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# A Reporter at Large

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By [Gideon Lewis-Kraus](#)

## Content

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In late August of 2019, Franklin Tao, a forty-seven-year-old chemistry professor at the University of Kansas, departed China with just enough time to make it home for the fall semester. Tao is short, with a high forehead and a spiky hairline that give him the cautiously inquisitive appearance of a hedgehog. He had spent the spring and summer tending to his ailing mother in China's interior, and visiting collaborators at Fuzhou University, on the country's coast. Tao's wife, Hong Peng, had booked his return trip to the United States, and, in the interest of thrift, had arranged an itinerary of almost unfeasible complexity. Tao flew from Fuzhou to Beijing, then to Tokyo's Haneda airport, and only then realized that his connection to Chicago left from Narita airport, fifty miles away. Tao hailed a taxi and instructed the driver to hurry, but at the destination his credit card was rejected. The driver escorted him to an A.T.M., but his bank card was also declined. Tao produced a business card and promised that he would settle his account somehow. To his astonishment, he told me recently, the driver agreed. He felt lucky that he wasn't in China, where an untrusting cabbie would likely have taken him directly to the police, who weren't known for their forbearance.

Tao was the last passenger to approach the jetway, and his boarding pass was given an extra check by a muscular man in uniform. While he was in the air, Peng dropped off their fourteen-year-old twins for their first day at Free State High School. She then returned to the family's new home, a modest, greenish four-bedroom with brick trim in a mazy subdivision of Lawrence, Kansas, to study for her medical boards. Peng had been trained as a radiologist in China, but her husband's all-consuming work had been cause to delay her American licensure. For the past seventeen years, she had worked as an imaging technician; patients often told her that she would make a good doctor.

Around nine o'clock, Peng heard a knock on the door, which she opened to find a phalanx of F.B.I. agents, their cars and mobile-lab vans bottlenecked in the leafy cul-de-sac. They produced a search warrant, telling her only that

it had something to do with her husband. She invited them in, confident that there was some misunderstanding. Her first thought was to reschedule a handyman's visit, which, under the circumstances, would have been embarrassing. The objects she had just unpacked—commemorative plates, neglected cacti—were removed from shelves and left in disarray; sealed boxes were torn open. The F.B.I. agents took everything with Chinese characters on it, including a souvenir from the prestigious Fudan University. Peng could see, through the windows, her new neighbors gathering to watch.

A few hours later, Tao deplaned in Chicago and was greeted by two agents from the Department of Homeland Security, who diverted him for questioning. What was the purpose of his travel to China? To care for his mother, who in recent months had twice attempted suicide. Was he travelling with cash? About sixty dollars. Had he ever travelled to Iraq, Yemen, Sudan, or Syria? No. His bags were searched before he was released. His flight to Kansas wasn't until the next morning, so he spent that night in the airport to save money. "This was normal for my life," he told me.

Tao hoped that his ordeal was over. The phone he carried was Chinese—like many visitors, he hadn't taken his U.S. mobile to China—and didn't get service in America. It wasn't until Peng met him at the airport in Kansas City that he got a full account of the F.B.I. intrusion. He had been awake for three days straight, and merely glanced at his home's disorder before retiring to bed. He was awoken by the arrival of federal agents, who handcuffed him. Other agents, he said, covered the rear exits. Disoriented, he hardly knew how to protest. As he was hauled to the car, he called out to Peng, "I've made such a contribution to K.U. How could they treat me like this?"

Tao was arrested under a program called the China Initiative, begun by Donald Trump's Department of Justice in 2018 to combat Chinese espionage. According to Jeff Sessions, the Attorney General who launched the Initiative, China had designs on American scientific prowess, and was running missions against targets "like research labs and universities." In the summer of 2019, an F.B.I. agent told a magistrate judge that the Bureau had received tips from multiple sources that fingered Tao as an instrument of the Chinese state. The evidence suggested that Tao had concealed an affiliation with a talent-recruitment program in China, which had secured him a shadow post at Fuzhou University. Tao was indicted for having failed to

disclose his Chinese ties, but to the prosecutors he was a clandestine agent who got off easy. Tony Mattivi, then an Assistant U.S. Attorney in Kansas, told me that the arrest had put an end to an ongoing intelligence operation: “We disrupted the transfer of American intellectual property to China by discontinuing Dr. Tao’s ability to transfer that information.”

When the F.B.I. left, one of Peng’s new neighbors enfolded her in an unexpected embrace and said, “You know your husband.” Peng could barely keep herself together. She hadn’t had time to cook for her children, who were at soccer and tennis practice, so she went to a Burger King drive-through, but forgot to pick up the food before driving away. She did, however, summon the presence of mind to contact a colleague of Tao’s in Japan, who paid the taxi-driver.



*“When are you going to realize you’re not the only being in the universe?”*  
Cartoon by Kim Warp

At the local jail, a technician taking Tao’s prints noted that there was something strange about his fingertips, as if they had been intentionally disfigured by cross-hatching. Tao repeatedly asked to call his wife, he said, but the officers acted as if they couldn’t understand his English. Peng prepared to post the deed to their new home as collateral, and to surrender her naturalization certificate and the American passports of her children, but Tao was denied bail. Mattivi claimed that he presented a flight risk. After the hearing, Tao was returned to his cell, where the prisoner in the adjacent cell

looked him over. “I just saw you on TV,” he said. “You’re a K.U. professor, and a spy for China.”

There is a long-standing conflict between scientists, who see themselves as citizens of a cosmopolitan republic of unrestricted inquiry, and the state, which is likelier to assign a property value to knowledge. Benjamin Franklin held that “science must be an international pursuit” in service of the “improvement of humanity’s estate.” He never sought to monetize his inventions, and shared the fruits of his research with friends and rivals alike. But what looked to some like the magnanimous diffusion of progress looked to others like theft. During the Industrial Revolution, Britain declared the emigration of skilled artisans and the export of specialized machinery treasonous. Alexander Hamilton, unimpressed, paid bounties to anyone who could deliver British manufacturing secrets, and espionage drove the growth of the American textile industry.

Since then, it has been largely taken for granted that developing nations will find a way to free-ride on the novelties of their more advanced peers. Scholars of international relations call this the “advantage of backwardness,” and it hasn’t always been considered a bad thing. In the period between the World Wars, when the Soviet Union industrialized, American companies sent thousands of engineers to assist; in 1929, the Ford Motor Company provided for the reproduction of an entire factory, and supplied technical personnel to help the Soviets get it running. The U.S. government’s attitude was that such generosity was none of its business.

The Second World War made this mood of permissiveness obsolete. In 1950, Klaus Fuchs, a German physicist who contributed to the Manhattan Project, was arrested for sharing sensitive information with the Soviets; his betrayal allowed Joseph Stalin to learn about the atomic bomb before Harry Truman did. By 1953, more than half of all research in the U.S. was federally backed, and ninety per cent of the funding flowed from the Pentagon. With the money came unprecedented secrecy regulations and loyalty oaths. John Krige, a historian of science and technology, told me that academics accepted the compromise: “They were willing to sacrifice a certain amount of freedom to publish as long as the spigot was open.”

There was, however, collateral damage. As the historian Mario Daniels recently wrote, “In such a chilly environment, scientific internationalism appeared highly suspicious, as did the leftist political leanings that were its frequent bedfellows.” After the war, J. Robert Oppenheimer, who had presided over the Manhattan Project, expressed reservations about the development of the hydrogen bomb. His enemies, referring to his associations with the Communist Party, accused him of being a spy. President Eisenhower, unconvincing, nonetheless ordered a “blank wall” erected between Oppenheimer and any nuclear secrets, and his scientific career was effectively put to rest.

Private companies were still generally left to their own devices. But in 1996 Bill Clinton signed the Economic Espionage Act, making the theft of trade secrets—an active pursuit of at least two dozen countries—a federal crime. The law was most proximately motivated by anxiety about Japan’s technological prosperity; according to one account, Japanese industrial spies occupied two complete floors of a Manhattan skyscraper. (The law also justified the continued allocation of resources to the intelligence community in the absence of an ideological adversary.) After this, the economic competitiveness of domestic firms was sacralized as a national-security priority.

By 2009, when the F.B.I. dedicated a new unit to economic espionage, concerns were focussed on China. In 2014, the Department of Justice indicted five members of China’s People’s Liberation Army—hackers with aliases like UglyGorilla and KandyGoo—for industrial cyberattacks. The next year, Xi Jinping unveiled the Made in China 2025 plan, which identified a catalogue of technologies that was broadly understood to represent an international shopping list. The consequences—for defense, economic competitiveness, and human rights—were potentially grave, and the Obama Administration’s attitude hardened in response. To educate the public, the F.B.I. produced a threat-awareness film, “The Company Man,” which renders the apparently true story of an engineer tempted by Chinese bribery in the style of after-school drama; one expects it to end with the Chinese criminals’ being forced to smoke the entire pack of cigarettes.

When Trump came to power, he was quick to ring the alarm about China, which he said was “raping our country.” In November, 2018, Sessions held a

press conference to announce the China Initiative. Our innovations, he said, “can be stolen by computer hackers or carried out the door by an employee in a matter of minutes.” As a showpiece, Sessions—who would be fired by Trump six days later—unveiled an indictment alleging that spies had targeted an Idaho-based maker of semiconductors. This was the first such program to be dedicated to the actions of a single country. Trump reportedly said at the time, of people from China, “Almost every student that comes over to this country is a spy.” Tao was the first academic arrested under the Initiative.

Franklin Tao was born Tao Feng in 1971, in a mountain village on the Yangtze River. The child of subsistence farmers, he often had little more to eat than cornmeal mixed with water. “The older men in my family were tall, but childhood malnutrition stunted my growth,” he told me. While his mother worked in the fields, he stood on a rickety stool to chop vegetables, and his fingertips were soon etched with scars. In middle school, his science teacher told him that one could make anything using chemistry, including medicine, but what particularly captivated his imagination was the idea that food could be created with only yeast.

Tao was the first student at his high school in three years to pass the national college-entrance exam, and he attended college in Chongqing. “I read my textbooks and saw that most things had been discovered by scientists in the Western world,” he told me. “I wanted to study with the people who invented and discovered these things.” In 2002, months after he and Peng married, the couple moved to Princeton, New Jersey, for his doctorate. His adviser, Steven Bernasek, told me that Tao was “an incredible student, one of the very best I’ve ever worked with—very creative, very hardworking, filled with ideas.” Tao never missed a day in the lab, and in four years completed a formidable dissertation and published fifteen papers. He felt free and happy. When the couple’s twins—a girl and a boy—were born, they were both named, with respectively gendered variations, after Bernasek; upon each was bestowed the middle name Princeton.

Tao studies an arcane subfield of chemistry that focusses on how chemicals react on the surfaces of substances. As a postdoc at Berkeley, he learned to use a technique called ambient-pressure X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy, which allows for precise analyses of these reactions; though AP-XPS

experiments involve highly constrained, artificial conditions, the resulting theoretical insights may eventually provide a basis for the development of clean-energy sources. The work was fiendishly difficult, but Tao found solace in Christianity, later rechristening himself Franklin, after the church in which he was baptized. Peng, who kept deferring her own professional ambitions, told me, “He should not have married me but married science.”

In 2010, Tao entered the job market. He was offered a fellowship at Oak Ridge National Laboratory, historically home to a range of classified research, and cleared a background check, but ultimately decided that he preferred a university environment. He was invited to interview at M.I.T., but before he could travel to Cambridge he received a take-it-or-leave-it offer from Notre Dame. The university promised to purchase him an AP-XPS machine—a room-size collection of dials, hoses, and domes that looks like a child’s retrofuturistic notion of a time-travel device—to support his experimental program, and he accepted. Before long, he received a prestigious grant from the National Science Foundation for about six hundred thousand dollars and another from the Department of Energy.

After four years, Tao was lured by a friend to the University of Kansas to help build a new program there. Kansas was not quite what he had envisioned—the lost M.I.T. interview was never far from his mind—but he would be hired with tenure. In August of 2014, Tao, his family, and more than a million dollars of federal grant money moved to Lawrence. In the meantime, his friend had second thoughts, and left Tao to build the new program alone. During Tao’s first semester of teaching, his father’s health deteriorated. He made the four-day journey home, and when he returned after his father’s funeral, a month later, student complaints about his absence had been registered in his file.

Two years later, Tao was passed over for an anticipated promotion. He found this baffling. He published about fifteen papers per year, most of them in his field’s top journals; in his estimation, he produced a quarter of his department’s output. But he wasn’t a schmoozer. One recent postdoc told me, “You saw other faculty members in the department go to lunch together and whatnot, but Franklin spent all his time working.” His lack of “soft skills,” as a former student delicately put it, made recruitment a challenge, and some researchers switched groups. The smartest of his American

students, Tao noticed, preferred industry to scholarship, so he scouted for talent abroad. “Go to any research-university campus at 10 p.m. and knock on the door of a lab, and a lot of the researchers still working are going to be Asian,” he told me. In retrospect, Tao thinks that his single-minded ambition may have been his downfall. “We were encouraged to apply for grants from the funding agencies, and I was very successful,” he said. “But if I’d just taught they couldn’t have charged me.”

The Trump Administration’s forays into academia, where the distinction between routine coöperation and impropriety can be nebulous, proved more troublesome than officials may have expected. The D.O.J. had been emboldened by the successful prosecution of more straightforward cases of industrial espionage. In 2013, Xu Yanjun, a senior operative in Jiangsu Province’s Ministry for State Security, reached out, under various aliases, to experts at American aerospace companies, offering them paid travel expenses and stipends to give presentations at Chinese universities. In 2017, he narrowed in on an employee at G.E. Aviation, seeking information related to composite fan blades used in jet engines, which the Chinese had been unable to replicate. The employee contacted the F.B.I., which instructed him to hand over dummy documents and eventually to arrange a meeting in Belgium, where Xu was arrested. For the Administration, such activity was only the most visible aspect of a more submerged menace. In 2018, Christopher Wray, the director of the F.B.I., testified before the Senate that China represented a “whole-of-society threat,” and that its intelligence efforts were now exploiting “nontraditional collectors—especially in the academic setting, whether it’s professors, scientists, students.”



*"I knew the indoor pool was too good to be true."*  
Cartoon by Jon Adams

China was indeed interested in annexing the world's research-and-development base. In the nineties, it inaugurated a raft of "talent programs" designed to encourage Chinese researchers to return from overseas posts. The prospect of repatriation apparently held little appeal, so subsequent programs allowed recipients, either Chinese expats or Westerners, to maintain jobs elsewhere as long as they spent some time contributing to scientific infrastructure in China. The country spent lavishly—by one estimate, two trillion dollars in the past decade, more than its military budget—to subsidize salaries, startup costs, and living expenses for scholars who might seed domestic programs with the newest techniques. For researchers, the benefits were obvious: whereas American science funding had been relatively flat for three decades, Chinese expenditures increased by an average of sixteen per cent every year. American universities had long been encouraging collaborations in China, which were not only productive but could be lucrative.

For those inclined to take a zero-sum view of our rivalry with China, the talent programs were easily construed as a hazard. If China could simply import basic research wholesale, it could devote its own resources to breakthroughs that might have commercial or military applications. A former U.S. government official, who worked on these issues for various

intelligence agencies, told me, “This was all a literal policy plan. Back in 2014, Xi Jinping said, ‘Our national power is going to be science and technology—that’s how we’re going to be a superpower, and we’re going to displace the U.S.’ It’s not a global collaboration to further science.” He continued, “The idea is: ‘We’re going to set up a parallel lab at our institution to replicate the work you’re doing in the U.S. We’re going to place researchers at your parallel lab in China. You’re going to train them up in the U.S. so they can come back. You’re going to take the federally funded research at your facility and run it in China so we don’t have to pay for it.’ ”

Trump Administration officials blamed American academics for being naïve collaborators, warning them in one F.B.I. memo that China “does not play by the same rules of academic integrity.” (The memo goes on to assert that the annual cost of stolen intellectual property is “between \$225 billion and \$600 billion,” oft-repeated numbers that Mara Hvistendahl, in “*The Scientist and the Spy*,” her account of Chinese economic espionage directed at Monsanto, shows to be essentially made up.) Most of the examples provided were drawn from industry, and the particular campus peril was left vague. Andrew Lelling, the former U.S. Attorney in Boston and one of the architects of the China Initiative, told me that the point was to encourage transparency: “The government was worried that there was a huge amount of collaboration with the Chinese that nobody knew about, and that was true!” F.B.I. agents toured American campuses to make their case, but the meetings often ended in mutual incomprehension.

The academic skepticism was not unwarranted. Participation in a talent program is not illegal. Plenty of countries have similar incentives to encourage technological development, and scientific expertise is necessary to determine what kinds of collaboration are improper. In 2015, the physicist Xiaoxing Xi was arrested at gunpoint in front of his family for sending sensitive blueprints to Chinese colleagues; he faced eighty years in prison. It later came out that the F.B.I. hadn’t bothered to consult anyone trained to read the blueprints, which were actually for something anodyne. Classified research occurs at national laboratories; most college professors couldn’t understand what their work—which was invariably destined for open publication—had to do with national security. “When the F.B.I. people left the room, everyone looked around at each other and said, ‘They have no idea how science works,’ ” a former senior State Department official told

me. “ ‘We don’t have trade secrets and we don’t work on anything that’s classified.’ ”

University administrators could ignore the F.B.I., but they couldn’t ignore major funders. In August of 2018, the National Institutes of Health sent more than ten thousand letters to academic institutions saying that it had reason to suspect that “systematic” attempts to steal intellectual property were under way, and advising them to pay attention to scientists who didn’t disclose foreign ties. Some letters mentioned individual scientists, whose names had been drawn from research papers where Chinese institutions were listed before American ones.

Shortly afterward, the F.B.I. investigated several Chinese researchers at M. D. Anderson Cancer Center, at the University of Texas. According to the N.I.H., one scientist had violated peer-review confidentiality by forwarding grant proposals to colleagues in China. This, in theory, could allow biomedical patents to be filed in China before the U.S. Another offered to bring proprietary DNA samples to collaborators in a Chinese lab, a clear example of academic misconduct—though not one that had any bearing on state secrets. Federal prosecutors weren’t able to translate their misdeeds into actual crimes. Nevertheless, several doctors were fired. One epidemiologist, who had worked at the institute for two decades and twice turned down Chinese talent programs, ended up back in China. The government seemed to have lost a sense of proportion. “They’re going after oncologists,” the former State Department official said. “We used to collaborate with the Chinese on a cure for cancer, and that was good, and now it’s . . . not good. And I’m not sure why.”

Tao’s professional ascent was thwarted by a brief encounter with a young scholar named Huimin Liu. In the spring of 2017, Tao received an e-mail from Liu, who was seeking a position in the U.S. Liu was from northern China and had studied chemical engineering at Tsinghua University. She was currently on a fellowship at the University of Sydney, where, according to Tao, she had had a row with her adviser. Tao, characteristically oblivious to any cause for interpersonal concern, offered to sponsor Liu as a visiting scholar in Kansas. But before they met Tao wrote to Liu’s adviser in Sydney to recommend one of his own visiting scholars, a woman identified in court documents as “X.Z.,” for a postdoc there. Liu feared that a conspiracy to

replace her was afoot. She sent Tao a furious message that read, “I don’t covet things that don’t belong to me, but when something that belongs to me is snatched away my counterattack may be very strong and extreme.”

Tao was bewildered: “In academia, who would do things like this?” Still, in October, 2018, he welcomed Liu to his lab. In one of the few photographs of Liu that exist online, she has tousled bangs, arching eyebrows, and a half smile. She stayed for only three weeks before initiating her visa transfer to Berkeley, where she continued her research. Tao’s other students told me that she kept to herself and made little impression. For Tao, she was just another visitor passing through. (Liu did not respond to repeated requests for comment.)

As their manuscripts were being readied for publication, Liu began to feel that she was being slighted. In February, 2019, she sent Tao an e-mail arguing that, on a few major papers, she deserved substantially more credit than he’d given her. She seemed to think that Tao played favorites, advancing the careers of undeserving labmates at the expense of her own. She wrote, “In fact, this email was drafted about 3 weeks ago, I have tried my best to calm down and revise it by using peaceful words.” She reminded him that she was inclined to an extreme “counterattack.” Five days later, Tao replied, acceding to Liu’s demands in several cases. The e-mail had a clinical tone; if Tao suspected that she had leverage over him, he gave no sign of it. In a case where Tao felt that an authorship credit was clearly not deserved, he agreed to pay her for her time. In Liu’s response, she emphasized that his “improper action” had hurt her “badly.” She concluded, “You should feel lucky, I am merciful.”

In April, Liu wrote to Tao again, suggesting that he had been responsible for the loss of her postdoc in Australia. He tried to offer whatever generic career assistance he could provide, but she rebuffed him, saying that she wouldn’t “concede one inch of what should be mine.” Later that day, she made an unequivocal demand. “If you are not sure how much you should compensate me, I could suggest you a level. It should be in the level of millions of RMB. For example, 2 million RMB,” or about three hundred thousand dollars. She continued, “Do not consider it is too much. You ruined my future. Do not consider it is too much. It is also your future.” Tao felt that the claim was plainly false and a waste of his time. He assumed that the issue would soon

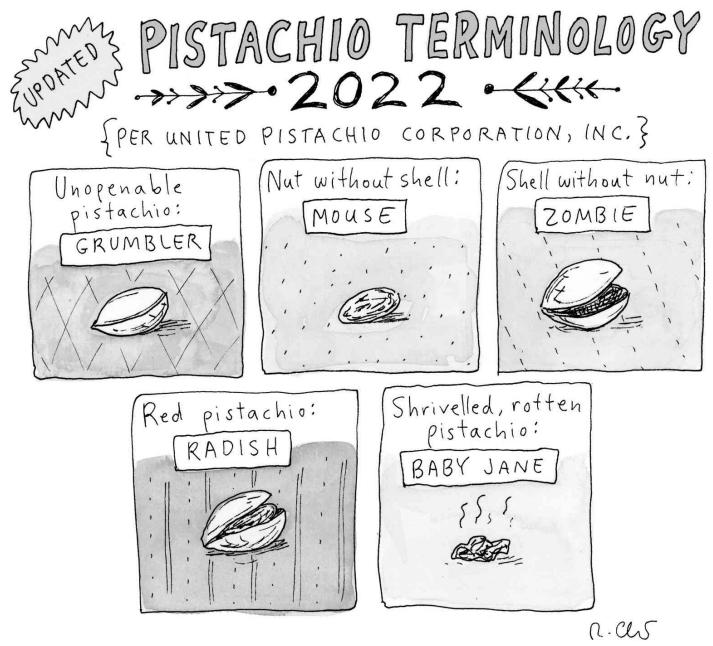
blow over. “My husband spends all his time in the lab,” Peng told me. “He couldn’t fathom that there were such crazy people out there.”

A week later, Liu forwarded Tao an e-mail she had sent to the journal *Chemical Reviews*, claiming authorship misconduct. For the first time, Tao seemed to lose his composure. “What is the evidence you want to say that?” he wrote. “If you don’t have evidence for that, you will get a big trouble.” Tao and Peng didn’t think to contact any authorities. Liu was a young woman alone in a strange country, and, Peng told me, “we tried to empathize with her.” They felt relieved the following day when Tao received an e-mail from someone claiming to be Liu’s mother, who apologized on her daughter’s behalf, affirming that Liu admired Tao and was grateful for the opportunity to work with him. “She has irritated you and caused so much trouble for you,” she wrote. “I am really sorry! I hope that you can be kind and forgive her.” Later, in the context of everything to come, one of Tao’s lawyers speculated that this message was Liu’s first e-mail impersonation.

Liu, however, doubled down on her threat, advising administrators at the University of Kansas that there was serious dereliction regarding the authorship of a recent article. When this didn’t gain traction, she elevated her vendetta to the plane of national security. On June 4, 2019, she wrote to Tao, “It seems that the term ‘tech spy’ is very popular nowadays. You should be careful. I have given you many chances and you didn’t care. After a thing happens, any compensation will be out of date.”

What Tao didn’t know was that “a thing” had already happened. In the late spring and early summer, University of Kansas officials and F.B.I. agents had received more than half a dozen e-mails, as well as submissions to the F.B.I.’s online portal, alleging Tao’s involvement with illicit schemes to transfer his research to China. The first was an anonymous tip to report the activity of “Espionage,” which claimed that Tao was working at the behest of the Chinese government. A few days later, an e-mail putatively from X.Z., the visiting scholar Tao had helped place in Sydney, suggested that Tao held a secret position at Fuzhou University. The message came not from any university domain but from Hotmail. Two days later, the sender wrote a more explicit follow-up: “Franklin (Feng) Tao in the University of Kansas is taking a Changjiang Professorship in China. He may be a scientific espionage.”

As evidence, the e-mails provided links to two of Tao's papers, which listed an affiliation with both the University of Kansas and Fuzhou University, and to Fuzhou's Web site, which seemed to indicate Tao's employment there. In another message, the sender attached an unsigned draft contract between Tao and Fuzhou, which offered Tao a salary, a signing bonus, campus housing, and research funds totalling about three million dollars. The sender was again listed as X.Z., but the message was signed, presumably inadvertently, "Huimin Liu." The next message came from an anonymous, self-destructing Guerrilla Mail account; another was apparently from "Chris Liang," but was signed with X.Z.'s name. A tip to the F.B.I. portal seemed to be from the recent postdoc, who was briefly placed under surveillance. A few weeks later, Liu, now writing under her own name on purpose, e-mailed the chair of Tao's department to report that Tao "not only works for KU, but also works for the Chinese government."



Cartoon by Roz Chast

From the beginning, university officials worked closely with the F.B.I. At one point, the head of global security at Kansas, Carl Taylor, sent a text to an agent that said, "A possible different source emailed me," then noted, "Actually rereading the message I think it is the same source." The F.B.I. traced the I.P. addresses and found that they had all come from the Bay Area —some from the San Francisco airport, others from the Berkeley campus. Taylor texted, "Got the scrapes on our latest chucklehead. Think we have a

solid lead on the Source.” Presumably the fact that Liu had signed her own name was a useful clue.

Nevertheless, the F.B.I. responded with alacrity to the idea that Kansas might have a spy in its midst. On July 9th, the agent interviewed Huimin Liu at Berkeley. Liu repeated her claims, adding that she had received the draft contract from a secretary at Fuzhou, whom she was unable to name. A few hours later, she wrote to the agent, “For the talk today, I have to admit that I lied in some of the items.” She confessed that she had written all the e-mails and anonymous tips. Tao had once given her his log-in credentials to apply for grant proposals, and she had discovered that the same password worked for an e-mail account in his name from Fuzhou University, which is where she found the draft contract. She seemed unaware that she appeared to be confessing to multiple federal crimes, but was intent on expressing her remorse: “I will accept any penalty for my wrongdoings. I am sorry for that. I will be appreciated if you could stop checking the issues with Franklin.”

During this period, Tao was placed under surveillance, including by drone. Sealed government records indicate that agents followed him at conferences in Texas and Chicago. In July, an F.B.I. agent submitted an affidavit to obtain a warrant to search Tao’s Gmail account, writing that “both KU and the FBI have received a series of complaints regarding Tao, both anonymously and from an individual claiming to be a former post-doctoral student.” The agent did not mention that Liu was, by her own admission, the single source of these complaints, or that she was known (as e-mails provided by K.U. had shown) to have demanded money from Tao. He wrote that the draft contract had been obtained “with Tao’s permission and with Tao’s direction”—something that was plainly untrue. (The agent later testified that he had misunderstood the ambiguous evidence, and the judge ruled that this was plausible.)

Several agents met again with Liu, this time prepared with even more pointed questions: “What state official directs him and how does he communicate with them?” “Does she have ANY of these communications?” “Will she testify?” They had her log in to Tao’s Fuzhou e-mail on a clean F.B.I. laptop, and idly reviewed the messages. It seems that they had second thoughts about this warrantless search, however, and wiped the log-in credentials from the laptop. As Mattivi put it in an e-mail to Tao’s attorneys,

“The government did so to avoid any potential litigation issues.” (The F.B.I. and the D.O.J. declined to comment on the case.)

The F.B.I. had hoped to arrest Tao under a statute called Section 951, as an unregistered agent of a foreign government, but the prosecutors ultimately improvised lesser charges. They believed that Tao had been recognized by the Changjiang Scholars, a prestigious talent program, and that, as a requirement of the award, he had accepted a full-time job at Fuzhou University. In the preceding two years, Tao had twice certified on K.U.’s standard conflict-of-interest forms that he had no “current or pending” sources of outside funding. The prosecutors didn’t bother to consult the agencies that had given him grants about whether this violated their rules, which until recently were designed to insure that federal grants were not duplicative. They indicted him for wire fraud and making false statements, arguing that he had concealed his Chinese employment in an effort to gain the portion of his salary (approximately thirty-seven thousand dollars) paid out of his federal grants, which might have been withheld had he been open about his affiliation with Fuzhou. He faced decades in prison, followed by deportation. Tao told me, “I got so much funding for K.U., and when the government came to investigate me they just threw me under the bus.”

Mattivi has since left the Department of Justice, and is now running against Kris Kobach in the Republican primary for Kansas attorney general. (His campaign bio highlights his participation in a capital case against an Al Qaeda operative, alongside his indictment of Tao.) Mattivi told me it was important to understand that “the fact that Tao was not charged with a national-security violation doesn’t mean it was unsuccessful from the point of view of being a counterintelligence or counter-espionage case. We said, ‘Look, we’ve got charges, let’s file them now to interrupt the intelligence operation instead of letting him send the information to China while we work to improve the national-security side of this case.’ ”

Nathan Charles, who worked on the case with the D.O.J.’s counterintelligence unit, was less sanguine. He had been pushing hard to indict Tao under Section 951, but, he told me, “I got my peepie slapped for it.” (A D.O.J. spokesperson declined to comment on personnel matters.) According to a lawsuit Charles subsequently filed against the department, his two supervisors—both career Justice officials—“declined to support the

prosecution because they could not identify a legitimate national security concern.” When he challenged them, Charles told me, one of them “bungled out something about how he didn’t want Chinese Americans to be discriminated against. It ultimately came down to cowardice.” Charles claimed that the prosecution only went forward after John Demers, the head of the D.O.J.’s National Security Division and a Trump appointee, called Mattivi to offer his personal support. Charles told me, of Tao, “Yes, he committed wire fraud, and I hope he gets convicted of it, but that’s not the heart of what he did wrong—that’s not why the F.B.I. started looking at him. They were looking at his pattern of behavior that showed he was a foreign agent, that he was a spy, and he was—an undeclared agent of a foreign power.” He paused. “That’s why I left the Justice Department. They wouldn’t use the tools that were at their disposal to protect the American people.”

In the wake of Tao’s arrest, the China Initiative seemed to have found its footing. In an interview with Politico, Demers urged U.S. Attorneys’ offices to pursue at least one or two cases a year, which was taken as a de-facto expectation, if not a quota. The cases might be complex, Demers noted, but “we wanted to signal to the U.S. Attorneys that we understood that, and nonetheless we wanted them to focus their resources on this, and that we were going to approve these charges.” Unfortunately, there did not seem to be enough industrial espionage to go around, and individuals couldn’t be prosecuted for Chinese affiliations alone. The Tao charges seemed to contrive a path forward; according to the *Wall Street Journal*, senior D.O.J. officials believed that the indictment represented a “potential blueprint for prosecuting talent program participants without having to produce evidence of intellectual property theft.” They could charge cases on the technicalities of funding disclosure while making it clear that the underlying moral crime was one of dual loyalty.

