes when a group of people agree to be shut in a warm room for hours on end.

“He filmed the first part with mascara on my face,” Roman was saying to the crew, which included David Cho; Dan Hurwitz, the director; a cameraman; a sound person; and Roman’s assistant, Jane Morgan. “It’s a boring story, but it’s because I wear a serum that makes my face look healthy and dewy and—”

“You’re not wrong about that story,” Cho said, making everybody laugh.

Roman’s first task was to make turkey stock, roasting the wings before throwing them in the pot with the neck and the liver—“not required of anybody,” but worth it, she swore. While the stock was simmering, she seasoned the turkey. “I like doing this so much,” she said, gently rubbing a mixture of brown sugar, pepper, and kosher salt into the crevices of the bird. “It’s kind of romantic . . . you’re taking a lot of time and tender care with something.”

She even appeared to be blushing, although it could have been the heat and the smoke. “It’s honestly like decorating a cake with sprinkles,” she said, modelling a cupping motion with her hand. Alert, even in the midst of doing so many things, to the possibility that the metaphor might not make sense to inexperienced cooks, she segued to a new one: “Almost like if you’ve ever built a sandcastle.” She carried the turkey to the refrigerator, clearing out some vegetables to make room: “Step aside, leeks!”

The next day, the crew convened at 8 A.M. The day’s agenda included an apple tart, two pans of stuffing, buttermilk mashed potatoes, roasted mushrooms and green beans, leek-and-greens gratin, roasted squash, two

salads (“making two is optional, but making one is mandatory”), and, of course, the turkey and gravy. Roman started with the tart, rolling out the dough, filling it with disks of apple, and sealing the crust with an egg wash.

“If you don’t have a hairbrush, use your fingers,” she said. “If you don’t have a pastry brush, use your fingers. If you don’t have a paintbrush, use your fingers. I bet there’s some sicko out there who would watch five hours of applying egg wash.”

“Hey, we don’t kink-shame here,” Cho chimed in.

Between takes, Roman checked her phone, grousing at a negative comment on her Instagram feed and poring over an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* that wondered how Grey Poupon had managed to sell out its “terrible mustard wine” in one day. The article concluded that the product’s success was “possibly due in part to the fact that cooking celebrity Alison Roman peddled it in an ad during a frittata demonstration video.”

“Do you think Grey Poupon will give us a raise?” she said.

It was five o’clock—time to get started on the sides.

“Mashed potatoes, let’s fucking go!”

At her best, Roman is the loose, whistle-twirling swim instructor of the kitchen, urging you to jump on in, the water’s fine! Her audience is made up of home cooks of all levels, but she is especially sympathetic to the misgivings of beginners. She tends to work with ingredients that are readily available, validating omissions and substitutions, respecting budgets, and keeping the dishwashing burden light. Attempting shrimp cocktail at home? Don’t bother deveining. Brining a chicken? Use a ziplock and whatever pickle brine, buttermilk, or beer you’ve got in the fridge.

Roman typifies a narrow demographic while appealing to a wide audience—her own cohort; younger people, who aspire to her sophistication; older people, who’d like to recapture their quasi-bohemian youth. At her place, it’s nighttime, the plates don’t match, your phone’s on the table, and the candle’s burning down to a nub. Her high-spirited, offhand quality makes you feel

that the most important element to any meal is gameness. If you could “throw your own hot dog party,” why *wouldn’t* you?



“Be honest. I don’t want to order anything monogrammed if our marriage is on shaky ground.”
Cartoon by William Haefeli

Watching her cook, I learned that you don’t have to take the seeds out of a honeynut squash before roasting it, that you can avoid gummy mashed potatoes by warming up the milk before you add it, and that the old trick of adding a hint of soy sauce to a green-bean casserole—from a recipe on the Campbell’s soup can—works equally well for a modern cousin, Frizzled Green Beans, Mushrooms, and Onions. “What makes Alison really unique is blending that high level of detail with a totally casual tone and attitude,” Francis Lam, the editor-in-chief of Roman’s cookbook publisher, Clarkson Potter, told me. “She never makes her recipes feel like an imposition.”

Preparing one of the Thanksgiving salads, Roman said, “If you think about what is going on here, it’s literally just me talking to myself for forty-eight hours.” She plunged a thermometer into the breast of the turkey, breaking into giggles. “One-fifty-five, baby!”

Roman’s mother once compared her palate to that of “a little deer on a salt lick.” She grew up in Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley, where her favorite restaurant was Tail o’ the Pup, a hot-dog stand shaped like a hot dog. She liked to eat chicken bouillon straight, dipping her fingers into the

packet. “I always had a large milk-carton-shaped box of Goldfish from Costco under my bed for snacking, which is a gross thing to admit,” she recalled. As a Southern Californian, she had access to fine produce and an array of international cuisines. She learned to tell Thai basil from Italian basil and stained her clothes with pomegranates so often that her mother stopped buying them. Her father told me, “I remember going to sushi and Alison was eating urchin.”

Roman’s father worked as a salesman, her mother as a court reporter. (The family’s last name was originally Romanoff, but Alison’s paternal great-grandfather “offed the off” after immigrating to America from Russia as a child.) Roman went to a private Catholic high school, where she tried hard to fit in, blowing her Jamba Juice paychecks on scented body lotion and attending a rave in the desert with friends “after getting invited by two dudes we met in front of the movie theatre.”

Eventually, she started to want to be somebody other than “Valley Ali.” She bounced between community colleges. She had an older boyfriend who was into food; he introduced her to Sona, in West Hollywood—“the most ambitious restaurant to open in Los Angeles in a long while,” according to a 2003 review in the *Los Angeles Times*. The restaurant, run by David and Michelle Myers, had a reputation for “intricate, cerebral cuisine”: thirty-six-course tasting menus, “albacore scattered with pumpkin seeds and wasabi caviar.” Ron Mendoza, a former Sona pastry chef, recalled, “A lot of places just wanted to please anyone that came in the door, but the idea was more, O.K., you’re coming into our house right now and kind of have to accept our rules.” One day, she knocked on Sona’s back door; Mendoza answered, and she told him that she was thinking about culinary school. He advised her to save her money, and hired her.

At first, Roman worked in a high-end pastry shop that the Myerse also ran. She spent her days cutting marshmallows. (“They wiggle around when you put your knife in—never try,” she recalled.) “I walked home crying every day, but not once did I think about quitting,” Roman said. “I figured, I’ll stop crying when they stop being mean to me, and they’ll stop being mean to me when I stop screwing up.” She remembers herself, at this time, as “an annoying little puppy” in black-framed glasses and thick bangs. Karen Yoo,

who supervised her at the restaurant, added that she could be headstrong. She joked, “I named my first gray hair Alison Roman.”

Every afternoon, Roman would run a tray of petits fours to Sona for the dinner service. “I loved the energy of the kitchen, and how fast people were moving, and how gruff and short with each other they were,” she said. She soon became a cook for the restaurant. She lived with two co-workers and, in their free time, they participated in seaside workouts that David Myers had dreamed up after reading a book about Navy Seal Team Six. “Mara dubois / tangerine saffron granita / cardamom i.c. / basil puree / black olive powder / chai spiced foam / orange tuile,” reads a page from a notebook that Roman kept in 2005. Another entry, involving a cake made from beets and white chocolate, reads as though she were trolling her future self.

