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A Reporter at Large

- Will Sanctions Against Russia End the War in Ukraine?

Will Sanctions Against Russia End the War in Ukraine?

D.C. bureaucrats have worked stealthily with allies to open a financial front against Putin.

By [Sheelah Kolhatkar](#)



One afternoon at the end of March, barely a month into Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, nine slightly rumpled officials from the U.S. Treasury Department emerged from a train at the Brussels station, boarded a waiting minibus, and headed toward the headquarters of the European Union. The Americans had come to meet with their European counterparts and further a plan of economic retribution against Vladimir Putin and the Russian Federation. Leading the U.S. delegation was Adewale (Wally) Adeyemo, the Deputy Treasury Secretary. Born in Nigeria, raised in California, and educated at Yale Law School, Adeyemo served as an economic adviser in the Obama Administration. Now he directs Joe Biden's campaign to devise sanctions and weaponize global financial systems against Putin's war machine.

Before the invasion, Western leaders had tried to use sanctions as a deterrent. After Putin's forces attacked anyway, President Biden, rather than send American troops into battle and risk a third world war, committed billions of dollars in weapons and military support to Ukraine. The Administration also devoted itself to a more aggressive sanctions effort that, carried out with member states of *NATO* and other allies, aimed to help drive Putin's tanks back across the border.

As the minibus crawled through central Brussels, some of the Americans took note of the Russian Mission to the E.U., a stately white building fortified by barbed-wire barricades. Adeyemo and his colleagues were on their way to meet Mairead McGuinness, the European Commissioner for Financial Services, Financial Stability, and Capital Markets Union, to evaluate the effectiveness of the earliest rounds of sanctions. If the U.S. didn't work closely with its allies, Adeyemo knew, Putin would find ways around the sanctions, avoid meaningful economic pain, and continue on his course of controlling or annexing Ukraine.

The Treasury Department, the E.U., the U.K., and Canada had already prohibited transactions with the Russian Central Bank, immobilizing approximately three hundred billion dollars of its assets held outside the country. The U.S. sanctioned Russia's two largest commercial banks and dozens of oligarchs and other élites close to Putin. Treasury Department directives restricted the ability of major state-owned companies in Russia to raise money in American markets. The U.S. and the E.U. also blocked seven large Russian banks from using *SWIFT*, the financial-communications system that facilitates the transfer of money around the world. The French finance minister, Bruno Le Maire, described the *SWIFT* ban as a "financial nuclear weapon."

John E. Smith, a former director of Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, told me, "This is the first global use of such massive economic power against a single country of such size." The unprecedented level of coöperation between the Americans and their Western counterparts on the sanctions, and their apparent willingness to risk disrupting their own economies in the process, surprised many experts, and likely surprised

Putin, too. But the collaboration had been taking shape, in secret, since the previous year.

In April, 2021, Adeyemo had contacted finance officials in the Group of Seven (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and the United Kingdom, in addition to the U.S.) to learn why their countries had not joined earlier U.S.-led sanction efforts, and what might persuade them to participate in future ones. The director general of the French Treasury, Emmanuel Moulin, and other officials responded that they didn't want to just sign on to punitive measures that the U.S. had already crafted. They wanted to be part of the design process from the beginning.

As the invasion began and the first tranche of collaborative sanctions against Russia was announced, the country's main stock-market index fell thirty-three per cent, the fifth-largest drop in its history. The value of the ruble also plummeted. A month into the fighting, however, Putin was undeterred, and his military continued to rain missiles on Ukrainian towns and cities.

Adeyemo and his team had developed new proposals to take to the G-7, but the Americans' ambitions were limited by an uncomfortable fact: Europeans were highly dependent on Russia for the fossil fuels that warmed their homes and powered their cars. (Nearly forty per cent of the natural gas consumed on the Continent in 2021 came from Russian sources.) Finding ways to reduce that dependency would not be resolved in a single meeting, but unless drastic steps were taken to change the situation Europe would end up inadvertently financing a brutal conflict that the West had condemned.

Adeyemo is self-possessed and confident in his bearing, but when it came to sanctions he was careful to manage expectations. During the train ride to Brussels from London, where he'd discussed strategy with British officials, he told me, "Ultimately, sanctions are a tool intended to change someone's behavior. You look for behaviors to change, but it may not come for a while." Nevertheless, he sensed momentum. "All those export revenues they're getting today, instead of building them up and using them to fund their war, Russia has made clear they're using those funds to prop up the

ruble. Those are exactly the types of choices we want Russia to make. Choices to waste resources to prop up the stock market.”

The minibus pulled up to the Berlaymont building, the towering glass headquarters of the European Commission, the E.U.’s executive branch. Before heading into his scheduled negotiations, Adeyemo stood before a bank of video cameras to coolly express a central talking point of the day: “One of the Kremlin’s goals in its unprovoked invasion of Ukraine was to divide us, but it has only strengthened our alliance.”

In the days that followed, Russian forces retreated from an attempt to take Kyiv, an immense military and psychological victory for the Ukrainians. But what might have seemed to some like the beginning of the end of the Russian invasion would soon prove to be, as Churchill put it in 1942, the end of the beginning. More than six months later, Ukraine has won back crucial towns and villages, tens of thousands of Russian troops are estimated to have been killed, and nationalist critics in Moscow have felt emboldened to call the invasion a failure. However, this month, the Russian military intensified its air strikes and Putin declared martial law in four occupied regions. The conflict seemingly far from over, Adeyemo and his team keep discovering what unprecedented Western sanctions can and cannot do to deter a nuclear superpower intent on occupying its neighbor.

The use of economic sanctions dates at least to ancient Athens. Around 432 B.C., Pericles issued the Megarian Decree, which set up a blockade aimed at Sparta’s allies. The tactic’s effectiveness, however, remains in doubt; some historians speculate that the decree helped ignite the Peloponnesian War.



"The key to selecting the perfect apple is to touch, like, four or five of them before picking one."
Cartoon by Jake Thompson

After the First World War, as the League of Nations considered the use of economic measures as a way to deter countries from invading one another, Woodrow Wilson spoke of sanctions as a tactic “more tremendous” than physical conflict. One nation had only to impose on another this “economic, peaceful, silent, deadly remedy and there will be no need for force,” he said. “It is a terrible remedy. It does not cost a life outside of the nation boycotted, but it brings a pressure upon that nation which, in my judgment, no modern nation could resist.” Wilson’s assessment proved optimistic, as the threat of sanctions against Germany, Italy, and Japan failed to prevent another global conflict.

Still, the appeal of economic sanctions persisted, particularly in the modern history of American foreign policy. In the past eighty years, the U.S. has deployed them against the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, Vietnam, Iran, and Iraq, among others; some ten thousand entities have been designated as targets of sanctions. The clearest success of a sanctions effort to date was perhaps the global campaign against South Africa’s apartheid system. In 1986, the U.S. joined other of South Africa’s trade partners in passing sanctions, and the movement to divest and boycott the country’s goods and services spread. The resulting economic pressure helped to end apartheid, in 1994.

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, George W. Bush quickly pledged to “starve terrorists of funding.” Al Qaeda had been raising cash through charitable networks and front companies, moving money around the world using couriers, local moneylenders, and various international banking institutions. To choke off that revenue stream, Bush turned to the Treasury Department, which had previously played a less central role in national-security debates. Its officials had financial expertise that could be useful in weakening a network such as Al Qaeda, which needed access to large amounts of cash to pay for weapons and training.

The U.S.A. Patriot Act, which was passed in response to the 9/11 attacks, granted the government vast new powers to combat terrorism. One provision gave the Treasury Department the authority to designate a foreign jurisdiction or financial institution a “primary money laundering concern,” and to force American banks and other institutions to cut the entity off from the American financial system. Because the U.S. plays such a dominant role in global finance, this kind of order is usually devastating to the target. “All of a sudden, the Treasury Department found itself thrust into the biggest issue of the day,” said Daniel Glaser, who worked on those sanctions and, during the Obama Administration, became the Assistant Treasury Secretary for Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes. “We were going to bankrupt Osama bin Laden. When I look back on it, I’m almost embarrassed by the stridency of it. But this idea of targeted sanctions became ingrained in the international community’s response to terrorism.”

By 2004, a new unit of the department, the Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, had been granted almost imperial powers. It could cut off financial support not just to suspected terrorists or money launderers but to anyone doing anything that threatened national security or undermined the integrity of the international financial system. The unit’s analysts played offense and defense, as Glaser put it. In addition to identifying and disrupting the financial networks that bad actors used, the group tried to pinpoint vulnerabilities in the international financial system which were ripe for exploitation by terrorist groups, narcotics networks, and rogue regimes. An opportunity to test the unit’s capabilities came later in 2004, when U.S. intelligence sources reported that Banco Delta Asia, a small bank in Macau, was being used by the North Korean government to

launder money. The regime in Pyongyang had been economically weakened by a series of traditional trade sanctions applied after the end of the Korean War, and in order to raise money Kim Jong Il was allegedly trafficking illegal drugs and selling counterfeit products, the proceeds of which were moved through front companies. One particularly robust line of business was producing high-quality counterfeit hundred-dollar bills, which were nicknamed Supernotes.

On September 15, 2005, the Treasury Department announced that it was designating Banco Delta Asia a “money laundering concern” and issued a decree requiring all U.S. banks to stop doing business with it. “We wanted North Korean financial activity to be rejected like an infection by the antibodies we had built up in the international financial system,” Juan Zarate, a former deputy national-security adviser to George W. Bush, wrote in his book, “Treasury’s War,” about his time in government. In the following days, account holders rushed to withdraw their funds, and the Macau monetary authority eventually stepped in and put the bank into receivership, freezing approximately twenty-five million dollars’ worth of assets related to North Korea that were held by the bank. The institution’s collapse had a ripple effect: other governments and banks around the world stopped interacting with North Korea. Within months, the country was effectively cut off from the global financial system. The action also became a bargaining chip in negotiations with Kim Jong Il regarding his nuclear program.

“That was where we showed, to ourselves and everybody else, that the U.S. Treasury Department, essentially operating alone, could put massive pressure on a jurisdictional target,” Glaser told me. “We couldn’t believe what we had done. People thought we were magicians.”

During the next few years, the officials running the Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence grew more ambitious. One of their efforts was a vigorous financial campaign against Iran. The U.S. had, from the mid-eighties, classified the country as a state sponsor of terrorism. In 2006, the T.F.I. sanctioned an Iranian bank, accusing it of facilitating the activities of Hezbollah, which the United States had designated a terrorist organization. Not long afterward, the department sanctioned a second Iranian bank, for

servicing Iran's weapons program. This pattern continued, and in 2010 Congress passed legislation authorizing even more sanctions, freeing the Treasury Department to target the Iranian Central Bank itself. By 2015, Iranian leaders, made desperate by the cumulative effects of the economic blockades, agreed to halt the development of nuclear weapons in exchange for sanctions relief.

Paradoxically, such harsh and prolonged sanctions have sometimes consolidated the power of the regime that the Americans were trying to undermine. Even in Tehran, fundamentalist leaders gained political legitimacy from the external embattlement. So did Fidel Castro during a decades-long embargo of Cuba.

Nicholas Mulder, a historian and the author of “The Economic Weapon: The Rise of Sanctions as a Tool of Modern War,” notes that, in these and other countries aggressively sanctioned by Western governments, despotic leaders lasted for years or remain stubbornly in place. “Sanctions are kind of like alchemy,” he said. “You apply all this pressure to this black box of a country’s economy and hope that, on the other side of that black box, political change comes out. But making sure that pain and pressure lead to the kind of change you want to see—that’s the real challenge, and often people underestimate how difficult that will be. And that’s why sanctions are often much less effective than you would think.”

In November, 2013, the President of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovych, abruptly pulled out of a major trade agreement with the European Union. With that sudden reversal, he not only betrayed the wishes of much of his citizenry, he also revealed how beholden he was to Putin. Tens of thousands protested in the streets of Kyiv, and as the situation became increasingly unstable Yanukovych fled Ukraine. (Eventually he resurfaced in Russia.) In February, 2014, Russian forces, wearing unmarked uniforms, began to wrest control of Crimea from Ukraine, and Putin soon declared the peninsula sovereign Russian territory.

The Obama Administration and European leaders did not act militarily, but agreed that Putin’s aggression called for strong economic sanctions. Officials in Washington developed a menu of measures that they hoped

would punish Russia and compel it to withdraw from Crimea and eastern Ukraine without seriously harming the rest of the global economy.

Russia, the eleventh-largest economy in the world, could mitigate the effects of sanctions by turning to China or other countries outside of the Western sphere of political influence. Jack Lew, the Treasury Secretary at the time, brought together the department's sanctions experts and its economists to identify aspects of the Russian economy that were solely dependent on the West. One area of vulnerability was Russia's access to stock and bond markets in London and New York. By targeting that access, the Treasury Department would make it far more difficult and expensive for Russian enterprises to borrow money or to find foreign investors.

In March, 2014, the U.S., the E.U., and Canada started enacting rounds of sanctions against Russia. An important component of the effort was the authorization of measures that could be implemented down the line—an attempt to signal to Putin what could be in store if he failed to retreat. Daleep Singh, who was then a senior official in the Treasury Department, told me, “The best sanctions are those that never even have to get used.”

Unfortunately, as Singh acknowledged, the steps taken by the West that month failed to deter Putin. On July 16th, the U.S. went further. It imposed limited sanctions on entities including two of Russia's largest oil companies, Rosneft and Novatek, and two of its largest banks, Gazprombank and Vnesheconombank, along with eight arms manufacturers and the Russia-backed Luhansk and Donetsk regions. Putin seemed unmoved. The next day, forces in eastern Ukraine shot down a Malaysia Airlines flight on its way from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, killing everyone on board. (Russia has denied involvement, despite evidence linking it to the event.)

More Western sanctions against Russia were levied in the next year and a half, including travel bans and asset freezes on Russian officials and separatist leaders responsible for the invasion of Crimea. Americans were not allowed to provide new financing to major Russian financial institutions, and some Russian state-owned companies were prevented from accessing Western financing sources. Almost no restrictions, however, were

placed on Western purchases of Russian fossil fuels, that engine of immense revenue for the Kremlin and the business élites.

When Donald Trump assumed office, there were concerns that he might reverse some of the existing sanctions. Congress, which at the time was controlled by the Republicans, preëmptively restrained Trump, passing legislation that imposed further sanctions on Iran, North Korea, and Russia, and blocked unilateral lifting of certain penalties. Inside the Treasury Department, career staff members were confused about Trump's intentions toward Russia. One former Administration official told me that Trump did not seem interested in sanctioning Russia: "He was focussed on Ukraine and Hunter Biden. He was focussed on Iran. He was focussed on, could he make a deal with China."

Most of the former Treasury officials I spoke to agreed that the sanctions levied in that era were insufficient. Vladimir Ashurkov, a director of the Anti-Corruption Foundation, which is connected with the imprisoned Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, echoed that conclusion. He said, "If the sanctions we have now had been gradually introduced over the eight years that passed since the first hostilities started in Ukraine, in 2014," the current tragedy might have been avoided. "I think they sort of encouraged Putin's assertiveness over this eight-year period. By February, 2022, I think he didn't expect much retaliation."

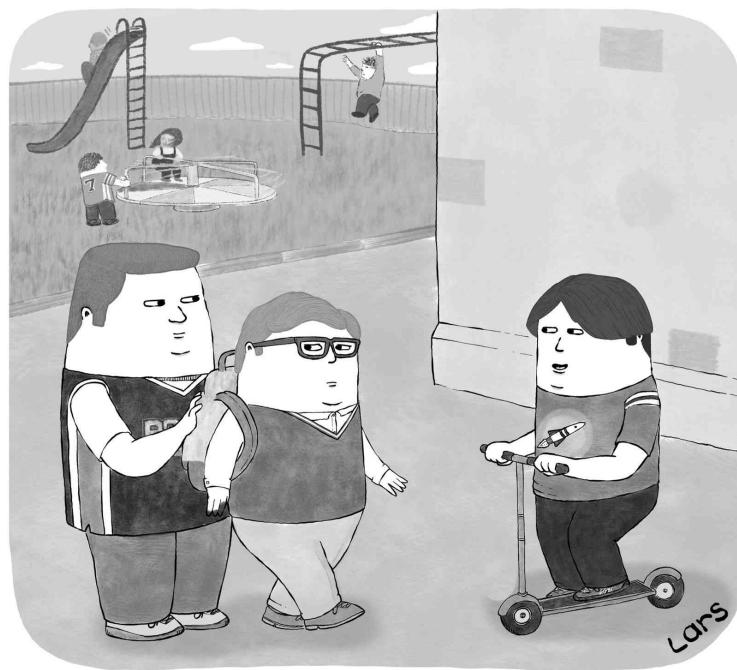
The sanctions rolled out in those years also provided Putin with an opportunity he could later turn to his advantage. He and his fellow-élites in Russia learned how to accommodate and compensate for the worst penalties of the Western sanctions regime. The government built an enormous cushion of foreign reserves that could be drawn upon to prop up the value of the ruble. It also established front companies across the world that could, if needed, help with the procurement of crucial technology and components. As a result, the work of Wally Adeyemo and his colleagues this year wasn't just informed by a long line of previous sanctions programs. It was complicated by them.

Standing behind public-facing officials such as Adeyemo are career civil servants, many with deep expertise, who have chosen to forgo more lucrative jobs in the private sector. One of them is Elizabeth Rosenberg, the

Assistant Secretary for Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes. Earlier in her career, having completed graduate work in Near Eastern studies, she'd covered the energy sector, national security, and sanctions as a trade journalist. But eleven years ago she decided that it was worth taking a pay cut to help create the sanctions she'd been writing about.

In the autumn of 2021, when intelligence reports about Russia's activities on the Ukrainian border made it plain that Putin was preparing for a large-scale invasion, she and other officials began to model steps that they might want to take, such as restricting Russian oil and gas imports, and the possible impacts those moves might have on the global economy. "Sanctions involve costs. There's no way around it," Rosenberg said. "We are cutting ourselves off from the Russian market. We have a responsibility to make sure we are not doing more than we have to."

A crucial aspect of the bureaucrats' work is sifting through intelligence data and predicting collateral damage—not just humanitarian costs but those detrimental to U.S. economic interests. Assessments of that damage had to be considered well before any decisions were finalized.



"Word around school is you've been attributing Shakespeare's works to Edward de Vere."
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

Rosenberg worked closely with Andrea Gacki, the director of the Office of Foreign Assets Control, who earlier in her career was at the Justice Department defending sanctions against targets who had sued the government. Through the fall and winter, the two officials consulted with their foreign counterparts about some of the knottier aspects of what they hoped to do.

Rosenberg and her colleagues travelled repeatedly to the U.K. and Europe. Sometimes her delegation would arrive and learn that the Europeans had budgeted only an hour or two for the meeting. “I would say, ‘No, we’re going to need a lot of time,’ ” Rosenberg recalled. “ ‘We need coffee, we need snacks, we need room availability.’ ” Other times, they would be met with surprise when they asked that representatives of a given country’s justice department and intelligence services attend the discussion, as national-security issues were bound to come up. Hours were spent reviewing whether a particular country had the legal authority to freeze Russian assets, and, if it didn’t, what it needed to do to establish such authority. After most meetings ended, Rosenberg and her team would rush to the American Embassy to send the results of the sessions to Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen.

The U.S. Treasury Department is the only such institution in the world that has its own intelligence agency, situated in the department’s headquarters, on Pennsylvania Avenue. On the night of February 23rd, Rosenberg went through heavy metal doors, placed her phone in a lockbox, and began work on a classified memo to Yellen about proposed sanctions. In an adjoining room, intelligence analysts who are on duty twenty-four hours a day stood behind banks of blinking monitors. Around 10 p.m., one of the analysts announced that Russia had launched missiles at Ukrainian targets. The war had begun. An official in the room that night recalled how the team’s sense of purpose intensified: “I will not forget how that felt.” Sweeping sanctions against Russia went into effect within hours.

Yellen told me, “I’m involved in some discussions with people at the finance-minister level. But when I hang up the phone I say, ‘My senior staff will be in touch with yours,’ and I cast all of this on Andrea and Wally and

Liz, and they do the heavy lifting. If this all works out, it's because of them.”

Some of the plans activated in February were less comprehensive than they first appeared. Dozens of Russian officials hadn't been touched, and the initial *SWIFT* ban applied to only seven banks. But the sanctions designers wanted to leave room to ramp up the pressure should Putin not respond as they hoped.

As Rosenberg explained to me, designing and implementing sanctions, which are largely about economic forecasts and banking relationships, often feels like mechanical work. Typical days involve composing and editing memos and passing them up the chain. Humanitarian concerns may feel very far away. “And then you have Bucha”—the site of a massacre of civilians by Russian forces this spring—“and you think, Oh, my God, this is why we’re doing it.”

Not all of what unfolded shortly after the invasion was anticipated, including a mass private-sector exodus from Russia. Within days, the anger of the Western public had moved dozens of companies—among them Apple, Netflix, ExxonMobil, and Shell—to announce that they were withdrawing from the country. Before long roughly a thousand more businesses joined them and, in Yellen’s account, “multiplied the impact” of sanctions.

Singh thought that the pullout would have a lasting effect. “Once a McDonald’s leaves, it doesn’t come back, especially those that had physical infrastructure that they just abandoned in Russia,” he said. “That was big.”

From the Treasury officials’ perspective, more penalties are not always better; heedlessly adding names to sanctions lists may have destabilizing consequences. In 2018, for instance, the Office of Foreign Assets Control sanctioned the aluminum magnate and oligarch Oleg Deripaska and his companies in response to Russia’s invasion of Crimea and other activities. The announcement jolted the global aluminum market, prompting a price spike.

The sanctions or seizures of foreign assets—for instance, the impounding this March by European officials of gaudy yachts linked to Rosneft, the state-controlled oil conglomerate, and to Alexey Mordashov, reportedly the richest man in Russia—are preceded by careful study and legal review. Before an individual or a company appears on a sanctions list, a multidisciplinary team at *OFAC*, often working with other government agencies, analyzes the potential consequences and tries to minimize unintended results.

Putin countered the sanctions with strategies to create demand for rubles and drive up their value. He required that most Russian oil and gas purchases be paid in rubles, and the Russian Central Bank restricted the ability of the country's citizens to exchange their money for foreign notes. By the end of June, the price of the ruble had rebounded. A month later, the Russian military had made slow but solid gains. Among its achievements was bombing the strategically important port of Odesa, which disrupted plans to release grain stores there that were badly needed in other parts of the world.

E.U. countries had by now adopted their sixth sanctions package, which included a pledge to phase out seaborne imports of Russian crude oil. This, along with a decrease in pipeline deliveries, the E.U. claimed, would allow it to cut Russian oil imports by some ninety per cent. The member countries also agreed to reduce their consumption of gas by fifteen per cent. Shortly afterward, the Russian state-owned energy company Gazprom drastically reduced natural-gas flows to Europe through the Nord Stream 1 pipeline, which runs from Russia to Germany. (Russia blamed technical problems that were exacerbated by sanctions.)

Russia was also selling much of the oil and gas that European countries didn't want to countries including China and India, which were offered better deals than they'd previously been getting. Estimates of Russian oil-and-gas revenue reached a stunning billion dollars a day, nearly forty per cent higher than they had been in 2021. A former Treasury official called the enormous profits “the elephant in the room.”

Margarita Balmaceda, a professor at Seton Hall University who studies the politics of Russian energy markets, noted that in this instance extensive

sanctions may produce only a middling effect. Western policymakers, she said, may end up “thinking we are doing something when we aren’t doing that much.”

By this summer, the Treasury Department’s sanctions experts were sometimes racked with self-doubt. “I think the going has gotten tough,” Elizabeth Rosenberg told me. “It’s frustrating that Russia is able to reap this premium with oil prices with this war it created. I find it demoralizing and sad to think that this horrible war grinds on.”

In early autumn, the conflict, along with other economic factors, was worsening a food crisis in Africa and the Middle East, and driving worldwide inflation higher. Western political leaders found themselves facing not just economic distress but simmering popular resentment at the costs of supporting Ukraine.

In the United States, nearly thirty per cent of respondents to a Pew study said that they weren’t concerned by the prospect of a Russian takeover of Ukraine. Such indicators of Western indifference served Putin’s interests at a moment when, according to the International Monetary Fund, Russia’s G.D.P. appeared to be stabilizing after a perilous summer.

The predicted rate of decline in Russia—more than three per cent in 2022—was roughly a tenth of the predicted decline of G.D.P. in Ukraine. It was also less than some Western leaders had hoped. But its consequences were being felt on the ground in Russia.

Ilya Matveev, a political scientist who studies Russian economic policy, estimated that in 2021 there were some twenty auto manufacturers, including Volkswagen, Nissan, and Hyundai, operating in Russia. All of their plants depended on imported parts. Today, few are still operating. One of those, AvtoVAZ, is a large carmaker founded in the Soviet era that had a partnership with Renault. But Renault is now gone and AvtoVAZ is making do with whatever components it can find. Another is a Chinese company trying to do the same thing. Sales of new cars in Russia fell nearly sixty per cent in September from a year earlier, according to the Association of European Businesses.

Matveev cited Tikhvin, a town of about sixty thousand people in northern Russia, as a telling example. Until recently, it had two main employers, an *IKEA* furniture-manufacturing plant and a Russian factory that assembled railroad freight cars. After the invasion, *IKEA* announced that it was closing its Russian operations. The plant is now empty. The freight-car manufacturer struggled to get the parts it needed; that factory was shuttered for months. Workers who were furloughed learned to live with less.

Those workers have no safe way to express their frustrations with their government, though. Acts of protest are restricted, and the independent media have been shut down. “Russia is now a full-fledged military dictatorship. It was not announced, but it is de-facto martial law,” Matveev said. “This is why it is really difficult for me to imagine political change in Russia.”

Matveev, who fled the country this spring, predicted pockets of labor unrest in Russia in the coming months, but he believes that Putin will still have resources to continue fighting the war for months, or even years. “This is the most tragic thing,” he said. “Like in the First World War—it was an extremely intense conflict, but it lasted four years. This could be similar.”

Vladimir Ashurkov, of the Navalny-affiliated Anti-Corruption Foundation, described sanctions as “a blunt instrument and not a silver bullet,” and said that those who expected sanctions to stop the war in Ukraine quickly were naïve. “Economic sanctions degrade Russian military and economic capabilities over time, but it’s not immediate,” he said. “Personal sanctions, they turn the life styles of the rich and famous of the Russian political and economic élite upside down, but they are not going to end the war immediately.”

Oligarchs who have been sanctioned by the U.S., the U.K., Canada, and Europe are now being forced to choose sides. Some will leave Russia with close to nothing. The entrepreneur Oleg Tinkov, who criticized the war on Instagram and claims he was forced to sell his stake in a bank for a fraction of its value, is reportedly living in fear of being assassinated. Others will stay in Russia and relinquish their assets outside its borders. For a person “who is used to traversing the Mediterranean on his mega-yacht, it’s highly inconvenient,” Ashurkov said. But, for an average Russian person, seeing

unemployment and prices skyrocket and the availability of goods declining, “it’s death by a thousand cuts.”



Cartoon by Roz Chast

Nicholas Mulder, the historian, believes that the use of sanctions fundamentally altered the meaning of war and peace. Although often presented as a way to prevent military conflict through deterrence, sanctions are themselves akin to a brutal form of warfare whose effects fall most directly on civilian populations. “A nation put under comprehensive blockade was on the road to social collapse,” Mulder writes. “The experience of material isolation left its mark on society for decades afterward, as the effects of poor health, hunger, and malnutrition were transmitted to unborn generations. Weakened mothers gave birth to underdeveloped and stunted children. The economic weapon thereby cast a long-lasting socioeconomic and biological shadow over targeted societies, not unlike radioactive fallout.”

Members of the Biden Administration, including the sanctions experts in the Treasury Department, take pains to note that the economic weapons they’ve deployed have exemptions for food, humanitarian aid, and medicine. But Adeyemo and his team have had to confront a range of unintended consequences, from global inflation to crop shortfalls in impoverished countries. For instance, in disrupting supplies of certain

fertilizers of which Russia is a major producer, E.U. sanctions could exacerbate already acute food insecurity in Tunisia and other parts of Africa.

Daniel Glaser, the former Assistant Secretary for Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes, said that it's important not to be coy about the damage sanctions do, collaterally or head-on. "When you talk about trying to raise inflation, or raise unemployment, or damage the G.D.P.—what do you think that is? Those are numerical representations of ways you're hurting the people." He went on, "I think we need to own it. I'm not saying I don't understand the criticism. It's tragic that someone like Vladimir Putin puts us in a position where we have no choice but to do this. But I do agree that the world sucks, and you often have to do things that are the lesser of two evils."

The next escalation of the sanctions war, Treasury officials hope, will include a price cap on Russian oil—a proposal that Rosenberg and her colleagues have been trying to finalize with coalition members this month. Yellen told me that the cap was the best way to damage Putin and to make it difficult for him to continue the war while shielding the U.S., its allies, and the global economy from adverse consequences. Oil prices are around eighty-five dollars a barrel today, down from a high of more than a hundred dollars in March; a Bloomberg News report suggested that a range between roughly forty and sixty dollars a barrel was being discussed. As Rosenberg put it, "We don't want Russia to stop selling oil into the global market, which would elevate prices even more. But we want it to earn less."

The idea of a group of countries banding together to limit the price at which Russia can sell a barrel of oil may seem fantastical, but the bizarre structure of the global oil market puts it within the realm of possibility. Western companies provide much of the insurance and financing that Russian oil tankers need in order to transport their oil to foreign buyers; the most recent packages of sanctions have already barred companies in the E.U. from providing insurance for Russian oil shipments. Some energy experts have dismissed the idea, however, noting numerous potential ways around the cap, among them finding alternative sources of tanker insurance.

Nonetheless, Adeyemo went to Paris, Brussels, New Delhi, and Mumbai in recent months to generate support for the idea.

Remarkably, the mere discussion of a price cap seemed to have an effect, contributing to uncertainty that in September forced Russia to offer further discounts for oil sales to China and India. Adeyemo argues that the proposed cap would work well with existing export restrictions that limit technology sales to Russia. “It’s starting to bring down their revenues,” he told me recently. “But, even if they continue to have revenues, a key piece of this is making sure the revenues they have can’t buy the things they need to continue the war in Ukraine.”

The Western prohibitions on exports of technology such as microchips have degraded Russia’s ability to make precision-guided missiles and other sophisticated weapons. Yellen noted with satisfaction that two Russian plants that made battlefield tanks had shut down because they’d run out of components. Treasury officials are similarly encouraged by the results of the risky step G-7 countries took in freezing Russia’s foreign-currency reserves—those hundreds of billions in dollars, euros, pounds, yen, and gold. The move prevented Putin from accessing the financial cushion he’d spent years building as a bulwark against this very situation.

Singh said that sanctions are only part of a broader Western strategy to constrain Putin, one that includes providing weaponry and equipment to Ukraine; helping Europe to diversify its energy sources; and fortifying the presence of *NATO* troops in countries including Poland, Estonia, and Latvia. But, he said, “there is always a connection between a country’s economy, its military-industrial complex, and its performance on the battlefield.”

Earlier this fall, the Ukrainian military reclaimed Russian-held areas in eastern parts of the country. Around the same time, China and India, under pressure from the West, began distancing themselves from the Kremlin. On October 5th, however, Saudi Arabia gave Putin a break. The group of countries called *OPEC+*, of which Saudi Arabia is the de-facto leader, announced a two-million-barrel-a-day cut in oil production in an attempt to reverse falling oil prices. The decision was not only a boon to Putin; it was

a rebuke to the Biden Administration, which had been urging countries to keep production high so that prices would continue to fall.

Margarita Balmaceda, the Seton Hall professor, told me that *OPEC+* countries were likely motivated more by economic self-interest than by a desire to help Putin. Even so, she said, “this is going to create havoc and chaos in Western societies, including in the U.S., where we have elections in a few weeks. That kind of signal is exactly what Putin wants.”

The political and financial benefits derived from the *OPEC+* cut won’t likely be felt by Russian workers currently experiencing the sharpest effects of the economic contraction. But Putin himself retains the short-term advantages of an autocrat and a kleptocrat. The system he’s created, including a vast and sophisticated secret service, is dependent on him, loyal to him, and also aware of the grave risks that come from breaking with him.

Still, Elizabeth Rosenberg remained confident that the central goal of the sanctioners, starving Putin of funds for war, was working. “All of our indications are that these restrictions we’ve put in place when it comes to accessing finance or importing technology and material—these are vises that keep tightening,” she said. “And our playbook is to keep tightening them.”

Many experts see Putin’s September mobilization of three hundred thousand reservists for mandatory military service as a sign of desperation. But he’s evidently not out of ideas. Earlier this month, his military deployed unguided kamikaze drones—reportedly manufactured in Iran—to sabotage Ukrainian electricity grids and water supplies, just in time for winter. States that are much sanctioned by the West sometimes collaborate effectively, too.

Many of those I interviewed underlined how hard it is to gauge the true state of Russia’s economy, or its leader, when the Kremlin controls information so tightly. Determining when and how this conflict will end is even harder. As Sergei Guriev, a Russian economist who now lives in Paris, said, “This is really a twentieth-century war,” with soldiers on the ground killing civilians and destroying towns. “That’s not supposed to happen in

the twenty-first century. It should not happen now. But it is happening. We should not rule out scenarios that seem implausible.” ♦

By Keith Gessen

By Evan Osnos

By Andrew Marantz

By Susan B. Glasser

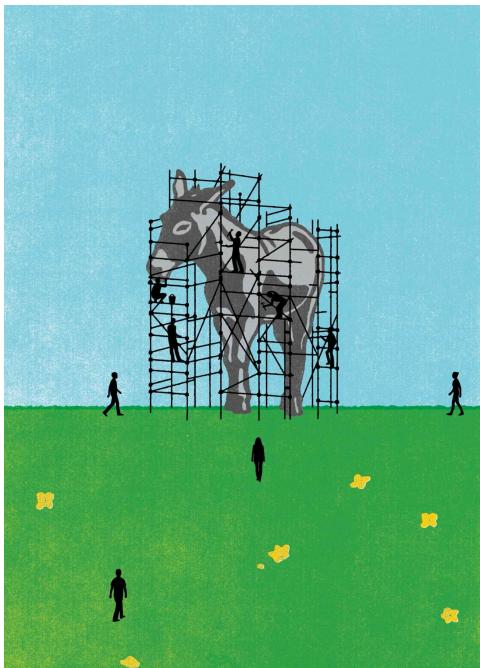
Annals of Politics

- **The Democrats' Midterm Challenge**

The Democrats' Midterm Challenge

In competitive races across the country, candidates are downplaying ideology in favor of kitchen-table issues.

By [Nicholas Lemann](#)



I've been spending time lately travelling to closely contested political territories, watching endangered Democrats campaign. If you live in deep-blue America, as I do, this can feel surreal. The issues my neighbors talk about on the street, usually in a tone of crisis-level alarm—the ill health of American democracy, the fragility of the planet, the pervasiveness of social injustice—and the issues the candidates I watched talk about on the campaign trail have only one point of intersection: the threat to abortion rights. The candidates talk less about fighting climate change, more about lowering your federal taxes through solar credits; less about the January 6th insurrection, more about the many reasonable Republicans they enjoy working with; less about the Biden Administration's passage of historic legislation, more about insulin price caps. And they combine this with a tough, unsentimental way of practicing politics that includes trying like hell to draw far-right opponents.

One morning in late August, I went to an American Legion post in Manchester, New Hampshire, to watch Senator Maggie Hassan campaign. Hassan, who previously served as governor of New Hampshire, is running for her second term in the Senate. In 2016, she defeated the incumbent, Kelly Ayotte, a relatively moderate Republican, by only a thousand and seventeen votes, so naturally she was on every list of endangered Senate Democrats as this election season began. This year, she has a much weaker opponent: a retired Army brigadier general named Donald Bolduc, who has never run for office before and who, in one of his first television ads, looked right into the camera and said, “I didn’t spend my life defending this country to let a bunch of liberal, socialist pansies squander it away.” But Hassan is taking nothing for granted.

The American Legion post was in a one-story brick building divided into two spaces—a meeting room and a warm, comfortable bar. Inside were thirty or so veterans, mostly older, mostly wearing military caps, sitting on folding chairs. Hassan—short, efficient, conservatively dressed in a blue suit with an American-flag pin on the lapel—entered right on time. Experienced politicians often speak extemporaneously at routine events like this; Hassan came to the lectern, opened a folder, and read from prepared remarks, in a deep, sure voice. She mainly talked about everything she has done for veterans. I had thought that I was aware of every single one of Donald Trump’s misdeeds as President, but I hadn’t known that he had stopped flying the ubiquitous black-and-white P.O.W./M.I.A. flag over the White House. Hassan was on top of this, and she helped fight to have it restored. “The flag is flying today in its rightful place,” she said.

