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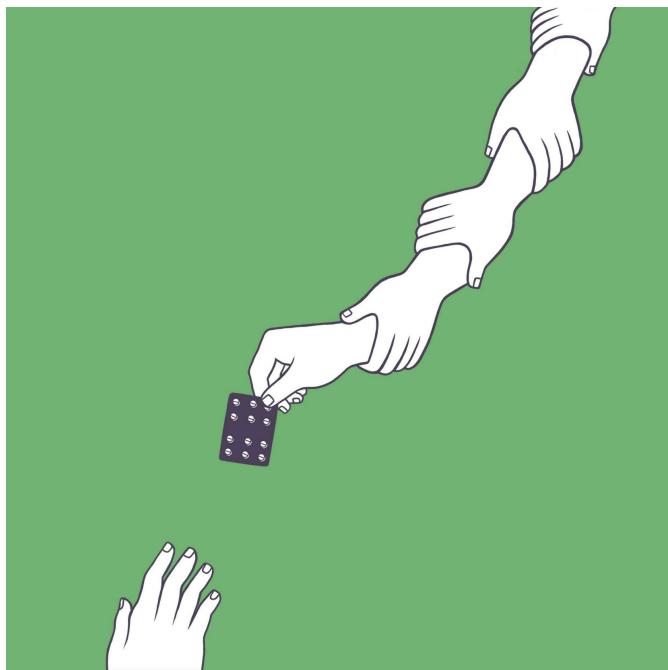
A Reporter at Large

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The Post-Roe Abortion Underground

A multigenerational network of activists is getting abortion pills across the Mexican border to Americans.

By [Stephania Taladrid](#)



The handoff was planned for late afternoon on a weekday, at an underused trailhead in a Texas park. The young woman carrying the pills, whom I'll call Anna, arrived in advance of the designated time, as was her habit, to throw off anyone who might try to use her license plates to trace her identity. She felt slightly absurd in her disguise—sun hat, oversized sunglasses, plain black mask. But the pills in her pocket were used to induce abortions, and in Texas, her home state, their distribution now required such subterfuge, along with burner phones and the encrypted messaging app Signal. Since late June, when the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, Texas and thirteen other states had effectively banned abortion, and more were sure to follow. In some of the states, laws that originated as far back as the nineteenth century had been restored. Providing the tools for an abortion in Texas had become a felony that could lead to years in prison, and a fellow-citizen could sue Anna and collect upward of ten thousand dollars for every abortion she was found to abet.

Anna wasn't a fainthearted woman—someone who had recently approached her for pills noted her “cottage-core vibes” and steely calm—but she wasn't reckless, either. She and other women defying abortion bans had turned to a model developed by Verónica Cruz, a prominent Mexican activist. Until last year, abortion was considered a crime in most of Mexico, the second-biggest Catholic country in the world, and women there had become adept at providing safe abortions in secrecy. (Given the legal exposure, pseudonyms have been used for Anna and other American women who let me into their underground networks.)

By the time the pregnant woman for whom Anna was waiting walked up, the trailhead was quiet enough to make the chirping of birds seem jarring. As Anna pulled a plastic bag of pills from her pocket and settled across from the pregnant woman at a picnic table, she registered the fear on the woman's face. Her distress, as Anna understood it, was less about a breach of Texas law than about the possibility that her husband, who was violent, might find out what she was doing. Hands shaking, the woman told Anna that she was already raising three children and had been trying to save enough money to remove them from a dangerous home. The prospect of having another child, she said, was like “getting a death sentence.” She couldn't vanish from her household for a day without explanation, travel to a state where abortion is legal, and pay seven hundred dollars to a doctor for a prescription. Anna's pills, which were free, were her best option. Taking the baggie and some instructions on how to take the medication, the woman thanked Anna and fled the park, hoping that her husband would never realize she'd been gone.

Hear from women distributing abortion medication illegally, on The New Yorker Radio Hour.

The town of San Miguel de Allende, in central Mexico, is known as the birthplace of legendary independence leaders. It is just as famous for its charm: cobblestone streets, Baroque churches, bright houses, and lively cantinas once frequented by Mexican muralists and Beat poets. Some Americans visit for a week and decide to stay. Among those expats is Liz, a retired Southern woman in her seventies. On the morning of June 24th, as she was making coffee in a kitchen where photographs of her great-grandchildren covered the fridge, she heard on the radio that the constitutional right to abortion in the United States had ended. She

maneuvered her walker to a nearby chair and sank down. She felt as she had as a child, in a house by the sea where she'd once lived, when a hurricane she'd been dreading made landfall. It was awful, yes, but knowing what was coming had given her a chance to gather her courage and make a plan.

Five years earlier, Liz had met Verónica Cruz, who runs a nonprofit called Las Libres—the Free Ones—out of the city of Guanajuato, some fifty miles west of San Miguel. At the time, Cruz was defying Mexican law by helping women—mostly poor women—abort at home. In part because activists like Cruz successfully reduced the stigma of abortion, the Supreme Court of Mexico decriminalized it in September, 2021. That same month, Texas moved in the opposite direction: a state law known as S.B. 8 banned nearly all abortions past the sixth week. Since then, Cruz had widened her remit, supplying free abortion pills to undocumented women in Texas.

Liz figured that, with Roe overturned and states from Arkansas to South Dakota implementing abortion restrictions, the demand for Mexican abortion pills would soar. If she lacked Cruz's decades of experience working on the cusp between the lawful and the criminal, she was neither too old nor too diminished to take a risk. She picked up the phone to call Cruz and then some friends, to find out which of them would be game to join an underground network.

Locals called expats like Liz “the Old Hippies,” in English. In early July, weeks after the U.S. Supreme Court’s Dobbs decision negated Roe, six of them joined Liz on her terrace for hibiscus tea and a talk with Cruz. Most of the Americans were over sixty and recalled what life was like before the 1973 Roe ruling. One tactic Liz remembered for ending an unwanted pregnancy was to alternate between a tub of ice-cold water and a tub as scalding as you could bear it. Those who tried this method suffered, then usually had a baby anyway. Liz had a baby, too, as a teen-ager. Although she had cheered when the Roe decision was announced, knowing how many lives it would change, it had come too late to change hers.

Cruz, the fifty-one-year-old daughter of farmers, has appraising dark eyes and a booming voice, and is direct by nature. She asked the Old Hippies if they would raise money and buy pills in Mexico that would be distributed

across the border. Cruz paused to let an Old Hippie translate for those whose Spanish was weak.

Medication abortion in the United States is typically a two-day process that involves taking mifepristone, which blocks progesterone, and misoprostol, which causes uterine contractions. The Food and Drug Administration approves the use of this two-pill regimen under a doctor's supervision up until the tenth week of pregnancy. A prescription, which can be obtained in states where abortion is legal, is required. In Mexico, Cruz explained, misoprostol is sold over the counter. Mifepristone still requires a prescription, but Cruz had found suppliers, and when she ran short she relied solely on misoprostol, which can cause an abortion on its own.



"You really should see a therapist about your suggestion that I see a therapist."
Cartoon by Liana Finck

Immediately after Dobbs, Cruz said, her existing crew of volunteers had slipped enough medication across the border to help two thousand American women have abortions. If the Old Hippies agreed to aid distributors in abortion-ban states, Cruz told them, Las Libres could help many more women. Each cell in the supply chain would know little about the other cells—safer for everyone that way.

Several Old Hippies wondered aloud about consequences, as the legal terrain was decidedly unsettled. In Louisiana, anyone who “knowingly performs” a medication abortion is subject to a five-year prison sentence and a fifty-thousand-dollar fine. In Oklahoma, it’s a ten-year sentence and a hundred thousand dollar fine. More such laws were likely to come, although no criminal convictions had yet been reported. If charged, an Old Hippie told Cruz, they might end up at the mercy of a district attorney in, say, Mississippi, facing years of jail time. But Liz was an optimist—“You have to be,” she always said—and by meeting’s end everyone in the room had signed on to her plan.

To avoid what Liz called the “gringo price,” she recruited her housekeeper to call more than two dozen pharmacies in San Miguel and find out what they had in stock, at what cost. Then the Old Hippies tried to buy all the pills they could. One pharmacist agreed to sell more than a hundred boxes but cancelled the order at the last minute without explanation. A second pharmacist demanded a prescription for misoprostol, something not required by Mexican law; an Old Hippie had to persuade her doctor to prescribe it for an ulcer, a condition that she didn’t really have but for which the drug was also used. It was a relief when a third pharmacist agreed to sell more than a hundred and fifty boxes with no questions asked.

Many of the pickups were handled by Diana, another Old Hippie, who at pharmacies gravitated to younger female clerks—less judgmental about her purchases, perhaps, than older men. On the day that she unpacked the last of the hundred and fifty boxes on her kitchen counter, she burst into tears. Every box contained more than enough pills for two abortions, and she saw in the stockpile before her hundreds of younger women who would be helped. “All of a sudden,” Diana said, “I realized what we’re all doing.” Those boxes just needed to get to the States, but that part of the relay would be left to others, as Diana, Liz, and other Old Hippies planned their next buy.

Six weeks later, sitting at a long table in a house on a hill in Guanajuato, Cruz counselled a woman in Georgia by phone while responding to a text from Arkansas: “I would like help with a medication.” A window behind Cruz overlooked a lemon grove, and around the table were colleagues—

some social workers, some lawyers, most of them young—fielding questions from pregnant women on both sides of the border. The atmosphere was convivial, and taped on one wall was a phonetic cheat sheet for those with limited English: “*Jai, dis is Las Libres. Can ay jelp iu?*”

Cruz’s work had long been funded by American nonprofits, and after Dobbs the phone number of her organization was passed around by informal networks of activists. Cruz said that she was now getting fifty requests a day from the U.S. for abortion pills. Some women created fake profiles on Instagram to get in touch with her, or sent messages on WhatsApp or Signal, or called her in the middle of the night.

The evasiveness and fear that she sensed when communicating with Americans reminded her of how Mexican women spoke of abortion when she was growing up. Her mother worked on a farm, harvesting corn, and the only way she and her girlfriends alluded to abortion and miscarriage was with the expression *malas camas*—“bad beds.” Such euphemisms were necessary in part because women in the state of Guanajuato could face up to three years in prison for ending a pregnancy, and so could the medical personnel who assisted them. Before last year’s Mexican Supreme Court decision, abortion, in all cases except for rape, was deemed a criminal act in Guanajuato, where state law presumed that life began at the moment of conception. There is no reliable estimate of how many women died annually from secret abortions; authorities and family members often blamed the deaths on infection or hemorrhage.

In 1995, Cruz had completed training as a social worker and was helping Indigenous farmers improve their crop yields and distribution when, in a coffee shop, she heard an older woman discussing abortion in a way she hadn’t heard in school. The woman, who had attended a United Nations conference on reproductive rights, was speaking about abortion unapologetically, as a matter of public health that disproportionately affected poor women and curtailed their rights. Cruz was surprised, and energized.

Word had been getting out, first in Brazil and then across Latin America, about an expensive American drug that allowed a person to end a pregnancy at home. Manufactured by Pfizer under the name Cytotec and

otherwise known as misoprostol, it was available over the counter in Mexico to treat gastric ulcers—to this day, the only use of the drug that Pfizer supports. (“The industry has never been an ally of women’s struggles,” said Raffaela Schiavon, a respected obstetrician-gynecologist in Mexico City.) Cytotec came in boxes of twenty-eight pills. Pregnant women who could afford it consulted other women who had had abortions and calibrated the dosage that would suit their bodies and stages of pregnancy. Some women took four or eight pills orally, and others inserted pills vaginally. When the abortions were done, Cruz had noticed, they’d typically toss out the remainder of the pills—a small fact that would later change the course of her work.

Mexican supporters of abortion rights were, and remain, up against a coalition of conservative politicians and leaders of the Catholic Church. When, in 2000, Guanajuato state legislators voted to make abortion illegal even for rape victims, subjecting them to years in prison, Cruz joined other activists to protest. But she wanted to do more than march on a statehouse—she wanted to make sure that rape victims could still get abortions. She started Las Libres and began asking those who bought boxes of misoprostol for an abortion to set aside the remainder of the pills for women who had been raped. Cruz recalled, “We said, ‘Keep them, and next time someone comes to us you’ll give them the pills and talk about your experience.’ ” The idea was to make abortion not just more accessible but less frightening. A pregnant woman could meet someone who had survived an abortion and gone on with her life. Cruz called the woman who shared her pills and her experience an *acompañante*—a person who accompanies another.

Eventually, opposition to the new state law became so great that the governor vetoed it, at which point Cruz decided to take her activism a step further and help women in Guanajuato who wanted an abortion for any reason at all. The *acompañantes* she recruited would bring pills and tips about how to use them, providing comfort and answering questions during the abortion process. Because the *acompañante* figure did not explicitly appear in Mexican criminal codes, Cruz argued that such a person would be immune to prosecution.

According to Georgina Sánchez, an academic at El Colegio de la Frontera Sur who has researched medication abortion in Mexico, some feminists were skeptical about the *acompañamiento* model. Ordinary citizens would have to shoulder the state's responsibility to provide health care to women, and *acompañantes* would become vulnerable to the whims of authorities. They, and Cruz, might end up in jail. "Me being me," Cruz recalled, "I told them, 'Well, you'll have to get me out!'" The way Cruz saw it, women had a moral duty to stand up for one another when the state failed to guarantee their rights.

"At first, women would come to us and say, under their breath, 'I need an abortion,'" Cruz told me. But she began convening meetings in bars and cafés, where she spoke emphatically about abortion as a right to be asserted, not a clandestine affair. "It was our way of saying, 'Don't be afraid. You have nothing to be ashamed of,'" Cruz said, adding, "There were times when the waitresses would come by afterward and say, 'How did you say one takes the pills?'"

The *acompañante* movement grew, and so did Cruz's influence. Working with a team of lawyers, she visited ten jails in the state of Guanajuato, in search of women being held for abortion-related crimes. They found nine women charged with infanticide when circumstances suggested miscarriage or other birth complications. Most of the women had been given sentences ranging from twenty-five to thirty years and had already spent more than four years behind bars. Javier Cruz Angulo, a criminal lawyer who worked with Cruz, said that not all of them could read or write, and that "none of them fully understood why they had been prosecuted." In 2010, Las Libres finally helped secure the release of all nine women, and Cruz went on to investigate similar convictions in other states.

In those states and elsewhere in Mexico, grassroots organizations were also campaigning for the liberalization of abortion laws. The capital, Mexico City, had already decriminalized abortion, in 2007. After sustained campaigns, the state of Oaxaca followed, in 2019, and in 2021 so did Hidalgo and Veracruz—just before the Supreme Court declared the criminalizing of abortion unconstitutional. "We are all pro-life," the chief justice, Arturo Zaldívar, said, "only some of us are in favor of allowing

women to live a life in which their dignity is respected, and they can exercise their rights fully.” The evening of the decision, which was unanimous, a 7.1-magnitude earthquake shook the capital—to some anti-abortionists, a sign of divine wrath.

In the following months, after S.B. 8 took effect in Texas and Cruz began sharing pills with activists there, she came to understand that she and some of her U.S. colleagues differed in their idea of what being an *acompañante* entailed. The Americans had been driving people to clinics and helping pay for the procedure for years; now they were planning to travel farther, to states with fewer restrictions. The Mexicans’ experience of aiding women had little to do with clinics. Rather, their model was one that Cruz believed her American contacts would need in the years ahead: a process of aborting that, in addition to being medically safe and effective (as a study of the *acompañamiento* practice in Argentina and Nigeria, published in *The Lancet Global Health*, had recently found it to be), also minimized the risk of criminal prosecution. If women avoided doctors and medical establishments and followed the blueprint of Las Libres, Cruz said, “there wouldn’t be a single trace. If the woman getting the abortion kept it to herself, no one would ever find out.”



I was going to gnaw on those bones!
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

In the Americas, one of the privileges of advanced age is getting the benefit of the doubt at security checkpoints. The first person to run the Old Hippies' pills over the border was a gray-maned, soft-spoken Social Security recipient named Rosie. She would pave the way for the second border crosser, an octogenarian.

When Rosie first met Cruz, she was too intimidated to speak; the activist, she said, seemed "like a rock star to me." But she returned home from the meeting brimming with purpose. Pouring her husband a glass of red wine, she said, "Honey, I'm going to be sneaking some pills across the border." Her husband did not take this news calmly. What if the Texas governor, Greg Abbott, decided to make an example out of some grandma? What if all their savings went toward hiring lawyers and bailing Rosie out of jail? "Our retirement money is limited," he told her. "What the heck are you doing?" Her kids, mercifully, were indifferent. "They don't take their parents very seriously," Rosie explained. No matter. Because she happened to reside in Mexico, she had an opportunity to change the lives, and maybe even save the lives, of younger women. "I have never felt so important," she said.

Rosie's specific assignment was to pick up a cache of pills, travel across the border, and mail them to a volunteer in Texas, who, in turn, would deliver the pills to women who had asked for them. Rosie had been told that crossing the border was necessary because packages sent from within the United States receive less scrutiny than those sent from abroad. Of course, U.S. Customs and Border Protection has its own rules and levels of scrutiny for goods entering the country. It requires that any medication brought into the U.S. have a doctor's note or prescription and tells travellers not to carry more than a ninety-day supply.

Rosie had been crossing the border for twenty years, and, as she planned her first journey with abortion pills, she realized that although Border Patrol agents had sometimes searched her luggage and X-rayed her car, they had never opened her toiletry kit. It was there that she tucked two plastic bottles containing three hundred and thirty-six pills of misoprostol. She placed the kit in an overnight bag, said goodbye to her husband, got in her pickup truck, and headed to Texas.

Not long afterward, she walked into a post office, the sound of rattling accompanying each step—hundreds of pills in plastic bottles, seeming to announce themselves from her bag. Unnerved by the noise, she packed the pill bottles into a box, approached a clerk at the counter, and reflexively pulled out a credit card to pay the postage. As the printer spat out her receipt, it dawned on her that she'd created the sort of paper trail illicit suppliers like herself were supposed to avoid.

The recipient of the box was a Las Libres associate elsewhere in Texas, and Rosie had left the return address blank. Back home, searching the Internet, she learned that the lack of a return address was a red flag to postal inspectors—"like the kind of thing a drug dealer would send," she said. Mailing pills within Texas to facilitate a self-induced abortion there is a felony punishable by up to two years in prison. If the pills eventually wound up in Mississippi, she could face up to five years in prison and additional charges for racketeering.

Two days later, the package arrived safely at its destination, and only then was Rosie able to sleep. Waking up the following morning, she wanted to do it again. Before long, her husband would be raising money for misoprostol buys, and associates in the syndicate would be referring to her by the nickname Pills on Wheels.

Three months in, the Old Hippies of San Miguel de Allende had raised ten thousand dollars to buy abortion pills—a decent haul, in the estimation of Liz, the great-grandmother, given that they had to persuade people to part with their money while sharing little about what would be done with it. Keeping donors ignorant was crucial because, post-Roe, giving money to a network like theirs could be construed as a crime.

The end of Roe had emboldened conservative activists and politicians in the U.S. After the court ruling, the Department of Health and Human Services assured doctors from states where bans had taken effect that they would not face prosecution under federal law for performing an abortion when the mother's life was on the line—a decision that prompted Ken Paxton, the attorney general of Texas, to sue the federal government.

Now that clinics in abortion-ban states had closed, conservative activists were targeting nonprofits that gave women money to travel for the procedure. These funds were now “criminal organizations,” in the words of Briscoe Cain, a Texas state congressman. As Mary Ziegler, a professor of law at the University of California at Davis, points out, one lesson of S.B. 8 is that a threat of legal consequences is enough to empty a state of abortion providers, regardless of whether there are prosecutions. This summer, many abortion funds in Texas ceased operation.

Conservative lawmakers were also threatening private companies, among them Lyft, that promised to reimburse employees for out-of-state travel to get abortions. Writing to an international law firm, Sidley Austin, which has offices in Houston and Dallas, eleven legislators warned it not to help employees “murder their unborn children.” Texas criminal prohibitions, the legislators said, extended to medication abortions, “even if the drugs were dispensed by an out-of-state abortionist.”

One of the best-known attempts to prosecute a ring of abortion providers in the United States occurred in 1972, when seven women belonging to a group known as the Jane Collective were arrested in Chicago. Members of the collective, which evolved from the efforts of a University of Chicago student to help a friend’s sister secure an underground abortion, lacked medical training; however, they had taught themselves to do the procedure according to clinical safety standards. Their hope was to improve the odds of pregnant women surviving what the historian Alicia Gutierrez-Romine calls “abortion roulette.” For most of the last century, women of means who sought to end a pregnancy turned to obstetricians and gynecologists who, for a steep price, performed illegal abortions on the side, while women with fewer resources risked having a vital organ punctured or bleeding to death. The Janes had done thousands of abortions in the years before the seven women were arrested. Charged with performing and conspiring to perform abortions, each of them faced a sentence of more than a hundred years in prison if convicted. However, when Roe was announced, in January, 1973, the charges against them were dropped.

It’s not yet clear whether, after Dobbs, authorities will choose to prosecute people for involvement in networks like Cruz’s. Amy O’Donnell, a

spokesperson for the Texas Alliance for Life, argues that state law already allows for the extradition on felony charges of those who bring abortion drugs into Texas from other states. However, extradition of people who reside outside the country is a federal matter and, she speculates, would likely not happen without the election of a President with anti-abortion views.

Even within Texas and other states with strong laws against abortion facilitators, the politics of enforcing penalties is complex, in part because the belief that abortion equals murder doesn't appear to be widespread. A survey released last month found that, among Texas voters, sixty per cent favored abortion being "available in all or most cases," while only ten per cent supported banning abortion completely. In this political context, David Donatti, a civil-rights attorney at the A.C.L.U. of Texas, says, "conservative legislators would benefit just as much from pretending no abortions are happening as they would from prosecuting abortions."

Early on in her American mission, trying to assess the sorts of risks volunteers might encounter crossing the border with pills, Verónica Cruz arranged a trial run. Five hundred pills arrived in Texas unhindered. Her methods for determining whether the people she chose to make the runs were sincere and not setting her up for trouble were somewhat less concrete. She made those decisions, she said, "by feeling." When Claire, a California woman who spent part of the year in Mexico, heard about the network and contacted Cruz about becoming a pill runner, she didn't get an assignment immediately. Instead, Cruz came to her house in San Miguel and spent hours "sniffing me out," Claire said. Claire didn't know about the Old Hippies and didn't need to. As Cruz said once she came to trust Claire, one person could be a network of her own.

Claire slipped her first batch of pills into the States in May, and mailed packages to women all over the country. Three months later, shortly before her second run, she dashed through an artisan market, past a woman charring corn over an open flame, to a stall that sold flower-shaped earrings crafted by Huichol people in the Sierra Madre mountains. Each piece was made of colorful glass beads.



"Sorry for the short notice, but I'm actually destroying New York this evening—are you around for a drink?"
Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein

"Hola, ¿cuánto cuesta? "

"Cincuenta pesos."

Two dollars and fifty cents. Paying in cash, she bought twenty pairs of earrings—sunflowers, camellias, roses—to camouflage the abortion pills she'd be bringing back to the U.S. She would put the earrings in cardboard jewelry boxes that had a layer of cotton padding. The earrings would go on top of the cotton, and the pills would be embedded inside, the better to keep a husband or parent from finding them. But Claire, who had had two abortions herself, liked the idea of placing earrings in every package for reasons other than discretion. "It's so stressful to be pregnant when you don't want to be," she said. "You have all these hormones going, you don't like the way your body feels, you just want it to be over, and so I thought, It'd be nice to get a pair of earrings when you're in that kind of mood. You know, an abortion and a present!"

She made her way out of the market, past portable shrines for the Virgin of Guadalupe and hearts of blown glass, and ran home, where Cruz was waiting at her door, navy-blue backpack in hand. "Little earrings," Claire called out, "*para las chicas!*"

At the kitchen counter, Cruz unzipped the backpack and pulled out blister packs of mifepristone and misoprostol, and Claire took a pair of scissors from a drawer. They cut open each of the packs, combining six pills of misoprostol with one of mifepristone—usually sufficient for one abortion. Each envelope would also contain instructions on the abortion process which Cruz and Claire had written together. The notes ended, “Hugs, the pill fairy.”

The pills that Claire and other fairies would be sending remained cheaper to obtain from a Mexican pharmacy than from a doctor in the U.S. But, after Dobbs, the price of a box of Pfizer pills in several establishments in San Miguel de Allende had markedly increased. In one pharmacy, the price rose from about two thousand pesos per box to more than three thousand, or from roughly a hundred dollars to a hundred and sixty. The cost of generic misoprostol fluctuated wildly—forty-five dollars in one pharmacy, seventeen in another—and at the nearby Costco you could encounter two different prices for the drug in a single day. If the inflation seen in San Miguel pharmacies suggested private-sector opportunism, it might also have reflected well-meaning expats dominating the market, clearing the shelves on behalf of Americans and, in the process, jacking up the price of abortion for Mexican women—an ethical dilemma that some of Cruz’s associates had yet to think deeply about.

As they divvied up pills, Claire mentioned to Cruz that crossing the border with pharmaceuticals was not, for her, a big deal. “I have Global Entry,” she said. “I’ve never been stopped by customs in my life.” But, when she’d asked a friend if she would consider joining her as a pill runner, the friend had responded, “I’m Black. I can’t do that. Isn’t that obvious to you?”

On Claire’s first mission, she’d sent pills to women in seven states where, if her actions were discovered, they could be seen as a crime. But she was given less to paranoia than to curiosity. Preparing to send her first lot of pills, she had Googled the addresses where they would land: trailer parks, run-down apartments, a house valued at thirty-four thousand dollars. She’d envisioned women with other children and tapped-out bank accounts who couldn’t travel out of state for an abortion. She had to force herself not to Google any further, should authorities uncover the digital footprint she now

regretted having created. This time, she had resolved simply to cross the border, mail the earrings and pills in an envelope with a fake return address, pay the post office in cash, take a photo of the tracking number, and destroy all receipts. She would later delete the photo of the tracking number, too.

Finishing up, as salsa music drifted in from another room, Claire asked Cruz about the varieties of civil disobedience that led the Mexican Supreme Court to decriminalize abortion. Cruz told her that she thought of herself as part of an ant colony: one of countless workers toiling beneath an unbroken surface, carving intricate paths toward their goal. “Was all of this hidden from the public eye?” Claire wondered. Cruz shook her head. From the start, Las Libres members defied the system openly. In the United States, as in Mexico, Cruz predicted, the more people who got involved in the movement, the harder it would be for anyone to stop it.

A few days later, as Cruz trained future *acompañantes* in Yucatán, Claire packed abortion pills and earrings in a carry-on alongside her perfume, oregano-oil capsules, and shea butter and caught an early-morning bus to the airport in Mexico City.

“Bringing anything back, Ma’am?” the customs agent asked when she arrived in San Francisco.

“Just some souvenirs.”

Handing her passport back, the agent said, “Welcome home.”

When you risk years in prison to distribute abortion pills to women who wouldn’t otherwise be able to access them in Texas, you tend to appreciate more straightforward aspects of existence. So Anna delighted in an okra plant in her small garden that, by September, had sprung up to twice her height. Her tomatoes were thriving, as were the rosemary and parsley, and one day, as she picked up some jalapeño seeds left over from a seasonal planting, it occurred to her to hide pills in a packet of seeds. You never knew which recipient might have a patch of dirt in which to plant them.

It had taken some time for Las Libres to find collaborators like Anna. After S.B. 8 went into effect, Cruz and her colleagues identified thirty abortion-

rights groups in Texas that they thought might be interested in receiving pills from Mexico. The first meeting of the Mexican and American activists had been awkward, though. The Mexicans had gathered in a conference room; the Texans joined the meeting individually, via Zoom. Most of their cameras were off, and the sound was bad. At the end of the meeting, when Cruz asked who was interested in collaborating, only one person raised her hand. There followed a long silence, until one of the Texans unmuted her sound. “The law has won,” she said. “They accomplished what they wanted: scare us to the point where we feel there is nothing to be done.” Only later did messages from some of the participants begin to trickle in, on Signal. They had been reluctant to assert their intention on a video call, but they were ready to work with Cruz.

Anna’s first move had been to post on social media that she could be of help to women in need—a post that never mentioned abortion directly. She said the same to strangers and friends in bars and cafés, just as Cruz used to do in Mexico, even as the penalties she might face increased.



“Food always tastes better between a gruelling morning’s work and an afternoon of exhausting office drudgery.”
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

Many of Anna’s pills almost certainly came from the Old Hippies of San Miguel de Allende, but she eschewed such precise information, for her own protection and that of others. She found mailing the pills especially nerve-

racking; for reasons she couldn't quite explain, she chose as a fake return address a shopping mall where, in third grade, she'd made a joyful trip with her mom to get her ears pierced. It was better to hand off the pills in person, she thought, because those exchanges were harder for authorities to track and safer for women who lived in homes where an envelope with a dubious return address might be opened by the wrong hands.

She'd set a hard rule for herself, early on: to meet pregnant women only in parks or other public spaces that could not easily be linked back to her neighborhood or her job. Some days, self-conscious about her disguise, she thought she'd be the last person in Texas still wearing a mask outside. Other days, sympathetic, she decided hard rules could be broken, as when she capitulated to the grandmother of an eighth grader who insisted that the only place she'd feel safe collecting pills was in Anna's own home.

The pregnant eighth grader seemed almost in shock when she arrived with her grandmother and an aunt, who were furious at the girl. "It was, like, 'You fucking idiot! You have a child in you! How did we get here?!"' Anna said. In the living room, lights dim and blinds closed, Anna tried to ignore the tension and focus on practical details: what to expect as the abortion progressed, and what to do if complications ensued. "If you have two regular menstrual pads and you're soaking them front to back, side to side, completely full of blood, for two hours in a row—that would be too much blood," she said. Across the room, Anna recalled, three sets of eyes widened. She quickly added, "Medication abortion is very safe."

The eighth grader's procedure went smoothly, but the grandmother told Anna some weeks later that the girl was still depressed: "She's just walking around in a big hoodie all the time, even though she's not pregnant anymore." Anna felt haunted by all she hadn't been able to do for the girl. "In other states, or under another law system, her grandmother could have taken her to a sexual- and reproductive-health clinic, where they could have had a conversation with her, taught her about condoms, given her birth control, and sent her home feeling empowered with more information," she said. "Instead, she had to go to some random person's house. I'm sure they did not feel safe or comfortable here."

If Anna was sometimes frustrated and uncertain, she appreciated that sensible counsel was coming from Mexico at a moment that flipped “the narrative that America is this beacon of democracy and hope and progress.” She had begun to see herself as part of an age-old global tradition: women helping other women with their reproductive-health concerns because they knew they couldn’t count on institutions for protection. As Gutierrez-Romine, the historian, notes, physicians began functioning as “gatekeepers” for women seeking to end their pregnancies only in the nineteenth century.