Carol Lam, a former federal prosecutor, wrote that the pressure to bring cases, and law enforcement’s crude understanding of science, made dubious prosecutions inevitable. The D.O.J. has not kept clear public records of what counts as a China Initiative case, and several cases—including one involving turtle smuggling in Singapore—have disappeared from its Web site, so a comprehensive accounting of the relevant prosecutions is difficult. But, according to data compiled by the *M.I.T. Technology Review*, fewer than a

quarter of the cases have involved actual economic espionage, and since Tao's arrest, the proportion of "research integrity" cases has risen dramatically. (The D.O.J. defended its docket, maintaining that fewer than half of all cases have involved grant fraud.)

It's a common prosecutorial strategy to bring lesser charges for more serious offenses. In these cases, however, there was no clear rationale for the initial investigation, which lends credence to the idea that the China Initiative was merely a formal gloss on a racialized moral panic. The failure to disclose outside sources of funding, an unfortunately widespread phenomenon, is typically subject to administrative remedies; on the National Science Foundation's Web site, there are at least a dozen recent infractions similar to those that have been alleged of Tao, which have resulted in suspension from one's university or temporary debarment from federal funding. According to a study by the law professor Andrew Chongseh Kim, more than half the defendants in economic-espionage cases since 2009 have been of Chinese descent. Andrea Liu, a physicist at the University of Pennsylvania, told me she attended a briefing in which "the F.B.I. likened working with Chinese researchers and students to a cancer, where the malignant effects might not be known for years afterward." She continued, "My reaction was that an overreactive immune response to cancer leads to autoimmune disease, and that can be equally deadly."

In its attempt to protect our technological supremacy, the government attacked the very people who underwrote our advances. In early 2018, an F.B.I. agent named Kujtim Sadiku learned, through Google searches, that Anming Hu, a Chinese-born Canadian citizen and nanotechnologist at the University of Tennessee, had taken part in the Beijing Overseas Talents program. Sadiku visited Hu's office and fished for a confession that he was a spy; when none was forthcoming, Sadiku attempted to recruit Hu as a source. Hu declined, and Sadiku spent the next two years trying to build a case, dispatching agents to tail his family. When the surveillance produced no evidence of espionage, the government indicted him for failing to disclose part-time work at the Beijing University of Technology to *NASA*, which had commissioned him to develop spaceflight materials. Hu was dismissed by the University of Tennessee and placed under house arrest; he wasn't allowed to visit his own garage or outdoor deck for a year. His son lost his visa status and was forced to leave college and return to Canada,

where the rest of the family lived. Hu told me, “My daughter, Grace, she saw that the other kids were picked up by their fathers when kindergarten ended in the afternoon, and she asked me, ‘Dad, why do you never come to Canada to pick me up from school?’” He choked up as he described how he told her a good-night story each evening over the phone: “After the short time I had to talk with her, it took a long time for me to recover—an hour or two, almost every day.”

When President Joe Biden took office, the government became defensive about claims of racial profiling. In an interview with *Science*, Lelling, the U.S. Attorney in Boston, said that, if systematic thievery were a policy goal of France, the D.O.J. would be prosecuting Frenchmen. (This may not have been the best example; in 2014, Robert Gates, the Secretary of Defense, identified France as one of the worst offenders, saying, “French intelligence services have been breaking into the hotel rooms of American businessmen and surreptitiously downloading their laptops.”) Michael German, a former F.B.I. agent, told me, “The F.B.I. will say, ‘If you look at our cases, people of Chinese origin are overrepresented,’ but that’s not measuring spies—it’s measuring who the F.B.I. is investigating.” Either way, the appearance of selective prosecution has had broad ramifications. Ed Lazowska, a computer scientist at the University of Washington, told me that one of the best young faculty members in his department fled to the private sector lest he come under scrutiny. Steven Chu, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist and the former head of the Department of Energy, told me, “My friends in Great Britain and Germany are ecstatic. They say, ‘The U.S. used to get the best grad students and postdocs, and now we see options!’”

The government had created a situation in which even a glancing scientific connection to China could be criminalized. In January, 2021, Lelling announced the indictment of Gang Chen, a beloved engineering professor at M.I.T., for disclosure violations, and was willing to say the quiet part out loud: “This was not just about greed but about loyalty to China.” An F.B.I. agent noted, “We have now reached the point where the F.B.I. is opening a new China-related counterintelligence case about every ten hours.”

This January, I met Tao at his home, which is panelled in dark wood, sparsely furnished, and decorated with imagery of wild horses at liberated gallops. Tao has been unable to eat much since his arrest, and wore a thin

blazer that hung loosely from his frame. A little alcove displays the awards he has won. He no longer has access to his lab or office, and has colonized most of the kitchen with computer monitors and wobbly towers of files. Tao lifted his pants cuff to relieve pressure from an ankle monitor he has worn for two and a half years. Peng is warm and emotive—as I sat down, she took sweet rice cakes out of the oven—but Tao, despite frequent pauses to look down at his hands and cry silently, can be prickly and irascible. He was recently admonished by one of his attorneys for leaping up in court to express his exasperation with what he considered a mistranslation of a phrase in Mandarin. He praised me, patronizingly, for paying close attention to the defense’s evidence, in a way that felt like a reprimand of his lawyers.



*"It's a slippery slope from casual bird-watcher to that guy."*  
Cartoon by Maggie Larson

The story the government tells about Tao is, on its face, relatively simple. “This is a pretty straightforward case that’s well within the heartland of wire fraud,” a prosecutor said at a hearing. “The object of the scheme was to obtain a second salary and money and access to federal funds that the defendant wasn’t entitled to.” The government has the unsigned draft contract that it got from Liu and a signed—but not countersigned—“addendum” that Tao sent back to Fuzhou University, in which he asks for significantly more lab funding than the original contract stipulated. He requested that the university purchase an AP-XPS machine, and his Gmail

account, according to the government, contained “numerous other instances of Tao equipping his lab” there. He had been assigned a Fuzhou e-mail address, which was used to submit grant applications to the Chinese equivalent of the National Science Foundation. He had office space at his disposal. He directed promising postdocs to Fuzhou, helped one graduate student secure a faculty job, and asked around for candidates to work with a Changjiang scholar. According to an F.B.I. interview with a professor in Taiwan, Tao reported that he had moved from K.U. to Fuzhou. He made fifteen trips to China in three years. During the spring semester of 2019, he lied to his dean about his whereabouts, claiming that he was doing research in Germany rather than in China. (At many universities, such deceptions alone would be sufficient grounds for dismissal.)

Tao’s appearance on the stand is unlikely, in part because of his personal qualities, but the story he tells is that he applied for the Changjiang scholarship not for money but because it would give a sheen to his career accomplishments. The system requires a nominating institution in China, and he was already collaborating with Fuzhou. This collaboration was never a secret; his dual affiliation was listed in published papers. He considered accepting the scholarship, and took his family to see the city of Fuzhou. But the proposal, he and Peng claim, was vetoed by his family. Tao’s children can’t read or write Chinese, and his wife had no interest in moving there. Tao and Peng are from an area near Sichuan Province, and used to eating spicy food; Fuzhou is on the coast, and no one in the family likes fish. “We had to go there to show you how much the kids and I don’t want this,” Peng said, during my visit.

Tao says that the signed addendum was a “polite way to decline their offer.” It made demands so extravagant—including a request for about eight million dollars in funding—that, he says, he knew it could never be accepted, allowing both parties to save face. The fact that he sent the counter-offer with his signature in place, however, does suggest that there was a threshold beyond which he would have made the arrangement work. Nevertheless, a chemistry professor at Fuzhou told me that Tao had never been a faculty member there, though members of the H.R. department had repeatedly tried to recruit him, and did not abandon the process until Tao was arrested. Fuzhou, in Tao’s view, exaggerated his role because it looked good for the school to advertise a Changjiang appointment.

Tao concedes that he lied to Kansas administrators about his whereabouts for the spring semester of 2019. He says that he was looking for another job, and that the student complaints about the earlier trip to China still stung. There is no question that Tao longed to work at a premier institution; that year, he also submitted applications to Brown, Stanford, and several other places. He told me that another reason he had not accepted Fuzhou's offer was that the university was decidedly second-tier. The U.S. government has thus far produced no evidence that Tao was paid by Fuzhou, despite having subpoenaed the bank-account records of members of Tao's church, and those of his fourteen-year-old children. Tao told me, "I never signed a contract, I never taught a single class, I never gave a lecture, and I never got paid."

It remains possible, according to the evidence, that Tao did in fact have a second job in Fuzhou, perhaps a part-time one. His lawyer Peter Zeidenberg, of the firm ArentFox Schiff, argues that it would still take legal contortions to construe this "moonlighting" as a federal crime. Several academics told me that such collaborations are widespread, and as recently as five years ago wouldn't have been a problem for the university, let alone the government. Academic conflict-of-interest forms are notoriously ambiguous, and government agencies have hastened to "clarify" their meaning since Tao's arrest. (Mattivi, the former prosecutor, argued in a hearing that he hadn't shown the actual forms to the grand jurors because they were so prone to misinterpretation.) And Tao has hardly neglected his duties in Kansas; in 2019, he won the university's marquee academic prize. Zeidenberg has argued that "the indictment attempts to transform what is, at best, a garden-variety employment dispute" into six federal felonies, each of which carries a maximum of twenty years in prison. If the government's case stands, it could create "truly bizarre and draconian situations." If a computer programmer falsely certified that he had not used marijuana while employed by a nonprofit that receives funding from the E.P.A., for example, would that be federal-program fraud?

Of course, the government has not always presented the case as "heartland" wire fraud. Tao's indictment is shot through with insinuations that Tao acted "for the benefit of the PRC" and did so "while purporting to remain loyal to KU, his employer." At one point, a grand juror asked Mattivi, "So is he being charged with double-dipping or espionage?" Mattivi demurred, giving the impression that the distinction wasn't so clear. The government has

argued that Tao brought sensitive, government-funded research to Fuzhou, in order to “make the PRC a world leader in the field of renewable energy.” Nathan Charles, from the D.O.J.’s counterintelligence unit, told me, “He was just handing them the work he was doing in the U.S., and he was getting good money to do it, all the perks.”

But when I asked the former prosecutors about the potential dangers of Tao’s research their understanding seemed fuzzy. Charles said that he didn’t remember all the details, but that Tao was “doing this very cutting-edge research that relates to the processing of petroleum, something with obviously a lot of economic interests, but also something— Hey, Japan largely invaded Oceania, all the territories south of the mainland, to get petroleum, to literally fuel its conflicts in China, and a big part of why they attacked Pearl Harbor is that they were trying to replicate what they did in the Russo-Japanese War, with the attack on Port Arthur. . . . The technology that Frank Tao was working on was technology that was going to help China, both in terms of industry and military prowess.”

Virtually any line of scientific inquiry could, with enough imagination and time, be pressed into the service of an adversarial misadventure. But I consulted half a dozen experts in Tao’s field, and all of them affirmed to me that what Tao does is fundamental science, without direct benefits to practical functions like petroleum processing. (Despite their general sympathy for Tao, very few were willing to go on the record and risk crossing the funding agencies or facing the same investigative scrutiny for their own Chinese collaborations.) Bernasek, Tao’s adviser, dismissed the idea that Tao’s work was dangerous: “It’s a long way from application, and the idea that he is responsible for any kind of industrial espionage is ludicrous.” One AP-XPS expert, who knows of Tao’s work but has no relationship with him, told me, “I don’t know everything Franklin worked on, but based on my experience it’s so basic and so fundamental that it’s very far from practice—and I have a very hard time imagining that anything about it is related to national security.” He added that it was “highly unlikely” that Tao’s tinkering with AP-XPS machines could result in patents or other forms of intellectual property.

The scholars noted that there is no bright line between science and engineering. In Tao’s case, the government has seized on one Department of

Energy project that mentions potential uses for “shale gas components” in the energy industries. But the AP-XPS researcher told me that even this work, which had been funded by the D.O.E. as part of its “basic research” rubric, was valid only in conditions that bore little resemblance to the outside world—it was as if these experiments had been conducted under the pressure of Mars. One scholar, who had spent more than a decade working in national labs and knew Tao’s work well, told me, “We are fundamental scientists, not weapons researchers. There is potentially money in what we do down the road, but I remember a conference where we said, ‘This could be useful,’ and a guy from Shell said, ‘Come on, guys, get real!’ ” Tao told me that his research was “pure science,” and that the references to shale gas and other bits of observable reality were a boilerplate requirement of the funding agencies: “No one funds something only for fun.” He added, “The discovery and knowledge generated from our fundamental studies could be beneficial to the world one day. But not for three decades, I think, and never without huge further efforts from other people.”

The national-labs veteran told me that there was “nothing magic about what Franklin did,” and that China did not need him. “Our colleagues in the Chinese Academy of Sciences do the same kind of work, and they are just as good as Franklin.” He added, “In terms of national security or tech transfer, there is no basis for a claim he did anything wrong.” More evidence could always come out at trial that changes this assessment. But Tao seemed befuddled by the possibility that his research could be subject to espionage. “We disclose all our details so someone else can replicate our results—it’s a basic principle in the scientific community,” he said. “Why would we worry that they’re coming to steal my work? They could just e-mail me to ask how I did it!”

Tao concedes that he did ask Fuzhou to buy an AP-XPS machine. But these machines are commercially available from a supplier in Germany, and several are already in China. The recent postdoc told me that, as far as he could tell, having such a machine there would serve only to further Tao’s personal efforts, by allowing him to double his research capabilities and publication output. If Tao did have a dual loyalty, the postdoc implied, it was not between the U.S. and China but between any narrow national interest and science as his vocation.

The China Initiative, at least in name, officially came to an end last month. Matthew Olsen, the head of the National Security Division of the D.O.J., announced that although the department's actions had been motivated by "genuine national-security concerns," he had registered worries about a "chilling atmosphere" for scientists and determined that the Initiative was "not the right approach." He was making official a slow collapse that had been occurring in plain sight for a year. Last September, a federal judge acquitted Anming Hu, pointing out that, even if he had neglected to disclose a part-time position in Beijing, no fraud was involved because *NASA* was happy with his work. In January, all charges against Gang Chen were dropped after a Department of Energy official said that Chen had been under no obligation to disclose foreign ties. Chen has said that he will likely no longer work on government-funded projects.

But most officials I spoke to maintain that the underlying threat is real, and unlikely to dissipate soon. Christopher Johnson, a former C.I.A. analyst with extensive experience in China, told me, "There's legitimately plenty of worrying activity that's happening here, and to compare it to a McCarthyist virus—I don't see it that way." To the chagrin of both the Department of Justice and the intelligence community, any cases they lost were immediately exploited by China for their propaganda value.

One of the most common objections to the China Initiative is that the vast majority of scholars do open research designed for publication, so only an F.B.I. simpleton would worry about "theft." This is true, but it also elides the distinction between explicit and tacit knowledge. In an article from 2019, "Why China Has Not Caught Up Yet," the researchers Andrea and Mauro Gilli note that before the First World War it took Germany only a few years to copy Britain's most advanced battleship designs, the product of five decades of intensive research and development. By now, though, technology has become so staggeringly complicated that developing nations can no longer expect to keep up on the basis of explicit knowledge alone. Between 2007 and 2013, Chinese hackers stole Pentagon blueprints for so-called fifth-generation stealth fighter planes. But the Chinese military lacked the general engineering know-how, and the production base, to replicate them, and still has not come close to producing an aircraft that achieves the performance of the F-22.



Cartoon by Liana Finck

In this view, talent programs might represent a more substantive threat than, say, cyber intrusions. The former government official who worked with intelligence agencies provided me with dossiers that he had compiled since 2014, based on information that has since been removed from the Web, which helped give substance to what often seem like vaporous expressions of anti-P.R.C. hysteria. In one case, a decorated professor of engineering in America received federal grants to apply machine learning to signal detection in medical devices. At the same time, as a talent-program awardee, he worked at one of China's defense universities, which have explicit ties to the People's Liberation Army; the university in question develops machine-learning applications for submarine warfare.

The former government official also argued that there had been methodical attempts to exploit the federal funding system. One talent-program awardee, he showed me, became a grant manager for a funding agency and awarded several grants to other members of the same talent program; when they became managers, they awarded him grants of his own. It's possible that the cohort did excellent work, or that this was simple cronyism. "We only had the capacity to look at one subsection of one subdivision of one funding agency," the former official said. "What we found could have been an outlier, but I doubt it." A think tank in Australia, he pointed out, has identified at least two hundred talent programs, and the U.S. has focussed on

only three or four. “Academia is correct when they push back and say, ‘What is the scale and scope of this?’ The U.S. government has no answer to that.”

The China Initiative’s most high-profile case has been that of Charles Lieber, the chair of the chemistry department at Harvard and a perennial Nobel Prize candidate, as well as the recipient of more than fifteen million dollars of federal funding, including from the Department of Defense. From 2012 to 2017, Lieber participated in China’s Thousand Talents, the most vaunted talent program; his contract paid him fifty thousand dollars per month, along with generous startup fees to establish a lab in Wuhan. He had, however, neglected to inform Harvard of his double-timing in China, and, when approached by federal investigators, he continued to conceal the arrangement—and the sacks of cash he had smuggled through customs. In December, he was convicted of lying to federal authorities, falsifying tax returns, and failing to report foreign earnings. Some felt that this was just another anti-Chinese expedition; a D.O.D. official testified that the investigation was prompted by the sheer number of Chinese students working in Lieber’s lab. But John Krige, the historian, has noted that Lieber’s contract stipulated that he work on the development of batteries for high-performance electric vehicles, an area of industrial competition. “The academic research community must ask itself if it is morally or politically acceptable to engage in international scientific collaboration with China in fields that can seriously harm the domestic economy,” he wrote.

Krige told me that scholars had to consider whether certain kinds of knowledge diffusion ought to be deterred. “Now that we’re facing a serious economic competitor in China, scientific internationalism can’t work in the same way,” he said. “The problem is that nobody wants to confront that head on—what is dangerous knowledge?” Finding a principled way to make these determinations is not easy. It may be in America’s interest to encourage tech transfer in some domains—say, biomedical information during a pandemic—while inhibiting it elsewhere. Such complicated calculations require the input of policymakers, scientists, and area specialists; they are not necessarily well served by the blunt instrument of criminal prosecution. The former government official told me, “The fundamental problem with the China Initiative is that the D.O.J. is in charge with the F.B.I., and they’re looking at it entirely through a criminal lens, because that’s the only tool they have. Most of the threats are not criminal in nature, so by definition the

China Initiative has failed, and will fail. Compliance can easily be handled by administrative authorities, but the D.O.J. stepped in and said, ‘No, we got this.’ They don’t know anything about how grants work, so they were totally cavalier—‘If they’re part of a talent program, we’ll just arrest them!’ But that’s idiotic. Of course they were going to botch these cases!”

Previous Presidential Administrations have formulated policies that take these considerations into account. In the eighties, President Reagan commissioned a panel to look into tech transfer to the Soviet Union. The panel outlined a strategy later known as “small yard, high fence”: identify some specific avenues of research that need to be protected with a high barrier of classification, and leave everything else open. In 2019, the N.S.F. commissioned the JASON group, a secretive collection of government advisers, to look into whether this guidance needed updating, and they concluded that it did not—that any other defensive structures would harm the progress of science more than they would help the short-term national interest. I asked Mario Daniels, the historian, why, if we already have the tools we need, there is so much hand-wringing about China now. He suggested that what’s new is a pervasive unease about America’s decline. “The difference between now and the early Cold War was that back then the Americans always thought they were more or less the uncontested leaders,” he said. “And that has changed.”

Franklin Tao’s lab has been shut down, his K.U. e-mail account has been deactivated, and his students have dispersed. “No one is using the machines,” he told me, “which is wasting a lot of money for the university and the federal government.” He has spent the past two years on unpaid leave, wondering why he was singled out: he noted that myriad other academics, including non-Chinese scholars, had been in similar situations and had never faced investigation. He is haunted by the suicide of a Stanford professor whose connections to China were scrutinized in 2018. Tao has paid obsessive attention to the other China Initiative court proceedings, and he travelled to Knoxville for Anming Hu’s trial. Tao does what he can to keep up with his research, and since his arrest he has published eleven more academic papers. Peng has taken jobs at three different hospitals to support the family. She sometimes hears her children crying in their rooms. For a time, they refused to use their last name—one of a tiny number of Chinese

surnames at Free State High School. Tao told me, “More than anything, the China Initiative reminds me of the Cultural Revolution.”

Inside the D.O.J., it had been clear since November, when a comprehensive review began, that the China Initiative had become a liability. But it took the department several months to craft an appropriate public message around its closure—to disavow the civil-rights consequences without downplaying the intelligence community’s apprehensiveness about China. Henceforth, the Biden Administration will deal with most “research integrity” violations through administrative penalties. Greater prosecutorial discretion will be exercised, focussing on criminal cases with an established “nexus to our national or economic security.” Lelling, the former U.S. Attorney, told me he now believes that the government should have led with regulation and guidance in the first place. “It might have been better,” he said, sighing. “But we didn’t do it that way.”

The announcement of the Initiative’s end was cause for considerable relief in the scientific community. But it may not fully dispel the anxiety of researching while Chinese. Margaret Lewis, a professor at Seton Hall Law School and a frequent critic of the China Initiative, told me that universities and grant-making agencies can still spoil the careers of academics, and often with less public scrutiny. She worries, too, that prosecutions could simply continue under another name. Senators Charles Grassley and Josh Hawley have already called for the Initiative’s reinstatement. Lewis told me, “I have a vision of a Bart Simpson blackboard meme: ‘The China Initiative is dead. Long live the Strategy for Countering Nation-State Threats!’ ”

The deeper issues, though, are less likely to be resolved with the prosecution of individual actors than with a revision of our national priorities. Zuoyue Wang, a historian of science, told me that two historical episodes might guide our way forward: “One was the news of the first successful Soviet atomic-bomb test in 1949. Which spies gave them the secret? Klaus Fuchs was arrested, and that fed into the Red Scare and McCarthyism. The other was the launch of Sputnik, in 1957, and there was more introspection then. That debate led to massive investment in science, education, and technology.” He continued, “There are global problems that affect American interests, like climate change and public health and nuclear weapons, and we need international scientific collaboration to solve them.”

The D.O.J. has made it clear that it will continue its existing prosecutions. Either the government believes that its case against Tao is necessary and just or it wishes to avoid the embarrassment of another dropped case and is willing to gamble on a Kansas jury. (A D.O.J. spokesperson told me, “Prosecutors make decisions based on facts, law, and the principles of federal prosecution.”) Zeidenberg, Tao’s lawyer, fears that this is the worst of all possible worlds for Tao: “People have been patting themselves on the back for the rollback of the China Initiative, and now they will move on, thinking the problem has been solved.” Tao’s trial begins on March 21st, in a courthouse in Kansas City, and his conviction remains distinctly possible. (The local NPR affiliate referred to Tao, incorrectly, as being on trial for espionage.) The judge, perhaps sensing a broader shift, recently barred expert testimony about the general nefariousness of talent programs, but her rulings have largely favored the prosecution. Tao is unlikely to go to jail for decades, but whether he will have a scientific career is an open question.

When I visited Tao, Peng brought out fifty dumplings she had made for lunch, but she and Tao took only a few. “We’re in big debt now,” Tao told me. They had borrowed money from several of their friends at church and received donations on GoFundMe. “If I were at Notre Dame now, faculty members’ kids get fifty per cent of their tuition paid anywhere,” Tao said. “My kids are going to hate me in the future.” Peng told me they are likely to lose the home they bought to anchor themselves in the community. She has put her licensure efforts on hold indefinitely. “I have a dream, too,” she said. “I want to be a doctor.” She looked over at Tao, who looked down at his uneaten dumplings. “He should be doing his research. It’s such a waste—it’s unfair to him, and to America. He could make so much more of a contribution, and I don’t know how they can’t see that.” ♦

# American Chronicles

- [Why the School Wars Still Rage](#)

By [Jill Lepore](#)

## Content

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In 1925, Lela V. Scopes, twenty-eight, was turned down for a job teaching mathematics at a high school in Paducah, Kentucky, her home town. She had taught in the Paducah schools before going to Lexington to finish college at the University of Kentucky. But that summer her younger brother, John T. Scopes, was set to be tried for the crime of teaching evolution in a high-school biology class in Dayton, Tennessee, in violation of state law, and Lela Scopes had refused to denounce either her kin or Charles Darwin. It didn't matter that evolution doesn't ordinarily come up in an algebra class. And it didn't matter that Kentucky's own anti-evolution law had been defeated. "Miss Scopes loses her post because she is in sympathy with her brother's stand," the *Times* reported.

In the nineteen-twenties, legislatures in twenty states, most of them in the South, considered thirty-seven anti-evolution measures. Kentucky's bill, proposed in 1922, had been the first. It banned teaching, or countenancing the teaching of, "Darwinism, atheism, agnosticism, or the theory of evolution in so far as it pertains to the origin of man." The bill failed to pass the House by a single vote. Tennessee's law, passed in 1925, made it a crime for teachers in publicly funded schools "to teach any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals." Scopes challenged the law deliberately, as part of an effort by the A.C.L.U. to bring a test case to court. His trial, billed as the trial of the century, was the first to be broadcast live on the radio. It went out across the country, to a nation, rapt.

A century later, the battle over public education that afflicted the nineteen-twenties has started up again, this time over the teaching of American history. Since 2020, with the murder of George Floyd and the advance of the Black Lives Matter movement, seventeen states have made efforts to expand the teaching of one sort of history, sometimes called anti-racist history, while thirty-six states have made efforts to restrict that very same kind of instruction. In 2020, Connecticut became the first state to require African

American and Latino American history. Last year, Maine passed “An Act to Integrate African American Studies into American History Education,” and Illinois added a requirement mandating a unit on Asian American history.

On the blackboard on the other side of the classroom are scrawled what might be called anti-anti-racism measures. Some ban the *Times’* 1619 Project, or ethnic studies, or training in diversity, inclusion, and belonging, or the bugbear known as critical race theory. Most, like a bill recently introduced in West Virginia, prohibit “race or sex stereotyping,” “race or sex scapegoating,” and the teaching of “divisive concepts”—for instance, the idea that “the United States is fundamentally racist or sexist,” or that “an individual, by virtue of his or her race or sex, is inherently racist, sexist or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously.”

While all this has been happening, I’ve been working on a U.S.-history textbook, so it’s been weird to watch lawmakers try their hands at writing American history, and horrible to see what the ferment is doing to public-school teachers. In Virginia, Governor Glenn Youngkin set up an e-mail tip line “for parents to send us any instances where they feel that their fundamental rights are being violated . . . or where there are inherently divisive practices in their schools.” There and elsewhere, parents are harassing school boards and reporting on teachers, at a time when teachers, who earn too little and are asked to do too much, are already exhausted by battles over remote instruction and mask and vaccine mandates and, not least, by witnessing, without being able to repair, the damage the pandemic has inflicted on their students. Kids carry the burdens of loss, uncertainty, and shaken faith on their narrow shoulders, tucked inside their backpacks. Now, with schools open and masks coming off, teachers are left trying to figure out not only how to care for them but also what to teach, and how to teach it, without losing their jobs owing to complaints filed by parents.

There’s a rock, and a hard place, and then there’s a classroom. Consider the dilemma of teachers in New Mexico. In January, the month before the state’s Public Education Department finalized a new social-studies curriculum that includes a unit on inequality and justice in which students are asked to “explore inequity throughout the history of the United States and its connection to conflict that arises today,” Republican lawmakers proposed a ban on teaching “the idea that social problems are created by racist or

patriarchal societal structures and systems.” The law, if passed, would make the state’s own curriculum a crime.

Evolution is a theory of change. But in February—a hundred years, nearly to the day, after the Kentucky legislature debated the nation’s first anti-evolution bill—Republicans in Kentucky introduced a bill that mandates the teaching of twenty-four historical documents, beginning with the 1620 Mayflower Compact and ending with Ronald Reagan’s 1964 speech “A Time for Choosing.” My own account of American history ends with the 2021 insurrection at the Capitol, and “The Hill We Climb,” the poem that Amanda Gorman recited at Joe Biden’s Inauguration. “Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true: / That even as we grieved, we grew.”

Did we, though? In the nineteen-twenties, the curriculum in question was biology; in the twenty-twenties, it’s history. Both conflicts followed a global pandemic and fights over public education that pitted the rights of parents against the power of the state. It’s not clear who’ll win this time. It’s not even clear who won last time. But the distinction between these two moments is less than it seems: what was once contested as a matter of biology—can people change?—has come to be contested as a matter of history. Still, this fight isn’t really about history. It’s about political power. Conservatives believe they can win midterm elections, and maybe even the Presidency, by whipping up a frenzy about “parents’ rights,” and many are also in it for another long game, a hundred years’ war: the campaign against public education.

Before states began deciding what schools would require—from textbooks to vaccines—they had to require children to attend school. That happened in the Progressive era, early in the past century, when a Progressive strain ran through not only the Progressive Party but also the Republican, Democratic, Socialist, and Populist Parties. Lela and John Scopes grew up in Paducah, but they spent part of their childhood in Illinois, which, in 1883, became one of the first states in the Union to make school attendance compulsory. By 1916, nearly every state had mandated school attendance, usually between the ages of six and sixteen. Between 1890 and 1920, a new high school opened every day.

Some families objected, citing “parental rights,” a legal novelty, but courts broadly upheld compulsory-education laws, deeming free public schooling to be essential to democratic citizenship. “The natural rights of a parent to the custody and control of his infant child are subordinate to the power of the state, and may be restricted and regulated by municipal laws,” the Indiana Supreme Court ruled in 1901, characterizing a parent’s duty to educate his children as a “duty he owes not to the child only, but to the commonwealth.” As Tracy Steffes argues in “School, Society, and State: A New Education to Govern Modern America, 1890-1940” (2012), “Public schooling was not just one more progressive reform among many but a major—perhaps *the* major—public response to tensions between democracy and capitalism.” Capitalism divided the rich and the poor; democracy required them to live together as equals. Public education was meant to bridge the gap, as wide as the Cumberland.

Beginning in the eighteen-nineties, states also introduced textbook laws, in an attempt to wrest control of textbook publishing from what Progressives called “the book trust”—a conglomerate of publishers known as the American Book Company. Tennessee passed one of these laws in 1899: it established a textbook commission that selected books for adoption. The biology book Scopes used to teach his students was a textbook that Tennessee had adopted, statewide, at a time when it made high school compulsory.

“Each year the child is coming to belong more and more to the state, and less and less to the parent,” the Stanford professor of education Ellwood Cubberley wrote approvingly in 1909. Progressives fought for children’s welfare and children’s health, establishing children’s hospitals and, in 1912, the U.S. Children’s Bureau. Mandatory school attendance was closely tied to two other Progressive reforms that extended the state’s reach into the lives of parents and children: compulsory vaccination and the abolition of child labor.

By 1912, twenty-seven states either required vaccination for children attending school or permitted schools to require it. Parents’ objections met with little success. In one New Jersey school district, in 1911, three hundred and fifty parents challenged the school board, pledging that “we will, one and all of us . . . move out of Montclair and out of the State of New Jersey

before we allow our children to be vaccinated. There are other suburbs of New York which have not this fetish of forcing vaccination on children.” The school board backed down. But, beginning in 1914, with a widely cited case called *People v. Ekerold*, parents could be prosecuted for failing to vaccinate their children. “If a parent may escape all obligation under the statute requiring him to send his children to school by simply alleging he does not believe in vaccination,” the court ruled, “the policy of the state to give some education to all children, if necessary by compelling measures, will become more or less of a farce.”

