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- [A Reporter at Large](#)
- [Annals of Medicine](#)
- [Art](#)
- [Books](#)
- [Comment](#)
- [Crossword](#)
- [Fiction](#)
- [Infrastructure Dept.](#)
- [Maine Postcard](#)
- [Our Local Correspondents](#)
- [Poems](#)
- [Pop Music](#)
- [Profiles](#)
- [Shouts & Murmurs](#)
- [Sketchpad](#)
- [Tables for Two](#)
- [The Art World](#)
- [The Current Cinema](#)
- [Together Again Dept.](#)
- [好物推荐](#)

A Reporter at Large

- [The Incredible Rise of North Korea's Hacking Army](#)

The Incredible Rise of North Korea's Hacking Army

The country's cyber forces have raked in billions of dollars for the regime by pulling off schemes ranging from A.T.M. heists to cryptocurrency thefts. Can they be stopped?

By [Ed Caesar](#)

April 19, 2021



Shimomura was a member of the Yamaguchi-gumi, the largest [yakuza](#) crime family in Japan. When one of his superiors asked him if he wanted to make a pile of fast money, he naturally said yes. It was May 14, 2016, and Shimomura was living in the city of Nagoya. Thirty-two years old and skinny, with expressive eyes, he took pride in his appearance, often wearing a suit and mirror-shined loafers. But he was a minor figure in the organization: a collector of debts, a performer of odd jobs.

The superior assured him that the scheme was low risk, and instructed him to attend a meeting that evening at a bar in Nagoya. (Shimomura, who has since left the Yamaguchi-gumi, asked to be referred to only by his surname.) When Shimomura showed up, he found three other gangsters, none of whom

he knew. Like many yakuza, he is of Korean descent, and two of the others were also Korean-Japanese; for a while, they spoke in Korean. The superior finally arrived, and the five men moved into a private room. Each volunteer was given a plain white credit card. There was no chip on the card, no numbers, no name—just a magnetic strip.

The superior read instructions from a thin manual: early the next morning, a Sunday, they should go to any 7-Eleven and use their white card at the store's A.T.M. They could not use a regular bank A.T.M., or one in another convenience store. The gangsters should each withdraw a hundred thousand yen at a time (about nine hundred dollars) but make no more than nineteen transactions per machine. If anybody made twenty withdrawals from a single A.T.M., his card would be blocked. Withdrawals could start at 5 *a.m.* and continue until 8 *a.m.* The volunteers were told to choose the Japanese language when prompted—an indication, Shimomura realized, that the cards were foreign. After making nineteen withdrawals, they should wait an hour before visiting another 7-Eleven. They could keep ten per cent of the cash. The rest would go to the bosses. Finally, each volunteer was told to memorize a *PIN*.

On Sunday morning, Shimomura rose early, and dressed in jeans, sunglasses, a baseball cap, and an old T-shirt. He walked to a 7-Eleven, where he bought a rice ball and a Coke, to settle himself. He inserted the card into the A.T.M. When the screen asked him which language he preferred, he felt a tremor of nerves while selecting "Japanese." He withdrew a hundred thousand yen, then another, and then another. There was nobody else in the store apart from the guy at the register, who didn't seem interested in him.

After making the first withdrawal, Shimomura printed a receipt. He saw a foreign name on the paper—he couldn't tell what nationality the name was, but he knew it wasn't Japanese—then stuffed the receipt in his pocket. Around 8 *a.m.*, having completed a total of thirty-eight withdrawals at several A.T.M.s in the area, he headed home, waddling because of his bulging pockets: 3.8 million yen is a lot of cash. Shimomura took his ten per cent—about thirty-five hundred dollars—and stashed it in a drawer in his apartment. At 3 *p.m.*, he met his superior to deliver the remaining money.

(Later, he discovered that one of the other gangsters had absconded with the money and the card.)