After a couple of years at Sona, Roman wrote “fourteen thousand e-mails” to Daniel Patterson, the chef at Coi, in San Francisco. (“Never responded to one of ’em. Fuck that guy!”) She moved to the Bay Area anyway, where she worked as the pastry chef at a Peter Thiel-backed club and restaurant called Frisson, and ran the pastry department at Quince, an Italian-influenced contemporary-Californian restaurant that now has three Michelin stars. Roman moved to New York in 2009, seeking “general life change and exploration.” Soon, she landed a part-time job as a “Milk Maid” at Milk Bar, the trendy dessert shop. She took on a second gig, at Pies ’n’ Thighs, in Williamsburg, rolling buttermilk biscuits eight hours a day. *Bon Appétit* was looking for a recipe tester, and Roman, looking for a way out of restaurant kitchens, went for an interview. Roman writes in “Dining In,” “They showed me a photo of biscuits and asked, ‘Can you make a recipe for biscuits that look like this?’ ” She got the job, immortalizing the experience in the introduction to a recipe that she calls Luckiest Biscuits in America.

At the time, *Bon Appétit* was led by Adam Rapoport, a former style editor. Critics have said that, under Rapoport, the magazine developed a clubby ethos, which manifested itself in everything from the internal culture to a video on pho; members of the staff said that employees of color were disrespected and underpaid for video appearances. (Like this magazine, *Bon Appétit*, for which I once wrote an article, is owned by Condé Nast. The company says that it conducted an extensive study of *Bon Appétit*’s video pay practices, and found that employees had been fairly compensated.

Rapoport resigned last year after the writer Tammie Teclemariam tweeted a 2004 picture of him dressed, for Halloween, as a “Puerto Rican.”) Roman rose steadily at the magazine. In four years, she went from recipe tester to senior food editor, evolving from wide-eyed transplant (“My job does not suck,” she marvels, in an early video) to cultural arbiter (“Every Dinner Party Needs a Pre-Game”).

In 2018, she joined the *Times* as a food columnist. (“Alison Roman! Alison Roman!” read the headline on a piece announcing her appointment.) At the *Times*, she specialized in visually enticing recipes that brought a sense of youthful glamour to the staid domain of weeknight cooking. If you wanted to bake some salmon, you went to Mark Bittman; if you went to Alison Roman, you wanted to bake some salmon. She developed a robust following on social media. “Alison has a very strong visual sense and is a quick wit—a combination that made her a trailblazer on Instagram,” Lam told me. Home cooks made her recipes and posted pictures; Roman laboriously reposted their handiwork to her account, showing her fans love while making the agnostics wonder if they were missing out on something.

Roman’s interview with Dan Frommer of the New Consumer was intended as a business move. She and David Cho had been tossing around the idea of adding some merchandise to her Web site. “He was, like, ‘Hey, I’m gonna introduce you to my friend Dan. He does this newsletter that’s for people in the tech world and business, and not really your demographic, and I think it’d be really good for you,’ ” Roman told me. “Normally I would have passed and just been, like, ‘What the fuck is the New Consumer?’ ”

The interview began with the usual pandemic chitchat. As the conversation picked up, it centered on Roman’s desire to build a bigger business without sacrificing her principles or the messiness that had made her successful. “Is there anything you really want to do or really don’t want to do?” Frommer asked. Roman had sold a TV show to Hulu, though she said production had been stalled by *COVID*. She was collaborating with a cookware company on a limited-edition line of vintage-inspired spoons. She dreamed of buying a house upstate.

She also knew what she didn’t want her future to resemble. “The idea that when Marie Kondo decided to capitalize on her fame and make stuff that

you can buy, that is completely antithetical to everything she's ever taught you," Roman said. "I'm like, damn, bitch, you fucking just sold out immediately! Someone's like, 'You should make stuff,' and she's like, 'Okay, slap my name on it, I don't give a shit!'"

She continued, "Like, what Chrissy Teigen has done is so crazy to me. She had a successful cookbook. And then it was like: Boom, line at Target. Boom, now she has an Instagram page that has over a million followers where it's just, like, people running a content farm for her. That horrifies me and it's not something that I ever want to do. I don't aspire to that. But like, who's laughing now? Because she's making a ton of fucking money."

At first, Roman thought that the interview had gone well. She was getting positive feedback for having spoken frankly about money. Still, there were rumblings of doubt on Twitter: Wasn't all the high-minded talk about creative integrity a bit rich coming from someone with a limited-edition vintage-spoon line? Roman accused one critic of bullying a successful woman, then tweeted, "Just wishing I had someone to hold my hand during baby's first internet backlash."

Roman decided to get off social media for a while. She had just baked a chocolate cake for a friend's bachelorette party when her manager called, saying that Chrissy Teigen's manager had told her that Teigen's feelings were hurt by Roman's comments. (Kondo has not said much about any of this, but recently told the Daily Beast that "it's completely natural for everyone to have different opinions.") "This is a huge bummer and hit me hard," Teigen soon tweeted, adding that she "genuinely loved everything about Alison." Roman dashed off an apology tweet to Teigen and went to bed. "I put my phone away, and then woke up the next morning to a bajillion texts, more texts than I had ever seen in my life," she recalled. "And I picked up my phone and was just, like, 'Holy Moses, oh, my God, now we're talking about race.'"

On May 11th, Roman issued a lengthy formal apology, saying that she had been "stupid, careless and insensitive," and that "the fact that it didn't occur to me that I had singled out two Asian women is one hundred percent a function of my privilege." (She had also made a comment—"For the low, low price of \$19.99, please to buy my cutting board"—that she said was

based on an inside joke about an Eastern European cookbook.) Roman told me that it hadn't occurred to her that Teigen would take offense. "It was, like, 'You're a hot billionaire supermodel married to John Legend, and I'm here covered in cat hair and a total mess,'" she said.

The *Times* suspended Roman's column, a move to which Teigen objected, setting off another cycle of headlines. (This spring, Teigen stepped away from Twitter amid allegations of bullying, acknowledging that earlier in her career she had been "a troll, full stop.") In one of the more incisive analyses of the affair, Navneet Alang, at Eater, wrote, "The backlash to Roman's comments, like most backlashes, was a combination of legitimate grievance and the way that Twitter refracts and concentrates reaction." Alang concluded, "If it felt as though people had been sitting around waiting for her to mess up, it was probably because many of them had."

"I never thought I would be at the center of this," Roman told me, in the immediate aftermath. "I thought I could hide behind chicken thighs my whole life and be, like, 'Oh, whatever, I'm just over here making food,' and now I'm in a very important conversation that I feel very ill-equipped to handle. But I'm going to handle it." She continued, "Sometimes I wake up and I'm, like, 'Oh, my God, is this navigable, and will I ever recover? Did I throw my entire life away?' And then there's also, like, 'That's a pretty big cop-out, and, if you're gonna fucking step into it, step into it.'"



"But, Burr, do you demand satisfaction so much as to go to New Jersey for it?"
Cartoon by Brendan Loper

I decided to write about Roman in March of 2020, a few months before the New Consumer debacle. I didn't own either of her books, and I don't watch many cooking videos, but I had made and enjoyed a number of her recipes. (The Swiss Chard and Mushroom Galette ought to be up there with the Caramelized Shallot Pasta.) Usually, it takes some time to locate the pressure points of a story, and to find sources willing to speak about them, but, in this case, almost as soon as I started reporting, my phone and e-mail lit up. I heard from a number of women working in the food world; some were white, others were Black and brown. Several spoke on the record; others preferred not to, knowing that their comments would inevitably be construed as personal grievance when, in fact, they were less interested in singling Roman out than in making a wider critique of the food world. Two themes emerged: the sense that Roman was both a product and a perpetuator of structural racism in food media, and a wish that her sense of social responsibility was commensurate with the size of her platform. Osayi Endolyn, who writes about food and identity, told me, "You can't really explain the phenomenon of Alison Roman as a figurehead without understanding how whiteness functions in America, and how whiteness functions in food and food media."