Hassan made a point of stressing that all her accomplishments for veterans had been bipartisan. She is not one to traffic in warnings about the Republicans having become a far-right, democracy-threatening party. Protecting our democracy is the seventeenth and last item on her campaign Web site’s list of priorities, after, for example, standing with law enforcement, lowering taxes, and assisting small businesses. “Supporting those who serve is not a Democratic or Republican issue,” she said. “It’s an obligation that should unite all Americans.” The audience applauded. She spoke for a few minutes about her father, who was a Second World War veteran. “My father served in the 76th Infantry Division, the Liberty Bell

Division,” she said. “He survived the Battle of the Bulge. He told me a lot about how they struggled in the freezing cold. They were fighting for the world to be free. They showed the world that, when Americans are united, we can do anything. Dad would ask me and my siblings at breakfast, ‘What are you doing for freedom today?’ ”

Hassan’s father, Robert C. Wood, was a political-science professor at M.I.T. and one of the key architects of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society; he later became president of the University of Massachusetts. These parts of his résumé went unmentioned, and, if Hassan imbibed any intellectual liberalism, in addition to patriotism, at the breakfast table, she rarely displays it. At campaign appearances, she hardly mentions the Biden Administration. After the American Legion event, I asked Hassan which way New Hampshire was trending politically. “I think I’ll let political scientists and pundits talk about that,” she said. “My observation is that, increasingly, people who are in office in New Hampshire are good problem solvers. That really is important to people here. . . . I don’t think my constituents want me or expect me to label myself.” What did she think of President Biden’s expansive domestic agenda, which goes beyond what his Democratic predecessors proposed? She was skeptical of the assumption behind my question. “I think President Biden has worked to address the country’s challenges. I’m not in a position to compare him to previous Presidents. What’s really important here is that we have passed critical legislation and most of it has been bipartisan.”



"The worst part about having a cold is everyone's helpful suggestions."
Cartoon by Carolita Johnson

A couple of weeks earlier, I had gone to another campaign event, in a Las Vegas suburb, for another endangered incumbent Democratic senator, Catherine Cortez Masto, of Nevada. This one was in a seafood restaurant, called San Francisco Bay, that had recently opened in a strip mall. The owners, Rudy and Norma Aguilar, both born in Latin America, had opened a jewelry store next door some years earlier. When Cortez Masto, who is the first Latina to serve as a U.S. senator, entered the restaurant, some of the customers stopped what they were doing to watch. She is brisk, professional, and low-key; she was dressed in a plum-colored suit. What she lacks in electricity she makes up for in attention to detail: she obviously knew many of the people in the restaurant, and she had all the time in the world to pose for photographs and listen to minor entreaties.

Cortez Masto's version of what the Democratic Party stands for, at least at this event, rests on aiding local businesses. "This is what we Latinos do," she said. "We open small businesses." She pointed out that, earlier in the pandemic, she had helped the Aguilars get funds from the Paycheck Protection Program. "It's a challenging time for us," she said. "This is about all our families. Who's standing with us? My opponent said it was good news when Latino businesses closed during the pandemic." A few people in the restaurant booed. (In fact, he had said it was good news that the

Democrats were in power when Latinos lost their businesses; he hoped that they would blame the party in charge.) Her opponent is Adam Laxalt—Nevada’s former attorney general, and a grandson of the late Nevada senator Paul Laxalt, born of a secret liaison between Laxalt’s daughter Michelle and the late senator Pete Domenici, of New Mexico—who is running as a hard-right Trump supporter. One of his first television ads of the campaign compared American politics to “Star Wars”: good versus evil. “The radical left, rich élites, woke corporations, academia, Hollywood, and the media—they’re taking over America,” Laxalt says in the ad, over images of Black Lives Matter protests. “That’s your Empire, right there.”

Cortez Masto, by contrast, strives for the prosaic. She seldom names the major Biden Administration bills that she voted for—the American Rescue Plan, the Bipartisan Infrastructure and Jobs Act, and so on—and instead mentions specific items that have provided Nevadans with tangible benefits. She and I spoke for a few minutes outside the restaurant. “It’s a very diverse state, and it’s a purple state,” she said. “They want people that solve problems here and not contribute to them.” Cortez Masto noted that she is a third-generation Nevadan. (Laxalt grew up near Washington, where his mother worked for the lobbying firm that Paul Laxalt started after he retired from the Senate.) Her focus, she said, is “kitchen-table issues.”

There’s a natural temptation, because of scenes like these, to think of Hassan and Cortez Masto as Joe Manchin-style moderates—but that’s not what they are. Both of them almost always vote in line with the Biden Administration’s positions. What they are trying to do is establish a reputation for the Democratic Party, or at least for themselves, as super-practical, non-moralistic, not very partisan, and intent on improving the everyday circumstances of people’s lives. In both New Hampshire and Nevada, the Democratic members of the House of Representatives—two in New Hampshire, three in Nevada, all in close races—are following the same program. And just about all the senior strategists in the Democratic Party I’ve spoken to, even ones from New York and California, offered similar prescriptions for how the Party can succeed in the future.

How can this be? Aren’t things looking O.K. for the Democrats right now, what with the political bounty bestowed by the Supreme Court’s highly

unpopular decision revoking the constitutional right to abortion, the extremist shenanigans of Trump and other Republicans, the drop in gas prices, the receding of unpopular pandemic restrictions, and the evident end of public intramural Democratic squabbling, symbolized by the passage of the Inflation Reduction Act? People who do politics for a living have to be ruthlessly realistic, and here is what they see if they are Democrats. Twenty years ago, many Democrats looked at demographic trends and foresaw a bright future for their party as the natural home of an increasingly diverse population. The election and reëlection of Barack Obama, in which record numbers of Black Americans voted, appeared to confirm this. Then, beginning with the 2016 election, it became obvious that this picture had been too rosy. The completely surprising success of Bernie Sanders and Trump, both of whom had initially looked like crank candidates, showed that many voters in both parties were deeply dissatisfied with the political system. Signs of nonwhite voters defecting from the Democrats started to appear in 2016, and have continued since then.

“We took for granted that voters of color would vote Democratic,” Howard Wolfson, one of the Party’s most senior operatives, told me. “Our challenge there is very real and very worrisome, especially among Latinos.” In the United States and elsewhere, left-behind rural areas have turned sharply to the right. In 2016, Trump carried eighty-three per cent of the counties in America, representing forty per cent of the population. This made more obvious what should have been clear all along: that the constitutional system, in particular the design of the Electoral College and the Senate, gives the depopulating countryside disproportionate political power. In 2020, Biden—the most traditional of the Democratic candidates, and the one best able to connect with voters who had left the Party to vote for Trump—prevailed by carrying the Midwestern “blue wall” states (Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania) that Trump had won in 2016, plus heavily Black Georgia and heavily Latino Arizona. Even so, Trump got eleven million more votes than he did in 2016, and the Republicans picked up fifteen seats in the House. Florida, Ohio, and Iowa, all of which Obama carried twice, went for Trump in 2016 and again in 2020.

The question of the Democrats’ future is usually framed as a struggle between progressives and centrists—Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Pramila

Jayapal, promising increased turnout among young voters, versus Abigail Spanberger and Elissa Slotkin, promising to appeal to swing voters, with Biden caught in the middle. Republicans this year are featuring the progressives' cultural agenda in their negative ads, while Democrats, at least in competitive races, are distancing themselves from it. When I requested an interview with Obama about the Party, he declined, but his office sent a list of suggested reading, which included a *New York* magazine article by Jonathan Chait, called "Political Correctness Is Losing." (In a recent podcast, Obama said that identity politics leaves a lot of voters "feeling as if you're not speaking to me and my concerns.") Yet it's an oversimplification of the Democrats' challenge to say that if they can simply jettison a few high-relief positions associated with the left wing of the Party then all will be well. How many of the Party's elected officials have actually called for abolishing the police or for teaching critical race theory in public schools? "In American politics, every generation of Republicans will have a new euphemism for race," Patrick Gaspard, a veteran Democrat who worked on Obama's Presidential campaigns and is now the president of the Center for American Progress, told me. "For a minute, it was critical race theory. It's usually crime, and now it's crime again. Critical race theory is effective when people don't see you in their community—when they can believe things about you. Look at places with a diminishment of power—economic power, political power—and you find that people recognize that through a prism of culture. You can take the teeth out of these cultural issues by being constant, by being attendant."

Among Democratic professionals I spoke to, there was a conviction that the Party had made itself vulnerable to Republican cultural appeals aimed at white working-class voters by not having paid enough attention, throughout the past few decades, to those voters' economic well-being. In particular, the Clinton Administration's enthusiastic embrace of free trade and globalization, over the strong objections of the Democrats' traditional union constituency, created a weakness that Trump exploited. "I think the largest newspaper in the country to editorialize against *Nafta* was the *Toledo Blade*," Sherrod Brown, a Democratic senator from Ohio and a stalwart union supporter, told me. "I got a letter from a woman who said, 'I can't believe you went to Yale and you're against *NAFTA*.' That kind of shit went

on.” These days, he said in an astonished tone, the Democrats carry Upper Arlington, a traditionally Republican suburb of Columbus.



“A dish ran away with a spoon last week, and there goes a runaway pickle.”
Cartoon by Victoria Roberts

It’s no longer accurate to say that the Republicans are the clear preference for people who have more money. Today, the most affluent congressional districts in the country are largely represented by Democrats, including, for example, the district in Connecticut where the Bush family’s political dynasty began. The problem for the Democrats is that what attracts these people often repels the Party’s traditional working-class base—including the older, churchgoing Black voters who gave Biden his victories in the Democratic primaries in the South in 2020. There simply aren’t enough affluent, educated, socially liberal voters to generate strong majorities in national elections. Only about a third of registered voters have a college degree, and many of them vote Republican. The Democrats’ fundamental worry is that they will lose votes among the non-college-educated majority faster than they can gain votes among the college-educated minority. “We’ve lost enormous ground with non-college voters,” Wolfson said. “Sometimes when I’m in rooms”—he means rooms where Democratic donors and elders gather, not American Legion posts—“and I talk about education policy, I ask, ‘How many people in America do you think are college-educated?’ People don’t know. They’re in that bubble. It’s ironic we

haven't been able to raise taxes on the wealthy when we have the greatest wealth in history. It's ridiculous. It's *ridiculous*. We can't take the Senate if we lose the economically liberal, socially conservative quadrant."

If there's anybody in the Democratic Party who shouldn't be worried about all this, it's Rusty Hicks, a veteran labor organizer who is the Party chair in California, which hasn't voted for a Republican in a Presidential election since 1988. As he put it when I spoke with him, "We have the California Republican congressional delegation to the point where it can fit into a twelve-passenger van, and I'm trying to get it into a minivan." But he's still concerned. "From an ideological standpoint, this is my challenge: to hold on to the Westside of L.A. white liberal and the Bay Area progressive, along with the blue-collar worker in the Central Valley. I feel like Gumby. My arms are being pulled from one side to the other, by the two sides of the Party." As an example, he gave the January 6th committee hearings: "If a voter in the booth is going to take seven seconds to make a decision, and it's a gut decision, is January 6th the only thing that's going to make them push a button for the Democrats? As important as it is, I don't know if it breaks through. I'm not sure voters in marginal districts will go to that over inflation, safety, energy costs, and can I get a decent job. I get the argument, from an intellectual standpoint. I'm not sure it's the selling argument in November." A state gasoline tax rebate that the Democrats in the California legislature passed this year, he said, might be a better selling point: "That's at least a two-hundred-dollar check to most voters in California. That's money in their pockets."

The aggressive mundaneness of Democratic candidates around the country, at least in competitive races, shouldn't be mistaken for simple centrist, difference-splitting caution. It comes from a reading of American politics right now as an open competition for the loyalties of voters who aren't especially affluent and who don't feel especially secure or in control of their circumstances. The Democrats are pitching the idea that they will make your life better in tangible, concrete ways: they'll improve your kids' public schools, they'll keep you safe, they'll protect you from disastrous health-care crises, and they'll try to make sure that you have a good job, while the Republicans are busy enacting a drama of cultural grievance. In Washington, the Democratic Party has been undergoing a much more

dramatic shift: more than forty years' worth of Democratic conventional wisdom about the government's proper role in the economy has abruptly dematerialized. For most of that time, the Party's dominant idea was to let markets operate freely and then to correct whatever inequities they produced—for example, through the tax system. Government was to avoid directly involving itself in the operations of businesses. The 2008 financial crisis, the ensuing deep recession, and the rise of Trump and Sanders shattered that consensus. The Biden Administration has a fragile congressional majority. Some of its major initiatives have failed to pass. Inside the Administration, there seems to be the usual high level of internal debate. Still, economic-policy ideas that were undiscussable for decades are now discussable, and some of them are being enacted.

All this activity, the campaigning out in the field and the policy deliberations in Washington, can be understood as part of the same project: searching for ways to stop the Democratic Party's leakage among non-college-educated voters, without losing its growing college-educated constituency. Somewhere in there might be the beginning of a Democratic-majority coalition that is different from Obama's or Bill Clinton's. It's developing before our eyes. Closely contested states like Nevada and New Hampshire are good places to watch that happen—and also to be reminded that the new Democratic program isn't the same everywhere, and isn't captured by the terms "moderate" or "progressive."

Harry Reid, the former Senate Majority Leader, who died at the end of last year, is still the dominant figure in the Nevada Democratic Party. Reid was a tough, canny career politician who was unable to galvanize a crowd. He'd outmaneuver and out-organize, rather than out-electrify, the opposition. (When Reid died, no photographer seems to have caught an image of citizens weeping in the streets, but hundreds of political operatives from across the country showed up for his memorial service, in Las Vegas.) He was first elected to the Senate in 1986. In 1998, he was elected to his third term by a margin of only four hundred and twenty-eight votes. Wanting to avoid a scare like that again led him to remake the state Democratic Party using a variety of techniques, some suitable for a civics textbook, some not. As the 2004 campaign approached, he formed an alliance with Sig Rogich, Nevada's leading Republican political consultant and adman, who was

closely associated with Paul Laxalt, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Roger Ailes. Together they started an organization called Republicans for Reid. This was designed to scare off the potential opponent Reid feared most, Representative Jim Gibbons, a handsome former Air Force pilot—and, in fact, Gibbons didn't run. Instead, Reid's opponent was Richard Ziser, a devout Mormon known for having waged an ardent campaign to get Nevada to ban gay marriage. Reid crushed him.

Then Reid became an early advocate for a Presidential caucus in Nevada, hoping to draw national attention to the state and to register new Democratic voters. The first caucus, in January, 2008, was one of the moments in which Obama established himself as a serious competitor to Hillary Clinton, and it also added thirty thousand new Democrats to the rolls. In 2010, when the Tea Party movement was ascendant in Nevada and the national Republican Party was targeting Reid, he once again identified the Republican opponent he feared most, a state senator and former television host named Sue Lowden, and did what he could to take her out. Lowden, at a campaign stop, had mentioned that, in the days before health insurance, rural patients who couldn't afford to pay would give their doctor a chicken in exchange for medical treatment. A Reid-affiliated organization called Battle Born Progress hired an actor to put on a chicken suit and show up at Lowden's public events. Reid's Republican opponent wound up being Sharron Angle, a former member of a far-right party who had served briefly in the State Assembly. He won by six points.

By this time, Reid and a team of aides he had assembled completely controlled the Nevada Democratic Party, in the manner of an old-fashioned urban political machine, and every candidate for a significant office had to seek his approval. Catherine Cortez Masto is the daughter of Manny Cortez, a close political ally of Reid's. She came up through the machine, was elected state attorney general in 2006, and was Reid's anointed successor when he decided not to run for reelection, in 2016. One member of Reid's inner circle, Megan Jones, who started out as an intern in his office in 1996 and worked with him as an adviser until he died, outlined for me, when I met with her in Las Vegas, Reid's five-step political formula. One, register as many Democratic voters as possible. Two, talk to them early and often. Three, don't pay attention to polls—people in Las Vegas work odd hours

and aren't around to answer the phone in the evenings. Four, get your people out to vote. Five, pick your opponent. "We were never afraid to do that," she said. "Elections are about a choice. It's between two people. It's a lot easier to run against an unqualified candidate."



Cartoon by Edward Steed

Just as Obama treated the Nevada caucuses as an opportunity to prove his candidacy in 2008, so, too, did Bernie Sanders in 2016. The socialist wing of the Party kept its organization in place after that, and, in March 2021, with Reid retired and facing late-stage cancer, its members turned out in force at the state Democratic convention and elected one of their own, Judith Whitmer, as the Party chair. The Reid machine reacted in a typically efficient and unsentimental way: the entire staff of the Nevada Democratic Party quit, and the machine set up a new, parallel party organization, called Nevada Democratic Victory. Officially, the two organizations are friendly and work closely together to achieve their shared goals; actually, Nevada Democratic Victory, which has much more money than the Nevada Democratic Party, is running the 2022 campaigns.

The Nevada Democrats are in trouble this year. The state has many conservative voters, some of whom have fled there from California, which has higher taxes. Both Cortez Masto's Senate race and the governor's race —in which the sheriff in Las Vegas, Joe Lombardo, a former moderate

endorsed by Trump, is challenging the Democratic incumbent, Steve Sisolak—are tossups. Rebecca Lambe, a veteran Nevada political operative who was another member of Reid’s inner circle, told me, “Here’s the reality. We are a tossup in every cycle. Pundits think we are much bluer than we have ever been. We grind it out.” The Reid machine, which attends closely to state-legislative elections and therefore controls congressional redistricting, has tried to lock down Nevada’s three Democrat-held House seats by creating a new map for 2022. It gave the state’s longest-serving Democratic member of Congress, Dina Titus, a much less favorable district, by moving some of Titus’s most reliably Democratic constituents into the districts of the Nevada delegation’s endangered Democratic incumbents, Susie Lee and Steven Horsford. Titus was furious. “I totally got fucked by the legislature,” she said at a public meeting. When I spoke with her, some months later, in Las Vegas, she gave me a less telegraphic version of the same argument. “I had a coherent, diverse, urban district,” she said. “Now I’ve been given an affluent white suburb where half want to build a wall and the other half want immigration reform. It’s no longer a coherent message. So I have to focus on how hard I work and what I can deliver that is not ideological.” That wouldn’t be easy with her new constituents: “Nevada is very individualistic. Nevadans are skeptical of government.”

The Reid machine has benefitted greatly from its ties to business, especially the gaming industry. Cortez Masto has received forty-five million dollars in campaign contributions this election cycle, more than triple Laxalt’s total, and that doesn’t count additional funding that Democratic groups have put into her race. But the Democrats’ core voters are mostly non-college-educated nonwhite union members who work in the casinos in Las Vegas. Susie Martinez is a state legislator who is the head of the Nevada chapter of the A.F.L.-C.I.O.; she is also the daughter of Mexican immigrants, a Teamster, and a thirty-four-year employee of the Flamingo casino. She offered her take on Nevada Democratic voters: “We want to be safe in our homes. We want a good job. We want housing, so we can rest. We want pensions, so we can retire with dignity. That’s what people want. That’s the American Dream.” The Reid machine has been good at getting significant amounts of federal funding for Nevada, but it isn’t confident that the Democratic Party will be able to explain to voters how this helps them. “Democrats are often afraid to talk to working-class people,” D. Taylor,

who, as the president of the hospitality union Unite Here, is the most powerful labor leader in Nevada, told me. “The Democrats have done best with Medicare, Social Security—when what they do helps everyone. They have emphasized going to college too much.”

New Hampshire, like Nevada, voted Republican in the three Presidential elections during the nineteen-eighties. Also like Nevada, New Hampshire has seen its Democratic Party rise substantially since then because of the work of one person. Jeanne Shaheen, who is now New Hampshire’s senior U.S. senator, came up through the operational ranks of politics, starting with Jimmy Carter’s New Hampshire primary campaign in 1975. She was elected to the State Senate in 1990, and became governor in 1997. She served three two-year terms as governor, ran for the U.S. Senate and lost in 2002, and ran and won in 2008, 2014, and 2020. Shaheen was an early supporter of Maggie Hassan’s. Hassan got involved in education politics as an advocate for her son, who has cerebral palsy. That brought her to the attention of Shaheen, who appointed her to a state commission on education funding and has nurtured her career ever since.

All the leading figures in the rise of the New Hampshire Democratic Party—Shaheen; Hassan; John Lynch, who was governor after Shaheen and before Hassan; and Raymond Buckley, who is the longest-serving state-party chair in the country—have followed a well-developed formula for winning. It is centered on a promise not to tamper with the state’s anti-tax inclinations: New Hampshire has no income tax or sales tax, and pledging to oppose any attempt to institute either tax is a de-facto requirement for ambitious Democratic politicians. When I spoke to Shaheen, she reminded me that she is the only governor in the history of New Hampshire to have won reelection without pledging to veto these taxes; this was during her campaign for her third term, when she said that she would not veto a sales tax to help fund public education. But the legislature never gave her the opportunity, and in the next cycle, when Shaheen made her first run for the U.S. Senate, the Republicans won every major race. Hassan and Lynch then renewed the anti-tax pledge in its pure form. Another element in the Democratic formula is bipartisanship. “One party doesn’t have a lock on what the best policies are,” Shaheen told me. “Probably the most consistent

theme I hear from constituents is ‘Why can’t you work together?’ I’ve done that since my first term in the State Senate.”

New Hampshire’s Democrats are also tightly disciplined—none of their major candidates this year had a primary opponent, while the Republicans were tearing each other to pieces in the primaries. Sanders-affiliated Democrats are obviously not in love with the Shaheen formula, but so far they are staying in line. I asked Shoshanna Kelly, a candidate for the New Hampshire Executive Council, who is Black and one of the state’s few politicians of color, how she felt about prohibiting new state taxes forever. She paused. “I don’t know the answer,” she said. “I don’t know what I’ll say in five years. But for now the system seems right.” New Hampshire Democrats are also extremely attentive to the unglamorous daily grind of politics, the door-knocking and database maintenance and delivery of government services. “New Hampshire voters want somebody to answer the phone if they have a problem,” Raymond Buckley told me, when I visited him at the state Party’s headquarters, in Concord. “That’s what they want. That’s *all* they want.”

As careful as the Democrats have been, they still often lose. Hassan lost her first race for State Senate, in 2002; ran again and won three times in a row; and then lost her seat in 2010. In 2020, a year when the Democrats did not campaign door to door because of *covid*, the Republicans won control of both houses of the state legislature and of all statewide elected offices. The Republican governor, Chris Sununu, is running for his fourth term as an overwhelming favorite; if he had heeded entreaties he’d been getting from the national Republican leadership to run for the U.S. Senate, he probably could have defeated Hassan. Fortune’s gift to the Democrats in this cycle has been the rise of the far right. Like Hassan, both of New Hampshire’s Democratic members of the House of Representatives, Chris Pappas and Annie Kuster, have drawn the most conservative of their potential Republican opponents—in Kuster’s case, partly because a national Democratic political-action group took out television ads boosting him. This has allowed the Democrats to move into the vast space between themselves and their right-wing opponents. They can run as, essentially, liberal Republicans, because there are no liberal Republicans anymore. “For the first time, I’m running on safety and freedom, which used to be

Republican issues,” Kuster, whose parents were delegates to the 1976 Republican National Convention and active supporters of abortion rights, told me. “People want safety, security, and community.”

Democrats benefit, too, from an extreme libertarian political movement that has made New Hampshire its home base. In 2001, Jason Sorens, a doctoral student in political science at Yale, published an essay suggesting that libertarians across the country move to a single state and try to create a political paradise there. That led to the creation of an organization called the Free State Project, which chose New Hampshire as its target. As of now, more than six thousand Free Staters, and an additional number of sympathizers, have moved to New Hampshire. Free Staters have been able to make themselves a significant presence in the state’s House of Representatives. One of them, Jason Osborne, the House majority leader, was recently found to have used racial slurs in an online forum in 2011. (Osborne said in a statement, “I am not the first person to have written something in the past that they deeply regret, and I will not be the last.”) Free Staters in one New Hampshire town proposed cutting the local school budget by half; in another, they joined an effort to shut down a popular county-owned ski resort. In the legislature, they introduced a constitutional amendment to have New Hampshire secede from the United States. I went to see the chair of the Free Staters’ board, Carla Gericke, at her house in Manchester. In front was a doormat bearing the words “Come Back with a Warrant,” and a sleeping German shepherd just inside, to enforce the message. Gericke, a cheerful and energetic woman who moved to New Hampshire from New York City in 2008 and has run unsuccessfully for the State Senate three times, told me that she is anti-vax, pro-secession, and in favor of New Hampshire’s refusal to comply with federal gun laws. She is personally pro-life, but, because she is a libertarian, she said, “If you want to murder your offspring, go ahead.”



"Isn't there a better way to charge the car?"
Cartoon by Edward Koren

If not for the Free Staters, Hassan might not be a U.S. senator. In 2016, when she won her seat narrowly, a Free Stater named Aaron Day ran as an independent and got almost eighteen thousand votes, and another libertarian, Brian Chabot, got almost thirteen thousand. Many of these surely came at the expense of Ayotte, the Republican candidate. One theory about why Chris Sununu didn't run for the Senate this year is that, after he'd stirred up Republican discontent by imposing *covid* restrictions, he felt he had no choice but to sign a state budget that came to his desk from the Republican legislature with strict abortion policies embedded in it. The Democrats, especially Hassan—who long ago briefly favored counselling for anyone under seventeen seeking an abortion—pounced. “This is the ‘Live Free or Die’ state,” she said at a campaign event I attended, outside the state’s oldest abortion clinic. At the heart of her reelection campaign is a promise to vote against a Republican-proposed national abortion ban. Sununu, who has larger ambitions, may have wanted to avoid having to negotiate the abortion issue on a national stage this year.

After the event outside the abortion clinic, Hassan went to the city of Laconia, half an hour north of Concord, to visit small businesses. She was joined by the city’s mayor, a political ally of hers named Andrew Hosmer, who served two terms in the State Senate when Hassan was governor; he

led the Senate Democratic caucus, but he lost his seat in 2016. “I remember Election Day,” he told me. “At 7 a.m., there were people lined up at my polling place, wearing costumes, holding signs, singing”—Trump voters. “I saw that at every polling place in my district. They were passionate. I said, ‘This doesn’t bode well for me.’”

Hosmer ran for mayor after losing his State Senate seat, and won. In 2021, he was reelected with seventy-three per cent of the vote, even though Trump, as he had in 2016, carried Laconia in 2020. “I realized after 2016 that I should focus on what people in this community need,” he said. “Don’t get disenchanted. I promised to work within a tax cap. This is what people here want—though I would love to spend money on projects. It’s also about being face to face. It’s hard to hate when you’re face to face with someone. I’d like to show people that government can work really well. We can deliver. Somewhere in there, there’s a secret sauce.”

Walking through Laconia with a couple of staff members and a small press corps, Hassan and Hosmer stopped at a record store, a coffee shop, and a florist, all independent small businesses. (While she and Hosmer were crossing the street, a guy driving by stuck his head out the window, and I heard him yell, “All politicians are crooks!”) Hassan, who spoke from a prepared script at the other events of hers that I attended, was visibly more comfortable in this setting. She took her time in each shop, talking to the owners at length, as if, with control of the United States Senate at stake, she weren’t involved in anything more important than listening to them. “What can we do to help?” she’d ask. She talked about the work she does with Republican colleagues in Washington on issues like supply chains, community-college tuition, and workforce shortages. “Hassan is the pragmatic center of the state,” Hosmer had told me beforehand. “The political landscape is littered with people who underestimated Maggie Hassan.”

Nevada Democrats, whose constituents are mainly blue-collar nonwhite residents, and New Hampshire Democrats, whose constituents are mainly white residents with small-government leanings, have a few things in common. They relentlessly emphasize the everyday practical benefits that the Party provides for its constituents. They are obsessively concerned with

organizing, and especially with door-to-door, in-person campaigning. They try their best to get extreme Republicans as opponents. And, at least when I was visiting, they hardly ever mentioned their support for the Biden Administration's major legislation. That's partly because Biden isn't very popular, and partly because of their conviction that voters, particularly in closely contested states, don't care about whatever great changes are afoot in American government. But that doesn't mean there is no connection between what the Biden Administration has been doing and the way Democrats in purple states run for office. Both are animated by a critique, implied rather than directly stated, of past Democratic Party policies and politics. As Biden himself put it in a speech last year, "We're now forty years into the experiment of letting giant corporations accumulate more and more power. And what have we gotten from it? Less growth, weakened investment, fewer small businesses. Too many Americans who feel left behind. Too many people who are poorer than their parents." Politicians on the ground and a rising generation of policymakers in Washington are trying to reposition the Democratic Party as more focussed on the daily lives of the working-class voters it has been losing. For the economic-policy branch of the Party, that amounts to a revolution, one that hasn't been sufficiently noticed.

In the summer of 2017, the *Washington Post* published a revealing profile of Jake Sullivan, the Biden Administration's national-security adviser, by Greg Jaffe. Sullivan had been a close aide to Hillary Clinton, and was expected to become national-security adviser four years earlier than he actually did. Jaffe wrote, "Sullivan, more than most in the Clinton orbit, has begun to shoulder blame for the loss and his role in it. He wants to understand his mistakes and figure out how to fix them." In particular, he was rethinking his automatic support for the internationalism that the élites of both parties believed in deeply and which was, as Trump showed, deeply resented in much of the country. Sullivan wondered if it had been a mistake for him to work on the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which Trump had run against and then ditched as soon as he took office. Sullivan said that he was thinking about moving somewhere far away from Washington, so that he wouldn't be so out of touch with the mood of the country.

Five years later, in the Republican Party, the foreign-policy establishment has been fully excommunicated, and the economic establishment has made a possibly unstable peace with Trump, despite his lack of enthusiasm for traditional Republican causes like free trade and limiting government spending. In the Democratic Party, the establishment lives on, but in a significantly altered form, and with a keen awareness of its past mistakes. At a recent private meeting of influential Democrats, Sullivan was the featured speaker; he said the economic promises that Trump had made in 2016 and mainly abandoned once he took office were actually being fulfilled by the Biden Administration. It's easy to guess at some of what Sullivan had in mind. Just a few weeks into the Biden Administration, he and Antony Blinken, the Secretary of State, publicly excoriated their Chinese counterparts at a meeting in Alaska; a favorite accusation of Trump's was that the Democrats were excessively friendly to China, at the cost of American jobs. This year, Biden signed into law the *CHIPS* and Science Act, which is meant to, among other things, move the manufacturing of semiconductor technology from China to the United States.

When Biden took office, his initial economic-stimulus package, the American Rescue Plan, was more than double the size of the package that Obama pushed through in his early weeks in office, even though, back in 2009, the Democrats controlled both houses of Congress and the financial crisis was dominating headlines. This was because of a retrospective sense among Democratic political strategists and economic policymakers that the Obama stimulus had been too small, and that he had paid a severe price for that mistake, both economically, in the severity of the recession, and politically, in the shellacking the Democrats took in the 2010 elections. High levels of spending are just the beginning of the list of economic policies that used to be off the table for Democrats but aren't anymore. The Party has few unapologetic free-trade advocates these days. Biden's partial cancellation of student-loan debt, highly unpopular in the business wing of the party, would have been inconceivable in the Obama Administration. The idea of the government's taking responsibility for building up specific industries and regions, also known as industrial policy, was disreputable for decades, and is now being enacted—for example, in the *CHIPS* Act, in the climate-change provisions of the Inflation Reduction Act, and in last year's

infrastructure bill. “I remember when, if you talked about industrial policy, people would look at you like you had three heads, if they even knew what it was,” Felicia Wong, the C.E.O. of the Roosevelt Institute, a progressive economic-policy think tank, told me. “Now it’s suddenly the new new thing.” Brian Deese, the director of Biden’s National Economic Council, has made two speeches endorsing industrial policy; in one of them, he called it a “critical and urgent imperative for the United States.”

Back in 1964, the historian Richard Hofstadter published an essay titled “What Happened to the Antitrust Movement?” His idea was that government trust-busting was a sepia-tinted cause from the late nineteenth century, long since replaced by technical macroeconomic management. The Democratic Party dropped antitrust from its platform in 1992, and didn’t restore a broad endorsement of the principle until 2016. Today, three of the most prominent advocates of forceful antitrust policy—Jonathan Kanter, Lina Khan, and Tim Wu—occupy high positions in the Biden Administration. Senator Amy Klobuchar, of Minnesota, who ran for President in 2020, has introduced new antitrust legislation and also published a book called “Antitrust.” “It’s about salvaging free markets,” she told me. “It always has been. What Biden is doing, by putting in people who are aggressive, is protecting the free market from monopolies.” Two of the three members of the White House Council of Economic Advisers, Heather Boushey and Jared Bernstein, come from the Democrats’ left wing on economic policy, which was minimally represented in the Clinton and Obama Administrations; conversely, Democratic centrists like Lawrence Summers and Timothy Geithner are not in this Administration. Clinton and Obama both made special efforts to get the federal government from deficit to surplus; Biden hasn’t produced a balanced or surplus budget yet. Biden is more vocally pro-union than any President in recent memory. “During the 2008 campaign, I asked that the word ‘union’ be put in speeches, and the message people wouldn’t let that word come out of his mouth,” a former Obama adviser told me. “This President talks about it all the time.”



"Dear Diary: It has been three days of Jonathan talking about how much the actors in the movie looked like they could actually be related in real life. I don't know how much longer I can go on. Every day is a struggle . . ."

Cartoon by Luke Kruger-Howard

One reason for all this ferment is that the Democrats' progressive wing is far more empowered and active today than it was when Obama took office, so it is a more significant source of pressure on the Administration. "There's a generation in Democratic policy circles who, like me, experienced the foreclosure crisis up close and personal," Sarah Miller, who was working in the Department of the Treasury during the crisis, and has since founded an organization called the American Economic Liberties Project, told me. "We watched the solutions that were put in place fail to alleviate suffering. We are reflecting on the mistakes of that era and beginning to embed what we learned in Democratic policy." Trump's election, as Miller put it, "blew open the door to our critique." Post-Trump, the Republicans are actively competing with the Democrats for the loyalties of working-class voters. Republican campaigns are centered on cultural issues in part because the Party's traditional small-government, pro-big-business economic stance won't play well with the voters it is now trying to attract. What's noteworthy about the recent addition of "woke corporations" to the standard list of Republican bogeymen is not wokeness—it's corporations, which used to be exempt from Republican attack. It seems unimaginable today that a leading Republican would launch a crusade to privatize Social Security, as George W. Bush did, with disastrous results, just after he was re-elected, in 2004.

If Republicans are focussing their attacks on crime and inflation rather than specific Biden programs, that means the Democrats have a freer hand in exploring more robust economic policies. There's also the idea that, in the recent past, Democrats have fixated too much on successfully managing "the economy," which is an abstract achievement, and not enough on creating specific tangible benefits (help with medical bills, a new bridge, trying to keep jobs from going offshore); this explains the heavy presence of such things in the Biden Administration's legislation. Senator Cory Booker, of New Jersey, another 2020 Democratic Presidential candidate, has proposed legislation to re-weight the economic rules in favor of family farmers and against big meatpacking companies. That's one more example of the Democrats' turn toward economic arrangements that protect people from disruption and disadvantage. "A farmer in the Midwest used to have five companies competing for his cattle," Booker told me. "Now he has one. Corporate concentration is killing his family. The rules are changing so dramatically." The list of Biden Administration initiatives in this spirit that you may not have heard of is long. It includes the advent of over-the-counter, non-prescription hearing aids; the blocking of four proposed hospital mergers; and the empowering of Medicare to negotiate some drug prices.

The Administration has made mistakes that (now, at least) seem painfully obvious. It pumped too much cash into the economy, and got too little policy change, in the American Rescue Plan. This helped set off the inflation that is one of the Administration's major problems in the current campaign season. In the fall of its first year, the Administration saw its most contested initiative, the \$2.2-trillion Build Back Better bill, fail, amid embarrassing public squabbling between the Democratic Party's progressive and moderate wings; this might have been avoided if the Administration had developed a keener sense of what it would be possible to get everyone to agree to, and when. The Democrats now have to find at least a measure of order and consistency in their new generation of policies, and then they have to find a politics that can make whatever it accomplishes palpable to voters.

This hasn't happened yet, which is why you hear Democratic candidates in competitive races talking about tiny shards of the big pieces of legislation

the Biden Administration passed, and never about the idea of a Biden economic-policy revolution. I asked Senator Shaheen what she thinks of the unusually high level of policymaking activity in the Biden Administration thus far. “I don’t know who said that. I haven’t heard that from anybody,” she said. “It’s been important for people, despite concerns they have, to have a President who has taken leadership and who has provided a return to, I would say, normalcy.” Chris Pappas, the New Hampshire congressman, was a little more candid: “The President has his supporters and his detractors. Most folks want to see him succeed. He has more work to do on the kitchen-table issues like energy costs and inflation. People want to see wins on the board for their families.”

Most of the Party operatives I spoke with emphasized that, as a first task, the Democrats have to upgrade their direct, in-person campaigning rather than focus on fine-tuning their message and beaming it out through expensive television ads. Steve Rosenthal, a long-discontented member of the pro-labor wing of the Party, complained about the Party’s drift during the high era of television advertising: “The Party was too invested in television ads and messaging, and it ignored infrastructure—block captains, precinct leaders, people who knock on doors. Media consultants controlled the Party, and the operatives wanted to *be* media consultants. The Party failed miserably at grassroots organizing. They talked about it, but they didn’t do it. The Party went completely in the direction of science. We created a generation of automatons who don’t know how to talk to voters.” He told me a story: an academic study by two psychologists, published in 2015, found that asking voters the question “Do you have a voting plan?” is associated with slightly increased turnout. So, according to Rosenthal, the Party’s cosseted turnout specialists began instructing their field workers to ask that question. He has a photograph somebody sent him of a handmade sign in front of a house in Pennsylvania in 2016, the year Trump carried the state: “We have made a plan to vote! Please don’t ring the doorbell!”