The superior told Shimomura that he would retain five per cent of what his volunteers brought in and send the rest of the cash to his bosses. When Shimomura handed over his money, he sensed that the superior had enlisted many others. He was right. As the newspapers soon reported, more than sixteen million dollars was withdrawn from roughly seventeen hundred 7-Eleven A.T.M.s across Japan that morning, using data stolen from South Africa's Standard Bank. The newspapers surmised that 7-Elevens had been targeted because they were the only convenience stores in Japan whose cash terminals all accepted foreign cards. Soon after the raids, the withdrawal limit for many A.T.M.s in the country was reduced to fifty thousand yen.

Shimomura deduced that he had been at the bottom of the food chain in the scam. The real money-makers were much higher up. What he did not know, until an interview with this magazine last year, was the identity of the villains at the top of the chain. Shortly after the A.T.M. thefts, according to Japanese police, the ringleader of the 7-Eleven operation crossed from China into North Korea. Shimomura had unwittingly been collecting money for the Korean People's Army, as part of a racket that became known as FASTCash.

In satellite images of East Asia at night, lights blare almost everywhere, except in one inky patch between the Yellow Sea and the Sea of Japan, and between the thirty-eighth and the forty-third parallels: North Korea. Only Pyongyang, the capital, emits a recognizably modern glow. The dark country is one of the last nominally Communist nations in the world—a Stalinist personality cult centered on [Kim Jong Un](#), the peevish, ruthless scion of the dynasty that has ruled North Korea since 1948, after the peninsula was divided. The D.P.R.K. purports to be a socialist autarky founded on the principle of *juche*, or self-reliance. Its borders are closed and its people sequestered. Foreigners find it profoundly difficult to understand what is happening inside North Korea, but it is even harder for ordinary North Korean citizens to learn about the outside world. A tiny fraction of one per cent of North Koreans has access to the Internet.

Yet, paradoxically, the North Korean government has produced some of the world's most proficient hackers. At first glance, the situation is perverse,

even comical—like Jamaica winning an Olympic gold in bobsledding—but the cyber threat from North Korea is real and growing. Like many countries, including the United States, North Korea has equipped its military with offensive and intelligence-gathering cyber weapons. In 2016, for instance, military coders from Pyongyang stole more than two hundred gigabytes of South Korean Army data, which included documents known as Operational Plan 5015—a detailed analysis of how a war with the country’s northern neighbor might proceed, and, notably, a plot to “decapitate” North Korea by assassinating Kim Jong Un. The breach was so egregious that Kim Tae-woo, a former president of the Korea Institute for National Unification, a think tank in Seoul, [told](#) the *Financial Times*, “Part of my mind hopes the South Korean military intentionally leaked the classified documents to the North with the intention of having a second strategy.”



“We’ve got ways of making you stop talking.”
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

North Korea, moreover, is the only nation in the world whose government is known to conduct nakedly criminal hacking for monetary gain. Units of its military-intelligence division, the Reconnaissance General Bureau, are trained specifically for this purpose. In 2013, Kim Jong Un described the men who worked in the “brave R.G.B.” as his “warriors . . . for the construction of a strong and prosperous nation.”

North Korea's cybercrime program is hydra-headed, with tactics ranging from bank heists to the deployment of ransomware and the theft of cryptocurrency from online exchanges. It is difficult to quantify how successful Pyongyang's hackers have been. Unlike terrorist groups, North Korea's cybercriminals do not claim responsibility when they strike, and the government issues reflexive denials. As a result, even seasoned observers sometimes disagree when attributing individual attacks to North Korea. Nevertheless, in 2019, a United Nations panel of experts on sanctions against North Korea [issued a report](#) estimating that the country had raised two billion dollars through cybercrime. Since the report was written, there has been bountiful evidence to indicate that the pace and the ingenuity of North Korea's online threat have accelerated.

According to the U.N., many of the funds stolen by North Korean hackers are spent on the Korean People's Army's weapons program, including its development of nuclear missiles. The cybercrime spree has also been a cheap and effective way of circumventing the harsh sanctions that have long been imposed on the country. In February, John C. Demers, the Assistant Attorney General for the National Security Division of the Justice Department, declared that North Korea, "using keyboards rather than guns," had become a "criminal syndicate with a flag."