In contrast to the geek-out approach favored by writers like J. Kenji López-Alt, Roman often presents herself as less informed than she is, or maybe ought to be. “I am not a vegetable scientist (lol) so I am not saying this is a FACT,” she writes, “but it *feels* like green beans have an especially tough, highly impenetrable exterior, but when they are warm, they seem to really accept flavor much better than when cold.” For all her outspokenness, she is reticent on certain issues. She’ll recommend a brand of pepper mill (Unicorn), or tell you what lipstick she’s currently wearing (Lasting Passion, a “really awesome orangey-red” from *MAC*), but she has little to say about the sustainability of tuna. “I speak to what I know,” Roman told me, adding that accessibility and affordability are also important aspects of the conversation. “I’m not a scientist, I’m not a food reporter, I’m not spending my time doing that research. How far does my responsibility extend?”

As the writer Andrea Nguyen has observed, the brash, prescriptive “bro tone” that has served many a male food-world personality so well is increasingly becoming gender-neutral. Roman has been one of its premier female purveyors, rarely shying away from—and occasionally picking—a fight. “Rice has always seemed like filler to me,” she wrote in 2016’s “Dining In,” dismissing the world’s second most important cereal crop as though she were swiping left.

At the end of 2018, Roman débuted what became known as #TheStew (né Spiced Chickpea Stew with Coconut and Turmeric). To make it, you soften garlic, ginger, and onions in olive oil. You add chickpeas, frying them with red-pepper flakes and turmeric, then simmer them in coconut milk. After wilting in greens, you serve the dish with mint leaves, a dollop of yogurt, and toasted flatbread. The recipe was healthful. It was warming. It was, to some readers, obviously an Indian chana masala or *chole* or, alternatively, a Jamaican chickpea curry. “This is neither a soup nor a stew, it’s called chana masala, and Indians have been eating it for centuries. Seriously, ☺,” an Instagram user named Priya Ahuja Donatelli wrote, in the comments of a post in which Roman had announced a giveaway with an equity-focussed spice company, inviting readers to respond with their “favorite ideas for dismantling the patriarchy OR cooking with turmeric.”

Roman was speaking the language of social justice, but she wasn’t crediting the cultures from which she drew certain techniques and ingredients. She

was shine theory in her head, but Sun Tzu in her heart. “I don’t read other cookbooks, I don’t follow anybody on Instagram,” she told me one day. “That clouds shit for me.” Nor did she acknowledge that her branding implied personal ownership over deep-rooted dishes. (“I wasn’t very thoughtful about it,” she said recently.)

“There’s a sense in editorial, publishing, and TV spaces that, if you are from a nonwhite background, what you talk about has to be generated from your identity in some way,” Endolyn told me. “But if you’re a white person you can go anywhere you want. You can talk about Asian cuisines, you can talk about African or African American cuisines, you can talk about South American cuisines. No one’s saying you can’t cook with turmeric—cook with turmeric, turn orange if you want to! The point is to recognize that people from nonwhite, non-Eurocentric cultures tend to be pigeonholed by their identity (which isn’t necessarily a measure of expertise) *and* not offered the same leeway to experiment, play, and ‘discover’ things.”

When Jezebel asked Roman about the issue of cultural appropriation, she dug in her heels. “Y’all, this is not a curry,” she said. “I’ve never made a curry.” She added, “I come from no culture. I have no culture. I’m like, vaguely European.” Through years of being told online that she was fat, that her pants were ugly, that her voice was annoying, Roman had learned to tune out negative feedback, positioning herself in opposition to whomever she perceived as a hater. She sometimes lent her support to progressive causes, but she was also hesitant to stray from her area of expertise, once telling *Cherry Bombe*, “Compared to a lot of women in our field and industry, I am definitely on the quieter side of politics, but that’s mostly because of my educational level.”

Her justifications and her critics’ objections converged at a certain point, with everyone agreeing that she just liked to make food that tasted good, without going much deeper. Her occasional attempts to take a more scholarly approach could feel half-hearted. “I’ve taken a negative public stance on rice in the past, and generally speaking, I stand by that stance,” she wrote in 2019’s “Nothing Fancy,” introducing a recipe inspired by *tahdig*, a Persian rice specialty. “But people can grow—so let me say this: Rice, sometimes you are great.” Her recipe, she said, “more or less gets the job done, without requiring the patience or technique (I have neither!).”

“Maybe that’s her genius, to say that the thing that she’s done exists in a complete vacuum,” the writer Alicia Kennedy told me. “It’s not new, but people don’t want new—they want what she’s selling.” You can detect the intentionality of her branding in her recipe titles and tags: The Only Piecrust, Everyone’s Favorite Celebration Cake, #TheStew, #TheCookies. “Low key, a lot of what I do is marketing,” Roman admitted to me one day, with typical frankness. She later added, “Marketing is not a pejorative.”

“The thing is that she *has* a culture, and it’s actually the dominant culture,” the food writer Charlotte Druckman told me. “It’s white-people food in that sort of aspirational, fratty, life-style-magazine area. And for her to call it ‘no culture’ is to dismiss the fact that she’s part of this cultural event.” Roman was willing to sound off on almost anything—why not a few words about the origins of turmeric? She was famously combative—why not fight a good fight, recognizing the flaws of a system that wasn’t her fault but nonetheless wasn’t fair? Why not make it her business to know what a *chole* is, if she’s getting paid to make chickpea stew?

In our early conversations, Roman claimed to understand, to some extent, the criticism. “I had a lot of friends—people of color—who were, like, ‘We experience this all the time,’ ” she told me, in April of 2020. “We do things for years and years, and all of a sudden a white person does it, and it’s, like, ‘Oh, look at this thing!’ ” But she was ambivalent about the charge of cultural appropriation. Eventually, she revised #TheStew’s headnote to include a reference to “stews found in South India and parts of the Caribbean.” Roman said that she had made the change because of the Internet outcry. “I didn’t call it a curry because it’s not a curry,” she said. “And I think that, if I *had* called it a curry, the same amount, if not more, people would have responded, ‘That’s not a real curry. Why are you calling it a curry?’ So, in that context, I could not win.”

Roman launched “A Newsletter” in June of 2020, acknowledging her choice of “a title so uncreative it could only have come from someone who never planned on launching a newsletter.” At first, it functioned both as a sort of missing-person bulletin, in which she could keep her fans updated on her whereabouts, professionally and emotionally, and as an instrument of penance, with which she would try to make amends. “While this newsletter is free and without a paywall, there will always be an option to subscribe for

a small donation, with 100% going to a rotating monthly charity,” she wrote in the first dispatch, which was about tuna salad, the only food, she wrote, that she’d recently been able to summon the will to make. She published her e-mail address, promising to read and respond to every message she received. Within a few months, though, one could detect hints of her old pugnaciousness intermingling with newfound caution. Writing in August about making bean salads at a shared vacation house, she acknowledged that “it might become apparent I am not cooking alone, and I refuse to pretend that I am for the sake of sparing my friends and myself a Covid-dining-related public shaming.”

According to Roman, the *Times* told her that August that it wasn’t bringing back her column. In an e-mail to me, she wrote that she’d been led to believe that she would be returning, “so didn’t think I needed to figure out a plan re: income (in retrospect, very naïve lol).” (A *Times* spokesperson said that Roman’s “column went on hiatus in May 2020. She informed us that September that she had decided to pursue other opportunities.”) Roman was now the sole proprietor of a business she had never really intended to launch. The product she needed to scale up and even disrupt was herself. “I’m not trying to pivot to being, like, ‘All right, buckle up, this is my new food blog, and I’m going to teach you about racism,’ ” she said last year. “It’s about continuing to be myself, a more sensitive version of myself.”