In this new era of criminalized underground abortions, doctors were still occasionally required, though. One morning, Anna delivered pills to a slight woman in her thirties, a friend of a friend, who was eight weeks pregnant. When they were going over the instructions, the woman mentioned that her health had been precarious. Anna reassured her that the risk of developing an infection or hemorrhaging was low—less than one per cent in each case, studies showed. But, within an hour of taking the medication, the woman texted Anna that she was feeling dizzy. She’d thrown up, and her palms were itchy. She was at her parents’ house, the woman told Anna, and no one there was aware that she was having an abortion. She texted Anna again shortly afterward to say that she had lost consciousness twice.

Panicking, Anna advised her to rush to the nearest emergency room. Eventually, the woman confided to her mother, “I took some pills. We’re going to the hospital. And you cannot tell them that I took some pills.” For the next four hours, Anna heard nothing. None of the tricks she used to calm herself—Wordle, Spelling Bee, mindless scrolling through her friends’ feeds on Instagram—worked. She was sick with fear that the woman had died.

Midafternoon, a text arrived: “I’m stable.” The woman explained, “I was hooked up to all these I.V.s, so I couldn’t text you. Let’s go out for drinks in a couple of weeks.”

That night, in tears, Anna told a friend, “I don’t know if I can do this anymore. I thought I had killed somebody.” Her friend reminded her that the people who had failed this woman, and others, were the officials who had stripped them of their right to reproductive care under medical supervision.

In June, the day before Roe's overturning, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* published an editorial warning of an imminent crisis of abortion access, citing research indicating that maternal mortality would rise by at least twenty per cent. The authors estimated a rise of maternal mortality among Black people of upward of thirty per cent. The biennial maternal-mortality report in Texas, due to be released last month, has been delayed until after the midterm elections.

Not long ago, on a Thursday morning, a Texas woman named Sarah sat on her toilet, watching a pregnancy test develop a second red line. She was pregnant—a big problem given the complex circumstances of her life at that moment, among them the needs of the toddler daughter just outside the bathroom door. Still inside, she texted a friend for advice. The friend suggested contacting Plan C, a project that links U.S. women and abortion-pill providers around the world. Within minutes, Sarah had chosen a provider in Austria, paid a hundred and seven dollars by credit card, had a “telehealth appointment” with a doctor she never actually spoke to, and ordered a set of abortion pills that would be mailed to her from India. The problem was that the pills could take almost a month to get to Texas. She couldn’t bear to wait that long.

Her friend, concerned, was also texting other people. “I might have a local contact,” she wrote a few minutes later. By eleven-thirty that same morning, in a quiet working-class neighborhood, Anna was handing Sarah a plastic bag of pills.

Afterward, Sarah’s abortion complete, the toddler laid claim to the party hats a few of her mother’s friends had brought over to keep her cheerful during a process they’d taken to calling a “Texas miscarriage.” (Just in case “Zuckerberg is tracking our texts,” Sarah said, half in jest.) Empty cans of White Claw the friends had also brought were in the recycling bin. Sometimes, Sarah grieved. She could imagine wanting a second child at a different time in her life, but she also knew that she was fortunate. Many other women in states where abortions had been banned didn’t have the support of friends like hers.

Weeks later, when the package she’d ordered from India arrived and she was stowing the abortion pills in a drawer, it suddenly occurred to her that

nothing but stray fear stood in the way of her doing what Anna did. She didn't know Verónica Cruz or the Old Hippies or Claire or anyone besides Anna who worked with them, but she imagined an expanding constellation of women, operating in secret and in concert, to help other women. "Try to arrest all of us!" Sarah said to herself. She grabbed her phone and texted Anna: "Hey! How do I start doing what you do?" ♦

By Susan B. Glasser

By Julian Lucas

By Isaac Chotiner

Books

- [Lydia Millet's Post-Human Prose](#)
- [Briefly Noted](#)
- [Italy's Great Historical Novel](#)

Lydia Millet's Post-Human Prose

In “*Dinosaurs*,” Millet once again rejects the small, familiar world of the individual. Her subject is loss on a planetary scale.

By [Katy Waldman](#)



The novelist Lydia Millet once told an interviewer that when she first moved to New York, in 1996, she was “amazed” by how people were “relentlessly interested in exclusively the human self.” This myopia—a sort of “inarticulate, ambient smugness about everything”—wasn’t her creed. Millet, who now lives near Tucson, has written more than a dozen books of fiction, one of which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, but she works at the Center for Biological Diversity and holds a master’s in environmental policy. As in life, so in art. Increasingly, fiction studies the “arc of the private individual,” Millet told another interviewer: “The personal struggles of a self and the ultimate triumph of that self over the obstacles in its path.” But Millet is energized, instead, by how feelings are “intermeshed with abstract thought,” with “our place in the wider landscape.” Why, her work demands, are we afraid to die? What are the ethics of wanting what we want?

If both fiction and people are blinkered, self-stunned, perhaps they require a similar intervention. Millet, eschewing the arc of the private individual, also forgoes the novel's traditional shape, in which tensions build to a climax. Her method is to churn up themes, generating a kind of mental weather, as if a book were less a trajectory than an atmosphere: something happens, and then something else happens; the cloudy design melts and shifts. "*A Children's Bible*" (2020), for instance, subjects a group of spoiled vacationers to ordeals reminiscent of those in the Old and New Testaments. But what the scriptural correspondences mean—if they mean anything—never resolves. Like Joy Williams, Millet uses fiction to elegize the collapsing biosphere. Also like Williams, she has a raunchy, fanged wit, often aimed at human self-delusion. ("Let's get divorced! said couples everywhere, excited.") Unlike Williams, though, Millet never lets surrealism darken into delirium, and her misanthropy feels circumstantial, not cosmic. She's a conservationist: her prose attends to "maples from Norway, mulberries from Asia, Siberian elm." A reader will be smuggled facts about coral reefs, or learn the word "gymnosperm." "Five hundred thirty million years ago," one character says, "we find the first known footprints on dry land."

Millet's philosophical fixations include whether things are earned or simply given, as grace. She applies specific pressure to the problem of inheritance, and to the entwinement of privilege with responsibility. Her adult characters tend to be comfortable, and on the attractive side. (Mercifully, some of them are also on the self-effacing side: the protagonist of "*Ghost Lights*," from 2011, reflects that "if he allowed for the margin of error created by social niceties, he would have to guess he was average-looking.") For Millet, scant justice is to be found in existing distributions of beauty, wealth, and power, a situation that only inflames the question of what to do with one's ill-gotten gains. In "*Magnificence*," from 2012, a widow inherits a grand run-down house, its rooms crammed with dusty animal specimens. "*A Children's Bible*" asks what today's parents are leaving their offspring. (The apocalypse, is the answer.) Throughout, there's a restless probing of the nature of freedom. Does it come from unfettering or relinquishing the ego? One character defines liberty as doing whatever you want, speaking of "that dream we all have. That, in a turn of a second, no matter what, we can act on an impulse." Evie, a character lounging Zen-like on the beach, might beg

to differ: “If you could be nothing,” she muses, “you could also be everything. Once my molecules had dispersed, I would be here forever. Free.”

“A Children’s Bible,” which was short-listed for the National Book Award, was forged in wrath. Millet wanted to honor “the anger of people who don’t yet run the world as they begin to bear witness to the effects of our negligence.” The book, narrated by Evie—think Greta Thunberg by way of “South Park”—melds an activist’s outrage with a teen-ager’s weapons-grade contempt for adults. A group of families convenes for the summer in a manse built by robber barons. The kids go feral; the grownups roam “in vague circuits beneath the broad beams, their objectives murky.” Then come storms, a plague, a Biblical flood. The parents, in an alcoholic haze, opt for denial: “Not science denial exactly—they were liberals. It was more of a denial of reality.” The children, left to fend for themselves, escape to a nearby farmhouse. As they try to survive and rebuild, the novel, which sounds preachy, somehow isn’t. Millet’s caustic humor wicks away sentimentality; her writing is so weightlessly lucid that it makes abstractions—both moral and metaphysical—feel concrete. One develops an almost unbearable tenderness for Jack, Evie’s younger brother. (“He was a sensitive little guy, sweet-natured. . . . He often had nightmares . . . dreams of hurt bunnies or friends being mean.”) But the parents are beyond redemption. Sickened by mold and hallucinating, Evie has a vision of them as “invalids,” with “problems attached to them like broken limbs.” The best they can hope for, from anyone, is a “pity that passed for love.”

In “Dinosaurs” (Norton), a new novel, Millet transposes her signal motifs into a gentler key. The book’s large-scale catastrophe is only as obvious as our own—which is to say, ecological ruin lurks in the background, but the story clings to characters’ muted, often deliberately stifled lives. A lonely man, Gil, moves into a house in Phoenix. He is handsome, embarrassingly wealthy, and desperate to be of use. He befriends a neighbor’s kid, who’s being bullied at school; takes up the cause of hawks and quail against a mystery poacher; and volunteers at a local women’s shelter. Throughout, Millet drops in gemlike descriptions of birds—phainopeplas that survive on a single berry, roadrunners that mate for life—and factoids about nature and

species loss. The neighbor boy, Tom, shares Jack's love of creatures great and small. "An ant could be smarter than *you* are," he informs Gil sternly.

Potted summaries of Millet have a way of risking slander. Like "A Children's Bible," "Dinosaurs" is sharp and implacably funny; it evades the sanctimony you'd expect. Millet writes in the simple, enigmatic language of books for young people:

He sat on a barstool. It had a revolving seat, so he revolved.

One thinks of a kind of beginner's literature for survivors of phantasmagoric American adulthood—people who know about barstools but not about real life. Millet's imagination remains scaled to the geological; in "Dinosaurs," she seems eager to disrupt readers' rhythms, favoring brusque phrases over complete sentences. ("Impact was needed. In the situation.") Her unerring ear for small talk is matched by her uncanny ability to deconstruct it:

"You have a lovely home," he ventured.

"Oh! Yes. So do you."

That was established now—they both had lovely homes. They'd bought them with money.

Yet, even half mesmerized, I wrestled with the work's aura of equanimity—until the thought occurred that this strange, quiet text might be an allegory about how to greet the end with grace, how to prepare for your own extinction. "A Children's Bible" emphasizes the parents' cowardly retreat from responsibility. "We know we let you down," intones one despicable mom. "But what could we have *done*, really?" Gil, by contrast, scans his surroundings, looking for small acts of service to perform. "He didn't want to win," Millet tells us, only "to be worthy." If "A Children's Bible" enshrines the radiant anger of the young, "Dinosaurs" is a primer on surrender. At one point, after fantasizing about birds joining the fight against climate change, Gil laughs at his own naïveté: "In the quiet," he thinks, "you could let your thoughts roam. Villains and heroes. Bravery and sacrifice. You could conjure up anything."

As tactics, resistance and denial both depend on conjuring up a hopeful story. Millet's distrust of narrative may arise from her intimate understanding of its pleasures. Her novel skims the personal, at times dipping into various facets of the human self and its struggles. Gil is tested by his neighbors' house. It's open plan, which he knows because the wall facing him is constructed entirely of glass. The family of four who live there evoke mannequins in a "high-end department store"; the wife, Ardis, brings over a pie, apologizing to Gil for "our fish-tank reality show." (They'd hoped to get the windows tinted, she explains.) Ardis, a magnetic psychotherapist, "had a certain exuberance," Millet writes. "As though anything was possible. And she had nothing to hide." The family embodies something like the allure of the illuminated self. Gil, meanwhile, refers to his house as "the castle," which gets at his emotional defensiveness. He is mourning his ex-girlfriend, who left after fifteen years without so much as a goodbye. The lack of closure is a torment. Gil feels like "less than no one. Because no one, at least, contained possibility."

"Dinosaurs" thus belongs to a cadre of recent novels that wrestle with the phenomenon of complex loss: grief that lingers after incomplete or ambiguous endings. These books, which include Christine Smallwood's "The Life of the Mind" (2021) and Namwali Serpell's "The Furrows" (2022), often link characters' suffering to the creeping terminality of the natural world. They have their own iconography—ghosts, thresholds, twilight—and preoccupations: lives riven between past and present, language that fails, understanding that flickers just out of reach. In "Dinosaurs," Gil's unresolved loss, and the planet's, contrasts with the bright, clean loss of Gil's friend, Van Alsten, a trash-talking war veteran who likes basketball, hard liquor, and the ass of his wife, Connie. When Connie falls ill, Van Alsten gives her a kidney, despite the risk posed by his drinking, and enters a coma. The scenes in which loved ones bid him goodbye—once in a hospital room, when he's taken off life support, and once at his memorial service—attain a crystalline heartbreak. "That a soul could be set free from a body," Gil thinks. "The souls might gather in a host, flock together and wheel and spin. Funnel and disperse." Perhaps no deaths are fair. But Van Alsten's, at least, is noble.

Van Alsten's stark ending grants his wife a complicated beginning. Searching for the bottom of ambiguous loss, Millet also offers ambiguous hope. It's no accident that her book pays such homage to the things with feathers: paleontologists no longer believe "that all the dinosaurs had gone extinct sixty-six million years ago," Gil says. "Only the ones that wouldn't turn into birds." But evolution is only ever a possibility, never a sure thing. The novel is both aubade and vesper. It implies that some people can't escape the prisons of who they are. They will do their best "and still fail," as Gil tells Ardis, describing himself. Yet others, he continues, in his head, may be "interrupted by an unexpected event—deliverance." They may be "lifted up . . . swung out in giddy delight over glittering peaks." The moment recalls Evie's epiphany about the eternity waiting on the far side of ego loss: "Once my molecules had dispersed, I would be here forever."

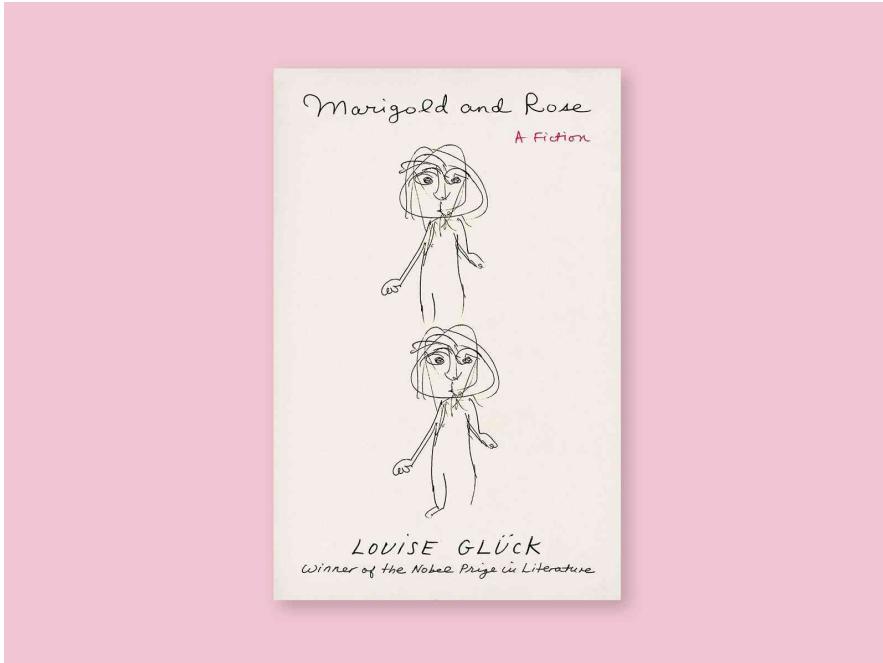
Millet has long located transcendence in the impersonal. Gil, like Evie, finds insight in a substance-induced fog—after he stumbles onto a spiky cholla plant, Ardis's husband gives him Vicodin—which parts to reveal the apparition of "a tree in a forest of trees, where men grew from apes." Millet's novels draw solace from the idea that we are infinitely bigger than ourselves. They propose that beginnings are difficult to distinguish from endings, that "separateness had always been the illusion." This enlightened, self-negating awareness lends "Dinosaurs" its sense of peace; yet I wondered whether Millet had finally ascended to a level of consciousness beyond her readers' reach. I longed for the adolescent urgency of "A Children's Bible," the blood and nerve of individuals with fears and desires. When we last see Gil, he is aglow with his apprehension of the ramifying tree. On the beach, though, the thought of Evie's brother abruptly wrenches her back to herself. Immortality—"particles that had once been others and now moved through us"—becomes less reassuring when its price is a loved one's specificity. "That was the sad thing about my molecules," Evie says, looking at Jack. "They wouldn't remember him." ♦

By Janet Malcolm

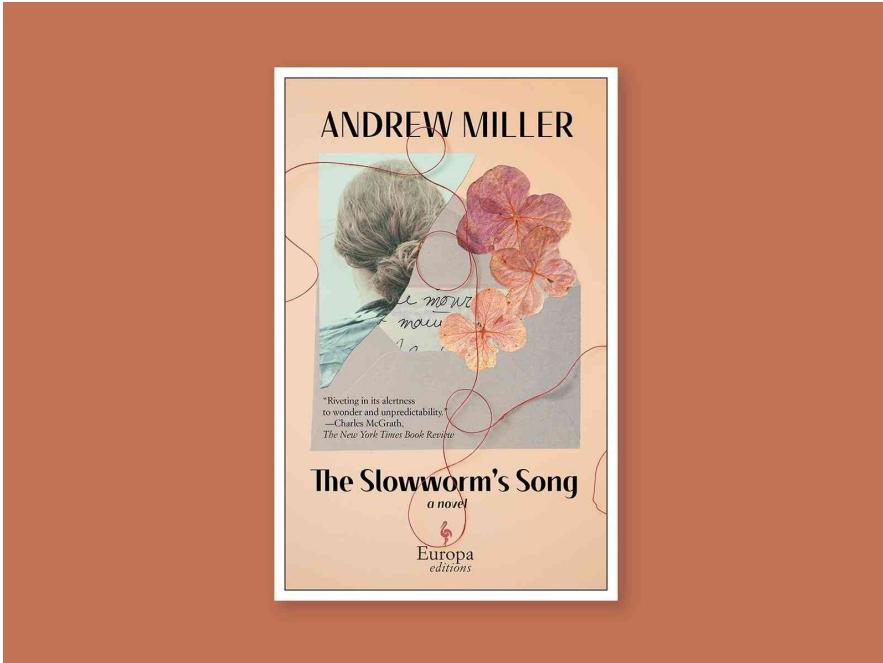
By Robert A. Caro

By Philip Gourevitch

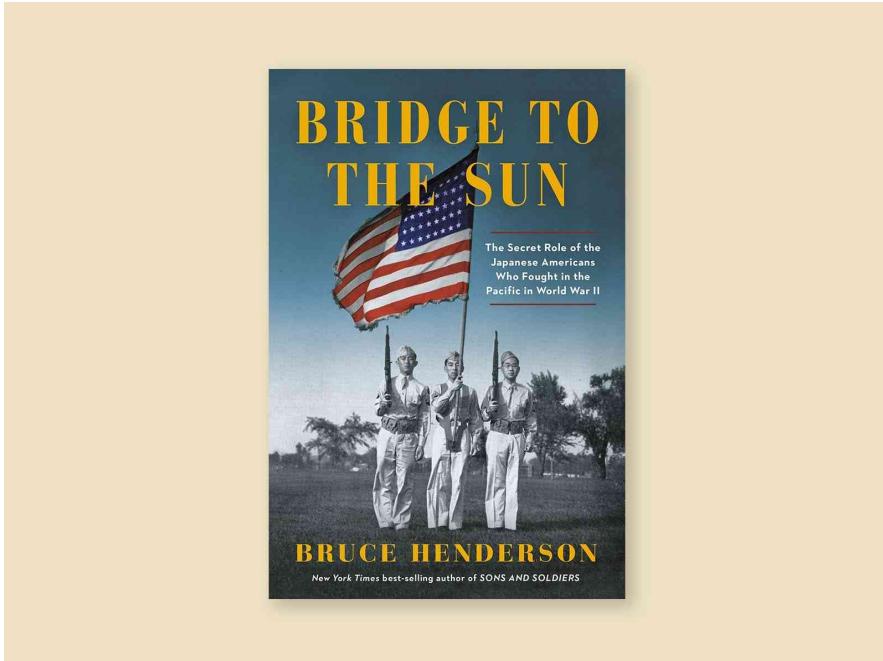
By Patrick Radden Keefe



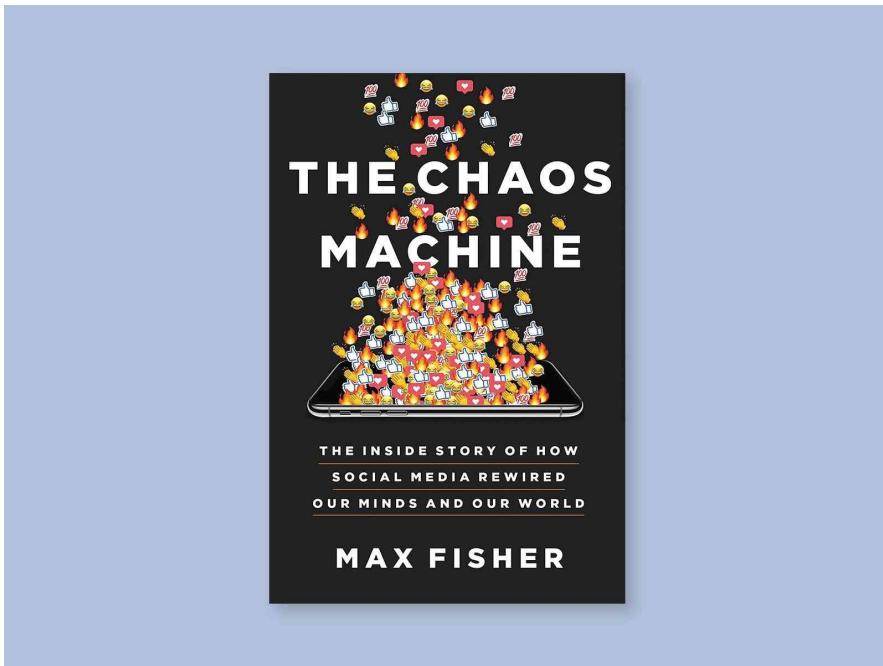
Marigold and Rose, by Louise Glück (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). This slip of a book, the Nobel-winning poet's first work of narrative prose, consists of the thoughts of twin baby girls, each named after a flower. Marigold is small, quiet, inward; Rose, born first, is loud, forgiving, and protective. Alongside an exploration of the dichotomies that bind the girls together are meditations on many of Glück's familiar preoccupations: halves and wholes, familial inheritance, time's passage, the psychic power of words. The innocence of the girls' observations, bearing an infant clarity, pare many of the book's subjects down to a revealing frankness. "Infinite possibility," they think as they learn to walk. "Then an absence or loss. Safety, which had disappeared."



The Slowworm's Song, by *Andrew Miller* (*Europa*). The narrator of this novel is a British former soldier and recovering alcoholic, who becomes unhinged after a letter summons him to Belfast to give evidence to a commission investigating a tragic incident that occurred in 1982, during the Troubles. Taking the form of a confession to his estranged daughter, the book works its way toward the life-altering event, which took place when he was a twenty-one-year-old recruit. Along the way, he recalls military training in Germany, his journey through rehab, and his current employment, at a rural garden center. His apologia represents a sincere redemptive attempt at “having a go at living.”



Bridge to the Sun, by Bruce Henderson (Knopf). The long-overlooked role of Japanese Americans who fought against their ancestral land during the Second World War receives its due in this authoritative history. Many were recruited from internment camps, and worked variously as interpreters, translators, and interrogators. America's ability to understand Japanese communications was "among the best kept secrets of the war," Henderson writes. He skillfully refracts the conflict through the experiences of several veterans, including Kazuo Komoto, who received the Purple Heart after fighting in Guadalcanal and New Georgia, and Tom Sakamoto, who was part of a select cadre of Japanese Americans entrusted with top-secret information, and who witnessed Japan's formal surrender. The book ends with a roster of the more than three thousand Japanese Americans who served.



[The Chaos Machine](#), by Max Fisher (Little, Brown). “The very structure of social media encourages polarization,” the author contends in this sobering investigation into the effects of platforms including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Tracking political movements that spread over social media, both in America and worldwide, Fisher describes how algorithms designed to “maximize our time on site” systematically promote extreme content that sparks moral outrage and forges group identities united by a sense of threat. “The effect, multiplied across billions of users, has been to change society itself,” he writes. Fisher speaks to researchers and industry insiders, who all seem to arrive at the same proposal: turn off the algorithms that reward engagement above all else.

By The New Yorker

By Keith Gessen

By Rebecca Mead

By Sam Knight

Italy's Great Historical Novel

Henry James decried the nineteenth century's "loose baggy monsters," but a new translation of Alessandro Manzoni's "The Betrothed" demonstrates the genre's power.

By [Joan Acocella](#)



A few years ago, reading the introduction to an English-language version of Hugo's "Les Misérables," I found the translator, Norman Denny, confessing that he had made a number of cuts in the French text. Certain of them, he said, were for sense. But others, he was not ashamed to say, were due to his feeling that the book was just too long-winded. The great Frenchman couldn't shut up. He told us things twice, three times. Or he said them too many times the first time. "It is not uncommon to find eight or ten adjectives appended to a single noun," Denny noted, with wonder. Even after the trims, his version is still more than twelve hundred pages long.

This fullness, overfullness, was endemic to the genre to which "Les Misérables" belonged, the nineteenth-century historical novel, a form that was immensely popular in its day. It recorded sweeping changes: kingdoms rose and fell, peoples were enslaved or freed. For great events, great

language was needed. But, from what I can tell, even readers of that time occasionally grew tired of the grandiloquence, and when they did they were not afraid to skip. Likewise their children and grandchildren. A friend of mine told me that once, when he was talking to a group of Russian-literature professors, he confided to them that he and his American colleagues often had difficulty with the many highly detailed accounts of battles in “War and Peace.” Oh, the Russians answered, we skip those parts! So boring! You should skip them, too, they said.

Americans are unlikely to take that advice. Modernism taught us not to. A work of literature was what it was. You didn’t toss out the parts you didn’t like. The assumption was that the author had already pared his novel or poem down to its bare bones, every word of which was essential to the true picture. Ironically, this way of thinking may have emboldened some people to avoid the big books altogether. In recent years, some celebrated writers have come clean about which fat masterpieces they have never read. Jonathan Franzen told a journalist that he had never got past page 50 of “Moby-Dick.” Others have said that they have not read “Vanity Fair,” or “David Copperfield,” and didn’t intend to. I have never heard a modern novelist say that he has not read Joyce’s “Ulysses”—there are limits—but I’ll bet that such a one is lurking out there, waiting to strike.

A writer who belongs at the center of this story is Henry James. On first acquaintance—with his late novels, in any case—he may seem one of those fog-bound fellows whom younger writers feel they no longer have to bend the knee to. In fact, however dense the surface of his texts, James is the captain of the opposing team, the non-meanderers. That is the debate, really. At bottom, it’s not about length but about whether it’s O.K. for the novelist, having dealt with his story from one angle, to wander off and then come back to it from a different angle. In the mind of your typical nineteenth-century historical novelist, this is *obviously* O.K. He’s a great writer, so why should anyone object if he interrupts his story to give us a lesson on the whiteness of the whale or the succession wars in northern Italy in the seventeenth century? He’ll come back to the main story. What’s the problem?

According to James, the problem was that this was not art. It was basically a picture without “composition,” by which he meant selection, focus. “A picture without composition slights its most precious chance for beauty,” James wrote. “There may, in its absence, be life, incontestably, as ‘The Newcomes’ has life, as ‘Les Trois Mousquetaires,’ as Tolstoi’s ‘Peace and War’ have it; but what do such large loose baggy monsters, with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary artistically *mean*? We have heard it maintained . . . that such things are ‘superior to art’; but we understand least of all what *that* may mean, and we look in vain for the artist, the divine explanatory genius, who will come to our aid and tell us.” The phrase “loose baggy monsters” has since entered the lexicon of critical vituperation, and the list of indicted books can be expanded well beyond James’s count. Sir Walter Scott was certainly the elephant in this room, accompanied by Balzac, and James Fenimore Cooper. Apropos of the last, a certain corniness—more than the nineteenth-century average—is often to be found in historical novels of the period. For that reason, as well as for the length problem, most of them have suffered a severe drop in popularity. Yet some are still regarded as classics, and others are revived now and then. Last month, the Modern Library added to its list “The Betrothed” (“I Promessi Sposi”), from 1842, by the Italian writer Alessandro Manzoni, in a new translation—the first in fifty years—by Michael F. Moore.

In some respects, this is a curious choice. Most readers outside Italy will not have heard of the title, or even of the author. In Italy, the book is considered a pillar of the national literature, perhaps second only to the Divine Comedy. It has gone into more than five hundred Italian editions, and it is a fixture in schools, where it is studied in tenth grade. In its day, the novel was famous across Europe, and it’s not clear why its reputation ceased to be an international one—why people who know of Dumas or Hugo, even if they haven’t read them, aren’t even aware of Manzoni’s existence. Moore, in his introduction, mentions speculation that the novel is too Italian (for instance, in its preoccupation with the Catholic Church) to travel well. In any case, the Modern Library is right: it is time for the situation to change. “The Betrothed” emerges in the new translation as a work that anyone who cares about nineteenth-century fiction should want to read. It has the great events—war, famine, plague—and the record of their impact on humble people. It has the sentimentality: demure maidens and brave lads and black-

hearted villains. It has passages of lyrical description and passages where the specificity of detail verges on the sociological. It has the prolixity, annoying to some, comforting to others. In other words, it is an exemplary historical novel.

Alessandro Manzoni, the child of a genteel Lombard family, lived from 1785 to 1873—that is, through the political turmoil stretching from the French Revolution through the Italian Risorgimento. His lively mother, Giulia Beccaria, was prevented from marrying the man she loved (his family was richer than hers), and so, at the age of twenty, she was forced to marry an older man, Don Pietro Manzoni, who lived with his seven unwed sisters and reportedly cared for little beyond the supervision of his estates. He also, according to one report, had no testicles. Alessandro was born soon afterward, and, in the words of his biographer Archibald Colquhoun, the evidence that he was the son not of Don Pietro but of Giulia's lover is “as conclusive as gossip can make it.” When Alessandro was six, Giulia finally got a legal separation from Don Pietro and took off for Paris with yet another man. The boy’s childhood was spent first with a wet nurse and later at a number of boarding schools in Switzerland and Italy. Giulia visited him occasionally, if she was passing through. She didn’t come often, though.

According to Colquhoun, Manzoni’s adult life was uneventful, “deceptively like that of many of his class and period: a background of solid squirearchy, youthful revolutionary enthusiasms apparently stilled by re-conversion to Catholicism, a little mild political activity, then long years of studious retirement, country pursuits, and rather melancholy family life.” At twenty-three, he married a sixteen-year-old Swiss girl, Enrichetta Blondel, a Calvinist—a scandalous choice in the Milan of the time. The sons that Enrichetta bore him were so badly behaved, it is said, that for a while he was reluctant to show his face in Milan, Lombardy’s capital. That problem was alleviated, in time, by his offspring’s propensity for dying young. Of the ten children, all but two predeceased him. Furthermore, he was plagued all his life by what Colquhoun calls nervous troubles: “He hated meeting new people, was terrified of crowds. . . . He could never go out alone, and felt voids opening up before him when he had to cross a street. Stories are told of his ordering servants to drive away birds in the trees under his windows, of his weighing his clothes several times a day.”