North Korea's leaders have been attuned to the nefarious opportunities of a connected world since at least the early nineteen-nineties. A [2019 paper](#) on the regime, written by scholars at Korea University, in Seoul, notes that [Kim Jong Il](#), having watched the United States' military engagement in the two Gulf conflicts, concluded that "modern war is decided by one's conduct of electronic warfare." (Among other tactics, American planes jammed Iraqi radar systems.) In 2005, a Korean People's Army book quoted Kim as saying, "If the Internet is like a gun, cyberattacks are like atomic bombs." His son Kim Jong Un came to power in 2012 and saw the commercial potential of the technology, noting that his army could "penetrate any sanctions." Cyber prowess, he soon declared, was an "all-purpose sword that guarantees the North Korean People's Armed Forces ruthless striking capability, along with nuclear weapons and missiles." Yet the West didn't really wake up to the danger posed by North Korea's cyber forces until after the country executed three spectacular crimes, between 2014 and 2017.

The first was a hack of Sony Pictures. In June, 2014, Sony released a trailer for “[The Interview](#),” a Seth Rogen and James Franco comedy about hapless journalists recruited by the C.I.A. to assassinate Kim Jong Un. A spokesperson for the regime called the film a “wanton act of terror” and promised a “merciless response” if the studio proceeded with releasing the film. Sony pressed ahead. (Rogen joked on Twitter, “People don’t usually wanna kill me for one of my movies until after they’ve paid 12 bucks for it.”)

That November, Sony employees reported that their computers had been hacked, by a group calling itself Guardians of Peace. After many of the company’s computers froze, Sony shut down the rest, stanching the bleed of data that was under way. For a few days, Sony Pictures operated without an electronic network, and in subsequent weeks the hackers leaked embarrassing—and, in some cases, damaging—e-mails, salaries, medical records, movies, and screenplays belonging to the company and its employees. Five upcoming Sony films were put online, as was the script of the next James Bond movie, “[Spectre](#). ” One of the studio heads, Amy Pascal, resigned after the hackers posted e-mails in which she joked with the producer Scott Rudin that at a meeting with President [Barack Obama](#) she’d be smart to bring up movies about slavery.

The F.B.I. soon attributed the attack to North Korean state actors. Pyongyang denied involvement but declared the hack a “righteous deed.” Obama promised to “respond proportionally” to what he called an act of “cyber vandalism.” Michael McCaul, who chaired the House Homeland Security Committee, later told reporters that the U.S. had launched a number of “cyber responses” to the Sony hack, not least a ten-hour Internet outage in North Korea in December, 2014.

If the attack on Sony had a cartoonish quality, the second major North Korean attack was like a caper. Around the time that the hackers were breaking into Sony’s network, members of the same gang—which became known as the Lazarus Group—began scoping out banks in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Accounts linked to the Lazarus Group sent e-mails to an array of targets at Bangladesh Bank and other financial institutions in Dhaka. The messages contained a link to malware that, if clicked, granted the North Koreans access to internal computer systems. In the first two months of

2015, at least three Bangladesh Bank employees were lured by these “spear-phishing” e-mails into downloading the infected attachment. By that March, the hackers had established a “backdoor” within the bank’s electronic communication system, allowing them to send messages to one another in a way that mimicked the bank’s encrypted-communication protocols, and did not alert security to their presence. The hidden hackers then spent ten months learning about Bangladesh Bank’s operations from the inside.

Like many national banks in developing countries, Bangladesh Bank holds a foreign-currency account with the Federal Reserve bank in New York. On February 4, 2016, the Federal Reserve received instructions from Bangladesh Bank to make dozens of payments, totalling nearly a billion dollars, to various accounts, including one in Sri Lanka and four in the Philippines. The requests were made via the *swift* network—a global conduit for money transfers, based near Brussels. In fact, the Lazarus hackers had sent the requests, using stolen usernames and passwords that they had collected while roaming around Bangladesh Bank’s network. In their fraudulent messages to the Federal Reserve, the Lazarus members had incorporated many details from genuine, previously executed *SWIFT* transfers, so that it would not be obvious their own requests were bogus. To further cover their tracks, the hackers had installed a network update that blocked *SWIFT* messages from being read at Bangladesh Bank—a piece of legerdemain that later impressed security experts. It was the equivalent of breaking into a bank’s vault after disabling its surveillance cameras.