Roman also lost the TV show that she had signed on to do with Hulu. “Nobody felt comfortable saying, ‘We think what she did was wrong,’ but nobody wanted to support me, so they just dropped me,” she said.

Soon, Roman switched to a for-profit model for her newsletter, though she makes a contribution of at least two thousand dollars a month to charity. With subscribers numbering in the five digits, she earns considerably more money than she ever did as an employee at *Bon Appétit* or the *Times*. But, more than a year after What Happened (as she often refers to the events of May, 2020), she is still raw. In the weeks that followed the public turmoil, she told me that she was going to get a publicist, “because it’s very clear that I can’t do this on my own anymore.” She definitely didn’t get one, as an awkward interview with the comedian Ziwe Fumudoh, in June, 2020, demonstrated. (Roman said that she had hoped to prove, by going on the show, that she wasn’t running away from dialogue about race.)

At one point during the Thanksgiving shoot, she pulled me aside to express her anxieties. “I have this façade that everything’s O.K., but sometimes I feel like if you blow on it, it’ll all fall down,” she said. “I just have to accept the fact that, regardless of what I said, there would still be people who would be, like, ‘You’re an ignorant white lady.’ ” At another point, she added, “I still have not seen a successful story of a woman getting dragged to hell in the way that I was and then coming back publicly and being able to talk. It’s like you either have to slink away into oblivion or just pretend it never happened.”

Roman recently began work on a third cookbook, about desserts. She had signed on to do it in 2018 but deferred the contract last year, feeling too depleted to conjure up a new angle on cookies and cakes. “I’m just trying to have as much fun with it as possible, because, honestly, I could not get it up for another cookbook,” she told me. Looking at images for the project, she added, “I think cookbooks can be very lonely books.” She explained, “It’s generally just a person with a plate of food.” To counteract her boredom—with herself, with the style she had spawned—she was going for a whimsical, sensual look, “even though I hate the word ‘sensual,’ ” she said. There would be cornbread in a field! A floating pie! Pineapples in rowboats! Her first two books had been filled with realistic celebration, bringing the *FOMO* of Instagram into print. Now she was calling attention to the staginess of it all. “I can’t feed the machine anymore. I need to be a different machine,” she said.

Her idea of a good time was also changing: for a recent shoot, she’d asked her friends to bring their kids. “I’m a generation older than the hottest, youngest, coolest people right now,” she said. She told me about a recent conversation with a friend: “We were talking about how old people think we are. Because they’re all, like, twenty-six! And she was, like, ‘We came of age being young. And now we’re in this weird in-between stage where we aren’t young and sexy but also don’t have kids and haven’t transitioned to being hot moms.’ ”



"I'll let you kids in, but you're gonna have to pay taxes and deal with your own mortality."
Cartoon by Farley Katz

Last year, at the urging of her therapist, Roman took an Enneagram personality test. She found out that she's a Type Four, the Individualist, an "expressive, dramatic, self-absorbed, and temperamental" profile to which she strongly relates. "I'm so at odds with myself constantly," she told me. "I'm, like, 'When will it be enough, what will be enough, what will make me feel secure?' I have these issues with friendships and romantic relationships, the feeling that love is finite, the feeling that attention is finite, the feeling that there are only so many people that can share a space, and that I'm fighting for it all. It's psychotic, because if I were more of a secure person I could just be, like, 'Everyone can write a cookbook—who cares, I know I'm good.' "

Roman had been explicitly avoiding food that might revive the cultural-appropriation debate, sticking to Americana-style classics like shrimp cocktail and cinnamon rolls. The week before we met, though, she had published a newsletter titled "Gentle Lentils," about a dish she had cooked for friends after medical procedures. "It should come as no surprise that nothing about me, including the food I cook, could be described as gentle," she wrote. "But for those I love: I can be gentle! For those I love: I can cook gently!" She'd taken pains to provide cultural context, referring to the dish as *daal*. Some readers applauded her efforts. Others posted negative

comments. “In my heart of hearts, I was, like, ‘You fucking idiot. Don’t cook with lentils,’ ” she told me.

I asked why she had done it anyway.

“Because I don’t want to operate out of fear,” Roman said. She concluded, “It just goes to show that food is very sensitive for people, and they feel underrepresented if they see someone with a large platform not taking it seriously. But there’s also a part of me that’s, like, Can we all just lighten up? Can I make a pot of lentils? Call it whatever the fuck you want, I don’t care.”

At around eight-thirty on the second evening of the Thanksgiving shoot, Roman’s guests started drifting into her Brooklyn apartment. They poured themselves drinks from a bar that she had stocked with various kinds of vermouth. Roman slipped into her bedroom and emerged several minutes later, having traded her sweaty, smoky jeans and shirt for a cropped cardigan, a chartreuse strapless dress, and an ankle mike that made it look a little like she was under house arrest.

“Let’s start Thanksgiving!” Roman yelled, just past nine-thirty, leading everyone to the table. They were being filmed, but it was a real party, too. At Roman’s left were Michael Wooten, a marketing director at the art gallery Hauser & Wirth, and Wooten’s boyfriend, who had slid into his D.M.s after Roman tagged Wooten in her Instagram stories. At Roman’s right was her boyfriend of nine months, a financial-services entrepreneur. (They met on Raya, a membership-only dating app, during lockdown.)

“There’s red wine, there’s white wine, there’s orange wine, there’s sparkling wine,” Roman said, standing to propose a toast. “You know, because you brought most of it!” The party lasted until 2 A.M., with the last stragglers sprawled on the couch, listening to Sarah McLachlan. Roman passed out immediately, and her boyfriend took a picture—the filthy soles of her feet sticking out from under a white duvet.

The following morning, Roman was heading to the Catskills. Last winter, she had finally bought a ramshackle mixed-use Victorian at the main intersection of Bloomville, a hamlet of about two hundred people, in

Delaware County. We set out from Brooklyn in her white VW Tiguan. There were sunflower seeds in the crevices of the driver's seat, and a euro in one of the cup holders. (She had been to Greece, at last, over the summer, and was proud of herself that, in an attempt to draw some boundaries, she hadn't posted a thing about it.) The farther we got from the city, the brighter the leaves—a perfect ombré effect up the F.D.R. Drive, across the George Washington Bridge, and toward the Goshen Turnpike. "The house is quirky and it's old as hell and it's really interesting," Roman said. "I'm putting more money into it than I thought I was going to, but I think it wants to have new breath in it."

"Hey, girl!" someone called out to Roman as she pulled up to the gas pump at a service station in Delhi, the last town before Bloomville.

"Oh, hey, girl!" Roman replied. "Are you selling pies this weekend?"

A few minutes later, we pulled up to the house. Three narrow upper floors made up the residential area. On the ground floor was a retail space, which most recently housed Table on Ten, a locavore pizzeria and community space. Roman had bought the place for less than three hundred thousand dollars, inheriting with it an industrial-grade coffee machine and a wood-burning oven. She was planning to open a little market, selling pantry items. "If I want to do chicken broth, I'll just make it in my kitchen upstairs," she said. She was thinking of hosting small dinners once she got the dining room in shape. "I'm doing all these different things, and I'm not sure I would have taken any of those leaps had last year not happened," she said. "I'm trying to create things that will outlive this moment, and that will be able to exist without me."

Inside, the Roman trifecta—plants, candles, music—was in effect, and some sage sticks sat alongside a tarot deck on the coffee table. Some of the windows had been open for weeks, and it was cold. We bundled up and went to dinner at Brushland Eating House, a tavern owned by Roman's friends Sohail and Sara Zandi. As we ate borlotti beans and rabbit roulade, a woman approached Roman. "I'm absolutely obsessed with you," she said.