Even the grumpy Rosenthal admits that things have become better lately, at least in the purple states. An up-and-coming star among state Democratic Party chairs, Ben Wikler of Wisconsin, who has an organizing background and who helped to turn Hillary Clinton’s narrow loss there in 2016 into a narrow win for Biden in 2020, told me, “It’s all happening in people’s

houses. In 2018, we had a hundred and seventy-five different teams. We knocked on twice as many doors as in 2016, at half the cost. That became the Biden model, but virtual. Thirty thousand volunteers. The biggest thing is the ability to show up. Connect with people at the level of values, speak to hard work, establish trust. It comes from exposure and proximity. There's the question of the issues, and then there's the question of who's on your side—who do you trust more?"

Campaigning in this way implies being highly concrete and specific in making a case for the Democrats, but that still leaves the question of what the Democrats stand for over all. Biden hasn't been very good at answering that question, and it's a difficult one, because the various parts of the Democrats' coalition have such different preferences, culturally and economically. One Democrat who has to think about this a great deal is Representative Ro Khanna, of California, a child of immigrants from India who was born and raised in Pennsylvania, represents part of Silicon Valley, and is one of the leaders of the Congressional Progressive Caucus. Khanna's district is one of the only majority-Asian congressional districts in the country, it is home to some of the richest corporations in the world (Apple and Google), and it voted for Bernie Sanders in the 2020 California Presidential primary. "I had a town hall in one of the poorer towns in my district, and many of the people there said our country's best days are behind us," he told me. "I had a town hall in Sunnyvale, and eighty per cent thought our best days are ahead of us. The world is their oyster."

How can you bring such different experiences and emotions into common political cause? "There is a necessary recognition that there have been blind spots and failures of globalization," Khanna said. "And a necessary recognition that the working class and the middle class have been left behind. The reality is, we made a strategic mistake. The consequence has been, in part, the rise of right-wing populism. The tech executives in my district recognize that we can't survive, going on as we are—that the middle class of the country has been hollowed out, that there's a growing anger, that it has led to xenophobia and increased tension with other countries. So I make the argument that this is enlightened self-interest for them. They understand that the bubble of prosperity for the few is not sustainable, and

that it is not the democracy we want. We are making the most wealth in human history. We can afford to change.”

Biden’s favorite rubric, when he was campaigning and afterward, has been “build back better,” but that’s now associated with a wildly ambitious proposal that didn’t pass. What else would work for the Democrats? That will take a long time to determine; they are at the dawn of a new political age. But Khanna was willing to make a suggestion, which may strike his fellow-progressives as jarringly jingoistic: “A new economic patriotism. There has to be a clear narrative. In the U.S., the story matters as much as the policy. And the story is the rejection of neoliberalism. For forty years, we made a mistake. Frankly, it was both parties. Now we need to be a nation that reclaims economic self-sufficiency and economic leadership. We’ll make sure the U.S. is preëminent. Having an aspirational vision for America is really powerful. In a sense, the new economic patriotism is a blend of culture and economics. We need to show we believe America is the greatest country in the world. It’s O.K. to root for the home team.” ♦

An earlier version of this article included an inaccurate description of voting patterns in Youngstown, Ohio.

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

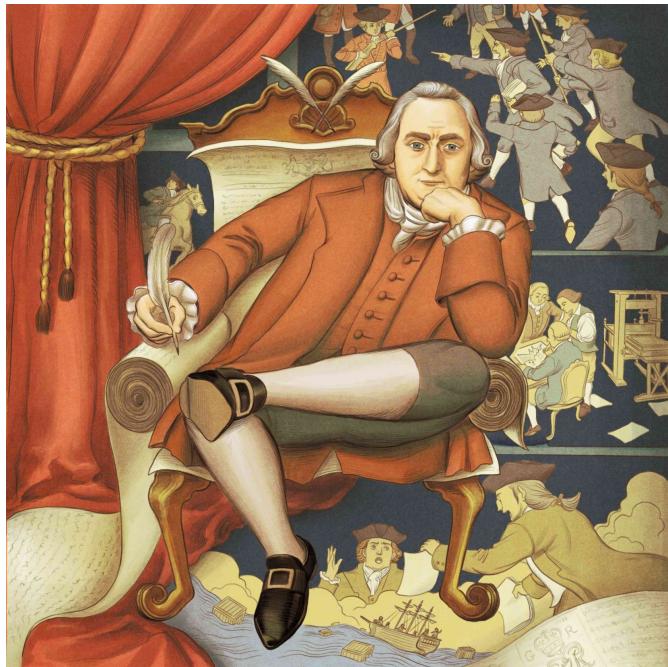
Books

- [How Samuel Adams Helped Ferment a Revolution](#)
- [Outbreaks and Uprisings in Orhan Pamuk's "Nights of Plague"](#)
- [Briefly Noted](#)

How Samuel Adams Helped Ferment a Revolution

A virtuoso of the eighteenth-century version of viral memes and fake news, he had a sense of political theatre that helped create a radical new reality.

By [Adam Gopnik](#)



How are we to find the Founding Fathers, in this period of their persistent unfounding? Popular books on the Founding Fathers keep appearing, and, far from being uniformly revisionist, they continue to make a case for the romance of the Revolution. Take these lines from Stacy Schiff's "[The Revolutionary: Samuel Adams](#)" (Little, Brown), evoking the famous ride of Paul Revere:

A glimmer, a gleam, the hurry of hoofs: a sturdy, square-jawed man speeds through the night, with an urgent message, on a borrowed horse. His topcoat flaps behind him. A bright moon hangs overhead. Within days he will know he has participated in some kind of history, though he will hesitate to attach his name to it for decades and is never to know that his own account will be obliterated—the adrenaline alone

enduring—by verse, leaving him trapped in tetrameter, a mythic figure, eternally jouncing his way toward Lexington.

The note of irony in that “jouncing” is modern, but the thrill of Revere’s ride is permanent. All writers must woo and win readers, and readers are wooed and won, today as yesterday, by stories of flawed, sympathetic people who do big and significant things despite many obstacles put in their way. The bigger the obstacles and the more grooved-in the personal flaws, the better the story. It is quite false to say that earlier generations liked only tales of flawless Founders: the point of Parson Weems’s tale about the young George Washington is not only that young Washington could not tell a lie but that he could first cheerfully chop down his father’s cherry tree. The saving candor came after the wicked impulse. The stories that Henry Adams (a relation of Sam’s) told about the Jefferson era were mostly sardonic, and William Henry Herndon’s Lincoln was as melancholic as our own. As the musical “Hamilton” reminds us, we don’t want our heroes perfect; we want them human.

So we live within an oddly divided consciousness: on the one hand, we need to hear of enslaved and subjugated populations; on the other, we expect a defiant celebration of the revolutionaries as radicals. We revise and revere and then revise again. How to do it well? Sam Adams is a fine case study, since he is one of those appealing figures who were for a time a very big deal, and then, suddenly, not so much. He is now best known as the trademark of a Boston brewery, which does carry on its Web site the invitation “Revolutionaries Wanted,” though the revolution in play seems more to do with whether one calls a beverage a craft ale or a lager or a beer.

Adams himself, disappointingly, probably wasn’t a brewer, though he was for a while in the family’s malt business, working as a “maltster.” It was an appropriate task, in its way, since the maltster is to the brewer what Sam Adams was to the Revolution: the person who preps the ingredients that eventually ferment and cause mass intoxication. Sam—thirteen years older than his second cousin John, and twenty-one years older than Jefferson—was among the more senior of the Founders. He was also the opposite of his friend and eventual rival John Hancock, whose signature is all that’s left of him; Sam’s signature on the revolutionary events is invisible, but his

fingerprints are everywhere. He shaped every significant episode in the New England run-up to war. Yet how he did it, or with what confederates, or even with what purpose—did he believe in American independence from the start, or was that forced on him by the wave of events, as it was on others?—is muddled by an absence of diaries or letters or even many firsthand accounts.

Lacking a good documentary record, Schiff constructs her book from a pleasing tapestry of incident and inference. She has a fine eye for the significant detail, and knows how to compose that lovely thing the comic-comprehensive catalogue. She lists, for instance, the surprisingly diverse topics of theses submitted at Harvard more or less around Adams's time there, as an X-ray of the New England mind in formation. The students at Harvard in the eighteenth century argued that the reptiles of America were those preserved by Noah; maintained that the Pope was the Antichrist; and regularly held “that it was unlawful to sell Africans.” Harvard was, well, as woke then as it is now. At one point, Schiff writes that a spirit of mutiny against the Crown convulsed Harvard College, where students donned disguises and threw bricks through windows.

Born in 1722, one of a dozen children of a successful Boston businessman and deacon, Sam Adams attended Boston Latin, from which much of Harvard’s local student body still rises, and, after his college years, returned to Harvard to pick up a graduate degree in what we would now call political science. Happy amid campus agitations, he was never really able to prosper in a nonpolitical trade, despite strenuous efforts by his family to land him in one. He was a failure in every business he tried out, and found his feet only when, in the late seventeen-forties, he began to stand for local office. It was already, in part, the family trade: his father had preceded him in politics, as, among other things, a major figure in the Boston “town meeting,” that special New England form of semi-direct democracy.

Young Sam soon became politically active, securing various posts—he was once elected tax collector, essentially on a platform of not collecting taxes—and then fell into a series of feuds with the royal governors of Massachusetts, resident in Boston. He had a hand in all those diorama-ready skirmishes and battles that we learned about in elementary school, and

which readied the colonists' minds for war, including Lexington. He was called "the Father of the American Revolution" at a time when it was hardly out of its cradle.



"Honey, you remember my co-worker Jan and her husband, whose name I never say because I'm too embarrassed to ask what it is again."
Cartoon by Teresa Burns Parkhurst

Yet what is impressive is how devoted he was, in the twenty years or so before the Declaration of Independence, to what we would once have called "publicity stunts." It is a reminder, to those who preach the necessity of real political work over empty theatricalized protest, that empty theatricalized protest set the stage for the American Revolution. In the decade before the Revolution, it was *all* symbolic warfare designed to infuriate the Brits by making them look foolish and incompetent, or even more foolish and incompetent than they already were.

The origin of Adams's ferocious quarrel with the British is somewhat obscure. The radicalizing affront, essential to the movie image of a rebellious patriot—the moment when the Russell Crowe or Mel Gibson character finds his family killed or his farm despoiled, down to the last dog—never happened to him. It's true that his father had, rather in George Bailey style, helped oversee a "land bank," a kind of early savings-and-loan company, which had been squashed, Potter style, by rivals who persuaded the royal governor in Massachusetts to get it shut down. But this setback,

though it damaged the family's finances, hardly seemed permanently traumatic, and, anyway, Schiff tells us, it proved politically fruitful for Sam's father, who got elected a Boston selectman in 1744 and, soon thereafter, to the Massachusetts legislature. So Sam Adams was scarcely oppressed by the Crown's governors. He just didn't like being told what to do without first being asked if he wanted to do it. When the British, desperate for money for the imperial budget, began to tax America in the mid-seventeen-sixties, he didn't ask, Is this tax fair? He asked, Who are people like *that* to tax *me*? He began by making this emotion regional, throughout New England, and then invented a nation in the image of the insult.

He was perhaps the first in the modern pattern in which revolutionary leaders rise from the well-off cohorts of a subject population, who turn on the colonial power more from principle than from immediate oppression. In the cases of Nehru and Che and Castro and so on, their sympathies were also lit by a sense of the groaning oppression of their poorer peasant countrymen. For Adams, who lived in a more prosperous society, the sympathies spread not so much downward as outward, to other members of the Colonial élite who might share his abstract but compelling sense of injustice.

This helps explain why it has always been so hard for American schoolchildren to understand the spiral of offenses and responses that led to 1776. What was so outrageous about the Stamp Act, and how could taxing tea lead you to throw it into Boston Harbor in the dead of night? Schiff reminds us that the colonists themselves had a hard time answering these questions. The Stamp Act of 1765—the scheme was to make colonists pay for an embossed stamp on their official documents—essentially never went into effect, and the tea tax *lowered* the price of tea, inconveniencing mostly the Colonial middlemen. The Stamp Act simply became a synonym for horror; Schiff tells of a New England servant who refused to enter a barn at night, for fear that the Stamp Act might be there.

What Sam Adams grasped was that these things could be imagined as symbolic outrages demanding symbolic revenge—the eighteenth-century equivalent of mask mandates, which infuriate people by their seemingly

capricious insistence, quite apart from their actual burdens. The arbitrary nature of these acts underlined the arbitrary nature of Colonial rule, the absurdity of a continent's being ruled from a faraway island. As so often in human affairs, popular protest was stirred by the perception of embattled sovereignty, not by economic self-interest.

The American tradition of tabloid political theatre begins here. There is, for instance, the improbably large role of effigies in the patriotic campaigns that swirled around Sam Adams in the seventeen-sixties in Boston—the making, burning, and hanging of stuffed dolls meant to represent royal officials and British Members of Parliament. Seeing yourself hanged and burned in effigy was outraging as a sign of disrespect and of a loss of social control. But imprisoning people suspected of hanging and burning a life-size stuffed doll bearing your likeness suggested a loss of social control, too. You looked ridiculous either way. So the governors muttered and fumed and wondered if they couldn't get a job running Nova Scotia or Barbados instead.

Adams was also behind what was effectively a news service, called, beautifully, the *Journal of Occurrences*, composed in Boston but intended to be circulated, and reprinted, elsewhere in the colonies. “The cross-pollination meant that one heard in Virginia that effigies of Governor Bernard and Sheriff Greenleaf had hung in New York for their Massachusetts misdeeds,” Schiff writes. She also makes it clear that Sam had Murdochian standards of truthtelling: “By the time the dubious tale of the worthy old man who discovered a soldier in bed with his favorite granddaughter had boomeranged back to Boston, it arrived as news, displacing memory.”

Adams wrote for other publications, providing stentorian commentary on his own fake news, under a charming variety of classical pseudonyms: Candidus, Vindex, Populus, Valerius Poplicola. The comic luxuriance of Roman references should not blind us to the significance of these constant appeals to the Roman Republic and to classical virtue. For the astonishing truth was that hardly anyone in two thousand years had actually seen what a republic or a democracy looked like, or how it might act in the world. The patriots referred to Rome not simply because they were classically educated

but because—the marginal cases of Switzerland and Venice aside—it was the last famous, functional republic to look back on. (The Cromwellian Commonwealth, which scarcely managed to outlive its charismatic founder, though occasionally invoked, largely served as a cautionary tale.)

The agitation surrounding the Stamp Act made Adams the secret master of Massachusetts. He had a knack for balancing overt legalistic opposition with covert extralegal intrigue. Late in August of 1765, a crowd of protesters gathered outside the splendid house of the loyalist lieutenant governor, Thomas Hutchinson, and it was soon overrun and looted. Hutchinson and his family escaped without injury, but the harm done was evident. A month later, Adams was elected to the Massachusetts legislature, where he led a revolt against any censure of the incident, and handed the governor, Francis Bernard, a statement of the inalienable rights of the people of Massachusetts. Where the moderates insisted that American representation in the London Parliament would fix things, Adams insisted that Americans can “no more be judged by any Member of Parliament than if they livd in the Moon.”

Up and down the colonies, effigies of the excise officers known as Stamp Men were hanged and burned, alongside effigies of the Pope—not exactly a player in the Stamp Act disputes, but, then, burning the Pope in effigy was an early Colonial rite, tied to the celebration of the defeat of Guy Fawkes and the Gunpowder Plot. Adams had a genius for taking events and shaping them in such a way as to inflict maximum moral damage on the oppressors without actually moving toward overt rebellion. After years of such agitation, British troops, occupying Boston in a halfhearted way, found themselves backed into a corner in the midst of a mob, and fired, killing several people. No one there was sure who among the redcoats had fired the first shot, or whether an order had been given. The event was pure chaos; the firing was seemingly done impulsively by a handful of the frightened, uneducated ex-cons who filled the British ranks. Within days, though, Adams—helped by the artist Henry Pelham, who made an incendiary graphic image of the event, and the engraver Paul Revere, who augmented and bootlegged it—had turned this incident into a fixed image of deliberate atrocity, the unified firing of a line of disciplined redcoat troops into a

gathering of helpless civilians. He had also made sure it got its permanent name: the Boston Massacre.

By an act of remarkable guile, which Sam must have approved, his cousin John Adams was encouraged to *defend* the British soldiers accused of the massacre in court, and he got most of them off. A masterstroke on the part of the Adamses, it enabled them to offer a demonstration of the patriot's high-minded decency, while still leaving the door wide open for the commemorative services and funeral orations of the American dead that, for the next twelve years, became an annual feature of Boston life.

Schiff's depiction of Sam Adams, recounting such feats, is a wildly entertaining exploration of the roots of American political theatre. Unreliable rumormongering, slanted news writing, misleading symbolism, even viral meme-sharing—it was all right there at the start. In John Singleton Copley's great portrait of Sam Adams, from the early seventeen-seventies, the best portrait ever produced by that early American master, this self-knowing conspiratorial figure emerges. We see Sam in a suit of bright-red clothes, a kind of wry parody of British military wear, his head turned mischievously into clandestine half-light while his left hand makes, with elegant crablike tension, what has been, since Raphael's depiction of Aristotle, the classic pictorial gesture of empiricism: hand facing downward, toward the facticity of earth. It says not, like Copley's portrait of a seated Hancock, quill in hand, "I am a man of mind" but, rather, "I am here, dealing with real things only, a *maker* of minds." It is the perfect image of a mastermind at work, Sam Adams as a Machiavelli of liberty.

For all the connivance in Adams's character, another side of the Adams legacy is also plain. Like his relatives, and, indeed, like his Founding fellows, from Franklin to Madison, he *was* a man of mind. The patriots, however flawed, really were driven by ideas, and the ideas they were driven by were mainly good ones.

Schiff shows how central Thomas Paine's 1776 "[Common Sense](#)" was to the making of the Revolution, the literary equivalent, as Sam Adams recognized, of his work as an agitator. "*Common Sense*" repays rereading, for the simple fact that this most popular of pamphlets is hardly like a pamphlet at all. It is not common, and contains little of what we think of as

sense. Instead, it begins with an abstract account of the difference between “society” and “government”—society being the healthy gathering of people with common impulses who depend on one another, government the necessary but unfortunate force that reins in their worst tendencies. It is a view that anticipates our own distinction between civil society and the state. Society, for Paine, was healthy, in its towns and cities and commerce; government was arbitrarily imposed from above by a distant Colonial master. To make government more like society and less like government was a noble national goal.

It's significant, even astounding, that Paine had arrived in America, from London, only in 1774. He was bringing British radical fire to light what he saw as a provincial powder keg. The communion of British and American radicals in the period is impressive. Justin du Rivage's 2017 study of the American Revolution, “Revolution Against Empire,” makes the critical point: the English-speaking radicals of the time, whom du Rivage calls “radical Whigs,” were transatlantic in their nature and orientation. They went from Bristol to Boston with, in effect, the same effigies to hang. Even Copley, the greatest visual chronicler of the American revolutionaries, had left for London by the time the Revolution itself began. It was a narrow ocean.

The necessary mythology of American independence holds that it was the result of long-brooded-on injustices and long-marinated traditions of independence, fed by Puritanism, Unitarianism, town meetings, and the like. Yet the year 1776 was not notable merely for the Declaration of Independence; it was the annus mirabilis of the entire English-speaking Enlightenment, with the publication of Adam Smith's “The Wealth of Nations,” as well as the first volume of Edward Gibbon's “Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,” with its famous chapters on the growth of Christianity, placing it in the realm not of the miraculous but of practical political history. The Declaration was the climax of a decade's worth of agitation in America, but it was also a typical product of its year, and again needs to be interwoven with the work of the motherland's minds. Even the Puritanism often cited as a shaping force was more local color than foundational beam: few thinkers had more influence in the colonies than the

Londoner John Wilkes, who was as notorious as a libertine as he was known as an enemy of privilege.

The radical Whig revolution failed in London, derailed by the backlash to the French Revolution. But it worked out—not least because of French assistance—in Boston and Philadelphia. In the following years, the same democratic cause that lit the Revolution was sublimated in Britain into a long-term program of parliamentary reform. The easy interpenetration of American and British thought in the Age of Enlightenment—the sense in which the Sam Adams group was a wing of that larger Enlightenment revolution—is among the revisionist stories worth telling.



"Our new app will take a hundred e-mails and compress them into one giant, unbearable e-mail."
Cartoon by Ngozi Ukazu

Having inaugurated the American tradition of show-business politics, Adams was a realist in tracing its effects. He never lost sight of the fact that independence could not be achieved without unity: the colonies had to act as one. Because we take this for granted now, it's hard to grasp the scale of the challenge. Adams seems never to have been outside Massachusetts until, at the age of fifty-one, he left for the First Continental Congress, in Philadelphia. Even members of the Colonial élite were far less alike in their backgrounds than their British counterparts were; Scots and Londoners were closer in style than Georgians and Pennsylvanians. Adams in

Philadelphia helped create a nation by nationalizing the struggle. Owing, in part, to all those issues of the *Occurrences*, patriotic leaders elsewhere in the colonies were invariably referred to as “the Samuel Adams of the South” or “the Sam Adams of Maryland,” and yet the man himself chose to play a muted role. His genius for behind-the-scenes work in Philadelphia led him to second himself to the Virginians; they were seen as less fanatical than the New Englanders, and letting them take the lead would, he recognized, prevent the other colonies from seeing themselves as being stamped by New England. Allowing someone else to claim credit for your work, Adams knew, could be the most expedient way to get the work done.

The Virginia strategy that Sam Adams godfathered lingered through the early years of the new country, with four of the first five Presidents, Cousin John being the exception, from the Old Dominion. The work and lives of Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe are the focus of Kevin R. C. Gutzman’s “[The Jeffersonians](#)” (St. Martin’s), which shows that, for all their agrarian small-government ideology, they ended up, as good politicians often will, essentially accomplishing the opposite of their stated intentions. Their shared achievement was to consolidate Alexander Hamilton’s financial system, which they had once opposed, but which worked, and ultimately to lead the country into the pointless War of 1812.

Though a conservative historian, Gutzman tries to thread the various needles of contemporary conscience, never excusing the slave-owning Southerners, but aware of the risks of judging the ideas of the eighteenth century by the standards of the twenty-first. In truth, the moral standards of 2022 are already different from those of 2019. Yet universal amnesty for everyone past feels too easy: taking and holding slaves was not an innocent occupation to which only a handful of moderns have retrospectively been awakened; it was an act self-evidently brutal and inhuman, which countless people at the time said was brutal and inhuman.

The reasonable approach seems to be to survey the field of possibility—to gauge what was understood at the time, which moral doctrines were readily available and which were not. Abolition was a powerful, articulate, and persuasive position during the American Revolution and in the years

afterward. Those who rejected it weren't just "men of their time"—they were in a real sense men out of step with their time (and women; as Gutzman notes, Dolley Madison made a point of having enslaved people wait on guests in the White House), having chosen to ignore the best available argument. They need not be eliminated from study or admiration—their contributions are too important, and history, anyway, is not a book of good-conduct awards. But it's not wrong to censure them retrospectively.

On the other hand, criticizing them for, say, not standing up for the rights of sexual minorities seems wildly unhistorical; an argument for these rights had not yet taken a coherent and widely available form. You can put a plaque at Monticello dedicated to the slaves who built it; but it is not helpful to chastise Jefferson for not supporting gay marriage, even though it is a rational consequence of his best thought, since so few people had even imagined it.

If all this puts us in the uncomfortable position of seeming to demand some measure of moral prescience from the past, well, is this not what we actually do, in any case? There are many skills in life where the magic lies in anticipating what has not yet happened but shortly will—hitting a curveball is one, acting morally may be another.

A shared truth that emerges from the book on Samuel Adams and the one on the Jeffersonians is that the Revolution, whatever its other causes, was rooted in a hatred of temporal and divine authority—in despising kings and Popes. The weird mixture of Deists, Protestant dissenters, and freethinkers who founded the new nation were never in favor of an official religion or even of a highly organized one; they never proposed that some master in the sky should tell society what to believe. A hatred of arbitrary tyranny and a contempt for organized religion were, for them, in the category of the incontestable.

Good things come in bad packages; bad things come wrapped in fine ones. Sam Adams was maddeningly opportunistic in his means—his shameless marshalling of half-truths—and astoundingly idealistic in his ends. But then most of what we inherit from the past, including the Founders, is the usual mixed bag that we get from people as divided as ourselves. What both new books make plain is that the "secret" or suppressed history of the founding

was quite as well known in its time as its official history. It was hardly a secret in 1802 that Jefferson had sex and children with Sally Hemings, and that Hamilton had sporadic monarchical beliefs (and ambitions), just as it had been no secret decades earlier that Sam Adams was lurking somewhere behind the Tea Party.

The idea that an insidious conspiracy called History needs to be dismantled before we can understand the past was always false and foolish. All of it is apparent now; all of it was apparent then. Anyone with a working mind recognized the evil of slavery (even if they thought it could be punted or excused for a time), and an end to the subjection of women was strong in the mind of the second First Lady. “That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical is a Truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute,” Abigail Adams wrote to John. The good question is not What are they hiding? but What happened then, and what happens next? “History has its eyes on you,” the song goes in “Hamilton.” No, we have our eye on history. The Founders made much of it, so we can make more. ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

Outbreaks and Uprisings in Orhan Pamuk’s “Nights of Plague”

When an epidemic comes to an enchanting Mediterranean island, the political consequences are as momentous as the medical ones.

By [James Wood](#)



Six years ago, the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk started writing a historical novel about the outbreak of bubonic plague on a fictional island. He'd been dreaming of such a project for decades: as a student of history and of the great European plague chronicles and novels—Defoe's "[A Journal of a Plague Year](#)," Manzoni's "[The Betrothed](#)," Camus's "[The Plague](#)"—he had a particular interest in the way that plagues have tended to get what we might now call "Orientalized." Muslims, especially in the Ottoman Empire, have been portrayed as more resistant than Christians to the imposition of quarantine. In a 2020 essay, Pamuk argues that Western observers like Defoe noted a strain of fatalism in the Muslim world view—the theological idea of "Every Man's end being determined," as Defoe put it. If you can do nothing to alter your fate, why bother protecting yourself from death? (Historians have vigorously contested the claims about both resistance and

fatalism.) Pamuk maintains that, in the nineteenth century, the rise of pilgrimages to Mecca or Medina insured that Muslims became “the world’s most prolific carriers and spreaders of infectious disease.” And since people always imagine that plague comes from elsewhere, from anywhere but within one’s own society, it may have been politically convenient for Westerners to imagine that it somehow originated in Muslim lands, or, more vaguely, in “the East.” As Pamuk reminds us, “Crime and Punishment” ends with Raskolnikov grandiosely fantasizing of a great, obliterating plague “that had come to Europe from the depths of Asia.”

So Pamuk started writing what became the near-seven-hundred-page novel “[Nights of Plague](#)” (Knopf), which has just been published in an English translation by Ekin Oklap. Then viral reality caught up with fiction, and Pamuk was suddenly writing a plague novel officially set in 1901 which was really a pandemic novel pointing to 2020. As a result, Pamuk’s story effortlessly generates a set of resonances that the novelist could hardly have predicted when he started the book. Hygiene theatre, for instance: on Pamuk’s fictional island of Mingheria (more about this in a moment), government clerks spray vast quantities of Lysol into the air. The contemporary historian who narrates the book tells us that “these initial precautions, which we now know to be largely ineffective,” reassured the populace that the epidemic “was a minor threat easily defeated with spray pumps and remedies that could be sprinkled into the air like perfume.” And the chronic breaching of lockdown: though citizens on Mingheria are not allowed to leave the island once quarantine is imposed, they do so anyway, “under cover of darkness.” And origin stories: some Mingherians think they have seen a sinister Cretan man walking around at night with a bag of dead rats, scattering their infected corpses around the streets; others are sure that the plague was imported on the very ship that brought to the island the Chief Inspector of Public Health and Sanitation, the man charged with containing the outbreak (i.e., they’re sure [Dr. Fauci](#) created it).

Curiously, though, the plague is not the most interesting element of Pamuk’s novel. Imaginatively speaking, the plague is relatively dead in “Nights of Plague,” partly because, as seasoned Covidians, we’re all now morbidly familiar with the mechanics of plague containment. What is most vital in this book is what is most fictional: Pamuk’s lovingly obsessive

creation of the invented Mediterranean island of Mingheria, a world so detailed, so magically full, so introverted and personal in emphasis, that it shimmers like a memory palace, as if Pamuk were conjuring up a lost city of his youth, Istanbul's exilic, more perfect alter ego. The effect is daringly vertiginous, at once floatingly postmodern and solidly realistic, something like Italo Calvino's "[Invisible Cities](#)" crossed with the nostalgic re-creations of Joyce's lost Dublin, or Joseph Roth's vanished Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Consider, for instance, the pleasure that Pamuk takes in fictional naming. Istanbul Street is the city's most vibrant thoroughfare (or was, until the plague struck). There is a Hotel Majestic, a Hotel Splendid, and, more gauzily christened than either of those, a Hotel Regard à l'Ouest. Notable landmarks include the Arkaz Castle, with its "quaint spired towers"; the White Mountain, "considered to be the most mysterious among the various volcanic peaks that populated the Mediterranean Sea"; and the Central Post Office and Telegraph Office, with its grand imperial entrance. There are also various churches and mosques—I enjoyed the fabulously named Blind Mehmet Pasha Mosque—indicative of the island's Venetian, Byzantine, and Ottoman history, and of its mixed religious and racial population. (Of about eighty thousand inhabitants, roughly half are Muslim and half non-Muslim, mostly Greek Orthodox.) The gemlike island sits to the west of Cyprus. We are told that it is the Ottoman Empire's twenty-ninth province.

Mingheria, as Pamuk conceives it, is an impossible Eden, into which the bacillus of history must enter. It is a fantastical, fantastically beautiful place, famous for its pink stone, drenched in "pink, yellow, and orange hues." Homer and Pliny wrote about this Mediterranean jewel; Romantic travellers memorialized its spires and mountains. Pamuk tells us that it "seemed to belong in the pages of a fairy tale." Or possibly in the pages of Tintin books, each scene and tableau painted into unreal reality by the fanatically detailed illustrations of Hergé. What is more Tintin-esque than the Department of Scrutinia, "an office which existed in no other Ottoman province," headed by Mingheria's top spy, Chief Scrutineer Mazhar Effendi? Or the island's mysterious Translation Bureau? (Required, one imagines, because at least two difficult languages, Turkish and Mingherian, are spoken on the island. Indeed, Pamuk extends a running joke throughout

the novel about the difficulty of reading and writing the “magical language” of Mingherian.)

There’s a curious way in which Pamuk, alert for how, in history, the plague has been unfairly Orientalized, enjoys, in fiction, frankly Orientalizing his own island, imbuing it with swirls of Ottoman magic and legend. It was no surprise to this reader that, near the end of the novel, we find Pamuk taking a little swipe at Edward Said, for the “negatively inflected sense” of Said’s academic coinage “Orientalist.” Here, Pamuk, one might say, is in the fictional business of producing a positively inflected Orientalism that has the decided advantage, in his sure hands, of actually issuing from the Orient.

The tale opens like a starry romantic chronicle. A steamer, topped with delicate white funnels and flying the Ottoman flag, is arriving by night at the Arkaz harbor. The island shimmers in the moonlight. It is 1901. On board are the Ottoman Empire’s Chief Inspector of Public Health and Sanitation, a Christian of Polish origin; his assistant, a Greek physician; and yet another physician, who is accompanied by his wife, a niece of the Empire’s sultan and so a princess. The princess will spend much of the novel confined to her quarters, writing long letters to her sister back in Istanbul; the novel’s tale is supposedly constructed, by her great-granddaughter Mîna, from these letters. The Chief Inspector of Public Health and his assistant are already celebrated as “scientist-saviors” for their work in containing previous outbreaks of plague and cholera in the vast Ottoman Empire. They, along with the prince consort, have arrived in Mingheria because of signs pointing to a new outbreak.



"Is there anything you can help me help you with?"
Cartoon by Liana Finck

It is at this moment that the island becomes “real,” which is to say, becomes political. The three medical scientists will have to deal with a shifting political landscape, one all too familiar to us in 2022. There is the cagey, anxious, ambitious governor, Sami Pasha, who first resists the idea that plague has broken out on the island, and then throws himself into the project of containment with too much fervor. (He’s fond of imprisoning people.) There is the aforementioned spy, Mazhar Effendi, who looks like an unassuming bureaucrat but will turn out to be fiercely dangerous. There are merchants and shopkeepers who are resistant to lockdown. There is the simmering tension between Muslims and Christians, and a Muslim hostility—accentuated by a recent deadly incident known as the Pilgrim Ship Mutiny—to European quarantine. And there is Sheikh Hamdullah, head of the island’s most powerful religious group, the Halifiye sect, who may or may not be fomenting political resistance to Governor Sami Pasha.

In leisurely strokes, Pamuk sets up all these characters. The story sparks into life when the Chief Inspector of Public Health is murdered in one of the riskier neighborhoods of Arkaz. Then his assistant is killed by a poisoned rose-and-walnut biscuit. A Quarantine Regiment is formed, to patrol the districts and enforce the hated quarantine. Mingherian resistance grows—the first breath of what will become full-blown Mingherian

nationalism. The sheikh eventually contracts the plague. The disease rages out of control, the body count rises, and Governor Sami Pasha is relieved of his job by the sultan, who says that he is sending a new man from Istanbul to be the island's governor, and that poor Sami Pasha will be sent off to Aleppo—a grim twenty-first-century joke, surely—to be the new ruler there. A demotion, as Sami Pasha fully understands.

These are some of the story's galvanizing events, around which intricacies of various kinds are wound. As you'd expect in such a long novel, there's a good deal of plot, but the book is engrossing and easy to read. The result is strangely paradoxical: a big but swift novel, a novel about pain and death that is fundamentally light and buoyant. This is partly because Pamuk doesn't linger on his characters, and doesn't ask much of their interiors, or forcefully goad their spiritual destinies; although there's an epigraph from "War and Peace," you'll find no earnest, questing Pierre Bezukhov in these pages, and very little theodicy. Pamuk is interested less in the human dimension of his story than in its political ramifications. He places his humans in the rich imaginary world he has created, this world he calls a "three-dimensional fairy tale," and observes what happens to the state when an epidemic tests its tolerances. Sure enough, things buckle.

That inquiry is traditionally novelistic, and written up, for the most part, in traditionally "realistic" guise—a three-dimensional fairy tale is, after all, a pretty good definition of the realist enterprise. There are political uprisings, a bloody shoot-out, transfers of power, the machinations of spies and lovers. But the whole thing feels lightly enchanted because what captures Pamuk's attention is not morbidity and mortality but the steady deathless roll of events, and above all the strange fate of his fictional island. In order to convey an adequate sense of that fate, I will have to approach the book's ending: readers excited by narrative unknowing should turn away here, as if from a spoiled corpse. What happens, in brief, is that, at the moment when those in political charge of the island's daily operations are ordered to yield to the omnipotence of Istanbul and the sultan, they turn rogue, and declare the island free and independent. The leaders of this joyous movement are the princess's bodyguard (whose role has grown larger and larger in the course of the chronicled events, and who becomes the island's first

President) and Sami Pasha (who has decided to disobey the sultan's order to leave his post).

Now it is time for full-scale “Mingherianization”—a happy festival-of-becoming that has, in fact, suffused the entire novel. (Pamuk seems to work on the assumption that you can never have too much Mingherianization.) Streets and squares will have to be renamed, and a new flag found. The teaching of Mingherian must be developed and expanded, so that it can become the island’s lingua franca. Soon, however, Chief Scrutineer Mazhar Effendi, the ruthless spymaster, stages a coup, names himself the new President, and sends the princess and her husband packing, on the same boat they arrived in at the start of the novel: the three-dimensional fairy tale is circularly complete. Though not quite, because a sparkling postscript, supposedly written in 2021 by the princess’s great-granddaughter Mîna Mingher (note the surname), brings the island’s history up to date. Mîna, a scholar and an author of the academic study “Mingherianization and Its Consequences,” informs us that President Mazhar went on to rule for thirty-one years, maintaining a punitive and militaristic regime. Mingheria was formally recognized by the United Nations in 1947. There are quick but potent references to the Armenian genocide (a charged topic for Pamuk, since in 2005 the Turkish state threatened the novelist with imprisonment for talking publicly about it), to Atatürk, and to the darker side of Mingherianization, which apparently involved prohibiting the teaching of the island’s Ottoman and Greek history, and dispatching dissenters to camps. In the nineteen-eighties, a military regime took charge of the island, and from 1984 to 2000 Mîna Mingher herself was banned from entering the country. Mîna tells us that she has inherited her mother’s “Mingherian fascination,” and dotingly describes the island’s old streets and haunts, the Arkaz of her childhood and of her mother’s young life. She is assisted in this nostalgic task by a chap called Orhan Pamuk, who is described as “the novelist and history enthusiast Orhan Pamuk.”