Priscilla Moriuchi, a fellow at Harvard’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs who focusses on the North Korean cyber threat, worked at the National Security Agency for twelve years. She told me that the Bangladesh operation was “flashy.” But the robbers not only showed technical finesse, she said; their patient work in the Dhaka heist “signalled a larger tactical and operational maturity.”

The Federal Reserve granted the first five payment requests, a total of a hundred and one million dollars. The next thirty payments, which amounted to eight hundred and fifty million dollars, stalled only because of a stroke of luck. An automated alert system was activated after detecting, in the text of a transfer request, the word “Jupiter,” which happened to be in the address of a Philippines bank branch. This alert was tripped because an unrelated

business, Jupiter Seaways Shipping, in Athens, was on a sanctions-evasion watch list for its activities relating to Iran.

After this and another small irregularity were detected, freeze requests were placed on the recipient accounts. But—as the hackers had anticipated—because the heist was carried out on a holiday weekend in the Philippines the freeze requests weren’t processed for another forty-eight hours. By that time, some eighty-one million dollars had been transferred into a different account. Most of this money was then withdrawn, converted into cash as Philippine pesos, and exchanged for casino chips. At the time, gambling establishments in the Philippines were exempt from anti-money-laundering regulations. It wasn’t a billion dollars, but it was a huge haul.

By the time of North Korea’s third major attack, nobody found the regime’s cyber threat funny anymore. A 2017 ransomware scheme known as WannaCry 2.0 crippled networks in America, Europe, and Asia—including the computer systems of Boeing, Britain’s National Health Service, and Germany’s federal railway. The hackers encrypted computer after computer, then demanded payment, in bitcoin, to unfreeze the systems. North Koreans tailored some ransomware code and then propagated it from one device to the next by appropriating a dangerous piece of American code, known as EternalBlue, that a criminal group calling itself the Shadow Brokers had stolen from the N.S.A. and then posted online.

A twenty-two-year-old hacker and malware expert from England named Marcus Hutchins, who worked out of a bedroom in his parents’ house, analyzed the WannaCry code and figured out how to direct much of the traffic that it was generating into a “sinkhole”—a Web address where the malware would do no harm. After Hutchins realized that he had upended the hack, *Wired* [reported](#), he went upstairs to tell his family. His mother, a nurse, was chopping onions. “Well done, sweetheart,” she said, before returning to her cooking.

The North Korean regime has long been considered a fundamentally criminal enterprise. Joseph Bermudez, Jr., a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, told me that the country’s survival has always been underpinned by a mafia-like “patronage system.” He explained that, even before the Korean War, smugglers and warlords had thrived in the

region. Since the birth of the D.P.R.K., crime has been used to garner not only cash for the regime but also political and social capital. The Kims, Bermudez said, have fostered a “desire to produce revenue to secure pleasure with the leader.”

Until recently, North Korea’s most lucrative state-sponsored criminal operations included the smuggling of cigarettes, the creation of counterfeit money, the trading of endangered species, and the manufacture and distribution of laboratory-made illegal drugs such as methamphetamine. In the seventies, North Korean diplomats who were posted abroad often trafficked narcotics. In the eighties, North Korean counterfeiters created a remarkably plausible hundred-dollar “supernote.” (In 2006, the Secret Service estimated that it had removed fifty million dollars’ worth of fake notes from circulation; seven years later, the U.S. Treasury redesigned its hundred-dollar bill with extra security features.) Many traditional criminal revenue streams continue to flow back to Pyongyang, but in the past decade the state’s focus has pivoted to the Internet.



You're just lucky you don't have your whole life looming in front of you.
Cartoon by Barbara Smaller

The range and creativity of North Korea’s digital crime spree caught many off guard. It wasn’t just that Pyongyang’s cyber warriors could compromise computer networks around the world; they showed real innovation in exploiting new technologies. Luke Dembosky, an attorney who advises

companies on Internet-security issues, first confronted North Korea's cyber threat at the time of the Sony hack, when he was the Deputy Assistant Attorney General in the Justice Department's National Security Division. Then he witnessed the Bangladesh heist—a striking leap in sophistication. "It was stunning for someone like me, despite years in this business, to see a relatively isolated nation-state actor not simply copying someone else's methodology or scheme but actually breaking new ground," he said.