Before compulsory schooling, many American children worked, in farms or factories. You might think that stopping parents from sending their children to work was a consequence of requiring that they send them to school, but the opposite was true: requiring parents to send their children to school was one way reformers got parents to stop sending their children to work. In 1916, Congress passed a law discouraging the employment of children younger than fourteen in manufacturing and the employment of children younger than sixteen in mines and quarries. When this and other laws targeting child labor were deemed unconstitutional by a laissez-faire Supreme Court, reformers drafted a Child Labor Amendment, granting Congress the “power to limit, regulate, and prohibit the labor of persons under eighteen.” It passed Congress in 1924 and went to the states for ratification. Progressive organizations, including the National Association of Colored Women, sent orders to their members to lobby state legislatures to pass the bill.

“Please remember, dear sisters, that unless two-thirds of the state legislators pass the Child Labor Amendment, it will not be incorporated into the Constitution of the United States,” the group’s former president Mary Church Terrell warned members, “and that will certainly be a calamity.” Businesses, not least the Southern textile industry, objected. And rural states, especially, objected—Kentucky was among those states which failed to ratify—since the amendment, which was badly written, could be construed as making it a crime for families to ask their children to do chores around the farm. The Ohio Farm Bureau complained, “The parents of the United States did not know that the congress was considering taking their parental authority from them.”

Parenthood, as an identity, and even as a class of rights bearers, is a product both of Progressive reform and of those who resisted it. The magazine *Parents* began publishing in 1926. “Devoted but unenlightened parenthood is a dangerous factor in the lives of children,” its editor said, maintaining that parents weren’t to be trusted to know how to raise children: they had to be taught, by experts. This doesn’t mean that experts usually prevailed; people don’t like to be told how to raise their kids, particularly when experts seek the power of the state. Like the Equal Rights Amendment, the Child Labor Amendment became one of only a handful of amendments that passed Congress but have never been ratified.

Anti-evolution laws, usually understood as fundamentalism’s response to modernity, emerged from this conflict between parents and the state. So did the teaching of biology, a new subject that stood at the very center of Progressive-era public education. At the time, parents, not schools, paid for and provided schoolbooks, so they had a close acquaintance with what their kids were being taught. The textbook that John Scopes used in Tennessee was a 1914 edition of George William Hunter’s “A Civic Biology,” published by the American Book Company. More than a guide to life on earth, “Civic Biology” was a civics primer, a guide to living in a democracy.

“This book shows boys and girls living in an urban community how they may best live within their own environment and how they may cooperate with the civic authorities for the betterment of their environment,” the book’s foreword explained. “Civic Biology” promoted Progressive public-health campaigns, all the more urgent in the wake of the 1918 influenza pandemic, stressing the importance of hygiene, vaccination, and quarantine. “Civic biology symbolized the whole ideology behind education reform,” Adam Shapiro wrote in his 2013 book, “*Trying Biology: The Scopes Trial, Textbooks, and the Antievolution Movement in American Schools*.” It contained a section on evolution (“If we follow the early history of man upon the earth, we find that at first he must have been little better than one of the lower animals”), but its discussion emphasized the science of eugenics. Hunter wrote, of alcoholics and the criminal and the mentally ill, “If such people were lower animals, we would probably kill them off to prevent them from spreading.”

At bottom, “Civic Biology” rested on social Darwinism. “Society itself is founded upon the principles which biology teaches,” Hunter wrote. “Plants and animals are living things, taking what they can from their surroundings; they enter into competition with one another, and those which are the best fitted for life outstrip the others.” What did it feel like, for kids who were poor and hungry, living in want and cold and fear, to read those words?



*“O.K., so we’ve had this argument a few times already.”*  
Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein

When anti-evolutionists condemned “evolution,” they meant something as vague and confused as what people mean, today, when they condemn “critical race theory.” Anti-evolutionists weren’t simply objecting to Darwin, whose theory of evolution had been taught for more than half a century. They were objecting to the whole Progressive package, including its philosophy of human betterment, its model of democratic citizenship, and its insistence on the interest of the state in free and equal public education as a public good that prevails over the private interests of parents.

In the nineteen-twenties, Lela and John Scopes were students at the University of Kentucky, in Lexington, when he took a course on evolution taught by a professor named Arthur (Monkey) Miller. That course caught the attention of people who thought the state was spending too much money on the university. In the summer of 1921, Frank McVey, the university’s

president, had pressed the legislature for funding to expand the university. In January, 1922, in a move widely seen as a response, the legislature introduced a bill to ban the teaching of evolution at any school, college, or university that received public funds.

McVey occupied an unusually strong position, partly because of the way he'd handled the recent pandemic. Born in Ohio, the child of Progressive Republicans, McVey had earned a Ph.D. in economics at Yale, where he wrote a dissertation on the Populist movement, and in 1904, after a stint writing for the *Times*, he published "Modern Industrialism," an argument against laissez-faire economics. He arrived at the University of Kentucky in 1917. A year later, during an influenza outbreak that took the lives of fourteen thousand Kentuckians, McVey made the decision, extraordinary at the time, to shut down the campus for nearly a month. Of twelve hundred students, four hundred became infected and only eight died, rates that were low compared with those at other colleges and universities. The achievement was all the more impressive because young adults, worldwide, suffered particularly high death rates.

The Kentucky anti-evolution campaign drew national attention. William Jennings Bryan, a three-time Presidential candidate and a former Secretary of State, hastened to offer support, predicting that "the movement will sweep the country and we will drive Darwinism from our schools." In January, Bryan, a barnstorming, larger-than-life showman, travelled to Kentucky to speak before the House and the Senate.

McVey weighed his options: he could fight, or he could sit tight and hope that the law, if passed, would be found unconstitutional. He decided to fight. He wrote to Woodrow Wilson for support, but Wilson refused to take a stand that would have pitted him against a former member of his Cabinet. McVey sent telegrams to some fifty people. "Bill has been introduced in Kentucky Legislature with heavy penalty to prohibit teaching of evolution," he cabled. "Wire collect your opinion." Forty-seven fiery replies arrived within four days. The reverend of the First Christian Church of Paducah maintained that the law "contravenes the spirit of democracy." "Universities must be left free to teach that which the best scholarship believes to be true," a pastor wrote from St. Louis. The president of Columbia University suggested that the legislature do one better and prohibit the publication of any books that "use

any of the letters by which the word evolution could be spelled.” The head of the First Christian Church in Frankfort, the state capital, called the bill “unwise, unamerican and contrary to the spirit of Jesus Christ.” Before the bill was considered, McVey had arranged for the responses to be published in newspapers across the state. Finally, he addressed both the House and the Senate and published an open letter to the people of Kentucky. “I have an abiding faith in the good sense and fairness of the people of this State,” he wrote. “When they understand what the situation means and when they come to comprehend the motives underlying this attack upon the public schools of the State they will hold the University and the school system in greater respect than ever before.”

He said that the university was bound to teach evolution “since all the natural sciences are based upon it,” but he hoped Kentuckians could agree that evolution wasn’t what its opponents had made it out to be: “Evolution is development; it is change, and every man knows that development and change are going on all the time.” He took pains to distinguish the theory of evolution from social Darwinism, regretting the law’s conflation of the two. Above all, he pointed out, banning the teaching of evolution “places limitations on the right of thought and freedom of belief,” and is therefore a violation of the Kentucky Bill of Rights.

Four days later, the bill was killed in the Senate, and the following month the House voted it down, forty-two to forty-one. McVey had won, but, as he remarked, “it may be that the fight here in Kentucky is really the forerunner of a conflict all over the nation.”

In 1924, John Scopes moved from Lexington, Kentucky, to Dayton, Tennessee, to take a job as a high-school coach. The next year, Tennessee passed an anti-evolution bill. Black intellectuals and Black reporters didn’t think the new law had anything to do with evolution; it had to do with an understanding of history. All Tennessee’s lawmakers know about evolution, the Chicago *Defender* suggested, “is that the entire human race is supposed to have started from a common origin. Therein lies their difficulty.” If they were to accept evolution, then they would have to admit that “there is no fundamental difference between themselves and the race they pretend to despise.” The president of Fisk University, a Black institution, wrote to the governor, “I hope that you will refuse to give your support to the Evolution

Bill.” But the president of the University of Tennessee, fearful of losing the university’s funding, declined to fight the bill, and the governor signed it, declaring he was sure it would never be enforced.

In Dayton, Scopes had briefly subbed for the biology teacher, using the state-mandated textbook, “A Civic Biology.” He agreed to test the law and was arrested in May. William Jennings Bryan joined the prosecution, defending the rights of parents. The month before the trial, he delivered a statement asking, “Who shall control our schools?” To defend the twenty-four-year-old Scopes, the A.C.L.U. retained the celebrated Clarence Darrow, who, that year, took on another case at the request of the N.A.A.C.P. As Darrow and the A.C.L.U. saw it, Tennessee’s anti-evolution law violated both the state’s constitution and the First Amendment. “Scopes is not on trial,” Darrow declared. “Civilization is on trial.”

During the trial, H. L. Mencken ridiculed Bryan (a “mountebank”) and fundamentalists (“poor half wits”): “He has these hillbillies locked up in his pen and he knows it.” But W. E. B. Du Bois found very little to laugh about. “Americans are now endeavoring to persuade hilarious and sarcastic Europe that Dayton, Tennessee, is a huge joke, and very, very exceptional,” he wrote. “The truth is and we know it: Dayton, Tennessee, is America: a great, ignorant, simple-minded land.”

Scopes, in the end, was found guilty (a verdict that was later reversed on a technicality), but Tennessee had been humiliated in the national press. Five days after the trial ended, Bryan died in his bed, and with him, many observers believed, died the anti-evolution campaign. The number of bills proposed in state legislatures dwindled to only three, in 1928 and 1929. But the battle was far from over. “The Fundamentalists have merely changed their tactics,” one commentator observed in 1930. They had given up on passing laws. “Primarily, they are concentrating today on the emasculation of textbooks, the ‘purging’ of libraries, and above all the continued hounding of teachers.” That went on for a long time. It’s still going on.

Lela Scopes, after losing out on that job teaching math in Paducah because she refused to denounce her brother, left Kentucky to take a job at a girls’ school in Tarrytown, New York. Then, in 1927, she moved to Illinois, where she taught at the Skokie School, in Winnetka. She never married, and helped

raise her brother's children—they lived with her—and then she paid for them to go to college.

In the nineteen-fifties, when Lela Scopes retired from teaching and moved back to Paducah, Southern segregationists resurrected Bryan's parental-rights argument to object to the Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. "Free men have the right to send their children to schools of their own choosing," Senator James Eastland, of Mississippi, insisted after the decision. All-white legislators in Southern states repealed Progressive-era compulsory-education laws: rather than integrate public schools, they dismantled public education, as Jon Hale reports in his recent book, "*The Choice We Face: How Segregation, Race, and Power Have Shaped America's Most Controversial Education Reform Movement*." The South Carolina governor George Bell Timmerman, Jr., signing one such bill in 1955, declared, "The parental right to determine what is best for the child is fundamental. It is a divine right. It is a basic law of nature that no man, no group of men, can successfully destroy." The following year, all but twenty-six of the hundred and thirty-eight Southern members of the U.S. House and Senate signed a statement known as the Southern Manifesto, warning that "outside mediators are threatening immediate and revolutionary changes in our public schools systems." Two states in the West—Nevada, in 1956, and Utah, in 1957—passed measures making it legal for parents to keep their children home for schooling.

By the end of the nineteen-fifties, segregationists had begun using a new catchphrase: "school choice," maybe because it would have been confusing to call for "parents' rights" when they were also arguing for "states' rights." In Mississippi, opponents of segregation founded Freedom of Choice in the United States, or *FOCUS*. Advocates for "choice" sought government reimbursement for private-school tuition costs, in the name of allowing the free market to drive educational innovation. The free market, unsurprisingly, widened the very inequalities that public education aims to narrow. Between 1962 and 1966, for instance, Louisiana distributed more than fifteen thousand tuition vouchers in New Orleans; in 1966, ninety-four per cent of the funds went to white parents. In the nineteen-seventies and eighties, court-mandated busing strengthened calls for choice, and Ronald Reagan pressed for the federal government to invest in vouchers; in the nineteen-nineties, Bill Clinton fought for funding for charter schools. Between 1982

and 1993, homeschooling became legal in all fifty states. Philanthropies, from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice (now EdChoice), later joined the movement in force, funding research and charter schools. And yet, in “*Making Up Our Mind: What School Choice Is Really About*,” the education scholars Sigal R. Ben-Porath and Michael C. Johanek point out that about nine in ten children in the United States attend public school, and the overwhelming majority of parents—about eight in ten—are happy with their kids’ schools. In the name of “choice,” a very small minority of edge cases have shaped the entire debate about public education.

A century ago, parents who objected to evolution were rejecting the entire Progressive package. Today’s parents’-rights groups, like Moms for Liberty, are objecting to a twenty-first-century Progressive package. They’re balking at compulsory vaccination and masking, and some of them do seem to want to destroy public education. They’re also annoyed at the vein of high-handedness, moral crusading, and snobbery that stretches from old-fashioned Progressivism to the modern kind, laced with the same contempt for the rural poor and the devoutly religious.

But across the past century, behind parents’ rights, lies another unbroken strain: some Americans’ fierce resistance to the truth that, just as all human beings share common ancestors biologically, all Americans have common ancestors historically. A few parents around the country may not like their children learning that they belong to a much bigger family—whether it’s a human family or an American family—but the idea of public education is dedicated to the cultivation of that bigger sense of covenant, toleration, and obligation. In the end, no matter what advocates of parents’ rights say, and however much political power they might gain, public schools don’t have a choice; they’ve got to teach, as American history, the history not only of the enslaved Africans who arrived in Virginia in 1619 and the English families who sailed to Plymouth on the Mayflower in 1620, but also that of the Algonquian peoples, who were already present in both places, alongside the ongoing stories of all other Indigenous peoples, and those who came afterward—the Dutch, German, Spanish, Mexican, Chinese, Italian, Cambodian, Guatemalan, Japanese, Sikh, Hmong, Tunisian, Afghan, everyone. That’s why parents don’t have a right to choose the version of American history they like best, a story of only their own family’s origins.

Instead, the state has an obligation to welcome children into that entire history, their entire inheritance.

Lela Scopes insisted that her brother's trial had never been about evolution: "The issue was academic freedom." Twentieth-century Progressives defeated anti-evolution laws not by introducing pro-evolution laws but by defending academic freedom and the freedoms of expression and inquiry. This approach isn't available to twenty-first-century progressives, who have ceded the banner of free speech to conservatives. And, in any case, teachers don't have much academic freedom: state school boards and school districts decide what they'll teach. Still, there are limits. Biology and history offer accounts of origins and change, and, when badly taught, they risk taking on the trappings of religion and violating the First Amendment. Biology teachers have to explain evolution, but they can't teach that God does not exist, just as public schools can't preach social justice as a gospel, a dogma that can't be disputed, and, equally, they can't ban it.

That's because history as doctrine is always dangerous. "Probably no deeper division of our people could proceed from any provocation than from finding it necessary to choose what doctrine and whose program public educational officials shall compel youth to unite in embracing," the Supreme Court ruled in 1943, in *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette*, when the Court struck down, as a violation of the First Amendment, a statute that required schoolchildren to salute the flag and recite the Pledge of Allegiance. "Those who begin coercive elimination of dissent soon find themselves exterminating dissenters. Compulsory unification of opinion achieves only the unanimity of the graveyard." History isn't a pledge; it's an argument.

John Scopes died in 1970. Lela Scopes buried him in Paducah, and had his headstone engraved with the words "A Man of Courage." She died in 1989, and is buried nearby, under a stone that reads "A Gracious and Generous Lady." She was ninety-two. She always said she thought the idea of evolution was even more beautiful than Genesis, evidence of an even more wonderful God. But she understood that not everyone agreed with her. ♦

An earlier version of this article incorrectly dated the Capitol insurrection.

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## Content

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On December 10, 2019, the Austrian writer Peter Handke received the Nobel Prize in Literature. If he felt pride or triumph, he didn't show it. His bow tie askance above an ill-fitting white dress shirt, his eyes unsmiling behind his trademark round glasses, Handke looked resigned and stoical, as if he were submitting to a bothersome medical procedure. As he accepted his award, some of the onlookers—not all of whom joined in the applause—appeared equally grim.

Handke embarked on his career, in the nineteen-sixties, as a provocateur, with absurdist theatrical works that eschewed action, character, and dialogue for, in the words of one critic, “anonymous, threatening rants.” One of his early plays, titled “[Offending the Audience](#),” ends with the actors hurling insults at the spectators. In the following decades, as he produced dozens of plays and novels, he turned his experiments with language inward, exploring both its possibilities and its limitations in evoking human consciousness. [W. G. Sebald](#), who was deeply influenced by Handke, wrote, “The specific narrative genre he developed succeeded by dint of its completely original linguistic and imaginative precision.”

Handke’s novels, which he has called “narrative excursions or one-man expeditions,” often feature a man who shares characteristics with the author as he reflects on what he sees while journeying through a landscape. Episodic, with long stretches in which there is little to no action, the narratives arise out of a series of encounters—with people, animals, or simply ideas—that gradually accrue meaning. In “[Repetition](#)” (1986), often considered Handke’s masterpiece, the setting is his mother’s homeland—Slovenia, then part of Communist Yugoslavia. In his latest novel to appear in English, “[The Fruit Thief](#)” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), which was published in German in 2017 and has been translated by Krishna Winston, we are in the countryside just north of Paris, not far from the suburb where Handke has lived for the past thirty years.

These novels, in their microscopic focus on the vagaries of the narrator's perception, are almost aggressively nonpolitical, but it is politics that has made Handke notorious, producing the frowns at the Nobel ceremony. In early 1996, six months after Serbs [massacred](#) more than eight thousand Bosnian Muslims at Srebrenica—the greatest atrocity on European soil since the Holocaust—Handke took a trip through Serbia. In his travelogue, which appeared in English under the title "[A Journey to the Rivers: Justice for Serbia](#)," Handke heaped scorn on the Western journalists who reported from Yugoslavia, accusing them of bias and corruption. In his account, the Serbs come across as charming, cultured hosts, their food delicious, their countryside pastoral, their political circumstances perplexing and unearned.

There was outrage from journalists and critics, but Handke doubled down. In the spring of 1999, as the U.S. and *NATO* allies began a bombing campaign intended to drive the Serbs out of Kosovo, he visited Belgrade to demonstrate his support for [Slobodan Milošević](#)'s regime. A few months later, according to the American journalist Peter Maass, Handke was granted a Yugoslav passport. When Milošević died, in 2006, Handke delivered a eulogy at his funeral.

Twenty-three years after Handke first waded into these troubled waters, the announcement of his Nobel Prize brought a further chorus of denunciation. The Holocaust scholar Deborah Lipstadt expressed concern that the prize would give legitimacy to his false claims; the former U.N. Ambassador Samantha Power, who had reported on Srebrenica as a journalist, tweeted that the genocide was an "undeniable fact." A member of the Swedish Academy announced that he would boycott the proceedings. Handke remained uncowed. When Maass confronted him at the Nobel press conference, Handke dismissed his questions as "empty and ignorant."

Handke's defenders argue that his Serbian adventure is essentially an excrescence, with little bearing on his work. The Austrian daily *Die Presse* opined that, as Handke's work had "long been considered part of world literature," the sad fact that he had "lost his way in the thicket of the Balkans" shouldn't disqualify him from the Nobel. Yet perhaps the most distinctive quality of Handke's art is that it has always been inseparable from the persona of its creator. A new collection of his essays, "[Quiet Places](#)" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), demonstrates that, regardless of whether Handke

labels a work fiction or nonfiction, his technique remains much the same—the tone discursive, the narratives eddying and associative, the point of view inward and subjective. Indeed, Handke has said that he wrote about Serbia “exactly as I have always written my books, my literature: a slow, inquiring narration; every paragraph dealing with and narrating a problem, of representation, of form, of grammar—of aesthetic veracity.” Rather than a departure from his literary work, Handke’s position on Serbia may be of a piece with it—a logical consequence of the postmodern experimentation for which he has long been celebrated.

“The beginning of my writing,” Handke has said, was “the stories my mother told.” Born in 1942 in an impoverished provincial town in southern Austria, the illegitimate son of his mother and her married lover, he was raised by his mother and an abusive stepfather. His consolation as a child was her tales of people from her birthplace, known only as Stara Vas, or Old Village.

Handke likes to tell two of his mother’s stories as a pair: they show up in several of his works, including “The Fruit Thief.” In one, his mother’s younger brother runs away from a boarding school and walks home, a journey of some forty kilometres. He arrives in the middle of the night on a Saturday, which is the day that the courtyard gets swept. So the boy picks up a broom and sweeps until daybreak, when the family discovers him.

The other story concerns a baby boy, the child of a “retarded milkmaid” who works on a local farm and was raped by the farmer. The farmer and his wife adopt the child, and the milkmaid is told to stay away from the boy, who grows up thinking that the farmer’s wife is his mother. One day, the milkmaid hears the boy screaming for help: he has got tangled in a barbed-wire fence. She runs over and unhooks him. Later, the little boy asks his presumed mother, “Why does the stupid girl have such gentle hands?”

Both stories have the quality of a fairy tale: the boy who sweeps the courtyard in the night by rote, as if bewitched; the foundling child who retains a connection to his mother even as others try to conceal it from him. And both are about the gulf between parents and children, and the often futile efforts to overcome that gulf—themes that haunt Handke’s work. Handke often emphasizes not an event but, rather, a seemingly minor

moment, the significance of which the person who experiences it does not even recognize.

In 1971, a few years after Handke published his first novel, his mother, suffering from debilitating headaches and depression, killed herself, at the age of fifty-one. In the aftermath, Handke poured out the anguished, stammering text that constitutes "[A Sorrow Beyond Dreams](#)," which was published the following year and remains the book for which he is best known in English. Like many of the novels that would follow, it chronicles a journey both exterior and interior: Handke's return to his home town for his mother's funeral, and also his investigation of her life, which quickly becomes an investigation of the limits of language to express what he wishes to communicate. Completed in only two months, the text has a frantic, driven quality. "My mother has been dead for almost seven weeks; I had better get to work before the need to write about her, which I felt so strongly at her funeral, dies away and I fall back into the dull speechlessness with which I reacted to the news of her suicide," he says at the start.

That "speechlessness," it soon becomes clear, is a characteristic of both contemporary life and contemporary literature. Handke had already written a play, "[Kaspar](#)" (1967), inspired by the real-life story of Kaspar Hauser, a teen-age boy who appeared mysteriously in early-nineteenth-century Bavaria, knowing only a single sentence, having apparently been raised without language. In "A Sorrow Beyond Dreams," the narrative enacts the breakdown of language and form as Handke attempts to relate the facts of his mother's life—her affair with his father, a bank clerk; her dissatisfaction with any subsequent love; her physical torment as she aged. Conventional narrative strategies such as description or characterization frustrate him. "She refuses to be isolated and remains unfathomable; my sentences crash in the darkness and lie scattered on the paper," he writes.

Dispassionately, Handke reports on his own dispassion; he is interested in his mother's story less as an exploration of her character than as an intellectual exercise. In an introduction to a 2006 reissue of the book, Jeffrey Eugenides wrote, "The most striking thing about the book is Handke's disciplined detachment from his subject, a mode of inquiry that offers nothing remedial or heartwarming." Even so, there are moments when an

image or an episode rises from the text with luminous emotion. Here is Handke on his mother's affair:

She herself thought it comical that she had once loved someone, especially a man like him. He was smaller than she, many years older, and almost bald; she walked beside him in low-heeled shoes, always at pains to adapt her step to his, her hand repeatedly slipping off his inhospitable arm; an ill-matched, ludicrous couple. And yet, twenty years later, she still longed to feel for someone what she had felt then for that savings-bank wraith.

This image of the mismatched couple—the man such an unlikely object of desire—has a helpless pathos worthy of Chekhov.

“Repetition” was also inspired by Handke’s mother’s life, although more obliquely. It follows the protagonist, Filip Kobal, on a journey through Slovenia in search of an older brother, who has been missing for two decades, since deserting from the German Army. For Filip, and indeed the entire family, Slovenia represents a kind of lost paradise. “What can one say to express the simultaneous experience of childhood and landscape?” Handke asks. There is a German word for this, naturally: *Kindschaft*, which might be translated in this context as “childscape,” and that is the terrain Filip covers.

The novel unfolds at a meandering pace, with a quality that Sebald characterized as “lightness.” He meant “not that the narrator is carefree or lighthearted; but instead of talking about his burdens, he turns to his senses in order to produce something that could help him and his reader—who may also be in need of comfort—to resist the temptation of melancholy.” Those sensory descriptions, vividly realized, include the experiences of the narrator (the night he spends in a train tunnel is as vivid as Handke’s mother’s love for the “savings-bank wraith”) and his impressions of the people he encounters. One is a road mender who moonlights as a sign painter, whom Sebald saw as an analogue for the writer, carrying out “his laborious work day after day,” virtually invisible to the world at large. The narrator watches him painting a sign, “conjuring up the next letter from the blank surface, as though it had been there all along and he was only retracing it.” Handke’s stories have a similar quality: at their most successful, they convey the

impression that they already exist in nature, and the job of the writer is only to excavate them. His work seems to confirm Wittgenstein's famous aphorism "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world."

Handke's more recent output proceeds by much the same method, existing from moment to moment, with the narrator meditating associatively on whatever he observes. The subtitle of "The Fruit Thief" is "Einfache Fahrt ins Landsinnere," a double pun. *Einfache Fahrt* means both "simple journey" and "one-way trip," and *Landsinnere* is one of those German compound nouns for which no other language has an equivalent: *Land* means country, countryside, territory; *innere* is inside or interior. It's a one-way journey into the interior of something: the country, or the characters' minds. But it is also "simple," in the sense that it is what it appears to be. The reader searching for an underlying meaning will be frustrated—better to go with the flow.

The action, such as it is, follows another Handke-like narrator from his home on the outskirts of Paris to the countryside, where the focus switches to the young woman the narrator is travelling to meet. Known as Alexia (which may or may not be her actual name), she is in her late twenties or early thirties, and her relationship to the narrator is initially unstated. He calls her "the fruit thief" because ever since childhood she has been unable to resist the allure of ripe fruit on a tree: pears, apples, peaches.

Alexia is a vagabond, moving from place to place—Siberia, Alaska—apparently in search of her mother, who has somehow been lost to her. There are episodes in which Alexia seems to break down, but the emotion that Handke conjured in his early work is absent here. This is clearly a deliberate narrative choice to convey her state of mind. "She felt as if she were in [two] places, with everything around her even more intensely present," Handke writes. "Dissociated, everything there became more intense, more distinct, and that included her, as part of everything there."

In the absence of feeling, this sense of intense presentness is the book's governing principle. The events of the plot seem arbitrary, even random. Alexia swims, fishes out of the River Oise a mug that's drifting by, waves to Chinese tourists on a sightseeing boat, sees a huge fish, is followed by a dog and then by a raven. ("That was what the story called for," Handke

interjects.) She crashes a funeral and spends the night with the family of the deceased; she meets a delivery boy on a moped and travels with him for a while. In these long passages of rumination and description, time itself seems to dilate: “It’s in the meanwhiles, the in-between stretches, that things happen, take shape, develop, come into being.”

It is hard to describe *what*, exactly, comes into being here. “The happenings that this story is narrating become that solely thanks to the narrator,” Handke writes. The narrator, highlighting the artifices of fiction, never lets us forget that he is a narrator. “Cut. Next scene,” Handke writes when he wants to move things along. When there is some factual detail he can’t recall, he tells the reader to “look it up on the Internet.” There is pleasure in watching this narrative wend its leisurely way to a conclusion, but its three-hundred-plus densely packed pages seem to take a long time to get there.

One of the essays in “Quiet Places” is called “Essay on a Mushroom Maniac.” An old friend of Handke’s becomes obsessed with mushroom foraging. Interested in nothing else, he stops reading any books other than ones about mushrooms, stops going to the movies or taking trips, and neglects both family and professional obligations. Mushrooms, Handke writes, “were the ultimate adventure, and he was their prophet.”

At this point—around three-quarters of the way through this nearly hundred-page essay—I wrote in the margin, “I’m starting to wonder whether this is really about mushrooms.” I was beginning to see echoes of Handke’s obsession with Serbia. The mushroom hunter is a lawyer whose work exonerates war criminals, and the account ends with something like an acknowledgment of error: “Mushroom seeking, and seeking of any kind, caused one’s field of vision to shrink. . . . And how one’s eyes weighed down one’s head when they remained fixed on the ground, and became dulled.”

But Handke has shown no remorse for his own error, no recognition that his single-minded line of inquiry might have shrunk his perspective. He continues to assert that he has done nothing wrong, that the questions he has asked—about the motivations for the Srebrenica massacre, which he considers unexplained; about the bias he perceives among Western journalists who reported Serb aggression and Bosnian suffering—serve the

goal of “justice.” His defenders have argued that, since he writes “dialectically,” it is easy for individual sentences, taken out of context, to be misunderstood. When I began reading “A Journey to the Rivers,” I was prepared to believe that Handke had been misinterpreted, but the book was even more maddening than I could have imagined. Handke states outright that he rarely asks questions of people he encounters, relying instead on his imagination and assumptions.

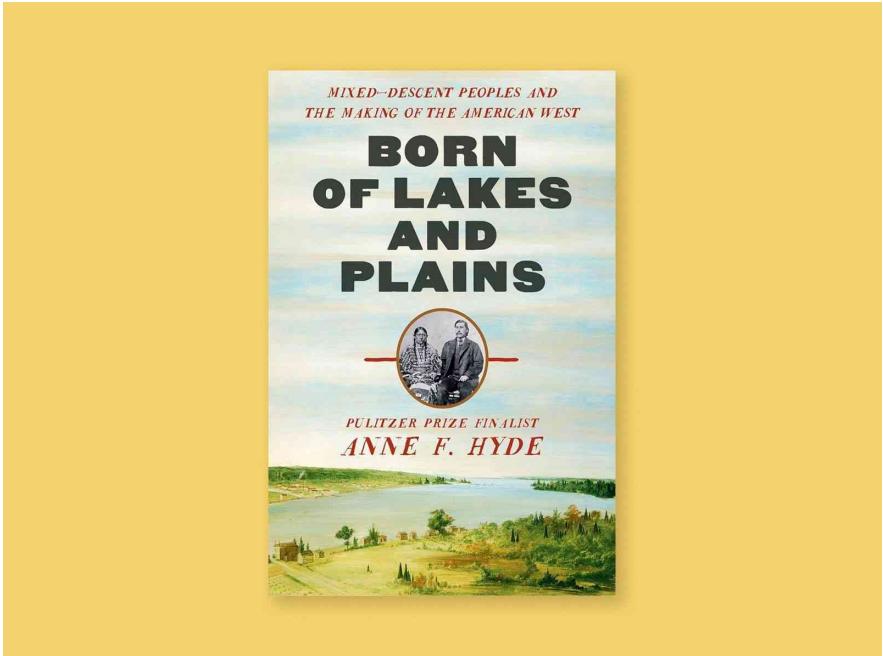
Some erstwhile Handke admirers have tried to explain his obsession with Serbia as driven by dismay over the breakup of the “great Yugoslavia” that his mother’s stories had primed him to cherish. “After 1991, Handke needed a new myth, and he discovered it in Serbia,” J. S. Marcus wrote in *The New York Review of Books* in 2000. Handke prefers to identify with the underdog, as he perceived Serbia to be in the face of the West. And he has said that when Slovenia declared independence it was “as if I had lost my home, which became a state, where there was really only a people and a landscape.”