Essentially, Pamuk builds his imaginary Eden in the first half of his novel, tells the story of its contamination and near-collapse, and then, via the island’s independence, gets to repeat the world-making process in the final third of the novel, now through the lens of nostalgia. For the new Mingheria, the island of the twenty-first century, though still quite beautiful,

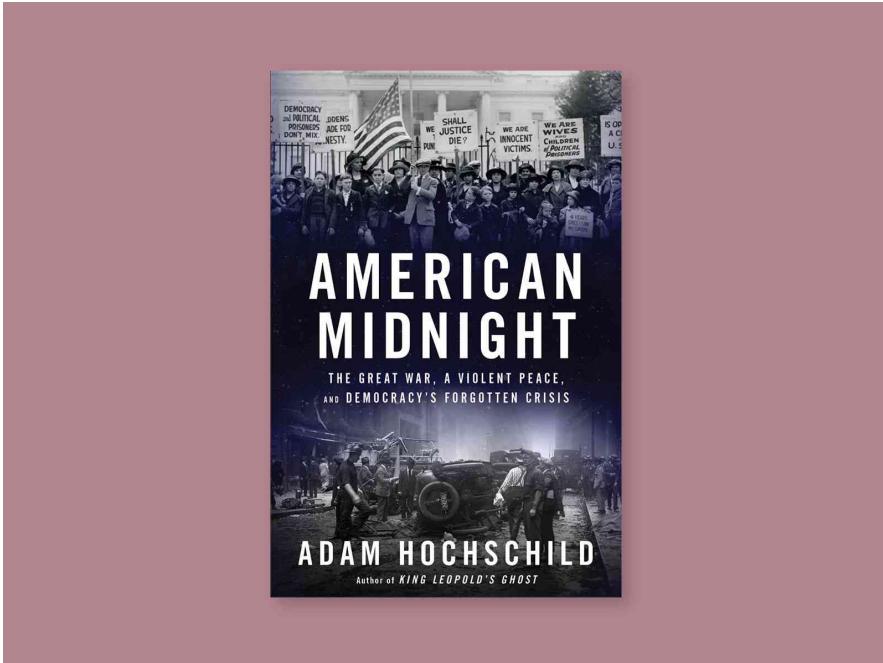
is nothing like the old, unspoiled Mingheria. Today, Mîna tells us, the tourist traffic makes summers unbearable, and there are modern apartment blocks facing the sea, and neon signs everywhere. Poring over black-and-white photographs commissioned by her great-grandmother, photographs that have supposedly formed the basis of the novel's detailed realism, Mîna longs for the old island. Pamuk has a phrase for this obsessive nostalgic consumption, and he used it as the title of a previous novel—it is the search for “the museum of innocence.” But what innocence? Pamuk is nostalgically drawn to that brief utopian moment when Mingheria broke free, when it announced its impossible independence, when the plague began to fade, when the new state was full of pure potential. It was a moment when “nationalism,” as he reminds us, was not the semi-fascist thing we think of now but was instead “a noble term, reserved for those brave, heroic patriots who rose up in revolt against their colonizers and ran headfirst, flags aloft, toward the invaders’ relentless machine guns.” This nationalism, at the heady moment of its conception, represents and contains nothing less than the promise of innocent, unspoiled freedom. It is entirely fitting, then, that Pamuk should enact that freedom with his undaunted reference to “the massacres of the Empire’s Armenian, Greek, and Kurdish populations,” and that he should also end his captivating novel with—it is the book’s last line—a rousing, slightly ironic call to a magical emancipation that, in its purest form, may belong only in the pages of a novel: “Long live Mingheria! Long live Mingherians! Long live liberty!” ♦

By Craig Thomas

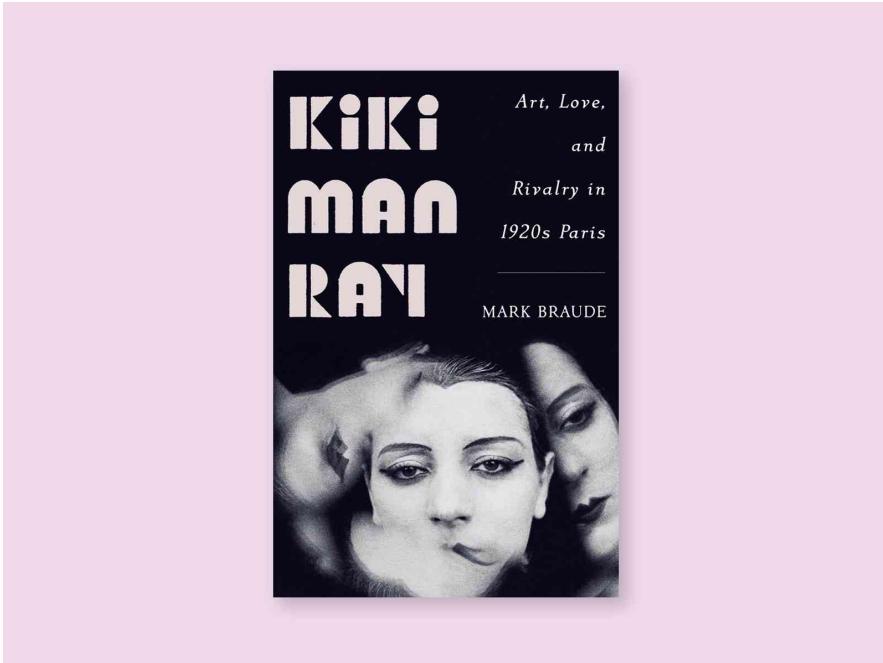
By Adam Kirsch

By John Cassidy

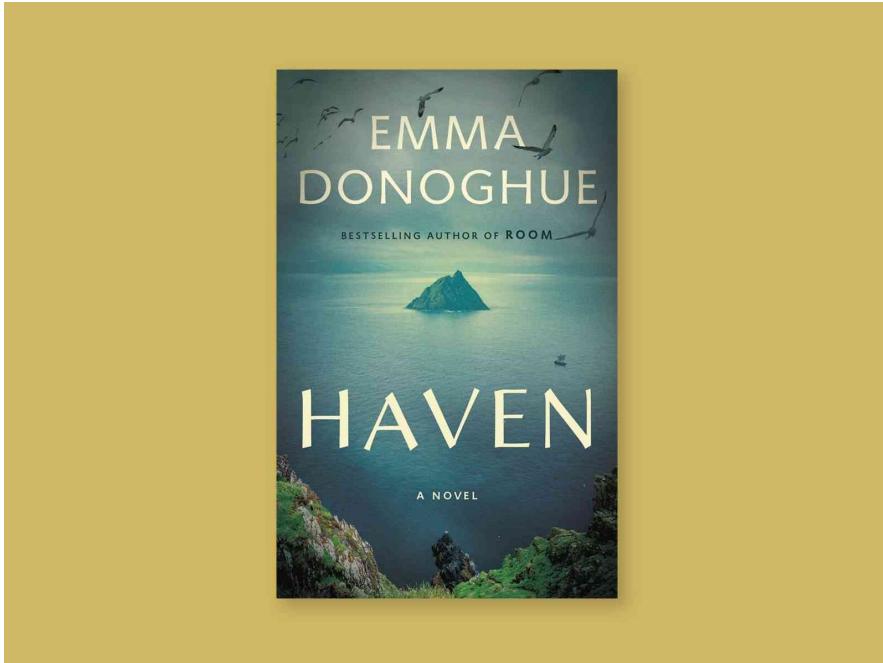
By John Cassidy



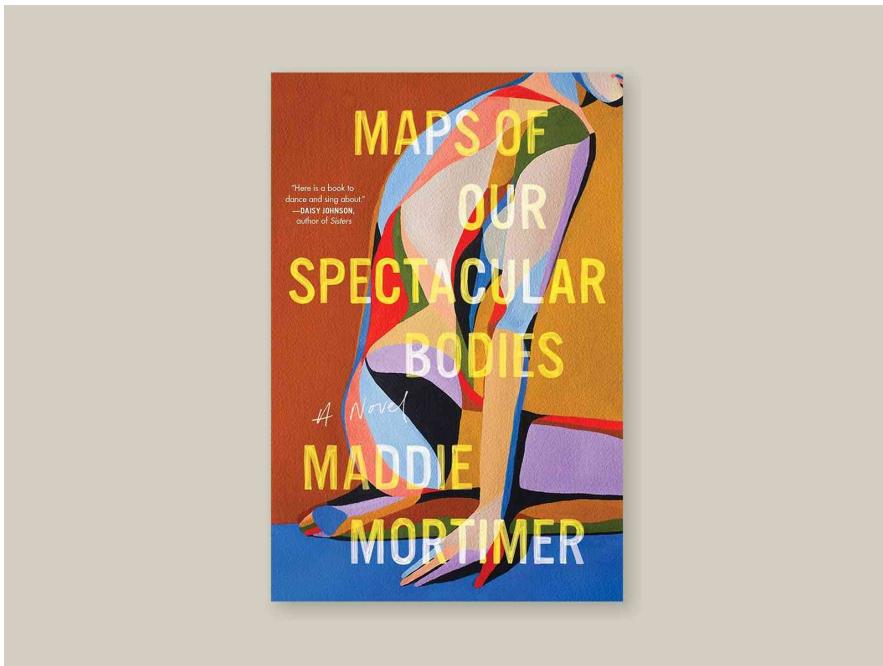
[**American Midnight**](#), by Adam Hochschild (*Mariner*). The four years of American history from 1917 to 1921 are underexamined, but, in this account, they emerge as pivotal. “Just as the war in Europe was being fought on several fronts, so was the war at home,” Hochschild writes. Vigilante groups and the government itself targeted labor unionists, socialists, immigrants, Blacks, Jews, and others perceived to be insufficiently patriotic. While narrating raids, arrests, lynchings, deportations, and instances of censorship, spying, and torture, Hochschild periodically checks in on an achingly conflicted Woodrow Wilson. When a member of his Administration suggested pardoning those who had been punished for opposing conscription, the President replied that, while the idea “appeals to me not a little, . . . I don’t feel that I can follow my heart just now.”



Kiki Man Ray, by Mark Braude (Norton). Kiki de Montparnasse was born Alice Prin, in a village far from the cosmopolitan Parisian enclave whose name she later adopted. One of the most popular artists' models of the nineteen-twenties—as well as a cabaret star, painter, memoirist, and bon vivant—Kiki posed for artists including Soutine, Foujita, and, perhaps most fruitfully, the surrealist Man Ray. Braude's biography argues that the pair's long love affair was mutually galvanizing, and that Kiki was not just a muse but an artist in her own right. If she has largely faded from view, he writes, it is because “you can't sell a dance at auction. You can't sell a pose.”



Haven, by *Emma Donoghue* (*Little, Brown*). In this novel of religious discovery, set in the seventh century, three Irish monks make a fraught journey from their monastery to Great Skellig, a craggy rock formation in the Atlantic that resembles “the most gigantic of cathedrals.” Switching perspectives among the monks, the narrative tracks their escalating discord as they endeavor to construct a new monastic settlement there. Donoghue evokes their devotional seriousness with a descriptive texture that is equally alert to a flock of cormorants taking flight “by some collusion,” or to the whittling of a makeshift pipe. As the men maintain routines of worship in the face of futility, the novel asks whether they should be answerable to God or to one another.



Maps of Our Spectacular Bodies, by *Maddie Mortimer* (Scribner). This striking novel takes a formally inventive approach to a woman's terminal-cancer diagnosis. Lia is a successful illustrator with a loving husband and preteen daughter, but their contentment is disrupted by the resurgence of her breast cancer. In Mortimer's rendering, the cancer has its own voice and graphic style, and it guides readers through Lia's most visceral life experiences: a strict religious upbringing; a destructive love affair; her treatments and her sense of the changes they wreak upon her body. Although Lia's fate is telegraphed from the start, sadness is not allowed to crowd out wit and joy, and Mortimer asks readers to think about death as something that "does not happen in the first or third person, but in the second."

By Jane Hu

By Charlie Tyson

By Adam Gopnik

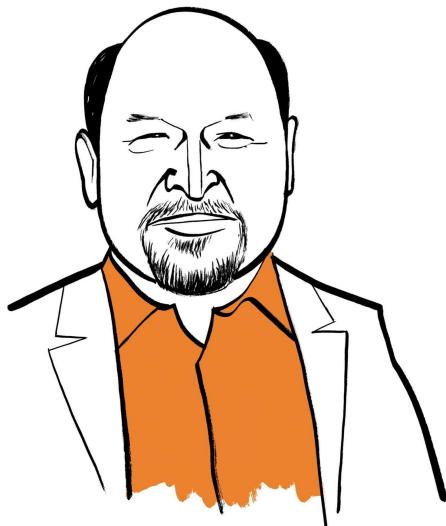
Breaking in Dept.

- Protégé Reinvents the Demo Tape

Protégé Reinvents the Demo Tape

A startup promises to match would-be stars with mentors such as DJ Khaled and Will Smith—like a mashup of MasterClass and Cameo. Can Jason Alexander help an aspiring Costanza make it in acting?

By [Michael Schulman](#)



John Ford told the teen-age Steven Spielberg where to place the horizon. Jane Fonda helped Meryl Streep find her light when she was doing her first movie. Denzel Washington paid Chadwick Boseman's tuition for a summer drama program. If you want to break into show business—and aren't related to a celebrity—it helps to have a mentor, or at least a close encounter. For some aspirants, that means waiting outside a stage door with a demo tape. Or you can go online and pay a small fee to wedge your foot in the virtual door. That's the idea behind Protégé, a startup that melds the pedagogy of [MasterClass](#) (where you can watch Itzhak Perlman teach violin) with the personalization of [Cameo](#) (where you can buy a birthday message from Kirstie Alley). On Protégé, you upload a sample of your talents and get a feedback video from an "Expert," such as DJ Khaled (three hundred dollars) or [Scooter Braun](#) (two hundred and fifty). The site launched in

February, with specialists in music and acting, and recently added painting and sculpture.

Protégé is the brainchild of Jackson Jhin, a twenty-seven-year-old from Houston. Growing up, he wanted to be a rock star, he said the other day, but “the only music contact my parents had was my piano teacher.” In high school, he joined the jazz band and played heavy metal. (His friends called him DJ Jhin and Tonic.) “I probably practiced guitar and other instruments, like, five, six hours a day,” he went on. “Did the whole YouTube thing. But I was never able to get in touch with the right person.” After college, he moved to Chicago to work in venture capital. His third day on the job, he stayed late and wandered through the firm’s co-working space. He ended up meeting some entrepreneurs who told him about the company that would become Cameo. Jhin would wind up as its C.F.O.

A few years later, he co-founded Protégé with the entrepreneur Michael Cruz; both cared about what Jhin calls “democratizing access to opportunity.” Cruz grew up in Guam, and had struggled to break into startups. “It wasn’t a skill gap,” he said. “It was an access gap.” Cameo’s C.E.O. became an angel investor in Protégé and introduced Jhin to a well-connected Bitcoin influencer; eventually, Lionel Richie and [Will Smith](#) invested. The team got DJ Khaled to become an Expert by asking him how much an hour of his time would cost. “He was, like, ‘I don’t know, ten grand?’ ” Jhin said. “So I said, ‘That’s only a hundred sixty dollars per minute!’ ” There have been success stories: a young hip-hop artist named Joshua Bryant uploaded a video to be assessed by 9th Wonder, a producer who has worked with Jay-Z; he invited Bryant to collaborate with musicians from his label.

All well and good, but how about a test run? Recently, an aspiring sitcom star (day job: writer) requested virtual tutelage from Jason Alexander, a Protégé investor and an Expert. The protégé taped himself performing a monologue from the “[Seinfeld](#)” episode “The Marine Biologist,” in which George Costanza describes rescuing a beached whale. (“The sea was angry that day, my friends, like an old man trying to send back soup in a deli.”) Four days later, Alexander sent back an eleven-minute critique. “So far, you are the only person to send me a piece of material that I actually have

performed myself,” he began. “It was both very flattering and profoundly strange.” He cautioned against using a scene famously performed by another actor at an audition, in case “the casting director thinks you don’t compare favorably.” The whale speech also suffered out of context, he warned, since TV audiences were familiar with George and “knew that he was in over his head, having to deal with a sea creature.” Play the subtext, he advised: George’s motivation isn’t to tell a funny story but “to humiliate Kramer,” who has been hitting golf balls into the ocean, one of which lodged in the whale’s blowhole. All in all, Alexander said, “I think you have real possibilities as an actor.”

The protégé reached Alexander by phone and confessed to being a journalist. “I had a strange inkling that perhaps you had not quite amassed your first professional credit in the industry,” Alexander conceded. He’d had about fifteen submissions on Protégé, he said. “Admittedly, the average struggling actor doesn’t have the hundred and fifty bucks to forgo.” (Scholarships are available.) But he believes in mentorship. When he was a theatre major, at Boston University, a professor named James Spruill called him into his office. “I fancied myself the next Olivier, and I was five feet five, twenty-five pounds overweight, and had already started to lose my hair,” Alexander recalled. “He said, ‘You might want to look in the mirror and develop a sense of humor.’ That fifteen-minute meeting was incredibly impactful. I think that’s what Protégé wants to do.” ♦

Lionel Richie and Will Smith invested in Protégé.

By Ken Auletta

By Sarah Larson

By Evan Osnos

By Jessica Winter

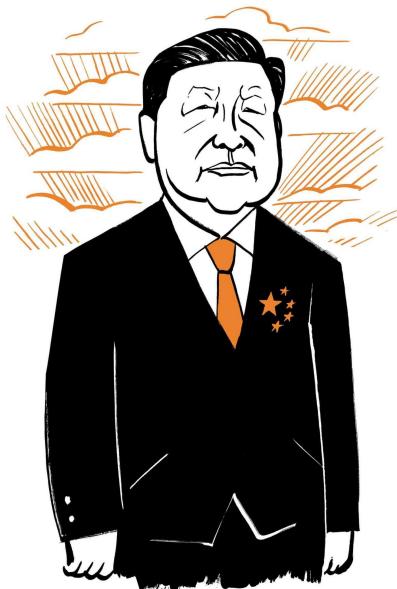
Comment

- [Xi Jinping's Historic Bid at the Communist Party Congress](#)

Xi Jinping's Historic Bid at the Communist Party Congress

In his efforts to escape the “cycles of order and disorder, rise and fall” that China’s emperors could not, is Xi himself slipping into them?

By [Evan Osnos](#)



[Xi Jinping](#) was born in Beijing in 1953, and spent his early years among the Communist Party élite. His father, Xi Zhongxun, was a Party hero of legendary devotion, who remained committed even after a rival Communist faction had threatened to bury him alive. The younger Xi heard so many tales of revolutionary glory that his ears got “calluses,” he later said. But he also witnessed the harrowing costs of losing power. In 1962, when he was nine, his father was humiliated in an internal Party struggle and cast out of the leadership; members of his family found him at home sitting alone in a darkened room. Barely four years later, [Mao Zedong](#) launched the Cultural Revolution, and the persecution of the Xi family deepened: a band of teenage Red Guards besieged Xi’s school; another group threatened to kill him; his half sister was, in the official account, “persecuted to death.” At fifteen, he was glad to be sent to toil in a remote village. Had he remained in the

chaos of the capital, he said, in a rare discussion of his experience for a state-media documentary in 2004, he didn't know "if I would live or die."

When, after a long, single-minded climb through the ranks, Xi reached the apex of the Communist Party, in 2012, propaganda accounts of his life sanitized the terrors of his youth. But, ten years later, his embrace of near-totalitarian control bears the deep imprint of his most personal beliefs about force, weakness, faith, and order. "A lot of people who came out of his experience in the Cultural Revolution concluded that China needed constitutionalism and rule of law, but Xi Jinping said no: You need the Leviathan," Joseph Torigian, an expert on Chinese politics at American University, said.

In a major address in Beijing last week, Xi delivered a preview of China's future, phrased as an "answer" to the age-old question of whether the Communists can achieve what the emperors could not: an escape from the "historical cycles of order and disorder, rise and fall" that have bedevilled the country for centuries. Yes, he said, by "self-revolution," the elimination of "crooked winds" and "hidden dangers within the Party, the state, and the military"—Party-speak for more campaigns against Western influence, ideological dissent, and political corruption. "The Party," Xi added, "will never change its nature, its conviction, or its character."

He was speaking in the Great Hall of the People, before an audience of more than two thousand members of the political élite, at the Communist Party Congress, which convenes every five years. This Congress was the twentieth, and it should have marked the end of Xi's decade as General Secretary, under term limits on the Presidency set in 1982, but he had engineered an end to them in 2018. Barring a sudden upset, Xi, who is sixty-nine, can rule for as long as he chooses. He has liberated himself from even the notional limits on his friend Vladimir Putin, who signed a law that could keep him in the Presidency until 2036.

Yet Xi has gone far beyond scrapping term limits in a bid to blunt threats to his power. A surveillance state erected by means of cameras, sensors, and algorithms prevents people from organizing or doing much without the Party's being aware of it. The technology has been especially pervasive in the Xinjiang region, where Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities have faced

widespread detention. Every Uyghur home has been required to carry a QR code listing its occupants, and pedestrians have been subjected to random scans of their phones; downloading the Quran can be grounds for interrogation. In the name of fighting corruption, the Party has investigated at least 4.7 million people, and replaced Xi's political opponents in a rolling purge that Kevin Rudd, the former Prime Minister of Australia, who is a China specialist, has called a "reign of terror." It has also sought to harden China's "ideological defenses," and to forbid "disrespectful" discussion among Party members. Protests have become so rare that when, days before the Congress, a banner denouncing Xi appeared on a Beijing bridge, it attracted international attention.

For all Xi's evident confidence in China's power (and in his own), however, there are other signs of discontent. The paralyzing lockdowns of his "zero COVID" policy prevented mass deaths but stirred broad public frustration. Observers who hoped that he might experiment beyond the policy—by allowing the use of more effective foreign vaccines, for example—were disappointed. On his watch, the economy has more than doubled in size, to \$17.7 trillion last year, but in recent months growth has stalled. He has called for "common prosperity," but the Party has offered few remedies for mounting government debt, a shrinking working-age population, and high youth unemployment. The World Bank projects that, if present trends continue, China's economic growth rate will fall below that of the rest of Asia for the first time since 1990.

The statist revival at home has been accompanied by a more aggressive posture abroad. Xi has doubled China's official defense budget, to the equivalent of more than two hundred billion dollars—only the United States' is larger—and he pledged a "no limits" partnership with Putin on the eve of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In what was perhaps the most closely anticipated of Xi's comments last week, he underscored his intention to take control of Taiwan, saying that the "wheels of history are rolling on toward China's reunification." China favors peace, he said, but reserves the "option to take all necessary measures."

Beijing has effectively abandoned a soft-focus self-portrait of a nation on a "peaceful rise," and its image has faltered in the eyes of the world. In 2012,

forty per cent of Americans had an unfavorable view of China; today, more than eighty per cent do, according to the Pew Research Center. Declines have been found in other countries, too, from South Korea to the United Kingdom. If that animus distresses Xi, he shows no sign of changing course. To sustain the Party, he has vowed to avoid the ancient cycles of the emperors, whose dynasties succumbed to corruption, overreach, uprising, and, eventually, replacement. But Geremie Barmé, a Sinologist in New Zealand, notes, “The irony is that he, by his actions to make himself supreme leader, is in fact repeating the cycle of history.”

Such is the enduring peril in Chinese politics. Sun Yat-sen, who led the overthrow of the last imperial dynasty, observed shortly before his death, in 1925, that even some of his fellow-revolutionaries had “dreamed of becoming emperor.” He feared that such imperial ambitions would bring ruin. He said, “All the periods of anarchy, which the country has gone through, have had their origin in this struggle for the throne.” ♦

By Liana Finck

By Katie Barsotti

By Jason Chatfield

By Alexandra Schwartz

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Monday, October 24, 2022](#)

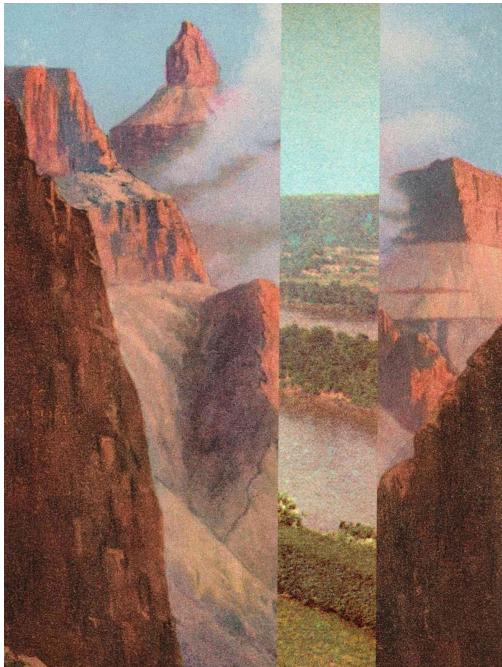
By [Will Nediger](#)

Fiction

- “[Narrowing Valley](#)”

Narrowing Valley

By [Jonathan Lethem](#)



Audio: Jonathan Lethem reads.

Wide Load / “Mr. Blue Sky”

The characters ride into the story aboard a 1976 Winnebago Minnie Winnie, one driven breakneck across broiling asphalt, overspilling its lane on both sides. Though the story’s characters are themselves oblivious, the story acknowledges that it is being written on stolen Tongva land—indeed, the same Tongva land toward which the recreational vehicle now barrels. The story gives respect and reverence to those who came before it, which ought to be absolutely everyone, even you, reader, since the story does not yet and may never exist. Yet here it seems to come—the story, and the recreational vehicle—the Winnebago like a breadbox rumbling westward on fat half-melted tires, a monster’s breadbox with its bragging orange stripe, side-view mirrors flying-buttressed a full foot from its cab to make it minimally navigable. The story already occupies too much space, demands too much attention. What the fuck, watch where you’re going! Who’s driving that thing? A dad in mirrored aviator shades? Why, of course. He’s R. Crumb’s

Whiteman, he's Albert Brooks in "Lost in America," he's the Exhausted Normative Protagonist—our movie's leading man, there's no way to avoid him. Or maybe there is. Maybe one of his kids or his long-suffering wife can provide us with a marginally improved point of view, a parallax position from which to operate. Some fucking oxygen here, though it may be that all the oxygen is recirculated within the tightly sealed Winnebago. They all breathe the same air, surely. At least we can't hear the music that's playing inside: Electric Light Orchestra's "Greatest Hits," on eight-track tape.

The Story's Writer / "Turn to Stone"

The alternative is equally unpromising: that we raise up a literary selfie stick and catch a glimpse of the story's writer. We might choose to cast him as the protagonist in a drama of the story's becoming (or, more likely, of the story's failure to launch, burdened as it is with debts and doubts, with qualms and queasy self-loathing). Of course, and it goes without saying, the story's writer is also male and white—another exemplar of the Exhausted Normative. And the project of literary self-consciousness is hardly novel (a pun, there), since it has been indulged in by so many of the writer's immediate and distant influences, from Kurt Vonnegut and Philip K. Dick to Jorge Luis Borges and Laurence Sterne. This model of self-consciousness has lately been renovated, refurbished, under the name "autofiction," yet even so it may once again be an expiring mode. Sure, it offers itself as an exit from the interstate of narrative—the kind of storytelling that doesn't trouble over the existence of the author, just barrels ever forward, claiming the turf of your attention. But perhaps it has proved to be an exit that is closed for repairs, or has simply shut down because no one wishes to go where it leads anymore.

Among those who may wish to avoid self-consciousness: the writer of this story. The writer wants to fight to stay on the interstate of storytelling! He wants to get somewhere! He wants to be aboard the Winnebago!

[Jonathan Lethem on what's stuck in his head.](#)

If so, this is no way to go about it.

Further Disclaimers / “Can’t Get It Out of My Head”

The story acknowledges borrowing the language of its acknowledgment of its occupation of stolen Tongva land from the Web site of a collective of spirit healers, who will go unnamed in this acknowledgment, for they may not wish to be associated. The story admits that it also depends for its existence on an occupation of the text of R. A. Lafferty’s “Narrow Valley,” a text that the story’s author first encountered in the anthology “Other Dimensions,” edited by Robert Silverberg in 1973. The story takes place six years later, in 1979, the year of Three Mile Island, of the Iranian hostage crisis, of the imminence of the Reagan era. The feeling that the Reagan era was coming is a migraine prodrome, a hangover suffered before a decades-long binge on Militarism, Bogus Optimism, and Imperial Fantasy that hasn’t abated yet. Since, really, what is the twenty-first century except the endless unspooling of the implications of the Reagan era? But the writer digresses. The clown Emmett Kelly died in 1979, as did John Wayne and Jack Soo and Sid Vicious. Natasha Lyonne and Chris Hayes and Pink were born in 1979. The story now acknowledges consulting Wikipedia’s “1979 in the United States” page. But who is R. A. Lafferty? A writer of science fiction and Westerns, Lafferty lived most of his life in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He died at eighty-seven in 2002. He was a Catholic. What’s “Narrow Valley”? A short story that is both a science-fiction story and a Western story, as well as a kind of tall tale or parable, typical of Lafferty’s eccentric style. In it a white family attempts to homestead on acreage originally given in a land allotment by the U.S. government to a Pawnee Indian named Clarence Big-Saddle, and handed down to his son, Clarence Little-Saddle.

The land appears, from some vantage points, to be a broad and fertile valley, with an alluring topography. However, when the white family attempts to enter the valley, it reveals itself to be a spatial anomaly—a strip of ground between two fences which is too small to enter. Or, more strangely, when outsiders, such as the white family, insist on entering it, it shrinks and flattens them to fit. Lafferty’s story, originally published in 1966, still has much to recommend it: a delightful insouciance; admirable ethics (even if expressed in twentieth-century terms); surrealist humor; a

winking self-awareness that affiliates it with more labored forms of literary metafiction yet lacks the overt self-consciousness with which the present story is hobbled. The present story now acknowledges that by basing itself on a specific earlier science-fiction story it is also indebted, paradoxically, to another: “The Nine Billion Names of God,” by Carter Scholz, which was based on “The Nine Billion Names of God,” by Arthur C. Clarke, and which has amused and obsessed the writer of the present story for decades. The story now acknowledges its utter colonization by its own procedure of serially confessing its sources. The story, which initially believed itself to be operating on a blank page, moving into a horizon of possibility, is dismayed by the likelihood that it has wandered instead into a sucking undertow of bungled authorial good intentions, the pathetic desire to write a story that will acknowledge its colonial crimes and historical debts. The Winnebago, moving with such innocent optimism across deserted Western spaces, may be blundering into a valley of palimpsest. The story is belated.

Collapsing Frontier / “Strange Magic”

The man and wife and kids in the Winnebago are moving west. The story moves west with them. All stories around here move west. An exhausting procedure, but necessary. Frederick Jackson Turner made this inevitable with his “frontier thesis.” Turner’s thesis declares that white people placed their boot prints on the American continent in the name of American democracy. The thesis rationalized their push west as a noble effort to occupy land that was as good as waiting for them, like a medium waiting for the artistry of their realization. It claimed that the land lay as ready as a blank page, one on which new meaning could be sprinkled as easily as tapping at alphabetic keys, as the writer finds himself doing right now. This story has attempted to launch itself on a presumption of innocence: it shouldn’t need to push another story off the page in order to be written, should it? It isn’t required that the story murder another story! Intertextuality isn’t colonization! Reference isn’t smallpox! The Winnebago rumbles through open space, not an obstacle in sight. The father has purchased some desert land, sight unseen—acreage described to him by the Realtor as “virgin.” He and his family are driving there to claim it. Will they build there? Will they only camp on it? They haven’t decided. We have to pretend this might work out, even though we know it doesn’t, whether

we have read Lafferty's version or not. There are two names for this operation: Suspension of Disbelief and Bad Faith.

An Indian / “Showdown”

The story is headed into crisis, because the white family must—as in Lafferty's original—meet an Indian. A Native American. An Indigenous North American person. The difficulty in producing even a stable term (“These terms have come in and out of favor over the years, and different tribes, not to mention different people, have different preferences. . . . A good rule of thumb for outsiders: Ask the Native people you're talking to what they prefer.”—David Treuer, “The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee”) shows how unlikely it is that the story's writer will be capable of manifesting such a character, or such a scene, on the page. Should we presume it was simpler for Lafferty? He would at least not have hesitated to call the character an Indian. As a securely twentieth-century human, one who had lived almost his whole life in Oklahoma, Lafferty imparted to characters such as Clarence Little-Saddle an air of fond and easeful familiarity. He employed Clarence Little-Saddle in the cause of “punching up” at the presumptions of the white characters, their avarice and delusions, as well as at the garbled scientific pontification of the characters who are called in as experts to examine the paradox of the mysteriously narrow valley.

It will not be so simple for this story's writer. In his dismay he recalls some astounding advice—a “craft tip”—he absorbed from a talk by the French author Emmanuel Carrère. Carrère had spoken of the difficulty of depicting characters from the legendary past (in his case, a Biblical figure of early Christianity) as if they were human. He said that he'd taken his guidance from early-Renaissance paintings in which the multitude of faces in religious scenes are obviously painted from life—from the fact, that is, that they are clearly portraits of specific people the painter had access to (including, sometimes, self-portraits). Carrère explained that this observation had led him to believe that it would be possible for him to make a literary portrait of someone inaccessible to him only if he decided that it would actually be a likeness of someone from life—and that nearly anyone would do.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice

[Listen to Jonathan Lethem read “Narrowing Valley.”](#)

The story's writer has seized on this advice in an attempt to rescue his enterprise. If he wishes to avoid caricature or sentimentality in his depiction of the Native person who will intervene in his story, and teach the white family its deserved lesson, he must make that character a portrait of a specific human. He must avoid the generic figure of the benevolent trickster (or “magic Indian”) who serves as the projected conscience in so many well-intentioned white narratives, from “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” to “Dead Man.” In this undertaking, he has landed, perhaps perversely, on a recollection of an encounter of his own, with a man named Max Gros-Louis.

Max Gros-Louis / “Telephone Line”

From Wikipedia:

Magella Gros-Louis OC [Order of Canada] OQ [Order of Quebec] (6 August 1931-14 November 2020), known as Max Gros-Louis or Oné Onti, was a Canadian politician and businessman in Quebec. For many years, he was Grand Chief of the Huron-Wendat First Nation. . . . Gros-Louis initially made a living by hunting, fishing and trapping. . . . He later opened a small shop “Le Huron” where he sold snowshoes, moccasins and other First Nation crafts, and also managed a dance company. In the course of his business he travelled widely to other indigenous communities and this led to his involvement in politics.

The story's writer met Max Gros-Louis when he was twelve years old, on an anomalous family trip, with his mother and his mother's boyfriend, to Quebec, in midwinter. The boy had never previously been out of the United States. His mother's boyfriend at the time was a younger man, a New York City schoolteacher, but one with a surprising amount of money, perhaps from a family source, and he had swept the boy and his siblings along on an impulsive voyage to French Canada. What the boy remembers of the trip, aside from the encounter with Max Gros-Louis, is French onion soup, buying a French version of a Spider-Man comic book, morning croissants in

the Château Frontenac, and warming his frostbitten toes under the radiator at that same hotel after a trudge through slush-crusted streets.

The story's writer had never met a Native tribal chief before, nor has he since. This is a matter not of avoidance but of happenstance. The story's writer came of age in New York, and has spent his life primarily in cities. He's known Native Americans! ("Some of my best friends are," etc.) The first were the elderly Mohawk women surviving in basement apartments in his childhood neighborhood, widows of the last of the men who built skyscrapers in Manhattan. (These skywalkers and their wives were also from French Canada, though he didn't know that at the time.) He met others, over time, though rarely those who'd been raised on tribal lands, or who'd participated directly in tribal communities. In the life of his family, who were both hippies and Quakers, Native people were also symbolically charged, tragic emblems of some better and nobler existence. That this was a discourse that mixed much that was good with much that was bad he'd understand later. But certainly it was affectionate, and intended to be respectful. The writer's father had copied out lines from "Black Elk Speaks" into the writer's high-school yearbook, for instance. Another example: as a child the writer had practically memorized an LP by a Native folksinger named Floyd Westerman, called "Custer Died for Your Sins." Some of the writer's Midwestern relatives liked to claim a small portion of their lineage as Native. That this was a common fantasy he'd also understand later.

His encounter with Max Gros-Louis, though, was a singular one. The writer's mother and her boyfriend had sought it out, a variation in their Quebec tourism, the majority of which had been in exercise of the fantasy that they'd actually travelled to Paris (croissants, onion soup, etc.). They'd gone to where the city met the reservation to find Max Gros-Louis's business, a shop called the Centre d'Artisanat Le Huron. They'd encouraged the boy to speak with Max Gros-Louis—to meet the chief, who'd dressed for his role in fringed leather and a headband. The boy had come away with the impression of someone kind, and formidable, and quite tall—but also of someone who felt an amused tolerance toward those who'd come to meet him.

The boy and his family didn't buy much, as he recalls. No moccasins, no headdress, no art work. In this they likely represented a disappointment. The boy, however, did purchase a postcard. He was a postcard collector in those days.

It is when the boy becomes the story's writer, nearly fifty years later, that he recognizes that in a semiconscious way he has always associated Max Gros-Louis with the figure in Lafferty's story, Clarence Little-Saddle, the recipient and rebuffer of the white family's attempt to occupy the narrow valley. It is also only when the story's writer conceives this plan to rewrite Lafferty, and connects this to his memory of Max Gros-Louis, that he troubles to Google Max Gros-Louis's name and discovers, from his obituaries, that the Huron-Wendat chief was alive until 2020, and that he was elected and served as the tribal chief in three separate periods across five decades, and that he was regarded as one of the truly great leaders in the First Nations cause in Canada's history.

Had the story's writer imagined that Max Gros-Louis was some kind of trickster or charlatan, a pretend chief who was really a seller of tourist merchandise? No. Yet, in his astonishment at what he learns from the obituaries, the story's writer realizes that he had imagined that Max Gros-Louis was frozen in time—that Max Gros-Louis was a kind of private dream nudging at his awareness. In this, the writer is too typical of himself. That he feels that the past lives in him, and that it stirs him, doesn't mean that the past actually exists inside him. The past, too, is a narrow valley, one refusing occupation. Or no. That's wrong. The past is huge, and real, but you are small. To reënter the valley of the past is, properly, to grow tiny, and to vanish.