Early the next morning, a rooster was crowing in a neighbor's yard. Sun filtered into the kitchen through an open door, weak and geometric. Roman

made pour-over coffee, decanting it into an earthenware mug. She said that she was planning to name her store First Bloom—after Bloomville, and after the flowering that occurs when you pour water over fresh grounds. She checked her boots for spiders, put them on, and went to take the compost out. She had Joni Mitchell’s “Free Man in Paris” on the stereo, playing loud: *The way I see it, he said / You just can’t win it / Everybody’s in it for their own gain / You can’t please ’em all.* ♦

New Yorker Favorites

- How we became infected by [chain e-mail](#).
- [Twelve classic movies](#) to watch with your kids.
- The [secret lives of fungi](#).
- The photographer who claimed to capture the [ghost of Abraham Lincoln](#).
- Why are Americans still [uncomfortable with atheism](#)?
- The enduring romance of the [night train](#).
- Sign up for our daily [newsletter](#) to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.

Shouts & Murmurs

- Just When You Thought It Was Over . . .

By [Jack Handey](#).

It would be the last time the band ever performed. That night, they boarded a plane for their next gig. On the plane, they were told that their contract had been cancelled.

Kate and Bob eventually got divorced, but remained friends—bitter, bitter friends.

Peter Piper died a pauper.

At Attila's funeral, one of the top Hun generals remarked, "Without Attila, we would have been nothing more than a bunch of savage barbarians."

After the huge asteroid missed Earth, everyone was happy, except for Clem Drexel, who lost a bet.

After Angelo Carcinelli was executed, it was determined that not only was he innocent; he was actually the electric-chair repairman.

Doc Rogen was laughed out of town, then laughed back into town.

Following the mutiny, a naval board of inquiry was convened, to determine whether the captain had been at fault. The board chairman was an arrogant, cruel man, making the others work long hours without breaks, and referred to them as "bloody swine." He even flogged one board member. The chairman was then overtaken and set adrift in a rowboat, to the taunts and jeers of the other board members.

After Ted Longmire failed to make the transition from drama to comedy, he threw himself in front of a steamroller.

Old Pete never did find the Lost Dutchman Mine, but he did find his burro, which had been hiding from him.

After retiring from boxing, Tim O'Shannon opened a paper mill, where he was accidentally beaten to a pulp.

Christopher Columbus died without ever realizing that he had discovered the New World, or that he was Italian.

A year later, Jeremy Larkin was hit on the head by another coconut, but this one didn't change him as much as the first coconut.

After their defeat by the mutants, the skeleton army fell apart.

Following Abraham Lincoln's death, two tickets were found in his pockets: one for the ship Titanic and another for the airship Hindenburg.

Professor Higginbotham grew rich from his invention, the moving wall of spikes. But he was killed when he tripped and fell on a porcupine.

When the Pope and the antipope finally met, it caused a huge explosion.

In addition to her other awards, Marie Curie won the top Halloween prize for her glowing skeleton costume.

After his death, the Greek philosopher who invented irony was mistakenly credited with inventing slapstick.

Despite the harsh reviews, "The Man with the Secret Weapon Who Also Had a Spare Secret Weapon" became a box-office hit.

Within fifty years of their signing, fifty-four of the fifty-six signers of the Declaration of Independence were dead, fulfilling what is known as the Curse of the Declaration.

After the war, mustard gas was banned, and for two years so was mustard.

Despite the sermons and the rehabilitation course, the pirates never lost their desire for treasure.

Although the Wolf Man was killed, scientists say that nearly three in five humans carry the werewolf gene.

The skunks eventually returned . . . and they were mad. ♦

More Humor

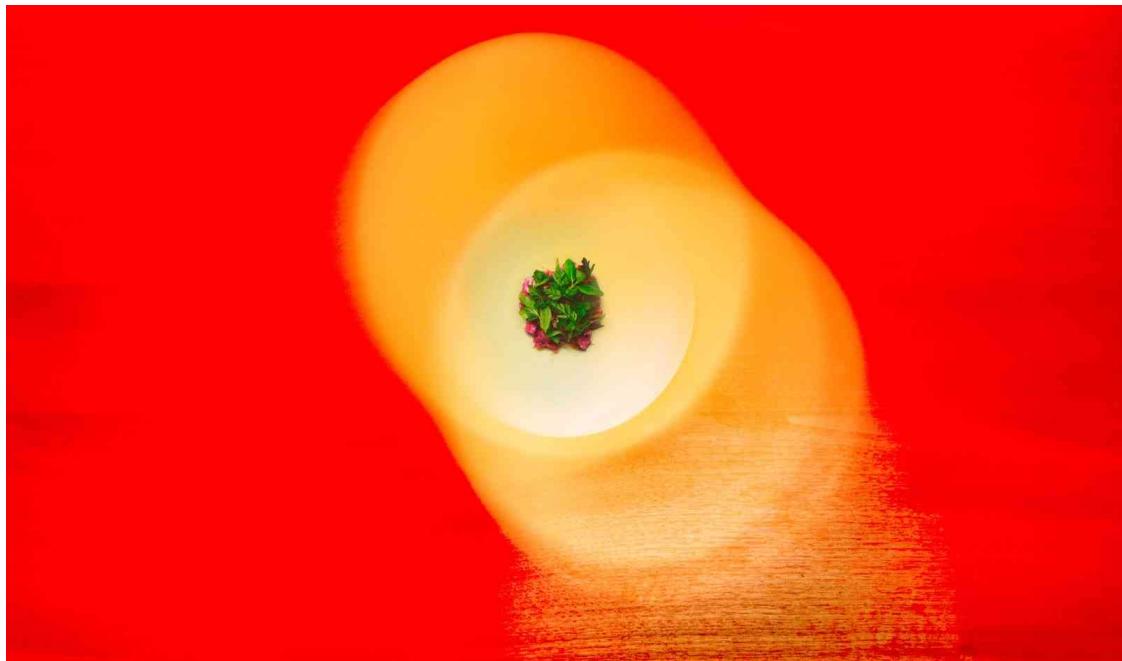
- I am a Tinder guy holding a fish, and [I will provide for you](#).
- How to turn off [location tracking](#) (updated).
- Subway crushes: [Where are they now?](#)
- My [typical New York day](#).
- Achievable ways to [feel accomplished](#).
- You have to [watch this show](#).
- [Updates](#) from your FedEx package.
- Get more humor in your in-box. Sign up for [the newsletter](#).

Tables for Two

- [The Culinary Playground of Fulgurances Laundromat](#)

By [Jiayang Fan](#)

Sometimes, in New York City, a laundromat is a restaurant and a restaurant is a concept and a concept is a culinary playground in the shape of a chef residency. Such is the case with Fulgurances Laundromat, which is tucked into a refurbished laundromat in Greenpoint and features meals from the imaginations of young talents who are, for the first time, fully in control of their own kitchen.



The restaurant presents multicourse prix-fixe dinners that reveal themselves in the course of a night.

To encourage and accommodate the spirit of experimentation, Fulgurances Laundromat does not proffer menus but instead presents multicourse dinners that reveal themselves throughout the night. The current resident, Aaron Rosenthal, a Boston native who has worked in France for the past nine years, said that he was still figuring out his style, which likely accounted for the breadth of his offerings, like so many laboratory petri dishes, in a recent evening's first course: fennel-topped mussels that emanated musk and brine, mullet roe wrapped in marinated kohlrabi, and a knockout crab-ají beignet that synthesized the best qualities of a crab cake and a cinnamon doughnut.



The current resident chef is Aaron Rosenthal, who has worked at various restaurants in France for the past nine years.