He thought of himself as a writer, if anything, and in his early years he produced some poems and essays and two verse tragedies—on Lombard themes, prophetically—but he had difficulty putting pen to paper and would leave his desk on any pretext, sometimes for long periods. Finally, however, Italy's great political cause of the nineteenth century—the Risorgimento, the conversion of the peninsula from a nice kitchen garden for French, Spanish, and Austrian invaders to a single, united nation—galvanized him, and he began a novel in the service of that ideal. “The Betrothed” took place not in the nineteenth century but, rather, in the seventeenth, a terrible time, the period of the Thirty Years’ War and of resurgent bubonic plague. This permitted Manzoni to make his book more sensational and exotic. (The men wear those floppy-cuffed seventeenth-century boots, like Puss in Boots.) It also, by relieving him of the temptation to allude to people in power in his time, kept him out of jail.

Chapter 1 opens like a flower:

The branch of Lake Como that turns south between two unbroken mountain chains, bordered by coves and inlets that echo the furrowed slopes, suddenly narrows to take the flow and shape of a river, between a promontory on the right and a wide shoreline on the opposite side. The bridge that joins the two sides at this point seems to make this transformation even more visible to the eye and mark the spot where the lake ends and the Adda begins again, to reclaim the name *lake* where the shores, newly distant, allow the water to spread and slowly pool into fresh inlets and coves.

Not only does the water pool and flow, so does the language, and the scene is made more dazzling by the clear indication that we are looking at the lake from high above. It is all laid out at our feet: God’s world on the seventh day (tellingly) of November, 1628.

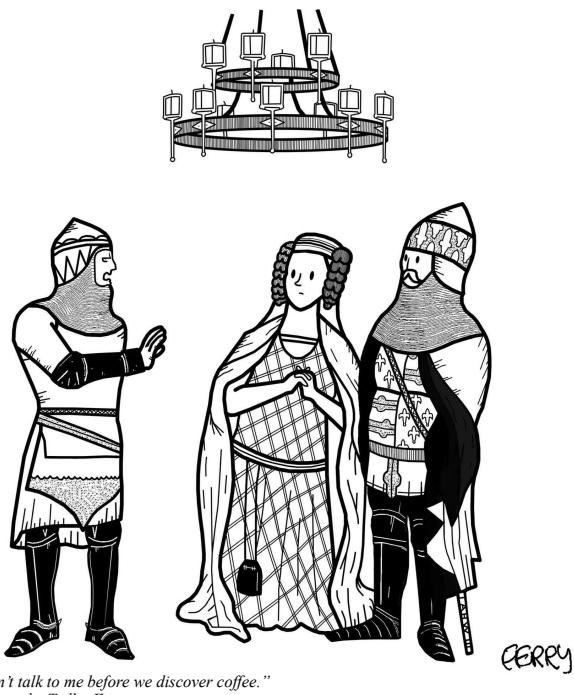
The first person we meet is a parish priest, Don Abbondio, reading his breviary as he takes his evening walk. Suddenly, the peace is broken. As Don Abbondio turns a bend in the road, he finds two men who have obviously been waiting for him. As he knows from their clothing and their manners, they are *bravi*, or hoodlums, enforcers. “Reverend Father,” one of them asks, “is it your intention to marry Renzo Tramaglino and Lucia

Mondella tomorrow?" Renzo and Lucia are the betrothed of the book's title, two young people from Don Abbondio's town whom he has indeed agreed to marry the next day, since there is nothing to prevent this—except what Don Abbondio now learns from the *bravi*: that Lucia has caught the eye of a local Spanish lord, Don Rodrigo, and he intends to have her for himself. (For a while, at least; there's no mention of marriage.) Don Abbondio is not a courageous man. "My good sirs," he pleads. "You are men of the world. You know perfectly well how these matters go. The poor priest has nothing to do with it!" The *bravi* let him off with a warning, and he skitters home. The next day, he tells Renzo what the situation is, and that he can do nothing about it.

Renzo, filled with fiery purpose, and suspecting that the making of such impediments to a Christian marriage is forbidden by law, goes to a lawyer, who assures him that, yes, the law is on his side—as long, the lawyer adds, as the complainant has done nothing to interfere with the interests of a person of standing. Uh-oh. Here's how Manzoni explains the functioning of the law in northern Italy in the seventeenth century:

In those days, nothing could be worse than to be an animal without claws or teeth yet no inclination to be devoured. The police did nothing to protect the law-abiding, inoffensive man who had no means to intimidate others. Not that there was any lack of laws and punishments against acts of personal aggression: Indeed, there was an overabundance of them. The crimes were enumerated and defined at tedious, meticulous length. The punishments were wildly exorbitant. As if that were not enough, in every case they could be increased, at will, by the Governor himself and by one hundred officers of the law. Trials were designed solely to free the judge from any impediment to passing sentence.

And the law was always in favor of whoever had more power or influence or money. The system was corrupt from top to bottom. Renzo does not know this, and he leaves the lawyer's office still clinging to the hope that the law will protect him: "He kept repeating to himself the same strange words. 'In the end there is justice in the world. . . .' For a man overcome with grief truly does not understand what he is saying."



"Don't talk to me before we discover coffee."
Cartoon by Tadhg Ferry

In Renzo and Lucia's village, worse trouble is brewing. Peasants in the fields "were sowing seed parsimoniously, sparingly, begrudgingly, as if they were risking something they cared about deeply. . . . A scrawny girl, leading an emaciated cow by a rope while it grazed, took a look around and then stooped down quickly to steal some herbs to feed her family, having learned from hunger that men, too, can subsist on grass." Famine is coming to Lombardy. It is this kind of quick, concrete detail, the girl's dipping down and then straightening up again, to avoid being caught filching a few leaves for her family's polenta, that gives us relief from Manzoni's expository prose.

But Renzo and Lucia are young and in love, and they want to try their chances. For the rest of the book, they are basically on the lam, sometimes helped, sometimes hurt, by the people they meet along the way. This structural principle produces a lot of adventures, and the adventures' adventures. I will be as brief as possible, but you can't really get a sense of this book, or yield to what is good in it, without consenting to be bored now and then by its ever-ramifying plot.

The first job for Manzoni is to get Lucia out of reach of Don Rodrigo and any other Spanish rapists in the territory. This is accomplished, not without

difficulty, but finally we see her settled in a convent, doing her needlework. Unfortunately, this convent is directed by a shady character, Sister Gertrude (based on a notorious historical figure spookily known as the Nun of Monza). Gertrude never sought a cloistered life. She was forced into it by her father, as a means of safeguarding primogeniture. Annoyed with her position, Gertrude has an affair with a servant boy. Her father is informed of this and forces her to take the veil. Nun or not, she soon embarks on a new erotic entanglement, with a “young man, a criminal by trade,” named Egidio. This is suspected by one of the lay sisters in the convent, so Gertrude and Egidio murder the woman and bury her somewhere nearby.

Back to Renzo. He, brave boy, goes to Milan, where he finds himself in the middle of food riots, because of the famine. He helps save an official from being lynched by a hungry mob, but, in the process, attracts the attention of a police agent, who proceeds to march him to prison. En route, he escapes and takes off, on foot, to Bergamo, out of Milanese jurisdiction and hence beyond the powers seeking his imprisonment. Also, he has a cousin in Bergamo, who will give him a job.

Back to the convent. With the help of a diabolically evil strongman—he is called the Nameless One (*l’Innominato*), because no one dares speak his name—Don Rodrigo has hatched a plot to kidnap Lucia. While on an errand in town, she is seized by the Nameless One’s men, taken to his castle, and locked in a room. But in the course of the struggle something strange happens. The Nameless One sees Lucia and suddenly begins to suffer for the sins he has committed in the past. As it happens, a famous churchman, Cardinal Federigo Borromeo (an actual figure of the period), is preaching nearby. The Nameless One goes to see him, and the archbishop greets him with a stern reproach for his evil life. The Nameless One weeps and repents. His first act of contrition is to return to his castle, gather up Lucia, and pack her off to her village, which, however, is soon ravaged by the Thirty Years’ War.

Lucia and Renzo are finally reunited in Milan, which is now in the grip of the bubonic plague of 1630. In Western fiction, there are a number of celebrated descriptions of plague: Boccaccio, Defoe, Camus, Marguerite Yourcenar. Manzoni’s, based on an eyewitness account, is a close cousin of

those. At first, the citizens deny the plague's existence, and hurl abuse—indeed, stones—at people who claim that it is real. (One thinks of Dr. Fauci.) Manzoni shows us the smoke that fills Milan's air as people burn their clothes and their bedding. Corpses litter the streets and spill out of the mass graves in the cemetery. Renzo, crossing the city, stops to let a cart go by. Two horses, pulling it, struggle to move forward, "straining their necks and digging in their hooves" while men at their sides urge them on "with lashes, punches, and curses." As for the load these horses are carrying: "Most of the corpses were naked, though some were loosely covered in rags. They were piled high and jumbled together, like a nest of snakes slowly uncoiling in the warmth of spring. At every jolt, every bump in the road, the tragic heap shook and came apart grotesquely. Heads dangled, maidens' braids unraveled, and arms slid out of the tangled mass of limbs to bang against the wheels." You feel sorrier for the horses than for the people: the people are out of their misery at least. But Renzo is transfixed by the sight of the bodies. Could Lucia be in that pile?

He eventually arrives at the lazaretto, or quarantine area, filled with the dying and those ministering to them, including many Capuchin friars. (According to Manzoni, most of the friars died, as did two-thirds of the population of Milan.) The lazaretto has a fenced-off area for women and, within it, a place where the babies of dead mothers are cared for, with wet nurses, and also nanny goats, giving suck to the children. It is in the domestic setting of the women's quarters, appropriately, that Renzo at last finds Lucia. "Oh, Renzo!" she cries. "Why did you come here?" "You're asking why I came?" Renzo says. "Do I have to tell you? Am I not Renzo? Are you not Lucia? . . . Are we no longer ourselves? Do you no longer remember what we were denied?"

The problem here is that Lucia, when she was imprisoned in the castle of the Nameless One, made a vow to the Virgin Mary that if she could be released from this humiliation she would renounce her love for Renzo and die a virgin. Fortunately, there is a wise friar at hand in the lazaretto, and he releases Lucia from her vow. She and Renzo, who had once planned to marry the next day, are only now, two years later, allowed to take their vows. The ending is sentimental: "'Oh Lord!' exclaimed Lucia in anguish, clasping her hands together and looking up at the sky.' It is also genuinely

affecting. These two people have been through a lot. They both seem older than they were at the start. I cried.

Part of the pleasure of reading “The Betrothed” comes simply from its romanticism, its sweep and danger and excitement: great, gloomy castles jutting over perilous abysses, pious maidens being abducted by unrepentant villains, murderous nuns. It should be remembered, though, that that style, those tropes, were the product of the politics of the nineteenth century, and of centuries of quarrels among, variously, Spain, France, the Austrian Empire as to which of them—forget the Italians—should harvest Italy’s grapes. And this dispute was part of a larger, pan-European one: Would the people of the West remain faithful to the Church—that is, to belief—or would they sign on to the Enlightenment, that cold eighteenth-century idea that we should examine things, even ask for concrete evidence, before deciding what the world was about? Most of the good deeds, and a number of the bad deeds, in “The Betrothed” are committed by clergy. But on the most pressing political issue in the book, and in nineteenth-century Italy—the unification of the peninsula—Manzoni’s mind was made up early, and he is cherished by Italians as much for his work as a patriot as for his literary skill.

Manzoni was a philologist of sorts—he wrote essays on language—and he deplored the ragbag nature of his native tongue. Because, in his time, Italians mostly stayed close to home and were ruled by foreigners, they barely had a native tongue; the peninsula was a patchwork of mutually unintelligible dialects. Manzoni said that his own writing was an “undigested mixture of sentences that are a little Lombard, a little Tuscan, a little French, and even a little Latin; and also of sentences that do not belong to any of these categories.” In the first edition of “The Betrothed,” published in three volumes from 1825 to 1827, he tried hard, with the help of dictionaries and learned friends, to write a purer Italian—which to him meant the Tuscan dialect, the language of Dante. This edition was an immediate success, but Manzoni wasn’t satisfied with it. He was ashamed of the Milanese and other Lombard usages still defacing his text, as he saw it, so he sat down and for the next thirteen years painstakingly revised the novel, effectively translating his own book—even moving to Florence for a while, to be able to command the cadences of Florentine Tuscan. This

revision, which then appeared in ninety-six installments between 1840 and 1842, is what Italians read today and what Michael F. Moore has translated for the Modern Library.

So “The Betrothed” was the product of two decades of work, and it feels like it. Almost everything in the world seems to have been stuffed into it. There are endless escapes, reversals, confessions, abductions. No sooner do we meet a new character than Manzoni feels he must give us that person’s backstory. (Sister Gertrude’s requires thirty pages.) Late in the book, meeting an unimportant character, Don Ferrante, we are told that he is an erudite man, with a library of almost three hundred books. “Oh, no!” we say, and, sure enough, we get a very long account of what Don Ferrante likes to study: history, politics, chivalry, sorcery, natural philosophy (science), regular philosophy. We find out what he thinks about Aristotle, and about Aristotle’s detractors. “I am starting to wonder,” Manzoni finally says, “whether the reader really wants to hear any more of this catalogue.” Well might he ask.

But “The Betrothed” is not just a novel. Its weakest component is its plot, or the plot’s organization. A lot of its psychology isn’t too strong, either. Under the influence of early-twentieth-century commentators such as Henry James and E. M. Forster, we, too, may believe that those things are the most important elements of a novel. “The Betrothed,” however true to its time, is closer to an opera, crammed with solos, duets, choruses, and lyric passages that, from what we can tell, are there more for art’s sake than for the sake of anything else. Here is Renzo returning to his village, after being away for years, and looking upon his vineyard, despoiled by war:

Everything had been pulled up by the roots or roughly chopped down: grape vines, mulberries, and fruit trees of every kind. You could still see the vestiges of the old plantings through new growth in crooked lines where there used to be straight rows. Here and there fresh twigs or shoots sprouted from mulberry, fig, peach, cherry, and plum trees. But even they were crowded out by a dense variety of new growth that had germinated and flourished, unintended by human hands. There was a riot of nettles, ferns, ryegrass, scutch, goosefoot, wild oat, green

amaranth, chicory, sorrel, cockspur, and the like, otherwise known as weeds by farmers throughout the world. . . .

Amid this riot of vegetation, certain plants stood out more prominently and conspicuously than others, though they were no better, or at least, not most of them. The tallest was pokeweed, with its reddish outstretched branches and majestic dark-green leaves, some of which already had purple edges and dangling bunches of berries, which ranged in color from deep purple on the bottom to violet then green, with tiny white blossoms on the tip. The large woolly leaves of the mullein were on the ground while its stem was in the air, its tall spikes spattered and speckled with bright yellow flowers. Then there was the thistle's prickly stems, leaves, and calyx, with tufts of white and purple flowers blooming or silvery-gray plumes breaking off and blowing away in the wind. In one spot, a clump of wild morning glories had climbed and wrapped itself around the shoots of a mulberry tree, covering it with their drooping leaves and dangling white trumpet flowers. In another, a bryony, with its red berries, had wound itself tightly around the fresh shoots of a grapevine, which, after searching in vain for a more solid support, had wrapped its own tendrils around the bryony in turn.

If you take twenty years to write a novel, and are very gifted, you might be able to produce something of this kind. The passage is amazing not just for its richness but also for its swelling symbolism: the ruin and destruction combined with, and eventually overshadowed by, the new growth—that is, hope. The description didn't have to be this long (and I have cut it). We didn't have to know about the scutch and the goosefoot; the pokeweed and the bryony would have been enough. But Manzoni did it for himself, and for Italy. Also, perhaps, for his nineteenth-century readers, who, after all, were not Henry James, and who prized color and quantity. People were short of entertainment in those days and, having paid their money, wanted a nice long show. More, please. It should also be said that a book being published in installments might require some repetition. The “art TV” of recent years often starts with recaps. If Manzoni feels we need reminding that Sister Gertrude is a rather sinister character, and therefore gives her not one lover but two, should we be surprised?

After “The Betrothed” Manzoni lived thirty more years, but he never wrote another novel. He almost didn’t have to. To the Italians, he was a national hero. Italy’s new king made him a senator, and he became an influential contributor to the task of forging a national language—the cause that had shaped so much of the novel’s composition. He was eighty-eight when he died, in May of 1873, and his body lay in state for several days in Milan. At his funeral, government ministers, princes, and a future king of Italy followed his coffin from the Duomo to the cemetery. Giuseppe Verdi, who so admired Manzoni that he recalled wanting to kneel when he got to meet him, was too grieved to attend. Instead, he set to work on his Requiem, which was dedicated to Manzoni’s memory and premiered on the first anniversary of his death. Verdi’s composition is now far more widely known than Manzoni’s novel, but it is not more heartfelt. ♦

By Sam Knight

By Keith Gessen

By Joshua Rothman

By Lauren Collins

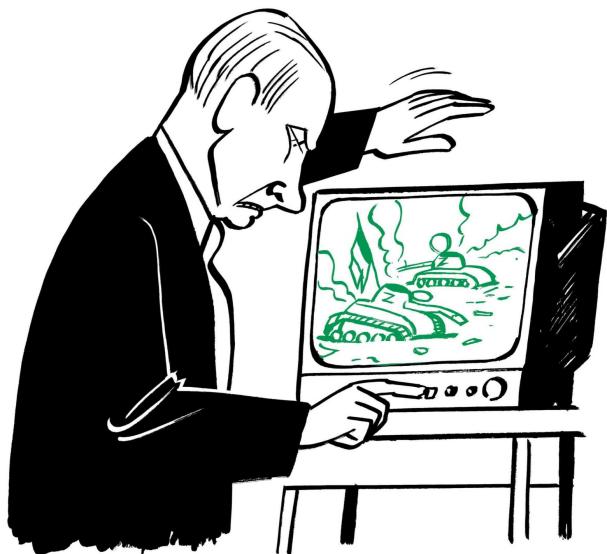
Comment

- [The War in Ukraine Launches a New Battle for the Russian Soul](#)

The War in Ukraine Launches a New Battle for the Russian Soul

The last time people were writing in Russian so urgently was in the late nineteen-eighties, when Soviet citizens were confronted with the terror of the Stalinist past.

By [Masha Gessen](#)



Russia says that it has expanded. On September 30th, President Vladimir Putin signed a document that ostensibly accepted four Ukrainian regions as members of the Russian Federation. The residents of those regions, Putin said in a speech, “have become our citizens forever.” He made this assertion as the Ukrainian Army was liberating territory to which Russia was laying claim. He was not just trying to snatch propaganda victory from the jaws of evident military defeat; he was laying the groundwork for fighting for those lands ever more aggressively. A week and a half earlier, he had ordered the military to draft hundreds of thousands of new soldiers, and had threatened to use nuclear weapons.

A Russia that includes parts, or all, of Ukraine and untold other lands is the Russian World, a vague and expansive idea pioneered by the self-styled philosopher Aleksandr Dugin, some of whose ideas have been adopted by the Kremlin. In August, his thirty-two-year-old daughter, Darya, also an imperialist pundit, was killed by a car bomb that may have been intended for him. Last week, the *Times* reported that U.S. intelligence believes a part of the Ukrainian government may have been behind the attack. If true, this suggests that the government puts strong, probably unfounded, faith in the power of the concept of the Russian World.

Putin, in his speech, described both the Russian World and the larger world as he sees it. According to him, the West destroyed the Soviet Union in 1991, but Russia came back, defiant and strong. Now the West wants to destroy Russia. “They see our thought and our philosophy as a direct threat,” he said. “That is why they target our philosophers for murder.” The ultimate goal of the West—specifically, the United States and Great Britain—is to subjugate people around the world and force them to give up traditional values, to have “‘parent No. 1,’ ‘parent No. 2,’ and ‘parent No. 3’ instead of mother and father (they have completely lost it!),” and to teach schoolchildren that “there are some other genders besides men and women and offer them sex-change operations.” Putin has said, repeatedly, that only Russia can save the world from this menace. This is the story of a world in which his war in Ukraine—and the draft, and even, perhaps, a nuclear strike—makes sense.

But when the world shaped by the feedback loop of propaganda collides with the world of facts on the ground, things begin to crack. On October 5th, two videos circulated widely on Russian-language social media, including in normally pro-war quarters. The videos show a crowd of men in uniform. They say that there are five hundred of them and that they were recently drafted. They complain of “animal-like” conditions, of having to buy their own food and bulletproof vests, and of a lack of organization. “We are not registered as part of any detachment,” one man says. “We have weapons, but these are not officially issued to us.” Meanwhile, some Russian television propagandists have been acknowledging Ukrainian victories, and urging Russians to prepare for a long wait before their country can attack again.

It's too early to make assumptions about where these tiny cracks may lead. It is not too early, however, to think about what a future, militarily defeated Russia might look like. This is what Alexey Navalny, the opposition politician who has been in prison since January, 2021, has been doing. The *Washington Post* recently published an op-ed, smuggled out by Navalny's legal team, in which he writes that Russia deserves to lose the war and that, once it does, it must be reconstituted as a parliamentary, rather than a Presidential, republic. This, he argues, will insure that no one person can usurp power in Russia as Putin has.

Navalny's op-ed serves to illustrate Putin's wisdom, of sorts—the wisdom of keeping his most important political opponent behind bars. Navalny seems to have missed a cultural turning point. In the seven and a half months since Russia launched its full-scale invasion, hundreds of thousands of Russians have left their country. Many of them are journalists, writers, poets, or artists, and they, along with some who are still in Russia, have been producing essays, poems, Facebook posts, and podcasts trying to grapple with the condition of being citizens of a country waging a genocidal colonial war. Some of their Ukrainian counterparts have scoffed at their soul-searching. Ukrainians, indeed, have bigger and more immediate problems. But they also have certainty—they know who they are in the world, while for Russians nothing is as it once seemed to be.

One of the earliest examples of this outpouring was a poem, by the children's-book author Alexey Oleynikov, about the incongruity of trying to flee Russia with a pet hedgehog in tow. One stanza reads, "We will not wash the shame off until our old age, until we die / There have been worse times, but there has never been a more ridiculous time." Posted on Facebook, the poem went viral in March. May's viral poem, by the actress and poet Zhenya Berkovich, tells of a young Russian man visited by the ghost of his grandfather, who fought in the Second World War; the ghost asks his grandson to forget him, lest the memory of his valor be used to justify the current war. This month's viral poem, by Eli Bar-Yahalom, an Israeli Russian, is a dialogue between God and a Muscovite who hopes to return home someday. "There is no resurrecting Bucha, no raising up Irpin," God says, referring to suburbs of Kyiv where Russians appear to have committed war crimes. There are also at least two Russian-language

podcasts devoted to the issues of individual and collective responsibility for the war. And Linor Goralik, an acclaimed Russian writer born in Ukraine and living in Israel, has founded an online journal called *roar* (Russian Oppositional Arts Review), which has published three packed issues.

The last time people were writing in Russian so urgently was in the late nineteen-eighties. Soviet citizens back then had been confronted with their past—the Stalinist terror. That moment gave Russia, among other things, Memorial, the human-rights organization that, along with Ukrainian and Belarusian activists, won the Nobel Peace Prize last week. Now Russian citizens are being confronted with their present. The writers in exile have physically fled their country (as has much of Memorial’s leadership) and are trying to write their way to a new Russia. Their imagination extends far beyond the Russian constitution to a world that’s radically different, and better than not only Putin’s revanchist Russian World but the world we currently inhabit. ♦

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Thursday, October 6, 2022](#)

By [Caitlin Reid](#)

Dance

- Jazz Is the Thread for LaTasha Barnes

Jazz Is the Thread for LaTasha Barnes

In “The Jazz Continuum,” at the Joyce, the choreographer and her ensemble embody the continuity between Black dance of a hundred years ago and Black dance of yesterday.



“The Jazz Continuum” is the name of **LaTasha Barnes’s** ensemble show at the Joyce, running Oct. 11-16. It’s also a good phrase for what she effortlessly embodies: the continuity between Lindy Hop and house dance, between Black dance of a hundred years ago and Black dance of yesterday. When she’s moving, steps and styles separated by time embrace like long-lost relatives. Here, she gathers performers of various disciplines and generations, using jazz music—plus hip-hop and line dance—as the thread.

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Philip Gourevitch

By Patrick Radden Keefe

Fiction

- “Come Softly to Me”

Come Softly to Me

By [David Gilbert](#)



Audio: David Gilbert reads.

Upstairs, the sisters prepared by putting on their dresses, while down in the yard everyone drank Mott's apple juice and snacked on Ritz crackers squared with Cheddar. Afterward, they'd have a proper meal. Lily had brought six pies. Eleanor, pasta salad and lentils with sweet potatoes. Louise's son Charlie would man the grill. There'd be enough to drink, that was for sure, and maybe something to smoke thanks to the dispensaries in nearby Great Barrington. Come night, Jasper, Lily's grandson, would play guitar. And Lewis, the son of Benjamin, the sisters' cousin, would light the bonfire, once his father's job. Oh, Benjamin. He'd been cremated with his healing crystals still clenched in his hands. The bonfire nowadays was confined to the copper fire pit at Louise's house, but they'd manage to get the flames up high. Then they'd shoot Roman candles and bottle rockets, brought by whoever had travelled from, or through, a firework state. Jasper would pick up his mandolin, and Philip, Lily's son, would grab Jasper's guitar, and Louise would sing, and then Lily would sing, and Eleanor would never sing but she might yowl and grab her crotch, and maybe this place would start to feel like the old place.

The biggest thing missing was the massive weeping beech. The interior of its hoopskirt canopy had acted as the sisters' sanctum sanctorum. It was from there that they used to emerge in their dresses, led by Benjamin beating on the same small drum he had beaten on since he was eight. But after Mom and Dad died the sisters couldn't agree on what to do with the old place, what with the hassles of upkeep, and the estate taxes, the property taxes, too. So they sold it to a rich couple who were semi-famous for their wealth—Eleanor would sometimes Google them and scroll through pictures of the man and woman at various parties and galas, e-mailing the choicest of these photos to Lily and Louise, as if she were putting pins into voodoo dolls. Eleanor hadn't wanted to sell. Eleanor had even thought about burning the house down. On her own. The final bonfire. But no matter. The rich couple bulldozed the house anyway. The ceilings were probably too low, something Lily had always noticed, how dark and claustrophobic it could get inside, with all the panelling and beams. On Google Earth the new house resembled three Monopoly hotels jammed together. A six-hole golf course took up the meadow where Mom had painted her watercolors and Dad had trotted his collection of horse-drawn carriages, where K.K., the oldest sister, the dead sister, liked to roll in the high grass and collect ticks, tracking their transformation into blood-engorged skin tags. K.K. the amateur naturalist, curious and unafraid. Then she'd put a match to them and Lily would shriek. But the weeping beech still maintained its central spot—through the peephole of Google, it resembled butter lettuce. The sisters' names were carved on the trunk, as were Benjamin's and Luke's, Benjamin's older brother, who'd drowned in the Maldives when Jimmy Carter was President. Up high in the tree Luke had once nailed a sachet filled with K.K.'s hair and fingernail clippings and a piece of gum, recently chewed, the sisters ordering him to go higher, and Luke, as always, obliging.

[David Gilbert on finding stories in dreams.](#)

Down in the yard the old RCA Victor started up, connected to the outlet by an extension cord plugged into an extension cord plugged into an extension cord. *Dom dom, dom do dom, dooby do. Dom dom, dom do dom, dooby do.* Eleanor's ex-husband, Mickey, couldn't help smiling. Always the Fleetwoods. It had been thirteen years since he'd heard this otherworldly

song. He glanced around, searching for someone who might be equally pleased. The goddam Fleetwoods. But no one else had a similar spark. For the most part Mickey stayed close to his son and daughter, Ash and Star, and their respective partners, Addy and Martha, while his five grandchildren ran around with the younger grandchildren, the group playing some game involving pinecones and sticks and a pillowcase slipped over the head of whoever was “it.” Mickey still had his *PEG* tube in, but he was making a happy return to solid foods. Like those Ritz crackers squared with Cheddar, Mickey flipping the cheese to the other side so his tongue could get the full blast of salt.

“Take it easy, Dad,” Star said after he popped in his second.

“My parents used to warm Ritzes in the oven. They’d spread butter on top.”

“That’s disgusting.”

“No, no, no, it was wonderful. Like, I can’t describe how wonderful it was.”

It was done only when company came over.

Served on a silver tray lined with a paper napkin.

Mickey grabbed a third despite Star’s eyeroll.

Would he take a bite of Charlie’s famous butterfly lamb tonight?

Or one of those specialty bratwursts that Arthur got shipped from Milwaukee?

Podcast: The Writer’s Voice

[Listen to David Gilbert read “Come Softly to Me.”](#)

Mickey was a longtime vegetarian, but nowadays all bets were off. He had been having intense fantasies about a cheeseburger with fries, a steak with onion rings, shrimp scampi and shrimp cocktail—for some reason he was obsessed with everything shrimp. During the doldrums of his treatment, he had watched a ton of television, with its endless stream of commercials for chicken sandwiches, and pepperoni pizzas, and loaded nachos, which all

looked so tasty he could weep. When Mickey wasn't watching television, he was either asleep or exhausted and moody as hell. His throat in constant pain. His taste buds shot. The radiation had also nuked his landmass of beard, so he was smooth-faced and awkwardly revealed. There was his neck. There was his chin. There were his cheeks pitted in acne scars, the reason for growing the beard five decades ago. And there was Eleanor, once more unto the Mickey breach.

"It's like I'm a fucked-up teen-ager again," he had said to her one night.

"You've always been a fucked-up teen-ager," she said back.

"Ha-ha."

Eleanor began to pour his dinner into the feeding bag.

"Fuck animals. Fuck heart disease. Just give me meat."

"Don't forget to do your swallowing exercises," she told him.

Mickey sighed.

"The only difference between me and teen-age me is I haven't had a boner in months."

"How tragic for you."

Did she find him charming again, or merely a continuation of ridiculous?

Come softly, darling

Come to me, sta-ay

Mickey refilled his Dixie cup.

The sweetness of the Mott's was thrilling.

The doctors were impressed with his recovery.

The PEG tube would soon be removed.

Yes, maybe he'd have a bratwurst.

After all, he needed the protein.