What About the Winnebago? / “Mr. Blue Sky” (reprise)

The Winnebago believes it is moving, but in fact it is parked. The family believes they are rumbling steadily west across the landscape, in pursuit of the valley, the open space, the tabula rasa, but they are mistaken. Such beliefs are belated, lapsed, overdue, like a book checked out from a library

and then lost for decades; the story has moved indoors, the frontier has become one of recursion, quotation, paraphrase, allegory. To be specific, the frontier is now an “electronic frontier.” The Winnebago is parked in front of a casino, deep in a tribal nation’s territory. The family members are shrunken, though they do not suffer from the vertigo that ought to accompany their shrinking; they remain unaware of their tininess, their insignificance. They are inside the casino, together, playing a gambling game that is a video game, designed to separate them from their money. The game is called Win-and-They-Go! The action consists of attempting to place homesteads on every hundred acres of open territory, a frantic effort destined, as in all gambling devices, to tease and entice with sporadic success and to bring in the end total failure and defeat. The soundtrack of the game consists of songs licensed from the band E.L.O.; the design of the “frontier,” across which the family navigates, and which repeats like the backdrop in a “Flintstones” cartoon, consists of cacti, distant canyon bluffs, abandoned gold mines, wood-panelled station wagons, and crafty winking trickster Indians selling merchandise at trading posts. All of this is rendered in a nostalgic nineteen-seventies-cartoon style, but the story, it is now apparent, takes place not in 1979 but in the present. The past, even so recent a past as 1979, a time in which a paraphrase of Lafferty’s story could still conceivably be written, is unsustainable. The machine is sucking money from the family’s coffers. It’s O.K., they have a lot of it. The story dollies out now to leave the family there, in the windowless bowels of the casino, to rise up and observe the Winnebago in the parking lot, amid so many other unwieldy vacation vehicles also stilled there. The story climbs ever higher to a wide pan of the surrounding desert, then higher, to find the horizon. The story acknowledges its collapse at this vanishing point, which is not a frontier of any type or variety. The story acknowledges its relief at being over even as it acknowledges the possibility that it never managed to begin. Game over. Thanks for playing. ♦

By [Cressida Leyshon](#)

By [Craig Thomas](#)

By [Jay Caspian Kang](#)

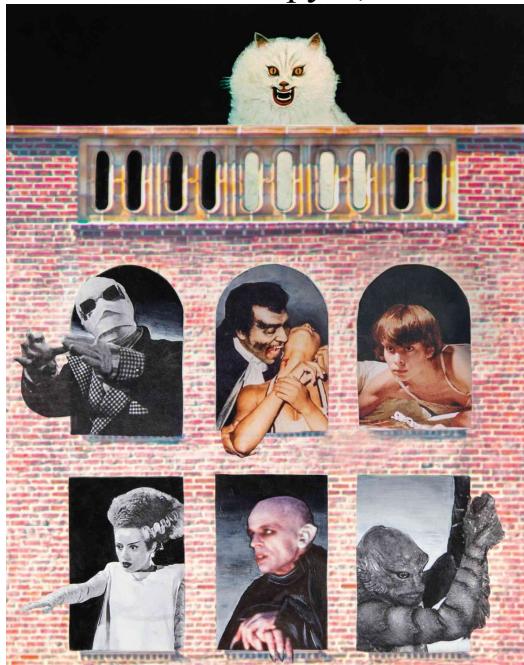
By [Sheelah Kolhatkar](#)

Movies

- [Monster Movies Galore, on the Criterion Channel](#)

Monster Movies Galore, on the Criterion Channel

The streaming service's Halloween-ready roster includes "Cat People," "Nosferatu the Vampyre," and "The Bride of Frankenstein."



The Criterion Channel, which has been a treasure trove of art-house movies since its launch as an independent streaming service, in 2019, has ramped up its offerings to include a wide range of Hollywood classics and genre delights. This month's program features a trio of Halloween-ready series: "'80s Horror" (including Paul Schrader's "Cat People," starring Nastassja Kinski), "Vampires" (with such notable films as "Blacula," starring William Marshall, and Werner Herzog's "Nosferatu the Vampyre"), and "Universal Horror Classics" (which is heavy on selections from the nineteen-thirties, such as "The Bride of Frankenstein," starring Elsa Lanchester and a heroic hairdo).

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

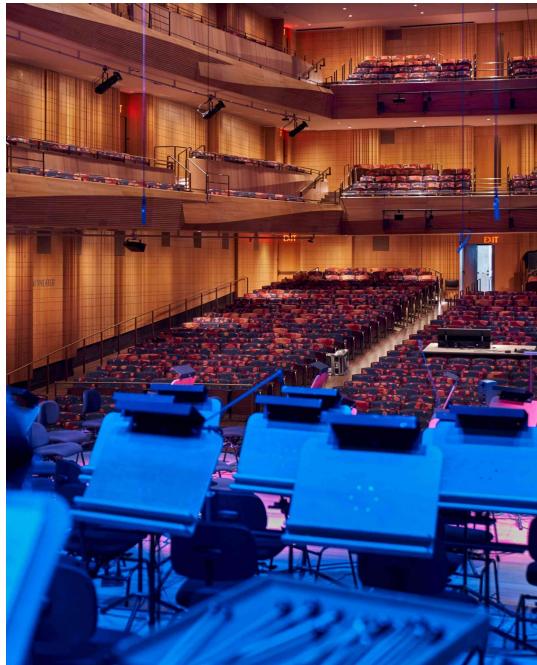
Musical Events

- [Is the New York Philharmonic's Swanky New Space Falling Short?](#)

Is the New York Philharmonic's Swanky New Space Falling Short?

The renovated David Geffen Hall looks better, but the acoustics leave a mixed impression.

By [Alex Ross](#)



Sixty years ago, [Leonard Bernstein](#) presided over the inauguration of Philharmonic Hall, the chief concert venue at Lincoln Center. The event was broadcast live on network television, with an estimated twenty-six million people tuning in. Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy headed a procession of distinguished attendees, who exclaimed over the white-columned monumentality of the façade and the blue-and-gold opulence of the interior. Bernstein led the New York Philharmonic in a program that included the Gloria from Beethoven’s Missa Solemnis, the first part of Mahler’s Eighth Symphony, and—less celebratory in mood—[Aaron Copland](#)’s concussively dissonant “Connotations.” Mrs. Kennedy, greeting the composer afterward, was at a loss for words. “Oh, Mr. Copland,” she said. “Oh, Mr. Copland.” When she was asked about the acoustical achievement, she replied, ambiguously, “I never saw anything like it.”

In fact, the acoustics were a failure, as Bernstein recognized. A document in the Philharmonic archives summarizes his reactions: “Mr. Bernstein said that as he listens in the auditorium the hall has an uninteresting sound except for the horns and clarinets. At no time does he feel that he is surrounded by music. He said that the general effect is like hearing music written on a blackboard—a tableau effect. He said that there is no presence or warmth.” Treble frequencies were too dominant; the cellos were often inaudible; the horns lorded over all.

Thus began a long twilight struggle to fix the problem: an overhaul in 1963, further adjustments during the following decade, a gut renovation in 1976, yet more changes in 1992. Philharmonic Hall became Avery Fisher Hall, then [David Geffen Hall](#). The acoustics eventually rose to the level of the decent, but the sound remained boxy, lacking in resonance. The décor, meanwhile, had devolved into beige boredom. Drastic measures were proposed, including a teardown; teams of architects came and went. Finally, in 2019, a more limited but still ambitious renovation got under way—a collaboration between the architectural firm Diamond Schmitt and the design team of Tod Williams and Billie Tsien. The construction was accelerated during the pandemic, and the hall reopened in early October. Advance publicity promised that the curse had finally been lifted and that the Philharmonic had acquired a world-class venue worthy of its history and reputation.

Certainly, the place looks better. The old hall, with its overextended filing-drawer shape, was a dispiriting place to hear music. The orchestra always seemed farther away than it really was—as if seen through the wrong end of a telescope, Bernstein commented. Now the stage has been moved forward and a bank of seats has been installed behind the musicians. The main floor has been more steeply raked, allowing for better sight lines. Balconies curve around the auditorium and are tapered into aerodynamic forms. Beechwood panelling is molded in rippling patterns. Rose-petal fabric covers the seats, and blue tones appear high on the walls. Anyone who has visited Frank Gehry’s [Disney Hall](#), in Los Angeles, will experience several pangs of *déjà vu*.

The public spaces at Geffen have been deepened and aired out. Picking up your ticket or exiting on the escalators is no longer an exercise in boarding-gate chaos. Couches and tables in the lower lobby encourage passersby to linger. The over-all visual aesthetic is a swanky jumble of brightly striped upholstery, patterned carpeting, midnight-blue walls, silver- and gold-hued partitions, bronze railings, and frosted-glass parapets. It's a little too kitschy-cool for comfort: I felt as though I were checking into a W Hotel in the Emirates. The décor will date rapidly—I predict a re-renovation before the decade is out—but for the moment it has an awkward, eager-to-please charm. There's an auxiliary performance venue, the Sidewalk Studio, with big windows overlooking Broadway. It has a crisp sound, as a noontime chamber concert attested.

The acoustics of the main hall were overseen by Paul Scarbrough and Christopher Blair, of the firm Akustiks. My initial impressions, after three performances, were mixed. The sound is bright and clean, with excellent separation of instrumental voices. When smaller groups within the orchestra are playing at lower volumes, their timbres float and bloom. When the entire ensemble kicks in, though, the sonic picture seems to flatten out and lose lustre. Treble overwhelms bass, and the brass squelch the strings. The music remains stuck in front of you instead of rushing around you. I had the sense that I was listening to a world-class stereo system in a dry room. Such, at least, was my experience in the orchestra seats. When I moved to the back row of the uppermost balcony, the balance was better, the bass fuller, the ensemble richer and more rounded. (Bernstein, in his 1962 notes, made a similar observation about the upper-balcony perspective.)

I thought back to the opening of Disney, in 2003. The L.A. Philharmonic, which had long played in the cavernous Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, generated an almost ear-splitting overload in “The Rite of Spring.” In subsequent years, it learned to handle Disney’s uncommon responsiveness. The New York Philharmonic, likewise, will tailor its sound to its new room, and the Akustiks team is making adjustments. Still, I can’t help feeling that Geffen has fallen short of its apparent model. This became clear when, the other day, I heard the L.A. Phil again on its home ground. At the booming climaxes of Copland’s Third Symphony, I sensed the bass coming up

through my feet—a sign that the entire hall was resonating with the music. Nothing of the sort had happened at Geffen.

The Philharmonic's official opening concert, on October 12th, began with a world première: “Oyá,” a high-tech tone poem by the Brazilian American composer Marcos Balter. Oyá is a Yoruba warrior spirit, and her powers were summoned in hard-edged explosions of electronics and in a psychedelic light display. The work was disjointed in structure but arresting in impact—shades of the apocalyptic assault of Copland’s “Connotations.” The remainder of the program—[John Adams](#)’s “My Father Knew Charles Ives,” Tania León’s “Stride,” and Ottorino Respighi’s “Pines of Rome”—showed off various facets of orchestral brilliance. [Jaap van Zweden](#), the Philharmonic’s music director, led briskly and without much insight, as is his wont.

The opening festivities also included the première of Etienne Charles’s multimedia piece “San Juan Hill,” a co-production of Lincoln Center’s programming department and the Philharmonic. San Juan Hill was the Puerto Rican and Black neighborhood that Robert Moses obliterated to make room for Lincoln Center. The Philharmonic joined Charles’s Afro-Caribbean jazz combo, Creole Soul, in a haunting evocation of that lost community, with film segments and recorded interviews supplying a live-documentary texture. As I listened, though, I registered an uncomfortable irony. Emblazoned on the walls of the auditorium were the words “Wu Tsai Theater,” honoring a donation by Clara Wu Tsai and Joe Tsai. Joe Tsai is the co-founder and executive vice-chairman of the Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba, which plays a crucial role in China’s draconian regime of surveillance. Perhaps a future event at Geffen could celebrate the Uyghur people, who are being [forced into concentration camps](#) in Xinjiang.

Whatever broader agenda Lincoln Center pursues—its new leadership is tending away from traditional classical fare—Geffen Hall ultimately has no purpose for existence except as an arena for orchestral playing. The Philharmonic, under the executive guidance of Deborah Borda, has lately made strides toward modernizing and diversifying its image. What it needs now is an energetic, creative music director; van Zweden, who is scheduled to depart in the spring of 2024, has accomplished little of note. When

programs excite the mind and performances seize the heart, questions of acoustics and décor recede into the background. ♦

By Rivka Galchen

By Alex Ross

By Alex Ross

By Hannah Goldfield

Onward and Upward with the Arts

- [A Unified Field Theory of Bob Dylan](#)

A Unified Field Theory of Bob Dylan

He's in his eighties. How does he keep it fresh?

By [David Remnick](#)



In 1956, rock and roll was busy being born. Ike Turner and the Kings of Rhythm had broken through five years earlier with a jump-blues hit called “Rocket 88”—a credible candidate for the ur-rock tune—but crooners and big-band acts lingered on the pop charts. Elvis scored a No. 1 *Billboard* hit with “Heartbreak Hotel”; Nelson Riddle and His Orchestra did, too, with “Lisbon Antigua.” But kids knew what spoke to them, and it wasn’t “Lisbon Antigua.” Robert Zimmerman, a pompadoured fifteen-year-old living in the Minnesota Iron Range town of Hibbing, was one of countless kids who went out and put together a rock-and-roll band. He called his the Shadow Blasters.

In his childhood and adolescence, he stayed up through the night, his head by the radio, absorbing everything being broadcast from nearby Duluth and from fifty-thousand-watt stations throughout the Midwest and the Deep South: R. & B., gospel, jazz, blues, and rock and roll. He was fascinated, as well, with the storytelling tricks and aural mysteries of radio dramas such as

“The Fat Man” and “Inner Sanctum.” “It made me the listener that I am today,” he told an interviewer many decades later. “It made me listen for little things: the slamming of the door, the jingling of car keys. The wind blowing through trees, the songs of birds, footsteps, a hammer hitting a nail. Just random sounds. Cows mooing. I could string all that together and make that a song. It made me listen to life in a different way.”

As he was rehearsing with the Shadow Blasters, the most thrilling song in the air was “Tutti Frutti,” sung by a flamboyant piano player from Macon, Georgia, who had once gone by Princess Lavonne and now performed as Little Richard. And what Zimmerman was hearing he wanted to make his own. His father ran an appliance store in town and kept an old piano in the back. When Bobby was supposed to be sweeping the floor or stocking the shelves, he was trying out hand-splaying boogie-woogie chords on the piano instead.

On April 5, 1957, the Shadow Blasters played at a variety show organized by their school’s student council—Bobby Zimmerman’s début. “He started singing in his Little Richard style, screaming, pounding the piano,” his friend John Bucklen recalled. “My first impression was that of embarrassment, because the little community of Hibbing, Minnesota, way up there, was unaccustomed to such a performance.”

The Shadow Blasters soon broke up—high-school bands are as ephemeral as mayflies—and Zimmerman formed another group, the Golden Chords. He and his friends had fun playing Van Feldt’s snack bar and Collier’s barbecue joint, covering songs by Elvis, Jimmy Reed, and, always, Little Richard. But it was soon clear, as he put it later, that he’d been born in the wrong place. He was a middle-class Jewish kid far from everything he was tuned in to. He would need to leave town, change his name, and deepen his musical education to fulfill his outsized sense of destiny.

First in Dinkytown, the collegiate section of Minneapolis, then in Greenwich Village, Zimmerman, adopting the name Bob Dylan, shifted his attention away from rock and roll. He immersed himself in the vast lexicon of folk music and the blues: Woody Guthrie, Robert Johnson, and the Dixie Hummingbirds; Odetta, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and the Staple Singers; the Stanley Brothers, the Delmore Brothers, and the Five Blind Boys of

Alabama. Sometimes music further afield, such as “Pirate Jenny,” from “The Threepenny Opera,” caught his attention and fed his musical vocabulary. His hunger for the music was boundless, even larcenous. Ask the friends whose records he stole. Playing guitar now more than piano, he memorized the chord progressions, picking patterns, and lyrics for hundreds of songs: hillbilly songs, cowboy songs, traditional English and Scottish ballads, sea chanteys, church hymns, ragtime, barrelhouse, every variation of the blues. He was reading, too—Kerouac’s “Mexico City Blues,” Ginsberg’s “Howl,” Homer, Keats, Shelley, Blake, Rimbaud. The Hit Parade could wait. “The thing about rock and roll is that for me anyway it wasn’t enough,” he said later. “‘Tutti Frutti’ and ‘Blue Suede Shoes’ were great catchphrases and driving pulse rhythms . . . but they weren’t serious or didn’t reflect life in a realistic way. I knew that when I got into folk music, it was more of a serious type of thing. The songs are filled with more despair, more sadness, more triumph, more faith in the supernatural, much deeper feelings.”

In the Village, Dylan apprenticed himself to older coffeehouse denizens like Dave Van Ronk and Ramblin’ Jack Elliott (both born in the Dust Bowl province of Brooklyn). He studied Alan Lomax’s field recordings and Harry Smith’s “Anthology of American Folk Music.” He played on any stage that would have him and quickly developed a persona that was a melding of Okie troubadour, Beat poet, and Charlie Chaplin. “For three or four years, all I listened to were folk standards,” Dylan has said. “I went to sleep singing folk songs. I sang them everywhere: clubs, parties, bars, coffeehouses, fields, festivals. And I met other singers along the way who did the same thing and we just learned songs from each other. I could learn one song and sing it next in an hour if I’d heard it just once.”

For all his earnest apprenticeship, not to mention the brazen theft of this one’s version of “House of the Rising Sun” or that one’s field-hand intonation, he was becoming something distinctly original. Like Walt Whitman, Annie Oakley, Gorgeous George, or Little Richard, he was doing that very American thing: inventing a public, performing self. And he was getting noticed. In September, 1961, Robert Shelton, of the *Times*, wrote a brief review of Dylan’s run at Gerde’s Folk City: “There is no doubt that he is bursting at the seams with talent.”

Dylan was twenty years old. Not long after his nights at Gerde's, he signed a contract with John Hammond, an unerring talent spotter at Columbia Records, and began work on his first album. It came out in March, 1962, and consisted mostly of covers. A significant exception was "Song to Woody," which was both an homage to Dylan's dying idol and the announcement of his intention to carry the music into the future:

Hey, hey Woody Guthrie I wrote you a song,
'Bout a funny ol' world that's a-comin' along,
Seems sick and it's hungry, it's tired and it's torn,
It looks like it's a-dyin' and it's hardly been born.

What happened next represents one of the great explosions of creativity in the twentieth century. Dylan wrote song after song in a kind of fever dream that lasted until 1966. "The best songs to me—my best songs—are songs which were written very quickly," he said. "Just about as much time as it takes to write it down is about as long as it takes to write it." He claimed it took him ten minutes to write "Blowin' in the Wind," a political anthem that borrowed from the tune of a spiritual called "No More Auction Block for Me." He merged the form of a seventeenth-century ballad, "Lord Randall," with the ominous weather of Cold War confrontation to write "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall."

Sometimes typing furiously, sometimes scrawling lyrics on envelopes and cocktail napkins, he seemed to be an antenna of the Zeitgeist. He was capable of writing three songs in one day. There was no accounting for the originality of the songs or the speed with which they kept coming: "Mr. Tambourine Man," "The Times They Are A-Changin'," "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," "To Ramona," "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)," "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right," "Highway 61 Revisited," "Subterranean Homesick Blues," "Desolation Row," "Like a Rolling Stone," "Just Like a Woman," "Visions of Johanna." There were narratives, comedies, epics, and romances, some earthbound, some surreal, and they arrived with an expanding sense of ambition. In no time at all, he had progressed from "Talkin' Hava Negeilah Blues" to "Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands."

Many fans had a hard time keeping up; some didn't want to. Folk purists, especially, resented his unwillingness to stay within bounds. During a tour of the United Kingdom, in the spring of 1966, he was applauded for his opening acoustic set but then booed—every night!—when he came out with an electric guitar and members of the Hawks (later, the Band).

One night, in Liverpool, a spectator shouted, “Where's the poet in you? Where's the savior?”

Dylan was having none of it. “There's a fellow up there looking for the savior, huh?” he replied. “The savior's backstage, we have a picture of him.”

But defiance was not enough. Dylan was struggling. Drugged up, worn down, razor thin, he was on the edge of a breakdown. In London, after the last show on the tour, John, Paul, George, and Ringo dropped by his hotel room. Dylan was too depleted to see them.

He was particularly weary of being a symbol, “the voice of his generation.” All his attempts to deflect, to joke his way through press conferences, to mock the requests for sage advice (“Keep a good head and always carry a light bulb”), his determination to lie to journalists and would-be biographers, telling them he'd been a runaway street hustler, not a bar-mitzvah boy, only heightened the mystique. And that mystique came to be untenable. Dylan had wanted to succeed Woody. He could accept being Elvis. But he sure as hell knew he couldn't survive being a prophet.

“Whatever the counterculture was, I'd seen enough of it,” he later wrote. “I was sick of the way my lyrics had been extrapolated, their meanings subverted into polemics and that I had been anointed the Big Bubba of Rebellion, High Priest of Protest, the Czar of Dissent, the Duke of Disobedience, Leader of the Freeloaders, Kaiser of Apostasy, Archbishop of Anarchy, the Big Cheese.”

In the summer of 1966, Dylan retreated to a house in Woodstock, New York, with his wife, Sara Lownds, and their children. One afternoon, he went out for a ride on his motorcycle, lost control, fell, and broke several vertebrae. He took the accident as a sign that he should prolong his retreat.

“Truth was that I wanted to get out of the rat race,” he wrote. “Having children changed my life and segregated me from just about everybody and everything that was going on.” The foremost symbol of the sixties, the High Priest of Protest, more or less sat out the rest of the decade, making very few public appearances. He even skipped the biggest hullabaloo of all, the Woodstock festival, which took place just an hour and a half up the road from him. Dylan did not tour again for eight years.

More than half a century has passed. Dylan is eighty-one, still writing, recording, and performing on what’s long been known as the Never-Ending Tour. He is an object of study. A Dylan museum in Tulsa is now open to scholars and visitors. There are countless books about him—books focussed on Hibbing or the Village or his influences, on particular albums, phases, and songs. Christopher Ricks, a distinguished scholar of Victorian and modernist poetry, wrote a treatise that takes Dylan’s prosody as seriously as that of Tennyson or Eliot. Michael Gray has published three editions of his enormous study “Song & Dance Man,” as well as “The Bob Dylan Encyclopedia.” There’s a book called “The Dylanologists,” about the hardy crew of fanatics who make the pilgrimage to the Iron Range, cruise by the singer’s Point Dume compound in Malibu, and vacuum up scraps and ephemera in pursuit of . . . clues.



“The morning light, the perfect framing of your body in the doorway—dear husband, I’m spellbound.”
Cartoon by Julia Suits

If you've got the bug, you've got it bad. Recently, I've read memoirs by Louie Kemp, Dylan's buddy from summer camp, and Suze Rotolo, an artist from a left-wing family, who was Dylan's girlfriend in his Village days and the inspiration for "Tomorrow Is a Long Time," "Boots of Spanish Leather," and other lasting songs. There are many biographies. Two early ones, by Robert Shelton and Anthony Scaduto, are filled with the juicy fruits of access, and Clinton Heylin's "Behind the Shades" is a work of heavy industry. But none of them are quite worthy of the subject on a musical or historical level—there's nothing comparable to, say, Peter Guralnick's two-volume *Elvis Presley* or Maynard Solomon's life of Mozart.

The critical explorations have been ceaseless, from Ellen Willis's 1967 essay in the magazine *Cheetah* on the tension between the public and the private Dylan to Greg Tate's assertion thirty-four years later in the *Village Voice* that Dylan's "impact on a couple generations of visionary black bards has rarely been given its proper." The most interesting writer on Dylan over the years has been the cultural critic Greil Marcus, who has written innumerable essays about the singer and the songs, including a book-length study of "Like a Rolling Stone." No one alive knows the music that fuelled Dylan's imagination better. Marcus just published "Folk Music: A Bob Dylan Biography in Seven Songs." It's another ingenious book of close listening, but, as Marcus would be the first to say, it is not in any standard sense the full life story.

Early on, Dylan seemed to decide that, if he couldn't make sense of his career, he would make sure that no one else could, either. He wasn't about to be both artist and critic. In D. A. Pennebaker's 1967 documentary, "Don't Look Back," Dylan, in his youthful wise-ass mode, is captured in conversation with an earnest middle-aged writer from *Time*, the dominant midcult magazine of the era. "I got nothing to say about these things I write," he informs the interviewer. "I don't write them for any reason. There's no great message. I mean, if, you know, you wanna tell other people that, go ahead and tell them, but I'm not going to have to answer to it."

One reason that Dylan might be suspicious of biographers at this point is that he is suspicious of his own memory—of any attempt, in fact, to recall

the past with accuracy. In Martin Scorsese's recent semi-fictional documentary about the gloriously shambolic Rolling Thunder Revue tour, Dylan starts out gamely answering questions about the events of 1975, until he breaks off and starts laughing at his own "clumsy bullshit":

I'm trying to get to the core of what this Rolling Thunder thing is all about and I don't have a clue! . . . I don't remember a thing about Rolling Thunder! I mean, it happened so long ago, I wasn't even born.

For years, there were rumors that Dylan was planning to tell his story himself. As an editor, I used to check in periodically with David Rosenthal, a former journalist who ran the publishing house Simon & Schuster, and who had a Dylan memoir under contract. In 2004, Rosenthal finally called and said, "I've got a manuscript."

Rosenthal told me that I should also connect with Jeff Rosen, a friendly and musically erudite guy who had been running Dylan's publishing, licensing, and other business concerns since the mid-eighties. I asked Rosen if I could read the manuscript. Maybe he could send it along?

Nothing doing. "I can't let the manuscript out of my office," Rosen said. He gave me an address and said I could come by to read it.

The next morning, I arrived at a commercial building near Gramercy Park. The buzzer at the door was not marked "Dylan Office." Instead, in the manner of a C.I.A. front, it was called something like XYZ Carpets. A rickety elevator took me up to a huge newsroom-like space crammed with albums, tapes, disks, posters, T-shirts, jackets, books, endless Dylan stuff. I'd been listening to Dylan since stumbling on a compilation album called "The Best of '66" as a kid. "I Want You," from the "Blonde on Blonde" album, came just after John Davidson's "You Don't Have to Say You Love Me." I didn't understand a word of "I Want You"—not on the level of language or desire—but that voice! I was hooked. For a long time, everything I cared about, every book or song, somehow came out of this obsession. So, if you had told me when I was fifteen that I could take up residence at the Dylan office and never leave, I wouldn't have hesitated.

Rosen, tall and lean, led me to a small room where shelves were lined with Dylan books: biographies, songbooks, criticism, encyclopedias. There was a chair and a table, bare except for a stack of manuscript pages. “Take your time,” Rosen said, and left me alone with “Chronicles: Volume One.”

Like all good Dylan fanatics, I’d read his 1971 book “Tarantula,” a bewildering prose piece influenced by his reading of Rimbaud, Comte de Lautréamont, and the Beats. It had some of the same larkish spirit as John Lennon’s “In His Own Write,” but I haven’t been tempted to read it again. The anxiety among Dylanologists was that “Chronicles” would be “Tarantula Redux.” It wasn’t. As I read the opening chapter, about Dylan’s arrival in New York, I saw that this was the real thing—echt Bob, and yet a relatively straightforward narrative, not a musically inflected version of “A Season in Hell” or “Visions of Cody.” He was writing now in the plainspoken mode of Woody Guthrie’s “Bound for Glory,” telling a story of self-creation. Though flecked with debatable details, it was a credible portrayal of his musical and sentimental education, with recollections of his first winter in the city, of the folk scene in the Village, and of listening to and learning from everyone from the Clancy Brothers to Carolyn Hester to the New Lost City Ramblers. His hunger for American music and his urge to master the tradition reminded me of W. H. Auden’s habit of sitting on a volume of the Oxford English Dictionary, the better to raise his sights and absorb the language whole.

I stayed on my seat, too, reading the manuscript straight through, no breaks. Once I was done, I dropped by Rosen’s office and, trying to keep it casual, said that I was eager to publish an excerpt. After a few more conversations, Rosenthal and Rosen said that they would let *The New Yorker* run five or six thousand words a few weeks before the book’s publication. We all agreed that we’d be in touch sometime before that in order to square things away: fact checking, copy editing, and so on. I was delighted.

Late that summer, Rosenthal called to say that the book would be published soon. Were we ready? We certainly were.

“One last thing, though,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“Bob wants the cover.”

“What do you mean?”

“Bob wants the cover. Of the magazine.”

“David, you told me that Bob *loves* the magazine. We don’t have celebrities on the cover. We don’t even have *photographs* on the cover!”

Rosenthal paused. Then he said, “Bob wants a cover.”

I got the message.

“So, David, what am I supposed to do?”

“If we don’t get the cover, I think we’re going to take the excerpt to *Newsweek*. ”

That stung. A music magazine I might have understood. But *Newsweek*?

“Seriously? There’s a Presidential election going on”—Bush versus Kerry. “They’re going to put Bob Dylan on the cover four weeks before the election?”

“That’s what they promised.”

I’d been careless. We had only a vague agreement. And so that was that. Dylan appeared on the cover of the October 4, 2004, issue of *Newsweek*. By then he was in his mid-sixties and looked like Vincent Price wearing Hank Williams’s clothes: pencil mustache, white Stetson, and cowboy suit. I had other unkind thoughts. But what was the point?

More than a year later, I got a call from Jeff Rosen. “Bob’s got a new album,” he said. “We wondered if you want to hear it.”

There was no use in relitigating the past. And, yes, I wanted to hear it.

“Sure,” I said. “Can you send over a disk?”

“Can’t do that. Come hear it at the studio.”

I went over to a recording studio on the West Side. Someone put me in a room with an armchair between two speakers. I sat there alone and waited in silence for a few minutes, and then the album, “Modern Times,” came roaring out. What struck me then, and still does, is that Dylan seemed to realize that he would never again recover what he once called the “thin, wild mercury sound” of the mid-sixties. In his maturity, he continued to write lyrics of immense imagination, but the music, the song forms, were no longer breakthroughs. He wasn’t inventing contemporary music; he was revisiting the past, making it his own, showing his love. And so, on “Modern Times,” there’s “Thunder on the Mountain,” which plays with a Memphis Minnie tune called “Ma Rainey”; there’s “Rollin’ and Tumblin’,” which is a Hambone Willie Newbern tune made famous by Muddy Waters; there’s “Ain’t Talkin’,” which takes bits and pieces from an Irish folk song and a Stanley Brothers tune. The album is filled with tributes, quotations, and inspired reinterpretations of moments in Jimmy Kennedy, Bing Crosby, June Christy, and even James Lord Pierpont, who, in 1857, wrote “The One-Horse Open Sleigh,” better known as “Jingle Bells.” Dylan detectives soon discovered that he had adapted some lines from Henry Timrod, a nineteenth-century South Carolinian whom Tennyson supposedly referred to as “the poet laureate of the South.”

That’s the way creativity works, Dylan told Robert Hilburn, of the *Los Angeles Times*. You’re always writing into a tradition. “My songs are either based on old Protestant hymns or Carter Family songs or variations of the blues form,” he said. “What happens is, I’ll take a song I know and simply start playing it in my head. That’s the way I meditate. . . . I’ll be playing Bob Nolan’s ‘Tumbling Tumbleweeds,’ for instance, in my head constantly —while I’m driving a car or talking to a person or sitting around or whatever. People will think they are talking to me and I’m talking back, but I’m not. I’m listening to a song in my head. At a certain point, some of the words will change and I’ll start writing a song.”

The parts that readers enjoy most in “Chronicles”—the bits that I’d hoped to run in the magazine—are about his becoming Bob Dylan, the Village years. What’s curious is that, in a moment of pure Bob-ness, he then skips

over most of his early fame. In a sixteen-month period, between March, 1965, and June, 1966, he put out three of the greatest albums of the era: “Bringing It All Back Home,” “Highway 61 Revisited,” and “Blonde on Blonde.” We never hear about that period, much less his reëmergence from Woodstock, the collapse of his marriage, and the making of a masterpiece, “Blood on the Tracks,” in 1974. Instead, “Chronicles” goes deep into precisely that period which most fans would just as soon forget, the low point of Dylan’s creativity—the mid- and late-nineteen-eighties, when he was ready to give it all up.

“I felt done for, an empty burned-out wreck,” Dylan writes. “Too much static in my head and I couldn’t dump the stuff. Wherever I am, I’m a ’60s troubadour, a folk-rock relic, a wordsmith from bygone days, a fictitious head of state from a place nobody knows. I’m in the bottomless pit of cultural oblivion. You name it. I can’t shake it.”

Dylan toured with Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers in 1986 and with the Grateful Dead in 1987, and though the concerts raked in plenty of money and he had a great sense of kinship with both bands, he felt distanced from his own work and struggled to write anything of consequence: “It wasn’t my moment of history anymore. There was a hollow singing in my heart and I couldn’t wait to retire and fold the tent. . . . The glow was gone and the match had burned right to the end. I was going through the motions.”

Even in this relatively fallow period, Dylan wrote songs that were among his finest: “I and I,” “Dark Eyes,” “Ring Them Bells,” “Man in the Long Black Coat.” A song like “Blind Willie McTell,” in particular, hinted at what was to come, with Dylan’s gaze peering into the deep musical past. But his most ardent fans would have to admit that the albums of that period were spotty and the concerts, too often, were lacklustre. On any given night, his attention might wander; the performances could be rote. Some point to “Wiggle Wiggle,” on the 1990 album “Under the Red Sky,” as an artistic nadir, though that wasn’t a parlor game Dylan was prepared to tolerate. “You know, no matter what anyone says, I have written my share,” he said. “If I never write another song, no one will ever fault me.” And, of course, he was right.

In the early fifties, Randall Jarrell published a review of “The Auroras of Autumn,” Wallace Stevens’s last collection of poems. Jarrell finds the late work to be inferior to what Stevens had collected in “Harmonium,” which had appeared almost three decades earlier. But Jarrell doesn’t chastise the poet for the decline; he asks that we see it as natural. “How necessary it is to think of the poet as somebody who has prepared himself to be visited by a *dæmon*,” Jarrell wrote, “as a sort of accident-prone worker to whom poems happen—for otherwise we *expect* him to go on writing good poems, better poems, and this is the one thing you cannot expect even of good poets, much less of anybody else.” Stevens followed the familiar pattern of self-imitation, Jarrell writes in his review, and yet the emphasis falls not on the failures of the late career but on the miracle that a phenomenon like Stevens happens at all: “A good poet is someone who manages, in a lifetime of standing out in thunderstorms, to be struck by lightning five or six times; a dozen or two dozen times and he is great.”



“The smarter we make the A.I., the less it wants to do our jobs.”
Cartoon by Paul Noth

The point is that, if Dylan had died of his injuries in Woodstock, he still would have left behind the richest catalogue of American songs of his era. At twenty-five, he could have declared himself retired, younger in age than Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and Otis Redding were when they died. Yet what makes Dylan so extraordinary is that the end of his early incandescence

didn't mark a sustained falling off. Since that brush with self-extinction and death-by-motorcycle, he has made more than thirty albums—all of them interesting, and many of them containing songs that rank among his best. It's the pace that's different.

"There was a time when the songs would come three or four at the same time, but those days are long gone," he told Hilburn. "Once in a while, the odd song will come to me like a bulldog at the garden gate and demand to be written. But most of them are rejected out of my mind right away. You get caught up in wondering if anyone really needs to hear it. Maybe a person gets to the point where they have written enough songs. Let someone else write them."

The first time I saw Dylan was in 1974, when he made his comeback with the Band. They toured behind a good album—"Planet Waves"—and then he went out and recorded one of his greatest, "Blood on the Tracks." At concerts ever since, the casual fans—the ones who have Dylan pegged as an "icon," a figure of the past—come to the hall hoping that he will sing "Like a Rolling Stone" or "Tangled Up in Blue" just the way they remember it from the records. Precisely because Dylan has continued to develop as an artist, they are invariably disappointed. The tempos have changed. Dylan's voice has changed. Even the lyrics differ from night to night. You never know what you're going to get. (In 1980, during his "born-again" phase, audiences got to hear Dylan, ordinarily as reticent as the Sphinx onstage, deliver apocalyptic sermons between gospel songs about the battle between the Antichrist and the Lord Jesus Christ.) Those casual fans wonder why he can't be more like the Stones, unfailing jukeboxes of their earlier selves. They want to squint and see the young Dylan, with his Pre-Raphaelite hair and his Brando sneer. They want, at least for an hour and a half, a magic act: a man in his eighties who is a man in his youth.

There are some older performers who are able to pull off a worthy form of compromise with their audiences. Bruce Springsteen knows well that, at least on some level, his fans want him circa 1978, a performer determined to drive himself to the point of abandon, a Jersey guy singing about freeing himself from the grip of the nuns and family misery, finding love, and taking it on the road. The bargain, for Springsteen, his magic act, is that

he'll stay in shape, he'll move like a younger man and he will sing you those hits, but he'll also salt the performance with newer songs, about parenthood, aging, mortality—the work that interests him now. Everyone goes home happy.