Rosenthal is fascinated by sourcing, an interest cultivated during his time as the executive chef of Clamato, a sister restaurant of Septime, Paris's vegetable-obsessed foodie destination. "If the product is quality, you don't have to compensate with over-seasoning," he explained while preparing the second dish, a play on beef tartare that substitutes meat with tiny cubes of beet, layered with smoked eel and horseradish and nestled below a wreath of herbs. Rosenthal tried beets after failing to find beef that met his standards. "Frankly," he said, "it really tasted better." Smoked seafood appeared again in a dish of poached and smoked Connecticut oysters steeped in a satiny consommé, the oysters' sea-metallic scent coaxing out the earthiness of a shallot-and-miso purée. "I like it when the ingredients' natural flavors are kept alive in the final dish," Rosenthal said.



Rosenthal characterizes his cooking as French “bistronomy,” favoring relaxed and accessible over stuffy and elaborate.

When pressed, Rosenthal characterized his cooking as French “bistronomy,” which favors relaxed and accessible over stuffy and elaborate. For an entrée, Amish guinea hen was cooked low and slow, the better to “preserve the natural umami.” A sweet-onion soubise sauce and a meat jus infused with Concord grapes were supposed to pep up the bird, but, as with a Parisian cheek kiss, the effect was more of a gesture. The addition of a salted egg yolk was slightly strange if not entirely unwelcome, given the pitilessly modest portion of meat, which I wolfed down in three mouthfuls.

Rosenthal’s predilection for eclectic assortments of small bites serves diners well when it comes to dessert, which comprised no fewer than four courses. The most original was a single tablespoon of honey still attached to the comb, spritzed with champagne vinegar. This was transitional honey, Rosenthal explained: made with the pollen of maple and black-locust trees, it was thicker and darker than summer honey, with a toastiness and a toffee-like texture. It paired beautifully with a golden fermented tea infused with chrysanthemum pollen.



Fulgurances Laundromat is tucked into a refurbished laundromat in Greenpoint, Brooklyn.

It's not surprising that a parfait should appear on a bistro menu, but Rosenthal adds depth and subtlety with caramelized scraps of honey, orange-blossom cream, and Bon Bon dates. "The Fulgurances kitchen is my *tremplin*," Rosenthal told me. "I'm blanking on the English word—you know, the big thing you can jump on?" He was referring to a springboard, and the description is apt; recipes and ideas bounce around his head like brilliant flashes—which is the translation of *fulgurances*. "Ideas are like lightning strikes," he added. "I like to experiment and see what comes up." Rosenthal has one more month to capture lightning at Laundromat before handing the baton to Alexia Duchêne, a twenty-six-year-old who competed on France's "Top Chef." "That's the thing about Fulgurances," Rosenthal said. "Like lightning, it's also ephemeral. After playing for a bit, I'll eventually have to figure out what to do in real life." (*Prix fixe \$80.*) ♦

The Current Cinema

- An Earthier, Sweatier “West Side Story”

By [Anthony Lane](#)

Sixty years ago, Robert Wise began his film of “West Side Story” with a view of Manhattan from the sky. He took us from the heel of the island, over the Empire State Building, and down to terra firma—an opening that Wise would echo, four years later, in “The Sound of Music.” (How do you solve *two* problems like Maria?) True, we landed on a lung-busting nun instead of a finger-snapping Jet, but the trajectory was the same.

Steven Spielberg, kicking off *his* film of “West Side Story,” skips the sky and takes a trip through rubble. The camera glides over bricks, twisted metal, and a wrecking ball before alighting on a kid, who pops up out of the ground like a mole. A sign reads “Slum Clearance,” and we realize where we are: the blast area around Lincoln Square, which is being demolished to make way for grand construction projects. Later, we see a billboard advertising new apartments, available from May, 1958. In short, Spielberg and his screenwriter, Tony Kushner, have brought us to Robert Moses’s promised land. The period in which the movie is set could well be—get this—the time at which the original “West Side Story” was taking shape, ahead of its Broadway première, in 1957. Cute or what?

For Lieutenant Schrank (Corey Stoll) and Officer Krupke (Brian d’Arcy James), whose job is to keep the peace between the neighborhood gangs, the Sharks and the Jets, the rebuild can’t come soon enough. No more turf wars, once the turf has been ripped up. It pleases Schrank to plague both houses; on the one hand, he anticipates “rich people in nice apartments employing Puerto Rican doormen,” and, on the other, he scorns the Jets, whose industrious forebears have moved out, as “the last of the can’t-make-it Caucasians.” It’s alarming how charming he is.

These early diatribes matter, because “West Side Story,” from its inception, has traded on an uneasy pact of the fantastical and the real. (No one knew that better than the late Stephen Sondheim, whose lyrics formed a pas de deux with Leonard Bernstein’s music.) That is why the theatre remains the natural home of the show. In the flesh, Jerome Robbins’s choreographic conceit—of violence reborn as dance—is thrilling to behold, whereas, onscreen, a hint of the ridiculous dogs every graceful step. You watch the initial combat scene of Wise’s film and ask yourself, What do these boys think they’re doing? Who’s hurting whom, given that they’re punching

empty air? When one of the Jets is actually hit, we see the tiniest dab of blood. Contrast Spielberg's take on the same blow; his Jet gets jabbed with a nail, right through the earlobe, and Schrank, the bad Samaritan, yanks it out.

The message is plain: this “West Side Story” wants to fight dirtier than its predecessor ever did, and the ethnic spite will be notably more acidic. “Sooner or later, the gringos kill everything,” one of the Sharks declares. Narrative touches are designed to add earthiness and sweat; Bernardo (David Alvarez) is now not merely the chief Shark but a boxer to boot, and, after a jittery standoff, his opposite number, Riff (Mike Faist), the captain of the Jets, wipes his hand across his forehead and then on his shirt. With his pale, squashed features, Faist—the keenest dramatic presence in the film—resembles a wicked pixie, and we believe in his desperation. If only that were true of Tony (Ansel Elgort), the resident Romeo, who has, we are told, already spent a year in prison for assault. Yeah, right. He looks about as homicidal as a tuna melt.

It’s the old conundrum: the nearer you get to the nub of “West Side Story,” the weaker its claim to authenticity grows. What do skewered ears have to do with the unsoiled innocence of Tony’s love for Maria (Rachel Zegler), Bernardo’s sister? Not that it’s an equal relationship; Zegler shines with energetic sweetness, while Elgort, who appears to be twice her height, is more of a baffled chump. “Tonight,” their big duet, is staged on a fire escape, as custom demands. A sensible choice. If they were facing each other, her top notes would be beamed straight into his sternum.

To be fair, the romance was even trickier in 1961. Natalie Wood and Richard Beymer, as Maria and Tony, were both dubbed when they sang, and Wise chose to signal the glory of their first encounter by blurring the screen around them. They seemed to be peering through a large hole in a wall of Vaseline. That movie owes its life to the supporting players—to Russ Tamblyn as Riff, George Chakiris as Bernardo, and the ace in the pack, Rita Moreno, as Anita, Bernardo’s fiery beloved. Moreno, who turns ninety on December 11th, returns with unquelled spirits to the fray; for Spielberg, she plays Valentina, who runs the store where Tony toils, and the role of Anita passes to Ariana DeBose, who arms it with her own strength and sass. “I am not American, I am Puerto Rican,” she says in defiance, in Spanish, without subtitles.

Other shifts and tinkерings abound. “I Feel Pretty” is caroled in Gimbel’s, where Maria and her comrades work as cleaners after hours. “One Hand, One Heart” finds Maria and Tony uptown at the Cloisters, where the stained glass bathes their devotion in a glow of serene cheesiness. “Officer Krupke” is staged at a police station, not on the street, and “America” tilts in the other direction—no longer belted out on a rooftop, after dark, but summoned by Janusz Kamiński, Spielberg’s regular cinematographer, into the clear light of day, amid pedestrians and traffic. To be honest, I still prefer the tighter, more intimate swoops and jolts with which Moreno and her troupe electrified “America,” more than half a century ago. Or, indeed, the tribute that Martin Scorsese paid to “West Side Story” in his music video for Michael Jackson’s “Bad” (1987). That lasted eighteen minutes, and the dance moves were like knives.