Everyone seemed happy to see him, Eleanor's family a forgiving lot. Many of them commented on his fine appearance—*Mickey, you look terrific!* *Mickey, you look great!* He had regained some of the lost weight. And his thick head of hair had proved impervious to the chemo. Even those acne scars came across as distinguished in the light of a new day. No doubt the family had been expecting something far worse, something they had seen before, whether in parents or friends or acquaintances on the street—that shift to when a person starts to wear the face he's going to die in. Mickey saved them from that sight. And while he was vain and susceptible to flattery, which had been his downfall in his marriage, as in other things, too, the compliments poked him in an unpleasant way. He knew that people were just being nice. Relieved for him and for themselves. *Mickey, so good to see you looking so good!* But please stop. There was a moment toward the end of the treatment when Mickey saw himself in the bathroom mirror and froze, not in shock but in tender fascination. It was his eyes. They had fallen so deep into the orbits that they seemed to pull in the rest of him, giving him a distant glimpse of who he once was. It was like meeting a dream only faintly remembered. He was Mickey but he wasn't Mickey, not anymore.



"Oh, look, Greg! A place for us to do our leaping."
Cartoon by Maddie Dai

He checked his watch, curious when the procession would begin.

The Reliquadry had already been moved into place.

The sisters' father had built the vessel-box thing, with help from Mr. Jones, the caretaker, the design based on a pencil sketch provided by the sisters. When it was finished, they painted it black. It wasn't pretty but it was solid and over the years had gained a certain noble quality born from ritual.

"Hey, Granddad."

Mickey turned and there was his grandson, no longer occupied by his cousins. Miles was all sweaty but his stink was odorless, his demeanor suggesting a live frog in his pocket.

"How's the game going over there?" Mickey asked.

"It's more of a story than a game," Miles said.

"And what's the story about?"

"I'm not sure, I'm not in charge."

They both glanced over at the grandchildren / cousins who seemed to be escorting the pillowcased grandchild / cousin to some kind of jail where more grandchildren / cousins awaited, either as prisoners or as guards, the coming violence indiscriminate.

“I hear you’re Father this year,” Mickey said.

Miles nodded.

“That’s a big deal.”

“I guess.”

Miles was still looking at his cousins.

“I was Father a few times,” Mickey said. “Ages ago.”

“Yeah?”

“I was even Mother once, which I liked very much.”

“Mother seems better.”

“Yeah.”

Mickey didn’t know Miles very well, or his other grandchildren, not because he didn’t spend time with them but because he never reached a space outside his own Mickey performance, which was also true with his children. Not that Mickey really understood this, but he could sense it, with a kind of yearning, every time he said goodbye to them.

“Granddad?”

“Yeah?”

“Can I see your tube thing?”

“The what?”

“The tube thing that you get food in.”

“You mean my *PEG* tube?”

“Yeah.”

No one had asked to see his *PEG* tube before.

Mickey was impressed.

“Sure,” he said. “Let’s check it out.”

Mickey glanced around, as though he were about to show Miles a tremendous secret, then he angled his body away from everyone else and lifted up his shirt. The *PEG* was inserted above his belly button and to the left, the exterior tubing about six inches long and held against his stomach with medical tape, like some silicone lamprey.

Miles craned for a closer look. “Does it hurt?”

“It can be awkward, but that’s about it. You attach another tube to this end here, which is attached to a bag you fill with, well, with whatever you feel like blending up.” With whatever Eleanor feels like blending up, Mickey should’ve said, since she was in charge of feeding him, mixing in her various supplements, the herbs and roots and tribal superfoods.

“So it goes inside of you?”

Mickey nodded. “It’s almost like when you’re in the womb, before you’re born, how you get all your nourishment through the umbilical cord, you know, where your belly button is. This is like my second umbilical cord. And when I’m done I’ll have two belly buttons.” Mickey was pleased with himself: he’d never thought of his *PEG* this way. He smiled in hopes of getting a smile in return, but Miles was all business.

“Can I touch it?”

Again, Mickey was impressed.

“Be my guest.”

Miles extended his index finger but then paused as if trying to figure out the best flight path.

“I don’t have to use it much anymore,” Mickey said as he untaped the tube and straightened the end for an easier greeting. “My throat is much better.”

But Miles hardly cared; he was zeroed in on the *PEG*-touching task. Mickey had a brief awful thought: what if Miles grabbed and yanked, what if he spun Mickey like a top? Luckily Miles was not a psychopath but instead a rather interesting and curious boy who did the deed as advertised. Mickey, for his demented part, considered startling Miles by screaming or going into a fake seizure, typical Mickey shtick, but he managed to control himself and just say, “And that’s my *PEG* tube.”

Miles nodded, then backed up. “O.K., I gotta go,” he said.

“O.K., then,” Mickey said, lowering his shirt.

But Miles didn’t move, the urge to leave waylaid. He just stared at Mickey, lost in God knows what thought, which Mickey was about to break by giving the boy a few soft taps to the cheek, something his grandfather used to do, something Mickey had forgotten he hated because those old hands seemed riddled with leprosy, but before Mickey could reach forward Miles turned and sprinted back to the other grandchildren and whatever story they were playing.

Upstairs, the sisters got ready, Louise removing Mom’s Bonwit Teller garment bag from the closet, laying it down on the bed, unzipping it. The smell of mothballs instantly joined the air, foul in practice but in memory dear. Louise freed the dresses one by one, Lily and Eleanor each stepping forward to claim theirs. A shake of fabric. A quick assessment of condition. The previous year’s damage hung on the dresses like a hangover, the sisters greeting these headaches with amusement.

“Shit,” Eleanor said as she revealed a four-inch tear in the front of her dress.

“Wow,” Lily said.

“I have no idea how this happened.”

“Oh, I remember,” Louise said, grinning. And of course she remembered. Louise was the unofficial keeper of memories, able to summon up, sometimes rather dubiously, myriad details from their childhood, whether the vacations to the beach or the vacations to the mountains or the vacations abroad, the birthday dinners at specific restaurants, the illnesses and injuries, the who-got-what for Christmas; she could also speak with authority on Mom and Dad’s own childhoods, their various home addresses, their pets, from hamster to Great Dane, their best friends at school, as well as the chronology of their relationship, how Mom was charmed by the goat Dad had in his New York apartment, a leftover from his fraternity days at Yale, a story all the sisters knew well, but Louise could name the goat (Tallulah) and the breed (Nigerian dwarf) and the cause of death (eating a poisonous houseplant—actually an oleander, Louise would have specified, and the fraternity was Psi Upsilon, the apartment at 71 East Seventy-first Street).

“Well?” Eleanor asked, annoyed at having to prod for the embarrassing info.

Typical second-oldest Louise, playing her sober advantage.

But when she was young she was the wildest sister.

Like the summer she was nine and pretended to be a dog named Maurice, and Mom and Dad went along with the spectacle, Mom putting Louise’s meals into a bowl, Dad getting her a collar with an inscribed brass tag. The Maurice exploits stopped only when she started to piddle in the house, after which Mom and Dad debated inviting Dr. Erikson for a weekend of intensive therapy sessions—for all the girls, they figured. The sisters leaned on Maurice until Maurice ran away and Louise returned. Sometimes K.K. insisted on a visit from Maurice—this was after she got sick—and Louise, then thirteen and half embarrassed, would curl up at the end of her bed.

Louise's grin finally gave. "You were doing the vagina thing again," she said.

"Oh, God."

Lily cackled—the sisters were cacklers. "Dammit, I missed that."

Louise turned to Lily, gleeful to fill in the Eleanor gaps. "She was so close to the fire, thrusting and jerking about, that we were worried she was going to ignite right in front of us, and then she birthed the world a bit too vigorously and *rrrrrrrip*. But it was glorious. It actually seemed to inspire you," Louise said to Eleanor. "I had to stop Arthur from putting his head through the opening and making it worse."

More cackling.

"Please don't let me eat one of Jasper's gummies tonight," Eleanor said.

Lily came over with a needle and thread, the thimble already helmeted on her finger.

"Or not a whole one," Eleanor added.

Lily lay the dress on her lap and went to work. She decided on a catch stitch, the x x x x x running down the front for all to see. It was their mother's style, part wabi-sabi, part kintsugi, though Mom was ignorant of those ancient Eastern practices; she simply wanted to acknowledge the repair, and never with cute embroidery—God, no—just the stitch, humbly expressed, whether a catch, a whip, a slip, a pick, a stab, a baste, or whatever else she had up her sleeve. Sewing had been one of her many talents. She'd made all her daughters' dresses, for a while at least, including these dresses, ivory white, done for her own sister's wedding, the girls the flower girls—and how excited they were, embodying the fairies of their fervid imagination, in crowns of baby's breath and everlasting, Alice walking down the aisle with Wilbur, Eleanor giggling over the name, *Wilbur, oink, oink*, K.K. whisper-singing, *Wil-buor, Wil-buor, always smelling of liq-uor*. Lily was the only sister who took an actual interest in sewing. Together, she and Mom would tackle the annual restoration of the

dresses. The alterations during the teen-age years were the hardest part, as Louise and Lily and Eleanor got older and grew taller and curvier. Mom showed Lily how to add panels of fabric here and there; how to reconfigure the sleeves, the collars; how to extend the life of these ivory-white artifacts, creating a Frankenstein's monster of a flower girl. It was almost funny, though Mom tended to remain quiet. This was not her production; she was merely playing her part—the broken-hearted mother trying to be a good parent to her surviving daughters. But she did insist on using a different color of thread for every year of stitching, beginning with dark red in 1959, then royal blue in 1960, and so on and so forth. Lily took up the responsibility after she died, this year's selection emerald green.

"Medic," Louise cried, revealing a split seam on the shoulder of her dress.

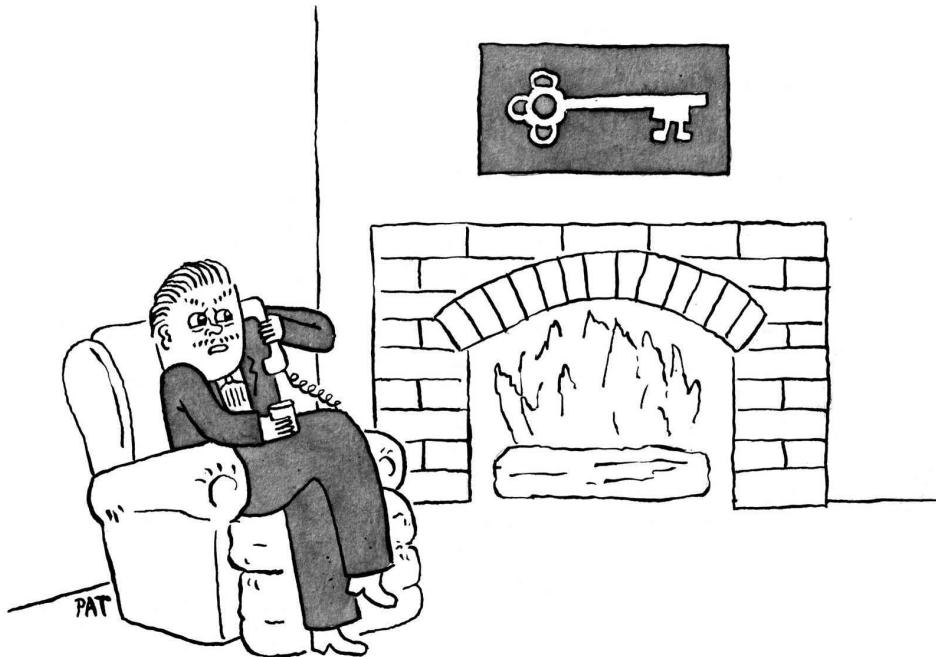
To see the dresses was to see a calendar in Morse code.

"I can't believe how good Mickey looks," Lily said as she did her mending.

Eleanor had been waiting for this.

"I know," Louise said. "It's quite something."

Separately the two of them had talked to her about Mickey, but they were relatively demure on the phone, focussing on his health and prognosis and how Eleanor was an absolute saint to take care of him. Eleanor hated the saint talk. This was Mickey. Hopeless helpless Mickey. There was no chance he could've handled this on his own, plus he presently had no girlfriend under his pseudo-beatnik sway. What else was Eleanor to do? Let Ash or Star get sucked into the burden? So he moved in with her. No big deal. Holding a grudge against Mickey was like holding a grudge against the weather. But whenever Louise and Lily were with Eleanor, the second- and the third-oldest facing the youngest, they could converge into a single conspiratorial line.



"You're locked out? Of the city?"
Cartoon by Patrick McKelvie

"I love him without the beard," Louise said.

"It's striking," Lily said.

"It really is," Louise agreed.

"And he's eating now?" Lily asked.

"He is," Eleanor confirmed. "He's doing really well."

"That's great," Lily said.

"So wonderful," Louise said.

"Does that mean he'll go back to his place or keep staying with you?" Lily asked.

"Ooh, good question," Louise said.

Here it was.

Eleanor shook her head. "You two are hilarious."

“Come on, I like Mickey,” Louise said.

“You weren’t married to him,” Eleanor said.

“I know he was a problematic husband, but maybe he’s pleasant company now.”

“Post-cancer,” Lily said.

“Yes, post-cancer.”

“He fucked my best friend.”

“True, true,” Louise said, “but he never tried to fuck one of us.”

“And that’s something,” Lily said.

Eleanor snorted.

“Seriously, there’ve been no stirrings?” Lily asked.

“Stirrings?” Eleanor placed her hand over her heart. “Oh, my, the stirring.”

“Stop.”

“You mean during the radiation and chemotherapy treatments, and the doctor appointments, and the PEG feedings, and the mucus, and the mouth sores, the fears of infection, the keeping track of the meds for pain, the meds for nausea, the meds for constipation—you know Mickey had a turd stuck for, like, two hours and it almost became an emergency-room situation.”

“Jesus.”

“It was hilarious until it wasn’t.”

“Poor Mickey.”

“I even tried Googling for a solution: *poop trapped half in half out help.*”

The sisters tried not to cackle, though Eleanor knew that laughter was the greatest change of subject. What she didn't mention was that she enjoyed taking care of Mickey. She had her Moleskine notebook where she marked down all the details of the day, the progression of side effects, the calories taken in, even the movies they watched and the music they listened to. It gave things a mortal focus, a sort of physical poetry, if that makes sense. His temperature. His pulse and blood pressure. His hours of sleep. She had become invested in deciphering Mickey's body while he shrank further into himself—at times he seemed to be just an echo. And Eleanor loved it more. Or loved the feeling. It was somewhat hard for her to puzzle out. The feeling was bigger than any she'd ever had for Mickey. And it wasn't some bullshit about grace, or compassion, or service for a person in need. Not at all. She loved him for being sick, not because she wanted Mickey to suffer but because she was back in the company of sickness. There was a warmth there, its own kind of simple conjuring. Rubbing Mickey's head. Clipping his extravagant toenails. Cleaning him. And here the cure had nothing to do with her ministrations. With K.K., she had tried peony seeds strung into a necklace, but with Mickey it was all protons and cisplatin.

Lily gave the dresses a final once-over, then removed the thimble from her finger.

"I think we're ready," she said.

"All right, then," Louise said.

They began to strip down, the three of them grinning as they returned to those intimate sisterly spaces. Eleanor was braless, as usual, her nipples famous in some memories. The grinning turned to giggling. Here they were, another year older. It seemed ludicrous. On went the dresses, slowly and carefully, as though the fabric were mined with explosives. Almost there. Almost there. Phew. The fit was chaotic at best. They daisy-chained for the buttoning up of the backs and the tying of the pink ribbons into bows, then they adjusted the shoulders and smoothed the fronts and regarded themselves. The sight of these patchwork dresses in a confetti of stitches, the original ivory white now a phlegmy yellow, should've been the height of absurdity, but instead an unnamed solemnity entered the scene.

Lily reached into a shopping bag and pulled out three flower crowns.

“Abigail and Felicity made these,” she said, always amazed by her granddaughters.

“Ah, Craspedia,” Louise said of the yellow-headed billy buttons.

Lily and Eleanor shared a look, mostly amused.

The sisters put the crowns on, using one another to fine-tune the placement.

“You look adorable,” Lily said to Eleanor.

“No, you look adorable.”

“We all look adorable,” Lily said.

They paused for a moment in their adorableness, which was also sad, to be adorable, to be adored—Eleanor started to tear up, Eleanor tired and maybe extra fragile, Eleanor feeling in her stomach, in the deepest part of her stomach, the pinprick spiral where another awareness seemed to dwell, an awareness that communicated in an alien language of prods and swirls, like the childhood game of spelling words on a bare back. Eleanor took Lily and Louise by the hand. She gave them a squeeze, and they squeezed back, as if providing proof of their own existence, then they started for the stairs.

Felicity had run away again, Felicity under a pillowcase because she was deformed, Felicity forced into this role by Katherine, who at fifteen was obsessed with Joseph Merrick, having read “The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences,” by Frederick Treves, and “The Elephant Man: A Study in Human Dignity,” by Ashley Montagu, and “The True History of the Elephant Man,” by Michael Howell and Peter Ford. And, of course, Katherine had seen the movie, Katherine weeping throughout. It was just so beautiful, he was so beautiful, Katherine watching it again and again, those sexy fucked-up lips. Then she watched “Eraserhead,” since it was made by the same director and seemed similar. But it wasn’t. Not at all. Except for the baby, who was like an Elephant Man baby, horrible but also freaky cute, which Katherine totally loved. But mostly she was confused and knew that

she was watching something adult, something she probably shouldn't be watching, something far weirder than any Internet porn she'd been warned about. Still, the experience gripped her. It was as if she had dreamed someone else's nightmare and now it was her nightmare. And Katherine was determined to take part in this sorcery, whenever she had the chance, so she had wrangled the younger cousins—Katherine was a natural wrangler—and had them playing orphans, and the orphans were playing house, and the orphanage was run by sadists who considered themselves perfect angels. Katherine guided the performance, whispering directives into ears. Maya was the villain, and Jacob and Gus and Aubrey were her lackeys, and Wilma was blind, and Crawford was deaf, Esther a schizophrenic, Oscar and Booker conjoined twins, and Hilma had Tourette's, Laramie a terrible rash, and Matteo was a stutterer, Felicity aforementioned, and finally Hugo and Miles, who were ghosts because as a rule Hugo and Miles never listened to their older sister.

"You were murdered by Jacob," Katherine whispered to Hugo.

"Like I care."

"In the next three minutes, frighten Esther," Katherine whispered to Miles.

But Miles was distracted by a bird. Miles was often distracted by a bird. This bird was high up in a tree, its silhouette raptorish—it could've been wearing a trenchcoat with a sawed-off shotgun hidden underneath. Miles wished he had his spotting scope and his Sibley's.

"O.K.," Hugo said to Miles. "Now I dare you to go up to Uncle Arthur and ask him if he knows what coprophagia means."

"Huh?"

"I dare you to go—"

"I'm not doing another stupid dare. Granddad was enough," Miles said as firmly as possible, since his older brother, like his older sister, could be relentless, the two of them treating him like a pet monkey until they got bored and threw him in a cage.

“Don’t be a pussy.”

It was a hawk, for sure.

“No, no, no, ask him what a Hot Karl is.”

Probably a Cooper’s. But Miles had seen dozens of Cooper’s, his lifer coming two years ago at Mohonk. He knew them well: the dark cap; the blue-gray upperparts; the dense rufous bands on the underparts. This one was different.

Miles curled his index finger into a makeshift scope.

“Whatcha got?” Hugo asked.

“Not sure. Maybe a Cooper’s.”

Hugo regarded the whatever for a moment, then he went over to haunt Jacob but not before punching Miles in the arm just hard enough to let Miles know he could’ve punched harder. But Miles remained in the bubble of the bird. This hawk was larger than the typical Cooper’s. If only it would leave its perch and give him a clear vantage of its wingspan and tail—if only Miles had his fricking spotting scope, because he was thinking it might be a northern goshawk, which he’d never seen before. A goddam fricking northern goshawk. Right here. Begging to be identified. And they were usually impossible to locate, their habitat large tracts of forest. Not back yards. Not at the edge of Aunt Louise’s country house. Goshawks fricking hate people.

No one else would be excited. Oh, his mother and father might pretend to care, their voices slipping into that annoying tone of Miles indulgence, like his face was a cue card or something. “Really! A northern goshawk! That’s amazing!” Every time Dad went birding with him—and Dad went birding with him a lot—Miles could sense his boredom as well as his pride at doing this bonding stuff, as if this were some knock against his own father. *See, this is how you parent,* Dad pointing out every cardinal and blue jay and missing all the warblers.

Maybe the goshawk was sick. Maybe it had aspergillosis, like Mabel from “H Is for Hawk.” Maybe it was dying up there in the tree. Starving. Unable to hunt. Maybe it needed help—maybe it was even asking for help, from someone like Miles.

Miles lifted his arm in the style of a falconer.

He knew it was a silly thing to do, and childish, like when he tried to wobble objects with his mind, or flick the lights with a wink, like when he prayed to God because he was scared of not waking up in the morning, but Miles did it anyway, and he was disappointed when the goshawk remained in the tree.

Or maybe it was a Cooper’s.

Just a plain old Cooper’s.

And then the drumming began. It was metallic and thin and advanced slowly from the direction of the house. The mothers and fathers clapped their hands and yoo-hooed to break up whatever was going on with the children. Katherine went from irritated to pseudo-parental, guiding her cast toward the Reliquadry, Felicity removing the pillowcase and revealing the deformity of flushed cheeks and sweat-matted hair. Miles’s father shouted because Miles was in his own world again, Miles turning around and seeing his father and grandfather, Dad gesturing at him to get on over here, Mickey giving him a thumbs-up.

“What do I have to do?” Miles asked of his impending role as Father.

“Just stand over there,” Dad said, “there” being the Reliquadry.

“You’ll be great,” Mickey told him.



BLOOPER
"Instead of purchasing from Amazon, buy local, and support your neighborhood bookseller's kooky space program."
Cartoon by Brendan Loper

"Just stand there?"

"Yes," Dad said.

"And?"

"Read what you're handed. That's it."

"You'll be great," Mickey repeated.

Miles—quick check of the bird, still there—went where he was told, the rest of the relatives gathering around as well, while a few, always the same few, remained on the sidelines. The Reliquadry resembled a small black stage waiting for its production, and now the production was coming into view, led by Terry, Benjamin's son-in-law, who was striking Benjamin's old toy drum, Terry wearing a tricornered hat, which was his own addition and not an addition anyone particularly liked. But that was typical of Terry. He had a belt-buckle collection, so enough said. Behind him, in single file, walked Louise, and then Lily, and then Eleanor; they could've been connected by rope. To the bystanders these women were grandmothers and aunts and mothers and great-aunts and wives and stepmothers and ex-wives and in some cases old friends, but right now, to themselves, they were just

sisters. An ethereal spirit seemed to carve a path through all that was familiar, the air getting closer, as if the past and the future were pressure systems meeting over seven acres in the Berkshires.

Miles just thought it bizarro.

Mickey smiled at him.

His stretched mouth was like windswept bone.

Standing there, Miles was pre-mortified, certain he would mess things up, and everyone would laugh because Miles was ten years old and was meant to mess things up, was practically designed to mess things up—he could puke or piss himself, could scream and curse and strip naked and go running into the woods and they'd all fondly remember how precious Miles lost his mind. With every second that passed, Miles could feel his anxiety further its corkscrew into his stomach.

The sisters arrived at the Reliquadry.

Uncle Terry gave a final flamboyant bang on Benjamin's toy drum and stepped away and in stepped Yann, Louise and Arthur's son-in-law, and his son Connor, the two of them in charge of opening the Reliquadry and helping the sisters inside. Yann bent over and took a handle, Connor bent over and took a handle; they gave a nod and pulled. It almost looked like the entrance to a cellar, but instead of going underground the interior was sixteen inches deep and divided into four sister-size berths, with four corresponding portraits painted on the back of the doors, which over the years had faded more than the cave drawings in Lascaux, but you could still glimpse their mother's artistic skill. She had been unenthusiastic about this morbid project, choosing speed over care. My God, her daughters could be persistent, as they demanded she add a worm here, a bug there, a skull in the corner—enough, girls, enough—but she did as she was told because she didn't have the energy to disappoint them.

K.K.'s dress was already arranged in the first berth, placed there earlier this morning.

Its various moth holes were unrepaired, but it could still fit a fifteen-year-old.

Not that Miles cared. He was noticing his brother, who was staring at him, bug-eyed, then shuddering, then grabbing his throat. Hugo would probably try to mess him up, maybe by coughing, maybe by doing one of his patented fake sneezes, which for some reason he was famous for in seventh grade. Miles wanted to know if the bird, whether Cooper's or goshawk, was still in the tree, but that would require him turning around and that seemed like the wrong thing to do as Yann and Connor were helping his grandmother and great-aunts into the Reliquadry. This took some effort. It was like watching someone sink into a very hot bath.

But soon enough they were flat on their backs and snug.

Like a can of sardines, though Miles had never seen a can of sardines.

Eleanor lifted herself up on her elbow so she could get a quick look at her sisters.

As always, Louise was nervous and working on her breathing.

Then Mother came along. This year it was Lily's granddaughter, Lacey, who had had her travails with serious drugs and unfortunate men and had been away for a while but now was back, for who knew how long. She carried a picnic basket and grinned at these strange excellent women and their strange excellent witchy ways. Louise and Lily and Eleanor tried to hold still, tried to keep their eyes shut, but Lily was peeking, and Louise was practically hyperventilating, and Eleanor had the slyest of smiles. Mother took them in. It was hard not to cry and not to be full of wonder. How the loss remained with them. How they celebrated the kinship of remembering. How the four of them had once sliced open their palms, left palm, right palm, and then clutched hands—at midnight, of course, during a full moon, of course—hidden under the canopy of that massive weeping beech, and they had begun to chant without prompting, without one of them taking the lead, just chanting, K.K. and Louise and Lily and Eleanor, the sounds never forming into proper words yet everything had its meaning, and soon they were moving and speaking in what their father would've

called an example of Huygens synchronization: something about vibrations and coupling strength—only Louise would've cared. The next morning the sisters got into tremendous trouble, cutting their hands like that, and with what kind of knife, and how dirty was the blade, their mother so worried, borderline panicked. So foolish, she told them, so so foolish and reckless and just plain foolish. But, seeing her girls now, Mother saw that they were right, that all of this was right, seeing her daughters laid out in a row, pulsing with stillness.

First things first. Mother removed the flower crowns and put them on their chests—nobody wanted that digging into a skull. Then she opened the picnic basket. Out came candy necklaces, which she gently slipped around their necks. Then the Fig Newtons, two of them, positioned in the center of each of the flower crowns. Followed by cherry Tootsie Pops because the sisters all agreed that cherry was the only flavor. A bottle of water and a straw tucked into the hollow of one arm. A small flashlight tucked into the hollow of the other. And last but not least a silver dollar in case they needed to pay someone for their hour-long journey into the underworld.

Mother gave her girls a final appraisal.

And here Lacey improvised. “Well, gals,” she said. “Happy trails.”

Terry turned to Deirdre, his wife. “What’d she say?”

“Happy trails.”

“Oh.”

Yann and Connor restored the butterflied doors to their cocooned state, being careful not to slam them down—and, like that, the sisters were gone, replaced by a black slab. Nearby was a bucket of dirt. Whoever was in the mood could grab a handful and toss it on the Reliquadry, the assignment most vigorously taken up by the youngest grandchildren.

And now it was Father’s turn.

Miles swallowed hard. Anxiety had breached his stomach and he was filling up with—what was it, exactly? It seemed more than nerves. The feeling was physical but also empty, a nothingness that defined a space he hadn't known existed. A horrible expansiveness. It was like losing a tether. Like the dream he had of his head becoming filled with helium and he had to be tied down otherwise he'd float away forever. Where was the thing he had to read? Nobody had given him anything. He was just standing there, like *Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the dumbass Miles show*. And there was his grandfather, looking at him, his mouth trembling, his second mouth hidden under his shirt. And his brother was getting ready to sneeze. And dirt was flying all over the place.

“Lacey,” Beverly, Lacey’s mother, whisper-hissed.

“What?”

Beverly pantomimed reaching back into the picnic basket.

Lacey stared at her mother as though the world would never make sense, not in a million years, nope—but then it did, it suddenly did, and she reached back into the picnic basket and pulled out the spiral notebook, yes, yes, yes, like it was the greatest victory, and she danced it over to Miles.

“Father,” she said, presenting it with a flourish.

Miles took the notebook, “The Pharmakon” written on the cover in big block letters. It was the kind of word Hugo would like—Miles wanted to remember it. The notebook itself was obviously old, but it also looked like any notebook Miles used at school. The inside had only two pages, the rest of them ripped out, which gave the thing a finished quality. For sure, the handwriting belonged to a girl. It was in ballpoint and the words were so round and clear, so immediate, it could’ve been one of Katherine’s props. And then Miles noticed the birds, four of them drawn in the horizon above those blue lanes subdivided in black ink.

They were probably ravens.

Miles got ready to read.

But they could've been crows.

Now we are dead. Don't ask us how we are dead, we are just dead. Maybe we ate poisoned mushrooms, like the mushrooms we see all the time but never eat because we think they might be poisonous but they're probably not. Maybe they were. And maybe we ate them. Maybe we died laughing. Or maybe it was a snake who came to us when we were napping on the grass and the snake bit us and the venom killed us because the snake was poisonous and rare in these parts but that didn't matter because we are dead from it anyway. Maybe we died screaming. Or maybe we just died because we wanted to die and we knew we would be dead a lot longer than we would be alive so why not be dead and get on with that part of not being alive. Maybe we didn't want to wait and wonder and watch animals and trees and birds and dogs and cats and mothers and fathers and sisters die without us and what are we to do without them. Now that we are dead we don't think being dead is much different from being alive. We know we will remember those we left behind who are of course sad and we want them to know they'll be dead soon enough and then we will all be dead together and won't that be nice. Maybe we drank poison like people do when they are mourning or when they are forced to because of something they did that some people think is wrong. But if we drank poison like hemlock we drank it like medicine because we know they are the same thing even though only one of us was smart enough to know everything about Socrates and the other ancient Greeks. Maybe we are dead because she is dead. Maybe we died when she died after she was sick. But we are all dead now. All of us. Dead as a doornail. Dead as a dodo. We are the sisters dead and we miss you and love you and are sorry Mother and Father to be the daughters dead but we need to be dead and do not ask us when we will be alive again. Maybe we died whispering how we would never die and here we are, dead. ♦

By Caleb Crain

By Bono

By Thomas McGuane

By Rivka Galchen

Food Memories

- [Recipes from the Survivors of Auschwitz](#)

Recipes from the Survivors of Auschwitz

Survivors of the Holocaust meet up to launch a cookbook—recipes for matzo-ball soup, kogel mogel, and Marion Wiesel’s onionless latkes, favored by her husband, Elie.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)



“As far as matzo-ball soup, my mother made the best,” Ronald Lauder said the other night on the Upper East Side, in the bookshop of the Neue Galerie, the art museum he founded. Lauder, seventy-eight, the younger son of Estée and Joseph Lauder, and a billionaire heir to their cosmetics fortune, was there to celebrate the publication of a cookbook. “Honey Cake and Latkes: Recipes from the Old World by the Auschwitz-Birkenau Survivors” was organized by the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial Foundation, of which he is the chairman.