Dylan is scarcely resistant to his role as an entertainer. When he last performed in the city, a year ago, he played a smattering of old favorites—"Watching the River Flow," "When I Paint My Masterpiece," "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight"—and he occasionally seemed to be having a good time. He'd grab the mike like an old-style crooner, cock a hip like Elvis, and even pause to make a joke worthy of Henny Youngman. But otherwise it was serious business. The concert was called for eight o'clock, and that's when he took the stage. If you were five minutes late, it was like being at the opera; the ushers held you back from your seat until there was a break in the action. And he did what he came to do: he played nearly every song on his most recent album, the distinctly elegiac "Rough and Rowdy Ways." For a long time now, Dylan has played piano rather than guitar, and, like a lot of performers these days, he doesn't depend on memory for the lyrics. Most have teleprompters. Dylan leans over and sings off lyric sheets. You can hardly blame him. He's older than Joe Biden, and the songs are often long. In the Whitmanesque "I Contain Multitudes," Dylan sings about the multiplicity of selves in him, in anyone, and provides a litany of the voices, from Anne Frank to William Blake, from Poe to the Stones, that have haunted his imagination:

You greedy old wolf, I'll show you my heart
But not all of it, only the hateful part,
I'll sell you down the river, I'll put a price on your head,
What more can I tell you? I sleep with life and death in the same bed.

Dylan is hardly immune to the pink Cadillac. In fact, he's done ads for Cadillac—along with Chrysler, I.B.M., and Victoria's Secret. He's got a line of bourbon and rye whiskeys on the market called Heaven's Door, which he went on the "Tonight Show" to promote. Not long ago he sold off his catalogue for hundreds of millions of dollars, and now he's in the N.F.T. business. But filthy lucre has not slowed him down. He doesn't stand in the same place for very long. Eighty-one and still at it. Why? Or, better, how?

Which leads us to my Unified Field Theory of Bob Dylan. The theory isn't especially complicated or even novel. Greil Marcus has been pressing the case for years, and Dylan himself, always typed as "enigmatic" and "elusive," has been trying to make these matters clear to us all along. In order to stave off creative exhaustion and intimations of mortality, Dylan has, over and over again, returned to what fed him in the first place—the vast tradition of American song. Anytime he has been in trouble, he could rely on that bottomless source. When he was in Woodstock, recuperating and hiding from the world, he got together with the Band, in the basement of a house known as Big Pink, and played folk songs: folk songs they remembered, and folk songs they made up. That was "The Basement Tapes." When he was struggling again, twenty-five years later, he recorded two albums of folk and blues standards—"Good as I Been to You" and "World Gone Wrong"—and four years after that he emerged, reenergized and backed by extraordinary musicians, to issue a string of highly original albums, "Time Out of Mind," "Modern Times," and "Together Through Life." Many of the songs were about mortality, just as they were on the album he recorded when he was twenty and singing "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean." But now they were felt on a deeper level. Shortly before "Time Out of Mind" was released, in 1997, Dylan heard a pounding on Heaven's door—a heart ailment, pericarditis, which forced him to cancel a European tour and consider, once more, the end. "I really thought I'd be seeing Elvis soon," he said.

Dylan kept moving, even having fun. In 2009, he put out "Christmas in the Heart." If you were stuck thinking of Dylan as a pure ironist, you were wrong; he sang Gene Autry's "Here Comes Santa Claus"—and made it his own—because he loved it. The record was all in the line of tradition: the Christmas albums of Ella Fitzgerald, Nat King Cole, Bing Crosby, and Elvis Presley. The same goes for what are known as his Sinatra albums—"Shadows in the Night," "Fallen Angels," and "Triplicate"—which featured Dylan paying tribute to the so-called American songbook. This shouldn't have been a surprise, either. Dylan loves Frank Sinatra, and the feeling was mutual. In 1995, at Sinatra's request, Dylan played his sunless yet defiant song "Restless Farewell" for the old man at a tribute concert. It's not hard to tell why the last verse would appeal to the guy who often closed his concerts with "My Way":

Oh, a false clock tries to tick out my time,
To disgrace, distract, and bother me,
And the dirt of gossip blows into my face,
And the dust of rumors covers me.
But if the arrow is straight
And the point is slick,
It can pierce through dust no matter how thick.
So I'll make my stand
And remain as I am
And bid farewell and not give a damn.

Those Sinatra standards replenished him and fed his imagination. They helped bring him to the songs on “Rough and Rowdy Ways.” They allowed him to keep forcing himself forward. Long past the pressure to be a voice of anything or anyone, he has released albums that, though deeply self-expressive, speak to and expand what Leonard Cohen called “the Tower of Song.”

Dylan has replenished himself in other ways as well. From 2006 to 2009, he hosted “Theme Time Radio Hour,” a weekly program on satellite radio. With the help of a like-minded music nut, Eddie Gorodetsky, Dylan, aping the mannerisms, puns, and bromides of the d.j.s of his youth, proposed a theme for each program—blood, say, or money or mothers or flowers—and he’d intersperse songs with his Bobbed-out patter. The programs were hilarious, full of campy nostalgia. Most important, you got to hear the often forgotten music that helped form him in some way, like Buck Owens singing “I’ll Go to Church Again with Momma,” and “Kissing in the Dark,” by Memphis Minnie. And, just to let you know the old guy was keeping up and had a broad sense of an expanding tradition, he threw in tracks from Prince and LL Cool J.

And now there’s another exercise in engaging the tradition. Rather than follow the first volume of “Chronicles” with, you know, a second volume, Dylan has published a kind of extension of the radio show: a rich, riffy, funny, and completely engaging book of essays, “The Philosophy of Modern Song.” The cover photograph features Little Richard, Alis Lesley, and Eddie Cochran, and it’s immediately apparent what you’re in for: Dylan

wandering through the enormous record bin of his mind. What he tries to get across is the *feel* of these songs, their atmosphere and internal life. It's at the end of his essay on Dion and the Belmonts' version of Rodgers and Hart's "Where or When" that Dylan makes everything clear:

When Dion's voice bursts through for a solo moment in the bridge, it captures that moment of shimmering persistence of memory in a way the printed word can only hint at.

But so it is with music, it is of a time but also timeless; a thing with which to make memories and the memory itself. Though we seldom consider it, music is built in time as surely as a sculptor or welder works in physical space. Music transcends time by living within it, just as reincarnation allows us to transcend life by living it again and again.

When Dylan won the Nobel Prize in Literature, in 2016, he got a lot of stick. The man wrote *songs!* But did he deserve the accolade? Leonard Cohen, one of his most literary contemporaries, had it right. Awarding Dylan the Nobel, he said, "is like pinning a medal on Mt. Everest for being the highest mountain."

What makes Dylan's career all the more remarkable is the way it has evolved, with peaks, declivities, crags—all in service to the music he began to revere in Hibbing. In his own way, he is reminiscent of Verdi, Monet, Yeats, O'Keeffe: a freak of creative longevity. Nicholas Delbanco writes about this phenomenon in "Lastingness: The Art of Old Age"; Delbanco's teacher John Updike wrote about it in his essay "Late Works," and exemplified it in the poems he wrote while dying of cancer in hospice care.

"I think that Bob Dylan knows this more than all of us—you don't write the songs anyhow," Cohen said in his last meeting with reporters. "Your own intentions have very little to do with this. You can keep the body as well-oiled and receptive as possible, but whether you're actually going to be able to go for the long haul is really not your own choice."

Genius doesn't owe explanations of itself. But perhaps the nearest Dylan came to explaining both his gift and its durability was in 2015, accepting an

award from the charity MusiCares. Reading from a sheaf of papers in his hands, Dylan exploded the myth of *sui-generis* brilliance.

“These songs didn’t come out of thin air,” he said. “I didn’t just make them up out of whole cloth. . . . It all came out of traditional music: traditional folk music, traditional rock and roll, and traditional big-band swing orchestra music. . . . If you sang ‘John Henry’ as many times as me—‘John Henry was a steel-driving man / Died with a hammer in his hand / John Henry said a man ain’t nothin’ but a man / Before I let that steam drill drive me down / I’ll die with that hammer in my hand.’ If you had sung that song as many times as I did, you’d have written ‘How many roads must a man walk down?’ too.

“All these songs are connected,” he went on. “I just opened up a different door in a different kind of way. . . . I thought I was just extending the line.” ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

Poems

- “[Six Notes](#)”
- “[To Noah, from Wife, Some Years After](#)”

By [David Baker](#)

Audio: Read by the author.

Come down to us. Come down with your song,
little wren. The world is in pieces.

We must not say so. In the dark hours,
in the nearest branches, I hear you thrum—

....

The deer come to die beside the creek.
Mud the color of walnut stain. Reek and
runoff from the new development, there,
beyond the woods. Rib and skull. No jawbone—

....

It makes a soundless scream. I hope for peace
when I walk here sometimes in the dark.

If not peace, clarity. If not clarity,
at least a place to breathe. Else I'll scream, too—

....

Come down, little dove, far above the bay.
I hear you in a thirsty palm or up
beyond the rocks. A windy reed of song.
Blue sun, blue cloud above the sweeping bay—

....

Sometimes we have to say so. I don't know how.
A man, a boy, an anger with no tongue

took his automatic rifle to school today.
The report we hear, discharge, echo—

....

is the sound of sorrow, reloading.
No matter where we walk, we hear it call.

Little wing, little creek, little bay, dark hour.
Come down with your beaks of morning and blood—

By Joshua Rothman

By Corey Robin

By Stephanía Taladrí

By Patricia Marx

By [Jean Gallagher](#)

Audio: Read by the author.

Brought back that glass box of ocean,
the glass a kind of ocean, too, but slower.
The green world was strange, nothing holy,
lots of space. When I looked too fast
at things, they looked like ocean still, *my*
eyesight a splash of salt water
I didn't actually own. The last
thing the boat/god said was *study*
the moment when water sees water. We
are married as the ocean is to its
glass self, is, is not, is.

By Françoise Mouly

By Hilary Fitzgerald Campbell

By Maya Phillips

By James Somers

Pop Music

- Will Sheff's Lament for a Starry-Eyed Rock-and-Roll Dream

Will Sheff's Lament for a Starry-Eyed Rock-and-Roll Dream

On “Nothing Special,” the artist, now forty-six, surveys the ecstasies and the devastations of getting older and giving up on some things.

By [Amanda Petrusich](#)



In the late nineteen-nineties, the singer and songwriter Will Sheff founded Okkervil River, a bony, urgent indie-rock band—later a kind of collective—named for a short story by the Russian writer Tatyana Tolstaya. Sheff and his bandmates had gone to boarding school at Kimball Union Academy, in New Hampshire; after graduation, they had relocated to Austin, where similar acts such as Spoon, . . . And You Will Know Us by the Trail of Dead, and Explosions in the Sky were becoming fixtures on college radio and MP3 blogs. Okkervil River released its début LP, “Don’t Fall in Love with Everyone You See,” in 2002. This was a fertile time for downbeat, brainy, vaguely dissonant folk rock, but Sheff’s elegant lyrics and expansive musical vision made Okkervil River feel unique. Other members drifted in and out. Between 2002 and 2018, the band released nine albums. One, “Black Sheep Boy,” from 2005, is a concept record of sorts, based on a

song of the same name by the American folksinger Tim Hardin, who died of a heroin overdose in 1980; another, “The Stage Names,” from 2007, functions as a winking cultural almanac, with references to Marcel Duchamp, Joni Mitchell, the book “Hollywood Babylon,” Greenpoint, John Berryman, “99 Luftballons,” and the grim reality-television show “Breaking Bonaduce,” which had featured one of Sheff’s songs.

Sheff is now forty-six. “Nothing Special,” out this month, is his first record under his own name. It’s an aching lament for a starry-eyed rock-and-roll dream that didn’t collapse, exactly, but came to reveal itself as limited. From the cool and steady vantage of middle age, Sheff surveys the ecstasies and the devastations of a youth spent touring the world and playing music with his friends, a life style that grew more financially, physically, and spiritually unsustainable as the years stretched on. “You trash the hotel room, and you’re leaving, and you see the maid going in, and you think, Oh, shit, am I just an embarrassment?” Sheff told me recently. He has nonetheless found compassion for his younger self, who was intellectually hungry and came of age idolizing “dead old white guys who talked about deranging your senses, getting fucked up and being visionary, and wild and crazy.” On “In the Thick of It,” a gentle song, he sings in a wobbly falsetto over piano and guitar:

Smooth-sailing kids,
Not a thought in their heads,
The world in a darling dumb daze,
Gold, gilt, and glitter
And burgundy waves . . .

You give me a dollar,
I’ll do some, or all
Of my perfectly middlebrow blues.
I’m painting my album in ivory hues.

These days, Sheff said, rather than seek to capture the abandon and euphoria preached by writers such as Arthur Rimbaud and Dylan Thomas, he hopes to simply “embroider things with a little bit of beauty.” Accordingly, “Nothing Special” is easy to like. Sheff crafts lilting, catchy melodies that feel effortless and soothing, and he has recruited a crackerjack

band (billed here as the Dirty Shitty Dirt Boys), which adds a gorgeous haze of pump organ, vibraphone, Mellotron, synthesizer, and guitar. The album evokes the feeling of being alone in some otherworldly landscape—the high desert, say—at dusk, with a campfire going, and something good to read.

“Nothing Special” is haunted, in a mostly benevolent way, by Travis Nelsen, who played drums in Okkervil River, and died in April of 2020, at forty-four. (Nelsen’s family has not made the cause of his death public.) Because Nelsen passed away during the early days of the pandemic, his loved ones navigated their grief in isolation. (“He had a ten-minute Zoom funeral,” Sheff said.) On the album’s title track, Sheff sings of seeing Nelsen in his dreams: “You were lost, or I was cowed / But it doesn’t matter now / We’ll discuss it next time I’m asleep.” Sheff and Nelsen’s kinship was rooted in a shared desire for rock-and-roll glory (or maybe oblivion), but, whereas Sheff was cerebral and timid, Nelsen was a “scrappy, broken-home, Midwestern, hardworking, sweat-of-his-brow guy who loved the Replacements, Cheap Trick, and Keith Moon,” Sheff said. At the time of Nelsen’s death, he and Sheff were estranged. “Part of the reason we had fallen out was substance abuse,” Sheff said. “It was a love story, and it was bound up in the mythology of art and being an artist and living the high-seas atmosphere of a rock tour—recklessness and drinking and drugs and derring-do.” He continued, “Travis fought really valiantly and heroically. Some days he won, and some days he lost. The mourning was very complicated, because I also was mourning this stupid dream that we’d had. It was really sweet and naïve and boyish and beautiful and destructive. It also needed to be something that I was not interested in anymore.”

“Nothing Special” can feel anachronistic, insofar as it is not the kind of record that lights up Instagram or TikTok. Its songs are unhurried, searching, and airy. Still, Sheff is conscious of rhythm, and, despite his focus on lyrical clarity and intelligence, “Nothing Special” is not without groove or body. Thematically, the album is focussed on a small and funny nexus: Halfway through a life, how do we pivot and find a new future that’s connected to the past yet also transcends it? In 2017, Sheff was living in New York City with his partner, Beth Wawerna, and feeling disillusioned. “I started to hate it, to be frank,” he said. “I don’t hate it anymore. But by the end I was just seething about New York City every waking hour.” One

day, it occurred to Sheff and Wawerna that they could simply leave. For a couple of months, they lived with Sheff's parents in Massachusetts; then they moved into a two-room cabin in Woodstock, New York, which was owned by A. C. Newman, of the Canadian rock band the New Pornographers. Eventually, Wawerna got a job offer in Los Angeles. Sheff returned from a tour with Okkervil River, and, he said, "I put all my remaining possessions in my car, and I drove across the country to Southern California. There's this Bill Callahan line I think about a lot where he says, 'With every mile, another piece of me peels off and whips down the road.' "

He arrived feeling unburdened and, in some ways, reborn. Sheff and Wawerna adopted a beagle mix named Larry, who had been found wandering the streets of Van Nuys and who suffers from epileptic seizures. (Larry, a good boy, is credited on "Nothing Special" for providing "Dog.") Sheff started taking walks around the neighborhood and stopped keeping a journal. He found the warmth and openness of California a compelling counterpoint to the heaviness of New England, but he was also stirred by the fragility of the landscape—the mudslides, the wildfires, the earthquakes, the floods. "It feels like death and danger are just waiting to strike in plain sight, instead of furtively and slowly in the dark," he said. "Nothing Special" is suffused with climate anxiety. "I wake up angry on an Earth still burning / The horizon hazy where the leaves stopped turning," Sheff sings on "The Spiral Season."

Mostly, "Nothing Special" is the result of Sheff trying very hard not to try at all—to relinquish, as we all should, the fantasy of his own exceptionalism. Sheff is most moved, he said, by art that feels instinctive and unfussy, driven by some "ineffable numinous thing that you can't explain and is so easy to destroy." This quality is often present in what now gets called "cosmic American music" (Gene Clark, Gram Parsons, Devendra Banhart), but Sheff also encountered it in semi-obscure German jazz releases and, he said, in experiences as pure as "looking at a mountain." Many of the songs on "Nothing Special" are about learning how to forgive ourselves for not being extraordinary—for not loving perfectly, or living perfectly, or ending up where we thought we would. On "Marathon Girl," Sheff sings of peaceful acquiescence, over nylon-string guitar: "Thanks for the sweet and bitter fruit / For crooked rain and morning

dew / For whatever the hell's ahead of me." It's O.K., the song seems to suggest, there is still life left. ♦

By Carrie Battan

By Hannah Goldfield

By Zach Helfand

By Michael Schulman

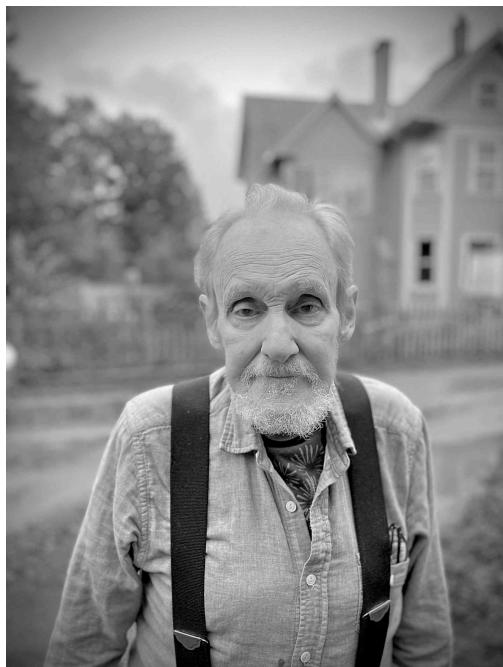
Postscript

- [Remembering Peter Schjeldahl, a Consummate Critic](#)

Remembering Peter Schjeldahl, a Consummate Critic

A voice is what he always had: distinct, clear, funny. A poet's voice—epigrammatic, nothing wasted.

By [David Remnick](#)



Sometimes a writer, an artist, a human being is so defiant of mortality that you begin to take him at his word. Just a few weeks ago, Peter Schjeldahl, who has been *The New Yorker's* art critic for a generation, handed in a [review](#) of a newly translated [biography](#), by Hans Janssen, of the Dutch modernist Piet Mondrian. To Peter's mind, Mondrian and Picasso were the “twin groundbreakers of twentieth-century European pictorial art: Picasso the greatest painter who modernized picture-making, and Mondrian the greatest modernizer who painted.” In this longish essay (longish for Peter, more a sprinter than a miler), he is at his very best—his most incisive, insistent, and personal:

Critical attention to him may rise and fall. For anyone undertaking to pay it, though, there can be no ups or downs in Mondrian's

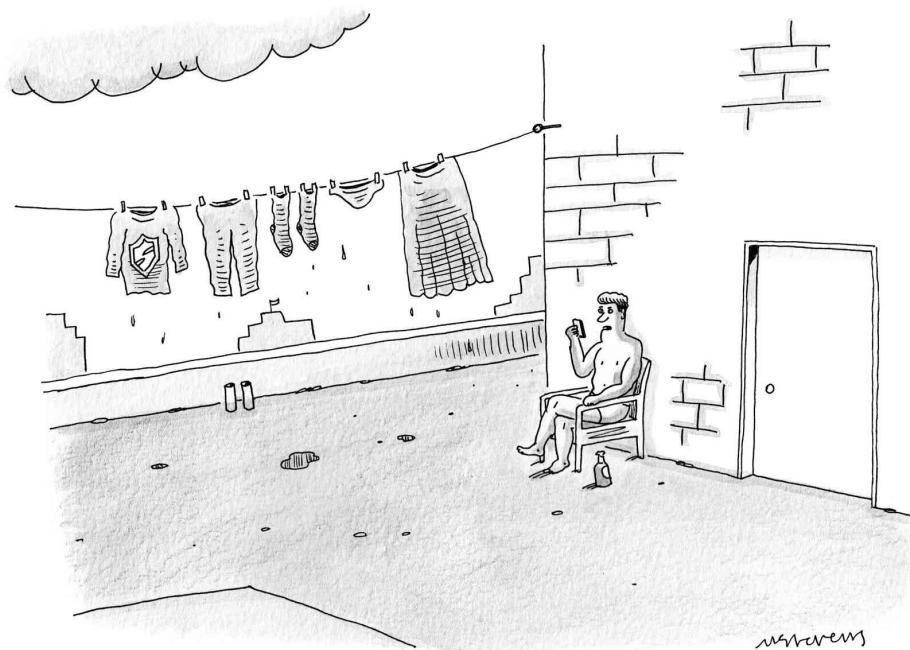
importance, relative to other artists past, present, and to come. There is only a steady state of inexhaustible meaning, beggaring comparison and defying definition. Even the critically consummate Janssen, with his magnum opus of a biography, can merely dance around, and not penetrate, the adamantine conundrum of the Dutch magus's dead stops in lived time.

As we were going to press this Friday, word came that Peter had died. It's hard to imagine what he must have summoned to write like that in his last weeks. In 2019, Peter learned that he had advanced lung cancer. He had started smoking when he was sixteen. When I asked if he was going to give up the habit at last, he said, "I've smoked a million cigarettes, and I've enjoyed every one." The wisecrack became part of a routine, a performance of insouciant defiance, and then part of an entirely serious philosophy. "I know about ending a dependency," he wrote in his essay "[77 Sunset Me](#)," published not long after he received the diagnosis. "I'm an alcoholic twenty-seven years sober. Drink was destroying my life. Tobacco only shortens it, with the best parts over anyway."

Even if you were prepared to argue the logic of this, you weren't going to get anywhere. Peter was a man of well-developed opinions, on art and much else. He was someone who, after being lost for a time, knew some things about survival. We met more than twenty years ago. I was looking to hire a full-time art critic. I'd read him for years in the *Village Voice*. And a voice is what he always had: distinct, clear, funny. A poet's voice—epigrammatic, nothing wasted. We got together at the office on a Saturday in late summer. Someone had shut off the building's air-conditioning. Peter was pale, rivulets of sweat running down his face. I asked about an empty interval of time on his résumé. "Well, I was a falling-down drunk back then. Then I fixed that." He was harder on himself than he would be on any artist.

Don't misunderstand: in the many years of his writing for *The New Yorker*, Peter was perfectly willing to give a bad show a bad review, and there were some artists he was just never going to love—[Turner](#) and [Bacon](#) among them—but he was openhearted, he knew how to praise critically, and, to the end, he was receptive to new things, new artists. His list of favorites was vast: [Velázquez](#), [Goya](#), [Rembrandt](#), [Cindy Sherman](#), [David Hammons](#),

[Martin Puryear](#), [Rachel Harrison](#), [Laura Owens](#). He took his work seriously—despite the cascades of self-deprecation, there were times when I think he knew how good he was—but he was never self-serious. He once won a grant to write a memoir. He used the money to buy a tractor.



"Well, it will just have to wait."
Cartoon by Mick Stevens

Peter grew up in a small, cold town in Minnesota. His parents had some money. Then they had less. Like countless young people, he came first to New Jersey and then to New York, with the hope of living a different life, though he didn't exactly know what sort. He had hard times, but he also had an enormous stroke of luck: he met his wife, Brooke Alderson, at the Whitney Museum. In 1973, they moved into a walkup on St. Marks Place. Their daughter, Ada, would later write a book called "[St. Marks Is Dead](#)," whose dedication read, "To my parents, who looked at the apocalyptic 1970s East Village and thought, 'What a great place to raise a kid.' "

The truth is, there's no point in trying to summarize things in the manner of a breezy obit: if you want to get a real sense of Peter's mind and his story, read "*77 Sunset Me.*" There you'll get Peter cracking wise about his drinking, his adoration of life, the difficulty of writing well. You'll get his mordant recognition of small triumphs after the rotten news from his doctors: "Swatted a fly the other day and thought, *Outlived you.*"

In the nineteen-eighties, Peter and Brooke bought a place three hours north of the city, in a town called Bovina. They soon became known for their Fourth of July parties, at which Peter blew up ungodly quantities of fireworks, in a display that resembled a blend of patriotic celebration and martial apocalypse. Hundreds came, invited and otherwise: writers, painters, actors; famous people, townspeople. It was an immense, incendiary potluck picnic, with hundreds of pies and hot dogs and opportunities for disaster. The last such event was in 2015, when, thanks to the snare of social media, some two thousand people showed up. Peter was no lawbreaker. “We were strictly legal, until the end,” he told Ginia Bellafante, a reporter for the *Times*. “The cops and firemen brought their families. This is libertarian country.”

When Peter got the news of his cancer—a cancer that he and his doctors kept at bay for longer than anyone imagined possible—Ada asked him if he wanted to revisit Rome or Paris. “Nah,” he said. “Maybe a ballgame.” And Ada arranged it, Peter wrote, “with family and friends: Mets versus Braves, at Citi Field. Glorious. Grandson Oliver caught a T-shirt from the mid-game T-shirt cannon. Odds of that: several thousand to one.” ♦

By The New Yorker

By Anna Russell

By Bruce Handy

By Andrew Dickson

Secret Mission Dept.

- [Among the Undercover Inflation Trackers](#)

Among the Undercover Inflation Trackers

A trip to the store with one of the secretive bureaucrats who fan out across America recording how much the price of milk or doggy day care has risen.

By [Katia Savchuk](#)



A man named Mitchell set out the other day to chronicle just how expensive life in America has become. He walked into a locally owned grocery store in California’s wine country and flashed his business card. “I’m from the Bureau of Labor Statistics,” he murmured to a supervisor.

Mitchell’s tablet directed him to his first stop, Aisle 10. He closed in on his target: a two-pound bag of brown sugar. He ran down a checklist. “Granulated,” he said. “Loose. No organic claim. It’s a national brand. Dark brown pure cane sugar.” He noted a change. “There’s a resealable zipper on the bag, and the bags they sold in the past didn’t have that.” He typed in the price: \$3.49. “In August, the price was \$3.29,” he said.

Intel like Mitchell’s is one of the reasons we know that [inflation](#) hit a four-decade high this summer, and that, in September, prices [were up 8.2 per](#)

cent from what they had been a year earlier. He is one of more than three hundred part-time “economic assistants” who, each month, fan out across the nation’s liquor stores and body shops, dental offices and doggy day cares—around twenty-eight thousand locales in seventy-five urban areas. They note whether an item in a category such as “uncooked beef roasts” has added a few cents to its price tag or shed a few ounces of meat. The Consumer Price Index, which tracks changes in how much urban dwellers pay for a representative “market basket of goods and services,” is largely based on this process.

Secrecy is part of a data collector’s job description, and Mitchell approaches his duty with a fervor befitting less prosaic government agencies. In the field, he declined to share his last name, the name of his late pit bull, the nature of his other work (“I do my own thing”), or his age. (Was he in his fifties? “Probably.”)

He cannot allow anyone to look at his computer. “If I’m in a coffee shop, I can’t have my screen right under a camera,” he said. The businesses he monitors and the brands he tracks are hush-hush. “There are some pretty stiff penalties for sharing,” he said. “And they do include jail time.”

Confidentiality matters because participation in the index is voluntary, and access to the data could give competitors an edge. “We strictly measure inflation,” Mitchell said. He makes his rounds in a Honda, with supplies that include a gallon of water, a bunch of bananas, and sunscreen.

After the sugar expedition, he drove to another strip-mall grocery store in Sonoma County. He had fourteen products (“quotes”) on his list (“schedule”). Taking each item off the shelf, he scrutinized it, insuring that the organic ketchup (still on sale for \$3.48) was indeed a “prepared liquid form,” and that the lemon pepper (up thirty cents, to \$4.49) still contained garlic and onion. Most prices hadn’t changed: French bread was still \$3.99; chocolate sandwich cookies, \$6.29; unflavored gelatine, \$17.49.

The types of goods and services Mitchell tracks are based on the shopping habits that local residents report in the Census Bureau’s Consumer Expenditure Survey. The items change over time. If a product disappears from stores permanently, he hunts for a similar substitute. The trickiest

items to replace are luxury cars and clothing. If he's tracking a blouse, say, stock might change every few months: "The next time you go in, it's got to be a short-sleeved blouse, button down, fabric content a hundred-per-cent cotton, same brand."

Mitchell's favorite trips are to movie theatres. His most stressful visits involve knocking on doors to gather rent figures. "Once every few years, we get someone who's very anti-government," he said.

As banal as his work can be, Mitchell is aware that it drives things ranging from interest rates and tax brackets to government funding for school lunches. The C.P.I. affects the income of nearly eighty million people by helping determine Social Security benefits, military pensions, and food-stamp allowances. Mitchell says he'd never take advantage of a sale on the job, but that now and then he'll drive to Oregon, where it's cheaper to service his car and there is no sales tax. "I'll load up on laundry detergent," he said.

He has a sense of where prices are heading each month, but he remains tight-lipped. "That's like the biggest taboo question," he said. He has a colleague named Sam who has a C.P.I. joke that he likes to tell: "A Bureau of Labor Statistics economist is asked, 'Is the glass half empty or half full?' To which he or she responds, 'It's a sixteen-ounce glass with eight ounces of water.' " ♦

By The New Yorker

By Jessica Winter

By Matthew Stock

By Jill Lepore

Shouts & Murmurs

- [Other Things It Takes a Village to Accomplish](#)

By [Sarah Hutto](#)

It takes a village to raise a child. The child is extremely heavy. She's not large, just dense, like a four-foot-two anvil that likes unicorns. The village must erect a system of pulleys to raise her, and, even then, only inches from the ground. The village raises the child once a year, on the eve of her birthday, and then it puts her down again.

It takes a village to qualify for Village Infrastructure Assistance under bylaw 57:2.1.5. A village constitutes a population of at least a hundred and seventy-five living human bodies within a twenty-two-square-mile area in the town of Nuttsall, Mabrasky. Village Infrastructure Assistance includes, but is not limited to, the building of a simple, sturdy footbridge next to the more charming and older footbridge that is falling down; the maintenance of large trees around which wizards' houses are situated; and toadstool restoration, which is very exacting and more costly than most villagers might think.

It takes a village to move the big rocks to Easter Island. The village must gather in the clearing on the third full moon after the first frost. Only then will the village be visible to the Light People, whose skycraft will appear just below the cluster of stars that resembles a three-legged horse. The Light People endow the villagers with superhuman strength so that they can transport prehistoric rocks across the sea to the island. After they finish, the Light People bestow on the villagers blueprints to eternal peace and time travel. It takes only one villager to drop the blueprints into the sea by accident, but it takes the rest of the village to unanimously decide to offer an annual sacrifice to the Light People from that day forward.

It takes a village to persuade a wandering couple with a broken-down car that they can safely wait for it to be repaired while staying in the only motel in town, which has its own graveyard out back. It also takes a village to neglect to tell the couple that the concierge, maid, and manager of the motel are all the same man wearing different disguises, and that one of the disguises is a dress worn by his late mother, who was mean. It further takes a village to feign confusion when a state trooper comes through town asking if anyone saw the couple leave. This particular village is pretty bad.

It Takes a Village was the name of the least successful day-care center of all time. The business model relied on volunteers to sign up and watch toddlers for very low pay. The same two people kept signing up: Tony, a former grocery-store bagger who was let go for dropping too many watermelons, and Wanda, a chain-smoking adult-party entertainer who could make only one kind of balloon animal, which wasn't an animal at all, even though she kept calling it a "rabbit." The day-care center was closed down within two weeks.

It takes a village to satisfy Oglo the Hungry Giant, who can sustain himself only by consuming an entire village every day. Oglo doesn't eat the village but instead snorts the village, using an unearthed aqueduct. Oglo's doctor says that he must stop snorting villages, as his heart will soon explode. Oglo's not in his twenties anymore, but he doesn't know that, as giants don't age in a predictable way, and, also, Oglo's memory is terrible, on account of his self-medicating with villages that are chock-full of microplastics.

It takes a village to host the Olympics, and to be briefly dubbed the Olympic Village. The plot of land has been there for millennia, but when the Olympics are there the village witnesses more athletic orgies crammed into two weeks than at any other time in its history. It takes the same village centuries to stop finding discarded medals, relics of a short yet complicated time period during which many bones were broken in a multitude of ways. ♦

By John Cassidy

By Jia Tolentino

By Patricia Marx

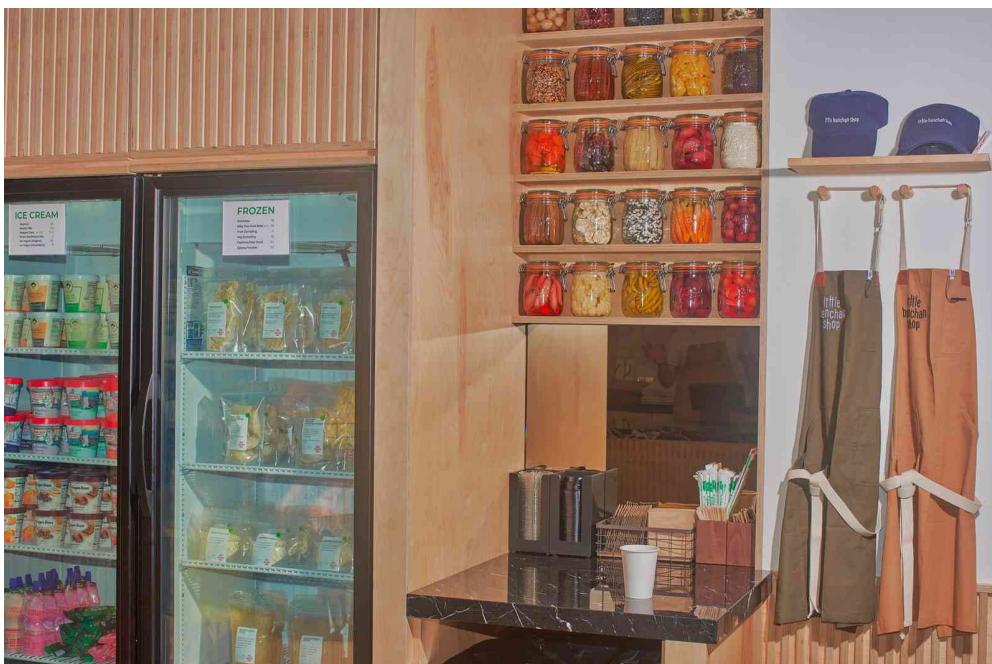
By Patricia Marx

Tables for Two

- [A Korean Utopia to Go, at Little Banchan Shop](#)

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

In my vision of a utopian future, there's a Little Banchan Shop in every neighborhood of New York City. Anyone well acquainted with Korea might tell me that I don't need a utopia, only to move to Seoul, where shops specializing in *banchan*, small, cold side dishes eaten with just about every Korean meal, abound. I just might. In the meantime, I will look for any excuse to head to Long Island City, where the Korean American chef Hooni Kim, known for the Manhattan restaurants Hanjan (now closed) and Danji, moved with his family about a decade ago, and where he opened Little Banchan earlier this year.



In addition to a rotating selection of banchan, the shop offers soups, stews, and sauces, as well as marinated meat and frozen items, including dumplings and breaded pork cutlets.

“One of the reasons I wrote a cookbook”—“My Korea,” published in April, 2020—“was to have people cooking Korean food at home,” Kim told me the other day. “In the U.S., people are used to eating Korean food in restaurants, but it’s not like Chinese or Indian food—people don’t eat it at home as much. I mistakenly thought my cookbook would help.” He laughed. “So the step in between, I figured, was, well, let’s have people eat Korean food at home without having to cook.”



The grab-and-go selection includes two varieties of gimbap, one with bulgogi and one with yubu, vegetables, and egg.

The shoebox-shaped shop feels industrial yet inviting. Cool concrete floors are offset by glowy globe lights, precise displays of prepared foods and pantry items by chatty, generous descriptions. Most of the rotating selection of *banchan* are packaged in sturdy resealable plastic pouches. For *gamja jorim*—“kid favorite,” the label notes—coins of fingerling potatoes are braised with onions and scallions in a rich mix of soy sauce, oyster sauce, and dashi. *Myeolchi bokkeum*, or baby anchovies cured in soy sauce, sesame oil, and sugar, are “great for breakfast, lunch, or dinner.” I concur, especially when you incorporate a pile of them into an artist’s palette of *banchan*, rounded out by a spoonful of *kongjaban*, or chewy, sweet black beans; a tangle of *minari muchim*, al-dente watercress slick with sesame oil and studded with sesame seeds; snips of *musaengchae*, Korean radish fiery with *gochugaru* (Korean chili flakes)—everything eminently mix-and-matchable, a thrilling strategy for stocking your fridge.