In a way, however, “A Journey to the Rivers” is no more maddening than Handke’s fiction, which relies on a similar dialectic of push and pull, denying resolution or reality for a world that appears to be willed into being through language. And as such it forms a logical, if regrettable, end point for Handke’s ideas. As Eugenides has pointed out, American postmodernism, as practiced by writers such as John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, and Robert Coover, was political in nature: these writers’ distrust of narrative omniscience was linked to their distrust of the U.S. government. By contrast, Handke’s fiction, though similar in appearance—the circling and recircling style, the rejection of literary conventions—was always centered on language rather than on politics. “The American postmodernists gave up on traditional storytelling out of an essentially playful, optimistic, revolutionary urge,” Eugenides writes. “Handke despairs of narrative out of sheer despair.”

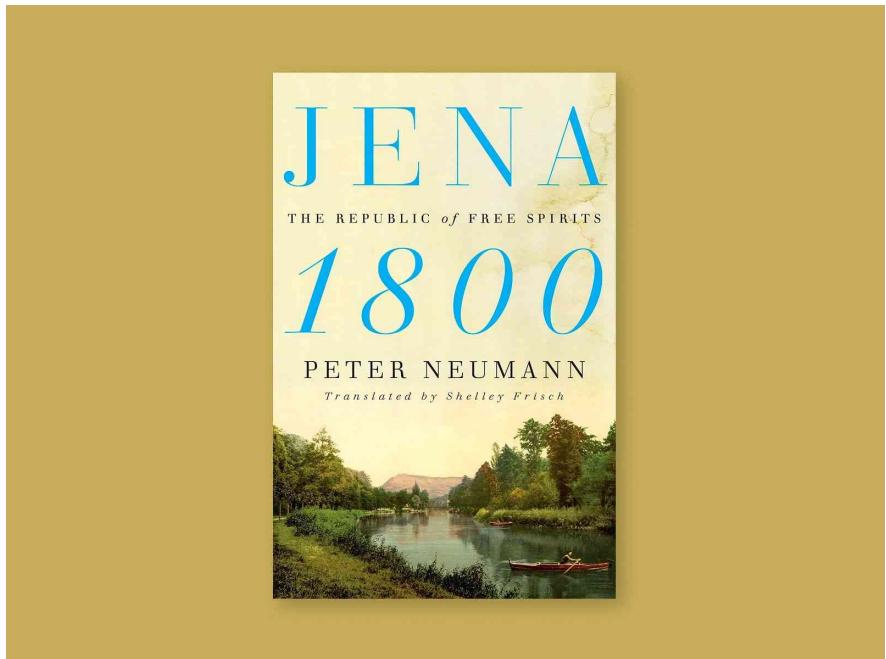
In Handke’s literary universe, only the self can be the final arbiter of meaning. The eye gazes from the window and records what it sees, while acknowledging that another observer might see something different. When some music plays in “The Fruit Thief,” we are told, “It did not really matter what music it was. Everyone who reads this is welcome to imagine any music that seems to fit.” But the idea that the facts of a situation can be

whatever we say they are sounds different now from the way it may have thirty or forty years ago. Some realities—the mass graves at Srebrenica, or, more recently, the outcome of an election legally conducted—cannot be treated “dialectically.” Another line from Wittgenstein comes to mind, one often invoked to express the dangers of trying to describe the enormity of the Holocaust: “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.” ♦

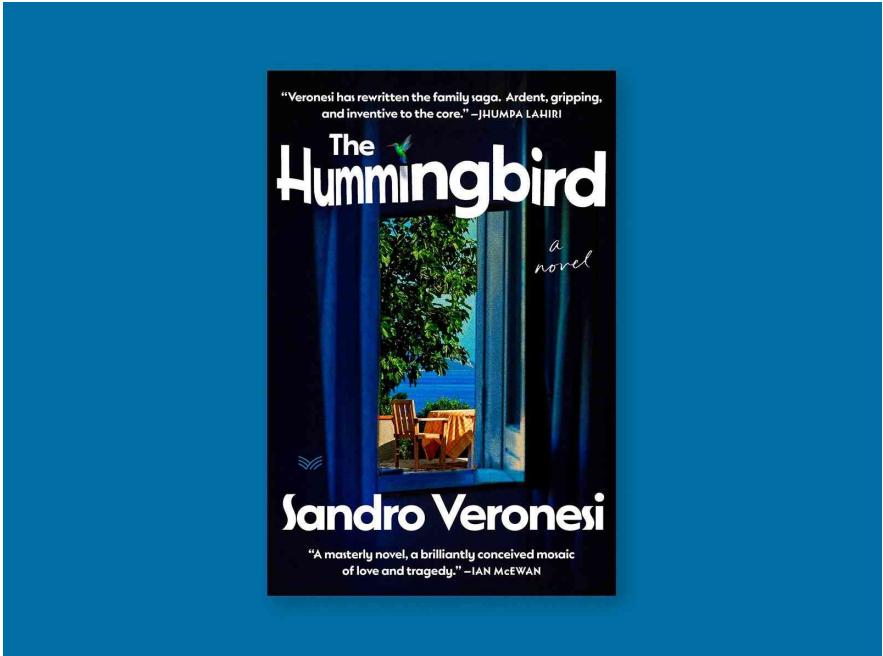
An earlier version of this article misspelled J. S. Marcus’s name and misidentified the nationality of the passport Peter Handke was given. It has also been updated to clarify that a description of a character in “The Fruit Thief” contains quoted material.



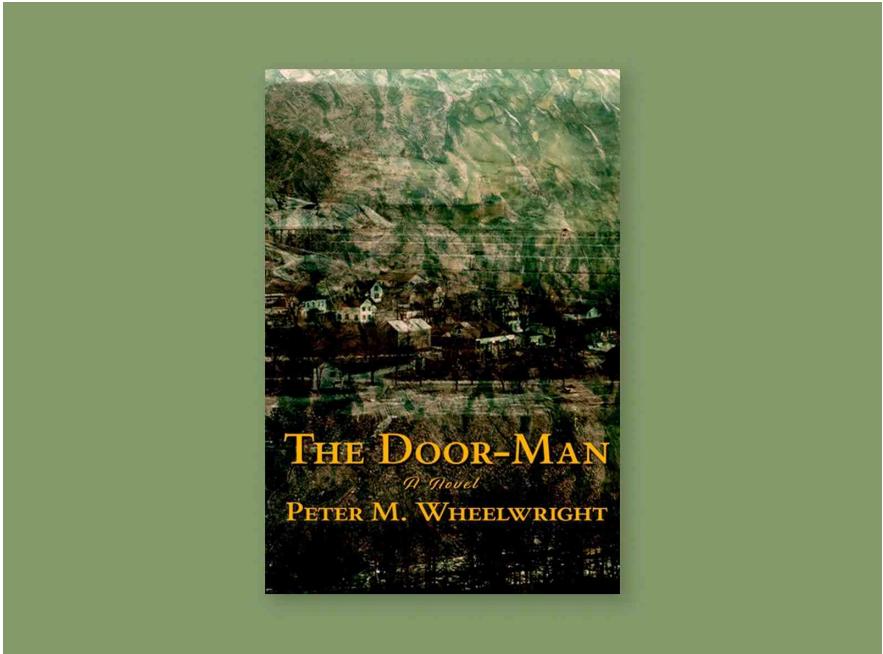
[\*\*Born of Lakes and Plains\*\*](#), by Anne F. Hyde (Norton). A new way of looking at the American West emerges in this history of the mixing and marrying of Indigenous people and settlers. Beginning with the fur trade, Hyde shows how marriage and procreation were crucial to integrating newcomers and building alliances. Commerce relied on networks of kin, and, as Native American clans would share knowledge only with those they considered family, mixed-descent children were vital intermediaries. The stories of five families through the nineteenth century illustrate how these intermediaries were also vulnerable to racist and expansionist policies. Though some were forced to hide their heritage, Hyde highlights their acts of agency, and tells “a narrative of our past with shared blood at its heart.”



[\*\*Jena 1800\*\*](#), by Peter Neumann, translated from the German by Shelley Frisch (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). This vivid group biography captures the moment, at the end of the eighteenth century, when Jena, a small university town, suddenly emerged as the “intellectual and cultural center of Germany.” Neumann’s cast of writers and philosophers includes Fichte, Novalis, Friedrich and Dorothea Schlegel, and Caroline and Wilhelm Schelling, with cameo appearances from such luminaries as Goethe, Schiller, and Hegel. Neumann is adept both at conveying the gossip, feuds, and eccentricities of this tight-knit milieu and at grappling with his subjects’ political and philosophical ideas, which were crucial to the development of German Romanticism.



[\*\*The Hummingbird\*\*](#), by Sandro Veronesi, translated from the Italian by Elena Pala (HarperVia). “How do you begin telling the story of a great love when you know it ended in disaster?” this novel asks. Its answer is to narrate the life of its protagonist, a Florentine ophthalmologist named Marco Carrera, out of sequence. We see him first as a husband and father, and later as a boy and as a grandfather; we learn about the dissolution of his family, his wife’s mental instability, and the infidelities of both of them. Letters, e-mails, poetry, and telephone transcripts are interspersed throughout. The temporal leaps, though sometimes disorienting, cunningly mimic the eddying, insistent nature of memory itself.



**The Door-Man**, by Peter M. Wheelwright (*Fomite*). The narrator of this novel, Piedmont Livingston Kinsolver III, is a doorman at a fancy apartment building on Central Park West, who, unbeknownst to his colleagues, commutes home to a penthouse on upper Fifth Avenue. The job, he says, affords him “solitude and invisibility,” the thrill of “hiding out inside one’s own life,” and the chance to “keep an eye on things” at the Central Park Reservoir. The reservoir’s water, it turns out, originates at a Catskills dam that submerged the Kinsolver ancestral home. When mysterious fossils appear at the reservoir, Kinsolver is forced to confront family secrets, including murder and incest, connected with a paleontological discovery made by one of his forebears at the dam site.

By [Margaret Talbot](#)

Lucky are those for whom the benefits of vigorous exercise are more or less the unintentional effects of something they love to do. I am not one of them. My friends have heard me declare that I like to swim, but what I really like is not so much moving purposefully through water as being immersed in it, like a tea bag. I like to walk, but would I do it quite so much if I had not, in a self-sabotaging form of rebellion against the Southern California car culture in which I grew up, refused to learn to drive? During the pandemic, I secretly relished the fact that my yoga classes had switched to Zoom; at home, with my camera turned off, I could look at my phone or play with the dog when other students were asking the instructor to help them refine their asanas. (The dog showed a keen interest in my “practice.”)

My husband, on the other hand, has a positive mania for basketball. Now sixty-two, he has been playing multiple times a week for more than two decades. He went back to the sport after breaking his ankle in a one-on-one game years ago, and again after a basketball sailed into his eyeball and detached his retina a couple of months ago. Sure, he knows that the cardiovascular workout is a boon—on days when his shot is off, he’ll say, “Well, at least I ran around”—but it’s the game he loves.

Unlike him, I have pretty much always had to cajole and guilt-trip and science-splain myself into exercising, even though I know from experience that I feel better, lighter, calmer afterward. (There have been long periods of my life when I didn’t even try.) This means that I am as familiar with the discourse about exercise as with exercise itself. I’m surely not the only one: the history of fitness is in large part the history of admonishments to become fit, and of advice on how and why to do so.

On this much we should agree at the outset: exercise is good for you. Virtually all medical professionals would sign off on that proposition, and so would most of the rest of us, even at a time when some portion of the population rejects plenty of other health-related expertise, like calls for vaccinations. Being physically active has been shown to decrease the risks of developing cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and some cancers; combat anxiety and depression; strengthen bones and muscles; sharpen cognition; improve sleep; and extend longevity. All exercise is not created equal: my twenty-minute afternoon strolls hardly compare to my husband’s two-hour

basketball games. But a little is better than none, which is comforting to remember. Getting up from your desk every hour or so is better than not doing so. Even fidgeting is better than sitting still—a bit of foot-jiggling increases blood flow.

Exercise has not always been recognized as an unassailable good. For much of the twentieth century, as the journalist Danielle Friedman writes in her canny and informative new book, “Let’s Get Physical: How Women Discovered Exercise and Reshaped the World” (Putnam), vigorous exercise for women was considered not only unfeminine—women were supposed to glow, not sweat—but dangerous to female reproductive organs. (My own grandmother used to tell me to avoid lifting heavy things, so as not to impair my childbearing ability.) Men in the nineteen-fifties and sixties could invite questions about their sexuality if they seemed too interested in developing their physique, according to a 2013 book on American fitness culture by the scholar Shelly McKenzie; taking up exercise in a regular way wasn’t generally seen in a favorable light. And mid-century medical advice stressed the perils of overexertion as much as underexertion, especially when it came to the gray-flannel-suited man in the executive suite, who was thought to be chronically stressed, and therefore perpetually at risk of a heart attack. (If he survived one, his doctor was likely to tell him that he shouldn’t do much of anything strenuous ever again.) Friedman describes a 1956 radio interview in which Mike Wallace, later of “60 Minutes” fame, expresses incredulity at the vision set forth by the pioneering fitness advocate Bonnie Prudden. “You think there should be a formal exercise, a kind of ‘joy through strength’ period for husband, wife, and family when the father gets home from work at six-thirty at night, before the Martinis?” he marvels. “You think we should have a routine, *all* of us?” So many time-stamped assumptions are packed neatly into that response: that a (male) breadwinner would be home with his feet up by 6:30 p.m., that an exercise “routine” couldn’t possibly supplant the ritual of a nightly cocktail.

Part of what changed is that science began producing evidence for the credo that Charles Atlas-inspired bodybuilders and dedicated weekend hikers and eccentric devotees of brisk calisthenics and even brisker swimming had long lived by. Some physicians, too, had known about the benefits of exercise. Anecdotally, they had observed that differences in physical activity on the job could lead to differences in life span. As early as the sixteen-nineties, the

Italian doctor Bernardino Ramazzini, comparing the health of various tradesmen, had noted that professional foot messengers fared better than tailors and cobblers. “Let tailors be advised to take physical exercise at any rate on holidays,” Ramazzini counselled, in 1713. “Let them make the best use they can of some one day, and so to counteract the harm done by many days of sedentary life.”

In the charming and idiosyncratic new book “Sweat: A History of Exercise” (Bloomsbury), the writer and photographer Bill Hayes tells the little-known story of an “unassuming British epidemiologist” named Jeremy Morris, who, starting in the late nineteen-forties, brought quantitative methods to observations of physical activity. Morris has sometimes been called “the man who invented exercise.” That would be a stretch, Hayes says, but he can be called “the man who invented the field of exercise science.” Morris and his research group studied thousands of London transit workers, who operated in pairs on the city’s trams and double-decker buses. The drivers sat for ninety per cent of their shifts, while the conductors hopped on and off the vehicles and climbed up and down the stairs of double-deckers collecting tickets. In a study first published in *The Lancet*, in 1953, Morris’s team showed that the conductors had far less coronary disease than the drivers—and that, when they did have it, they developed it much later. Moreover, he went on to demonstrate, this outcome was independent of body size: the London transportation agency obligingly provided him with the waistband sizes of its employees, so he was able to determine that the conductors had a lower risk of heart attack whatever their girth. Morris went on to compare postal workers who delivered mail by foot to civil servants with office jobs, and turned up similar results. His findings were not immediately embraced—many experts were dubious that exercise alone could make so much difference—but the work inspired waves of new research that corroborated and expanded on it.

Morris, the son of Jewish immigrants from Poland, was born in 1910 and grew up poor in Glasgow. He died in 2009—when, as he apparently liked to say, he was ninety-nine and a half. It might be relevant that Morris paid attention to his own research, swimming, jogging, and cycling into old age. But he does not seem to have viewed fitness as an outward sign of individual worth, or to have treated good health as a state independent of its social determinants. As Morris’s obituary in *The Lancet* put it, he was a self-

professed “radical” with a “lifelong passion” for investigating and addressing inequality.

The same cannot be said of many contemporary exercise proselytizers and of the fitness-industrial complex in general. Modern fitness is shaped by neoliberal ideas of the optimizable self, by consumer capitalism, by race and class privilege, and by gender norms. In my lifetime, I’ve seen the image of the thin yet ripped body transformed from something desirable and maybe athletic into a powerful signifier of ambition, affluence, and self-respect. Both images are sellable, but the second is more insidious. “The fitness industry has a history of exclusion, catering to middle- and upper-class white people with disposable income,” Friedman writes in “Let’s Get Physical.” “Just as the rich get richer, the fit tend to get fitter and too often, the poor get sicker. And then there’s the problematic fact that exercising has, for several decades, been linked to virtue, creating stigmas against people who can’t or don’t want to or even don’t *look like* they work out.” As Mark Greif writes in his wonderfully caustic 2004 essay, “Against Exercise,” the modern exercise regime lumps the non-exerciser “with other unfortunates whom we socially discount . . . the slow, the elderly, the helpless, the poor.”

For women, good advice about exercise has been particularly hard to separate from the pressure to diet and look hot. Even the sensible-sounding, mountain-climbing Bonnie Prudden had a fitness show on TV whose theme song trilled, “Men love you / when there’s less of you.” Friedman’s history of women and exercise chronicles the rise of various fitness trends since the fifties—and the entrepreneurs, athletes, and enthusiasts who invented them without ever quite escaping that trap. There’s Lotte Berk, a German-Jewish dancer whose family had fled to London as refugees from Nazism. In 1959, when there were few freestanding exercise studios anywhere, Berk, then forty-six, had the bright idea of opening a dance studio “not for dancers, but for women who wanted to *look like* dancers,” Friedman writes. Berk’s studio, a former hat factory in the Marylebone neighborhood, was soon drawing trendsetting students, including the writer Edna O’Brien and the Bond girl Britt Ekland. Berk was gung ho about sex. “If you can’t tuck, you can’t fuck,” she liked to say of one of her signature pelvic exercises. Thus was launched the barre method, now the staple offering of hundreds of thriving studios that attract serious women in pricey fitness wear, who care

less about the exercise's louche origins than about its ability to tighten their cores.

Friedman also introduces us to Judi Sheppard Missett—"a lanky dancer from Iowa with permed blond hair and a megawatt smile"—who, in the nineteen-seventies and eighties, developed Jazercise, the peppy aerobic workout set to music, and became a Lycra-clad multimillionaire in the process. The popularity of Jazercise and its successors, including Jane Fonda's lucrative exercise tapes, "created a greater appreciation for women's physicality and strength," Friedman observes. At the same time, "America's body ideals inched further out of reach for most women" as "pop culture began to idolize female bodies that were slim but also vaguely athletic looking." That's the story with so many of the fitness phenomena that Friedman writes about: they offer women an outlet for their energy, or an affirmation of their physical competence, and then pastimes harden into life styles, empowerment becomes a commercial slogan, particular body types get exalted and fetishized, and some of the fun seeps out.

Which is not to take away from the genuine thrill of certain breakthroughs that Friedman describes. When Kathrine Switzer, a twenty-year-old journalism and English major at Syracuse University, set out to run the Boston Marathon in 1967, women were barred from it. Switzer registered under her initials and showed up anyway, only to be ousted by reporters shouting, "It's a girl! It's a girl!" The race director tried to eject her physically from the course. Switzer and others later appeared on television to promote female runners, and the seventies jogging craze attracted women, too. President Richard Nixon signed Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments into law, promising female athletes equal access to facilities and funding in schools. In 1984, the Olympic Games held a women's marathon for the first time. Today, more than half of all marathon runners are women. A woman sweating in running gear isn't radical now; if anything, she might seem like a wellness cliché. At the same time, running isn't quite the democratic, "anybody with a pair of sneakers can do it" pursuit that some of its boosters like to imagine. You not only need the physical capacity but also, in many places, have to be white to feel safe doing it. Still, as Friedman writes, "every woman who dared to run in public before the 1970s deserves credit for opening doors for women to move

freely and fully; to experience the profound sense of physical autonomy that comes from propelling yourself forward using only your muscle and will.”

It’s this tantalizing evocation of exercise as freedom and play that most makes “Sweat,” Hayes’s book, worth reading. It does not count its steps, Fitbit style, but, quite appealingly, meanders. Hayes, while chronicling his pursuit of boxing, biking, swimming, running, yoga, and lifting, sprinkles in bits of exercise history that happen to capture his genial curiosity, from the late-nineteenth-century career of the circus strongman and bodybuilding impresario Eugen Sandow to the surprising significance of bicycles for women in the same era. The journey is, in part, a scholarly one: his fascination with a volume he finds in the rare-books room of the New York Academy of Medicine, a 1573 edition of “*De Arte Gymnastica*,” by the Italian physician Girolamo Mercuriale, gets him moving, literally—off to England, France, Italy, and Sweden to visit archives and to meet librarians and translators. Mercuriale turns out to be one of those voices from the distant past which resound with pragmatic and humanistic good sense. Swimming, Mercuriale believes, can “improve the breath, firm up, warm and thin the body” and make people “less liable to injury.” And he writes eloquently of the way water “produces by its gentle touch a sort of peculiar pleasure all its own.” (I’m with him there.)

One senses that the real impetus for Hayes’s inquiry is personal, as exercise always is, once you stop reading the article about the latest five-minute miracle workout and lace up your trainers. A decade and a half ago, Hayes’s boyfriend, Steve—forty-three at the time and “by all appearances, perfectly fit”—died suddenly one morning, after suffering a heart attack in his sleep, with Hayes beside him. There had been no “signs, no premonitions.” They’d gone to the gym the night before, made dinner, read in bed. After Steve’s death, Hayes set out to complete a to-do list that Steve had left on his desk, a series of household tasks, and then made his own list of things that he’d always wanted to do, which included learning to box. It’s this quest—an outlet for grief, or perhaps a redoubled zeal for life—which leads to a distinctive, often moving blend of historical and memoirist writing. Hayes has much to say about gym culture among gay men during the *AIDS* crisis, and about a particular San Francisco gym he frequented, Muscle System, which was decked out with floor-to-ceiling mirrors. “If nothing else, muscles could make a man *look* strong, healthy, and attractive, even if he

didn't feel that way inside," he writes. "Directly or indirectly, every gay man was in some stage of the disease—infection, illness, survival, caregiving, denial or mourning."

More recently, Hayes and his partner, Oliver Sacks, the brilliant neurologist and writer, began swimming "whenever we could—in cold mountain lakes, in salty seas, and in New York's overchlorinated public pools." After Sacks died, in 2015, Hayes lost his passion for exercise. When he first went back to it, he was mainly attempting to regulate his weight and blood pressure, both of which had crept up. But, when he started to swim again, he soon recovered the intrinsic rhythms; his body remembered how to do a dolphin kick, his mind how to wander. As I read Hayes's account, his lightheartedness made me think of certain kinds of movement that we indulge in as kids but very seldom revisit as adults. Skipping, for instance, which looks ridiculous but is hella fun. Or rolling like a barrel down a grassy hill. Hayes doesn't do either of those, but he does try running naked, which was how athletes competed in the original Olympics. At Sacks's house in the country one day, Hayes runs down the quarter-mile driveway and back in the buff. In case you were wondering, "there was some jostling down below," he reports, "but within seconds my testicles retracted and scrotum followed, as if shrink-wrapping my balls," and he soon finds himself "sporting nature's own jockstrap."

So that's how they managed at Marathon! The experiment proves "vital, wild, powerful." For many of us, with our gym memberships, our wearable technology, and our hopescrolling through longevity research and dieting tips, joy in movement is no longer the primary motivation to exercise. Hayes's exuberant book tells us what awaits if we can only make it so. ♦

By [Elisa Gonzalez](#)

The title of Solmaz Sharif's second book of poems, "[Customs](#)" (Graywolf), evokes the extended "if" of someone enmeshed in the sadistic bureaucracy of American immigration, a person at the mercy of an "officer deciding by blood sugar, last blow job received, and relative level of disdain for vermin" who belongs and who does not. Anyone whose presence is conditional knows that a time will come when the conditions will not be met. To be let in, as Sharif—who was born in Turkey to Iranian parents and is a naturalized citizen of the United States—writes, is inevitably to be "let in until." In these poems, the ostensible clarity of borders and checkpoints gives way to a terrain of fundamental uncertainty, a geography of elusive thresholds, delayed arrivals, and impossible returns.

"[Look](#)," Sharif's début collection and a finalist for a 2016 National Book Award, appropriated vocabulary from the U.S. Department of Defense's "Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms," in order to flay euphemism from imperial atrocity. "According to most / definitions, I have never / been at war," Sharif writes. "According to mine, / most of my life / spent there." Like "[Customs](#)," "[Look](#)" dramatizes the consciousness of a subject who is also a suspect, an enemy of the state in the state's eyes—and in her own. "*I feel like I must muzzle myself,*" the poet confesses. "So you feel dangerous?" her psychiatrist asks. "Yes." Poetry can bite, hard.

In "[Customs](#)," Sharif's old self now seems not dangerous enough: "I said what I meant / but I said it // in velvet." She might be the poet most lauded by the American poetry establishment who most obviously loathes the American poetry establishment, where writers are "convinced they are ringmaster / when it is with big brooms and bins, in fact / they enter to clear the elephant scat." Their offense is in being both profoundly cynical—they knowingly participate in the circus—and deeply delusional: they think they can control the performance, but end up shovelling shit. Sharif spurns the charade. Rejecting the injunction to bear witness, she displays a thrilling contempt for literature's vaunted ability to elicit empathy, which means only "laying yourself down / in someone else's chalklines // and snapping a photo." For Sharif, the chalk lines around a body, like the borderlines around a body politic, are another boundary not to be trusted; the contours of

personal experience can't describe, literally or literarily, the truth of a trauma.

But, if lines are treacherous, then what is poetry made of? "It is very / private / to be in another's / syntax," Sharif warns. The poet's space can be usurped by a reader; her lines will, inevitably, be crossed. June Jordan, whom Sharif has credited as a model, describes writing "toward a personal semantics" as a vital protection—refusing to "take somebody's word" and instead choosing her own. The poems in "Customs," though neither baroque nor esoteric in vocabulary, seem similarly encoded. Sharif's lines are interrupted or involuted, and fragments and fissures fill the pages. In a poem called "The End of Exile," Sharif wanders her ancestral city and hears a man selling something she doesn't have a word for: "this thing: a without which // I cannot name. // Without which is my life." A preposition becomes a noun, because the gap between languages has become an object itself. An absence, when left unfilled, turns into yet another barrier.

In "Without Which," one of two long poems in the collection, Sharif takes this phrase and applies even more pressure:

*Of* is the thing without which  
I would not be.

]]

Of which I am without  
or away from.  
I am without the kingdom

]]

and thus of it.

I am—  
even when inside the kingdom—  
without.

These lines are littered with prepositions, as if the poet were searching for the right syntactic relationship to the “kingdom.” But being “inside” it is a fantasy, sequestered by em dashes within a harsh reality: “I am without.” The repeated brackets suggest erased text, adding space but subtracting possibility. They are never open—only closed.

For Sharif, exile is a matter of time as well as place. Born “away from” her homeland, she never had anything to forget, and yet she feels the missing memory as a compounding absence: she must “lose even the loss.” She finds one way of capturing this disordered temporality through the present-perfect tense in Farsi, which “is used at times to describe a historic event whose effect is still relevant today.” She translates the tense into English as “is-was,” as in “*The Shah is\_-was a dictator.\_*” This layered vision of time deepens and extends the past, but can cloud what lies ahead. At one point, Sharif imagines a future self “who was dead before she died.”

For the anti-imperial poet, writing within the circus of empire is a high-wire act without a net. Facing a customs officer, the writer finds redress in knowing that her enemy “will be in a poem / where the argument will be // anti-American”—an insurrection that occurs only in the mind. Does it count? In “The Master’s House,” which takes its title from Audre Lorde’s warning that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” Sharif lists the methods by which poets accommodate the evils of empire:

To be lavender sachets and cedar lining and all the ways the rich might  
hide their rot  
To eye the master’s bone china  
To pour diuretic in his coffee and think this erosive to the state  
To disrobe when the agent asks you to  
To find a spot on any wall to stare into  
To develop the ability to leave an entire nation thusly, just by staring at  
a spot on the wall, as the lead-vested agent names article by article what  
to remove  
To do this in order to do the other thing, the wild thing

While the “rich” and powerful have the tools to both “hide” and expose, the poet is stripped of instruments, one word at a time. The only means of resisting such humiliation, it seems, is to “develop the ability to leave”—the

ability to disappear. Absence once again becomes the best way to hold on to what is most essential.

If preserving the self means withholding the self, can poetry create possibilities, or only retreat? Can it do “the wild thing”? Sharif’s collection imagines how a poet’s well-chosen lines might reject the arbitrary lines set by someone else’s customs—that is, both its borders and its norms. But it’s a hard vision to retain, and by the poem’s end it has been “forgotten,” if it was ever known.

The metaphor of a customs checkpoint may be a deliberate misdirection in a collection of poems that is also guided by doors and passages: between memory and forgetting; between the living and the dead; between the language in which one writes and the language in which one laments; between the poet’s real life and the poet’s “imagined life crying hot in my ear.” The porousness of these portals seems never-ending. When Sharif does find a gate that opens, she discovers that “more gates were built inside.” But in the collection’s final lines she travels down a path that does, at last, seem to reach a threshold:

I wipe clean my blade  
I tap at the door

I pass through there so that

Here the book ends, the sentence left incomplete. Does this door open onto a place not yet charted in these poems? Or is the book a closed loop, its end a return to its beginning? That the answers to these questions are withheld may be reason to believe that the poet has reached a new realm. She denies us entrance in order to inhabit it herself. ♦

# **Comment**

- [The Trumpist Ukraine Blame Game](#)

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)

“*HIGHEST GAS PRICES IN HISTORY!*” [Donald Trump](#) said in a statement that he issued last Tuesday. “*DO YOU MISS ME YET?*” The answer is no. The world could hardly be at a more dangerous juncture, with a catastrophe in [Ukraine](#) that could spiral into a wider war—perhaps even a [nuclear](#) one. One of the few blessings of the moment is that our own nuclear arsenal is not in the hands of a Twitter-happy tantrum-thrower beholden to his own vanity. At a speech in New Orleans this month, according to the *Washington Post*, Trump mooted the idea of putting China’s flag on American planes and sending them to bomb Russia: “Then they start fighting with each other and we sit back and watch.” During Trump’s time in the White House, he was, at best, an awful judge of Vladimir Putin, the author of Ukraine’s tragedy, and an even worse judge of [Volodymyr Zelensky](#), who has emerged as a symbol of courage and endurance. The first time Trump was impeached, the charges arose from his attempt to pressure Zelensky to help him dig up dirt on Joe Biden’s son. If there were a need for a one-word retort to Trump nostalgia, it could be “Ukraine.”



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

The Republican Party, though, has a different, if predictable, response to Trump’s demand for attention. This story has played out before. There is a shock—in this case, Russian troops moved on Ukraine, as Trump declared Putin’s “genius” and “savvy.” Then there are notes of guarded dissonance,

followed by capitulation. On March 4th, former Vice-President [Mike Pence](#) said, at a Republican donors' conference, that "there is no room in this party for apologists for Putin." More than one news organization called that a "veiled swipe" at Trump. The veil is pretty thick. On March 8th, in a Fox Business interview with Maria Bartiromo, Pence praised Trump's management of Putin: "I truly do believe that the reason why our Administration is the only American Administration in the twenty-first century where Putin did not try and grab land and redraw international borders by force is because he saw American strength."

Pence's stance is no doubt tied to his own ambitions. His political organization is spending ten million dollars to air an ad in swing congressional districts which claims that Putin's invasion was precipitated by a "horrific decision": Biden's revoking of the permit for the Keystone XL pipeline. Pence has indicated that he may run for President in 2024, though at this point he'll only have a chance if Trump stays out of his way. Recent polls of potential Republican primary voters all show that Trump is the top choice; the closest contender, Governor Ron DeSantis, of Florida, is a distant second. And even he is not treating Ukraine as an opening to turn on Trump. Instead, DeSantis said of the Russians, "When Trump was President, they didn't take anything. And now Biden's President, and they're rolling into Ukraine."