In the shop, before the book’s launch, [Lauder](#) sat with a handful of its contributors. How did the idea originate? “When you’re dealing with survivors, when you’re dealing with Jews, everyone has a different version

of events,” he said. “But there’s only one version that’s correct, and that’s mine.” In January of 2020, Lauder had invited a hundred and twenty survivors to visit Auschwitz-Birkenau on the seventy-fifth anniversary of its liberation. At dinner one night, talk turned to gefilte fish. The group stayed in touch. Maria Zalewska, the foundation’s Polish-born director, began to gather recipes.

More than one survivor remembers sustaining fellow-prisoners with vivid descriptions of the foods they’d eaten in their earlier lives. Tova Friedman (*kasha varnishkes*, carrot tzimmes), a sprightly eighty-four-year-old with a silvery-blond bob, was five and a half when she was sent to Auschwitz. “Food is home,” she said. “And if you talk about it the smell comes to you and home comes back.”

Eugene Ginter, eighty-three, who was liberated just before he turned six, had a more complicated relationship with smells. “When I came in Auschwitz,” he recalled, “I looked through the wooden slats of the cattle car, and I said, ‘It’s very pretty,’ because it had trees. But then the smell, it was a sweet smell. It was the human bodies being burned.” Ginter’s contributions to the book are the foods his mother made after the war, to fatten his emaciated frame: dark chocolate shaved over buttered black bread; a boiled potato mashed with buttermilk; *kogel mogel*, whipped egg whites beaten with yolks and sugar.

Across the hall, in Café Sabarsky, servers circulated with trays of champagne and bite-size versions of some of the book’s recipes: Elisabeth Citrom’s eggplant salad with crispy rye croutons; David Marks’s *rakott krumpli*, Hungarian layered potatoes with cheese; Goldie Finkelstein’s rugelach. Sitting on a banquette, Lois Flamholz, ninety-four, a survivor who was born in Czechoslovakia, looked at a photograph of herself in the book in which she presses circles of dough together for jelly cookies. “I miss those cookies!” she cried. “I can’t stand,” she explained. “I stopped cooking, I stopped baking.”



"On the lighter side, here's Muffin with a piece of string."
Cartoon by Mick Stevens

On another banquette, the actor and director [Joel Grey](#) recounted, to the producer Jeffrey Seller, his experience filming “Cabaret” in Germany, in 1971. “I was terrified on the flight,” he said. “I stepped off the airplane, stood on the ground, and wept.”

Lauder moved to a lectern. “The first title of the book was ‘Auschwitz Recipes,’ ” he said. “It didn’t go too far.” Midway through his thank-yous, he turned toward the door. “Before I say anything else, a very special woman is coming in now, Marion Wiesel.” He went on, “It was Marion who I called to get the recipe from her husband, [Elie](#). And, today, the latkes that you ate were from Elie’s recipe.”

The latke recipe was, unusually, absent onions. Later, a pushy interlocutor asked Mrs. Wiesel, ninety-one, a survivor herself, and a gifted translator, if it was true that her late husband didn’t care for them. She said, “I can’t believe you’re interested in whether or not he liked onions.” Elisha, the Wiesels’ son, said, “My father preferred to focus on the positive. So rather than an onion-hater, I would think of him as a chocolate-lover.” According to family lore, Marion had ensnared Elie with her latkes, and also bribed him into quitting smoking by promising him a Jaguar. “There was no Jaguar,” Elisha said.

In the lobby, on the way out, Tova Friedman, whose TikTok account, TovaTok, has nearly half a million followers, held court. Thanks to her new memoir, “The Daughter of Auschwitz,” she’s been invited around the world to tell her story. “So they took us to this . . . high tea,” she said, describing a visit to London. “We got that thing, full of little sandwiches. So I said, ‘What happened to the crust? That’s the best part of the bread!’ ” She went on, “You eat your soggy white bread, I got an idea. I’m gonna invent *chai* tea,” as in the Hebrew word for life, pronounced gutturally. “It’s gonna be rye toast, with crusts, and it’s gonna be lox. It’s gonna be gefilte fish.” ♦

By Hannah Goldfield

By Hannah Goldfield

By Hannah Goldfield

By James McAuley

Judge Not

- Invasion of the Sports Cheaters!

Invasion of the Sports Cheaters!

As Aaron Judge broke Roger Maris's home-run record, weird vibes sullied professional chess and poker, and an angling tournament looked to be the target of a low-tech con: lead weights in the fish.

By [Ben McGrath](#)



Top of the first, 1–1 count, hanging slider: all rise. With just one more game remaining before the start of the playoffs, [Aaron Judge](#), one of the largest players to bat lead-off in baseball's long history, launched a moon shot for his sixty-second home run of the season, climbing into seventh place in the annals. Judge's total was the American League record, we kept hearing, because the men who out-swatted him all happened to play for National League teams, never mind that interleague play has long since made the distinction arbitrary. Nobody cares about American League records. They care about the presumption that Judge grew his magnificent body by consuming food, not pharmaceuticals, unlike the slightly less gargantuan men who bested him. We are stirred because we believe he plays by the rules.

Does anyone else? The *Wall Street Journal* reported last week that the online platform chess.com had found more than a hundred instances in which the nineteen-year-old grand master Hans Niemann likely “received illegal assistance” by toggling screens and seeking artificial intelligence—a brain on steroids. Think of it as cheating on a take-home test. (Reports of academic fraudulence soared during the pandemic.) Niemann admits to having done so twice, when he was twelve and sixteen, but he denies the accusation that he found a way to cheat last month at a live tournament in St. Louis, when he defeated the world champion, [Magnus Carlsen](#), in front of video cameras. “I had the impression that he wasn’t tense or even fully concentrating,” Carlsen said afterward, explaining his refusal to play Niemann again. On the Internet, speculation proliferated about where Niemann might have stashed a device that could vibrate in a kind of Morse code, offering hints from an associate. His shoes? His rectum? Niemann offered to play in the nude.

Vibration theory has overtaken professional poker as well. At issue is a two-hundred-and-sixty-nine-thousand-dollar hand won recently by Robbi Jade Lew, who had lousy cards. Did she somehow know that her opponent, Garrett Adelstein, had bupkes, too? That’s what Adelstein seemed to suspect. He confronted her—and, strangely, Lew gave him his money back, thereby encouraging a Zapruder-film level of analysis online. (She later said she regretted doing so.) Her chair, some noticed, appeared to vibrate sporadically, as if zapped. “I was shaking my foot,” she told the podcast “PokerNews,” blaming A.D.H.D. and a hangover. What about the red jewel on her finger that vanished after her hands dropped briefly below the table? “I was twisting my ring, as I always do.” Was that a phone-shaped bulge in her pants? “I was wearing the absolute tightest pants in the absolute smallest size.” Versace leggings. “I wish we could have all just stripped down naked,” she added, echoing the aloof chess rogue.

Merited or not, the level of competitive distrust calls to mind an ex-President who insists that all elections are rigged [unless the right person wins](#). Sports don’t build character, the saying goes. They reveal it. Are we all getting paranoid? Unfortunately, the angling tournament on Lake Erie that made international news the other day doesn’t bode well for the sanguine. “We got weights in fish!” the Dickensian-named tournament

director, Jason Fischer, announced, after holding an unusually dense walleye caught by the ostensibly winning team, slicing its belly, and withdrawing a lead sinker, to hoots from an angry crowd. On the one hand, this was a pleasingly low-tech con, along the lines of Deflategate, as compared with the sci-fi conspiracies in poker and chess. More walleyes were cut open, revealing not just additional sinkers but fillets of previously caught fish—ingenious in its absurdity. On the other hand, those of us following virally soon learned that the would-be champs, Chase Cominsky and Jacob Runyan, had been enjoying a streak of fishing domination so conspicuous that, like Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa in the nineties, they couldn't help attracting doubters. (Sosa, for what it's worth, has never admitted wrongdoing.) Lake Erie is vast. How could one set of lines keep finding the biggest fish? It didn't help that one of the men had reportedly failed a polygraph at last year's Fall Brawl. One's faith in the social contract is not improved by the knowledge that polygraphs were already a well-established feature of the angling circuit.

"Now you know why I hate fishing tournaments," a trout-hunting obsessive e-mailed the other day, and then confessed that he, too, had cheated in the only contest he'd ever entered. "We juiced our flies with smell bait." He continued, "We brought them to the river, and maybe cast them a few times, didn't catch anything, and went back to fishing straight. So I should say, we tried to cheat, but quit on it because it wasn't working. So our third-place finish was legit!" Much like Judge's seventh-place finish. Or so we'll hope, until it emerges that the Yankees were stealing signs and sending pulses to his belt buckle. ♦

By Sarah Larson

By Lauren Collins

By Jessica Winter

By Jessica Winter

Letter from India

- [When the Hindu Right Came for Bollywood](#)

When the Hindu Right Came for Bollywood

The industry used to honor India's secular ideals—but, since the rise of Narendra Modi, it's been flooded with stock Hindu heroes and Muslim villains.

By [Samanth Subramanian](#)



In the summer of 2019, the actor Mohammed Zeeshan Ayyub won a role on “*Tandav*,” an Indian political drama being produced by Amazon Prime. The title was clever. In Hindu lore, the *tandav* is the dance of life and death performed by Shiva, the god whose terrible powers can end the universe—a neat metaphor for the dark, intricate maneuvers of national politics. When Ayyub read the show’s script, he spied a handful of allusions to the India around him. In one episode, policemen barge onto a university campus to arrest a Muslim student leader. The scene recalled the government’s persecution of popular student politicians and, more broadly, the hostility toward Muslims that marks the Hindu nationalism of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (B.J.P.). The B.J.P. had just begun its second straight term in power, and “obviously, when you write,

you write about recent things,” Ayyub said. Mostly, though, “Tandav” aspired to be splashy entertainment—the kind of show in which a Prime Minister dies after drinking a glass of poisoned wine, which happens in the opening episode. “In fact,” Ayyub said, “I even told the director, ‘If your main character breaks the fourth wall, you will have your “House of Cards.”’ ”

Ayyub played another student leader, a tyro named Shiva Shekhar—not quite the main role, but a key one nevertheless, and a fillip to his career. A little more than a decade ago, Ayyub had been a floundering theatre actor in Delhi. “It took me four or five months, with great difficulty, to save enough money to buy a refrigerator,” he said. Then he moved to Mumbai and threw himself into its entertainment industry—into Bollywood, to use a term that many of its denizens dislike. Since then, Ayyub, now thirty-nine, has earned supporting parts both in blockbusters and in small, sparkling movies. He has a magnetic way of speaking Hindi, but he isn’t yet the sort of actor who is mobbed on the street. When we met, in June, he suggested not a luxury hotel or Soho House—the usual, discreet haunts of stars of a certain luminosity—but a café near his apartment complex. We sat outdoors, in sweaty, pre-monsoon weather, and Ayyub went through cigarettes and chili-cheese toast with the vim, if not the metabolism, of an undergraduate. After being cast in “Tandav,” Ayyub said with a laugh, he had to lose weight to look young enough to be Shiva Shekhar.

In the first scene that Ayyub shot, Shiva is onstage in a student skit, playing his namesake deity: a Shiva in a suit, newly risen from a cosmic nap, wondering how to be relevant once more. Tweet about something controversial, an accomplice proposes—something about how the university’s students, forever demanding *azaadi*, or freedom, from their government’s oppression, are “anti-nationals,” traitors to India. The audience chuckles; the B.J.P. rants in this vein so often that it has turned into a trope. But Shiva is surprised. How can a call for freedom be controversial? “*Azaadi?*” he exclaims. “What the . . . ?” The last word is drowned out by the shriek of mike feedback.

Like nudity and sex, profanity discomfits the average Indian film or television producer. This is especially true of those who make the

quintessential Hindi movie—the song-and-dance melodrama, fit for all ages—but the instinct persists in those who aim to be edgier. When lawyers for Amazon Prime and an external law firm first reviewed “Tandav”’s scripts—a customary procedure—Shiva’s line had been a full, florid “What the fuck?” One of the lawyers told me that his team had urged the showrunners to prune the expletive, but that there was more concern about “Tandav” coming off as anti-B.J.P. One character, the lawyer remembered, “was a politician depicted as a conservative, pushing for the privatization of education, which is one of the Modi government’s issues. We always said, Do it in a way where you can’t match the incidents onscreen to real incidents.” (Amazon broadly disputed this characterization.)

Drawing inspiration from bleak headlines—the religious lynchings, the cronyism, the autocratic acts of the state—had become a fraught enterprise. The B.J.P. and its supporters were growing intolerant of contrary views and criticism, and they were liable to react badly—through social-media attacks, targeted harassment by government agencies, or endless litigation. Outright violence was rarer, although its threat was never distant. “In the year or so before ‘Tandav,’ ” the lawyer said, “people were objecting to anything.”

When “Tandav” premiered, in January, 2021, Ayyub was on location, shooting a film. On Twitter, he noticed that he was being tagged frequently—sometimes by people praising him, but mostly amid heaps of abuse. In cities and towns far from Mumbai, people filed police complaints, claiming that the portrayal of a foulmouthed Shiva was an insult to Hinduism. (A B.J.P. official told me that, in the large family of Hindu-nationalist organizations, “an enthusiastic worker can always be found who will file these complaints to keep his bosses happy.”) Such cases usually go nowhere, but in the B.J.P.’s India, where the police and the courts are pliant, it’s hard to be sanguine. Recently, a Muslim journalist was imprisoned for three weeks because someone complained that a four-year-old tweet derided Hinduism. The account that reported him was anonymous, had one tweet and one follower on the day of the arrest, and went offline thereafter.



"Now that I don't have to 'make the most of summer,' I can finally relax."
Cartoon by Anne Fizzard

To be safe, Amazon cut the skit scene from “Tandav” a few days after the show began streaming. But the storm raged on. A senior B.J.P. leader wrote to Amazon, accusing its “ideologically motivated employees” of running “vicious programming.” Amazon petitioned India’s Supreme Court to protect the show’s director and producers from arrest while the cases were being heard; the Court refused to grant this reprieve. That felt unprecedented, Ayyub said, and it tipped everyone into a state of high alarm. An Amazon employee who worked on “Tandav” remembers how taxing the experience was. “It took over our days, nights, weeks, months,” he said. “And we were all working from home, because this was peak *Covid*. So I was on calls with the Amazon guys in the U.S. late night my time, early morning my time, because the company wanted to protect its employees.” All the discussions, he said, were about “how to keep our people safe”—but for a few months it really looked as if an Amazon executive might go to prison for green-lighting a cheesy TV show.

Filmmaking thrives in plenty of other cities in India, but “Bollywood” has become shorthand for Indian cinema as a whole, and for the thousand or so movies that the country releases annually. For nearly a century, Bollywood has also worn the warm, self-satisfied gloss of being a passion that unifies a country of divisions. Not only are its audiences as mixed as India itself,

filmmakers will say, but Bollywood is a place where caste and religion don't matter. The most piously presented proof of this is the fact that, in a Hindu-majority country, a Muslim man named Shah Rukh Khan has been the supreme box-office star for decades.

Even if Bollywood possesses this liberal fibre, the rightward swing in Indian politics has gnawed away at it. In Mumbai, people divide recent history into pre-“Tandav” and post-“Tandav” periods, reading the show’s fate—its bitter legal battles, its suspended second season—as a lesson in what can and cannot be said in Modi’s India. Their nervousness manifests in absurdities—in, for example, how Amazon Prime now discourages characters who share their names with Hindu deities—but also in decisions to put audacious film and TV projects into cold storage. Other filmmakers embrace genres that match the B.J.P.’s tastes: dubious historical epics that glorify bygone Hindu kings; action films about the Indian Army; political dramas and bio-pics, dutifully skewed. These productions all draw from the B.J.P.’s roster of stock villains: medieval Muslim rulers, Pakistan, Islamist terrorists, leftists, opposition parties like the Indian National Congress. Through Bollywood, India tells itself stories about itself. Many of those stories are now starkly different, in lockstep with the right wing’s bigotry.

Governments have tried to control Indian cinema in the past—mostly through the Central Board of Film Certification (C.B.F.C.), a state authority that can order alterations or essentially ban movies by refusing to certify them. But the B.J.P.’s disdain for Bollywood registers as something deeper—as an echo, in fact, of its animus toward the Congress and other rival parties. When Modi came to power, in 2014, he decried national politics as an élite club: upper-class, upper-caste, English-speaking politicians, activists, and journalists, all cozied up to one another in the plush pockets of central Delhi. In the eyes of the B.J.P., Bollywood, too, is full of liberals disconnected from the real India. And if the film industry is full of “nepo kids”—the children of actors, producers, and directors—then Rahul Gandhi, the Congress’s aspirant Prime Minister and the son, grandson, and great-grandson of earlier Prime Ministers, is the foremost nepo kid of all. “People like us—we’re hated,” the director Nikkhil Advani, the cousin and grand-nephew of producers, told me.

The B.J.P. began with small, typical political moves. In 2015, it appointed a B-movie actor, who was also a longtime Party member, to lead a prestigious, state-run filmmaking institute. When a C.B.F.C. chair quit, citing coercion by the government, she was replaced by Pahlaj Nihalani, a director who'd made a campaign video for Modi. Nihalani didn't want any swearing in cinema—or violence, or sex, or, in one case, even the word “intercourse.” When Alankrita Shrivastava submitted her movie “Lipstick Under My Burkha” to the C.B.F.C., in 2016, “they refused point-blank to certify it,” she told me. In an industry known for writing larger-than-life characters, Shrivastava had told human-size, bittersweet stories about the desires of four women. The C.B.F.C., in a letter to the producers, objected to scenes of sexual intimacy, and to the “lady-oriented” plot. This hidebound reaction, Shrivastava told me, could have occurred under any government. Her point was that, back then, she was able to appeal to a tribunal, which certified the film for release. “It was frustrating and expensive, but at least there was a way of getting the decision reversed,” she said. Last year, the government abolished the tribunal. Now the only recourse available to censored filmmakers is litigation.

The B.J.P. exhibited another skill as well: an ability to whip up its base—its Internet bruisers, rank-and-file cadre, and ideological allies—into a frenzy so coördinated that it came to resemble popular sentiment. When Aamir Khan, the versatile star of several of Bollywood’s highest-grossing films, admitted, in 2015, that he was worried about growing intolerance in India, a social-media backlash began against Snapdeal, an e-commerce platform that Khan had endorsed on billboards and in TV spots. Within months, Snapdeal decided not to renew his contract; even this year, Khan pleaded with audiences not to spurn a new film because of his past remarks. In 2020, one director told me, an actor friend was put through the wringer of a boycott campaign on Twitter. “When I saw that, I went and deleted all my posts about politics,” he said. “I had a film coming out, and they’d have definitely used my tweets against it.”

Ignoring the mob felt increasingly unwise. In 2016, Sanjay Leela Bhansali —a reserved, bearded director known for maximalist costume dramas—started making “Padmaavat.” Bhansali was dramatizing a legend: the story of Padmavati, a Hindu queen from the Rajput caste, who is so renowned for

her beauty that Alauddin Khilji, the Sultan of Delhi, attacks her husband's kingdom to abduct her. Bhansali shot "Padmaavat" with his usual grandiosity: cavernous palaces, scenes teeming with extras, rich palettes of fabric. Toward the end, Padmavati and her handmaidens are besieged by Khilji's army. Instead of submitting, they dress in red and stream through the palace, like blood through an artery, to leap into a pit of fire—a happy ending, in the moral universe of the Hindu right. Khilji is portrayed as half-mad, lustful, and a committed carnivore, stereotypes of the Indian Muslim brought to life.

Before the film's release, though, a rumor leaked of a love scene between Padmavati and Khilji. This, it appeared, was too great a slight against Hindu honor. A B.J.P. politician announced a reward for beheading Deepika Padukone, who played Padmavati. A posse of young, angry Rajput men stormed onto the film's set, found Bhansali, and roughed him up; then they destroyed film equipment and, in a later incident, burned down part of the set. According to Bhansali, he had to finish shooting "Padmaavat" under the protection of fifty-two policemen. "At one point, I thought, Enough. Change my profession. I can't make films anymore," he said later.

The B.J.P. often ascribes these events to fringe elements or faceless Hindu "patriots." But the number of such incidents makes filmmakers assume that they're seeing a bigger transformation, in which the average member of their audience now truly likes everything the B.J.P. likes, and abhors everything it abhors. For anyone with hundreds of millions of rupees riding on a movie, a director of lavish blockbusters said, these are tectonic confusions. "When someone thinks of a movie idea—not just me but other people who think of themselves as liberals—they think, Is it O.K. if my hero is a Muslim?" he told me. "But the darker question is: Is there even an audience out there for this kind of movie?"

"The Kashmir Files" has proved particularly vexing. Released earlier this year, the movie purports to be based on true events: the brutal eviction, beginning in 1989, of tens of thousands of Hindus from the Muslim-majority valley of Kashmir. At least two hundred Hindus were killed, according to government data, but the movie inflates the number to four thousand. Armed insurgents were responsible, but, implicitly or explicitly,

the film blames many others for enabling the tragedy and for lying about it afterward. Unsurprisingly, they include some of the B.J.P.’s pet antagonists: leftist university professors, the Congress. “The Kashmir Files” has already triggered a riot, and one B.J.P. leader given to casual calls to shoot “anti-nationals” urged his Twitter followers to watch the film “so that there is no Bengal Files, Kerala Files, Delhi Files tomorrow.” Modi praised the film as another bursting of the liberal bubble; B.J.P. leaders distributed free tickets. After “The Kashmir Files” became one of the highest-grossing releases of 2022, Nikkhil Advani told me, filmmakers naturally wondered if this was the kind of thing people want to watch. “Now that it has worked,” he said sardonically, “let’s all make this kind of nationalistic, jingoistic cinema.”

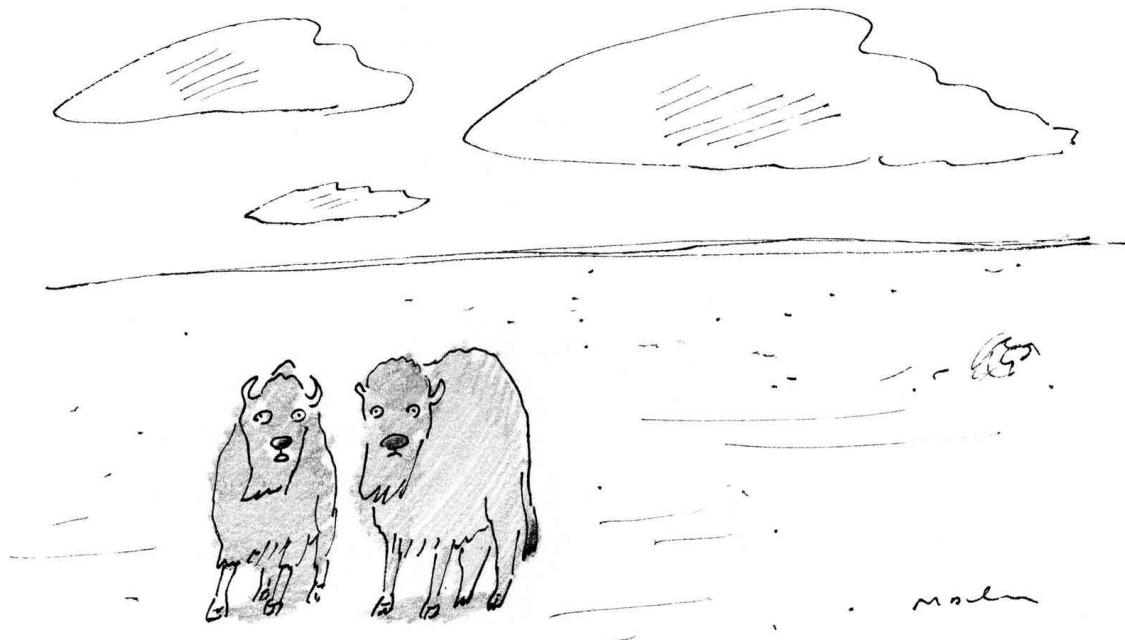
In Mumbai, the quotient of Bollywood celebrity is highest in Bandra, a western suburb shaped like a piece in a jigsaw puzzle. The stars who appear elsewhere in the city on movie posters reside here, amid narrow, winding roads, weathered Portuguese churches, and chic bars that they can never visit. Salman Khan, an actor who has spent most of his career playing a square slab of muscle, lives in the same apartment building where he and his two brothers—both actors now—grew up. Not far away, the actors Kareena Kapoor and Saif Ali Khan, the children of stars themselves, occupy several floors of an apartment block. The drivers of Mumbai’s black-and-yellow taxis ritually point out these landmarks as they pass by.

Mumbai’s worst-kept secret lay a few doors from my hotel, down a road facing the sea. Shah Rukh Khan lives with his family in a villa the size of a small hotel, set back from a pair of heavy gates. Above a wall surrounding the compound, Khan has erected a black metal fence with a platform, where he sometimes materializes, in sunglasses, to greet the fans thronging the sidewalk to glimpse him. The pavement is never empty; even late at night, returning to my hotel, I’d see a few straggling devotees taking selfies, talking quietly, or just gazing at Khan’s house in the dark. In those moments, nothing demarcated the gulf between their worlds—between fan and celebrity, outsider and insider—more vividly than the black metal fence.

One morning, a man with a polite mustache joined me at my hotel for breakfast. Once a consummate outsider, he is now trying to become a new

kind of insider. I'll call him Ramesh, because although he belongs to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the mother ship of the B.J.P. and other Hindu-nationalist groups, he was keen to stress that he was meeting me in a personal capacity. The R.S.S., a volunteer organization that's nearly a hundred years old, isn't a political party. It's the custodian of a belief that India is, first and foremost, a land for Hindus; it aspires so much to a literally muscular Hinduism that its members often receive paramilitary training. Mahatma Gandhi's assassin was once a proud R.S.S. man. Modi joined the R.S.S. when he was young, as did many other B.J.P. leaders. Ramesh denied, though, that the R.S.S. wields any undue influence over the government. "It's like there's a college—let's say, Harvard," he said. "A hundred students of Harvard become senators in the U.S. Now, every time they go to their professors to ask something, would you say Harvard runs the government?" He framed this as a rhetorical question, but I suspect that we had different answers in mind.

In 2019, the R.S.S. formed a media unit in Mumbai, ostensibly to liaise not just with the film industry but also with journalists, the music business, and other trades. Ramesh cherishes this work. He'd come to Mumbai the previous year, from a town in southern India, where he'd grown up as a film buff. He still remembers the first movie he watched with his father in the cinema, when he was four years old: a pulpy mystery called "Hatya," or "Murder," dreadfully inappropriate for his age. In scrupulous daily accounts of expenditures, his father used to include the title of every film he'd watched, along with the price of the ticket. "I still have the list of hundreds of movies that we've seen," Ramesh said.



"Home now is here on the range, but I'm originally from Bridgeport, Connecticut."
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

Ramesh's work with the R.S.S. involves many meetings—often half a dozen a day, with directors, producers, writers, and studio executives around Mumbai. He solicits these on WhatsApp. (A director sent me screenshots of one of Ramesh's texts: "Your debut film was an internationally acclaimed movie and also won several awards here. . . . We would love to meet you for an informal interaction at your convenience & comfort.") Ramesh's mission, he said, is to nudge filmmakers toward subjects close to the R.S.S.'s heart. He wouldn't care for a drama about conflict between Hindu castes, for instance: "Look at the great history of this country—and what do we show? We show all bad things." But conflict in itself is not a problem. He often suggests tales of India's military and intelligence agencies, or stories about the battles won by Hindu kings. He told me about a seventeenth-century Hindu general who, according to legend, held a pass against a Muslim king's army with the help of just a few hundred troops—"you know, like '300.'" That would make for an excellent movie, Ramesh said, because it would encourage people to feel good about India. "Every story should end *sukaant*—that is, happy."

Happy endings are relative, though. If a film conforms to the R.S.S.'s vision of India, Ramesh excuses any manipulations of fact; if it departs from that vision, Ramesh believes that its creators seek to "tarnish" India's image. He

cited “The Empire,” a show on Disney’s Indian platform, about Babur, the Muslim warrior who founded the Mughal dynasty in India, in 1526. Why make a show that humanizes Babur, Ramesh wondered. He doesn’t consider Muslim rulers to be Indian, even if they were born in the country. “They were invaders,” he said. “Sacred Games,” a noirish Netflix series, depicted a Hindu man plotting an act of terrorism. Ramesh thought that it was propaganda: “You want to show Hindus as terrorists because you don’t want to acknowledge Islamic terrorism.” “Tandav”? Also propaganda. But he forgives directors who invert history, depicting Hindu kings defeating their Muslim foes in battles that they actually lost. “You have to show something that will inspire people,” he said. And when I asked him about “The Kashmir Files”—about how brazenly polarizing it was, how its tenor was far from *sukaant*—he claimed unflappably that it was all fact. “You should know the history,” he said.

The B.J.P. likes to attribute its success to a Hindu awakening. Ramesh, similarly, thinks that Bollywood would be wise to heed a newly aware public that will brook no offense. If Amazon feels daunted by the lawsuits against “Tandav”—if it feels compelled to make shows and movies for Hindu partisans—that doesn’t worry Ramesh: “They must be happy that we do court cases. We don’t go and destroy their buildings.” His own efforts to set Bollywood right were minor, but they represented the importance that the R.S.S. vests in cinema. “We recognize that this is the most powerful medium, which controls minds, which influences the opinions of people,” he said. “A film is a mirror of society,” he went on—a tired, tedious idea, although it struck me that the Hindu right, to obtain the precise reflection it wants, is recasting not just society but also the mirror itself.

The writer Saadat Hasan Manto, who crafted some of the darkest, funniest short stories of the twentieth century, once adored the cinema, sometimes watching three films a day. In the late nineteen-forties, just before the British Raj ended, Manto joined Bombay Talkies, the first great Indian studio. The subcontinent was bloodily being pulled apart into India and Pakistan. “Hindu-Muslim riots had begun,” Manto wrote later, “and as wickets fall in cricket matches, so were people dying.” In these precarious times, one of the studio’s heads, Savak Vacha, a Parsi, set about reorganizing Bombay Talkies, promoting several employees who, like

Manto, happened to be Muslim. “Vacha began to receive hate mail,” Manto wrote. “He was told that if he did not get rid of the Muslims, the studio would be set on fire.” Manto felt responsible; how would he face his colleagues if the studio were visited by violence? His friend Ashok Kumar, Bollywood’s earliest superstar, tried to reassure him. “‘Manto, this is madness. . . . It will go away,’” Manto recalled him saying. “However, it never went away, this madness. Instead, as time passed, it became more and more virulent.”

There was, perhaps, never a prelapsarian India—an India resounding with religious harmony—but “in many ways Bollywood, in its beginning, was one of the most cosmopolitan employers,” Debashree Mukherjee, a scholar of South Asian cinema at Columbia University, told me. In part, this was a political alignment with freedom fighters like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, who wanted India to be a plural country. But it was also born out of necessity, Mukherjee said, because the movie industry was created as a patchwork of many other trades. “Some of the earliest financing came from Gujarati Muslims, and some of the earliest writers were from the Parsi theatre scene,” she said. Lyricists wrote songs in Urdu, a language inflected with Arabic and Persian and fostered by Muslim nobles as a medium of high culture. On a set, the dress *dada* might be a Hindu tailor and the art *dada* a Muslim painter. “The workforce was diverse, which remains the case today,” Mukherjee said.