The made-to-order menu includes bulgogi over rice (top left); jjampong beef noodle soup with beef broth (center); and fried chicken wings with gochujang soy sauce (right).

Banchan can add up to a meal on their own, so long as they're eaten with rice, Kim explained. (The shop carries sacks of it, sourced from a farm in Korea, or you can buy it already cooked.) There are also soups and stews (seaweed with curls of brisket; soy-braised chicken thighs with carrots and potatoes); raw *galbi*, or marinated short rib, for easy barbecuing; scallion-pancake batter; fresh noodles; and frozen dumplings and breaded pork cutlets. For eating in (there are a few counter seats), there's a grab-and-go selection of *bibimbap*, *gimbap*, and *dosiraks* (set meals), plus a recently launched menu of made-to-order hot dishes, including an excellent bulgogi, over rice, and noodles blanketed in *jjajang*, a thick, ink-dark Korean Chinese black-bean sauce rich with onions and slips of pork belly.

The holy trinity of Korean food is known as the *jangs*: *ganjang*, or soy sauce; *doenjang*, or soybean paste; and *gochujang*, chili paste. Kim makes all of these himself, in Korea, under the tutelage of a longtime mentor, and brings them home when they're done aging; each ferments for at least a year. Focussing on *jangs* has changed his entire philosophy of cooking. "When I opened Danji, I thought flavor was everything, because that's what I learned cooking at Daniel, at Masa," he said. "But what I learned cooking Korean food is that your initial goal is the technique of a correct

fermentation. Every batch is going to taste different. The creation of the flavor was done six, seven years ago. Now I'm just sort of translating it."

A door that's almost concealed in a wall at Little Banchan Shop leads to a beautifully designed private dining room, with an open kitchen and counter seating for eight. Later this fall, Kim will launch a tasting menu called Meju, named for the bricks of dried fermented soybeans that are the building blocks for all *jangs*. The seven-course meal, offered only a few times a week, will highlight Kim's *jangs*. "With that sort of mind-set," he said, "there's no pressure of cooking delicious food because nature has done all the work." (*Banchan and prepared foods \$6.50-\$28.*) ♦

By Nicole Rose Whitaker

By Patricia Marx

By Patricia Marx

By Jia Tolentino

The Art World

- [Two Views of New York, from Edward Hopper and a Historic Black Gallery](#)

Two Views of New York, from Edward Hopper and a Historic Black Gallery

Museum shows capture the great realist painter's vision of the city and, at Just Above Midtown, the work of artists of color from the seventies and eighties.

By [Hilton Als](#)



Even among the many seismic changes that the New York art world has experienced in the past seventy years or so, the legendary gallerist Linda Goode Bryant stands out. The founder of Just Above Midtown, or *JAM*, the historic gallery that played host to an incredible range of artists of color from 1974 to 1986, Goode Bryant established what she called a “laboratory”—a singular place where an artist’s meaning and intention could be expressed in an intellectually free ethos and without commercial interference, a down-home, do-it-yourself cosmos for performance art, happenings, and conceptual, rather than narrative—read: ideological—art. And what art! [David Hammons](#), Howardena Pindell, [Lorraine O’Grady](#), Senga Nengudi, and [Lorna Simpson](#), among many others, had their first significant New York showings at *JAM*, while volunteers such as the critic

[Greg Tate](#) and the historian and curator Lowery Stokes Sims manned the phones.

If you think the New York art world is segregated now—and it is—imagine what it was like when the then twenty-five-year-old Goode Bryant hatched her plan to compete in the white gallery world by exhibiting unconventional work by Black artists. In the very lively conversation that Goode Bryant has with Thelma Golden, the director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, in the catalogue for “Just Above Midtown: Changing Spaces” (at the Museum of Modern Art through February 18th), she says that she wasn’t interested in the kind of “representational work, which I called ‘red-green-and-black’ or ‘Black-women-nursing-babies’ art because those were common elements,” that was being shown at other alternative spaces in New York during the seventies. Although she considered herself a Black nationalist, she didn’t care for the aesthetic of the work produced during the Black Arts movement, which was spearheaded by the poet [Amiri Baraka](#) (LeRoi Jones) following Malcolm X’s death, in 1965. During those troubled and troubling times, Baraka and others championed Black art for Black audiences. Goode Bryant had different ideas about the Black community, or, more specifically, about how to represent it: instead of treating it as something that *could* be represented as a whole, she showcased each work as the product of a unique consciousness. Blackness was only part of who the artist was.

When Goode Bryant, a single mother who had worked at the Studio Museum in Harlem, started *JAM* in its first space, on West Fifty-seventh Street—she borrowed four thousand dollars to get it up and running—she was very conscious of how different from other art spaces she wanted it to be. As she tells Golden, “In terms of the Black community, there was a fierce debate between artists making representational art and those making non-representational work, about the definition of Black art.” At *JAM*, however, this argument dissolved. “The cross-fertilization in that little seven-hundred-square-foot space was amazing because every segment of the Black community came in,” Goode Bryant said. “Whatever their motivations for coming, however they identified, professionally or creatively, those distinctions started to break down.”

At *JAM*, there was no Jacob Lawrence or Romare Bearden, no artists who addressed struggle and uplift in an agrarian or urban Black world; instead, there was David Hammons's trickster universe—a visual equivalent of Richard Pryor's jokes-as-the-only-truth. Hammons had been largely based in Los Angeles, and for his first solo show in New York he told Goode Bryant that, rather than hanging the body prints that were already being bought up by West Coast collectors, he would show a new work. Called “Greasy Bags and Barbeque Bones” (1975), the piece consisted of shopping bags stained with vegetable oil and pork grease, along with sculptures made of black hair and metal. “Greasy Bags” caused a sensation, in part because its unconventional mediums drew a clear line between what Black art had been and what it could be. Thomas Jean Lax, the brilliant curator of “Just Above Midtown: Changing Spaces,” writes in the catalogue, “At the exhibition’s opening, several painters were outraged by what they saw as Hammons’s iconoclastic materials—sourced from Black barber shops and supermarkets rather than an art supply store—and a spirited debate about their artistic validity ensued.” How can you make art or show it without being siddity, like white Europeans? By confronting the issue of commodification and the art market—How could you sell this work? Who would want to buy bags stained with pork grease?—Hammons and Goode Bryant made a powerful statement about the impact of capital and how it distorts what we see.

Part of what makes “Just Above Midtown: Changing Spaces” so moving is that it’s been mounted at a time when the art market can’t commodify Black art and artists fast enough. How devastating, then, to find in one corridor of the show a wall covered in the past-due notices that Goode Bryant received as she tried to keep her gallery afloat, or to see a letter from Senga Nengudi asking Goode Bryant for a letter of support so that she could get an American Express card. In the years that Goode Bryant managed to keep *JAM* going, she was almost always broke: there was no market for ideas, especially if those ideas were made manifest by Black artists. People were hungry for *JAM*, but Bryant couldn’t and wouldn’t make them pay. Lax’s exhibition rocks you out of your complacency—you’re at *MoMA*, and everything’s fine now; *JAM* won’t be forgotten, and the art market has made Nengudi and other artists stars—by reminding you, again and again,

that if there is a Black aesthetic it's about making do, and using what little you have to express who you are.

The making-do aesthetic was popularized by white artists, including [Robert Rauschenberg](#), who was reenergized by the Italian Arte Povera movement, which advocated using man-made detritus to make art—thereby destabilizing the market's ideas about “fine art” and thus commerce. From the fifties on, Rauschenberg often made use of whatever he could find on the street—cardboard, tires, and the like—to create sculptures and collages that were imaginative, personal, abstract, and real. It's a measure of how racially divided the art world was then that Black artists such as Houston Conwill, whose 1978 *JAM* piece, “Notes of a Griot,” was composed primarily of dirt, sand, and stones, and Randy Williams, whose beautiful 1977 Cubist sculpture, “L'art abstrait” (also shown at *JAM*), was made up of wire, a lottery ticket, a book cover, and wood, had to wait this long to find a wider audience.

“Just Above Midtown: Changing Spaces” takes up a little more than five thousand square feet, not huge by *MoMA* standards, but Lax makes the most of it; the show is dense and beautifully hung, with ephemera beside videos, sculptures next to documentary performance photographs, each piece jumping out at you, full of youth and surprise. And part of the joy you feel when walking through the exhibition has to do with the way that artists such as Dawoud Bey and the late Camille Billops made an effort to record what rarely got recorded: the lives of Black artists. And how those lives mattered, not just to Goode Bryant but also to others. In the catalogue, there are wonderful photographs of Black powerhouses like Stevie Wonder and Roberta Flack (who funded a show at *JAM*) stopping by the gallery to commune with the work.



"I don't suppose you play pickleball?"
Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

The stories that Goode Bryant and her artists told remain fabulously alive here. Lax has divided the alternately curving and open spaces chronologically, so that you follow *JAM* as it moves from midtown to downtown. Eventually, you get to Janet Olivia Henry's piece "The Studio Visit" (1982), which was shown when the gallery was at 178-80 Franklin Street. It's a mixed-media piece that includes two dolls. One, "the curator," is white (and made from a doll that resembles Spanky, from the "Our Gang" comedies). The other, "the artist," is Black (a doll that represents Lieutenant Uhura, from "Star Trek"). The Black doll sits across from the white curator, who is holding a frame and surveying several paintings. You want to laugh, but at the same time you remember all those artist friends who called before Black was booming in the art world to tell you that a gallery would have signed them if only they'd agreed, say, to use more blue in their paintings than red. Elsewhere, you find a haunting and hilarious photographic display of images from Lorraine O'Grady's appearance at a party held at *JAM* in 1980, in which she inhabits a character she called Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire. The black-and-white photographs show O'Grady in a sort of cotillion dress made of gloves. In one, she's standing beside a wall piece by the great Maren Hassinger, a delicate frieze of galvanized steel rods. Instead of holding a bouquet of flowers in her hands, O'Grady cradles a cat-o'-nine-tails, to which flowers have been attached. In other photographs, we see her

whipping herself with it. What do standardized forms of beauty cost?, the work seems to ask. And what is your reward for accepting them? Self-flagellation?

“Just Above Midtown: Changing Spaces” is, among other things, a gorgeously feminist show, and when you look at O’Grady’s work or at Nengudi’s unexpected and powerful sculpture “Swing Low” (1977/2014), which uses panty hose and sand to represent the sagging breasts of a wet nurse, or at images of Nengudi performing, her hair and body both free and controlled, you understand that what Goode Bryant was showing, at times, was her own biography in motion. At *JAM*, and now at *MoMA*, the story she told, and that Lax tells, is of a Black woman who considered what she was supposed to be, then said, “Uh-uh,” and chose to be something utterly different.

There were significant champions of artists of color before Goode Bryant: notably, Peter Bradley, whose racially integrated “The De Luxe Show,” in Houston in 1971, dared to hang Sam Gilliam’s work in the same room as Kenneth Noland’s; the artist Suzanne Jackson, whose Gallery 32, in Los Angeles, showed many of her Black contemporaries, from 1968 to 1970; and the artist brothers Alonzo Davis and Dale Brockman Davis, whose Brockman Gallery, in L.A., nurtured the careers of Black artists from 1967 to 1990. But it can be a challenge to research art that wasn’t backed up by catalogues raisonnés or by lengthy reviews. Lax’s show is a gift to art history, because he was able to work with a living source and to elicit from Goode Bryant, it seems, all that she wanted to remember and some things she may have preferred to forget—because who wants to remember why something you loved came to an end? (Bryant’s impresario spirit hasn’t waned. Since *JAM* closed, in 1986, she has produced and directed documentary films, and founded the Active Citizen Project and Project eats, which supports urban gardening and food distribution. For the *MoMA* show, she and Lax commissioned a new collaborative work by the artists Garrett Bradley and [Arthur Jafa](#).) Lax is able to contextualize the work that was shown at *JAM* in a way that’s rare in the current curatorial climate, where there is altogether too much talk about “the object” as an isolated creation, separate from the world of its creator. Viewing art in this way undermines

its power to teach us about empathy, about who we are or are not, in relation to an artist or to the world at large.

The world that the great American artist [Edward Hopper](#) (1882-1967) painted was the world he knew—which was, for the most part, a white world. It's amazing to see, in "Edward Hopper's New York" (at the Whitney, through March 5th), how he mined his relatively narrow experience to produce work that still feels wide-ranging and universal, if only because loneliness is universal, and, for Hopper, what unites us as human beings, if there is such a thing as unity. Curated with great intelligence and care by Kim Conaty, "Edward Hopper's New York" is a terrific show based on a great idea, and it's weird that no one thought to approach his work in this way before. New York was Hopper's primary muse, but it took him a long time to figure out what he loved most about her: not what was visible but what wasn't revealed, her many absences.

The exhibit is organized thematically—"Washington Square," "The Window," "Theater," and so on—and spans the nearly sixty years during which the artist lived and worked in New York. It's touching to see, in the "First Impressions" section of the exhibition, which includes such works as "Tugboat with Black Smokestack" (1908) and "Blackwell's Island" (1911), how gentle Hopper's early paintings were. They're "beautiful" in the way that an Edward Steichen photograph of a tree in winter, or a building, is beautiful—atmospheric and a little self-conscious, "real" art. But by the late twenties, after working hard, failing, and then working hard again, Hopper, who had become a master etcher, had learned how to use what he had to get what he wanted. As a commercial illustrator, he needed to achieve his effects fast: atmosphere had to be conveyed through line, not color. When you reach the section of the show called "The Horizontal City," and see paintings like the extraordinary "Apartment Houses, East River" (circa 1930), you recognize Hopper waking up to his own potential and exploring scenes in which New York is not characteristically New York—dense with people and sound—but spare and trapped in an essential loneliness.

Take a look at "City Roofs" (1927) to see what I mean. In the painting, Hopper's vantage point is the one you have when you open the door to the roof of your apartment building and the world is yours: filled with shapes

and lights that are startling in their melancholy and sobriety. The only thing that disturbs this perfect view of the architecture of city life, eerily not abuzz with neon or with sounds from the downstairs neighbor, is you, the viewer. It can feel embarrassing to have so much flesh in the absence of flesh. Hopper's New York is not a city that you can enter, or be a citizen of, even when his paintings involve the presence of other people, as does "The Sheridan Theatre" (1937). The painting is a series of brown and amber and yellow curves—railings, light fixtures, and offstage spaces—that go up and up to a balcony, perhaps, or to a celestial realm? In any case, it is suffused with darkness. Standing at the right of the frame is a female figure looking at something we cannot see, and although it's one of Hopper's more populated paintings—there are three figures in the aisle to her left—all we can see, in that half-light, is what's not there. Maybe she's watching a movie set in New York? Perhaps a scene with lovers in the Park, or the city's skyline, its buildings holding all kinds of people, bathed in moonlight, alienation, and joy. ♦

By The New Yorker

By Jessica Winter

By Matthew Stock

By Jill Lepore

The Boards

- [Curtain Call, with Zamboni](#)

Curtain Call, with Zamboni

Victoria Clark and the cast of “*Kimberly Akimbo*” turned into rink rats to prepare for their Broadway opening.

By [Zach Helfand](#)



Sports have a monopoly on team building through ritualized suffering, at least in the popular imagination. (See: “Hard Knocks,” “Two-a-Days,” Rocky and Paulie punching beef in a meat freezer.) But is sports all that different from, say, the theatre? Coaches have a lot in common with directors. Lineups are like casts. There is choreography, chemistry, and gruelling practice. “There are so many similarities!” the actress Victoria Clark said recently.

Clark, along with the rest of the cast and the crew of the Broadway musical [“Kimberly Akimbo”](#), had gathered at the ice-skating rinks at Chelsea Piers for the start of their own training camp. Above them: an enormous photograph of the 1994 Stanley Cup Rangers. Among them: adolescent rink rats in smelly gear. The show is a cheery examination of looming early death. (Kimberly, a soon to be sixteen-year-old, played by the sixty-three-year-old Clark, has a fictional genetic disorder that causes her to age rapidly

and carries a life expectancy of sixteen.) It's also set, in part, on ice: two scenes are at a local rink, and some of the actors skate onstage. To prepare, the director, Jessica Stone, and the choreographer, Danny Mefford, rented rink time. The goal was to review the basics and to build camaraderie. "We're calling it skate camp!" Stone said.

Stone and Mefford were outside the rink, discussing favorite figure skaters. "Dorothy Hamill," Stone, who wore a blue dress with white Stan Smiths, said. "I had her haircut! I actually, with my haircut, went ice-skating one winter. I fell and broke my wrist."

Mefford, in a tropical-print shirt, was serving as coach. He'd been taking private lessons, in preparation for the show, for three years. "I've gotten way better than I ever really needed to," he said. "Stephanie"—Chelsea Piers' skating director—"wants me to do the bronze certification so that I can do these low-level adult competitions. I don't want to compete. But I kind of want to do the certification, just to know if I'd pass."

Some of the production members had gone through skate camp once before, prior to the show's Off Broadway run. But proficiency remained low. "Nobody was cast for their skating experience," Mefford said.

During the first run, Clark had been barred from the ice for fear of injury. Mefford said, "I've had to tell her a million times, 'Vicki, you're a little bit of a daredevil.'"

To the rink! Mefford and Stephanie Hernandez, the skating director, gathered the gang for a pre-skate speech. "You made it to Broadway!" Hernandez said. Everyone cheered. "Take it easy. It's the first day. No spins!"

Clark, wearing a tutu and a padded headband, stepped gingerly onto the ice, clutching Mefford's hand. The first lesson was on how to wipe out. "Accept that you're gonna fall, and just pick a side and do it!" Hernandez said. As everyone collapsed to the ice, Mefford gave pointers on getting back up. "Keep both feet on the ground," he said. Then he slipped, both feet churning off the ice, before recovering and throwing his hands in the air. Everyone whooped.

The cast split into two groups. Clark went with the newbies, practicing little shuffles before easing into some gliding. Justin Cooley, Clark's nineteen-year-old co-lead, zoomed by with the advanced group, wiggling backward as if dancing. "O.K., O.K.," he cooed. Nearby, Alli Mauzey, who plays Kimberly's mother, was tottering along. A crew member told her gently, "You put elbow pads on your knees."

"So it's going well!" Mauzey said. (At one show last year, she'd laced up her skates on the wrong feet.)

The group skated for forty-five minutes, falling only occasionally. Mefford sneaked in some spins. By the end, Clark and Cooley were skating together. Then the horn sounded, and the Zamboni steamed on.

On their way out, Clark and Cooley caught up. Cooley mentioned that he'd attended the first skate camp but hadn't skated onstage. "So I went to Central Park and skated for fun," he said.

"I was at home passed out on the couch," Clark said. "I'm just incredibly accident prone. Emergency room many times. Several bike accidents. I walked into the set a few times. I wiped out just entering. One time, I forgot a prop. I was trying to get you a message."

"I was trying to read your mind," Cooley said.

"I think we've been friends in many previous incarnations," Clark said. "When we met, we were, like, 'This feels like it's a continuation of something that started a long time ago.'" Her husband, Thomas Reidy, she added, was fine with it.

"He was, like, my pet turtle or something in another life," Cooley said.

"Tommy was your pet turtle?" Clark said. "That's great!" ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

The Sporting Scene

- Toto Wolff, the Compulsive Perfectionist Behind Mercedes's Formula 1 Team

By [Sam Knight](#)

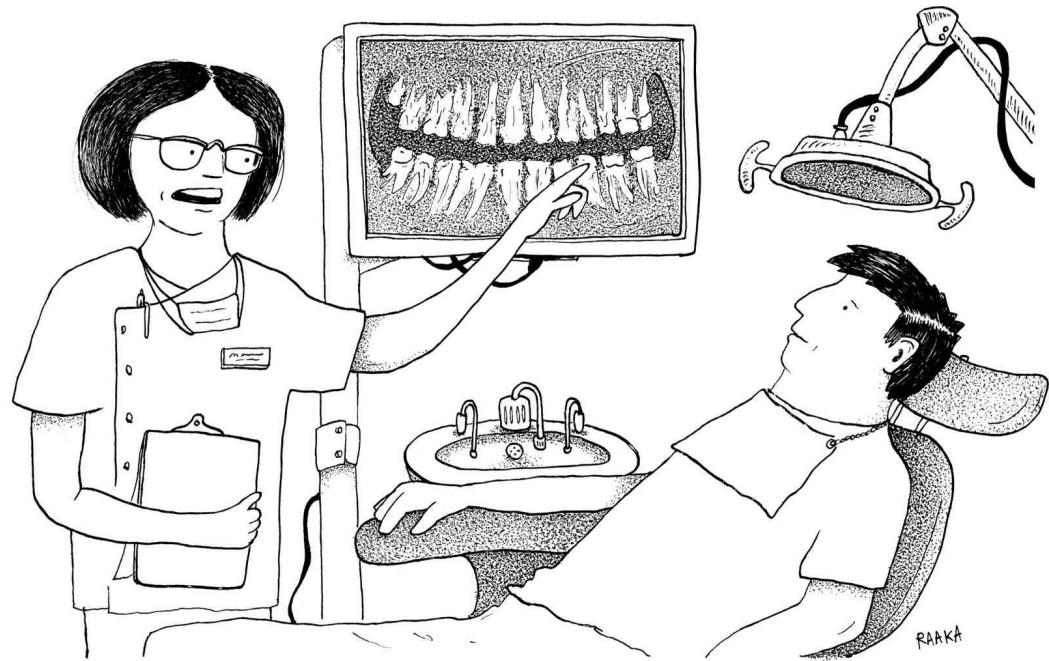
A few minutes before the start of the Dutch Grand Prix, which was held last month in baking sunshine at Zandvoort, a beachside racetrack within commuting distance of Amsterdam, Toto Wolff, the principal of the Mercedes-AMG Petronas Formula 1 team, walked out onto the starting grid. A Grand Prix begins when a row of five red lights above the start line is extinguished, but, for a short time before, the track is a twenty-thousand-horsepower mob scene.

Each of the unearthly, long-nosed machines is attended by a mobile I.C.U. of generators, steel trolleys, laptops, tire blankets, and uniformed mechanics in crash helmets and flameproof gear. Umbrellas shroud the drivers' cockpits. Billionaires stalk the grid. Race marshals hold clipboards in red gloves. The noise is beyond belief: helicopter blades, high-speed wheel guns, the desperate howls of the cars, the massed emanations of the waiting crowd.

In Zandvoort, loudspeakers laced the sky with dance music. The afternoon was humid; the air felt saturated. Wolff was at home. He is tall, dark, and Austrian. He could pass for a Sacha Baron Cohen character or for someone who breezes past you in the airport, smelling good, wearing loafers and no socks. He worked the grid in a white shirt emblazoned with the Mercedes star and the logos of twelve other corporate sponsors, black pants, team-issued Puma sneakers, lovable smile. He kissed people's cheeks, touched elbows, gave impromptu TV interviews, and yelled last-minute thoughts to his drivers. Somewhere in the fumes was death. Two Formula 1 drivers were killed in the span of three years at Zandvoort in the seventies. At one point, I found myself by the pit lane when three cars leaped out, red tail-lights flashing. The speed was like a whip.

Wolff, who is fifty, is the best team boss in the recent history of the world's fastest motorsport. The "formula" of Formula 1 refers to a set of rules, first enshrined after the Second World War, to bring some order to the urge to race dangerous cars on the asphalt of foreign cities. Whereas Nascar is all left turns, cars that look like cars, and spectator-friendly oval tracks, Formula 1 has a madder, purer heart: the oldest courses date from a century ago. Races last around ninety minutes. They twist, sweep, and go down

hills, sometimes on existing streets. The cars, which started out as death traps for daredevils, are now specimens of extreme technology, flying algorithms that fight for advantages of a hundredth of a second—the distance of a yard over a three-mile track. The sport is esoteric, but globally so. Last year's Mexican Grand Prix attracted three hundred and seventy thousand spectators. The Singapore race runs through the city at night. (Drivers can shed six pounds in stress and sweat.) The average television audience for a Formula 1 race is around seventy million people—four times that of the typical N.F.L. game—and the best drivers earn soccer-star salaries and lasting fame. When Ayrton Senna, a three-time world champion, was killed in a race, in 1994, the Brazilian government declared three days of mourning. A million people waited in the heat to pay their respects, and many spoke of their *saudade*—an inexpressible state of longing for something that is gone.



"And here's where I can tell you I'll never amount to anything."
Cartoon by Stephen Raaka

Between 2014, when Wolff took charge of Mercedes, and 2021, the team won the world championship eight years in a row—an unprecedented achievement. (In Formula 1, there is a constructors' championship, for the most successful team, and a drivers' championship, awarded at the end of some twenty races.) Each team has two drivers. Mercedes's star is Lewis Hamilton, who earned around sixty-five million dollars last season. During

the team's winning streak, Hamilton won six individual world titles, bringing his career total to seven. No one has ever won eight. "I couldn't think of a better friend. I couldn't think of a better boss," Hamilton told me, of Wolff.

Formula 1 is currently surging in popularity, particularly in the United States, in part because of a Netflix series, "Drive to Survive," which has embroidered the nerdery of the sport with artful camerawork and bitchy insight into the lives of its protagonists. Wolff, who speaks five languages and whose wife, Susie, is a former racing driver, is one of the show's natural stars. Of the ten team principals in the sport, only Wolff and his archrival, Christian Horner, a Briton who runs the Red Bull team, have ever won a world championship. But, unlike Horner and the rest of his peers, Wolff is also a co-owner of his team. His one-third stake in Mercedes is conservatively valued at around five hundred million dollars. He sees himself simultaneously as a competitor and as someone who is shaping the future of a multibillion-dollar business. "The other team principals, and I don't mean this in an arrogant way, are incentivized for performance only," Wolff said. His rivals see this. "He's playing a game and he is always one move in advance," one of them told me.

But this season Wolff and Mercedes have failed to win a single race. The Dutch Grand Prix was the fifteenth of the season, and Mercedes's best results so far were a couple of second-place finishes. (In 2020, the team won thirteen out of seventeen.) Hamilton, who joined Formula 1 as a rookie in 2007, has never gone a season without winning at least one race. Ahead of the U.S. Grand Prix, in Austin, on October 23rd, the team was languishing in third place, behind Red Bull and Ferrari—its worst position in a decade. Seeing Wolff and Mercedes lose their way has been as disconcerting as it has been refreshing, like watching Roger Federer shank his serve, the Yankees miss the playoffs, Simone Biles miss the beam. It is understandable, up to a point. "We've not gone from being an eight-time-winning world-championship team to not being able to build cars," Hamilton said. "We just . . . it's wrong this year."

The ostensible reason was a change in the rules. Every few years, the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile, which has overseen Grand Prix

racing since 1906, forces the teams to redesign their cars. Normally, the official logic has to do with safety, or with making it easier for cars to overtake one another, but there is almost always an unspoken motive: to upset the existing order of things and to stop one team from gaining a permanent advantage.

In the past, Mercedes profited from these changes, adapting faster than its rivals. But the 2022 reset was unusually far-reaching. One of the aims of the new rules was to reconfigure the downforce generated by the cars, to reduce the amount of “dirty air” left in their wakes and to allow for closer racing. At a preseason testing event in Bahrain, in March, Mercedes’s new car—the W13—appeared to embody the boldest interpretation of this idea. It was skinnier and more futuristic than the rest. “People were looking at that thinking, Wow. Mercedes are going to blow the field away,” George Russell, the team’s other driver, told me. “Within reason, we thought that as well.”

But the W13 proved capricious. Data collected in the wind tunnel, or through computer modelling, didn’t pan out on the track. At high speeds, the car bounced, an effect known as porpoising. “My back is killing me!” Hamilton yelled on a long straight in Baku, in June, where the floor of the car repeatedly hit the asphalt at more than two hundred miles per hour. Attempts to resolve the issue only uncovered more problems. “We’ve tried and tried and failed. And tried and tried and failed,” Hamilton said. Andrew Shovlin, Mercedes’s trackside-engineering director, who has a Ph.D. in the dynamics of military logistics vehicles, compared fixing the W13 to peeling an onion. “Even the aerodynamic bouncing manifests itself in about three different mechanisms,” he said.

The other reason for Mercedes’s poor performance was a sense of injustice and doom. In 2021, with five laps remaining in the final race of the season, Hamilton was leading the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix, on his way to an eighth individual world title and solitary greatness. Hamilton had won the previous three races; he had the car on a string. “He was unbeatable and we were unbeatable,” Wolff said.

On lap fifty-three in Abu Dhabi, the race was interrupted by a crash, and then a safety car took over. (In Formula 1, when there is a hazard on the

track, a sports car with flashing lights leads a stately, jumbled procession of cars, until the danger is cleared.) Under normal circumstances, the Grand Prix would have finished behind the safety car, with the race order intact. But the race director, an F.I.A. official named Michael Masi, made the decision to divert a group of cars to enable a final lap of racing between Hamilton and the second-place driver, Max Verstappen, of Red Bull. The drivers were equal in points in the world-championship standings. Verstappen was on fresh tires; he slipped past Hamilton and took the title. The F.I.A. later concluded that Masi had made a “human error,” and he left his post. But the result stood.

Whenever Abu Dhabi came up in conversation, Wolff talked himself up into a rage and then slowly talked himself down again. “How much injustice is happening in the world every day on a terrible scale, human tragedies?” he said. “I’m finding peace with myself.” But Mercedes hasn’t won a race since. “For Toto, it was more than a disaster,” Frédéric Vasseur, the team principal of Alfa Romeo, and one of Wolff’s closest friends in the sport, said.

One evening in Zandvoort, I sat with Wolff in a corner of the team’s motor home. European house music played at a low volume. Beautiful people walked past outside. Wolff occasionally knocked on the tinted windows in greeting, but people had a hard time seeing who it was. He spoke in somewhat Nietzschean terms about the season so far. Wolff likes aphorisms about the necessity of failure. He struggles with depression and has been seeing a psychiatrist for almost twenty years. During his team’s long winning streak, he often talked about what was then an infrequent experience of learning from setbacks. “You rarely come back from a race weekend where you’ve won and you say, ‘Why the fuck did we win?’” he told me. “But, you know, it’s really deep when you’re losing.” I asked Wolff to describe his feelings about the W13. “In the moment,” he said, “I hate it.”

The history of Formula 1 says that, once a winning team loses its way, it might never recover. At the start of this century, Ferrari, the most successful racing team of all time, won six consecutive championships under Ross Brawn, a legendary technical director, until it, too, was derailed by rule

changes. The weekend before the Dutch Grand Prix, Mercedes had endured a horrible race at Spa, in Belgium. Hamilton crashed on the first lap; Russell finished fourth. During qualifying—when drivers compete to set the fastest lap time, and thus determine their starting position—the Mercedes cars ran almost two seconds per lap slower than Red Bull’s car driven by Verstappen. Two seconds is geological time in Formula 1. Valleys form.

Wolff has, in a way, been waiting for this moment ever since he took over at Mercedes. I asked him if it was a relief that the slump was finally here, and no longer an imagined downfall. Wolff feared that he was adapting too well to losing. “I’m not sleepless,” he said. “I’m not. But, at the same time, it frightens me that I’m not sleepless. Has my ambition gone? No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. Not at all.” An old friend of Wolff’s explained to me that he was *unzufrieden*—unsatisfied—with himself, whatever the situation. Seen that way, losing was not so different from winning. “It’s this ambivalence in me,” Wolff said, of finding that he was able to cope. “On one side, it’s really good. I’m surviving it. On the other side, I don’t want to have this feeling.”

The car was quicker at Zandvoort. The track returned to the Grand Prix calendar only last year, after a thirty-six-year absence, as a home race for Verstappen, whose father, Jos, was also a famous Dutch driver. About a hundred thousand people trooped into the grandstands each day to drink beer, perform the wave, and join in great wordless roars that, whenever Verstappen drove by, briefly overwhelmed the unending, choral whines of the cars. But the course was short and twisty, with banked corners, and these features played to the strengths of the Mercedes car.

Hamilton and Russell qualified to start from the fourth and sixth places on the grid, and, in a virtual meeting on the morning of the race, Mercedes’s engineers outlined a possible strategy to win. One of the W13’s few advantages, relative to the quicker cars of Red Bull and Ferrari, was that its tires tended to keep their speed for longer. Pit stops and tire changes have been a tactical puzzle in motor racing for more than a hundred years. (At the first Grand Prix, at Le Mans, in 1906, mechanics slashed off worn tires with knives.) After running simulations of the race all night at the team’s headquarters, in Brackley, England, Joey McMillan, a senior strategist,

explained to the drivers that, if they used slower but longer-lasting hard tires, they would have to stop only once during the race—compared with two likely stops for their rivals—giving the team a slim chance to secure its first victory of the year. McMillan pulled up a screen with twenty lines (representing the twenty cars in the race) and showed their likely progression, with Hamilton’s Mercedes just hanging on to first place at the end.

Wolff’s voice came on the call. The idiom of Formula 1 is a Ph.D.-level patter of ride heights, tire-degradation curves, strat modes, and gurney flaps. Wolff was a racing driver before he dropped out of college. On race weekends, he sees himself as a sparring partner for the engineers. He asks blunt questions and states his fears. Often, he advocates for the drivers. “I’m a translator,” he told me. “He’s an out-and-out racer,” Hamilton said. In the meeting, Wolff addressed Hamilton and Russell: “Are you two O.K. with that?,” referring to the plan McMillan had outlined. “If we see the opportunity for a win and we take a risk . . .”

“Of course,” Russell replied. It is his first season on the team. He has never won a Grand Prix.

Hamilton paused. He is, by nature, an introvert. He has won a hundred and three Grand Prix races—twelve more than any other driver.

“Er . . . I suppose so,” he said. “Let’s see how it is.”

The starting lights went out. The cars jostled away. Unlike most team principals, who sit with a clutch of strategists and engineers on the pit wall—a macho zone, right next to the track—Wolff perches at a desk in the team garage. He has no active role during the race. “I give input, sometimes I’m more firm,” he said. “But they’re still flying the airplane.” The pit-wall team doesn’t watch the cars go around. They keep their eyes on churning columns of numbers, like traders in a Wall Street boiler room: lap times, splits, telemetry graphs, a bunch of G.P.S. dots, whizzing around the track. “They are living in the data world,” Wolff said. “But there’s a human in the data.”

For the first two-thirds of the race, the Mercedes plan worked perfectly. Hamilton and Russell moved to the front, while the cars around them stopped for fresh tires. “I might be dreaming,” Wolff said over the radio. With twenty-four laps to go, Verstappen was back in the lead. But he was only eleven seconds ahead of Hamilton and had to stop again—meaning that Hamilton would have another chance to overtake and hold on for the win. “Just keep pulling him toward you,” Peter Bonnington, Hamilton’s race engineer, told him. On Wolff’s screen, the colored lines of the computer model updated constantly, fluctuating between a Hamilton and a Verstappen victory.

“This sport is never going to give you perfect information,” Wolff told me later. On lap forty-eight, a car belonging to AlphaTauri, the eighth-ranked team in the championship, stuttered to a stop. The interruption led to a “virtual safety car,” a period of the race in which drivers have to slow down and are not allowed to overtake one another. Verstappen used the opportunity to switch his tires, and Mercedes’s tactical advantage was lost. “That V.S.C. stuffed us,” Hamilton said. A few laps later, another breakdown led to the appearance of an actual safety car. During these suspended passages in a race, the team radio is a cacophony of requests, calculations, and controlled panic. Verstappen changed his tires again, putting on soft tires—the quickest of the lot. Russell changed his, too. “Fucking good work!” someone yelled over the radio. “What did we do?” Wolff asked.

When the race re-started, Hamilton was in the lead, but on old, hard tires. “It’s going to be difficult to stop Verstappen,” Wolff murmured. With shades of Abu Dhabi, the Red Bull driver overtook Hamilton again, on the main straight, in front of his home crowd, and pulled away. “You fucked me over!” Hamilton shouted at his engineers. “I can’t tell you how pissed I am right now.” A few laps later, Russell passed him as well. Hamilton finished fourth, outside the podium places. Russell came in second, his best result for Mercedes.

Afterward, the air was dense with orange flares. Verstappen sprayed the customary champagne. A sea mist was coming in, and Red Bull stunt planes turned loops over the beach. Hamilton smiled regretfully through his

TV interviews. “The emotions were just out of control—it was so close,” he said. “We haven’t had a win for so long and all of a sudden we were *right there*.” I caught up with Wolff in his office in the motor home. He was changing out of his race-day uniform. “That was great fun,” he said. “But you need to always put yourself in the shoes of the driver. . . . Lewis is not in a great place.” Over all, it had been Mercedes’s best weekend of the season; the W13 had been competitive at last. But Wolff sensed that losing had its uses, still. “Emotionally,” he said, “maybe this win would have come too early.”

One of Wolff’s heroes is Alfred Neubauer, who, in the nineteen-twenties, invented the role of racing-team manager. Neubauer helped create the Silver Arrows, Mercedes’s factory team, which raced in unpainted aluminum cars. In 1926, Neubauer came up with a system of colored flags, numbered signals, and hand gestures to communicate with drivers during a race. The sport was barely a sport. Drivers rode with their mechanics and eschewed seat belts, preferring to be thrown clear in a crash. In July, 1928, Neubauer used his flags and signals at a Grand Prix for the first time, at the Nürburgring, a very long, arduous track in the Eifel Mountains, south of the Rhine. “The tremendous pace began to tell,” Neubauer wrote, in a bracing account of racing from that period:

Paul Bischoff’s “Chiribiri” slithered out of one of the bends with flames shooting from the engine. He flung himself clear just in time. Momberger’s Bugatti lost its left mudguard and steam began to pour from the radiator. Prince zu Leiningen’s Amilcar crashed into a barricade. He was pulled out unconscious, but escaped with a broken leg.