In other words, there may or may not be room for Putin apologists in the Republican Party—[Tucker Carlson](#), of Fox News, still has a G.O.P. following—but there is certainly room for Trump apologists. Last week, [William Barr](#), the former Attorney General, published a memoir of his time in the White House, and it contained some headline-making observations about Trump's instability. But it also included numerous rationalizations of Trump's actions, and an ugly jab at his successor: "I am afraid that, with a wavering, intermittently alert Joe Biden in the Oval Office, Vladimir Putin will pursue Russian strategic goals more assertively." Barr says that he'd vote for Trump again, out of fear of the "progressive agenda."

And yet, when it comes to Biden's agenda for Ukraine, there is broad bipartisan agreement on key points, including supplying arms to Zelensky's government and banning the import of Russian oil and gas, which will put further pressure on supplies. That hasn't stopped Republican leaders from

turning gas prices into a rallying cry. Fuel prices were unusually low before and in the early months of the pandemic, then rose because of supply-chain issues and other inflationary factors, and have moved steeply upward because of the situation in Ukraine. (On Friday, the average price of a gallon of gasoline was \$4.33.) Nonetheless, at a press conference last week, Kevin McCarthy, the House Minority Leader, argued that Democrats are unfairly blaming the Russian invasion for the current high prices, when the real problem is their lack of love for fossil fuels—their failure to authorize more pipelines, new leases on public lands, and more drilling. “These aren’t Putin prices. They’re President Biden’s prices,” McCarthy said. (Asked whether he also saw Putin as “savvy,” McCarthy said he thought that he was “evil”—but then complained that Biden had shown him “weakness.”)

The argument that Republicans are making about gasoline prices is, as they surely know, disingenuous. The prices are not yet the highest in history, when adjusted for inflation. And the United States has unused production capacity, which oil companies could tap. Handing out leases as if they were wartime party favors is not going to get the country through this crisis, or the next one. It takes years to develop new fields, and doing so would put the U.S. on the wrong path in terms of meeting emissions-reduction goals. There is likely more that the Administration and Congress can do in the short term, such as suspending the federal gasoline tax and continuing to draw on the strategic petroleum reserve, from which the Department of Energy released thirty million barrels two weeks ago. Meanwhile, paying more to fill up a car is a modest sacrifice if it can help to address the agony of the Ukrainians. Still, the rising prices do present a problem, both for Biden’s political standing and for Americans without access to public transportation. For someone driving to a low-wage job, the price increase can amount to a meaningful pay cut.

The scenes in Ukraine are wrenching and humbling. The events have unfolded like a series of parables—about oligarchic corruption and individual bravery, but also about the need for international coöperation. One of the many lessons of the past few weeks is that we are years overdue in moving toward a future based on more sustainable fuels. Ukrainians, and the rest of us, have put up long enough with a world in which oil and gas prices are a weapon of dictators—or a point of self-celebration for a would-be autocrat. We won’t miss it. ♦

# Crossword

- [The Crossword: Monday, March 14, 2022](#)

By [Patrick Berry](#)

# Dream Role

- The Anti-Elizabeth Holmes

By [Naomi Fry](#)

“When my agent called with the offer, I said, ‘Pass,’ thinking, I don’t want to shoot in L.A. for four months,” Amanda Seyfried said the other day, at a restaurant on the Upper West Side. “Also, I had *COVID* when they asked, and I was freaking out. I have incredible health anxiety. I was, like”—bratty voice—“‘My legs are itchy!’” She laughed. “Then, the day after, I realized, Oh, of course I need to do this. It’s a *dream role*.”



Amanda Seyfried/Illustration by João Fazenda

Seyfried, who is thirty-six, was referring to her part as the disgraced biotech entrepreneur Elizabeth Holmes, on the Hulu limited series “The Dropout,” created by Liz Meriwether. To play Holmes, the ex-C.E.O. of the sham blood-testing startup Theranos, Seyfried wore the onetime Silicon Valley savant’s Steve Jobsian black turtleneck, a rat’s-nest bun, and caked makeup. She also landed Holmes’s frazzled tics with an eerie exactitude. “That thing she does with her mouth,” she said, pursing her lips and lowering her pitch (insta-Holmes!). “I saw her do it, and doing it made me feel safe in the role.” In a red sweater, with her hair in a smooth ponytail, Seyfried was more relaxed and vivacious than Holmes, whose outsized ambition led her to lie about her company’s chimerical testing capabilities. (She was recently convicted of wire fraud.)

“Holmes tricked herself into believing that the technology she had was real,” Seyfried said. “She was, like, ‘I will fucking stop at nothing.’ I was ambitious as an actor, but I was also realistic, maybe even a little pessimistic.”

Seyfried grew up in Allentown, Pennsylvania, and began modelling and acting as a teen-ager. She first gained popular recognition for her comic turn as a lovable dumbbell in the 2004 movie “Mean Girls.” Roles in such crowd-pleasers as “Mamma Mia!” and “Dear John” followed. Her career flourished as she travelled between New York and L.A., but she didn’t love the hectic aughts-era life style expected of young celebrities. “I saw so many people do the Von Dutch hat, linking arms with other famous girls, getting into the best clubs. That would have been really fun at one point, but I hated being hungover. I hated one-night stands,” she said. “I also saw people act like pricks, thinking they’re famous and powerful.”

In 2013, she bought a farm in the Catskills, where she now spends most of her time with her husband, the actor Thomas Sadoski, and their two children, whom Seyfried’s live-in mother helps care for. Rounding out the household are a cat, a passel of goats and horses (one, retired from the N.Y.P.D., is named Officer Herman), and a sheepdog rescue. Recently, a neighbor’s cows strayed onto Seyfried’s property. “They were, like, *stomp stomp stomp* over everything, and I had to wave a stick and run and yell.”

For her next project, “The Crowded Room,” an anthology series for Apple, Seyfried will play a psychologist opposite Tom Holland. “The best part is it shoots in New York, so I’ll get to be on the farm this summer,” she said. A 2021 Best Supporting Actress nomination for her role in “Mank” has allowed her to be choosier (“It really. Does. Make. A difference”), and while her part in “The Crowded Room” isn’t a lead, she likes that. “You spend time with your kids,” she said.

You also craft. After lunch, Seyfried crossed the street and entered a yarn store. She is an obsessive crocheter, and she needed to load up on supplies. “I want to get sheep so I can spin their fleece into yarn,” she said, her eyes scanning a shelf labelled “Worsted.” “I’ve been collecting my dog’s fur for years, and a lady in Long Island that I met told me she could spin that into yarn with any fibre I want.” A sales associate sidled over. “A woman came

in the other day wearing a hat with the brightest pink fluff on it, and it turned out she dyed the fur of her Alaskan sheepdog for it,” she said. “Wow, that’s cool,” Seyfried said. “That’s, like, a step short of taxidermy.” She picked up a fluorescent salmon-colored ball, then grabbed three more. She would make a granny-square blanket, or maybe a purse. She needed a project to keep her thoughts and her fingers busy. “The good thing about crocheting is that it’s fast, and you can make mistakes,” she said. “It’s all about process. For Holmes, it was just about the end result. Unfortunately, the end result didn’t exist.” ♦

# Fiction

- “Wood Sorrel House”

By [Zach Williams](#)

## Content

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

*Audio:* Zach Williams reads.

### I.

It was a modest summer rental, the kind Ronna recalled from girlhood trips to Maine or Vermont or the Finger Lakes, set in a small clearing on a thickly wooded mountainside, peacefully out of sight of roads or neighbors or anything else. Jacob opened all the doors, came back downstairs, and remarked a little sternly that the cottage needed updates: the range wobbled, the mattress caved in the middle, the woolly plaid sofas were from another era. Still, there was something idyllic about the place.

They unpacked into daisy-papered drawers and put their toothbrushes behind the spotted mirror. Max got his very own room. When he woke crying in the night, Ronna walked down the hall and took him from the crib —a wooden antique with rattling bars. On the shelves in the den, molted antlers served as bookends. A “Hi and Lois” strip hung in a frame there. “I’ve been coming to this old cottage since I was a little girl,” it read. “I love the smell of mothballs, the beat-up furniture . . . the rickety porch. . . . There’s no TV, telephone or Internet! But that is what I like best!”

That week, a hot front rolled up the mountain. They spent an afternoon in the forest by the stream. Wiry insects skated on the eddies near the banks; woodpeckers sounded overhead. Ronna repeated the word, to teach it to Max: “woodpecker.” He could say more and more and was newly walking. When he tripped over a root, she stood him up and brushed away the pine needles. In his fire-truck shirt and blue summer shoes, he set off again, dragging Quinn, his cloth doll, by the leg.

[Zach Williams on letting go of logic.](#)

Climbing back to the house, they saw the snapping turtle for the first time. The light had deepened, but the day was still hot, teeming with flies and gnats. The turtle stopped to watch them from the grass beside the path. It

was enormous. Pale mud streaked its shell; its skin was gnarled. It might be a hundred years old, Ronna thought. They did live to ages like that—staggering, cartoonish ages.

Max turned his shoulders, pouting. “Too scary,” he said.

It was his one conceptual word. What he meant by it was hard to say. The turtle was scary, but so were spinach and nap time.

Jacob said, “No. It’s pretty. Look.” He set Max down, squatted behind the turtle, curled his fingers under the shell on either side, and lifted it into the air.

The turtle splayed its legs, twisted its neck, showed its tongue and teeth as if gasping.

It must have nested nearby.

The next time she saw it was weeks later, or months, if months was the right word. In those early years, or whatever they were, she grew strangely attached to the turtle.

•

Nights, once Max was down, Ronna and Jacob would play Risk—an old set, the box’s split corners held with masking tape—and talk their way along the edges of the hard questions. For example, their car: where was it? There wasn’t even a driveway. Had someone dropped them off? From whom had they rented the cottage? For how long? How much time had passed before these questions occurred to them? How much more before the questions grew urgent?

Jacob argued that the way to understand the situation was through numbers, facts, records—anything they could observe and set down, because that was the way you solved a puzzle. But Ronna felt sure that the place didn’t follow those rules. She tried to show him what she meant. For instance, his plan to track the moon’s progress in his journal. It was, of course, a good idea. If the moon did behave oddly here, that might suggest further lines of inquiry, a chain of discoveries. But think of all the nights when he’d realized with a

start that the moon was already up, that he'd forgotten the project altogether for who knew how long. He'd pull out all the drawers in search of the spiral notepad, which most of the time he couldn't find, despite looking behind the bookcase and in the cellar and below the kitchen sink and under the sofa, where once, on his belly, an arm extended, he caught his fingers in a mousetrap. On the handful of nights when he did find the notepad, he'd run down the porch steps into the moonlight. He'd stay out for a long time. Then he'd come back all glum and drop it, still open to his earnest sketches, onto the floor.

"And," she added, "a handful of nights—what if that's not right? What if it's dozens? Hundreds?"

"Don't exaggerate," Jacob muttered, lying on the rug, eyes hidden in the crook of his arm. "It isn't hundreds."

•

They were supposed to draw a line on the floral wallpaper for each new day. But they'd fight over who'd done it, or if anyone had, or whether it'd been done twice. A small and impenetrable forest of ballpoint ink had sprung up there. Jacob's beard grew into his mouth, his hair ran past his shoulders. Ronna would push it out of his eyes and offer to cut it, saying he looked uncomfortable. He'd tell her that comfort was a distraction; they had to stay focussed. Her own hair she cut with the heavy scissors from the kitchen drawer—old-fashioned, black-handled, like the ones she remembered from school. She'd stand in front of the bathroom mirror, a towel around her shoulders. Max's hair somehow didn't seem to need cutting. In fact, it hadn't grown an inch. And his fingernails—could Jacob remember the last time they'd clipped Max's nails?

"No," he said. "I don't know. Cut them, then, if they're long."

And he went back down the steps to the cellar. He'd been obsessed by the chest freezer there: when and how and by whom was the food replenished? He was determined to sit unblinking in front of it until he got some answer. "But," he admitted one night, amassing his forces, blue, to threaten hers,

green, in Siam, “I don’t think—somehow, it doesn’t . . .” His voice broke, his eyes welled. “I think maybe it isn’t allowed.”

She crawled over the board and put her head on his shoulder.

•

It was always summer on the mountain. Mornings, when Max’s crying woke her, Ronna would see how well he’d done by the hue of the light on the pines. She’d walk down the hall—softly past the spare room, which Jacob, with his insomnia, now used—and find Max waiting for her, holding the crib’s bars. She’d pick him up, kiss the top of his head, smell his hair, take the pacifier from his mouth, and drop it into the jar on the dresser. “*Quinn-n-n*,” he’d sing as she carried him back to her bed. Every night, they placed the doll on her nightstand, a little ceremony they had together: *Good night, Quinn, good night, Quinn. I’ll see you in the mo-or-ning*. It was the only way he could bear to part with the thing; if she let him take it into the crib, he’d play with it for hours and never sleep. So, at sunrise, reunited, Max would pull Quinn tightly to his body, then push the doll away to appraise it. Ronna spoke for Quinn, chirpily: “Good morning, Max.” “Morning,” he repeated. The doll’s head slumped to one side. “Did you have a good night’s sleep?” She watched the trees moving. Cool air bled through the screen. All the mornings fanned out together, like reflections in facing mirrors. Max, looking at Quinn, would nod and say, “Good sleep.”

•

For Jacob, the final memory was a pale-white morning, sun in his eyes, and a downtown bus approaching. He thought he was coming from the gym. For Ronna, it was scrubbing Max’s back in their old blue tub. Around those moments Jacob nursed little mythologies: maybe he’d missed a sign flashing in the sunlight that morning, or there’d been some code meant for Ronna in the galaxy of bubbles on Max’s skin. On the floor of the den, legs crossed, eyes closed, Jacob would lead guided meditations: walking slowly down flight after flight of imaginary stairs, focussed on breath, hands and feet tingling, trying to wrench the memories loose and uncover behind them something new, no matter how trivial, so long as it lay beyond the horizon of the sun in his eyes. Or the soap. But he worried. What if, under scrutiny,

their memories grew unstable, eroding or degrading with the addition of confabulated parts? The final bridge to their old lives might crumble. What if the memory practice made things worse? About this problem he could speculate endlessly. Occasionally, it terrified him. He'd run his hands over his head, staring into the distance as he spoke, and Ronna would listen, feeding Max peas, or bouncing him on her shoulders, or lying with him and Quinn on the carpet, playing trucks.

Giving up the memory practice, Jacob moved on to enumeration: listing, between turns at Risk, each reliable aspect of their new lives, no matter how trivial, hoping to piece together some rough cosmogony of the place. "Here," he'd begin, "there is day." Ronna—it was a stupid exercise, she hated it—would reply, "And night." Sun, moon, grass, trees, blue beetles, occasional rain, ferns that withdrew at the touch of a finger, the sign in the yard—"wood sorrel house"—and, beyond that, the porch steps, and the porch itself, the hall table and the high staircase, the cellar steps and all the dust-covered things at the bottom of them: the fishing pole and the wading coat, the crutches with the torn yellow padding, a tool chest, a sledgehammer, a gray tarp, a pile of red bricks, and a toy bucket and shovel that Max liked to use in the green plastic sandbox out back—Little Tikes brand, in the shape of a turtle.

"What about the snapping turtle?" Ronna offered once.

The night was lush; moths battered the screens.

Jacob collected six blue armies. "The snapping turtle?"

"Yeah." The last time she'd seen it was one morning, near dawn, just after Max had begun to cry in his crib. No light yet on the pines. The turtle had lumbered over the grass, leaving a trail through the dew. "It's the only one of its kind we've encountered. It's particular, among the wildlife here. The birds and grasshoppers are indistinct. We often hear them without seeing them. They might be a kind of set design, a flourish. But the snapping turtle—it's got some kind of . . . I don't know how to put it. Stature. Doesn't it? Or character. It feels realer to me."

She rolled the dice.

“Say more.” His tone was keen; she’d pleased him.

She thought of the time she’d seen it with Max in the birch grove. “Scary,” he’d whined again. But the turtle had watched them pass—really watched. “You can see a mind behind the eyes. It’s so old. Older than us. It’s been here longer; its experience of this place must run deeper. Too much experience. Decades. It’s almost cruel: what does it do here with so much time? I don’t know. I’ve got questions about the snapping turtle. When I see it, I feel . . .”

“A sense of something larger. You’re right. A wider world.”

She nodded, drew a breath to continue, then stopped. It was a delicate subject with Jacob—the one aspect of the place he wouldn’t talk about. Max would slip and fall on the rocks or in the woods, and she’d race to him, turn him over, hoping to find his skin broken. It never was. Her skin had bronzed and cracked, new wrinkles ran from her eyes. But Max was the same. He never had learned “woodpecker.” In the notepad, she’d written down everything Max could say: *Mama, Dada, Quinn, hat, outside, uh-oh, dirt, play, nose, waffles*. She hadn’t let herself work from memory, she’d waited until she heard each word anew. *Light, bath, nap, scary*. Soon, she’d stopped needing to update the list.

“Maybe,” she said, “Max will live as long as the turtle.” Jacob was silent. If she didn’t look up at him, she’d be able to keep talking. She stared into the Risk board’s blue compass rose. “Or longer. I don’t know how to think about it. I’m trying. Maybe he’ll be here when the house collapses, and the forest dies, and the sun explodes.” Her eyes were unfocussed, her throat had gone dry. “Isn’t that an incredible thought?”

“The snapping turtle,” Jacob muttered. “You’re right. Where does it go?”

•

There were rows of old paperbacks on the shelves, spines laced with faults. They didn’t appeal, but she’d read and reread them all: “Gone with the Wind” and “The Pelican Brief” and “A Case of Need.” One day, Jacob thought to look up “wood sorrel” in the dog-eared Peterson guide. Then he

went out, found it growing all through the clearing and into the trees. It looked like clover: three heart-shaped leaflets, joined at the stalk. Ronna watched Jacob crane over the book, gray and haggard, a bunch of wood sorrel in his hand, and she thought suddenly of his vigils in the cellar, when they were still new here—his vow to solve the riddle of the chicken thighs and mixed berries in the freezer.

He snapped the book shut and said, “It’s edible, Ron. You can cook and eat this stuff.”

•

Much later, long after he’d left for good, she’d lie out for hours in the wood sorrel, half dreaming that the lawn was absorbing her gently. One afternoon, she looked up the hill toward the house—run through with summer light, its doors and windows flung wide—to see Max crawling backward down the staircase inside. She was achy and spare, her sunburned scalp showed. He shouldn’t do that, she thought, sitting up and shielding her eyes. But when, halfway down, he pushed off the stairs to stand, she laughed: a little mountain climber. There was even a comic aspect to the way he fell, straight back, arms wide, as in an old cartoon. The sound of his head hitting each step carried down the hill. When she opened her eyes, he’d come to rest on his back, stone still, by the hall table. What if maybe he’s dead, she thought, standing to cross the lawn. An unhurried breeze stirred the tops of the pines. By the time she’d reached the porch he was halfway up the stairs again, on hands and knees. She sat down in the doorway, drifted off, and woke up in the dark.

## II.

The first time Jacob went exploring, he returned with rabbit skins, ragged and patched with gore, hanging from his bag. “I figure I’ll get better at it,” he apologized, letting them fall to the porch. That night Ronna put Max to bed by herself—Jacob was too exhausted—and then they talked on the couch in the den, he with his head across her lap. “I found a lake,” he said. “You follow the stream down the mountain to where it levels, then on a little ways, and then it opens up, all at once, onto the water. I saw the sun glinting

on the surface through the trees and thought I was dreaming, or dead. The water's cold and clear. There are fish in it."

She whispered, "Fish?" It was somehow astounding.

Jacob said he wanted to find the edge, if there was one. If it turned out that Wood Sorrel House was in the real world, then the edge would be a road, or a town—it would be the edge of their seclusion. If, instead, the place was something constructed, the edge might be more literal. Such a discovery would be horrifying. But then, at least, he would be able to map the interior. "I wonder," he said, "if it's automatically generated, somehow. Maybe it's creating itself as I go. Like, I could walk for the rest of my life and it'd just be different configurations of the same trees, the same hills." But maybe not. Maybe if he walked far enough, he'd find a change in the pattern. "Imagine if there were cities. They might be strange to us; the people in them might not be people, exactly." There might be anything out there. Enough to fill lifetimes.

Ronna ran her fingers through his hair. "I tried to stick Max with a sewing needle today. I wanted to see if I could hurt him. You know?" Feeling her voice shake, she bit her cheek. "I was scared, because what if I could? But I told myself that the way to take care of him, sometimes, is by hurting him. Like an inoculation." Bent over his crib, she'd held the needle above the soft underside of his forearm. "But I kept dropping it," she said. "I couldn't do it. And I didn't know if it was me, or him, or the place. I really wanted to do it. I kept trying."

Jacob lay with his eyes closed. "I climbed the high mountain."

"Yeah?" She wiped her cheeks with her shirtsleeve.

"I got above the tree line. I could see in every direction."

She waited.

"Nothing but trees. I could see the lake. I could see other mountains. A chain. But it's wilderness, it's all wilderness. Miles and miles. No roads. Nothing."

“Could you see us?” she asked. “The house?” Her mind ran over the day: Max atop her shoulders, leaning to pull a birch leaf from its stem, his outstretched arm before her.

Jacob opened his eyes. “Who’s accountable for this?”

Absently, she pressed her thumb to his lips. He kissed it and she pressed again, wanting him to open his mouth for her; she ran her left hand down his chest to his belt and began to pull at the buckle.

He seized her wrist and flung it away.

•

There was no alcohol in the house. There was, in the medicine cabinet, ibuprofen and antihistamines. She wondered if she could find something psychoactive in the woods. Or poisonous. Though, if she wanted to die, there were better ways. Ceiling beams and rope. Kitchen knives. She could slam her head against the wall, even. Or drown herself in Jacob’s lake. His trips out grew longer. She’d stay in bed, a pillow wrapped around her head to dampen the sound of Max’s crying. She’d sweat and shiver, talking to herself. But, sooner or later, she’d have to get up. Wash her face, drink from the faucet, brush her teeth. Walk down the hall, turn the knob, open the door. He’d be there, in the crib, diaper sodden, hair matted, eyes dark. She’d stand on the threshold. He’d grab the bars, pull himself up, raise both arms toward her.

•

Once, Jacob stomped up the porch into the house and pulled Max from his high chair. A storm was coming; he wanted him to see it. Jacob was gaunt and sullen, his beard tied in two long braids. A weird green light fell over the clearing, black clouds crossed the sky. Max squeezed the air between his fingers and whispered, “Too scary.” And later, after they’d been without Jacob for a long time, it all happened again: same stony clouds, same cold rain. “Too scary.” She wished she could cut his head open and look inside. Had he retained any memory of the first time? Did Max hold on to scary

things, or did they pass through him, the way the rain passed over the mountain? Once the blue sky had returned, the storm seemed impossible.

When she asked Max if he remembered his father, he'd only point to something he recognized—a cup, a toy, a tree—and name it.

•

On his final return to Wood Sorrel House, Jacob carried the snapping turtle impaled on a spear.

Ronna stood on the porch holding Max. “You killed it,” she called, horrified.

He smirked. “Nasty fucker tried to bite me.”

The spear—the serrated hunting knife he'd found in the cellar, lashed to a broomstick—had sliced straight through the turtle's shell and out its padded chest. Upside down, legs splayed and tail limp, it shuddered each time the spear's butt struck the earth. Max watched as Jacob hung the turtle with rope from a tree branch below the house and cleaned it. He worked efficiently. Its eyes were milky, its tongue swollen and foamed with spittle. The ancient skin fell in scraps; the meat was nearly purple. When Jacob had finished, the emptied shell swayed in the breeze.

It had a spine, Ronna thought in awe.

Fried in butter, the meat was gristly and ripe.

“Go on,” Jacob urged. His teeth were filthy.

Ronna took a bite. She chewed until her throat contracted and saliva pooled. Then she spat into a napkin.

Jacob slapped the table with both hands. “Max,” he said, loud and grinning, “this country life does not agree with your poor old mother.”

III.

The lake was just as Jacob had described it. Glimpsing it through the trees, she wondered for a giddy instant if it held something stranger than water. But then she skirted it, moving under branches and through heavy brush, until she found a rocky outcropping that spread down to the edge. It was perfect. She'd left before dawn, and now the midday sun baked the rock. She stretched out and fell asleep. No dreams. When she woke, she removed her clothes and stepped into the water. It was frigid. But afloat on her back, drifting out, she felt good. Near sunset, she took from her backpack a can of tuna, a sleeve of crackers, an apple, and a chocolate bar. She ate, then went into the woods to gather branches and leaves and needles; she built a fire on the flat rock and spent the evening feeding it. She told herself scattered stories, watching the sparks on the water.

She stayed nine days. Near dawn on the tenth, she crashed up through the woods in a panic. It was still dark in the trees. She fell, rolled, and struck a rock. She couldn't breathe; she thought she'd broken a rib. Even as the sky brightened, the space before her was hard to parse—colors and shapes in the darkness, the woods all the same. She'd have to go back to the lake and start again. But she couldn't find the lake. The sun rose higher, she was thirsty, she wondered if this was what had happened to Jacob. Then she saw the water through the trees. She traced her way back to the outcropping, where the embers of her fire still smoldered, and then out the way she knew she'd come, and when she found the stream she followed it up the mountain.

Max sat in the corner of his crib. The room was humid and dim. Everything he'd had—pacifiers, blanket, the green water cup—he'd thrown onto the floor. Except Quinn. He held the doll close. It was mangled and wet; he must have been gnawing at it. His breathing was slow.

"Max," she said. Then she shouted it, grabbing his shoulders.

He said, "Too scary."

•

Well—how *had* it been for the snapping turtle? It had slept in the high grass. In hot weather, it had sat in the stream; it had made its crooked way back and forth across the mountain. The turtle could not think. Presumably, it had

been barely aware. But it had lived so long. And what sorts of understanding might be gained in fifty thoughtless years? Or eighty, or a hundred? Couldn't the turtle have gathered some intelligence beyond itself? An intelligence in parallel, or in secret: a remote space, if not in its brain then somewhere else, a hidden compartment in which to hold the character of its experience—bright nights and dark ones, soaking rains, the taste of chewed grass. What kinds of awareness might the turtle have accumulated in a hundred and fifty years? What if it could have lived for a thousand? How long before it couldn't rightly be called a turtle?

•

Her clothes hung loose, then fell apart; the words in the paperbacks grew blurrier until she could read them only if she bent close, with the shade off the lamp. New light bulbs were always in the closet by the stairs. Bars of soap, too, and extra sheets, talcum powder, needles, and thread. She'd mended Quinn so many times that it wasn't really Quinn anymore—the doll's face had worn away, its clothes were gone. The only things that changed in her life were dreams, so she paid more and more attention to them; she came to feel that all the dreams she'd ever had were connected, as if part of one vast landscape, and with practice she could traverse it, discovering dreams she'd never remembered before. I could drop him into the lake, she thought one morning, as she saw by the light on the pines that he'd woken too early. But suppose he climbed out? I could try to do to him what Jacob did to the turtle. Eyes, tongue, brain, and bones, all scattered. But I can't, she thought. I can't. I can't. He sat, holding Quinn, a pacifier in his mouth, in the crib. She fell down beside it, reached through the bars, put her hand on his head. "Hi, Max," she said. She was shaking, covered in sweat. "Did you have a good sleep?" Max took the pacifier from his mouth and said, "Sleep."

#### IV.

Something flew up the stairs toward her, struck her hands as she guarded her face—a blue jay had flown in through the open door. She twisted and fell down the steps, then lay whimpering by the long hall table. Her ankle burned and was discolored; it wouldn't take any weight. She crawled into

the den, pulled herself onto the couch, and shivered under the quilt, listening to the bird flit against the rafters.

Upstairs, Max woke from his nap and began to cry.

In the morning, she lowered herself down the cellar steps, seated, her left leg outstretched. The crutches stood in the corner. And then she found the backpack, filled it with food, took a lighter and a knife and the wading coat from its hook. The steps were too steep to climb, so she went out the storm doors into the clearing. She stood looking up at Max's window. Clouds stung her eyes.

She rested that day and the next by the stream, and then she set off down the mountain, on one crutch, in little hops, her left hand tacky from saplings and branches. At the lake she slept through a run of days, sun on her face, and at night she watched fish break the water's surface. Mornings, when it was cool, she gathered stones from the shoreline, piling the flattest and heaviest into cairns. How deep was the lake? Was it possible she'd sink past the edge into some other world? Yes, that was possible. There was just no help for it —any of it. It wasn't as if she could leave him a note. Or one last meal to eat. Or teach him to dress himself or use the toilet. The problem was too big. She had no power over it.

She unbuilt the cairns, stone by stone, pushing each one into the pockets of the wading coat.

But more days passed, and slowly her mind started to change.

Because here's what she could have done: she could have taken him out of the crib. As things stood, it was only if the legs rotted and it crashed to the floor, or the house burned down or blew over or fell apart, that he'd ever be free from it. A hundred years, a thousand. Longer, she didn't know. However this thing worked.

She went into the brush for more wood. Night came and she stared into the fire.

For the sake of argument: say she went back. She'd take him out of the crib and put him on the floor. Then what? She'd have to turn and run; he'd try to follow. Impossible. She couldn't. And in the crib, at least, he'd be safe.

But from what?

She threw twigs into the flames.

Well—safe from scary things. Because, left alone, Max would fall down the stairs again. He might tumble down the mountain, crash through branches and over rocks. One scary thing after another, on and on, into infinity. A kind of Hell. What if somehow he followed her into the lake, and a current swept him to the bottom and pinned him against her as she rotted? It was possible, she had to concede that. In the crib, nothing would happen. Nothing at all. And that could be holy, in a way. He'd be like a monk, almost. A sort of saint, enshrined, enthroned. Inhabiting eternity.

She surprised herself by crashing into the water, not in some solemn moment, after a speech or a prayer, but on impulse. Exhilarated by the cold, she kicked until her toes hit nothing, the stones pulling her, water throbbing in her ears. There was a hum or a hiss she could hear only once she'd gone under, an aquatic vibration, and then a shock at realizing that this was going to work. But she must have fought, despite herself. It was hard to remember. She found herself back on the outcropping, belly down, legs still in the water.

All the way home to the cottage she felt calm and strange, separated from things by a layer of noise. Max lay asleep in the crib. She kissed his brow; he stirred to life. She rocked him, seated on the edge of the toilet, as a hot bath ran. She washed him clean while he sang to Quinn, and his wet skin glowed. He asked her to give Quinn a kiss. She did it. Then she touched Max's nose, held his body, felt it swell with breath. She fell into the tub and dug at him with her fingers, pressed her face into his neck, gasping to take in the smell of his head.

V.

She fixed him to her back in a swaddle of cut bedsheets and wore the backpack on her front. Quinn she stuffed down beside him. The straps chafed, and Max squirmed and kicked, sometimes he cried, but mostly, as they travelled, he spoke softly to the doll.

In the afternoon, they passed the lake. A victory. Of course, there was only more forest, all the same. She built a fire beneath an overhanging rock; she ate jerky and apologized to Max for not feeding him. He pouted but then wandered off, picking up sticks and digging with them in the earth. The sun set. They sang to Quinn: *I'll see you in the mo-or-ning.*

In the night, she woke and felt Max breathing against her.