Onscreen, Indian Muslims tended to be typecast, but in mainstream Bollywood this wasn’t so unusual: *every* character tended to be typecast. When Muslims led the story, they often figured as Mughal nobles, as courtesans, or as players in what the film scholar Ira Bhaskar calls the “Muslim social,” in which older, feudal ways of life tilted at the twentieth century. The stock of secondary roles included the benevolent Muslim elder (*Khan Chacha*, or Khan Uncle), the soulful poet or composer, and the best friend.

The Muslim type appeared even in “Amar Akbar Anthony” (1977), a landmark film that enshrined the ideal of religious tolerance. “Amar Akbar Anthony” is unabashed Bollywood—long and exuberant, with a baroque plot and half a dozen musical numbers. Three brothers, separated in

childhood, are adopted into different faiths, and grow up to be the film's dashing heroes, each neatly falling in love with a woman from his own religion. The movie's conclusion is never in doubt. Its energy springs instead from the question of *how* its various ends are obtained: how the brothers realize that they're brothers, how they find their long-lost parents, how they win their women, how they defeat a crime lord who has tried to destroy their family. The film ends in a joyful, syncretic reunion—the Nehruvian nation transposed onto the family in the clearest possible fashion. In this idyll, Akbar, the Muslim brother, could have clerked in a bank or run a magazine; instead, he sings Urdu *qawwalis*, and his love life is its own little Muslim social.

"It's only in the late nineteen-eighties, and really with greater and greater frequency in the nineteen-nineties, that mainstream films start showing Muslims as gangsters, smugglers, and then terrorists," Bhaskar said. Not by coincidence, she pointed out, these were also the decades when the B.J.P. grew as an electoral force. In 1992, after calling for the destruction of a mosque in the temple town of Ayodhya, B.J.P. and R.S.S. leaders watched as their followers tore the building down in a matter of hours. The demolition ignited riots, ushering India toward its present condition of chronic, quivering polarization. In 2010, Bhaskar met the director Yash Chopra, who had made many staunchly secular movies between the sixties and the eighties. "We couldn't make those kinds of films today," he told her. The plural ideal had withered too much. "Back then, we had faith in it."

But perhaps it has been a mistake to regard cinema as a moral compass, to treat it as anything other than what it is: a machine to make money by pleasing as many people as possible. "Some of the criticism that Bollywood is frivolous or misogynistic has come from the well-meaning liberal left, which looked down upon the form," Nandini Ramnath, a film critic for the Indian news Web site Scroll.in, told me. Ramnath believes that Bollywood's prime confection—the family entertainment—appeals to audiences not despite its vanilla universality but because of it. "If the left was anxious that such films weren't prescriptive enough or noble enough—well, now the right wants films to be prescriptive in its own way," she said. The leaders of the B.J.P. are "brilliant at creating the impression that they're omniscient and omnipotent," she added. "And I think the clearest signal is: think twice

before you say or do anything, because you don't know who it's going to offend, and you can assume it's going to offend us."

In Bollywood taxonomy, the director Dibakar Banerjee makes "gentry films"—films for people whom the industry regards as the "thinking public, classy folks," Ramnath told me. (A second kind, she said, are "mass pictures"—movies for everyone.) Banerjee's sly, charming début, "Khosla Ka Ghosla," or "Khosla's Nest" (2006), featured a young engineer who postpones his plans to immigrate to the U.S. so that he can thwart a local don's schemes to annex his family's land. Another movie, "Shanghai" (2012), which kicks off with a deadly attack on a leftist academic, is broadly inspired by Vassilis Vassilikos's novel "Z." Banerjee, who is fifty-two, waited out much of the pandemic with his family in their house in the Himalayan foothills. On Zoom, he tends to stare into the distance and gather his thoughts before answering a question, a habit that often made me think the image had frozen. Then he'd slap at a mosquito on his arm, and I'd know he was still online.

In 2017, Banerjee felt an itch. He'd been reading with horror about the lynchings of Muslims and about the murder of a journalist named Gauri Lankesh, all at the hands of Hindu extremists. This was, he said, "a special eruption of the poison"—and yet much of the country seemed not to sense its dreadful import. "The middle class was aware only of a daily, ubiquitous 'othering' of people in our lives," he said. "I really wanted to make a film about it." The following year, Banerjee signed a contract with Netflix, for a movie tentatively called "Freedom," and shot the bulk of it in the course of thirty-six days at the beginning of 2020, largely in Mumbai. "We had another five days of exterior sequences left, but that didn't happen, because the Indian lockdown started," he said.

Earlier this year, Banerjee sent me a Vimeo link to his finished film, which confronts the bigotry infecting India. Banerjee approaches his theme slowly and sideways, through the story of one Muslim family. The family's first generation, living in Kashmir during the unrest in 1990, finds itself sundered from its Hindu friends. In the second generation, a young woman wants to buy an apartment in present-day Mumbai, but no one will sell to her. (Muslims in Indian cities commonly struggle to find places to live, a

form of discrimination practiced by Hindu homeowners and residents' societies.) In 2042, the woman's son, a novelist, lives in an even more ghettoized Delhi—a geofenced city where the state machinery determines what people can do based on their social-credit score. The wretchedness of this future spills out of the movie; later, I seemed to remember every frame as being gloomy and grim, even though several scenes are brightly lit. "We've lived through enough history to understand what's going on now," Banerjee said. "Now we can extrapolate, which is what my film does."



"He responds so enthusiastically to music, we sometimes wonder if he'll grow up to be an entirely average person who enjoys music."
Cartoon by David Ostow

During the years that Banerjee wrote and shot his movie, the takeover of Bollywood quickened. By 2019—an election year—new power brokers had emerged in the industry, seemingly from nowhere. One of them, the son of a legislator allied with the B.J.P., directed "The Accidental Prime Minister," which pilloried the Congress leader who had governed India before Modi. ("It felt like propaganda even as I was making it," Arjun Mathur, one of the film's actors, told me. "I really regret doing it.") Another produced a fawning bio-pic of Modi. One director told me about Mahaveer Jain, a producer who "was a nobody" but who now partners with some of Bollywood's biggest studios and filmmakers. Jain, who said that he couldn't meet me because he was unwell, is often described as the B.J.P.'s chief Bollywood liaison. In January, 2019, he helped choreograph a meeting

between Modi and a band of A-listers, which yielded a selfie that blazed through the Indian Internet. Conspicuously, not one person in the photo was Muslim.

Sometimes there are more deliberate flexes of muscle. In the summer of 2020, under the pretext of probing an actor's suicide, federal authorities launched an investigation into the drug habits of some of Mumbai's most famous stars. Among them was Karan Johar, the city's most influential filmmaker—a director who runs a sprawling production firm, a TV host who jokes on his talk show with his Bollywood friends, and, as the son and the nephew of famous producers, a twenty-four-karat nepo kid. Kshitij Prasad, a young executive producer who was then with Johar's company, was called in for questioning, and he later said that the officers seemed keen to pin something—anything—on Johar or on another celebrity. "They kept insisting I was supplying drugs to the industry," Prasad said. (The investigating agency has denied Prasad's version of events.) When Prasad refused to coöperate, he was sent to prison for ninety days, then released on bail. The threat of a tax raid has also become a weapon, one director told me. When he was raided himself, investigators noticed that he'd been donating small monthly sums to news sites like Scroll and the Wire, which often criticize the government. "They said, 'Don't contribute to any of these publications,'" he said. "So I had to stop."

Even these events, though, were reduced to mere prologue last October, when drug inspectors arrested Aryan Khan, the twenty-three-year-old son of Shah Rukh Khan. A team of agents, under the orders of the same officer who'd imprisoned Prasad, stopped Aryan in a Mumbai port terminal, where he was preparing to attend a party aboard a cruise ship. The agents found no drugs on him, yet they held him in jail for nearly a month before allowing him bail. Earlier this summer, they dropped all charges against him—which made it impossible not to speculate about what had happened. Had a government agency really imprisoned Aryan Khan without proof, as pure intimidation? Shah Rukh Khan said little during those weeks. The rest of Bollywood, meanwhile, absorbed the news as the most cautionary tale of all: if they could do this to the king, imagine what they could do to us.

By mid-2021, after a series of lockdowns, Banerjee had finished postproduction on his generational drama. Like a punctilious gardener, he'd offered to trim some of the movie's nettles himself, unwilling to have Netflix stung more than necessary. (According to an internal memo, these changes included cutting images of the Indian flag. The memo also suggested, "In one of the shots, one person is walking in the background during National Anthem—remove that person.") Toward the end of 2021, after Banerjee showed Netflix the film, something shifted. "There'd been a discussion about releasing the film in late 2022," he said. "But an executive told us that they couldn't commit to a release plan." (Netflix denied this characterization.) The government had issued new guidelines for streaming platforms, obliging them, for instance, to pull a show or a movie within thirty-six hours if a court or a state agency ordered it. As Netflix kept dithering, Banerjee felt that he had just a few options left. "Wait indefinitely for the release to happen, or look for a producer who has the interest to release it in India—for the audience that I meant it primarily for—or look for a producer who doesn't release it in India but releases it everywhere else," he said. That last possibility was "very, very horrible—but what choice do I have?"

Banerjee's film joins a growing trove of content that studios and filmmakers are reluctant to air. One director told me that he'd shot a love story about a couple who run away from home to be together. No one wants to release the film, he said, because "it just so happens that the boy is Muslim and the girl is Hindu." According to two sources, a miniseries based on "Maximum City," the popular nonfiction book that recounts Mumbai's religious riots in 1992, has been frozen. (The production company denied this.) "Takht," a Karan Johar extravaganza set in the Mughal period, began gestating around 2018. Two people who worked on the film described it as a celebration of secular values—which, they suspect, is partly why it's effectively comatose. (Last year, Johar denied that he has abandoned the project.) Nikkhil Advani, who made the series about Babur, told me that he'd never experienced any censorship himself. But when I asked if he'd planned a season on Humayun, the second Mughal emperor of India, he said, "I had, but it's not going to happen." Humayun had waged persistent war against Hindu kings, but Advani found it dull to compose him in the shrill key of the bloodthirsty Muslim. And although there were other obstacles—the first season's wan

performance, rights issues with a source book—Advani knew that a humanized Humayun wasn’t worth pitching to any platform. “There’s no way they will allow me to make this,” he said.

More than once, I heard filmmakers liken their circumstances to those of their Iranian counterparts—in a tone that was plaintive but also, I thought, a little wistful, as if they hoped that these travails would burnish their artistic cachet. An ex-Amazon Prime executive classified the dismay over shelved projects as “whiplash—from writers and directors who assumed streaming platforms would give them the freedom and funds to tell whatever stories they wanted, without any checks and balances. If these people are just going to roll over and die, they don’t have the right to bitch to you about it.” A former executive at another streaming service described many of these filmmakers as people “who’ve never been in a room where someone else is more important than them,” and said that the recent encounters with political might were mere jolts to that privilege.

But that wasn’t necessarily a refutation of the belief, harbored by so many writers, directors, and producers, that their work was being iced because of its politics. In a conversation with a former Netflix employee, I asked why Banerjee’s film had suddenly stalled. “There’s a huge sense of fear,” the employee admitted. “No one wants to take the political risk of releasing a project like that.”

In contrast, Bollywood is glutted with movies and TV shows that align with the B.J.P.’s politics. There’s a series on a 2019 terrorist ambush of Indian troops in Kashmir. A film about Vinayak Savarkar, an architect of Hindu chauvinism. A bio-pic of Nathuram Godse, the erstwhile R.S.S. member who assassinated Gandhi. (Its producer promised that the film would “explore the mind-set and journey of a freedom fighter.” He was referring to Godse, not Gandhi.) Two vocal Modi supporters, the actors Kangana Ranaut and Anupam Kher, are collaborating on a film about the Congress leader Indira Gandhi and her two-year suspension of democracy, between 1975 and 1977. One director showed me a four-minute video that he’d received on WhatsApp—a teaser for a production about a Congress corruption scandal in the eighties. The clip interleaved old news footage and fresh footage so deftly, the director said, “that you feel like they don’t

have an agenda. Then you read the names of the people involved.” At the end of the video, a logo popped up: Anupam Kher Studios.

One day, I met Sandeep Singh, the producer of not only the film about Modi but also the upcoming Godse and Savarkar bio-pics. His office was in a suite on a high floor of a hotel; for a while, the hotel’s power failed, the afternoon warmed the room, and we sweated gently into our coffee. Singh, who moved to Mumbai in 1992, worked as a film journalist before breaking into the industry, and, in accounts of not being invited to awards ceremonies, he let slip his resentment about being an outsider in Bollywood. He didn’t come off as a rank B.J.P. apologist, like Kher and others often do. Rather, Singh is that more common phenomenon: a producer who wants his films to ride the B.J.P.’s success. He made his glowing, airbrushed movie about the Prime Minister, he said, because “the character of Modi excites people.” His Savarkar film similarly exploits a fierce public debate about a right-wing ideologue who is being championed anew by the B.J.P. and the R.S.S. Savarkar is “a misunderstood hero,” Singh said, and his reputation had been sullied by rival politicians. “For today’s youth,” he went on, “it is very important to know what our past is.”

The first week I was in Mumbai turned out to be a representative one, as far as Bollywood releases were concerned. One new movie, “Major,” was about the life of an Indian Army officer who died trying to rescue hostages from the Taj Mahal Palace hotel, in Mumbai, after Pakistani terrorists seized the building, in 2008. Another film, “Samrat Prithviraj,” sang the glories of a twelfth-century Hindu ruler, Prithviraj Chauhan, who was killed after a battle against Muhammad Ghori, a king venturing eastward from present-day Afghanistan. “Samrat”—or “Emperor”—had been affixed to the title at the eleventh hour, after members of Chauhan’s caste protested that calling the film “Prithviraj” was insufficiently reverential. This was the same group that had vandalized the set of “Padmaavat”; it was perhaps easier to just give in.

I watched “Samrat Prithviraj” on the morning of its release—“first day first show,” as it’s called in Bollywood—with Nandini Ramnath, the film critic for Scroll. Ramnath was excellent, acerbic company for a movie with plenty to be acerbic about. In the lead role was Akshay Kumar, an aging action star

with a face as lean as a greyhound's. Kumar's Prithviraj is a self-righteous bore, forever harping on about Hindu tradition and the need for Hindus to stick together. (The film's obviousness won it tax exemptions in several states ruled by the B.J.P.) His sandstone palace is bathed in a golden light—the perfect venue for his wedding to an ingénue of a princess. But Prithviraj can spare little time, and just a couple of song-and-dance sequences, for love. Most of the film is taken up either by his councils with advisers about battles or by the battles themselves. In the climax, Prithviraj dies—but not before he rewrites history by killing Ghori. (Lions in a coliseum are involved.) The film's epilogue calls Prithviraj the "last Hindu ruler in north India" (a falsehood) and laments that, after his death, India recovered its honor only when it gained independence from the British, in 1947—thus conflating homegrown Muslim rulers with European colonists in a sweep of rhetoric.

When the lights came up, there were barely a dozen people left in the theatre, down from the twenty or so at the beginning. In the weeks that followed, "Samrat Prithviraj" proved to be a box-office dud. It's the sort of fact that some filmmakers cited to me in hopeful tones, as if to say that the Hindu-nationalist playbook doesn't guarantee a hit—that the whims of the audience will ultimately thwart any ideological conquest of Bollywood. But this idea ignores the sheer volume of oxygen taken up by films like "Samrat Prithviraj," and their accretive psychic weight. And it overlooks the movies that aren't being made, the stories that aren't being told, the things that aren't being said. "The worrying aspect," Mohammed Zeeshan Ayyub told me, "is that, out of fear, you draw back and you draw back and you draw back, until you step on the very people you ought to be defending."♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Philip Gourevitch

By Patrick Radden Keefe

Musical Events

- [The Bel-Canto Brilliance of Lawrence Brownlee](#)

The Bel-Canto Brilliance of Lawrence Brownlee

The singer's performance in Rossini's "Otello," at Opera Philadelphia, was a tour de force of tenor genius.

By [Alex Ross](#)



In everyday discourse, the word “operatic” signifies loudness, opulence, mayhem, and excess. Everything from the Lexus LC500 convertible to Rudolph Giuliani’s third divorce has been described as operatic. Theatrical values at the Metropolitan Opera perpetuate the pejorative meaning of the term. The auditorium is vast; sets tend toward the hulking; singers must bellow in order to be heard. The repertory favors Romantic entertainments that litter bodies across the stage. A new production of Cherubini’s “*Medea*,” which opened the Met season, proves no exception. Sondra Radvanovsky, in the title role, staggers about with a knife in her hand, issues blood-curdling high notes, and, at the end, curls up with her murdered children.

It's all good fun, yet it's somewhat peripheral to what makes opera truly satisfying as an art. Two days earlier, I had seen Rossini's bel-canto tragedy "Otello" at Opera Philadelphia, which, since the downward spiral of New York City Opera, has become the most vital alternative to the Met on the East Coast. If I had to give a concise definition of what it means to be operatic, I might point to the tour de force of tenor genius that Lawrence Brownlee delivered in Act II of "Otello," as he sang Rodrigo's aria "Che ascolto." In this version of the story, Rodrigo, the Doge's son, is a much bigger character than he is in Shakespeare's play. In "Che ascolto," he reacts to the news that Desdemona, the object of his affection, has married Otello: "What do I hear? Alas, what are you saying? / Ah! how come you don't feel pity for my torments? / for my betrayed love?" Out of these standard-issue sentiments Rossini fashions an aria that veers from sweet lament to rollicking rage. The tenor must first sing with melting beauty of tone. He must then navigate rapid fioritura, keeping up with a nimble clarinet. He must hit a series of high B-flats and C's. And the athleticism must be expressive: it has to convey emotional frenzy.

Brownlee, a forty-nine-year-old native of Youngstown, Ohio, triumphed in every respect. He has long been one of the most impeccable stylists on the opera scene, but in "Otello" he found a dramatic bite that I hadn't encountered in him before. It's as if he were now so secure in his technical command that he could focus on text and drama. In the final section of the aria, he threw in a slew of variants and embellishments, as bel-canto singers must do. After a crisp strike at one high C, he reached up to a D before tumbling back down. This daredevil virtuosity was thrilling in itself, yet it also became a window into Rodrigo's psyche, revealing his arrogance and his insecurity in equal measure. Precision at the extremes—that's operatic.

This revival made an excellent case for Rossini's opera, which was first performed in 1816 and has long dwelled in the shadow of Verdi's masterwork, composed seven decades later. Desdemona is the central figure, with Otello, Rodrigo, and Iago all vying for her attention; she emerges not as a fragile innocent but as a complicated, flesh-and-blood figure. Daniela Mack sang the part impressively, with pinpoint tessitura and a glowing middle register. Her account of the Willow Song, in Act III, showed moments of strain, but the vividness of the characterization never

slackened. The young South African tenor Khanyiso Gwenxane, making his American début as Otello, thrived more in the lyrical stretches than in the dramatic ones; still, he is a singer to watch. Alek Shrader made for a grimly eloquent Iago, Christian Pursell a golden-toned Doge.

The production, which originated at the Opéra Royal de Wallonie, in Liège, was elegant and subtle, perhaps to a fault. The sets, by Daniel Bianco, suggested a country mansion in the early twentieth century: a wide marble staircase dominated the stage picture. Emilio Sagi directed, with keen attention to differences in class and status. Because both Otello and Rodrigo were portrayed by Black singers, the racial dynamics of the plot moved into the background, which is perhaps for the best. Corrado Rovaris elicited sharp, energetic playing from the Opera Philadelphia Orchestra; John Diodati was the mellifluous clarinet soloist in “Che ascolto.”

The performance took place at the venerable Academy of Music, which opened in 1857 and presented Rossini’s “Otello” during its first season. The intimate brilliance of bel canto is considerably more at home here than it is in the canyon of the Met. Let’s hope that Opera Philadelphia’s explorations of this repertory continue to grow, paralleling its substantial commitment to contemporary fare. In recent years, the company has confined itself to a twelve-day festival format—an arrangement that facilitates press coverage but leaves Philadelphia musicians out in the cold. (According to Local 77 of the American Federation of Musicians, the projected salary for an orchestra player in the shortened season is a little over seven thousand dollars.) With broader support, Opera Philadelphia could expand to become what New York City Opera once was: the house that picks up where the Met leaves off.

“Medea,” originally “Médée,” is a famous piece that few people have had the chance to see live. Cherubini wrote it in Paris in 1797, at a time when Beethoven was coming into his own, and echoes of its motivically obsessive style appear in the younger man’s works. By the end of the nineteenth century, though, the opera had faded from the canon. In the nineteen-fifties, Maria Callas restored “Medea” to circulation, but her matchless intensity discouraged other sopranos from following her lead. In 1988, at the Opera Company of Boston, I witnessed a valiant attempt by the

British soprano Josephine Barstow. That staging, under the direction of Sarah Caldwell, was undermined by interminable spoken interludes in ancient Greek, with sci-fi electronic music in the background. The Met production, employing a mid-nineteenth-century Italian version of the score, revealed the tautness of Cherubini's construction.

There is no point in reviving "Medea" unless you have a soprano who can embrace the dark camp inherent in the tale. Radvanovsky met the challenge with zest, her voice smoldering with fury from the outset. She successfully imitated several of Callas's mannerisms, as when she slid insinuatingly into the repeated pitches of her initial address to Giasone (Jason, the father of her doomed children). She was on shakier ground during her first aria, "Del tuoi figli la madre," which ought to exude Mozartean vulnerability and grace. Vocal radiance has never been her strong suit; the monochromatic ferocity of her Medea displayed the same limitations as her Norma, at the Met five seasons back. Still, she satisfied the role's essential demands, and her hellbent finale deserved the ovation that exploded afterward.

Carlo Rizzi, in the pit, set a propulsive pace, with occasionally messy results. Matthew Polenzani was a vigorous, clean-cut Giasone; Janai Brugger, as Glauce, and Ekaterina Gubanova, as Neris, provided welcome lyric contrast to Radvanovsky. All deserved a better production than was supplied by David McVicar, the most needlessly overworked Met director since Franco Zeffirelli. As in McVicar's "Don Carlos," this past spring, his "Norma," in 2017, and most of his nine—yes, nine—other stagings at the Met, tableaux of sumptuous dilapidation showed scant regard for the specifics of the piece at hand. Should old acquaintance be forgot, he will be back on New Year's Eve, with "Fedora." Peter Gelb's Rolodex needs a few fresh cards.

The McVicar fixation aside, the current Met season looks to be one of the liveliest in recent memory. It includes contemporary scores (Kevin Puts's "The Hours," Terence Blanchard's "Champion"), revivals of twentieth-century classics ("Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk," "Peter Grimes," "The Dialogues of the Carmelites"), modern takes on Mozart (Ivo van Hove's "Don Giovanni," Simon McBurney's "The Magic Flute"), and a couple of vats of Wagner. With Brownlee singing Mozart's Tamino, Joyce DiDonato

essaying the role of Virginia Woolf, and nuns being guillotined en masse, it should be operatic in every sense. ♦

By John Cassidy

By Alex Ross

By Susan B. Glasser

By Benjamin Wallace-Wells

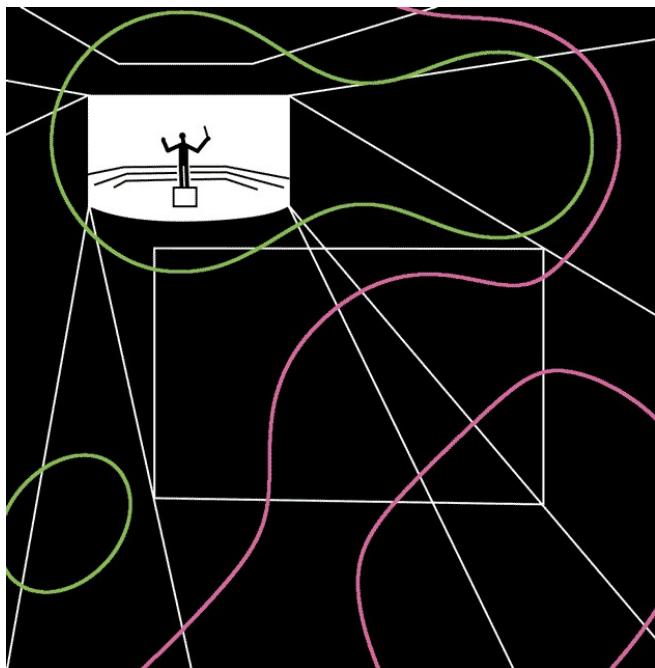
Our Local Correspondents

- [The Science and Emotions of Lincoln Center's New Sound](#)

The Science and Emotions of Lincoln Center's New Sound

In renovating Geffen Hall, the acoustics came first.

By [Rivka Galchen](#)



“I have a very specific answer to your question,” Jamie Bernstein told me. Bernstein is the daughter of Leonard Bernstein, the famed conductor and music director of the New York Philharmonic. “At the Moab Music Festival, one of the things they do is the Grotto Concert.” She described taking a boat down the Colorado River, into Canyonlands National Park, then walking a sandy path that led to a small cave. In that natural amphitheatre, she heard a two-piano performance of Stravinsky’s “The Rite of Spring.” “Michael Barrett was playing one, and he was playing so intensely that he split open his thumb. In the pause between the two movements, his thumb was bandaged and they wiped the blood off the keys. In the second half, some large bird—not a canyon wren—started cawing with the music. And it was like the earth itself was opening up from the sound.” Each note hung in the air for a moment and then a few seconds

later returned from across the river, echoing off formations some two miles away. “And *those* are the best acoustics I have ever experienced,” she said.

Founded in 1842, the New York Philharmonic is the oldest symphony orchestra in the United States. Carnegie Hall—known for its creamy, embracing acoustics—served as its home starting in 1891. In 1962, a few years after Leonard Bernstein became the Philharmonic’s music director, it moved to Philharmonic Hall, at Lincoln Center. Lincoln Center became the new home of the New York City Ballet and of the Metropolitan Opera, too—it was a Cold War showcase for American high culture. Bernstein was the son of Ukrainian Jewish immigrants; his father ran a beauty-supply company. The Philharmonic was revered; Bernstein was perhaps even more revered. But the new Philharmonic Hall was not. Its acoustics were described by Harold C. Schonberg, the music critic for the *Times*, as “antiseptic” and “very weak in the bass, with little color and presence”—and Schonberg was one of the hall’s gentler critics. In addition, the members of the orchestra often couldn’t hear one another properly. “This building went up, and it was brand new and very glamorous and modern,” Jamie Bernstein recalled. “But also it had this marmoreal solidity. My father used to call Lincoln Center the Travertine Mausoleum.” Philharmonic Hall had been built to accommodate bigger audiences—in those days, the symphony’s concerts consistently sold out. But acousticians agreed that the hall was too big, and had too many seats, whose occupants absorbed sound waves.

In the summers of 1963, 1965, and 1969, efforts were made to improve the sound. Wood panelling was added. The upholstery on the seats was changed. A hundred sound-reflecting panels were added to the auditorium’s sides. An entirely new ceiling was put in. At first, Schonberg wrote that “listening to music in Philharmonic Hall is no longer an ordeal. It is now a pleasure, a real pleasure.” But the musicians still had trouble hearing one another; Schonberg later called it a “cold installation.” The problems weren’t confined to the sound. Too many seats were still too far from the stage, precluding a sense of intimacy. Deborah Borda, the current president and C.E.O. of the Philharmonic, remembers her first visit, to see one of Bernstein’s famous Young People’s Concerts; she thought that the musicians, so small and so distant, might be toys. In 1974, Schonberg, in an

article called “The Curse of Fisher Hall’s Acoustics” (the hall had been renamed, not for the last time, for a donor, and was now called Avery Fisher Hall), wrote, “Fisher Hall was built with the best intentions . . . but unfortunately there is no getting away from the fact that Fisher Hall is a less than satisfactory acoustic ambience.” A renovation in 1976 was blessed by Schonberg, who called it a transformation from “a horror to one of the important music installations of the world.” Yet the praise didn’t stick.

In 2015, David Geffen gave a hundred million dollars toward another renovation, and the hall was renamed for him. Eventually, the firms Diamond Schmitt and Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects were hired to renovate the hall and to redesign the public spaces, the consultants Fisher Dachs were contracted to handle the theatrical-design aspects, and the acoustical-engineering firm Akustiks was brought in to solve the sound. The hall was expected to be completed in 2024.

Then, at the end of 2020, when New York and the rest of the world was mostly shuttered, the boards of Lincoln Center and the Philharmonic decided to try to accelerate the design-and-construction process into a two-year timeline—these were lost playing seasons, for the most part, anyhow. Henry Timms, the president and C.E.O. of Lincoln Center, said that, amid the pandemic, the boards found that “focussing on this was a way to be optimistic, to think about the future.” When I visited Timms in his office, he had a large L.E.D. clock counting down the months, days, hours, minutes, and seconds before the new hall would open.

“Lincoln Center is where acoustician careers go to die,” Christopher Blair, of Akustiks, told me, looking pleased. I was visiting him and Paul Scarbrough, two of the principals of the company, at their office, a modest space situated above O’Neill’s Irish Pub & Restaurant, in Norwalk, Connecticut. (Scarbrough and Blair helped the bar redesign its acoustics, of course.) We were in a bright conference room. Blair, who is seventy-two, was wearing a blue gingham shirt and a navy cardigan; Scarbrough, sixty, was drinking tea from a California State Railroad Museum mug.

Scarbrough was more measured: “One thing people say is that concert-hall acoustic design is a high-wire act. The margin for error is small.”

Blair added, “This is much more complicated than making a nuclear power plant. Though it’s more devastating if you get a nuclear power plant wrong.”

Some fifty miles away, hundreds of workers at Geffen Hall were hoisting, painting, mounting, wiring. The architectural firms had dozens of people on their teams, but the acoustics were being handled by, pretty much, just Scarbrough and Blair.

“I scare people sometimes. I lack a filter,” Blair said. “That’s why Paul is our front man—he’s very good at explaining things to people.” They showed me a fibreboard-and-wood model of the new Geffen Hall, equipped with tiny microphones, and also some computer printouts that graphed the decay of sound in the space. I said that I didn’t really understand how sound moving through a small model could tell them much about Geffen. Scarbrough said, “The real computer is in his head,” pointing at Blair.

Scarbrough and Blair both came to acoustical engineering when they were young. Scarbrough was studying architecture and music theory at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and took a course with J. Christopher Jaffe, a legend in architectural acoustics, who designed the concert hall at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. He apprenticed under Jaffe for a summer and has worked in the field ever since. He is calm, tall, and kind, with a surprising hobby—he had recently spent a weekend conducting Connecticut’s Essex steam train.