Spielberg’s panache and command are evident in every nook of this handsome film. Yet somehow it feels dutiful, and the duty weighs it down (more so, unexpectedly, than was the case with “Lincoln,” from 2012, which Kushner also wrote). Homage to one classic is paid in the strenuous bid to become another. Set pieces outweigh grace notes. If I had to pick a favorite musical moment in Spielberg, aside from the John Williams scores, it would be the sound of Elliott’s brother, in “E.T.” (1982), coming home from football practice, going to the fridge, and chanting snatches of Elvis Costello’s “Accidents Will Happen.” That is how most of us sing, if we sing at all, and only Spielberg would notice it, but is there room for such close observational skill in the picture-perfect world of “West Side Story”?

There is, at least in the quieter moments. When a gun is pointed at Riff, for example, he advances and presses his brow against the barrel, as if to say, Something’s coming, so it might as well come now. At the other extreme, we are softly swept away as Valentina, in the movie’s most daring switch, delivers “Somewhere.” Usually, the number is sung by Tony and Maria, athrob with yearning as they vent their particular hopes. Rita Moreno transforms it into a wistful hymn to everyone: the young, the elderly, the Jets, the Sharks, and those who have come to America and left another somewhere behind. She sits alone at a table, but her voice and her expression tell of a time and a place where the dancing never stops.

The latest Adam McKay film, “Don’t Look Up,” is a farce about the end of the world. In Michigan, the astronomically good news is that Kate Dibiasky (Jennifer Lawrence), a grad student working with the nicely named Dr. Mindy (Leonardo DiCaprio), has discovered a comet. The slightly less welcome news is that it’s racing toward Earth and will be dropping in on us, according to Dr. Mindy’s math, in six months.

We have met such bombshells before, in movies like “Armageddon” and “Deep Impact,” a twin pack of doomsayers from 1998. The difference, in “Don’t Look Up,” is that the doom barely registers—neither on TV, where Mindy and Dibiasky try spelling it out for a couple of snarky anchors (Cate Blanchett and Tyler Perry) on a morning show, nor at the White House, where the bumptious President Orlean (Meryl Streep) decides to “sit tight and assess,” on the advice of her son, Jason (Jonah Hill), who is also her chief of staff. The joke is that the heads of human beings are now so easily turned, and so full of dumb detritus, that we may not even notice, let alone comprehend, our own extinction.

McKay has a point, though his frame of reference hardly stretches beyond the United States, and the stink of localized political contempt all but overpowers the plot. Orlean is a neo-Trumpist, and only her supporters, it is implied, will refuse to gaze heavenward (hence the title) and acknowledge the obvious; any resemblance to anti-vaxxers and climate-change deniers is wholly intentional. Still, we get a laughably crowded cast, rounded out by Timothée Chalamet as a skater dude with a sideline in prayer and Mark Rylance as a tech billionaire, at once creepy, childlike, and voracious. And there’s a tempting heresy in the idea of being aroused by apocalypse, as Blanchett’s character is, rather than petrified or numbed. “Tell me we’re all going to *die*,” she moans, dragging Dr. Mindy into a hotel room. Whatever turns you on. ♦

New Yorker Favorites

- How we became infected by [chain e-mail](#).
- [Twelve classic movies](#) to watch with your kids.
- The [secret lives of fungi](#).

- The photographer who claimed to capture the [ghost of Abraham Lincoln](#).
- Why are Americans still [uncomfortable with atheism](#)?
- The enduring romance of the [night train](#).
- Sign up for our daily [newsletter](#) to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.

The Theatre

- [Two Musicals on the Perils of Aging](#)
- [Sutton Foster Takes the Role of Marian the Librarian](#)

A buoyant revival of Sondheim's "Company" and the refreshingly off-kilter "Kimberly Akimbo."

By [Alexandra Schwartz](#)

"Company," Stephen Sondheim's gimlet ode to the eternal fear of shrivelling up and dying alone—that is, of being thirty-five and single—is now itself fifty-one: a brassy older broad, two generations removed from the people it describes so brutally and so well. Three years before it premiered, in 1970, Benjamin Braddock sprang Elaine Robinson from her wedding ceremony with the urgency of a fireman rescuing a baby from a burning building, only to ride into their joint future with a look of numb horror on his face. That was commitment in the age of sexual revolution—the end of joy, the ruin of youth, the kiss of death. "Company" took that queasy closing shot of "The Graduate" as its starting point. "It's things like using force together / shouting till you're hoarse together / getting a divorce together / that make perfect relationships," the show's couples sing. They're like prisoners arguing against their own parole. Sure, they could choose to be free. But why?

Have the marital pressures that the show examines changed in half a century? Utterly—women have allegedly been liberated; the end of men has been heralded by pundits far and wide—and, somehow, not at all. Maybe it depends whom you ask. In Marianne Elliott's bristling, buoyant revival (at the Bernard B. Jacobs)—which was supposed to open in March, 2020, on Sondheim's ninetieth birthday, and now, in a bittersweet trick of timing, comes to us just after his death—Bobby, the musical's avowed bachelor, has become Bobbie (Katrina Lenk), a post-feminist, post—"Sex and the City" singleton in present-day New York, who is pursued not by a trio of marriage-hungry gals but by three eligible gents who think she's crazy not to settle down. Her friends, all of them long ago partnered, heartily agree. Even the set (designed, with flair, by Bunny Christie, who is also responsible for the costumes) seems to conspire against her. The show opens on Bobbie's thirty-fifth birthday—closer to her eightieth, if we're counting in ovary years—and it won't let her forget it. A block of brownstones are all nightmarishly numbered 35, and the same digits appear in a Jasper Johns pastiche hanging on a living-room wall. Spot a clock onstage and you can bet that its hands will be pointing to five minutes past three. It's the middle of the afternoon, but for Bobbie the hour is growing late.

Bobbie would like to celebrate her dubious milestone quietly, alone in her apartment with a bottle of Maker's Mark. Her married friends have other ideas. No sooner has she come through the door than the many-happy-returns voice mails begin to flood in, followed by the friends themselves, who cram, clown-car style, into Bobbie's tiny foyer. In the theatrical equivalent of a zoom shot, the apartment, framed in white neon, glides toward us, yielding a glimpse of Bobbie, wry, skeptical, and more than a little alarmed. There will be a surprise party later, but this overstuffed scene is happening inside her overstuffed mind, where the cacophony of well-wishes threatens to drown out any she might have for herself.

Sondheim, as the moving outpouring of homages occasioned by his death attests, has become such a monumental figure that it can be easy to overlook how truly weird his work often is. The first big revolution in American musicals arrived in the middle of the last century, when the revue style perfected by Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, and the Gershwins gave way to the Rodgers and Hammerstein model, shows with scores that expressed emotion and songs that deepened character and progressed the plot. Sondheim, Hammerstein's protégé, elevated that tradition to unforeseen heights, but he also liked to toy with it. "Company," which was based on a series of one-act plays by George Furth, who wrote the book, dispenses with dramatic arc in favor of stand-alone vignettes, clustered around one of Sondheim's favorite themes: growing up.