They followed the sun, so she called it west. Sometimes the hills they climbed would level and drop limply back down; other times, they'd break through the tree line to bare rocky stretches, where eagles skimmed overhead. They travelled along a mountain ridge, two beautiful days, but had to double back when they came to a high chasm: no way down. That afternoon, they saw black bears, three of them, nosing along the mountainside. She shifted Max so he could see and said, "Bears." She stewed and ate nettles; she kicked mushrooms from tree trunks and roasted them. When Max put both hands into the fire, she panicked and started to shout, then stopped and let him.

The trees thinned. No more big pines, only firs, growing shorter and sparser, until—it happened so gradually she barely noticed—they were out of the forest. The soil turned sandy and pale. Before them was nothing. Nothing whatsoever. Now and then, she'd look back: the forest's edge, like a wall, and the mountains looming over it, clouds and sky above the peaks, all together like something in a fishbowl. She walked until it was only a green-blue smear, and then nothing. And then they were nowhere.

On her back, Max was quiet and still. The sand was soft and felt nice on her feet. It faded to a dirty white, like smudged paper, and so did the horizon. When the lack of perspective made her dizzy, she walked with her eyes shut. They had no fires. She ran out of water. Sometimes Max whispered things in her ear. Then the last trace of gray was gone from the sand. It was fine and synthetic-feeling; when displaced, it whirled in the air with unnatural

lightness. The sky darkened, and the air grew thinner; it tasted like plastic. Then the only light was behind her, as if she were walking into a cave. And soon they were in total darkness.

O.K., she thought. What now.

She sat down, slipped the backpack's straps over her arms, and found the lighter. Briefly, it lit the space around them. She pulled Max from her back, curled up with him, and fell asleep.

When she woke, he was gone.

She felt for the lighter and couldn't find it; the darkness jumped before her eyes. But then she calmed herself: he couldn't have gone far. She angled her head to listen, in one direction, then another, and on hands and knees she found the place where the sand went smooth again. In rigid, deliberate movements she crawled out, feeling with her fingers, counting each motion away from the backpack, and then returning. Wider each time, a spiral. Finally she felt a divot in the sand ahead of her, and then another. She followed the indentations out, slow and careful, the blood loud in her ears. Her fingertips found Max's cloth diaper, and then his back, his shoulders, the nape of his neck; she went into a crouch and drew her arms around him. Only later did it terrify her: he'd been sitting perfectly still, staring into the dark.

Back out in the light, it was the first thing she noticed: "Max. Where is Quinn?"

She dug through the pack.

"Quinn," he said.

She looked toward the dark, then at him, and fell into wild sobs.

VI.

First, she knocked out the walls with the sledgehammer from the cellar. Then she dismantled the rooms upstairs from the inside out, chopped up the plaid sofas, the crib, the bookshelves, and the staircase, board by board. No

more stairs—only ramps, built from repurposed wood. The house was transformed into something like a dais, with a wide, flat surface.

She doesn't feed him. She leaves him for days in the woods. She has a cage on a rope, like a crab trap; she leads him to the lake and submerges him inside it.

"Too scary," he says, once he's coughed up all the water.

She shakes his face and tells him that it's not.

One day, she imagines, she'll unlatch the top and pull him out, cold water pouring from the bottom, and he'll say nothing at all. He'll be quiet and strong. He'll have kept something from before. She believes this not only because she has to but because he's started talking about Quinn. He looks out over the treetops and tells her Quinn is in the dark. In his head must be a picture of the scene, a story he tells himself. And so it stands to reason that he may in some way remember what he's been taught. Maybe he'll remember her. There's a place in the yard where she buries her teeth when they fall out: six little funerals, so far. She brings him to watch. Maybe she'll feel it coming and know to slink away. But, even if she dies there on the ground, the time before she's gone to soil will be, to him, like nothing.

She'll eat less and less, lie on her mat, boil wood sorrel with salt. He'll walk up the ramps, sleep in the grass, play in the bleached old turtle shell. The sun will rise early and set late. There will be beautiful days. ♦

By [Deborah Treisman](#)

# **Letter from Ukraine**

- **What the Russian Invasion Has Done to Ukraine**

By [Joshua Yaffa](#)

## Content

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

Patient Unknown No. 1, a seven-year-old boy, arrived at Ohmatdyt children's hospital, in Kyiv, on the second day of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. He had been riding in a car with his parents and two sisters when they came under fire. Shells exploded around them, sending shrapnel ripping through glass and metal, then flesh. His parents and one sister died on the spot; his other sister was taken to a different hospital. An ambulance brought the boy, unconscious and losing blood, to Ohmatdyt, where doctors performed emergency surgery and put him on a ventilator. It was a couple of days before the staff located his grandmother and learned the boy's name: Semyon.

No one had been sleeping much in Kyiv since the start of what Vladimir Putin was calling a "special military operation," but one of the doctors who treated Semyon, a pediatric surgeon named Roman Zhezhera, looked particularly exhausted. When I first met him, he was slumped in a chair in the hallway, several days' growth of beard on his face. He led me up a flight of stairs to Semyon's hospital room. A tiny head poked out from under a light-blue blanket. Tubes and bandages covered his face. Machines whirred and beeped. I asked about the boy's condition. Not good, Zhezhera said: shrapnel had passed through the side of his neck. He was on life support, with little sign of brain activity. "As a doctor, I understand what happened to this child," Zhezhera told me. "But I don't understand what is going on around us, here and across the country—something absurd and terrible is happening."

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A television in the corner of the room was on, delivering the news from Belarus, where delegations from the Ukrainian and Russian governments were engaged in a futile day of negotiations. The Kremlin's opening position built on Putin's stated aims from the first day of the war: Ukraine must not only recognize Crimea as Russian and the Donetsk and Luhansk territories,

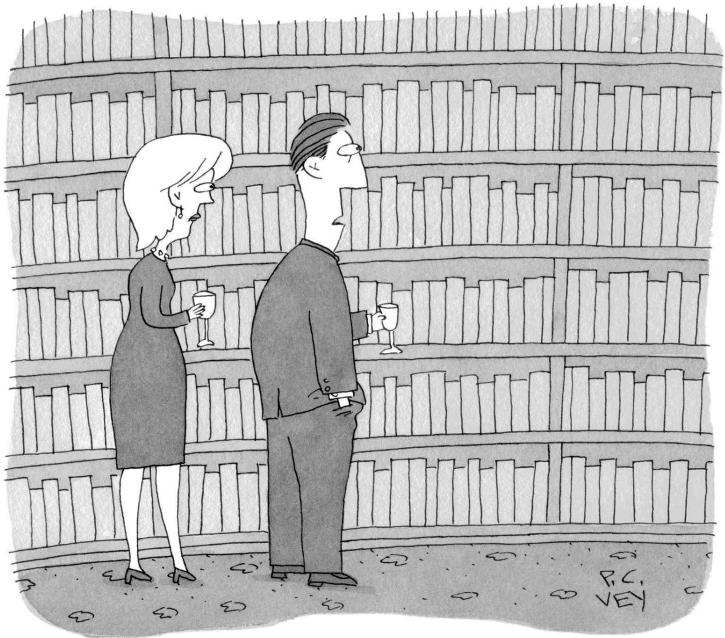
in eastern Ukraine, as independent states, but declare its neutrality and demilitarize—a vaguely articulated process that suggested, in effect, a rejection of its own national sovereignty. Members of the Ukrainian delegation, for their part, sought an immediate end to the Russian offensive. After the talks, Mikhail Podolyak, an adviser to President Volodymyr Zelensky, tweeted, “Unfortunately, the Russian side is still extremely biased regarding the destructive processes it launched.”

A grinding stalemate was taking shape. Having embarked on a war that did not deliver a quick triumph, and which was exacting a ruinous toll on the Russian economy, Putin had no choice but to emerge with something he could credibly present as a victory. Zelensky, seeing that the Ukrainian military held up against the initial onslaught of Russian forces far longer than most experts had expected—and that the country rallied together—was not inclined to concede to an aggressor. Ukraine became an independent state after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in 1991, and, no matter how fractious its politics have been since, the vast majority of Ukrainians have shown little interest in coming once more under the writ of Moscow. It appeared that only one of two things could make it through this war: Putin’s Presidency or Ukrainian statehood.

As the fighting dragged on, the wards at Ohmatdyt steadily filled up with children injured in shelling and missile strikes. I walked down the corridor and peeked through a glass door at a thirteen-year-old boy on a hospital bed, his face cut and bruised by an explosion of shrapnel. He, too, had been struck while riding in his family’s car. His six-year-old cousin died; his mother lay injured in the bed next to his. Doctors told me of another child, in the Kyiv suburbs, who died as he waited for an ambulance, which was stuck on the road, owing to intense fighting. “I feel simple, ordinary, very human anger,” Zhezhera told me.

The hospital was facing a crisis with its regular patients. Hundreds of children suffering from severe conditions required urgent treatment and operations. Supplies of expensive and rare cancer medicines were running low; flights were grounded and logistics scrambled, making it impossible to get stem cells for bone-marrow transplants. Given the ongoing risk of missile strikes and air raids, most of the children had been moved to a series of basements in the hospital complex. Inside one, dozens of mattresses were

arrayed on a concrete floor. The space was dank and drafty. The ceiling leaked. Mothers rocked their crying children or lay silently with them. Pots of food were kept warm on small stoves. One infant needed a shunt implanted to remove fluid from her brain. A six-month-old girl and her mother had checked in to Ohmatdyt for an operation to regulate the baby's lymphatic system. "We were all ready, and the war started," the woman told me.



*"I never have time to read but if I did these are the books I'd read."*  
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

Two days later, with Russian forces still held at bay outside Kyiv, I returned to Ohmatdyt. A bus was parked out front, and a number of doctors were waving and crying. Nataliia Kubalya, the head of the chemotherapy department, who has worked at the hospital for thirty years, explained that the bus was taking children and their families to Poland for treatment. "It is a great tragedy," she said. "We were finally able to offer these children the level of care they need in Ukraine, but now we have no choice but to send them away, and along with them the purpose of my life."

Nearby, Alexey Sinitsky was seeing off his young son, who had leukemia. Sinitsky, who is forty-four and had previously worked at an agricultural-equipment manufacturer, had decided to remain in Kyiv to join his local unit of the Territorial Defense Forces, a volunteer military corps that has, in recent weeks, attracted thousands of people from across the country. "When

the kids leave, it will be easier for everyone,” he said. “After all, someone needs to stay behind. If no one is here, the Russians will just enter and that will be it.”

I found Zhezhera standing by the entrance to the hospital. He looked energized by the urgency of his work, but his eyes were glassy. His wife and two kids were spending each night in the hospital’s underground bomb shelter. His eight-year-old daughter had asked him about a word that she had been hearing: “Dad, what are occupiers?” He answered, “Those who try to capture with force territory that doesn’t belong to them—in this case, Russians.”

I asked Zhezhera how Semyon was doing. The boy had died the day before, he said.

According to Putin’s reading of history, the invasion would enshrine the inviolable unity of Ukraine and Russia. Instead, it has torn the two countries apart. In February, on what turned out to be the eve of war, I travelled to Shchastia, a town of some eleven thousand people on the banks of the Siverskyi Donets River, in the largely Russian-speaking Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. Since Soviet days, Shchastia has functioned as a satellite of Luhansk, an industrial center of roughly four hundred thousand people less than twenty miles away. Every Friday, a line of cars snaked through farmland north of the city, as families went for weekends in the pine forests or picnics along the river. In English, Shchastia means “happiness.”

In 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and backed a would-be separatist conflict in the Donbas, Luhansk and much of the surrounding area fell under the control of Russian-backed militias. Shchastia was held by the rebels for less than three months, until it was retaken by a pro-Ukrainian paramilitary group. Families and friends were split by the “contact line,” as the new de-facto Ukrainian border was called. For the first time, Shchastia had to open its own dentist’s offices, hair salons, and veterinary clinics. Allegiances shifted, but the relationship between the two municipalities was never completely severed. For the next three years, a coal-fired power plant in Shchastia supplied electricity to occupied Luhansk, which meant that its workers sometimes headed to the plant under fire from the people to whom they provided power.

Two days before I arrived, Putin recognized the “independence and sovereignty” of the two separatist republics in the Donbas—Luhansk and Donetsk—even though two-thirds of the region, including Shchastia, remained under Ukrainian control. Russian-backed proxy militias had been firing on the town from truck-mounted multiple-rocket launchers, known as Grads, which send fusillades of forty missiles at a time. Several of the Grad volleys were aimed at the power station, leading to blackouts in the area. Once again, residents found themselves in their cellars and bomb shelters, venturing out only occasionally to charge their phones at solar-powered stations around town. The rockets had also knocked out the town’s water supply.

Late one morning, I made my way to Shchastia’s administration building. There was a lull in the shelling, but I could see thick plumes of black smoke rising from the power station in the distance. On the steps, I ran into Oleksandr Dunets, a barrel-chested man who was the head of the city’s civil-military administration, effectively Shchastia’s mayor. In 2014, Dunets, as a lieutenant colonel in the Ukrainian Army—his nickname in the field was Spider—fought in nearby Stanytsia Luhanska and Debaltseve. “I got to know the Russians very closely—eye to eye,” he said. He is originally from Khmelnytskyi, in western Ukraine, and he took up his post in 2020. “I arrived to a relatively peaceful city, and had some rather ambitious plans,” he told me. “We wanted to rebuild and improve life here, so that, however clichéd this sounds, it lived up to its name, Happiness.”

Now his concerns were elemental: “For starters, you have to try and survive.” Eventually, he said, if the power wasn’t restored, the entire populace would have to be evacuated. Dunets’s deputy, Vladimir Tyurin, who lives in Shchastia, but whose mother, father-in-law, and brother live in Russian-occupied Luhansk, told me, “This is even scarier than 2014. Back then, we didn’t yet know what war is, that if a shell falls, this can mean death, you have to hide.” Now he knew: “They’ll simply raze the city.”

Later, I stopped by the apartment of Galina Kalinina, who, friends had told me, was among the town’s more vocal pro-Ukrainian residents. I took a seat in her sunny living room, which was filled with plants. Her three cats hopped up onto the sofa and then onto us. She had just made her third trip that day to the well in the courtyard, lugging plastic jugs up three flights of

stairs. At one point, when the shelling picked up, Kalinina said, “Oh, they’re banging on again,” with the eye-rolling exasperation of someone fed up with neighbors who play their music too loudly.

Kalinina moved to Shchastia in 1986 to take a job at the power plant. She recalls a charming, verdant place, with rosebushes lining the central avenues. In the decades after the Soviet collapse, a good number of the town’s residents retained a cultural attachment to Russia, or at least felt some wariness about successive governments in Kyiv. When war broke out in the Donbas, many neighboring cities asserted their allegiance to Ukraine. But in Shchastia more than a few people were willing to accept the arrival of what Kremlin propagandists called Russky Mir, or the Russian World. The idea, at its most grandiose, anticipates a regathering of the lands, uniting Russian speakers whose ties were ruptured by the dissolution of the Soviet Empire. Kalinina understood it more simply: “People were suffering from a kind of euphoria of youth,” she said. “They thought Russia would come and, like a time machine, give them the chance to live as they did before.”

With war looming again, Kalinina was prepared for the worst. “We got lucky in 2014,” she told me. “The town was taken back quickly and without a whole lot of noise.” But in recent days it had become clear that Putin was prepared to turn the conflict into something much bigger, with greater significance for all sides. “If they capture Shchastia, we won’t get it back anytime soon,” Kalinina said. “Not as long as Putin is alive.” Once “the Tsar,” as she jokingly referred to him, extends his dominion over Shchastia, “everyone will be expected to get in line.”

In Sievierodonetsk, forty-five miles away, I visited the office of Serhiy Haidai, the governor of the Luhansk region. Like many government officials across Ukraine, faced with the Russian attempt to decapitate the Ukrainian leadership or, failing that, to decimate the country, Haidai seemed to channel Zelensky’s defiance. “Putin has tried every measure possible to pressure us, but it hasn’t worked,” he told me. “So he simply wants to blow Ukraine apart.”

Haidai, at least on paper, is responsible not only for those living in territory controlled by Ukraine but also for the smaller population in separatist-controlled areas of the region. His own life, he said, “completely destroys

Russian propaganda.” As a child, he lived in Sievierodonetsk, speaking Russian, then moved to Lviv, in western Ukraine. He learned Ukrainian because he thought it melodic and beautiful. “There was never any aggression toward the Russian language,” he told me. As we spoke, Haidai got a call from officials in Kyiv, asking about the situation in Shchastia. “They’re shooting Grads,” he said. “They’ve gone crazy.”

Haidai told me that Putin’s understanding of Ukraine was, at best, incomplete and outdated. In 2014, the country’s Army was disorganized and unprepared. Now it was an experienced and competent fighting force, with a sizable arsenal of antitank missiles and armed drones. “We know perfectly well what the Russian military machine is like,” he said. “But this won’t be some easy stroll for them. A war will cause irreparable damage to Ukraine, yes, but to Russia, too.”

Over the previous month, as more than a hundred and fifty thousand Russian troops assembled along the Ukrainian border, I had written a number of stories trying to decipher Putin’s intentions. Most analysts and foreign-policy experts in Moscow predicted a simmering, drawn-out standoff, with Russia keeping forces on the border as a lever to pressure the West. A full-scale invasion, they reasoned, would be counterproductive folly. I had gone to Kramatorsk, a midsize city that houses the Ukrainian command overseeing the war in the Donbas, in search of evidence of what some considered a more likely scenario: Russian forces would enter the separatist enclaves and use Ukraine’s response as an excuse to launch a wider incursion, maybe striking somewhat deeper into Ukraine.

An even more terrifying reality became clear around 5 A.M. on February 24th, when I felt three window-rattling explosions in my hotel room in Kramatorsk. I ran downstairs to the hotel’s basement and checked the news. Russian bombs and missiles were landing not only at the military airfield in Kramatorsk but in Kharkiv and Kyiv, with more explosions heard across the country. Russian tanks began streaming into Ukraine from Belarus and Crimea. Putin was on Russian television, declaring the start of his “special military operation,” and calling the situation in the Donbas a genocide. “To this end,” he said, “we will seek to demilitarize and de-Nazify Ukraine.”

What did “de-Nazification” mean in a country with a Jewish President who was elected with seventy-three per cent of the vote? The subtext, at least, was ominous. In recent years, Putin has surrounded himself only with a small number of like-minded security officials, a habit that intensified during the pandemic, when he isolated himself to an extreme degree compared with other world leaders. He emerged a mouthpiece of obscurantist theories, more convinced than ever of the fundamental illegitimacy of the Ukrainian nation. Ukraine, Putin believed, was not a country with its own history and claim to independence but a territory cobbled together from Austria-Hungary and the former Russian Empire by the Bolsheviks. Its lack of proper statehood had allowed it, time and again, to be exploited by outside powers as a staging ground for weakening Russia. The United States and its allies were using Ukraine to pursue “a policy of containing Russia,” he said. “For our country, it is a matter of life and death, a matter of our historical future as a nation.”

From Kramatorsk, I drove west with a photographer and our fixer, the head of a local charity, toward Dnipro, a regional hub of a million people, then on to Kyiv. The drive took us along the Dnieper River, which separates the country geographically into east and west. The two sides have long been seen as culturally and politically distinct, but that characterization obscures more than it reveals. In 2019, Zelensky, a native Russian speaker from Kryvyi Rih, an industrial center in the south, won a majority of the votes in nearly all of the country’s regions, including in the west. And national polling showed majority support for the prospect of Ukraine joining the European Union, including nearly half of those surveyed in the east.

We passed cars packed with families and their belongings, and columns of Ukrainian tanks and armored vehicles rumbling into position to counter the Russian assault. When we stopped for fuel, outside the capital, I witnessed a scene that seemed emblematic of the country’s growing civic consciousness, which had been thrust into acute relief by the onset of war. An attendant stood watch, directing traffic to the pumps. A car with Lithuanian plates pulled up. Some Ukrainians register their cars abroad, to avoid paying import duties and taxes on automobile purchases. “No gas for people who don’t contribute to the state,” the attendant shouted. “Support our Army, support our people, then get your gas!” The car sped away.

There were frequent military checkpoints along the highway. Some were manned by Ukrainian soldiers, others by local volunteers, who constructed barricades out of concrete blocks and car tires. But as we rode into Kyiv the streets were quiet. We stopped at an apartment building on Lobanovskyi Prospect, a wide boulevard in the city's southwest; a missile strike had torn a three-story gash in the façade.

Over the years, I've come to love Kyiv, with its pre-Revolutionary architecture, cheerful people, and fabulous restaurants, not to mention a techno music scene that is arguably among the best on the Continent. Now few people ventured outside; those who did so after curfew were, by default, considered pro-Russian *diversanty*, or saboteurs. "We are hunting these people," Vitali Klitschko, Kyiv's mayor and a former heavyweight boxing champion, said, claiming that six *diversanty* had been killed in a single night. A Ukrainian friend joked that I'd be in trouble if I was stopped at a Territorial Defense checkpoint and asked to say what had become a kind of code word for sussing out enemy agents: *palyanitsa*, the name of a soft white-bread loaf. The word rolls off the tongue of Ukrainian speakers but is hard for Russians to pronounce.

At first, Russian troops tried to penetrate the capital with light, nimble assault teams, apparently operating under the assumption that they could take the city in a matter of days. "It looked like they planned for a kind of raid," Andriy Zagorodnyuk, a former Ukrainian defense minister, said. "They thought they could weaken Ukraine's military with air and artillery strikes and carry out a special operation to replace the government."

Instead, they met a formidable defense. Russian paratroopers seized the Hostomel airport, just outside Kyiv, only to be overrun by a Ukrainian counterattack. At an overpass not far from the Kyiv Zoo, I came to a spot where, the night before, Ukrainian soldiers had ambushed Russian forces as they tried to infiltrate a weapons supply deep in the city. A pair of burned-out military vehicles stood in the street, with shards of metal and glass trailing for half a mile. Pieces of flesh lay scattered on the road.

Every morning brought renewed fear that this would be the day the city was fully encircled. A forty-mile Russian convoy of tanks and armor seemed to have stalled north of Kyiv, likely hampered by lack of fuel or by poor

logistics. (“They didn’t have a plan for more than three or four days,” Zagorodnyuk said.) Still, a sense of siege set in. More checkpoints appeared. Residents began sleeping in metro stations, which had been turned into makeshift bomb shelters, housing as many as fifteen thousand people a night. It was hard to find a pharmacy. Restaurants shut down, and only a few supermarkets remained open, often with lines that left patrons waiting outside for hours. I settled into a diet of cheese, salami, and apples.

One day, as fighting inched closer to the city center, I drove out to International Square, in a western neighborhood, near where the bulk of Russian forces had massed. There had been a firefight the night before. The carcass of a torched military transport truck lay slumped on the asphalt. A shot-up Army bus with deflated tires stood across the square. Shrapnel and bullet casings crunched underfoot. A group of locals had gathered to take a look. I spoke with a woman who asked to use a pseudonym, whom I’ll call Svitlana. She lived with her twelve-year-old daughter in a nearby apartment. “When the explosions started, I woke her up,” she told me. Her daughter stood beside her, in a puffy coat and a wool hat. “She was hysterical, terrified, crying.”

Svitlana explained that her grandparents came from Rostov-on-Don, a major city in southwestern Russia, then settled in eastern Ukraine. I barely managed to ask a question before she offered her own response to Putin’s notion of Pan-Slavic unity. “I’m ethnically Russian, I speak Russian, and I hate Russians,” she said. She and her daughter had been living in Luhansk in 2014, when the war started there, and fled to the capital. Four years later, she bought an apartment in what she presumed were the safe and bucolic outskirts of Kyiv, a place to build a life. “Now Russia’s wars are coming to me for the second time,” she said.

Earlier in the year, neighbors in Kyiv had asked Svitlana, given that she had lived through one conflict with Russia, what she expected. She told them that Putin might escalate the war in the Donbas, but that a full-scale invasion was unthinkable. “I said such a thing can’t happen. They haven’t gone completely crazy. Well, you see—they went crazy.”

Nevertheless, Svitlana was set on staying in Kyiv—at least she was until Russian forces began firing Grad rockets at seemingly random apartment

blocks, a terror tactic she experienced in Luhansk. “It’s a matter of principle,” she said. “I simply don’t want to live under the rule of occupiers. I did not invite them here. I don’t need them to save me.” I asked if she and her daughter managed to find any small moments of pleasure these days. “We’re happy when we hear about new sanctions and killed Russian soldiers,” she said.

One day in Kyiv, I visited a donation center set up for the Ukrainian Army in a warren of rooms attached to the national military hospital. Boots, jackets, canned fruit, instant noodles, toilet paper, and medical supplies teetered in towering stacks. Every few minutes, someone came by to drop off more goods. They were accepted by Yulia Nizhnik-Zaichenko, who trained as a makeup artist before organizing aid supplies in the early days of the Donbas war. Back then, she had stood near the checkout counters of grocery stores, asking those in line to donate food and other supplies to be sent to the front. The air of improvisation and solidarity remained. “We can barely keep up,” she told me. “Accept, give, accept, give, accept, give—and sometimes hide in the basement when the sirens go off.”

A few minutes later, we heard the unmistakable warning of an air raid. Volunteers who had been sorting supplies hastened inside and closed the steel door. I sat on a couch next to Nizhnik-Zaichenko, listening to the muffled booms. “Of course this is scary,” she said. “During the Donbas war, we didn’t have to worry about missiles or heavy artillery reaching the city.” She could finish her volunteer work and go home for a shower and a quiet night’s sleep. “Now there is no such peaceful place,” she said. She felt Kyiv emptying out. “The scariest thing to imagine is Russian rule in Kyiv, making us submit to them as if we’re just another region in the Russian Federation. That’s the only thing that could make me consider leaving—if I manage to survive, of course.”

Putin, after more than twenty years in power, seems to have committed a grave error of projection. The Russian state he has built is a vertical machine, distant from those it rules, and responsive to those at the top. Ukraine is home to a messy, vibrant society, with years of experience in horizontal organization. I found myself mystified, as did just about anyone I spoke to in Kyiv, about what Putin thought would happen even if he seized

the capital and unseated Zelensky. Did he expect people to just go along with it?

The sense of purpose and solidarity among Ukrainians was in sharp contrast to the apparently demoralized state of many of the Russian soldiers sent into the fight. From interrogations of those who had been captured, a common theme emerged; namely, none of their commanding officers bothered to explain the purpose of their mission. Perhaps because no one had told them, either. Reports surfaced of Russian soldiers abandoning their tanks and armored vehicles and walking into the woods. At a press conference in Kyiv, a man described as a captured Russian officer, addressing the Ukrainian people, said, “If you can find it in yourself to forgive us, please do. If not, God, well, we’ll accept that, as we should.”



*"I'm so busy I have to eat lunch at my desk."*  
Cartoon by Sam Gross

Billboards around Kyiv castigated the Russian troops. “Russian soldier, stop! How can you look your children in the eye!” one read. Another admonished, “Don’t take a life on behalf of Putin! Return home with a clean conscience.” Some were still more blunt: “Russian soldier, go fuck yourself!” Though addressed to the invading forces, the taglines seemed to boost morale among the Ukrainians themselves. The billboards were also a testament to the fratricidal nature of the war. In land invasions, the aggressor

rarely shares a language, not to mention a culture and a history, with the defending side.

As the days wore on, soldiers guarding the checkpoints became less jittery. Shops were restocked with food, and the lines shrank considerably. The streets were cleaned; even trash pickup started again. Andrii Hrushchynskyi, the head of Kyivspetstrans, the firm responsible for collecting seventy per cent of the city's refuse, told me that sixteen of the company's thirty trucks were in service. (Several of the others were positioned as roadblocks at major entrances to the city.) His main problem was losing employees to the Army or the Territorial Defense Forces. "My guys want to rush into battle," Hrushchynskyi said. "I tell them that anyone can stand at a checkpoint with a gun, but collecting trash isn't for everybody."

Later that day, I stopped by Dubler, a stylish café co-owned by a local architect named Slava Balbek. It had been closed for days, but I found a dozen young people seated around a long wooden table finishing a late breakfast. Balbek was conducting a planning meeting with volunteers. He had turned the café into a nonprofit kitchen and delivery hub, sending meals to Territorial Defense units, hospitals, and anyone else left behind. "I went straightaway to my local military-recruitment depot, but they told me they were already full"—in the first ten days of the war, a hundred thousand people reportedly enlisted in the volunteer forces—"so I thought, O.K., how else can I be helpful," Balbek, who is thirty-eight, and an amateur triathlete, told me. "I'm a good trouble-shooter, and if you leave out the particular horrors of war, this is basically organizational work. You need strong nerves and cold reason."

Balbek receives calls all the time: a restaurant owner phoned to say he had three hundred kilograms of food to donate if someone could pick it up; another contact was able to provide thousands of plastic takeout containers. Balbek and his team are now delivering ten thousand meals a day. "In any organization, the most important thing is a shared idea," he said. "And if nothing else we have that—a common enemy and a need to help defeat it."

A crude military logic underpinned Putin's decision to invade. He and the paranoid coterie of security officials around him believed that Ukraine had become the instrument of an ever-expanding West. Even if Ukraine didn't

formally join *NATO*, it was receiving weapons and military training from *NATO* countries. With time, perhaps this support could amount to a kind of backdoor *NATO* membership. If Putin saw U.S. missile-defense systems in Poland and Romania as a danger, the prospect of them in Ukraine may have felt existential. Better to strike while Russia retained the military advantage, and use that force to refashion Ukraine's politics—and foreign policy—to accord with his vision of Russia's security interests.

But there was also an element of historical messianism in Putin's thinking, a pseudo-philosophical strain that ran far deeper than concerns over Western armaments. In July, he published a six-thousand-word treatise in which he proclaimed Russians and Ukrainians to be "one people," but with a clear hierarchy: Ukraine's rightful place was under the protection and imperial care of Russia, not led astray—politically, militarily, culturally—by the West. "I am confident that true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia," he wrote. Only by acting now to rejoin the two peoples, as they were meant to be, could Putin prevent Ukraine from becoming irreparably European or even, for that matter, Ukrainian. Because once that happened it would be too late: Russia would indeed be occupying a foreign land.

The indiscriminate bombing of Ukrainian cities, unsurprisingly, achieved the opposite effect. Residential districts in Kharkiv were hit with cluster munitions, killing people as they walked home from the grocery store. In Chernihiv, a Russian plane dropped a series of unguided aerial bombs—including one that weighed an estimated thousand pounds—killing at least forty-seven. On March 9th, a Russian air strike in Mariupol, a city with a predominantly Russian-speaking population, demolished a hospital's maternity ward, leaving pregnant women to scramble out of the burnt wreckage. "It's brutal," Zagorodnyuk said. "They want to create panic and terror, to demoralize the population and break their will to fight. But that won't work with Ukrainians."

The question, then, is how much longer Putin can continue the campaign. For all the inefficiencies and outright bumbling of the first two weeks, Russia, with an annual military budget more than seven times larger than Ukraine's, enjoys a formidable advantage in terms of brute military might. Ukraine, for its part, has lost ground in the south and east of the country, but

managed to hold off the bulk of Russia's invasion force. It has relied on a combination of battle-hardened troops who have been fighting since 2014, antitank and anti-aircraft missiles supplied by the West, and, perhaps no less important, the moral determination to expel an invading force.

The spirit of the country's resistance has been exemplified by its President. Before the war began, Zelensky was struggling. His inability to uproot corruption and government inefficiency, and his failure to resolve the conflict in the east, had eroded his popularity. But once the war began he called on his experience as an actor, revealed a deft feel for the national psyche, and attained almost mythic status. In a series of short, defiant speeches that quickly went viral on social media, he appeared at once approachable—unshaven, in olive-green T-shirts and warmup jackets, carrying his own chair into a press conference—and coolly heroic. With Russia evidently hunting him down (there had reportedly been three foiled assassination attempts on him), his presence in the capital felt imbued with bravery, the opposite of what Putin likely expected.