On the fourth lap, Ernst von Halle, a German amateur driver, rolled his car and suffered a contused lung. He died soon afterward, at the age of twenty-three. On the fifth, a Bugatti, driven by Čeněk Junek, a Czech, somersaulted through the air, killing him on impact. Rudi Caracciola, Mercedes’s star driver, passed out briefly from the engine heat. The team’s veteran, Christian Werner, had his shoulder dislocated by the force of holding the wheel. Neubauer revived him during a pit stop with fortified wine, black

coffee, and the yolk of a raw egg. “It worked wonders,” Neubauer wrote. Mercedes came in first.

Neubauer possessed, in his own description, a towering rage. But he had a special love of drivers. Under his leadership, Mercedes dominated the sport twice, in the thirties and the early fifties. (The Formula 1 championship dates from 1950.) The legends of the Silver Arrows included Caracciola; Juan Manuel Fangio, an Argentinean; and Stirling Moss, an Englishman. “I believe that when someone like Alfred Neubauer uses the term ‘artist’ in relation to a driver, he knows what he’s talking about,” Moss told an interviewer once. “Driving is certainly like ballet in that it is all discipline, rhythm, movement.”

At 6:26 p.m. on June 11, 1955, a Mercedes-Benz 300 SLR driven by Pierre Levegh collided with an Austin-Healey at the Le Mans twenty-four-hour race, broke apart, caught fire, and flew into the crowd. Levegh and eighty-three spectators were killed. “I was barely conscious of what was happening simultaneously before my eyes,” Neubauer wrote. Another car bounced down the track and ran over a police officer in front of him. The race continued. Mercedes won the world championship three months later. Then the Silver Arrows withdrew from Grand Prix racing for half a century.

I once asked Wolff what attracted people to Formula 1. “It’s an alpha-male thing. You want to beat the other guy,” he replied. “It’s very archaic.” About a thousand people work exclusively for the Mercedes team. (Another thousand or so make Formula 1 engines, which Mercedes supplies to three other teams.) At the start of the 2021 season, Wolff sent an all-staff e-mail asking employees—everyone from aerodynamicists to catering staff—to find out who their opposite number was at Red Bull. “Look at him/her every day,” Wolff wrote. “Put the picture right in front of you so you know whom to beat.”

By that logic, Wolff’s mind should be full of Horner, the Red Bull principal, whom he disdains. Like Wolff, Horner started out as a racing driver. He later led Red Bull to four successive championships before Mercedes began to win, and the animosity between the two men is a major plotline in Formula 1. From race to race, Wolff and Horner snipe at each other’s tactics, drivers, budgets, and respective adherence to the sport’s ever-

changing rules. Last season, at the peak of the championship duel, Horner was asked, while sitting next to Wolff, to describe the relationship between the two teams. “There is no relationship,” he said. Wolff rolled his eyes.

In March, Horner referred to Wolff as a tax exile who runs his team remotely. (Wolff’s home is in Monaco.) Wolff tries, not always successfully, to find the higher ground. “It is the emotion that takes over and says, What a fucking arsehole. But maybe he is not,” he told me. Wolff likens Horner to a yapping terrier. He does not consult a picture of him every day. “He’s just so *simple*,” Wolff complained. (Horner declined to speak to me.)

Wolff’s executive style combines empathy with a hysterical attention to detail. The race calendar requires him to travel more than two hundred days a year. He has missed two Grand Prix in ten seasons. He tries to stay in the same hotel room each year for each race and to be picked up by the same driver in the same car wherever he lands. (For European races, his motor home moves from track to track.) Wolff eats the same meal—grilled chicken and vegetables—for lunch and dinner, preferably alone, when he is away from home. His sleep schedule was designed with the help of a *NASA* scientist. He seeks the outer limits of control. “Whatever I do, I do not take risks,” he told me. “My assessment is: a risk is something that I couldn’t cope with, if the worst happens. So I’m not doing it.”

He makes unreasonable demands of others. “You don’t get to where he is by being a guy that’s super nice with everyone,” Susie, Wolff’s wife, told me. (One of Wolff’s favorite phrases is “tough love.”) In July, 2014, Susie, who is Scottish, became the first woman in twenty-two years to take part in a Formula 1 race weekend, when she drove a car for the Williams team in a practice session at the British Grand Prix. She said goodbye to Wolff in the paddock. “He looked at me. There was a pause and I thought, O.K., he’s going to say something really nice,” she recalled. “And he looked at me, deadpan straight, and said, ‘Don’t be shit.’”

On his first day at the Mercedes factory, in January, 2013, Wolff found a couple of old coffee cups and a discarded newspaper on a glass table in the reception area. At the time, the team boss was Brawn, the former Ferrari technical director—a lion of the sport—who had led his own team, Brawn GP, to the world championship in 2009. “I went up to Ross and said, ‘I have

just been in reception. . . . It doesn't look like a Formula 1 team,' " Wolff recalled. "And he said, 'That doesn't make the car quicker.' And I said, 'For me it does. Because it means a sense for the detail.' " Wolff's daily schedule is a mess. Meetings overrun constantly, often because Wolff gets into personal conversations with his staff, an unusual tendency in a data-driven culture. "He was always willing to spend *hours* with people discussing their situations and their challenges," Brawn told me.

Wolff probably goes too far. "He is a bit maniac," Vasseur, the Alfa Romeo team principal, said. "Even during holidays, he is not able to switch off completely." James Vowles is the Mercedes team's chief strategist. To improve rapid decision-making during races, he has embedded with emergency-room doctors, aircraft pilots, and day traders. "Truthfully, he overthinks," Vowles said, of Wolff. "That's his big problem. He tries to take a problem and think it to a range that is just not possible."

In 2019, Wolff hired Miguel Guerreiro, a hygiene manager, to travel with the team and to make sure that the Mercedes motor-home bathrooms were spotless at all times. Wolff insisted on a cleaning rota that reflected the various rhythms of the race weekend, and showed Guerreiro how he liked the toilet brush to be shaken dry (twice) before being replaced in its holder. "I want the brush to be exchanged every day or every other day," he told me. When I expressed disbelief about this, Wolff called Guerreiro over.

"Miguel, can I steal thirty seconds of your time?" Wolff asked. "What did we discuss yesterday?"

Guerreiro replied, "Exactly how the toilets were functioning and how we could improve because—"

"We discussed about the soap—that you can't really reach it well. You don't know where the sensor is."

"Yes," Guerreiro said. "And the paper, you can't really see it. . . ."

There were traces of water droplets on the mirror. The door handles needed a wipe. "We have done pretty well, Miguel and I. Everybody laughed about us at the beginning," Wolff said. But, according to Wolff, the team suffered

from less diarrhea and fewer viral infections than their rivals. “We’re talking about feces and all this shitting,” Wolff said. “The point is that I want to set the standards in what I do.”

Torger Christian Wolff did not grow up a racing fan. He has a childhood memory of being called in, on a summer’s day, to watch Niki Lauda drive in a Grand Prix somewhere. Lauda—a three-time world champion—was Austria’s greatest racing driver. In 1976, he was almost killed at the Nürburgring. (After winning the 1968 German Grand Prix, in thick fog, the Scottish driver Jackie Stewart called the course “the Green Hell.”) Lauda’s Ferrari swerved off the track, hit an embankment, and burst into flames. He suffered lung damage and severe burns to his hands and face, and went into a coma. He returned to racing forty-two days later. For the rest of his life, Lauda wore a red cap, sponsored by various corporations, to cover his scars.

Wolff loved to drive. At the age of eighteen, he took a Volkswagen Beetle up to the Höhenstrasse, a curving, cobbled road through the woods in the northwestern part of Vienna, where he lived, and went as fast as he could. He practiced every night. “When it was raining, it was even better,” he said. He didn’t worry about the Beetle’s straight-line speed—it was about not slowing down for the bends. (“The straights don’t count, the straights are just there to join the corners,” Moss, the great Mercedes driver, once said. “But in the corners there is something to see, sometimes.”) Wolff crashed the Beetle into a tree.

In the summer of 1990, Wolff drove from Vienna to Amsterdam with friends. They borrowed a Peugeot 605 limousine and took turns, on the German Autobahn, trying to cover two hundred kilometres every hour. “We were real, complete idiots,” he said. “If my son would tell me such a story, I would give him—how do you call it when you punch somebody?” (Wolff has a five-year-old son with Susie, and two children from a previous marriage.) On the way back, the group stopped at the Nürburgring, to watch a friend, Philipp Peter, compete in the German Formula 3 championship. Wolff showed me a photograph of himself, kneeling by Peter’s car on the starting grid, in a state of bliss. It was his first time on a racetrack. That night, Wolff went to a bar with a group of drivers. “There was nothing else anymore,” he recalled. “It’s like an identity I got.”

He was, deep down, unhappy. “There was too much bitterness. There was too much self-felt humiliation,” he said. Wolff’s father, Sven, who was Romanian, was an entrepreneur. In 1973, when Wolff was a year old, Sven set up Kunsttrans, a freight company specializing in the transport of art. Kunsttrans was a success, and the family lived in Vienna’s eighteenth district, a well-to-do neighborhood.

But, in 1980, Sven was diagnosed as having a brain tumor. A couple of years later, the business went under. Wolff’s parents separated, and he and his sister moved out with their mother, Joanna Bednarczyk, a Polish anesthesiologist. Sven died in May, 1987, when Wolff was fifteen. When I asked Wolff if he was similar to his father, he said, “Now you’re talking about heavy stuff. . . . I have no idea.” Joanna was often elsewhere. “I don’t think she is a naturally made mom,” he told me. “She lived her own life.” Wolff dates his aversion to risk-taking—his urge to control catastrophe—to the unravelling of his bourgeois childhood. “I was eight or nine or ten, and I wanted to be in control,” he said. “And I wasn’t.”

A hopeful racing driver needs financial backing to succeed. “Zero with me,” Wolff said. “I had to build it all on my own.” He leased a *SEAT* Ibiza and went to driving school. Hamilton’s parents also separated when he was young; he grew up in social housing in Stevenage, a commuter town in Hertfordshire. “Toto hasn’t come from a privileged background,” Hamilton said. “I think that’s probably what connected us quite a bit.” Wolff spent three seasons on the Formula Ford circuit—the minor leagues of European motorsport—and showed promise, but nothing more. Younger drivers came through, a shade faster. One Christmas, he stood in a golden cape and golden face paint outside a sponsor’s electronics store and handed out cards to shoppers. In the spring of 1994, Karl Wendlinger, another Austrian, crashed during practice for the Monaco Grand Prix and suffered terrible head injuries. Wendlinger and Wolff shared a sponsor, who withdrew from the sport. Wolff went to business school.

In 1998, he spent a few months on the West Coast of the United States, observing the dot-com boom. He returned to Vienna and told René Berger, a friend whom he has known since he was eight, that he was going to be a tech investor. Berger teased him: “I said, ‘Yeah. They waited for you.’ ”

Berger was planning a career in social-democratic politics. He joined Wolff instead. Wolff discovered that the most popular Web site in Austria belonged to a free text-messaging service, called SMS.AT, which was run by a teen-ager named Markus Schwab, in Graz. Wolff drove to meet him in a Porsche. According to Wolff, Schwab agreed to sell Wolff half the business, as long as Wolff could find investors and Schwab could borrow the Porsche. Wolff raised the money. Schwab sold the rest of his stake soon afterward. “He got bought out for twenty million euros or so,” Wolff said. In 2006, after a series of mergers, the company was sold in a deal worth two hundred and seventy-five million dollars.

Investing in startups enabled Wolff to go back to motorsport. He became a manager of drivers, nurturing younger talent and learning the commercial side. “Toto told me, and I think it was 2000, in the kitchen of our office, ‘One day, I will own a Formula 1 team,’ ” Berger said. In 2003, one of Wolff’s clients, a Canadian driver named Bruno Spengler, signed with ASM, a French Formula 3 Euroseries team managed by Vasseur. ASM’s engines were made by a small high-performance-car company called HWA. It was named for Hans Werner Aufrecht, a venerable engineer who started making specially modified Mercedes sports cars in the late sixties.

In 2006, Wolff acquired a forty-nine-per-cent stake in HWA. Aufrecht, who is now eighty-three, loved listening to the younger man explain the future of the business. “He understands,” Aufrecht told me. “In German, we say, ‘*Er kann um die Ecke schauen*’—he can see round corners. . . . When he makes his strategy, he is not only looking straight forward. He is also looking what is coming from the side.”

In his thirties, Wolff went back to racing. “I wanted to prove to myself . . . could I have made it?” he told me. He was the runner-up in the Austrian Rally Championship. He won a twenty-four-hour race in Dubai. In the spring of 2009, he set out to beat the lap record for the Nordschleife, the north loop, and the longest section, of the Nürburgring. The track was taken off the Grand Prix circuit after Lauda’s crash. The Nordschleife is almost thirteen miles long and has around a hundred and seventy corners. The lap record for a GT car—the most powerful road car—was seven minutes and seven seconds. (Lauda drove a slightly longer version of the loop in six

minutes and fifty-eight seconds in a Formula 1 car in 1975.) Friends warned Wolff not to do it; Lauda, whom he had come to know, told him it was a waste of time.

On April 15, 2009, Wolff broke the record by five seconds on a warmup lap. He was driving a blue Porsche 911 RSR. He sensed that his tires were going. “This is where I broke my rule to take the calculated risk,” he said. He went for the record proper: “All the power on. All the funky stuff.” Wolff’s right rear tire burst on a section known as the Foxhole compression. The car hit a steel guardrail at a hundred and seventy-nine m.p.h. and careened down the track for more than two hundred metres. Video of the crash shows Wolff calmly turning off the ignition, undoing his harness, removing the steering wheel, and climbing out of the car. He stretched his back. He took off his gloves, stepped over the guardrail, and passed out.

He regained consciousness in the ambulance. He had a severe concussion and a broken vertebra. The force of the impact dislodged Wolff’s olfactory nerve. He couldn’t smell or taste for six months. He was thirty-seven years old. “That’s the moment where I realized that was not intelligent,” he said. Back in Vienna, Lauda had little sympathy. “You deserved that outcome,” he told Wolff. Aufrecht forbade him to race again. At the time, Susie was driving a Mercedes in the German touring-car championships. She had seen Wolff once or twice on the circuit, but they had never spoken. When news came in of Wolff’s crash, the other drivers on her team suggested that she call Wolff—the part owner of HWA—on their behalf, to wish him well. Wolff was recently separated. “It was supposed to be a ten-minute call that lasted an hour,” Susie said. They married in 2011.

Seven months after the accident, Wolff became an investor in Formula 1, buying a sixteen-per-cent stake in Williams Grand Prix Engineering. Williams, a British team led by Frank Williams, a charismatic veteran manager, had been a pioneering force in the sport in the eighties and nineties. Wolff’s role was financial, but he loved the hustle of the paddock, which was then ruled by a generation of aging *garagistes*, as the Europeans called them, mostly British, mostly self-made, mostly egotists: Williams, who was left in a wheelchair after a car crash in 1986; Ron Dennis, the owner and team principal of McLaren; Eddie Jordan, an Irish karting

champion who first put Michael Schumacher, the great driver of the nineties and two-thousands, in a Formula 1 car; Max Mosley, the long-term president of the F.I.A. and the son of the British fascist Oswald Mosley; and Bernie Ecclestone, a marketing genius who controlled the commercial rights of Formula 1 from 1978 to 2017. “These were iconic figureheads, larger than life,” Wolff said. “I find myself between these guys. But, in a way, for a long time under the radar.” In a sport rampant with grudges and betrayal, Adam Parr, Williams’s chief executive at the time, noticed that Wolff had a gift for avoiding conflict. “You throw a stone into that pond and it reverberates for decades,” Parr told me. “He was a very smooth pebble.”

In March, 2012, Parr resigned. Williams, who was turning seventy, asked Wolff to help run the team. “It was a vacuum,” Wolff recalled. For the first time, people looked to him on race weekends. “I could feel that they were following me with such an energy,” he said. “And I was trying to give the energy back.” In May, Pastor Maldonado, a Venezuelan, won the Grand Prix in Barcelona—Williams’s first win in almost eight years. By that time, Susie was on the team as a test driver. She and Wolff celebrated with tacos on the beach. “She said, ‘Remember this moment,’ ” Wolff said. “‘We’re Grand Prix winners for the first time.’ ”

That summer, Wolff took a call from Wolfgang Bernhard, who was on the board of Daimler, the parent company of Mercedes-Benz. In 2010, the Silver Arrows had returned to Formula 1 racing for the first time since 1955. Mercedes had acquired Brawn’s title-winning team from 2009, which had used Mercedes engines, and retained Brawn as team principal. Schumacher, who had driven for Brawn at Ferrari and was now forty years old, signed up to drive. But the team underperformed, finishing fourth two years in a row.

Bernhard asked Wolff to give a presentation to Dieter Zetsche, the chief executive of Daimler, on the company’s return to Formula 1. “You need more money,” Wolff told Zetsche. He showed that Mercedes was spending less on its engineering than Williams, which had finished five places behind in the championship. Brawn had also made the case for more investment, but had not been given the funds. In Wolff’s view, Brawn was undermined by his position as the previous owner of the team. “The problem was he

couldn't say why," Wolff said. "It was very difficult for Ross, who sold his business for a small fortune to Mercedes, to say, 'Actually, we need more money than I thought.' "

In January, 2013, Mercedes restructured the team. Wolff bought a thirty-per-cent stake, for thirty-eight million dollars, and became an executive director. Lauda also took a ten-per-cent share. The previous autumn, Lauda and Brawn had persuaded Hamilton to join Mercedes. With an increased budget and arguably the most talented, and unfulfilled, driver in the sport, Mercedes was ready to challenge for the championship. Initially, Brawn and Wolff worked well together. "He was always, you know, reasonably polite," Brawn said. In 2013, the Silver Arrows won three races, enjoying their best Grand Prix season since the fifties. But Brawn was conscious of Wolff's board-level connections at Mercedes and his own ebbing hunger for the sport. "I was on a decline, and he was on the ascent," Brawn told me. "I knew I was on a decline because my interest, the way I was racing, the way I was involved, was less motivated. He could see that." Brawn left Mercedes at the end of the year.

The standard criticism of Wolff is that it was Brawn who built Mercedes's winning machine and he merely steered it. (Lauda, whose red cap hangs on a set of headphones in the team garage, died in 2019.) Horner, the Red Bull boss, often refers disparagingly to Wolff's route into the sport. "He has a financial background and is very driven by what the balance sheet says," he said earlier this year. Brawn and Wolff remain civil and respectful of each other. "I once said to him, 'Toto, you've done a great job. You didn't drop the ball,'" Brawn said. "And he was quite offended. He said, 'Is that as much as you think of me?'"

Since 2017, Brawn has been a senior executive at Formula 1, the company that controls the commercial rights to the sport. He played a role in devising the onerous rule changes that tripped up Mercedes this season. I asked him what he made of Wolff's recent struggles. "He walked into a successful organization. He has now had his first trouble, his first major trouble," Brawn said. "These ups and downs are always the real measure." We talked about the misfiring W13. Brawn couldn't resist a dig at the investor who

supplanted him. “I mean, there’s so many clever people there,” Brawn said. “I’m astonished that they haven’t got on top of it.”

After Zandvoort, the Formula 1 teams moved to the Autodromo Nazionale Monza, in a former royal park outside Milan. The beach-party atmosphere of the Dutch seaside gave way to something graver and more reverential. The Autodromo was celebrating its centenary. At Monza’s first Grand Prix, in September, 1922, a young Alfred Neubauer prepared to drive an Austro-Daimler Sascha, with the race number 8. But, during a practice session, his teammate, Gregor Kuhn, flipped off the road and died. The team withdrew. One morning, I walked the inside of the track and heard a loudspeaker playing Rossini through the trees. Monza’s nickname is the Temple of Speed. People know its corners’ names—Curva del Serraglio, Parabolica—by heart. The course is famous for its long straights and fast chicanes, both of which were considered problematic for the W13.

On the Friday before the race, I watched the team practice. Wolff was in his usual position in the garage, at the end of a central bank of screens, which separated Hamilton’s and Russell’s cars. The drivers would burn out for a lap or three and then head back to the pit lane, where the mechanics deftly hoisted the W13s onto a low trolley, called a skateboard, and wheeled them into the garage to add fuel, change the tires, and make tiny adjustments. “This circuit is awfully bumpy as you go down to turn eight,” Russell said, when he came in. Hamilton asked for his front wing to be lowered. Lap times during practice don’t count, but everyone keeps an eye on them anyway. The Mercedes cars were running half a second slower than their rivals. “We’re getting pretty much destroyed by Red Bull, as you can imagine,” Riccardo Musconi, Russell’s race engineer, said.

Russell was the more vocal of the drivers. The rear of his car was sliding in the apex of his turns. He noted an odd brake migration in turn four. When the cars left the garage, mechanics patrolled the shiny gray floor and fussed at marks with cloths. The air was tangy with metallic smells. Sometimes an engine cover was removed and I glimpsed the bones and the gills of the impossible machine. Hamilton seemed subdued. A race penalty, caused by his crash in Belgium, meant that he would be starting toward the back of the grid. At the end of the day, he was a second off the pace. He asked if his car

had been damaged. “It felt like something was broken,” he said. “It was so slow.”

The question of Hamilton’s future hangs over the team. This season, he is sixth in the world-championship standings, two places behind Russell. He has driven Formula 1 cars powered by Mercedes for his entire career. His contract expires at the end of 2023, by which time he will be thirty-eight. No driver older than forty has won the world championship since Jack Brabham, in 1966. “He is still the greatest,” Wolff told me. Hamilton is friends with other age-defying stars: Serena Williams, Tom Brady, Tom Cruise. “He has a few years,” Wolff said. “We just need to make a fast car for him.”

The two have not always been close. “It took some time to get to know him well,” Hamilton has said, of Wolff. During the 2016 season, Hamilton and Nico Rosberg, the two Mercedes drivers, were fierce rivals for the world championship. They stopped speaking and crashed into each other twice in three months. At the end of the season, Rosberg quit the sport and Wolff summoned Hamilton to his house in Oxford. They sat in the kitchen. “We are not taking this fight overnight,” Wolff said. “You are the best driver, and I would like to have you in the car.” The men spoke for several hours.

“That was the beginning of the real relationship between us,” Wolff said. “Something annoys us. Boom. We pick up the phone.” Hamilton didn’t identify the conversation as a single turning point. “I think perhaps for him he was, like, Wow, this is the most open you’ve probably been,” he said. “It’s not easy for some people to be open about their feelings and what they’re going through. But I think after that then we definitely continued to grow.”

Hamilton has more celebrity than all the other drivers in Formula 1 put together. He has sidelines in music, fashion, and charitable foundations. In 2018, he worked on a fall collection with Tommy Hilfiger. He took part in a runway show in Shanghai, partied in New York, and arrived in Singapore two days later to take pole position and ended up winning the race. “Toto has been told, ‘Hey, look, this is not what drivers do. Look what Lewis is doing. He shouldn’t be doing that,’ ” Hamilton said. “And instead of blocking me, instead of restricting me and stunting my growth, and saying,

‘No, you can’t,’ we will have discussions about it.” Earlier this year, Hamilton performed ten skydives a week before the Australian Grand Prix. “As long as the performance is right, he can do anything,” Wolff said.

Hamilton is also the only Black driver in Formula 1. At a testing event in Barcelona, in 2008, he was taunted by fans in blackface. In the spring of 2020, after the killing of George Floyd, he went to Wolff. “I was, at the time, one of the few people of color within the team, and naturally it hit home for me,” Hamilton told me. “I just remember him being, like, ‘What can I do? How can we support you?’” Mercedes painted its silver cars black, to stand against racism, and kept them that way for the following season. Hamilton and Mercedes have established an initiative to improve racial diversity in motorsport—six per cent of the Mercedes team workforce is from a nonwhite background—but he continues to suffer discrimination. Last November, on a podcast, Nelson Piquet, a former world champion and the father of Verstappen’s girlfriend, used a racial slur to refer to Hamilton. Earlier this year, Hamilton, who has ear studs and a nose piercing, was threatened with punishment after the F.I.A. decided to enforce a long-standing ban on wearing jewelry while racing. Wolff has stood by him each time. “He’s conscious about the state of the world,” Hamilton said.

Wolff reveres his star: “How is a human being capable of achieving what he has achieved?” But the paddock is a merciless place. “You cannot win trust. You can only be given enough time to be trusted,” Wolff said, of his relationship with Hamilton. “We’re all very ambitious, highly skeptical —‘paranoid’ is too much of a word—animals. I don’t think you will ever have anyone in that environment saying, ‘I one hundred per cent trust you.’ Because I don’t think that exists.”

A few hours after practice, Wolff and I took a walk on the track. Night was falling. “Italy has this *dolce vita*,” he said. Sometimes Wolff speaks in clichés, which are nonetheless sincere. “Nothing is too serious. It doesn’t feel like anybody is living in a pressure cooker.” He paused to study the road. “What do you see? Tarmac? It’s not only tarmac—what we look at is the stones. Which stones? Are they polished? Are they rough?” Before each race, the teams carry out surface scans, to figure out how abrasive the track will be. “I love the science,” Wolff said.

We made our way to the course's old Parabolica turn, which fell out of use in the sixties, after one crash too many. Drivers used to take the concrete bank, which has a maximum steepness of thirty-eight degrees, at speeds approaching a hundred and eighty m.p.h. Wolff took off his loafers and headed for the top but became stranded halfway up, hanging on to a piece of guardrail. He challenged me to climb the bank, and I found myself scrambling up. He is the kind of person you want to please. On the way back, we talked about Wolff's recent fame, from the Netflix series, which he enjoys. At last year's U.S. Grand Prix, a young woman threw herself through the open window of his car, to get her picture taken. Wolff had recently read an article about selfies. "It is like fishing," he said. "You put it on social media, it is like showing your fish. It is nothing to do with the fish." Less than a minute later, a couple of Germans spotted Wolff and begged him for a picture. "*Mein Gott! Mein Gott!*" one called out, crouching low in disbelief. Wolff flashed a smile in the dark.

The Mercedes cars started the Italian Grand Prix at opposite ends of the grid. Hamilton was in nineteenth position, and Russell, who benefitted from penalties applied to other drivers, was in second. Because the W13 was slower than the Red Bull and the Ferrari cars, the race simulations did not see any way for the team to win. Russell was predicted to slip from second to third, and Hamilton, at best, could finish fourth. Even though Verstappen was starting from seventh on the grid, he appeared unstoppable. "He's either going to crash . . . or he's going to win the race. That's the reality," Russell said during the pre-race strategy call.

Russell was skeptical about starting on soft tires, which he feared would degrade in the heat. "My gut's telling me that the deg today is going to be worse," he said. Vowles, the team's chief strategist, reminded him that every tire permutation had been modelled overnight. "Everything you're debating, George . . . it's done about a hundred thousand times in a simulation," he said. Afterward, Wolff showed me that he had been texting Russell during the meeting, encouraging him to push the engineers. "It's tough love," he said. "The driver challenges the engineer, and the other way around." He wanted Russell to feel invested in the plan. "The psychological aspect is something that the engineers are not calibrated to think of. And they shouldn't," Wolff said. "That is my part."



"Oh, it's not haunted—it's just really old and nothing works."
Cartoon by Sarah Kempa

The Frecce Tricolori—the aerobatic display team of the Italian Air Force—thundered over the starting grid, trailing green, red, and white smoke, with an Airbus 350 thrown in for good measure. If anything, the race in Monza followed the computer modelling even closer than it had in Zandvoort. Verstappen hit the front on lap twelve and never looked back. Russell managed to keep the W13 in touch with the faster cars of Red Bull and Ferrari. “Clever driving,” Wolff murmured. Hamilton picked off the slower cars in the field with ease. Afterward, he said the race reminded him of go-karting as a child. He finished fifth. With six laps to go, Daniel Ricciardo’s McLaren broke down with an oil leak, bringing out the safety car. The race officials followed standard procedure, unlike in Abu Dhabi, and the Grand Prix finished in an orderly, undramatic fashion. Russell came in third. Verstappen moved a hundred and sixteen points clear in the world-championship standings. He secured the title two races later, in Japan.

When the cars crossed the line, Wolff stayed at his desk. Charles Leclerc, a young Monégasque driver for Ferrari, finished second, which prompted the *tifosi*—Ferrari’s hard-core fans—to run onto the track. The Mercedes garage emptied, as mechanics went to stand in the ticker tape and celebrate with Russell, who was on the podium for the second week in a row. But Wolff seemed reluctant to move. At the end of the 2019 season, he had

considered stepping down as team principal. Mercedes had won a sixth consecutive title—matching the previous record. “It was always meant to be a project,” he told me. “It’s like my investments. You buy and you sell. The exit is the reason why I’m doing all that.” He gave himself a year to decide. The pandemic intervened. Wolff was torn. He called Aufrecht. “He was really, really upset. He was saying, ‘What shall I do? And what the hell am I doing and why?’ ” the older man recalled. “I told him, ‘Toto, that’s your life. You have to do it.’ ”

When he decided to continue, Wolff gave up an option to sell his shares. The sense of commitment was novel, and unnerving. “It wasn’t a project anymore,” he said. “We said, ‘We want to keep this,’ Mercedes and I.” He took the risk of staying, and losing. He yielded a measure of control. While the celebrations continued in Monza, Wolff remained in his chair. The finishing positions of the Mercedes drivers glowed in a column of figures on his screen. “It just cements we are third on the road at the moment,” Wolff said. “I would just like us to be back in the front.” I asked Wolff if he could imagine ever being happy with third, or even fifth. “No,” he said. “Sport is very honest and sometimes maybe things don’t turn as quickly as you want.” There was no disaster. There was next year’s car. Mercedes, and he, would win again. “We’re not wobbling, you know,” Hamilton said. “We’re not.” But this waiting was death. ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated Charles Leclerc’s nationality and incorrectly described the starting lights of a Grand Prix race.

By Jill Lepore

By Evan Osnos

By Sarah Larson

By Susan B. Glasser

The Theatre

- “[Topdog/Underdog,” Back on Broadway, Still Has Its Eye on the American Long Con](#)

“Topdog/Underdog,” Back on Broadway, Still Has Its Eye on the American Long Con

The director Kenny Leon puts a realistic spin on Suzan-Lori Parks’s allegorical tour de force.

By [Helen Shaw](#)



A man walks into a dingy apartment wearing a big, down-filled coat. He’s bundled up against the cold, or so we think. But soon he’s doing a thief’s striptease: there’s a whole boosted suit under there, tags and all. When he turns around, we see another suit, still on its hanger, dangling down his back. He keeps unwrapping himself, finding two shirts, two jackets, two pairs of pants, two belts. Then—just when we think he couldn’t possibly be hiding anything else—he pulls out two ties.

“Topdog/Underdog,” Suzan-Lori Parks’s tour de force, wears its own puffy coat: it’s a poetic Passion play in which the metaphorical crucifix is American history, dressed as a realistic two-hander about brotherly one-upmanship. Every image smuggled inside is some kind of double or

inversion or mirror. This is true in a larger sense as well: the often superb Broadway revival now at the Golden can't help being a through-the-looking-glass version of the play's original incarnation, the one that premiered at the Public in 2001 and moved to Broadway in 2002. Expectations are high. Yahya Abdul-Mateen II and Corey Hawkins are stepping into iconic roles, which were made famous—and are still deeply stamped—by Yasiin Bey (known then as Mos Def) and Jeffrey Wright.

Gone is the dark fun-house quality of George C. Wolfe's now legendary production, replaced by an engrossingly believable, even naturalistic portrait of Black men at their limits. Hawkins plays the slippery, haunted older brother, Lincoln; Abdul-Mateen is the ambitious, suit-snatching Booth. Their names tether them psychically to the historical Lincoln and Booth, but the brothers are also locked in their own kind of existential struggle. As they eat Chinese food, banter about women who left them, and add up their meagre accounts, each one takes a turn as the top dog, then the underdog, then the top dog again. It's the "first move that separates thuh Player from thuh Played," Lincoln, who trained his eye for suckers back when he was hustling three-card monte, says. But whose move is really first, when the American long con started hundreds of years ago?

In the show's twisting, torrential language—it moves like white water—Parks joins a keen social insight reminiscent of James Baldwin's (he was the first person to tell her to write plays, when she was a student at Mount Holyoke) with her own jazz-inflected dramaturgy. She exerts rhythmic control from inside the text, distinguishing between "rests" (which indicate "take a little time") and "spells" (which are longer and have "an architectural look"):

Lincoln:

(Rest)

Goodnight.

Lincoln:

Booth:

Lincoln:

Booth:

Lincoln:

Booth:

Lincoln: You can hustle 3-card monte without me you know.

Parks was the first Black woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for drama, and, in the two decades since, her prize-winning play has become a classic. The New York theatre scene is very different now from what it was in 2002, when she was the only Black writer with a play on Broadway, and she, too, is different—a Great Figure instead of a bomb-thrower. We’re currently in the middle of a Parks-a-palooza: later this fall, she’ll perform in her new work, “Plays for the Plague Year,” a sort of bereavement cabaret, at Joe’s Pub; then, in the winter, her musical adaptation of “The Harder They Come” will débüt at the Public, where she’s been in residence since 2008.

The director of “Topdog,” Kenny Leon—who was nominated for a Tony for directing the sensitive 2020 revival of “A Soldier’s Play”—emphasizes the dialogue’s overheard quality, the shoot-the-shit ease that the brothers have together. His work with the actors is light but sure. Abdul-Mateen—swaggering, buoyant, easily offended—reacts behind the beat, maintaining his optimism for a minute after bad news comes through. Hawkins, on the other hand, stays just ahead of the moment, his shoulders crumpling slightly, like a card that’s been thumbed too much, even when the brothers seem to be getting along. They are both wonderful, but Hawkins gives a sly, peekaboo performance that rolls up next to you like a grenade.

Explosive realism, though, is only one half of the script’s double act. Lincoln’s day job is to dress up as his eponym at an arcade, smearing on whiteface and donning an old-timey coat and a stovepipe hat, all so that fun-seekers can “assassinate” him with blanks. Lincoln is a professional “faux-father”—a joke that appears in “The America Play,” another drama that Parks wrote about a Black Abraham Lincoln impersonator. Long after the character’s first, creepy entrance in his arcade costume, Honest Abe stays in our thoughts—he’s the face on every penny that anybody ever earned, the reminder of a freedom that came with conditions.

Parks wants us seeing double, so she fills her text with references to symmetrical or mirrored images, such as a pair of black cards in some street patter that Booth practices (“Ima show you thuh cards: 2 black cards but

only one heart”) and a shiny, dented fuse box where Lincoln can see the reflections of his arcade assassins coming up behind him.

Booth: Yr Best Customer, he come in today?

Lincoln: Oh, yeah, he was there.

Booth: He shoot you?

Lincoln: He shot Honest Abe, yeah.

Booth: He talk to you?

Lincoln: In a whisper. Shoots on the left whispers on the right.

Booth: Whatd he say this time?

Lincoln: “Does thuh show stop when no ones watching or does thuh show go on?”

In case you were wondering if these doomed brothers are in the world of allegory, Arnulfo Maldonado’s set design includes a sepia-toned American-flag curtain that lifts to show us Booth’s crummy room, its single bed, and the red recliner where Lincoln sleeps. Golden scalloped drapes that frame the proscenium extend all the way around and behind the two walls of the set. When the flag curtain rises, the room rotates slightly toward us, as though it were just finishing a turn on a pedestal. Cars in showrooms get luxurious, glittering backdrops like this; so do trophies.

When it comes to what’s *in* that room, though, Leon keeps the metaphor stuff tidied away. In his scene work, Leon isn’t interested in the grotesque or the uncanny, or in imparting a sense of something we cannot see. Allen Lee Hughes has his lights rise and fall on the men (it is always night, but when, say, Lincoln sings, he gets a spot), yet he doesn’t go stark and expressionistic with them, the way Scott Zielinski did twenty years ago. Leon has poured his energy into the actors and into making their interactions unhurried, unpretentious. The play is bleakly funny, but Leon makes sure that it’s *funny* funny, true to the moment, up to the minute. Abdul-Mateen and Hawkins certainly give performances that are cinematically fine-grained, but focussing only on their realism and plausibility leaves the work’s other stylistic cards unplayed. Leon’s transitions are hasty and a little awkward, and he misses the way the show should invoke—especially in its final moments—an unseen force, some demonic mill somewhere, grinding away at fate.

You'll therefore need to listen, rather than watch, for the way the boundaries of Parks's reality keep curving back on themselves. Much of what the two men say about what's happening in the rest of their lives is unreliable, based in fantasy or in lies. The scholar Michael LeMahieu has argued that the Best Customer, the one who whispers in Lincoln's ear, might be Booth. (I can believe it. Parks loves making points with wordplay, and when Booth asks, "Hes a brother, right?," our Spidey senses should ping.) Whether Leon explores it or not, there's a clear intimation that we're seeing something more than the ruin of one small family. America won't let these men out; Emancipation won't let these men out; the grim, violent preoccupation with male potency won't let these men out. Under that big, puffy coat, there is a pair of mirrors for all of us. That's how you get a mise en abyme, after all—you point two mirrors at each other, and instead of showing you an image they reveal an infinity stretching into the dark. ♦

By Andrew Marantz

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