Blair is his foil in many ways. A father of five, he is the Costello to Scarbrough’s Abbott. He has worked in acoustics for fifty years. His father was an aviation pioneer whose fourth wife was the film star Maureen O’Hara. Blair studied music and mechanical engineering at the University of Vermont, then did graduate studies simultaneously at the New England Conservatory, in orchestral conducting, and at M.I.T., in acoustical engineering. “I didn’t go to a rock concert until I was forty years old, and they paid me,” he said. “That was Joan Jett. I told them to raise the speakers twelve degrees off of the floor if they wanted to stop receiving complaints from three miles away.”

Scarborough said that the Royal Festival Hall of London was one of his favorite venues: “You cross the Thames on the Hungerford Bridge, you can see Parliament, the London Eye, St. Paul’s Cathedral. The lobby is active, it’s like the living room for all of South Bank. You progress upstairs, and —”

“—and it almost makes up for the acoustics,” Blair interrupted.

“True. But you feel you’re in a special place. It’s the psychoacoustics that works so well there.”



In the past, acousticians relied primarily on what was easiest to measure—things like frequencies and reverberation times. Blair, in an essay on concert-hall design, noted that this started to change in the nineteen-nineties, when acousticians “began to rely more upon their ears, informed by historical precedence, than their measurement devices.” Psychoacoustics is the study of how mood, color, sense of place, and other emotional factors affect the way people perceive and understand music. Pretty much everyone I spoke to—the musicians, the architects, the C.E.O.s of both the Philharmonic and Lincoln Center—emphasized the importance of psychoacoustics. People often have a special feeling about listening to

opera outdoors, under the stars with a bottle of wine. The sound is usually weak, or amplified, or in other ways just not that good—yet, still, great.

I wondered aloud what sort of sound systems acoustical engineers might have in their own homes.

“Well—”

“You know what they say—”

“The cobbler and his shoes.”

“I prefer to listen to music live.”

Sound engineering is ancient. Certain walls in the Hagia Sophia are angled to generate what’s called a “slap echo,” a fluttery *ta-ta-ta-ta* that in ancient times was referred to as “angels’ wings.” If you stand at the base of Chichén Itzá, the Mayan ruins in the Yucatán, and clap, what you hear sounds uncannily similar to the call of a quetzal bird. If you stand under the head of the dragon painted on the ceiling of Honjido Hall, in the Toshogu Shrine, in Nikko, Japan, built more than four hundred years ago, and hit together two pieces of wood, the sound echoes throughout the temple, producing an effect called “the crying dragon.” People have been channelling, amplifying, and manipulating sound for a good long time. But, as a formal science, acoustical engineering is relatively new.

One origin story: In 1895, Charles Eliot Norton, a Harvard professor and polymath, had been complaining about the lecture hall at the Fogg Art Museum, which had recently been built. No one could hear properly in there. It was like lecturing in a narrow canyon. Its shape was pretty standard for a lecture hall, so what was wrong? Wallace Clement Sabine, a young physics professor, took up the problem, spending his nights hauling Oriental rugs, chair cushions, an organ pipe, and a stopwatch between the Fogg and the Sanders Theatre. The Sanders, a wood-panelled hall with a similar shape to the Fogg, had beloved acoustics, and Sabine began doing comparative studies. He measured the sound absorption of various materials (the cushions, the rugs), and those materials’ effects on reverberation. One can think of reverberation as the way a sound tells us about the space that it

—and thus we—are in. When recorded music became widely available, players had to come up with ways to create that sense of space. The blues musician Robert Johnson would record himself playing guitar while facing a corner of the room; Capitol Records had concrete echo chambers built thirty feet below its recording studio.

Sabine wasn't focussed on the movement of the sound waves—instead, he looked at what was absorbing and reflecting the sound. He found that in the Fogg lecture hall a spoken word would hang around for a little more than five and a half seconds, making for a swampy and overly reverberant sound, in which it was difficult to distinguish individual elements. In order to cut that time in half—he considered just over two seconds the ideal length of time for a sound to linger—he added sound-absorbing materials to the space. The cushions and rugs worked.

Around the same time, Boston was building a symphony hall. American orchestras typically performed in theatres or in opera houses, venues that were often shaped like fans, with the stage as the base of the handle. This design made for good sight lines. But Sabine, when consulted, told the architects to use the European model of the “shoebox” concert hall—a rectangle, which can provide a full sound, evenly distributed among the seats. Sabine also suggested narrowing the balconies and making the stage walls taper inward, to redirect and focus the sound. Materials that reflected sound, such as hard brick, steel, and plaster, were used to make the walls—a counter to the absorption of the seats and the human bodies. A balance of warmth and clarity was achieved. Boston's Symphony Hall remains celebrated for its acoustics. And the unit of sound absorption is called the “sabin.” One sabin is roughly equivalent to the sound absorption of one of those old Sanders Theatre seat cushions.

When I first spoke with Blair and Scarbrough, in November, 2021, many decisions had already been made. Geffen is a shoebox, and it would stay that way. But the orchestra had been moved forward twenty-five feet. Scarbrough said, “Before renovation, almost thirty per cent of the seats were more than a hundred feet away from the orchestra. Now nine per cent of the seats are.” This wasn't just about sound—it was about the *feeling* of closeness, and how that affects one's experience of music. The seating

capacity had been reduced from more than twenty-seven hundred to twenty-two hundred. Scarbrough and Blair said that one reason for the disappointing acoustics of Philharmonic Hall had been the initial failure of the board and the architects to listen to acousticians' advice. The original acousticians were led by Leo Beranek, who died in 2016, at the age of a hundred and two. Beranek did much important research in the field, including on the acoustics in jet planes, where pilots' voices were drowned out by excessive noise from the engine. He also designed the acoustics of the United Nations General Assembly Hall, in New York. "It really wasn't his fault!" Blair said, of Philharmonic Hall's sound. "They added more seats without even consulting him, and it destroyed him."

"Well, I wouldn't say it destroyed him," Scarbrough said.

Propped against the wall of the conference room where we were sitting was a piece of buttery-looking rippled beechwood, which resembled an old radiator. Scarbrough explained that it was a sample piece of panelling for the hall's interior: "We gave Gary"—Gary McCluskie, the head architect for Diamond Schmitt—"the percentage of wall surface we needed flat versus articulated. Those numbers were based on studies of historic halls in Europe. They came up with this modified sine curve." (The architects had also considered oak, but found its lines to be too visually noisy.) "Beechwood was a challenge, because wood is organic, it expands and contracts," Scarbrough said. "We had the woodworkers give us exact measurements of how big a panel could be so that the wood wouldn't get cracks. But it was worth it for the emotion of the wood."

Blair said that, though most old European halls appear to be built wholly of wood, this is an illusion. "They're mostly plaster," he said. "In Vienna"—at the Musikverein—"there's a wood ceiling, but on top of that is a layer of bricks." Scarbrough added, "The acoustical historian Pamela Clements argues that this was an effort to fireproof the hall," which, incidentally, contributed to the Musikverein's marvellous sound.

The unseen elements of Geffen Hall had the opposite effect. Scarbrough explained that the walls were sucking energy out of the air: "In the 1976 renovation, the walls were three-quarter-inch-thick plywood panels, then furring strips, and then insulation." Bass sounds vibrated the plywood

panels, leaching the strength of the bass from the music; lacking bass, music can sound anemic, and diminished in complexity. The new beechwood panels will adhere directly to the masonry. On one of his weekly visits, Scarbrough checked the wood panels for how rigidly they stuck to the wall; he recommended changing the one-eighth-inch coating of adhesive to a three-sixteenths coating—insuring a tighter seal and reducing vibration.

The architect Gary McCluskie—tall, thin, and stylishly dressed, like an architect—took me on a couple of hard-hat tours of the hall while the renovation was in process. McCluskie’s team has also designed concert halls in Montreal and St. Petersburg. “The hall is itself an instrument, right?” he said. “It’s made of wood.” McCluskie showed me how the floor had been reraked—increasing the slant from four degrees to seven degrees—to provide better sight lines and to avoid the music running into the flat wall of the audience. The side tiers now had seats that angled toward the stage, as if embracing it. He explained that the stage would have risers and platforms that could be rearranged, depending on how the musicians might use the space, and on whether a performance would include a chorus.

We were looking out at walls of plastic sheeting; something enormous was being hoisted up above the stage so that adjustable absorptive banners of wool serge could be installed. “One thing that’s really interesting to me is the psychoacoustics,” McCluskie said. “Restaurateurs know about this, of course—that the presentation of food affects the way it tastes.” The architects had to make the space warm and welcoming, so that the audience would feel connected to the musicians. For that reason, McCluskie had pushed for the reraking of the floor. “It’s just three degrees difference, but it really affects the sense of closeness to the musicians,” he said. The architects also changed the way that the audience circulates through the building. “With the old hall, it was difficult to even find the entrance, unless you already knew where it was,” McCluskie said. They wanted the hall to feel welcoming to everyone, not only to those people who were—in whatever way—in the know.

It’s the same hall—the same box—but it’s also a near-total transformation. The ceiling is relatively untouched, saving time and money, but it will be

experienced differently. “It wasn’t adding anything to the old hall,” McCluskie said. It was simply a dark vault. His team designed a “sound-transparent” mesh to overlay the ceiling: a hand-bent steel grid, with a clover pattern, that catches the light. The seats are upholstered in a fabric with a fallen-petals pattern, a visual echo of the trees visible through the now mostly glass front of the building. “When the fabric for the seats first arrived, it was the wrong thickness—we were in a total panic,” McCluskie said. Seating is a major source of sabins—of sound absorption. “But it turned out the samples they sent just didn’t have the proper backing on them.”

So much of concert-hall design is a matter of chance. Scarbrough talked about working on a concert hall in Nashville. “At the outset of the project, I travelled with the board to see seven concert halls, in five cities, in six days,” he said. One of those was the Musikverein, for an afternoon concert of Dvořák’s Requiem. “And, just as the closing chords were sounded, the sun came around the west of the building, and the room flooded with golden light,” he said. “It was everything—music, architecture, acoustics, the natural environment.” And that is why the Schermerhorn Symphony Center, in Nashville, has windows.

Deborah Borda was the President and C.E.O. of the Los Angeles Philharmonic when the Walt Disney Concert Hall, a silver Frank Gehry building whose shape bears a resemblance to an Everlasting Gobstopper, was being constructed. “We didn’t really know what the sound would be,” she said. “You do all this planning, but . . . Well, I will never forget sitting in the audience section with Frank and Yasuhisa Toyota, who was the acoustician. And Esa-Pekka Salonen was conducting. We were so scared. Frank and I were holding hands. Then Esa-Pekka turned around and said, ‘Ladies and gentlemen, we have a bass section.’ Frank and I cried.”

Jaap van Zweden, the conductor of the New York Philharmonic, wears all black, which draws attention to his expressive gray eyes. He has a relatively thick Dutch accent, and tends to punctuate his speech with “well, yah” and with the placing together of his hands as a form of punctuation. “Young people listen with their eyes,” he told me. “This hall needs to be not just for us but for the next century.”

Van Zweden explained that, because the orchestra travels, it is accustomed to the challenge of acoustics changing all the time. “Sometimes when we arrive somewhere we don’t even have the opportunity to rehearse in the space that we will play,” he said. “Each hall is an instrument, and, if a hall does not have good acoustics, I say that the orchestra must make their own acoustics.” Acoustics, he said, is a living thing. If a sound is “dry,” a little curt, then you can play over the rests for continuity. “If the acoustics are naturally excellent, you don’t need to dig into the strings for a bigger sound. It’s like painting in oil paint, versus a watercolor,” he said. “In a good hall, you can play with both.”

Van Zweden cited Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony as an example of a piece that can test the acoustics of a space. Some parts are very loud, and some very soft—does a hall let you hear both extremes? “That piece has very powerful moments when you hold your breath—that’s so important,” he said. “How can you make thick sounds, thin sounds—this is what we ask of a space.” Van Zweden also, in his own way, emphasized the power of psychoacoustics. “In my parents’ bedroom, when I was a child, they had a piano next to their bed. That sounded pretty well, I really liked those acoustics,” he said brightly. He added that some of the best halls from an acoustical perspective include Cleveland and Boston, and that “there is a certain magic touch that only comes with time. Like a Stradivarius violin—it’s a fantastic sound, plus history.”

My initial conversation with van Zweden was in June. At the tuning rehearsals, which would begin in August, the orchestra would play selections from various pieces to test aspects of the hall’s acoustics—its range, its clarity, its reverberance, and also how well the orchestra members could hear one another while playing. “That is when we will see,” van Zweden said. “It will be dynamic, we will be changing things.” He would start thinking about whether, say, to place the second violins on the outside, as in the Viennese style, or whether to put the cellos or the violas there. The distinctive sound of each section of the orchestra—the brass, the strings, the woodwinds, the percussion—would carry, or not, in the space.

Covid had been very difficult for musicians, van Zweden said. He had spent much of the past two and a half years at home in Amsterdam. He lamented

having been unable to develop his relationship with the orchestra through shared music, since he had only begun working with the Philharmonic in 2018. When the music world opened sufficiently for the Philharmonic to play some concerts—though not in their home space—he was proud, he said, that “our audience came with us.” Musicians are meant to be sharing their music.

But van Zweden also valued being home, with family, in the early days of the pandemic. He focussed on his health, and lost seventy pounds. He spent time with his father, who is ninety-four. He even revived his father following a heart attack, doing chest compressions until an ambulance arrived. “My father still plays the piano every day,” he said. “And a few times a month he still puts on concerts in small halls in Amsterdam.”

“By the time of the tuning rehearsals, it’s entirely in the ears,” Scarbrough said. “We’ll do measurements to document it, and measurements get you to ninety per cent, but the ears get us that last ten per cent.” In the most general sense, Scarbrough and Blair would listen for balance among the different sections of the orchestra. Scarbrough said, “The magnitude difference between a brass instrument and a woodwind is quite extraordinary, but, if the hall balances effectively, the conductor can work with that.”

They would also listen for timbre. “Does an oboe sound like an oboe? The woodwinds produce similar tones and frequencies, but they have subtly different timbres,” Scarbrough said. The trueness with which the hall would reflect the oboeness of oboes, the piccoloness of piccolos—that would be another measure of success. Scarbrough went on, “We’re also listening for blend and transparency. You can have tremendous blend but then not be able to pick out individual instruments. You can have tremendous transparency, but with the orchestra sounding like a hundred and five soloists.”



"Try to play with a kid whose parent isn't too chatty."
Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

Blair said, "What we really want is an orchestra that can hear each other and perform together even without a conductor." This is not only a goal but an occasional practice: the New York Philharmonic usually plays the overture to "Candide" with no conductor, in memory of Leonard Bernstein, who composed it.

"And we want it to sound good from many different seats in the hall," Scarbrough said.

"And, to be completely honest, we have to make sure Row N is perfect," Blair said. "That is where music critics tend to sit," he added, with a look of mischief.

The hall is "a chameleon," Scarbrough said. Changes to the acoustics will be made after the tuning rehearsals, but also sometimes in between performances. Some of the main mechanisms for these literal fine-tunings are the risers, the seating arrangements of the orchestra, reflectors above the stage, and the wool-serge banners. The doors around the stage have slots for panels that can reflect or dampen sound. Scarbrough said, "If they are doing something special with a lot of amplified sound, for example, they can pull

out the diffusive panels and put in the absorptive ones, to dry up the stage so an amplified performer can hear themselves.”

The banners are beige, so as not to attract notice, and can be deployed in numerous ways, though they are used most often for amplified sound, such as at film screenings and pop performances. Scarbrough said, “I used to put in some pre-settings and label them ‘classical,’ ‘romantic,’ ‘contemporary,’ etc., but then you’d get into these questions like, Is Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony crossing into ‘romantic’?”

Blair added, “And Debussy is not the same as Mahler.”

Scarbrough said, “So I try not to give those labels anymore.”

“The key is, they have our phone number.”

“This is the most fun and exciting part of the process for us.”

“Dealing with the musicians is always very rewarding. Unless they’re unhappy, in which case it’s not very rewarding.”

After the first tuning rehearsal, Ryan Roberts, an English-horn player and one of the youngest members of the orchestra, told me, “I think the general consensus in my section was that the sound in the hall was coming out a bit cavernous.” The resonance was greater than befitted the music. “If it were just one voice, that would be gorgeous, but with many individual voices the complex texture was getting lost.” A roomful of people would absorb some of that resonance, and the reflectors and the door panels could also be used.

“The first thing that struck me was how much smaller the hall feels—and that’s a good thing,” said Carter Brey, the principal cellist, who has been with the Philharmonic since 1996, or, as he puts it, “for a geologic epoch.” For about a third of the rehearsal, Brey did not have to play, so he’d gone to sit in the audience. “The sound had a sheen and unanimity that was missing before,” he added. The orchestra was used to the hall’s previous acoustics, so much so that when they played at Carnegie Hall—where the acoustics are generally beloved—they would initially feel as if they had lost their footing. After the first tuning rehearsal, van Zweden said, “We need to

marry our acoustics. Before you marry, you need to engage. And, before you get engaged, you need to start dating your acoustics. So that is what we are doing now.”

Roberts said, “Carnegie has such a warm and resonant and rich sound, but there’s also something stylized about it—that’s the Carnegie sound.” The new Geffen Hall, he said, will be defined more by its “amazing clarity,” like “if you were wearing sepia sunglasses and took them off and saw the world in all its vibrancy.”

At the second set of tuning rehearsals, Blair and Scarbrough sat in the seats behind the orchestra, in the highest tiers, in the side-boxes, in the middle rows of the floor. They took no notes and spoke little to each other. “We’re mostly listening for balance,” Blair told me. “We’re more relaxed now.” To me, the music sounded clear and enveloping. The orchestra played pieces it planned on performing during an upcoming residency at the Oklahoma State University campus, in Stillwater, Oklahoma: Florence Price’s Symphony No. 4 (a recently revived work by the early-twentieth-century Black composer) and Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony (his last complete symphony, composed when he was mostly deaf). I looked at a cellist and followed just her sound, then did the same with a bassist, and with a trombonist. I had brought a friend, who sang in college, and during Beethoven’s Ninth he whispered to me that what the orchestra didn’t know was that he was onstage with them, singing his heart out. “They were just playing accompaniment,” he said.

Bernstein’s Young People’s Concerts can still be watched on YouTube. One of them focusses on Sibelius; another goes into detail about what makes a piece of music a sonata. Many of the concerts begin with a familiar piece of music and proceed to something less familiar, carrying a playful intellectual line through the selections. In the first televised concert, titled “What Does Music Mean?,” Bernstein begins by having the orchestra play a bit from Rossini’s overture to “William Tell”—which became the theme song to the TV show “The Lone Ranger,” about a hundred years after its composition. He asks the children what it’s about, and he then says that his daughter Jamie, too, thinks of the Wild West when she hears it.

Proceeding through other pieces that are more and less explicitly connected to stories or images—the orchestra plays part of Strauss’s “Don Quixote,” part of Mussorgsky’s “Pictures at an Exhibition”—Bernstein builds an argument that, even when there is a specific story attached to music, it’s not part of the music. “It’s extra,” he says. He moves on to pieces that are not as closely associated with stories or images: part of Tchaikovsky’s Symphony No. 4, the bright ending of his Symphony No. 5. “Now we can really understand what the meaning of music is—it’s the way it makes you feel when you hear it,” he says. “You see, we can’t always name the things we feel . . . and that’s where music is so marvellous, because music names them for us, only in notes instead of in words.” ♦

By Alex Ross

By Rebecca Mead

By Anna Russell

Poems

- ["Romantic Poetry"](#)
- ["Before Notre Dame Burned, We Went on Vacation"](#)

By [Diane Seuss](#)

Audio: Read by the author.

Now that the TV is gone and the music
has been hauled away,
it's just me here, and the muffling silence
a spider wraps around a living morsel.
And at times, often, the unbearable.
I bear it, though, just like you.
Long ago, I bore a suitcase filled with books,
bore it far on city streets. To sell, I guess, at some
used-books place, one of those doorways down
steps into dankness and darkness. The scent
of mildewed, dog-eared, fingered pages.
The suitcase, big and square and sharp-cornered,
covered in snakeskin, bought at Goodwill
for a dollar, knowing I had some travelling to do,
some lugging, and I was right.
What books I sold I do not know.
Maybe that's where "Modern Poetry" went.
The cover cherry-red and blossom-white.
I can see its spine in my mind's eye,
pointing downward beneath the dank

and the dark to the water tunnelling
under the city and making its way to the river.
Poems sliding down the book's spine
into water, the shock of the cold and dank,
down where my uterine lining, my blood
and cast-off ovulations, cast-off fetal
tissue swims, below the city.
The micro-dead ride modern poems
like swan boats in the park.
From the park to the river to the sea.

I'm thinking now of PJ Harvey and Nick Cave.
Balladeers. Lovers. Vita and Virginia.
Frank O'Hara and Vincent Warren. Somehow,
we ride our lost loves out to sea. Or they ride us.
It doesn't matter. Poet or poem or reader, the same
ectoplasm. The modern, in time, becomes antique,
and the stone faces of the dead convert to symbols,
ripe for smashing. Come to think of it,
symbols are terrible. As the tyrant
shouted to the masses,

part of his brainwashing campaign:

I know it, and you know it, too.

I was twenty-three when I sold off
“Modern Poetry” and sailed to Italy, seeking
Romantic poetry, which was at one time
modern, and found my way to Rome,
and Keats’s death room.
His deathbed, a facsimile.
Everything he touched was burned,
to kill what killed him.

I lifted his death mask from its nail,
cradled it, closed my eyes and kissed his lips
until the plaster warmed,
and stained his face
with the lipstick on my lips. Red
as the cover of “Modern Poetry.”
The color of the droplets of arterial blood
he coughed onto his sheets, and viewed
by candlelight. Then he knew he was done for.
His death warrant, he called it.

After those many kisses over his face and eyes,
and the reticulated eyelashes,
cold and tangled,
my lips were blossom-white,

my face, chalked. Like I'd caught
something from him,
and I don't just mean consumption,
though my lungs burned for years.
They still burn.
This is the danger of the ecstasy of kissing

the dead or dying poet on the mouth.
The disease you'll catch—well,
it changes you.
The tingle in the spine,
the erotic charge, will be forever married
to poetry's previous incarnations.
It's why marriage itself never worked for me.
I kept wanting to get to the part
where death parts us
and I could find myself again.

Keats made such a compact corpse.
Only five feet tall, shorter than Prince,
and intricately made. Always,
he was working it, working it out,
the meaning of suffering, the world's,
his own, the encounter with beauty,
nearly synonymous with suffering,
how empathy could extinguish him,
and he could set down the suitcase at last,
or finally deliver him to himself, distinct

as the waves in his hair and the bridge
of his nose. How auspicious,
rare, lush,
bizarre, kinky, transcendent,
romantic, to be young, just twenty-three,
and to cradle him
in my arms, as we listened
to the burbling water

of the Fontana della Barcaccia
from the open window.

This is drawn from “Modern Poetry.”

By Monica Youn

By Anthony Lane

By Françoise Mouly

By Cressida Leyshon

By [Maya Phillips](#)

Audio: Read by the author.

In the grave chambers of the cathedral / we were reverent
silent // we didn't want to awaken the saints and / besides /
though votive candles and sober sermon and
venerating faithful / I had no prayers

to offer // my god was a private shame / the space between
my parents // I couldn't petition this heaven / despite
the invitation / am not so much a tourist that I'll take
another man's holy for my own / though it did

make me want to say holy / even in my godlessness / my
half-assed tourist pass through a city cramped ancient and
cobblestoned // (and yes full of lights / I wish I could've loved
such radiance) // an old world from which god

was made / and the two of us / foreign and /
together / and witness to a faith that dwarfed even what we believed
of each other // where do our heathen friends go
for forgiveness / for thinking themselves equal to

an architecture of infinite / unconditional // what I would give
for a gospel / of a life twined with mine // the word in me /taken
in vain // I've already said / I have no prayers to offer //
what holy bells toll for lack of hurt / or because // for lack of joy

/ or because // my god / I've loved / a largeness so burning brilliant //
Our Lady of love / that such fury can shatter

By [Rebecca Mead](#)

By [Joshua Rothman](#)

By [Andrew Solomon](#)

By [Keith Gessen](#)

Portfolio

- [Waiting for the School Bus in Uvalde](#)

Photography by [Greg Miller](#)

On the Monday morning after the Sandy Hook shooting, in 2012, the photographer Greg Miller and his wife waited at the edge of their driveway, in Mansfield, Connecticut, for the school bus to pick up their six-year-old daughter. “It’s a beautiful time, not school or home but this membrane between the two,” Miller said. “It’s when they say the most amazing things.” Now, though, the waiting was tinged with worry: what world were they sending their daughter into? During the next few months, Miller began using a large-format camera to make portraits of his daughter and other children as they waited for the bus.

In September, Miller travelled to Uvalde, Texas, three months after the shooting at Robb Elementary brought an abrupt end to the school year. That day, Sophie Hoskins and her classmates in the first grade were escorted out of the school by armed officers, who told them to leave their backpacks behind. Robb Elementary will soon be torn down. Parents in Uvalde asked the governor of Texas, Greg Abbott, to call a special legislative session to restrict the purchase of semi-automatic rifles, to no avail. “I spent the whole summer contemplating whether I send them back or not,” Sophie’s mother, Theresa Hoskins, said. “Ultimately, my husband and I decided it would be their choice.” Sophie and her sister elected to return to school. “The nightmare is, what if they don’t come back?” Hoskins said.

In Uvalde, the bus makes its rounds before sunrise, and Miller’s camera shows the sisters and other kids illuminated as if by passing headlights, absorbed in their private worlds. A month after classes resumed, Hoskins told me that her anxiety has eased, although she doesn’t think it will ever go away. Her daughters, like children all over the United States, are becoming accustomed to a world where “nothing feels safe anymore,” Hoskins said. “It’s how they’re growing up. It’s their new normal.” ♦

—*Rachel Monroe*

By Françoise Mouly

By Sam Knight

By Ted Geltner

Shouts & Murmurs

- [Helicopter Parents Are Last Year's Model](#)

By [Jay Martel](#)

Lawn-mower parents were even more overly involved . . . making “helicopter parents look mild in comparison.” . . . Today, teachers say, some parents have taken even that to extremes.

— “*Rise of the ‘Jackhammer Parent,’ ” Washington Post.*

Waring-Blender Parents

Will absolutely liquefy obstacles to their children’s future success, but they are not above dicing someone who just annoys them.

Pasta-Maker Parents

They roll teachers, babysitters, and other people’s kids flat and then slice them up into different shapes, depending on their whims and what works best with a sauce made from pushy relatives, nannies, and admissions officers.

Leaf-Blower Parents

Very loud and aggressive. They don’t actually deal with stuff so much as dramatically blow it around so that someone else will clean it up.

Drone Parents

Stealthier than Helicopter Parents, they use location services on phones, Ring doorbells, and old baby monitors to track their children. Although seemingly quiet and unobtrusive, they will appear out of the blue and annihilate anyone whom they perceive to be blocking their children’s momentum toward the Ivy League.

Swiffer Parents

Seemingly efficient at cleaning up their children’s messes, but actually not so great with the really big ones.

Trash-Compactor Parents

Make every member of the family do things together whether they want to or not.

Air-Fryer Parents

Either completely shut down or blasting intense heat, causing a protective

crust to form around their children. Are considered healthier, since they don't use conventional methods, but end up being just as bad for you as everyone else.

Riding-Mower Parents

Lawnmower Parents too lazy to stand while they clear a path for their children.

iPhone 6 Parents

Old, sluggish, and often slow on the uptake, although sometimes more reliable than more up-to-date parents, despite being quirky and often cracked.

Toilet-Paper Parents

Often gentle, but somehow never around when you really need them.

Coronavirus Parents

They never go away, lingering in some form long after their children have matured and moved out, making unannounced visits and upending plans.

Pinworm Parents

Invisible and usually harmless, though can be a source of malaise if allowed to gather outside their normal habitat.

Pug Parents

Always watching with their big, bulgy eyes, but have trouble breathing and get exhausted easily.

Tesla Parents

Quiet, attractive, and ostensibly better for the world, but loathed by other parents for their sanctimonious bullshit.

Peloton Parents

Want the world to believe that they're in great shape and up for any challenge, but, when it comes right down to it, they're just watching TV.

Particle-Accelerator Parents

Known for propelling their child forward at high speeds until he or she

cracks up at fifteen, during freshman year at Harvard. ♦

By Jeremy Hooper

By Jessica Winter

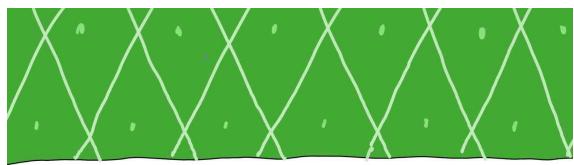
By Joshua Rothman

By Jessica Winter

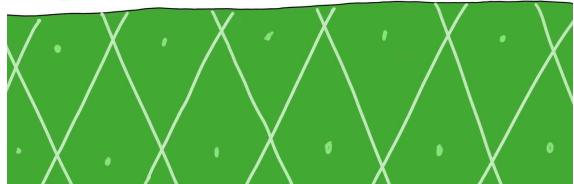
Sketchbook

- [The Story They Don't Tell You About Mary's Little Lamb](#)

By [Roz Chast](#)



HERE IS A SONG MY SON AND I SANG TO HIS ALMOST TWO-YEAR-OLD KID



The lamb ate some toxic waste and became a huge giant lamb...

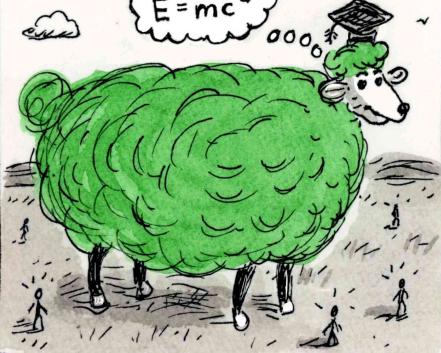


Also, it was green.

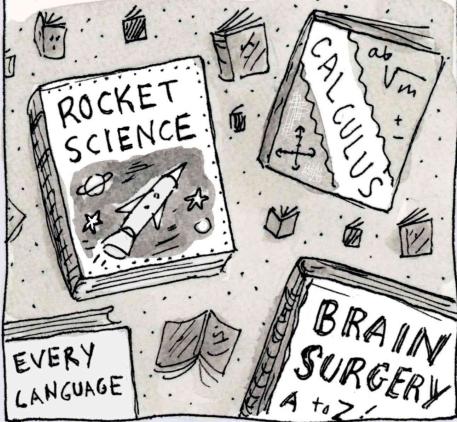


And, also, it was very smart, as smart as Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk put together...

$$E=mc^2$$



It knew everything there was to know about everything...



Plus, it could fly...



It flew around and
around the planet...