One popular video began with the camera looking out a window on a nighttime scene in Kyiv. Zelensky came into the frame, walking down a hallway toward his office in the Presidential suite, evidence that he was still in Kyiv, still at work. "I'm not hiding, and I'm not afraid of anyone," he said. The next morning, he stepped outside to enjoy a moment of early spring: "Everything is fine. We will overcome." As the Russian campaign turned more grim, so did Zelensky's mood. "We will find every bastard who shot at our cities, our people, who bombed our land, who launched rockets," he said, on March 6th. "There will be no quiet place on earth for you. Except for the grave."

One afternoon, I visited an outpost of the Territorial Defense Forces, in Kyiv's government district, a hilly enclave of cobblestoned streets that houses Ukraine's parliament and Presidential-administration offices. When my car pulled up, a group of Ukrainian soldiers formed a semicircle around it, their rifles drawn.

In a nearby building, a hall for government officials, which had a colonnaded ballroom and heavy drapes, I was greeted by Evgeny, the outpost's commander. He had a slight frame, a graying beard, and the coiled

energy of a man familiar with combat. Evgeny was from the Russian city of Maykop, in the North Caucasus. His first war was in Afghanistan, in the eighties, where he fought as a young Soviet conscript. Two decades ago, he moved to Kyiv and worked in construction. When the Donbas war started, he joined a pro-Ukrainian battalion—his second war, as he put it. Since 2015, he had worked as an adviser to Ukraine’s defense ministry and overseen humanitarian programs, including prisoner exchanges. On the second day of Russia’s invasion, he picked up his rifle and assembled a number of other veterans, as well as like-minded friends and acquaintances, including his son-in-law, to form a Territorial Defense unit—his third war.

Evgeny said that he had been moved to fight for Ukraine after the Maidan protests, which toppled the Russian-backed President Viktor Yanukovych, in 2014. “Ukraine experienced something like liberation, like a chicken being born, breaking out of its egg,” he said. But, he went on, “over that same time, nothing was born in Russia.” The state of mind is largely the same as it was, he told me. “As the master says, so be it.”

There hadn’t been much fighting inside the government quarter. Every day brought a new report of Russian mercenaries or Chechen paramilitaries being sent to storm Kyiv and kill Zelensky, but it was hard to tell what was true and what was information warfare. “At the moment, things are very calm here,” Evgeny said, even as the building shook from distant artillery fire. “But later they could be very not calm.” He spoke about his unit’s role protecting Zelensky, among other targets. “The President is a symbol,” he said. “By defending him, we defend the country.”

Evgeny believed that Ukrainians maintained a certain advantage. “We are fighting with our wives, daughters, sons at our backs,” he said. “They have no one.” It sounded like wishful thinking, but Evgeny recalled his childhood in the Caucasus. “However much we curse the Russians, they still have something human inside of them,” he said. “When they see that people—old people, women, children—are coming out of their homes and blocking the streets in towns they’ve captured, maybe some of them will stop and think. Maybe some of them will even turn around.”

In the days that followed, Russia’s military assault grew more punitive, with civilian areas increasingly being targeted. If a quick victory over Ukraine’s

armed forces wasn't possible, then the country's people would be made to suffer. In Kharkiv, the campaign looked at once like a form of punishment—the Kremlin probably assumed that the city, less than thirty miles from the Russian border, would not resist a Russian intervention—and like a warning, above all to Kyiv. See what can happen if you don't give in.

Kherson, home to a strategic port with access to the Black Sea, was the first major Ukrainian city to fall. Russian forces imposed a curfew and impeded the arrival of food and other supplies from elsewhere in Ukraine. Trucks of humanitarian aid were brought in from Krasnodar, in southern Russia, a Kherson resident, who asked to remain anonymous, told me: "They thought we'd rush to grab their canned meat, but no one showed up." Pro-Ukrainian demonstrations have been held regularly in Kherson's central square, drawing thousands of people, chanting, "Go home, while you're still alive!" and "Shame!" At one point, Russian troops fired into the air to quell a crowd, but for the most part they have looked on in wary silence. "As soon as the war started, even those who felt some affection for Russia switched to pure aggression," Konstantin Ryzhenko, a local journalist, told me. "There's just no scenario at this point in which Kherson will willingly join Russia. They thought we'd go along with it. Now that they realize that's not possible, they don't know what to do."

Since the start of the war, as many as two million Ukrainians have left the country, out of a population of more than forty million. The exodus has been called the fastest-moving European migration since the Second World War. Last week, in Kyiv's central train station, families crowded up against the departures board, searching for trains to literally anywhere. Children cried; exhausted spouses shouted at each other. The state railway service organized evacuation trains heading west, prioritizing women and children. Every time a train rolled up to a platform, a crowd formed, waiting for the doors to open, then people pushed their way inside, often without knowing where the train was headed. A woman told me of travelling in a compartment meant for four people that held twenty-six.

I set off from Kyiv by car, following back roads to Lviv, western Ukraine's largest city and a major hub for displaced people fleeing the country. The main highway had grown so clogged that a team of *Times* reporters recently got stuck along the route and had to spend the night in a village

kindergarten. From Lviv, many families are pressing on to the Polish border, more than forty miles away. Once there, it can take days to cross, with people sleeping in their cars or even by the side of the road as they wait.

Galina Kalinina, from Shchastia, had also ended up in Lviv. Once I got to town, I went to see her at a donation center where she was volunteering. The coördinator, a landscape-design instructor named Maria Bogomolova, told me of a family that had just arrived from Irpin, in the Kyiv suburbs, where Russian shelling had targeted a bridge that civilians were using to evacuate, killing at least four. The family had spent several days in a bomb shelter. A five-year-old boy arrived without socks. “What they had on when they fled is what they showed up in,” Bogomolova said. The boy had stopped talking.

Kalinina was sorting winter coats. She told me that, on the first morning of the war, as missiles fell across the country, Shchastia came under attack: “I woke up to hear shelling, machine-gun fire, Grads—they were firing it all.” She had already planned to evacuate. Her bag was packed. By 8 A.M., she was on the road with a friend, but her husband didn’t want to leave. “He says he likes it at home, everything will be normal,” she said. “I told him, ‘How can this be normal?’ ”

Kalinina had intended to reach Kharkiv, where her son and daughter live, but she heard that the city was under heavy bombardment, with Russian tanks approaching. She and her friend drove on to Kyiv. Kalinina eventually got through to her son. His building had been struck—his apartment was now burnt rubble—but he had been in a bomb shelter at the time. Kyiv was getting hit, too. “We quickly saw it wasn’t safe there, either—bombing, bombing, bombing,” she said. Finally, they made it to Lviv, where Kalinina was grateful to find volunteer work. “Better than sitting around reading the news and going crazy,” she told me.

Phone service in Shchastia had ceased days earlier, and she hadn’t been able to reach her husband. When she got to Lviv, she went for a haircut and started to sob in the salon chair. “I was crying for Shchastia, and for my husband, and for the life I had,” she said. “I have this dream that I’ll come back to Shchastia riding a tank, waving a Ukrainian flag.” After a pause, she added, “But I understand that I have fairly rosy expectations.”

I called Serhiy Haidai, the regional governor in Luhansk, who said that Russian troops had reached the outskirts of Sievierodonetsk and were lobbing artillery shells into the city. They had destroyed the roof of a kindergarten. He also told me, “Shchastia in the form you saw it no longer exists.” Eighty per cent of the buildings were damaged or destroyed. And, he added, “It’s occupied.”

War has split Shchastia yet again. Dunets, the civil-military-administration head, was recalled back to the Ukrainian Army, and is fighting with the 128th Brigade. Tyurin, his deputy, stayed on in the city administration, albeit under a new flag. Haidai told me that agents from the F.S.B., the Russian security service, had called to offer him a chance to switch sides. “I told them to fuck off,” he said. ♦

# Musical Events

- [Revisiting Verdi's Political Masterpiece](#)

By [Alex Ross](#)

An argument can be made that the greatest of Italian opera composers wrote his masterpiece in French. Verdi's "Don Carlos," the anomaly in question, is now playing in a new production at the Metropolitan Opera, with the original French text supplanting the Italian translation that had been used in previous stagings at the house. Although there is little point in debating whether "Don Carlos" outclasses "La Traviata" or "Otello," the work is certainly Verdi's most formidable political creation, standing alongside Wagner's "Die Walküre" and Mussorgsky's "Boris Godunov" as an eternally topical study in the delusion and desolation of worldly power.

The wonder of "Don Carlos," which is based on the play by Friedrich von Schiller, is how it keeps expanding its field of vision. Set in Spain and France at the time of the Inquisition, it dwells at first on a standard romantic dilemma: Don Carlos, the son of King Philip II, falls in love with Élisabeth de Valois, only to find that she has been married off to his father as part of a peace pact. At the end of Act I, the populace expresses gratitude for peace, raising the question of whether the agonies of noble love matter in the face of mass suffering. Act II takes us into a completely different realm: the monastery of San Yuste, where Charles V, Carlos's grandfather, took refuge after abdicating the Holy Roman throne. The music is towering and cold, with four French horns sounding in unison. In harmonies that waver between major and minor, the monks invoke the deceased Charles, who once ruled half of Europe and now "trembles at the feet of the Lord." When Philip enters, he scowls impressively, but he is already shadowed by the higher majesty of the Church. In Act III, we are given a repulsively splendid pageant of secular and sacred power intertwined: buoyant choruses in praise of the king are crosscut with the black-toned dogma of monks preparing heretics for an auto-da-fé.

Ultimately, the story pivots less around the doomed romance of Carlos and Élisabeth than around the curious attachment between the king and Rodrigue, the Marquis de Posa—a reform-minded noble who advocates for the liberation of the Flemish people. Philip begins to favor Rodrigue, who later intercedes to protect the king from an increasingly raving Carlos. Perhaps Philip is exploiting Rodrigue for his own ends; perhaps he is genuinely enchanted by the idea of becoming a more enlightened ruler.

Either way, he finds that his authority is curtailed. In Act IV, Philip is confronted by the ancient, blind, deep-bass Grand Inquisitor, possibly the most terrifying character in all opera. The Inquisitor determines that not only Carlos but also Rodrigue should be handed over. Disturbingly, the king accepts the first verdict but bridles against the second. When the Inquisitor turns to leave, the king quakes. Rodrigue must die.

Even after Philip backs down, he remains anxious: “*Mon père*, may peace be restored between us . . . Let the past be forgotten!” The Inquisitor sustains a high C as he answers, “*Peut-être.*” That “perhaps” is a devastating counterweight to the king’s haughty comment to Rodrigue early in the opera: “I pardon boldness—sometimes.” What’s especially chilling about Verdi’s critique of power—credit should be shared with his librettists, Joseph Méry and Camille du Locle—is that it delivers no comeuppance, such as Wagner meted out to Wotan. Both Philip and the Inquisitor live on, however hollow their souls. Wagner was a Romantic, dreaming of world transformation; Verdi was a realist, unmasking the world as it is.

“*Don Carlos*” has received any number of stagings commensurate with its dark magnificence. Especially striking was Peter Konwitschny’s production at the Vienna State Opera, in 2004, which included a mock red-carpet gala in the theatre lobby, with heretics being flogged in front of television cameras. The new Met version, directed by David McVicar, is tame by comparison. This is McVicar’s eleventh outing at the Met, and his formulas have become tiresome: Old Master-ish tableaux, sumptuous costumes, a vaguely modernist patina of ruination. The auto-da-fé was a strangely cluttered, constricted affair.

At least we got to hear the opera in French, in an abridged yet still satisfactorily sprawling version of the five-act colossus first seen at the Paris Opéra in 1867. Most of the cuts could be justified in the interest of keeping the evening shorter than “*Die Meistersinger*,” but I wish space had been found for Verdi’s original opening scene, in which French woodcutters lament the deprivations of war. The chorus establishes the work’s scope and heightens its contrasts.

The cast kept to a high vocal standard, with dramatic values lagging. The most consistently absorbing performance was that of the Canadian baritone

Etienne Dupuis, as Rodrigue. Lithe in movement, incisive in diction, finished in tone, Dupuis captured a young idealist with tunnel vision who fails to see the trap into which he has walked. As Princess Eboli, Jamie Barton was vivid in a more elemental way; despite moments of discomfort, she exuded the kind of smoldering vocal personality on which the Verdi style hinges. Her “O don fatal” elicited the longest ovation of the night, and rightly so.

Carlos has only one big aria at the beginning, and after that must convey his character largely in exchanges with others. That he seems to be going mad by degrees adds to the complexity of the part. The musically impeccable tenor Matthew Polenzani had more than enough stamina, but his acting was too wooden to bring the character to life. Sonya Yoncheva showed a similar deficit as Élisabeth: her lustrous tone stayed on the cooler end of the spectrum, leaving the queen’s emotional world at a distance. Eric Owens, as Philip, sounded gravelly and underpowered, though he created a haunting portrait of a saturnine, wounded monarch. John Relyea, as the Grand Inquisitor, had the requisite range and volume, yet his diction lacked bite, and his stage business was hackneyed.

Yannick Nézet-Séguin, conducting his third run of Verdi’s opera at the Met, fashioned a stylish, fleet, purposeful interpretation, displaying more consideration for his singers than he had in some overloud performances earlier in the season. His achievement was particularly striking given his hectic schedule: in the days preceding the opening, he had stepped in to lead a three-concert Vienna Philharmonic series at Carnegie Hall, replacing Valery Gergiev, whose international career has ended in disgrace on account of his propaganda for Vladimir Putin. The Met orchestra, returning after a month’s rest, made a glorious noise: the stark incantation of the horns in Act II evoked a monumental architecture that was sadly absent onstage.

Earplugs might have come in handy at the Met the following night, as the young Norwegian soprano Lise Davidsen sang the title role of Strauss’s “Ariadne auf Naxos.” Marek Janowski, who conducted, is far too experienced to lose control of the orchestra, but Davidsen would have cut through any imaginable racket emanating from the pit. In three decades of operagoing at the Met, I’ve encountered nothing like this glamorous klieg

light of a voice, except on the night Birgit Nilsson came out of retirement to sing “Hojotoho!” at a gala.

An unaccustomed thought crossed my mind: Is it possible to be *too* loud at the Met? At times, Davidsen could have reined in her tone to match that of Brandon Jovanovich, who mastered the punishing tenor role of Bacchus. Ordinarily, he would not have sounded faint. I also noted that the top of Davidsen’s voice is considerably stronger than the rest. She will need a fuller, more clearly articulated lower register before she can do justice to Isolde or Brünnhilde. Still, at thirty-five, she is already a phenomenon. The lineage of almighty Scandinavian sopranos—Fremstad, Larsén-Todsen, Flagstad, Nilsson—may have a twenty-first-century heir. ♦

# **Night Life**

- Dionne Warwick's Flawless Voice

Since **Dionne Warwick** arrived at Scepter Records, in the mid-nineteen-sixties, the soul singer has become one of the most accomplished performers of the rock era—a Grammy Hall of Famer who's sold more than a hundred million records, breaking barriers in the process. On such standards as "Walk On By" and "I'll Never Fall in Love Again," her flawless voice exudes composure, and it has only grown richer and more robust with time. On March 22, the eighty-one-year-old brings more than three decades' worth of hits to City Winery.

## On Television

- “Bel-Air” and “Abbott Elementary” Reboot and Revive the Network Sitcom

By [Doreen St. Félix](#)

A Black television show cannot spring from a blank slate. It is always a referendum on the history of the medium, the history of race and representation. Two new shows, “Bel-Air” and “Abbott Elementary,” offer a window into the fascinating pressures, exerted by the audience and by the creators themselves, on Black television débuts of late. With “Bel-Air,” which is currently airing on Peacock, the qualifier “new” comes with an asterisk. The show is one of those reimaginations—a.k.a. reboots—of an existing property, in this case the nineties NBC sitcom “The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air.”

The contemporary reboot trend might seem uniquely unchecked, but the practice is nothing new. Hollywood has been obsessed with refining and reflecting its own image since the nineteen-thirties, an era of remakes. Still, it’s reasonable to feel extra cynical about “Bel-Air,” a revival that was inspired by a piece of viral fan fiction. Three years ago, Morgan Cooper, a young cinematographer, created a trailer that took the breezy vibe of “The Fresh Prince” and made it dark, indie, moody. Subtracting the laugh track and treating the dashing Philly kid with a washed-out palette, Cooper discovered, suddenly turned the fish-out-of-water comedy into a drama.

The problem is that “The Fresh Prince,” a work of slangy and satirical genius, already knew that it had this capability, dating back to its première, in 1990. The American sitcom in the twentieth century often centered on the dilemmas that ensue from some sort of fracture in the nuclear family. For Black sitcoms, the stakes for sociological insight were higher, as the notion of the Black family unit was—and is—somewhat contested. In “The Fresh Prince,” the audience’s object of affinity was Will Smith, playing Will, a pretty-boy baller from Philadelphia, who was wrestling with whether assimilation into the Black upper class of Los Angeles was worthwhile. Abandoned by his father, Will is being raised by a single mother, who sends him to live with rich relatives literally named Banks. The culture clash gestured at three decades’ worth of change in Black sitcoms; it was like J.J. from “Good Times” strolling into the Huxtables’ brownstone. Carrying his luminosity into the beige Bel-Air mansion, Smith the actor foretold the reconciliation of hip-hop with pop culture and the rise of the big-budget Black movie star.

Smith is an executive producer of “Bel-Air.” (Cooper, who made the trailer that inspired the show, is a writer, executive producer, and occasional director.) Smith’s participation can explain the myopia of the new series. “Bel-Air” is absurdly reverential toward its source text. The choice to make each episode an hour long—twice the length of the ones in the original series—feels like a kind of genuflection. The pilot opens with a corny fever-dream riff on Smith’s legendary theme song. Our new Will (Jabari Banks) is sitting atop a throne, underwater, a crown gracing his head. It’s a reference to a scene that comes later, in which Will almost drowns at a pool party.

“Bel-Air” veers from the original by showing us a glimpse of Will’s life in Philly. Following a standoff with an enemy that ends with a traumatic night in jail, he goes to live with his aunt and uncle as a kind of witness-protection program. All the characters have been upgraded, which is to say, made uninterestingly sexy. Uncle Phil, formerly a judge, is now an unfathomably rich mover and shaker who is running for district attorney. Aunt Vivian, a professor in the original, is a lapsed painter in the reboot. Hilary, their eldest daughter, is a food influencer, and Geoffrey, previously the family’s butler, is now a mysterious consigliere to Uncle Phil.

The most meaningful shift is the retooling of Carlton, Will’s cousin. In the nineties, Alfonso Ribeiro played the character as a charismatic whiner, the surprisingly wise beta to Will’s peacock alpha. In “Bel-Air,” Carlton (Olly Sholotan), is not only the show’s antagonist but an avatar for the dark heart of Black conservatism. He maintains his popularity at Bel-Air Academy in part by goading his white male friends into racist behavior, and he looks down on his cousin with a snobbery that would have made Herman Cain blush. He is a nearly tragic figure, poisoned by the Black-royalty rhetoric that he’s been subjected to all his life.

A recent episode hints at Carlton’s future conversion to righteous race awareness, a plot point that the writers should have resisted. “Bel-Air” is correctly circling around the ugliness in Black politics, but it’s too fearful of being misunderstood, or misrepresented, by its viewers. There is also—with story lines involving Will’s home-town adversary and Phil’s political enemies, which are resolved too quickly—a flashy crime drama just begging to surface. The show understands drama as ominous scores, leaden dialogue, and unnecessary cliffhangers. But what if “Bel-Air” looked to its peers such

as “Empire,” “Power,” or maybe even “Scandal”? The missing element here is the camp of a juicy soap. If we can’t laugh, then we should gasp. Remaking an iconic series is a silly endeavor—why not lean all the way into that?

Where “Bel-Air” is uncertain of its identity in relation to genre, “Abbott Elementary” is assured. A mockumentary sitcom about the staff of an underfunded public school in Philadelphia, “Abbott” feels au courant, given its interest in social class and the teaching crisis, but it also feels classical, given its mastery of the tight, half-hour A-plot/B-plot format. The show, which is nearing the end of its first season, premiered late last year on ABC. A decade of critical discourse about television auteurs has made network TV virtually synonymous with the retro and the censored: lodestars of ABC, like Kenya Barris and Shonda Rhimes, left those precincts for the wilds of Netflix, and before Issa Rae went to HBO, ABC declined to pick up her pilot. Quinta Brunson, the creator of “Abbott,” has found freedom in formula, making a mass-appeal treat that feels fresher than a lot of buzzy streaming comedies.

The pilot is great. We meet Janine Teagues (played by Brunson), a newbie second-grade teacher. She radiates the can-do neuroses of “Parks and Rec” ’s Leslie Knope, but her edge is immediately revealed. “For primary classes, rugs are like a calming space for the kids,” she tells the unseen documentarians. “It’s like a Xanax. Like a huge Xanax for kids to sit on.”

The camera crew is there at the request of Principal Ava (the standup comic and writer Janelle James, side-splittingly funny), a clueless, egotistical bureaucrat—a glamorous variation on “The Office” ’s Michael Scott. Janine’s other colleagues are drawn confidently, too. There’s Sheryl Lee Ralph, channelling her Broadway hauteur to play Barbara Howard, woman of God, the veteran kindergarten teacher Janine idolizes; Lisa Ann Walter as Melissa Schemmenti, the Italian wiseacre; Tyler James Williams as Gregory Eddie, the high-strung substitute teacher; and Chris Perfetti as Jacob Hill, the overwrought white ally. The high jinks are generated from real injustices in the public-education system, exemplified by Principal Ava, who got her job by blackmailing the superintendent, whom she caught cheating with a church deaconess. Janine’s naïve savior complex is tested in every episode.

In the pilot, she tries to acquire a new rug for her classroom. Thwarted by Ava, she turns to Melissa, who gets her the rug by using Mob connections.

“Abbott” doesn’t lionize teaching, but it is interested in the emotional intensity the career demands in a nation that doesn’t respect education. The direction, done in the early episodes by Randall Einhorn, who styled “The Office,” is understatedly chaotic, reflecting the disorder of America’s failing bureaucracies and the bustle of young kids. The show teems with warm, niche references to the environs of Philadelphia. It’s also judiciously hip; the Internet impresario Zack Fox, Brunson’s peer, plays her ain’t-shit boyfriend.

What’s most exciting about “Abbott” is its evident long game. The show is setting up a tangle of relationships that hint at a big emotional range. Will Janine and Gregory evolve the way Pam and Jim did? How will Ava, a bad boss and a Black woman, torque the antihero trope? “Abbott” has a sense of its future, and I’ll be there to see it through. ♦

# Paris Postcard

- Translating the French Election for the Freedom-Fry Audience

By [Lauren Collins](#)

Only twenty-seven days remain before the first round of the French Presidential election, but it wasn't until the beginning of March that the incumbent, Emmanuel Macron, got around to formally entering the race. There were strategic reasons for the slow rollout, but, as Russia's assault on Ukraine intensified, a showy announcement seemed inappropriate, leading Macron to cancel a rally in Marseille. The contrast between Macron's schedule and those of the other candidates was kickoff enough. "On Monday, conservative candidate Valérie Pécresse (Les Républicains) visited the iconic Salon de l'Agriculture, a national farming fair which takes place every year in the south of Paris," Gilles Paris noted, in *Le Monde*. "Communist candidate Fabien Roussel also wandered among cows, sheep, wines, cheeses, and other delicatessen producers. Emmanuel Macron for his part, spent his morning in a national security council meeting in the Elysée palace's war room and talked on the phone for ninety minutes with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin."



Gilles Paris Illustration by João Fazenda

The above passage required no translation: Paris was writing in a daily report called "The French Test," the first column that *Le Monde*, France's leading center-left newspaper, has published in English. It aims to guide Anglophone readers "through the twists and turns of a French campaign," presuming an audience of international readers, in addition to, as Paris

explained recently, “people living in France with not that good French.” The idea is “to be useful and, if possible, funny.” So be it if Paris must patiently identify the main players and their parties, explain the two-round voting system, remember not to use “liberal” to describe someone who favors minimal government, and emphasize that the heavily regulated French campaign-financing system renders the Presidential contest roughly equivalent, financially, to “a Senate race in South Dakota.” Neither is the occasional infelicity—“Eric Zemmour can hardly be accused of antisemitism as he is a Jewish of North African descent”—an obstacle. “I’m totally comfortable with the fact that I’m a French guy writing in English,” Paris said.

The column is published each day at 1 P.M. Paris time—7 A.M. in New York. “We are obviously targeting the East Coast,” Paris said. The U.S. is the Anglophone country he knows best, having just returned, last summer, from a seven-year stint as *Le Monde*’s Washington correspondent. He travelled to forty-seven states (still missing: Hawaii, Alaska, Maine), took several R.V. trips, and came to love drip coffee (“I know! I know!”). “The French Test” is inspired, in part, by the kind of pithy, aphoristic political writing that Paris learned from reading Beltway commentators. “When I was much younger, I loved William Safire columns,” he said. “He was so funny, so cruel. And Maureen Dowd also is this kind of columnist, except when she’s writing about Thanksgiving lunch with her Republican brother.”

The center-right president of the French Senate has already complained that the abbreviated campaign risks creating “a crisis of legitimacy.” Paris, however, sees this election as “the most consequential in decades”—not in terms of the personalities involved but in its potential for completing the restructuring of French party politics that began when Macron, a former minister in Hollande’s Socialist government, blew up the party to start his own movement, in 2016. This year, the center-right Républicains may meet their end if they fail, for the second time in a row, to field a candidate who progresses past the first round of voting. “If that happens, the two pillars of the Fifth Republic will be done,” Paris said. As he grapples with the passive forms of English verbs and scans WordReference.com for the closest English equivalent of such French idioms as “*avoir le cul entre deux chaises*” (“to have your ass between two chairs”), i.e., to be undecided, the stakes are changing quickly. “Some people believe the war in Ukraine might

stifle the electoral campaign. On the contrary, it takes all its meaning. It brings issues of life and death to the forefront and the voters will give their opinion during the two rounds of the presidential election, in April,” he wrote earlier this month, without forgetting, amid the turmoil, to flag the two-round system once again. ♦

# Poems

- “[Anvil](#)”
- “[The Letter, 1968](#)”

By [Arthur Sze](#)

## Content

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

*Audio: Read by the author.*

When a black butterfly flits past,  
when you glimpse the outlines of apple trees,  
when you smell the sprig of sunrise and walk up to the ditch,  
when Bering Aleut, Juma, Tuscarora join the list of vanished languages,  
when you turn a spigot and irrigate blossoming pear trees,  
when the time of your life is a time of earthquakes,  
when a woman, hit by a car while crossing the street, recovers then slides  
into pain,  
when a matsutake emerges out of the rubble of Hiroshima,  
when a bartender blows smoke rings and slips through hoops into his past,  
when foragers slice russulas, amanitas, clitocybes and pursue red-capped  
boletes,  
when water slips through roots, rises through a trunk, streams into leaves,  
when in our bodies we sway and flood,  
when you bloody your hands,  
when the mind like this Earth is struck and tilts its axis,  
when, under summer stars, you have built a cabin in the wilderness,

when you gaze at Aldebaran and sense a first frost on the grass,  
when in our bodies we ride the waves of our Earth,  
here is the anvil on which to hammer your days—

By [Marie Howe](#)

## Content

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

*Audio: Read by the author.*

That he wrote it with his hand and folded the paper  
and slipped it into the envelope and sealed it with his tongue  
and pressed it closed so I might open it with my fingers.

That he brought it to the box and slipped it through the slot  
so that it might be carried through time and weather to where  
I waited on the front-porch step.

(We knew how to wait then—it was what life was,  
much of it.) So, when the mailman came up the walk and didn't have it,  
he might have it the next day or the next, when it bore the mark  
of his hand who had written my name, so I might open it and read  
and read it again, and then again and look at the envelope he'd sealed,  
and press my mouth to where his mouth had been.

# Portfolio

- [Ukrainian Refugees' Journeys Have Just Begun](#)

Photography by [Rafał Milach](#)

When the Polish photographer Rafał Milach took these pictures, on his country's eastern border, the war in Ukraine was less than a week old. During that week, nearly a million people fled Ukraine, half a million of them escaping to Poland. (Both numbers have since doubled.) It was freezing along the border. Before refugees crossed to safety, they endured delays of many hours, or even a few days: in cars, in trains, on foot. The first quality that stands out in these portraits is the exhaustion in people's faces. The muted colors in the background—the pewter sky, the drab pastel walls, the dead white of the bus—seem to sympathize.

I witnessed Milach at work, and was struck by how long he talked with each refugee before taking a photograph. He wanted to hear their stories. “What can you do when a grown man starts to cry in front of you?” he said to me. “What can you do when people tell you how they had to abandon their homes and their relatives overnight? I can listen. I can document it—to remember, so the images and words can resonate long after this nightmare is over.”

[*Your support makes our on-the-ground reporting on the war in Ukraine possible. [Subscribe today »](#)*]

Despite the heartrending situation, these photographs are full of life. There is sadness in them, but also defiance. The man in the blue jacket is Sher Alkroi, a Syrian citizen. He left his native country in 1996, and ended up in Ukraine, where he owns a furniture business. Alkroi fled his home, in Kharkiv, near the Russian border, when fighting began. He told Milach, “We didn’t take anything—the children, that’s it. We didn’t take any money—the banks were closing, we could not withdraw money, our money was left in the office. We do not have anything, we left. We have enough money only for gas.”

What will Alkroi do next? He didn’t know. Perhaps he would go to Germany, perhaps Norway. All he desired was peace. In Syria, he noted, “there is also a war.”

Cell phones feature in several shots. We are all attached to our devices, but the refugees I met clung to them, for they are a lifeline to news from home—

and to ideas about where to go next. If the exodus from the war in Ukraine sometimes feels like a crisis ripped from the pages of twentieth-century history, it is also a distinctly modern one. Refugees are continually consuming social-media content about the conflict they are fleeing. They navigate their upheaval by using Telegram channels that tell them where the shortest lines are, which agencies might help them, or how to get a bed for the night. Technology allows them to share advice, support, and love in real time.

I was not surprised to see pets at the border, along with other cuddly animals. A Ukrainian medical student I met in a Polish railway station told me that, in her haste, she'd packed only one nonessential item: a Teddy bear. Many kids seem to have had the same idea. Milach's photograph of a girl clutching a giant stuffed shark while her anxious, bleary-eyed mother makes a call captures the essence of the refugee experience: ordinary people, their lives violently upended, grabbing on to comfort.

The mother on the phone, Maryna Klimova, told Milach that she planned to return to Ukraine, alone, and join the resistance. "I am here because of her," she said of her daughter, who is eleven. "My daughter comes first. But when she will be safe, I can help." Klimova knew of "a very safe space for my child in Munich." Then she would go back "to help our people—they need a lot of help." Klimova is an actor. Were it not for the Russian invasion, she said, she would now be in Kyiv, in a theatre on the Dnieper's left bank, performing in a staging of Homer's *Odyssey*.

—*Ed Caesar*



*Sher Alkroi fled Kharkiv with his family. "I do not have a plan about where to go," he said. "I don't know if this will finish in a month, or two, or three."*



*Twenty-one-year-old Nastya Kyyatkovskaya had been preparing to open a clothing store with a friend in Kyiv when the invasion began. "This hurts, because we were getting ready for this for two years," she said. "This is proof that you have to act on your ideas the second that they come to your head. Because later, that's it. Everything can change in one day."*



A bus carrying refugees arrives near the Polish village of Korczowa. Since the start of the invasion, more than two million people have fled Ukraine, about half of them to Poland.