In the course of the musical's two and a half hours, Bobbie, who is seen by her cohort as a kind of willful kid, visits with her various friends and lovers, and what she observes does not tempt her matrimonial appetite. Harry (Christopher Sieber) and Sarah (Jennifer Simard) sublimate their simmering aggression in bouts of jujitsu; Susan (Rashidra Scott) and Peter (Greg Hildreth), a picture-perfect couple, are getting a divorce. David (Christopher Fitzgerald) claims to dote on his wife, Jenny (Nikki Renée Daniels), but can't stop ogling Bobbie; Paul (Etai Benson) is devoted to his fiancé, Jamie (Matt Doyle, who coasts through the terrifyingly tricky "Getting Married Today"), and Jamie repays him by calling off their wedding. As for the single men, forget it. P.J. (Bobby Conte) is a loony toon with an Illuminati tattoo and faux-spiritual pretensions; sensitive Theo (Manu Narayan) just got engaged to someone else. Then, there's Andy (Claybourne Elder), a flight attendant whose godly body comes tragically attached to an empty

head. “You’re not dumb, Andy,” Bobbie reassures him, to which he replies, “To me, I am.” The logic is bulletproof.

All this could, as the show puts it, drive a person crazy, and it does. Bobbie, in Elliott’s production, is an Alice trapped in a surreal New York Wonderland. She slithers down a manhole, and comes home to discover that her apartment has shrunk to the size of a doll house. After she goes to bed with Andy, a vision of their possible domestic future together flashes, literally, before her eyes. The stage fills with substitute Bobbies: Bobbie pregnant, Bobbie with a baby on her chest, Bobbie wiping up the piss that splatters around the toilet every time Andy takes a leak. It’s funny, it’s true, and it’s petrifying.

Change is a risk. So is not changing. Thanks to the gender switch, when Joanne (Patti LuPone), Bobbie’s salty, seen-it-all older friend, raises her vodka Stinger to “the girls who just watch,” in “The Ladies Who Lunch,” she’s no longer talking only to herself but to Bobbie, too, warning of what might happen if she stays on life’s sidelines. Joanne’s marriage—her third—to the adoring, and usefully rich, Larry (Terence Archie), is the most complex coupling in the show. She distrusts Larry’s love for her, because trust is what gets you hurt; there’s a soft heart beneath that carapace of knowingness. Over the years, LuPone has concocted a signature, bouncy version of Joanne’s ferocious song, maybe to distinguish hers from that of Elaine Stritch, who originated the song and made it a classic; LuPone’s pronunciation of the words “ladies,” “caftan,” “sitting”—her pronunciation of any word, really—is, like sunrise at the Grand Canyon, a phenomenon that should be experienced in person at least once in this life.

If there’s a weak link here, it’s Lenk. She certainly looks the part of Bobbie, slinky and seductive in blood red, and she acts it, too, with sharp comic timing and ironic emotional armor to spare. What she can’t totally do is sing it. Lenk seems to push her voice, straining where she should soar. There’s nothing wrong with a little roughness; it can even be good to have some sand in the oyster. But Lenk gives the impression of holding herself apart from the music. Bobbie gets one chance to cut through the detachment that she has so carefully cultivated, and it is one of the greatest moments in musical theatre, or, you might argue—if you are feeling especially grateful to Sondheim in this newly Sondheimless world—in music or in theatre: the

song “Being Alive,” a five-minute journey from cynicism to hope. The song’s aesthetic and emotional beauty lies in its steady build. But Lenk chops each verse up into short, disconnected phrases, and her tendency to break into her speaking voice brings to mind the devastating moment, in D. A. Pennebaker’s documentary about the making of the original “Company” cast album, when the studio engineer asks a vocally exhausted Stritch to “sing” her next take. Perhaps to compensate, Elliott has Lenk overact the scene to the point of pantomime, kneeling prayerfully, at the song’s climax, to signal that she’s ready to make her wish for human connection come true. If she could forget all that jazz and trust the music, the feelings would follow. They always do.

Another big birthday is at the heart of “Kimberly Akimbo,” a new musical (directed by Jessica Stone, at the Atlantic Theatre Company) composed by Jeanine Tesori and based on a play by David Lindsay-Abaire, who wrote the book and the lyrics. Kimberly Levaco, the show’s protagonist, is about to turn sixteen, but the occasion is far from sweet. She suffers from a rare genetic disorder that turns her into a kind of reverse Benjamin Button, aging at warp speed. While her peers are hitting puberty, Kimberly (played by the sixty-two-year-old Victoria Clark, with shy adolescent charm) has already gone through menopause. Worse, the statistics suggest that the coming year may be her last.

Yet this grim premise yields something refreshingly off-kilter, with more than a dash of Roald Dahl, who, like Sondheim, tended to dress optimism in a cynic’s clothing. Kimberly has a deadbeat drunk for a dad (Steven Boyer) and a chirpy narcissist for a mom (Alli Mauzey). Her aunt Debra (a bawdy Bonnie Milligan) is appropriately affectionate, but also, alas, a crook whose latest scheme involves roping Kimberly and a gang of her fellow New Jersey high schoolers into committing mail fraud. (Rarely has such loving artistic attention been paid to Bergen County.) And, as in a Dahl story, it’s the kids who have moral sense and sympathy. Seth (Justin Cooley), a tuba-playing nerd, isn’t afraid to march to his own beat, and he sees, in Kimberly, someone whom he might march with. Life may be long, or vanishingly short. Whatever the case, this tender show tells us, it’s worth finding good company on the way. ♦

New Yorker Favorites

- How we became infected by [chain e-mail](#).
- [Twelve classic movies](#) to watch with your kids.
- The [secret lives of fungi](#).
- The photographer who claimed to capture the [ghost of Abraham Lincoln](#).
- Why are Americans still [uncomfortable with atheism](#)?
- The enduring romance of the [night train](#).
- Sign up for our daily [newsletter](#) to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.

Barbara Cook originated the role of Marian the librarian, the headstrong, love-starved heroine of Meredith Willson's "**The Music Man**," in 1957. In a splashy new Broadway revival, the role is played by Sutton Foster (above), who, like Cook, has a soprano tone as clear as a bell on a hill and an uncanny ability to make her work look easy. In Jerry Zaks's production (starting previews on Dec. 20, at the Winter Garden), she's joined by Hugh Jackman, as the smooth-talking con artist Harold Hill, and a bunch of plucky kids.

Table of Contents

[NewYorker.2021.12.20](#)

[A Critic at Large](#)

[What's So Great About Great-Books Courses?](#)

[American Chronicles](#)

[An Education While Incarcerated](#)

[Annals of War](#)

[The Secret History of the U.S. Diplomatic Failure in Afghanistan](#)

[App推荐-英阅阅读器](#)

[安利一个英语专用阅读器](#)

[Books](#)

[Briefly Noted](#)

[Comment](#)

[What Has Omicron Changed?](#)

[Crossword](#)

[The Crossword: Monday, December 13, 2021](#)

[Dept. of Technology](#)

[Can “Distraction-Free” Devices Change the Way We Write?](#)

[Fiction](#)

[“Lu, Reshaping”](#)

[Louisiana Postcard](#)

[Touring Louisiana’s Chemical Ghost Town](#)

[Mental Notes](#)

[How an Impossible Steel Drum Gets Built](#)

[Missed Connections Dept.](#)

[After Seventy-five Hundred Miles, a Long-Haul Paddler Floats Into Town](#)

[Monsters of Rock Dept.](#)

[J Mascis Puts Out Energy](#)

[Poems](#)

[“Winter Solstice”](#)

[“Calypso Bean”](#)

[Profiles](#)

[Alison Roman Just Can’t Help Herself](#)

Shouts & Murmurs

Just When You Thought It Was Over . . .

Tables for Two

The Culinary Playground of Fulgurances Laundromat

The Current Cinema

An Earthier, Sweatier “West Side Story”

The Theatre

Two Musicals on the Perils of Aging

Sutton Foster Takes the Role of Marian the Librarian