By Barry Blitt

By Naomi Fry

By Ellie Black

By Joe Berkowitz

Tables for Two

- [Rejoicing in the Return of Great N.Y. Noodletown](#)

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

The other night in Chinatown, as I made my way down the Bowery, I was suddenly enveloped by a pack of beautiful twentysomething women, galloping around me like wild horses. My chest tightened. Could they be headed to the same place that I was, and would they beat me to the last table?

As it turned out, the women were not bolting to Great N.Y. Noodletown—but they could have been! They should have been. In March, the intensely beloved fifty-eight-year-old Cantonese restaurant, which seemed to have weathered the pandemic O.K., closed abruptly. Though a notice on the façade explained that the closure was only for renovations, and offered assurance that the restaurant would reopen on the first of June, under the same management, some passionate patrons grew concerned as June came and went. In early September, when the metal gates were finally raised: rejoicement.



A soft-shell crab finds its light.

For my first dinner back, I was meeting a range of Noodletown aficionados. There was a Taiwanese American son of Chinatown who had recently, and reluctantly, left the neighborhood for Brooklyn, and a friend who, as a teenager living in Westchester, had been led on a Noodletown pilgrimage by a

worldlier Manhattanite peer. There was a former barfly who had fended off many a hangover here, arriving just before the kitchen's 4 A.M. closing time.

As has been lamented of late, New York is, at least for the moment, not quite the city that never sleeps. These days, the kitchen closes at ten o'clock Sunday through Thursday, and at eleven on Fridays and Saturdays; during two recent visits, employees began stacking chairs the second the clock turned over, dropping checks with gruff apologies.

It was just as well: the barfly has a baby now. More important, the food was as good as—if not better than—anyone remembered. I'd last been there in 2017, on an awkward double date with a couple whose obvious disharmony had not detracted from the lo mein with ginger and scallion, a slippery mass of thin, curly noodles which activated taste buds on the back of my tongue that I wouldn't otherwise know were there.



Roast pork and spareribs hang in the window.

What a pleasure it was to be reunited with that sensation, and to be served a bowl of clear, fragrant broth dense with wontons bobbing like jellyfish, their ruffled bellies stuffed tightly with shrimp, their slippery wrappers trailing like tentacles. Behind the front counter, a man with a cleaver stood before a cylindrical wooden chopping block, upon which he hacked

glistening golden ducks and swaths of sparkly suckling-pig skin into precise rectangles.

A handwritten bilingual sign announcing the return of soft-shell-crab season was tacked to a freshly painted wall. (The changes to the dining room appear to be mostly cosmetic—new flooring and wall tiles, new chandeliers offering brighter, cleaner light.) Each salt-baked crab was neatly quartered into segments, the delicate crunch of chitin and fresh green chili giving way to fleeting bits of sweet flesh.

Among old favorites I found new ones: thick *e-fu* noodles—made springy, traditionally, from the addition of carbonated water to their dough—strewn over a lobster chopped in its shell; a ceramic crock overflowing with clams, steamed in rice wine with great hunks of ginger and scallion, piled atop glass noodles. Long strips of sweet, buttery-fleshed eggplant were flecked with diced chicken and bits of salted fish, as funky and intoxicating as the finest aged cheese. Deeply bronzed eggrolls, fried to the edge of reason, shattered to release a generously packed mix of flowering chives and mushrooms.

A complimentary plate of orange slices signalled that our time was up. Tsingtaos drained, we stood on the corner plotting our next moves. “Is it raining?” someone wondered, puzzled by a rhythmic noise. The sky was clear. It was only the wind, rustling the multicolored pennants that had been strung to herald the grand—the great—reopening. (*Dishes \$3.95-\$38.95.*) ♦

By Lauren Markham

By Nicole Rose Whitaker

By Rebecca Mead

By Patricia Marx

The Current Cinema

- The Persuasive Potency of “Decision to Leave”

By [Anthony Lane](#)

You're a cop, on a rooftop, facing a guy with a knife. You have no weapon, so what to do? You reach into your pocket and pluck out a glove, made of fine chain mail, as was once used to cowl the heads and necks of medieval knights. Pulling on the glove, you grab—without fear of injury—the blade that your enemy thrusts at you, make a fist of your free hand, and punch his lights out. A nice move, and just one of the practical lessons to be drawn from “Decision to Leave,” the latest film from Park Chan-wook. Other tips: when interviewing a suspect at a police station, order in two boxes of premium sushi to feed the friendly mood. Also, as one of the characters says, “Killing is like smoking. Only the first time is hard.” Sensible advice, though I need to know how easy it is to *quit* killing. Do you wear a patch? Or chew anti-homicidal gum?

The begloved cop is Hae-joon (Park Hae-il), who, during the week, lives in the Korean city of Busan. On weekends, he goes home to his wife, Jeong-Ahn (Lee Jung-hyun), who works at a nuclear power plant in another town. Hae-joon is bright, polite, punctilious, fit (outpacing his young deputy during a chase on foot), skilled at cooking, and, you might think, difficult to fool. If only he could sleep. One day, Hae-joon is called to inspect a dead body, at the foot of a towering rock, and we are treated to a demonstration of the visual wit—frequently grand, yet etched with a cunning forensic precision—in which Park and his director of photography, Kim Ji-yong, like to deal. From a distance, we spot two tiny figures being hauled to the top of the rock, on an electric pulley; in closeup, we see the cracked face of a Rolex, its hands now motionless, and ants slaving over an eyeball. Something about this case is starting to crawl.

The widow of the fallen man, who was an experienced climber, is Seo-rae (Tang Wei), and she is far from prostrate with grief. “I worry when he does not come back from a mountain, thinking he might die at last.” At last? Is she *relieved*? To be fair, we shouldn’t read too much into her phrasing, because, as she says, “I’m Chinese, my Korean is insufficient.” Like Park’s previous film, “The Handmaiden” (2016), “Decision to Leave” is rich in linguistic slippage. At one point, on a snowy night, Seo-rae speaks Chinese into her phone, which, in turn, thanks to the dangerous miracle of Google

Translate, talks in Korean to Hae-joon. He is standing in front of her, adrift in the blizzard of words.

Gadgetry is everywhere in the new film (how lonely Hae-joon looks, dictating his thoughts into the phone on his wrist), yet it's only one cog in the ticking machinery of Park's plot. The whole thing is engineered, we realize, to tell a tale of obsessive love. Thus, as Hae-joon, sitting in his car with binoculars, observes Seo-rae at work—she is a caregiver, who believes that “living old people come before dead husbands”—he magically appears in the room beside her, like Kirk beaming up next to Mr. Spock. The imagery answers to Hae-joon's desire, granting him a proximity to Seo-rae that life, even the life of a prying detective, cannot supply. All the while, of course, he is supposed to be establishing whether or not she pushed her husband off that rock. The quest grows more urgent in the movie's second half, as Hae-joon, “completely shattered,” gives up the job in Busan and goes home. You really think the case is closed? Open wide.

One way to size up this singular film is to enumerate all that it lacks. Of the nastiness that spattered Park's early works there is no sign; any violence here is brisk and fleeting. As for the glistening carnality of “The Handmaiden,” forget it; Hae-joon does have sex with his wife, on the red-hot principle that, as she says, “new research suggests it's good for cognitive ability,” but his rapport with Seo-rae is hilariously chaste. See her fumble through his raincoat and find a tube of lip gloss! Wait two hours for a kiss! Fans of Tang Wei, who recall what she brought to the erotic candor of Ang Lee's “Lust, Caution” (2007), will note the demureness with which, as Seo-rae, she raises her skirt to display a mark on her thigh. Compare Lauren Bacall, in “The Big Sleep” (1946), scratching the itch on her knee.

Despite such restraint, or because of it, “Decision to Leave” bears the persuasive potency of true romance. It should be called “Love, Recklessness.” Having been twisted into bewildered bits by the convolutions of Park's narrative, I was astonished, toward the end, to find it brushing against the tragic. The entire movie has swarmed, often farcically, with aquatic details; poor Hae-joon even had his finger bitten by a turtle. Now, however, he staggers alone along a beach. The sun, on the horizon, is ready to call it a day. Amid the crash of breakers, you can just about hear

him crying out for Seo-rae. Whether she turns up, and what waves of crime have or have not swept her to this shore, I leave you to discover.

In another life, the director of “Silver Linings Playbook” (2012), David O. Russell, would have made disaster flicks in the nineteen-seventies. The purpose of that noble genre was to stuff as many stars as possible, exquisitely mismatched, into a confined space; on board the deadly-virus-bearing train in “The Cassandra Crossing” (1976), for example, were Sophia Loren, Burt Lancaster, Ava Gardner, Richard Harris, and Martin Sheen, plus an unusual pairing of Ingrid Thulin, so often the purveyor of agony for Ingmar Bergman, and O. J. Simpson. Too much? Not by the standard of “Amsterdam,” Russell’s new film, which features Christian Bale, Margot Robbie, John David Washington, Zoe Saldaña, Chris Rock, Mike Myers, Michael Shannon, Anya Taylor-Joy, Rami Malek, Robert De Niro, and—hold the phone—Taylor Swift. If ever a cast cried out for a bug on a train, or a skyscraper on fire, it’s this one.

Bale plays Burt Berendsen, who is badly hurt in the First World War, as is his pal, Harold Woodman (Washington). In Belgium, their wounds are tended by a nurse named Valerie (Robbie); her surname shifts as we go along, and is best kept under wraps. Initially in hospital and then, once the conflict is over, in the gilded leisure of Amsterdam, the three of them form an unbreakable pact of friendship. Before long, needless to say, it is broken. Burt, sporting a glass eye, returns to New York, to the icy disdain of his wife, Beatrice (Andrea Riseborough), and to his career as a doctor, much of it spent relieving the pain of other ex-combatants. Harold, too, finds himself in the city, practicing as an attorney. But where, pray, did Valerie go? And what will connoisseurs of early-twentieth-century romantic threesomes learn from “Amsterdam” that they don’t already get from “Jules et Jim” (1962)?

Russell’s plot quickens, thickens, and stalls. Burt, at the autopsy of his old military commander, meets a fellow-medic, Irma (Saldaña), who views the death as suspicious. The trail leads to a mansion, home to the flighty but fearsome Libby Voze (Taylor-Joy) and her husband, Tom (Malek), who seems to be as pliably soft as his sweater. Appearances, though, are calculated to deceive, and Burt and Harold soon happen upon a hideous—

yet unmistakably daft—conspiracy to inject Fascism into the American bloodstream. The fate of such an evil scheme depends on a speech, to be delivered to veterans by a retired general (De Niro). The latter stages of the film are chewed up, interminably, by the prelude to this major event.

“Amsterdam” is, or is meant to be, a caper: an easygoing endeavor, you might think. But capering is as tricky on the silver screen as it is on the dance floor, and the tone of the tale keeps losing its footing. To and fro we trip across the years. A couple of ornithologists-cum-spies (Shannon and Myers) pop up in postwar Europe, and again, in the mid-nineteen-thirties, in the U.S.A. The screams of bloody soldiers, on stretchers, are overlaid by a merry musical score. Burt describes his duties as “fixing faces, raising spirits, singing songs,” and the strain of that mingling tells on Bale, whose performance is unhappily redolent of late-period Al Pacino, complete with hiccupping speech patterns and loony stares. What we see in Bale is a tremendously serious actor proffering a considered essay in comedy—which is not, alas, the same as being a funny guy.

Only in its milder moments, when Russell is not trying too hard to be madcap, or to badger us with dark political portents, does “Amsterdam” stir and convince. An early conversation at the hospital, between Harold and Valerie, isn’t exactly a heart-to-heart, yet we do feel, by the end of it, that we have witnessed two people falling—calmly, not crazily—in love. She shows him scraps of art that she has made, from spent bullets; her later efforts include collages, photographs, wire sculptures, and X-rays, many of them created for the movie by the British artist Linder Sterling, and riffing beautifully, I’d say, on the work of Meret Oppenheim and Man Ray. In short, you should go to Russell’s film, but not for fun. Go for the art. ♦

An earlier version of this article misidentified the character who is married to Hae-joon and the actress who plays her.

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Philip Gourevitch

By Patrick Radden Keefe

The Pictures

- Ruben Östlund's Cruise to Nowhere, with Bubbly

Ruben Östlund's Cruise to Nowhere, with Bubbly

The Swedish director of “Triangle of Sadness” set sail from New York Harbor with two of his actors, Dolly De Leon and Zlatko Buric, to talk about seasickness and class warfare.

By [Michael Schulman](#)



The Swedish filmmaker Ruben Östlund stood on a pier in Chelsea one overcast evening, smoking a cigarette and watching the Hudson River go by. Östlund makes deadpan comedies about the European élite. In “Force Majeure,” a father on a ski holiday sprints from his family when an avalanche approaches, to the disillusionment of his wife. In “The Square,” a museum curator is pickpocketed and hatches a fool’s quest to regain his wallet. Östlund’s latest, “Triangle of Sadness,” which won the Palme d’Or at Cannes, follows a fashion-model couple on a luxury-yacht trip that descends into seasick squalor and Hobbesian anarchy. “There are such strong hierarchies when it comes to these yachts,” he explained, with a capsizer’s smirk.

Östlund—forty-eight, with sandy hair and a beard—had agreed to take a sunset voyage after a screening at the New York Film Festival. He was joined by the Filipina actress Dolly De Leon, who plays the yacht’s “toilet manager” (Östlund loved the ring of “corporate bullshit”), and Zlatko Buric, a Croatian-Danish actor with Einstein hair and a Rembrandt face; he plays a Russian oligarch who befriends the sozzled Marxist captain, played by Woody Harrelson. The three boarded a mahogany-trimmed Jazz Age-style yacht run by the [Classic Harbor Line](#), for a champagne-and-cheese cruise. A server filled their flutes with Blanc de Blancs. “Bubbles, bubbles, no more troubles,” Buric growled.

Writing “Triangle of Sadness,” Östlund and a researcher contacted crew members from upscale yachts and mined them for tales of decadence. One passenger had requested a special bottle of wine, which was “basically transported from the other side of the planet,” Östlund said. (In the [film](#), a helicopter flies in Nutella to satisfy a patron.) A captain told him about a guest who had asked for the master-bedroom Jacuzzi to be filled with champagne, plus goldfish. Östlund made a reconnaissance mission on a yacht called Sea Cloud, observing the guests incognito. “The common—how you say it?—denominator was that they are old,” he said. “These are people that are very close to death.” During an Italian buffet, the waters got rough. “There was one person throwing up in the dining room,” he recalled. “Then you look at the other passengers, and they’re, like, What should I do now? Should I continue eating?” He filmed in Greece, aboard the Christina O, once owned by [Aristotle Onassis](#), with stools upholstered in whale foreskin: “So the story they were telling was ‘You’re sitting on the biggest penis in the world!’ ”

As the boat passed the Statue of Liberty, a server named Matt, in a fleece and a ball cap, returned with a bottle of Besserat, paired with Cahill’s porter cheese. He was officially the first mate, as well as an aspiring actor. “As far as survival jobs go, it’s great,” he said.

“Any seasickness?” Östlund asked.

“Lots,” Matt said. “We’re technically not allowed to give you anything, so we’re, like, ‘You just have to look forward and breathe.’ Pour some ginger ale.” Östlund had learned about a ginger candy that crews give to nauseated

guests. “Oh, we have ginger candies downstairs!” Matt said. “I always wondered what they’re for.” Did he get any obnoxious requests? “We’ve had some pushy rich people at the bar,” he said. “Just dismissive of us as working-class people.” One passenger had written a nasty Yelp review because the boat had run out of cheese plates.

Östlund said that, on luxury yachts, the staff is “trained not to say no to the passengers, so, whatever request they have, they will say, ‘Yes, sir!’ They want a unicorn? ‘O.K.!’”

“We had a list of hospitality rules that were sent to the company,” Matt said. “Actually, I was just breaking one—Don’t put your hands in your pockets.” They’d been ordered to hold champagne flutes by the stem when serving. “If people tip, you’re just supposed to say, ‘Thank you,’ and nothing else. I don’t know what else you could possibly say.”

“It’s a very rich experience for you as an actor, because you can observe them,” De Leon told him. She once worked at a McDonald’s in Manila, where the patrons were “assholes,” she said. “So congrats to Matt for being so patient with us.”

The yacht circled under the Brooklyn Bridge, then back to Chelsea. Östlund’s next film, “The Entertainment System Is Down,” will be set on a long-haul flight with a screen outage. “I got interested in the term ‘air rage,’ ” he said. “With a boat or an airplane, there’s a captain that we put our trust in, and it’s like a little micro-society. You can highlight a lot about our behavior when it comes to the small spaces.” Back on land, he lit up a cigarette and said, “Now we’re back to normal life again.” ♦

By Ellie Black

By Joe Berkowitz

By Helen Rosner

By Steve Coll

The Theatre

- [Tom Stoppard Resurrects the Past in “Leopoldstadt”](#)

Tom Stoppard Resurrects the Past in “Leopoldstadt”

A crowded portrait of a glittering prewar Jewish milieu exorcises the playwright’s own ghosts.

By [Helen Shaw](#)



The word on “Leopoldstadt,” the latest drama by Tom Stoppard (at the Longacre), is that this time, at last, he gets personal. In Hermione Lee’s immense 2020 Stoppard biography, in recent interviews and profiles, and even via links e-mailed to ticket buyers before the show, we read that the playwright has finally abandoned what Clive James called his “ebullient detachment” and broached the topic of his Jewish identity and a long-gestating survivor’s grief. Some critics have been looking for this turn for decades. In 1977, in this magazine, Kenneth Tynan compared the stories Stoppard used in his plays (wild coincidences with peacocks and shaving foam) with the one he never did share: his 1939 flight, at the age of eighteen months, from the Nazis. He was then Tomáš Sträussler, and he travelled with his Jewish family from Czechoslovakia to Singapore; his mother then evacuated him and his brother to Darjeeling, and from there to

England, where he was given a new name and little knowledge of all that had been lost. Stoppard was fifty-six before he learned the facts about his Czech family's religion, the extent of their persecution, and the long list of cousins and aunts and grandparents who were murdered in the camps.

Given the rumors of "Leopoldstadt"'s autobiographical underpinnings, it is somewhat surprising to find that when the curtain rises we are not in Prague but in Vienna, in a bustling apartment where two intermarried, interfaith families, the Merzes and the Jakoboviczes, meet and celebrate. In five intermissionless acts, Stoppard rappels down the twentieth century: we see the families in 1899, 1900, 1924, 1938, and 1955. The set designer Richard Hudson shows us the Merzes' stately apartment as it changes over time, from brocade-upholstered warmth to interwar sleekness, then from post-Anschluss tenement squalor to a terrible postwar emptiness. In each section, characters turn to or away from their Jewishness, often looking for a sense of belonging or national identity or safety. Of course, there is never safety. We hear history (a subliminal rumble from the sound designer Adam Cork) preparing to break over the families like a wave.

In 1899, the Merz family is prosperous and variously assimilationist—we begin at a glittering Christmas party, which has a tree topped accidentally with a Star of David—but they and the Jakoboviczes will fall through two World Wars, losing nearly everything in the process. "Leopoldstadt" requires more than two dozen performers, and many actors play several parts, including children who grow up and whose identities must be referred to at a dash. How to keep the generations straight? A handwritten family tree appears several times in slides on a black scrim that serves as the stage curtain, and the program helps, but for much of the show's two-plus hours the audience is left scrambling to remember when Hermann Merz (David Krumholtz) and his wife, Gretl (Faye Castelow), had a child, and whether shy Hanna (Colleen Litchfield) is Gretl's niece or her sister-in-law. Stoppard makes jokes about this complexity—characters stumble over the relationships, too—though the humor is not always intentional. One cousin asks another if she remembers a certain dead soldier's childhood, and the woman responds, "He was the nicest big brother in the world." We can assume she remembers him.

The first scene is a welter of references to Viennese thought and art—Freud, Mahler, Klimt—and the coming destruction of that golden culture is one of the tragedies of the play. Over whiskey, Hermann and his mathematician brother-in-law, Ludwig Jakobovicz (Brandon Uranowitz), argue about Hermann’s blithe disregard of Austrian anti-Semitism. Hermann is joining the Jockey Club and—a *mathematician*, you say? Your inner Stoppard gong should ring at that; this is the playwright who taught us chaos theory and probability. When Ludwig later tries to demonstrate coördinate geometry using a cat’s cradle, we can see that one of Stoppard’s famous Knowledge Metaphors is twisting itself into view. And, indeed, like the knots on Ludwig’s cat’s-cradle string, family members change positions yet maintain their connection. By the bitter fifth act, set in 1955, there are huge differences between the destroyed families’ three lone revenants—an American émigrée, an Auschwitz survivor, and an English humorist who remembers nothing. They stand in an apartment that’s as bare as an abandoned lot. Nevertheless, they are cousins, still tied by the family string.

The armatures of Stoppard pieces are often other plays: “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead” rests on “Hamlet”; “Travesties” travesties “The Importance of Being Earnest.” Here, his vision of Vienna borrows from the provocative turn-of-the-century Austrian playwright Arthur Schnitzler (Freud called him his “psychic twin”), whose work Stoppard has adapted several times. In the 1900 section, he reworks elements from “Dalliance,” his own adaptation of Schnitzler’s cynical “Liebelei”—again, there’s a cavalier dragoon named Fritz having an affair (this time with Gretl) and the threat of a duel. “Leopoldstadt” makes reference to another Schnitzler play, “Reigen,” in the course of the action, and begins to echo its structure, with two-character scenes linked in a daisy chain: Hanna and Gretl, Gretl and the dragoon, the dragoon and Hermann. Stoppard uses content and structure to point to a playwright whom many in the audience will not know, and even this unknowing is important. Stoppard’s subject, after all, is forgetting.

The 1924 act shifts its tone, borrowing from Coward and Wodehouse, and is animated by both the Charleston and a farcical misunderstanding. The families gather for a baby’s circumcision, and a Gentile banker is mistaken for the mohel. (Hermann: “What are you talking about?” Grandma: “Foreskins!”) Some in this generation bear the wounds of the First World

War, but these are largely ignored in favor of the new baby, the new dance craze. A Klimt portrait of Gretl in a green shawl hangs above the sideboard; beneath it, her niece Nellie is sewing a red flag, a symbol of the socialist movement that will be a pretext for yet more anti-Semitic vitriol. Swiftly, though, we're on to the next act. In 1938, both green shawl (art) and red flag (politics) will disappear, trampled by the Reich's jackboots.

Stoppard has described his writing as a "series of small, large, and microscopic ambushes," and there's a quality of intentional frustration here—dramatic plots crowd in and break off, and key confrontations remain offstage, experienced mainly in retrospect. What happens with Hermann and the dragoon? Or Nellie's march for the workers? You might find out, but by the time you do there'll be a Nazi pounding on the door.

Stoppard has always believed in creating difficulty for his audiences, writing intellectual high-wire acts ("Jumpers," "The Invention of Love") and idea-in-action masterpieces ("Rock 'n' Roll," "Arcadia," "The Real Thing"). In these plays, dazzling flights of language manage to make us think and feel simultaneously, to experience both sorts of internal action. Here, though, the challenge lies in keeping the narratives straight, and that difficulty crowds out conceptual engagement and emotional connection. It deprives us of the crucial Stoppardian pleasure, the opportunity to think in real time alongside a mental acrobat.

Could this be deliberate? Is Stoppard snatching away the expected, fictional climaxes in order to point to the "real" grief of the last scene? Certainly, the final moment is wrenching: the audience gasps with tears as the survivors tell their English cousin (who knows as little as the young Stoppard did) what happened to each old man and sweet child. But the drama's other emotional currents simply haven't registered. In his rush to cram so much into abbreviated scenes, Stoppard veers toward self-parody, particularly when Ludwig talks about math like a character aware that he's speaking the theme of the play. The writer's many gifts do not include compression on this scale. His orchestration is off; in all the hurry, we cannot hear the motifs when we need to, or the individual voices.

The staging is at least partly to blame. The director, Patrick Marber, has imported his production from the U.K., and his mostly new, mostly

American cast has, for some reason, been told to speak with a British accent. (In London, that was the neutral choice—on Broadway, it seems affected.) Perhaps out of nervousness about audibility, Marber has his performers stay far apart and yell their lines from opposite sides of the stage; Hermann and Ludwig, in their first conversation, sound as intimate as two guys trying to park a semi. People must rapidly communicate their backstories (Why am I missing this eye? Where did my first husband go?) amid the clamor of other characters, and this just leads to more shouting. Uranowitz is the only one who goes big but maintains his precision; Castelow resists the melodramatic tide, much to her credit. There is, at least, a prettily staged Passover Seder: the lighting designer Neil Austin bathes the scene in a deep, resinous glow, a moment preserved in amber.

As I watched the play, I couldn't work out why so much of it left me unmoved, and it was only afterward that I began to follow its bread crumbs into the dark. For instance, why is the play called "Leopoldstadt"? The word refers to the old Jewish quarter of Vienna, but the Merz apartment isn't situated there. I can think of two reasons. One is that the Stoppard stand-in is called Leopold (changed to the more English Leonard), and this play's gilt-and-black Vienna is the "stadt" of his lost memory, a city he will need to either rebuild or abandon. The other possibility is that we're meant to wonder. If we look it up, we learn that the sector was named for King Leopold, the Holy Roman Emperor who expelled Austria's Jews, in 1670. Of course, the tides shifted, and Jewish families returned a few decades later. They flowed back into a neighborhood now named for their tormentor, setting up house in the ashes of the pogrom.

In the end, much of what I found moving about "Leopoldstadt" was not onstage. Instead, it came in the reading that the play persuades you to do, and in the memories of those other Stoppard pieces, which waltz and curtsy in the mind. The show sent me to read Tynan and James and Lee; it sent me to those beautiful interviews with the man himself. Stoppard's frequent collaborator Carey Perloff recently published "Pinter and Stoppard: A Director's View," and she spends a chapter discussing his not quite forgotten, always sort of known Jewishness, the way it emerged in past work as stories about doubles and twins, or heritage that is torn down and lost. Her book helped me think about where Stoppard's experience surfaces

in Hermann, a man who both knows and does not know his true situation, a man who thinks he has won the coin toss while the coin is still in the air.

The more you learn, the more you feel. (That might be a central tenet of Stoppardianism.) The particular lesson in “Leopoldstadt” is that we are responsible even for the things we do not know. Here is a play that strikes deepest if you understand its origin: a conversation in a café between Stoppard and a cousin he didn’t realize he had, while his mother sits at the other end of the table, upset that he is finding out the truth. You will have to seek out that story yourself, but at least it’s easy to find. Stoppard, notoriously, is a man who does the research. Why should his audience not have to do it, too? ♦

By Andrew Dickson

By John Cassidy

By James McAuley

Your Own Back Yard

- [The People vs. Palm Trees](#)

The People vs. Palm Trees

The landscape designer Lily Kwong wants to replace L.A.'s exotic plants with native species, which require less water and satisfy the allergy constraints of her husband, Nick Kroll.

By [Sheila Yasmin Marikar](#)



Bougainvillea and palm trees are as common in Los Angeles as brake lights on the 101. Could that be a bad thing? “Bougainvillea, boxwoods, Madagascar palms—none of these are native to this region,” the landscape designer Lily Kwong said the other day. She stood in front of her house on the east side of L.A. wearing a khaki jumpsuit and leopard-print slides. “All of this used to be boxwood,” she said. “It was just, like, dead. You’d never see any wildlife.” Last fall, she ripped it out and replaced it with a meadow of native plants: yarrow, mallow, manzanita. “The way the native bumblebee flaps its wings is what opens up the plant,” she said, petting a squat, verdant shrub. “Non-native bees can’t access it.”

Native plants require less water than exotics and also harbor more fauna: your birds, your bees, a mother duck that recently warmed its eggs in a thicket of white sage that Kwong had planted at the JW Marriott in Palm

Desert. (The hotel chain hired her to create sustainable gardens in several locations.) “Native plants provide habitat in a way that hydrangeas and petunias don’t,” said Kwong. “Like, what about the monarch butterfly that will only lay its eggs in milkweed?”

A former model, Kwong used to peddle aesthetics. “I was the most depressed, anxious, and exhausted I’ve ever been,” she said, pointing out the contents of a row of planters: lemon balm, chocolate mint, and mugwort, which, she claimed, “can help you remember your dreams.” She grew up on the fringes of Muir Woods. Hobbies: “Leading a band of kids into the woods, foraging for plants, building forts,” and watching her grandfather tend a vegetable patch.

Kwong moved to New York to attend Bard College, but dropped out after a year: “It was a big financial stretch for my family, and I wasn’t clear on what I wanted to do.” She moved in with her cousin Joseph Altuzarra, a fledgling fashion designer. “He fit his first collection on me,” Kwong said. “I got sucked in.”

Modelling gigs in Paris, London, and Shanghai piqued her interest in cities and “the way people connect,” she said. “It’s so dependent on public spaces and parks.” She modelled while majoring in urban studies at Columbia. Around the time of graduation, she booked a Tiffany & Co. campaign. Instead, she took a job with the landscape-design firm Island Planning Corporation. She spent two years on construction sites in Gabon, Miami, and the Caribbean, setting up nurseries, “making a fraction of what I made before. I felt my soul return.” She started her own company in 2017. “The early jobs I got were because people knew that I could get seven truckloads of tropical plants into Bushwick,” she said.

She made botanical art for the [High Line](#) and Grand Central Terminal. In 2020, she moved to Los Angeles. “Living in New York for thirteen years with a window box, you don’t see the power of the natural world in the same way,” she said. Her new school: the Theodore Payne Foundation, a native-plant nursery and education center in Sun Valley. “My [garden](#) is not a hundred per cent native,” she said, climbing into her S.U.V. “I’m not going to take out the trees that have been here for thirty years, even though

they're exotic palms, but reëstablishing the understory—that's something I can do."

Cruising down Los Feliz, she pointed out the window. "These ginkgoes are gorgeous, but they're from Asia," which means that they house far fewer species of caterpillar than a native oak: "over two hundred," she said. "A brood of chickadees needs six thousand caterpillars to survive."

At the nursery, she said, "Look at all the bees!" They buzzed around Matilija poppies with egg-yolk-colored pistils. Evan Meyer, Theodore Payne's executive director, approached in a baseball cap and a denim shirt.

"First of all, the ferns are so happy, I just need more," Kwong told him. "Then, for the meadow, I have some bald spots."

"Maybe some grasses," Meyer said.

"The problem is that my husband" —[Nick Kroll](#), the actor and comedian —"is allergic to everything," Kwong said. "What can we do besides grasses?"

Rounds were made, options assessed: golden yarrow, caterpillar phacelia with coils like fuzzy seahorses. More mugwort? Yes. Yerba buena? "I'll take five," Kwong said. She asked Meyer about the origins of landscaping. "It has a kind of colonial, élitist legacy," she suggested.

"It fits within a colonial framework of dominating the landscape," Meyer said. "Rather than being in conversation with your environment, you're, like, 'I'm gonna make it exactly what I want it to be.' Think of places like Versailles," he added. "Super-oriented towards linear."

"Boxwoods," Kwong said. "So many boxwoods." ♦

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