## **Tables for Two**

- [Delightful Discoveries at Hawksmoor](#)

By [Jiayang Fan](#)

Does New York City need another steak house? Furthermore, would its gastronomic horizons be brightened by the addition of an *English* steak house? No and definitely not, a food-aficionado friend said, brow arched, when I raised the question. Perhaps it was in anticipation of such skepticism that Hawksmoor, an upscale U.K. steak-house group, pulled out all the stops when it opened its ninth outlet (of ten), in Gramercy Park, last year.



*A Scotch-bonnet mignonette, which dresses the oysters, tastes like a far superior alternative to the usual lemon and Tabasco.*

Housed in the former assembly hall of the United Charities Building, Hawksmoor, all stained-glass windows and vaulted, ornate ceilings, recalls a Victorian library or a palatial aristocratic home. “I love the fact that basically anyone who’s ever walked through these doors has never seen this room before, because it’s been closed to the public for more than a century,” Will Beckett, a co-founder of the group, told me. “When you walk in, there’s a sense of wonder. You think you know what to expect, but actually you don’t.”



*Hawksmoor, all stained-glass windows and vaulted, ornate ceilings, recalls a Victorian library or a palatial aristocratic home.*

The same philosophy might apply to the food, starting with the dressed oysters. To this lover of raw bivalves and tart heat, the Scotch-bonnet mignonette tasted like a far superior alternative to my usual D.I.Y. treatment—lemons squeezed to smithereens and a soup of Tabasco. Another delightful discovery: the ash-baked beets. Cooking over coals is a theme of the establishment, the executive chef, Matt Bernero, told me. Keep a beet on a fire long enough and it acquires an earthy depth; pickled fennel and horseradish further tease out the smokiness.

If you are at Hawksmoor, chances are you're a carnivore. What's refreshing about the meat here—and what mammoth slabs of meat they are—is how little the kitchen fusses with it. This is because half the work has been done beforehand: the beef is sourced exclusively from family-run farms, with cattle raised on hay and pasture. The other half of the job is done by the charcoal, which imparts a crisp, black exterior to the steak, an appealing contrast to its red, yielding interior.



*Cooking over coals is a theme of the establishment.*

It takes confidence to season the main event with nothing but salt, eschewing even butter, but, as Hawksmoor's cuts attest, the practice highlights the unmitigated richness of the beef. When I bit into my hunk of T-bone, which I'd ordered rare, I was surprised by its leanness, elasticity, and nutty tang. I was, however, also grateful for my anchovy hollandaise, one of five accompanying sauces on offer. (Word to the wise: skip the bland, unctuous peppercorn sauce and bone-marrow gravy.)

Under the guidance of a very genial waiter, I tried the creamed spinach, but its nutmeg and cayenne seasoning, instead of cutting the cream, exuded a distracting funk. You're better off with the Caesar or the lettuce-and-herb salad. Or, if you want to clog your arteries like a true hedonist, go for the beef-fat fries, which dial up the umami so much that the expense to your cardiovascular health seems almost worth it.



*“When you walk in, there’s a sense of wonder,” Will Beckett, a co-founder of the Hawksmoor group, said. “You think you know what to expect, but actually you don’t.”*

It was late in the meal when I decided to get a cocktail. I had feared doing so because I was certain the drinks at an English steak house would be so stiff that a lightweight like me would need to be wheelbarrowed home. I was happy to be wrong. Both the Hawksmoor Calling (a take on a Tom Collins) and the Shaky Pete’s Ginger Brew (“somewhere between a homemade ginger beer and a shandy,” the waiter said) were so smooth that I suspected they were virgin; they were not. This must have been why, when I ordered the sticky-toffee pudding, “the most English dessert on the menu,” according to my waiter, I was emboldened to tell him how astonished I was that something so English could be so good. My companion tried to shush me, but it was too late. The waiter nodded with a smile. This wasn’t the first time he’d heard the sentiment. (*Entrées \$22-\$65.*) ♦

# The Art World

- Art in a Time of War

By [Peter Schjeldahl](#)

War is the worst evil that people have inflicted upon one another, at costs to themselves, since some hominid discovered the lethal efficacy of rocks. It is waged continually somewhere or other in every generation, furiously now, in Ukraine, and fitfully in the Middle East and Africa. The recurring horror has paused on a global scale—holding its breath, you may feel—only because, post-Hiroshima, nuclear weaponry bodes suicide for the next power to use it. Or so we have thought, and perhaps still think, but with shaken complacency. What never ends is the primordial emotional tug toward organized mayhem, which is playing out, yet again, in Eastern Europe in the face of widespread revulsion. Putin: Monster! But a madman? Diagnosing him as such assumes that sanity is the normative state of people with power.

By an unforeseen coincidence, the Clark Art Institute, in Williamstown, Massachusetts, has opened a show, “As They Saw It: Artists Witnessing War,” that consists of archival prints, drawings, and photographs that historicize war’s sick seductiveness. The images are displayed chronologically, focussed by turns on the Napoleonic Wars, the Crimean War, the American Civil War, the Siege of Paris in 1870-71, and the First World War. The ensemble is a small, smattery affair that nonetheless concentrates the mind on past, present, and, ineluctably, future calamity. At its core is a slide show of Francisco Goya’s eighty intaglio prints, “The Disasters of War” (1810-20). For fear of censorship, the works were first published in 1863, as an album, thirty-five years after the artist’s death. The Clark owns a copy.

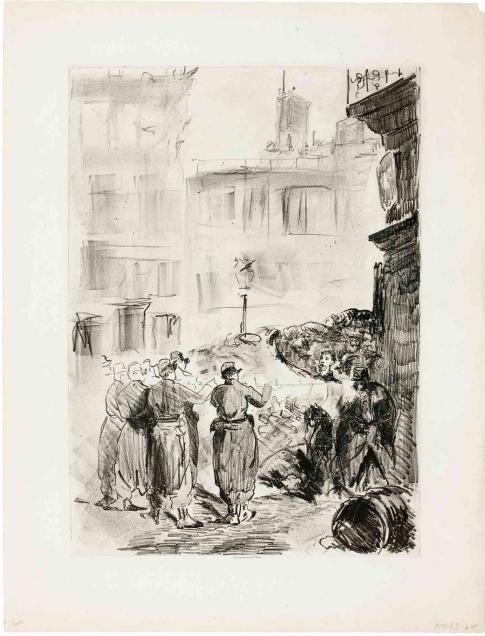
The “Disasters” are philosophically dire like nothing else in art history. Derived partly from Goya’s personal observation of battlefields, they begin soon after the onset of the Peninsular War, launched by Napoleon in 1808 with a misbegotten invasion of Spain, and proceed to gruesome renderings of war-induced famine and subsequent collisions of Royalist and liberal Spanish factions. They include instances of torture that make death seem merciful. Each of the plates zooms in on what the artist deemed an innate human capacity for savagery that never expires, persisting at a simmer in peacetime. What is it like to suffer atrocity and, alternatively, to perpetrate it? Goya generally plays no favorites among the parties to his nightmarish scenarios.

Jumping out at me is the twelfth plate, captioned “This is what you were born for,” in which a man vomits at the sight of heaped corpses. Though ugly, the man’s reaction is a rare hint, in the series, of compassionate feeling. He could be anyone civilized (that is, with inborn instincts inhibited) who comes upon carnage. By comparison, most of the other items in the show, with the exception of a sobering print by Édouard Manet, are banally or viciously propagandistic, demonizing enemies, or else remaining professionally detached—in either case, rhetorically akin to genres of spectator sport. Photographs can’t help spectacularizing violence, given that a disinterested object, the camera, is interposed between the viewer and the viewed. While perhaps stirring emotion, they are chiefly informational.

The same goes, in the show, for the rote thrills and martial sentiments of gaudy late-Baroque battle scenes; fetishized military garb and accoutrements that were popular magazine fare in the nineteenth century; and laconic reportage by the likes of Winslow Homer and Mathew Brady. All set us at a distance. Coping intimately with the truths of war requires either firsthand experience or, if one has blessedly been spared it, introspection, which Goya exercised in abyssal depth and which the news of our day might kindle in us.

In 1966, when my draft number came up, I presented myself at the Army Induction Center on Whitehall Street in Manhattan. I did so in a condition that was curatorially drug-addled, sleepless, and unwashed. Already underweight, more weak than strong, and chronically nerve-racked—I was not someone whose comradeship you’d want in your foxhole—I probably could have done without the frills, but fright drove me to load the odds in my salvific disfavor. Briskly rejected, I was giddy with relief.

Then shame set in. Another guy would have to go in what might, after all, have been my place. In addition, there was the betrayal of my youthful conviction that of course I would serve someday, as the firstborn son of a father who had won a medal during the Second World War, in the Battle of the Bulge. Only much later did I understand that he had probably incurred lifelong psychic hurt from the ordeal, which may have explained his jumpy elusiveness as a dad. Even now, at the Clark, I can summon tingles of the vicarious bloody glamour that, as a boy, I felt when I imagined my father’s war.



"The Barricade," by Édouard Manet, from 1871.

Wisdom came later, albeit incompletely. I am a frequent reader of military histories. I swear, especially, by the work of the late John Keegan, who is at once humane in his focus on the fates of common soldiers—in his breakthrough book, “The Face of Battle” (1976), he details the specific vicissitudes of those who fought at Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme—and unillusioned about the justifications, however compelling, that sent men into harm’s way and kept them there, whether from incentives of patriotism or, failing that, remorseless coercion.

Keegan, like Goya, leaves you with the belief that he sees war-making as hardwired in humanity. In “A History of Warfare” (1993), he noted that when the natives of Easter Island, after more than a millennium in isolation, fell to fighting over dwindling resources, they spontaneously hit upon two of the three classic means of defensive strategy: reinforced refuges and a huge ditch. (The island was too tiny to warrant the third expedient: regional fortresses.) Nor did the combatants need to consult the Iliad, say, to grasp what they were about. Havoc with obsidian spearheads developed naturally.

Do wars start with reasons? Always, and they accumulate supplementary imperatives from the first shot onward. You know that life is hell, someone once remarked, when you reflect that everyone has reasons, albeit often delusory. Keegan recalled that the deciders on all sides of the First World

War, having been schooled in the Clausewitzian dogma that war is the continuation of politics by other means, directed a catastrophe that made practically no political sense whatsoever. Cause or no cause, war is something that people do because they can: it “reaches into the most secret places of the human heart,” Keegan wrote. Set aside for a moment the fact that the conduct of a war can enoble even when the outcome is likely doomed, as is generally believed of the Ukrainians, led by the astonishing Volodymyr Zelensky.

Inevitably, one takes sides. I keep replaying the video of a Russian helicopter gunship being shot down with, I assume, a Western-gifted Stinger missile. I don’t like to think of the men who perished in that ball of fire. Instead, I contemplate the event as something cartoonishly abstract: the copter “Russia,” the missile “Ukraine.” It counts for something that the crew died while on a death-dealing mission, but they were fellow human beings. Simply, there’s no getting around the moral repercussions of a rooting interest once a conflict has been internalized.

Manet updated Goya in a modernizing, strangely urbane manner. He made his lithograph “The Barricade” in 1871, the same year as the deadly suppression of the Paris Commune, which he had witnessed. Soldiers let loose a volley at defenders of a street obstacle. We see only one victim distinctly, in a sophisticated composition that is largely obscured and formally flattened by a cloud of smoke, which effectively eliminates a middle ground between the shooters and the shot.

Had the scene’s passionate Communards been properly armed, they might have reversed their encounter with the dutiful soldiery, piling up uniformed bodies. They weren’t, and therefore couldn’t. Manet, for all his temperamental sympathy with the rebels, doesn’t dramatize the slaughter. He fatalistically records it. Whatever uncertainty attends a war’s commencement, each conflict ends with facts. Artists have no say in the matter, but, if they are honest about a phenomenon that makes a treason of honesty, they can at least disabuse us of naïve projections.

Goya’s penultimate “Disaster” depicts a glowing female figure supine, and apparently lifeless, amid a mob of standing monsters. The caption reads, “Truth has died.” The following, final image, “Will she rise again?,” repeats

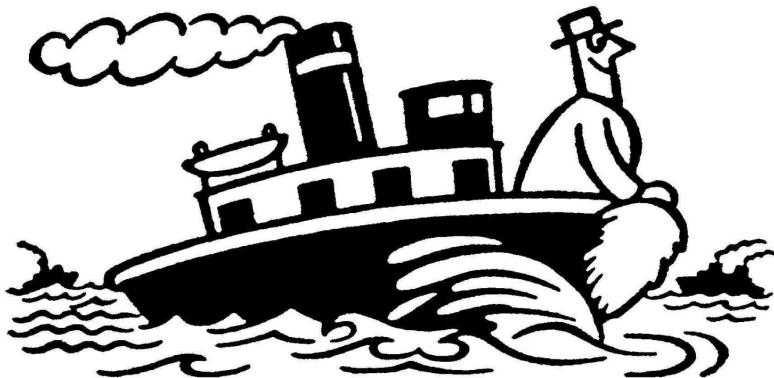
the same composition. The woman's posture and hopeless situation are unchanged. Only, in this one, she has opened her eyes. ♦

# The Deep

- Waiting for the Endurance

By [Adam Iscoe](#)

A hundred and six years ago, in the Weddell Sea, east of the Antarctic Peninsula, the explorer Ernest Shackleton ordered his men to abandon ship. It was eight and a half degrees below zero; the wind was calm. Shackleton's crew—twenty-eight men, forty-nine dogs, and a cat—had spent a winter stranded in the ice—"frozen," as one sailor put it, "like an almond in the middle of a chocolate bar." Shackleton shouted, "She's going, boys!" as ten million tons of ice pushed against the ship's wooden sides, which were two feet thick in some places. The deck buckled. On November 21, 1915, the stern went up, the bow went down, and the Endurance slipped under. Frank Worsley, the ship's captain, wrote down the coördinates in his diary: 68°39' South, 52°26' West.

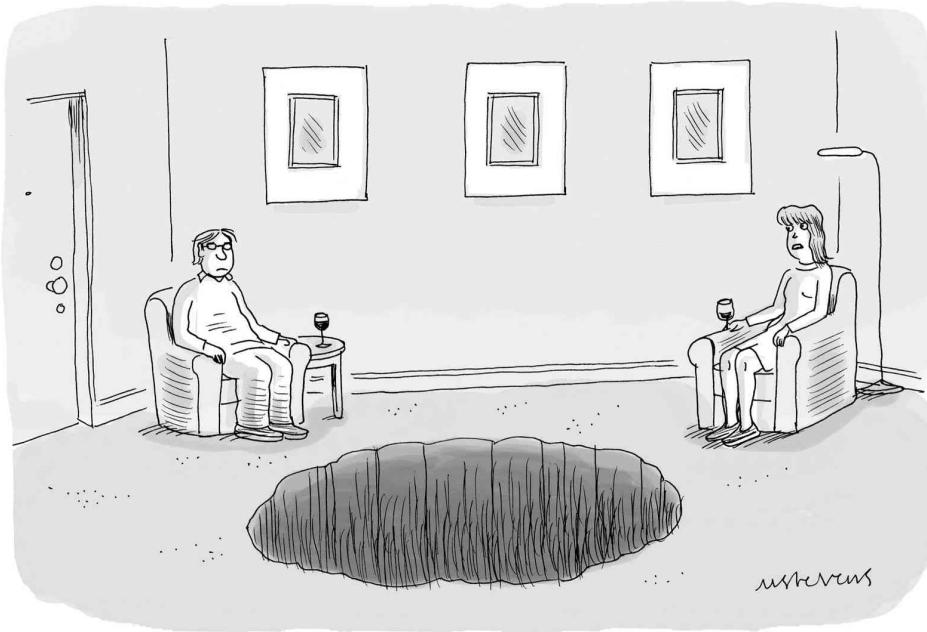


In 2019, a red double-hulled icebreaker known as the S.A. Agulhas II charted a course from Cape Town, South Africa, toward Worsley's coördinates. An expedition led by John Shears, a veteran polar geographer, and directed by Mensun Bound, an Oxford man who has been called "the last of the gentlemen archeologists," was looking for Shackleton's ship, believed to be intact, ten thousand feet down in what Shackleton called "the worst portion of the worst sea in the world." The expedition did not go well. One day, the team's autonomous underwater vehicle, or A.U.V., which conducted the search, went missing. Another time, the Agulhas II got stuck

in ice for three days. “It was an absolute disaster,” Shears recalled, the other day, on a video call from the Agulhas II, which had embarked on a second expedition in search of the Endurance. He wore a gray fleece, and carried a radio on his hip. “To go from that complete and utter failure to this absolute, total success is quite mind-blowing.” Bound, who grew up in the Falkland Islands, and worked in the engine room of a steamship after high school, chimed in: “This is life’s pinnacle for me.” He laughed, then yawned. “We’re running on empty.”

The crew had spent eighteen days hunting for the Endurance. A team of engineers worked in minus-eighteen-degree temperatures on the ship’s back deck to deploy Saab Sabertooth A.U.V.s, which use sonar sensors to create an image of the seafloor. Sea-ice scientists studied the floes; the helicopter team organized a table-tennis competition to pass the time. Sometimes colonies of crabeater seals and emperor penguins approached the ship’s stern. Each night, Bound and Shears met for a cup of Earl Grey tea and a single square of Lindt dark chocolate. Time was running out: “We only had three days before we would’ve had to abandon the search because of the approach of Antarctic winter,” Shears said. “I knew that at any moment the weather could turn.”

Shears, who is sixty, went on, “The night before we found the wreck, we had a music evening. I thought, Shackleton had music evenings. They’d listen to the gramophone, and Hussey”—the ship’s meteorologist—“would play on his banjo. Our people were getting a bit low, and worrying about ‘Are we gonna find her?’ I wanted to try and raise morale.” That night, a cadet sang Alicia Keys’s “Good Job,” and a historian recited Tennyson’s poem “Ulysses.” Someone led the group in “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary,” which Hussey liked to play for the penguins on the sea ice in 1914. The next day, Bound and Shears asked the ship’s crane operator to lower them onto the ice in a rope basket. Shears looked out at the expanse: gray sky, a white iceberg, frozen seawater forever. “Today is a good day,” he said. “I think she’s beneath my feet!” Bound smiled as a penguin danced on the ice. The two returned to the deck. “Literally, as soon as we set foot on the ship, there was the bridge, on the intercom, demanding our presence, immediately,” Bound recalled.



"The pit of despair. That's new, isn't it?"  
Cartoon by Mick Stevens

"My first reaction was I was extremely worried," Shears added. "I was thinking about safety, and I thought we'd lost an A.U.V."

On the bridge, Nico Vincent, who oversees the underwater-vehicle team, held up his iPhone. "Gents, let me introduce the Endurance," he said, displaying a high-resolution sonar image of the wreck. The Endurance rested upright on the seafloor; the ship's wheel was almost perfectly intact, and a pink-and-white sea anemone had fastened itself to the deck railing. Ropes and timber were scattered across the deck. The men erupted into laughter and applause. "I'm not normally lost for words, but I was speechless," Shears said. "It's as if she sunk just yesterday." The water is so cold that there had been no gribble worms to eat the wood. Bound said, "Look at the varnishing! You can see the corking between the seams." That night, Bound and Shears celebrated: *two* cups of tea, and *two* squares of chocolate. In the morning, they set a course for South Georgia Island, where Shackleton was buried.

"It just feels like the proper way to end this project," Bound said.

"We discovered the ship on the fifth of March, 2022. And Shackleton was buried on the fifth of March, 1922," Shears said. "One hundred years later, we found the wreck." ♦

# The Theatre

- History Lessons in “The Chinese Lady”

By [Vinson Cunningham](#)

In the fall of 1834, a trading ship named the Washington sailed into New York Harbor bearing strange cargo—the human kind. Two merchant brothers, Francis and Nathaniel Carnes, had brought from China a teen-age girl who would become known as Afong Moy. She was believed to be the first Chinese woman in the United States. (Men had come as workers before.) The canny Carnes brothers used her as an exotic object. First, she helped them sell goods that they'd brought from China. Later, she became the star of a travelling show.

Now, almost two centuries after her arrival, Afong Moy is the subject of a historically minded play, “The Chinese Lady,” at the Public. The show, written by Lloyd Suh, directed by Ralph B. Peña, and co-produced by the Ma-Yi Theatre Company, is set in a shallow “room” that the Carneses designed as a kind of stage for Afong (Shannon Tyo). She sits in a small chair, exhibiting the differences—cultural and brutally physical—that audiences have come to see. She performs a tea ritual, shows off her use of chopsticks, and demonstrates, by walking in a small circle, what it is like to have bound feet. The room, with its stark simplicity and display-case orientation, looks like a diorama at a natural-history museum.

Afong’s address to the audience is at once ironic and informative. She denigrates forks as “violent and easy” compared with chopsticks, which are “elegant and poetic.” She holds forth, at length, about the legend of tea in China, or, as she calls it, the “accident of tea”: a leaf swept gently by the wind into an emperor’s cup of boiled water produced the first serendipitous batch. Her words can be cutting—it’s clear that this is double-barrelled speech, aimed unsubtly at both the past and the present. Afong, noting that tea, a Chinese invention, has become central to British culture and self-understanding, says, “Is this not comforting? It is, right? That one culture can be so moved by another that it simply cannot resist the urge to appropriate it for themselves?” Part of Suh’s craft is to make the audience constantly aware of its difference from—and, implicitly, its superiority over—those crowds in the nineteenth century. Afong goes through the physical motions for them, but she’s talking to us.

That remark about the British, pointed in its anachronism, prompts disagreement from the only other character in the play, Atung (Daniel K.

Isaac). He's an interpreter who knows both Chinese and English—we're made to understand that Afong's English-language skills are zilch—and, like Afong, was brought to the United States in his youth. With obvious effort, he puts on a toothy smile and conspires in his own self-effacement. When Afong calls him "irrelevant" to her show, he gamely agrees. Between her presentations, which repeat in a circular way, adding context as they go, he sells, with seeming cheer, the Carnes brothers' wares: maps and paintings and statuettes. He's not a star, but he helps the real show—commerce, however achieved—go on.

By degrees, though, we see that the knowledge afforded to Atung through his facility with English has made him more jaded than Afong. In response to her aside about appropriation, he snorts. "It's just . . . well, I think it may be a little more complicated than you're making it sound," he says.

*AFONG:* Atung, you cannot possibly object to such a beautiful example of cultural sharing, for is this not our very purpose in America?

*ATUNG:* There is a difference, Afong Moy. Between sharing, and taking.

Afong asks whether Atung cares about "the hopeful exchange of ideas and practices around the globe," and he responds, "Just doing my job." Their relationship is, by far, the most promising aspect of "The Chinese Lady," but its potential intensities reveal themselves only in spurts, through quick, slightly muffled arguments. When Afong goes to Washington and gains an audience with President Andrew Jackson—in her naïveté, she refers to him as an "emperor"—we see a tender side of her forced friendship with Atung. It's clear that Jackson views Afong as a freak; the President (played in retrospect by Atung) requests to look at her feet and calls them "disgusting and mesmerizing." But Atung uses the art of translation—which he insists is "more like . . . interpretation than direct recreation"—to blunt the force of his dismissiveness, reassuring Afong that her hope to be a cultural ambassador isn't in vain.

There's a tension here: Afong's desire to bridge cultural divides is a delusion. Suh, through Atung, makes clear that the eighteen-thirties crowd is

there only to soak in her “exoticism,” and maybe to buy some home décor. Still, Afong’s main utility in the present, for the putatively more enlightened crowd at the Public, is just as one-dimensional, and perhaps just as futile. Every time she re-starts her act—the repetition dramatizes the passage of time and the inertia of her condition—she explains a bit more about the history of tea, which becomes a sweeping, rapidly summarized history of the travails of the Chinese in America.

We get potted versions of the Opium Wars and the Treaty of Nanking, the building of the transcontinental railroad, and, eventually, the Chinese Exclusion Act. Afong Moy, the play’s centerpiece, falls into the background as capital-“H” history, with all its cruel adjustments, becomes the true star. At one point, Atung abruptly drops out of the show, eliminating its only source of interpersonal intrigue and allowing Afong to complete her transformation into an animate textbook.

“The Chinese Lady” made me think about a well-intentioned but often misguided tendency that is prevalent today, not only in art. History has been whitewashed and skewed for so long that we’ve settled into a pattern that is congealing into a formula—lay out the history, in all its disturbing detail, and surely the correct political or cultural attitude toward those who lived through it will make itself obvious. The problem with this certainty, in the theatre as in journalism and politics, is that the great historical flood threatens to drown out the unique voices of individual people. Trying to “humanize” Afong Moy by surrounding her with facts just adds to the heap of detritus that has already occluded her voice.

Lives portrayed this way become cautionary or exemplary, instead of astoundingly short, strange, and inexplicable. History is real, and its undertow is always felt, but none of us simply melt into it. Sometimes it’s somewhere offstage, exerting its influence in ways we can’t feel.

Several recent plays, with varied success, have tried to wrangle history into artistic form, juicing it for its energy without letting it settle into eclipse. In Aleshea Harris’s exuberant new play, “On Sugarland” (at New York Theatre Workshop), the inhabitants of a remote cul-de-sac witness—and partake in—the ravages of a war. The parallels to America are clear, but Harris gives Sugarland its own ceremonies of remembrance and loss, including a semi-

Pentecostal, funereal holler that made a holy terror announce itself in my body. The play's more straightforward historical references—especially to American-style racial horror—are often confined to monologues, making memory a formal matter that enriches human understanding instead of blocking it out. Plus, “On Sugarland” is plain funny, which art about trouble too seldom tries to be.

Another show, “sandblasted,” by Charly Evon Simpson (which recently closed, at the Vineyard), engaged in an absurd allegory—Black women’s body parts inexplicably fall off. The play was uneven and essayistic, and shied away from the grim horror of its early sight gags, but it tried admirably to get past specifics and, by way of metaphor, into the dark corners of the heart.

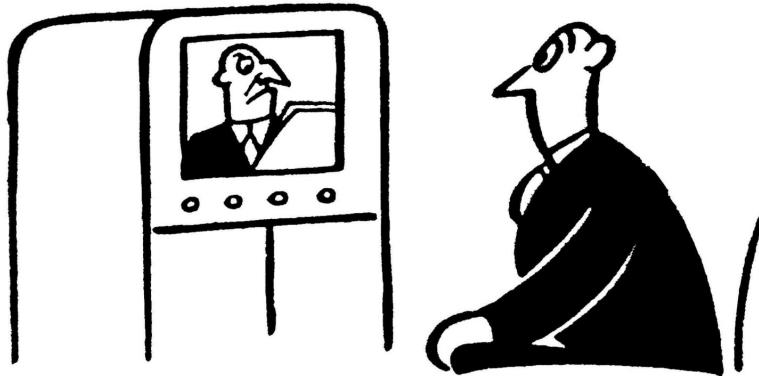
“The Chinese Lady” ’s setting—the very stage on which its real-life subject was perpetually trapped—is an interesting theatrical gesture. Here’s a show for the ages, but also for you. Yet it points to a contemporary problem: without an act of transformation, history can leave its subjects stuck up there, frozen under the lights. ♦

# Ukraine Postcard

- [Vlogging the War](#)

By [Katia Savchuk](#)

Five days after Russia invaded Ukraine, as missiles pummelled Kyiv and a forty-mile-long military convoy menaced the city, a vlogger there named Volodymyr Zolkin phoned a stranger across the border in Russia to deliver some news: “Roman Gavrilovich has been captured.” The young man on the line had already heard that Ukrainian soldiers had detained his friend, and said he was still in shock that his friend had been in combat.



“I served with him. I quit in January,” he told Zolkin, who was streaming the call live on his YouTube channel. “I don’t understand at all how they threw them over there. They’re not ready for war. We just dug and painted; most didn’t even know how to shoot.”

“Are you thinking of doing anything to fight this in your country?” Zolkin asked.

The Russian paused. “Information is being blocked, and nobody sees that people are dying. Everyone thinks that everything is fine, and there’s no war.”

“Are you telling anyone that there *is* a war and everything is *not* fine?”

“I’m spreading the word, but it’s pointless.”

Zolkin, who wore a hoodie and had days-old stubble, sighed. A forty-year-old Kyiv native, he is a freelance videographer who’d made a hobby of political blogging. When Russia attacked, he enlisted in Ukraine’s Territorial Defense Forces, the military’s volunteer branch. He was issued an automatic rifle and made thirty Molotov cocktails.

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Then, on February 26th, he saw that the Ministry of Internal Affairs had launched “Find Your Own,” a channel on the messaging app Telegram that releases a grisly stream of photographs and videos from the front line, purportedly to help with the identification of Russian soldiers: documents and insignia of the dead, closeups of bloated corpses, P.O.W.s in bloody bandages. The channel, which has more than eight hundred thousand subscribers, also contains an automated form that Russians who are searching for relatives can fill out. (U.S. intelligence agencies estimate that as many as four thousand Russian soldiers have died, and Ukraine’s military claims that there are more than two hundred prisoners.) Zolkin got hold of the queries that Russian citizens had submitted and matched some to soldiers named in the Telegram stream. (He says that he got the data through a friend who developed the software.)

As explosions shook Kyiv and rockets killed dozens of civilians in Kharkiv, Zolkin began calling Russians to report the fates of their loved ones and to try to pierce the shroud of disinformation. “If relatives are dying, at least they’ll tell neighbors, friends, family,” he said during his first live stream.

The next day, he asked the mother of a soldier why she supported his deployment to Ukraine. “Wherever his homeland sends him, that’s where he fulfills his duty,” she said.

“And if he gets killed how will you react?”

“For a mother, you don’t even have to ask that question.”

“I’m asking you not as a mother but in general: Why is this happening?”

“You’ll have to ask the people in charge.”

Zolkin told another woman that her son had been captured. “I’m against the war,” she said, explaining that she’d thought that her boy was on a training exercise. “We didn’t want this.”

“Are you going to go out and protest?” Zolkin asked her.

“I would go out anywhere, as long as my child comes home.”

“Then organize and protest, please.”

Zolkin streams from what looks like an office—fluorescent lights, swivel chair, a cabinet on which his Kalashnikov rests. He won’t disclose his location in central Kyiv, or who is with him. After two days, he said that he was considering giving up his effort to sway Russians. “They’re like slaves,” he said. The next day, he was dialling again. “If people share this information among themselves, maybe one of their soldiers will refuse to come kill Ukrainians.”

One woman he called described her quest to learn the whereabouts of her son, also supposedly in training. Officials would only tell her, “They left.”

“At first, we were in a state of fear, anticipation, confusion, and all of that grew into unfathomable anger,” she said. “We just want to bring him home.”

“We want to give them all back,” Zolkin said. When he told the relative of a P.O.W. that their conversation was being broadcast live, the man asked, “And tomorrow, what will happen to me?” (By then, Zolkin had stopped disclosing the names of his interlocutors, after some told him they’d been interrogated by Russia’s security agency.)

Another soldier’s mother told Zolkin, “His grandmother is Ukrainian. We have relatives in Vinnytsia, sitting there trembling. . . . When we learned a war had begun, we wept.”

Zolkin told her that some Russians left comments about the country's needing to show its strength.

"It's twenty years of endless propaganda and censorship," she said. "Forgive us. What can I say?"

After a week of making calls, Zolkin said, "I feel that I influenced the situation as much as I could. Dozens of people said they showed the live stream to Russians who didn't believe or know what was going on." His YouTube following has grown from thirteen thousand to thirty-one thousand, and more than a third of those now tune in from Russia. In the meantime, the authorities there have restricted access to all independent media, along with Twitter and Facebook. Zolkin predicts that YouTube will be next.

"I don't know how long I'll keep doing this," he said. "In the next minute, a Russian cruise missile could fly into my building." ♦

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