Priscilla Moriuchi, the Harvard analyst, told me that, in retrospect, the D.P.R.K.'s turn to cybercrime had been an organic development. "North Koreans understand criminality," she said. "They're integrated in many, many places with this criminal and gray underground world. And so it's natural to overlay this new technology, the Internet. It connects criminal organizations and smugglers with one another."

We discussed the Japanese A.T.M. scam of 2016. Shimomura may not have known his ultimate boss, but the yakuza had been smuggling illegal products out of North Korea for decades. Around the turn of the millennium, North Korea supplied about forty per cent of Japan's methamphetamines. So, if cyber scammers in Pyongyang needed boots on the ground to withdraw cash in Nagoya, they could make a request, and it would soon be answered.

Moriuchi also noted that, although the North Korean hackers were technically accomplished, their more important attribute was a felonious *savoir-faire*. In the Bangladesh Bank case, the robbers waited seventeen months after their first reconnaissance in Dhaka before they pulled off the heist. They had determined the ideal weekend and holiday to strike; they had planned how to move cash quickly out of recipient banks; and they had chosen institutions that had particularly lax know-your-customer protocols. Once they executed the theft, they used local contractors in the Philippines to launder their pesos, effectively hiding the money trail. Their success was predicated on knowing not only how computers work but how people do. "They're *smart*," Moriuchi told me. "It's this connection of the virtual world and the physical that's so impressive."

In most countries, hackers develop their skills by experimenting on computers at home when they are teen-agers. Marcus Hutchins, who dismantled WannaCry, was one such high-school recluse. But North Korea's

talent in the cybercrime field is grown in a hothouse. Few families own computers, and the state jealously guards Internet access.

The process by which North Korean hackers are spotted and trained appears to be similar to the way Olympians were once cultivated in the former Soviet bloc. Martyn Williams, a fellow at the Stimson Center think tank who studies North Korea, explained that, whereas conventional warfare requires the expensive and onerous development of weaponry, a hacking program needs only intelligent people. And North Korea, despite lacking many other resources, “is not short of human capital.”

The most promising students are encouraged to use computers at schools. Those who excel at mathematics are placed at specialized high schools. The best students can travel abroad, to compete in such events as the International Mathematical Olympiad. Many winners of the Fields Medal, the celebrated prize in mathematics, placed highly in the contest when they were teen-agers.

Students from North Korea often perform impressively at the I.M.O. (It is also the only country to have been disqualified for suspected cheating: the D.P.R.K. team was ejected twice from the competition, in 1991 and in 2010.) At the 2019 I.M.O., held in Bath, England, Kuk Song Hyon scored perfectly on the first five of six challenges, and was tied for first place with students from China, South Korea, Poland, and the U.S. until the final problem, when he received a low score.

Two colleges in Pyongyang, Kim Chaek University of Technology and Kim Il Sung University, vacuum up the most talented teen-agers from the specialized math and computer high schools and then teach them advanced code. These institutions often outperform American and Chinese colleges in the International Collegiate Programming Contest—a festival of unsurpassed and joyful nerdery. At the 2019 I.C.P.C. finals, held in Porto, Portugal, Kim Chaek University placed eighth, ahead of Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, and Stanford.

Costin-Andrei Onicescu, who represented the University of Oxford at the 2019 I.C.P.C., and who began programming competitively in his native Romania at the age of ten, told me that the I.C.P.C. was not only fun and

sociable but also a recruiting ground for big technology companies. Huawei sponsored the 2019 finals. Contestants, Oncescu said, have gone on to do impressive coding work. He mentioned Nikolai Durov, a member of the championship-winning St. Petersburg State University teams of 2000 and 2001, who subsequently co-founded the Russian social-media apps VK and [Telegram](#).

Oncescu added that the North Koreans had stayed in the same hotel as the other contestants in Porto. But he hadn't seen them socialize with students from other countries. He said that, although the competitions tested coding fluency, the true test was of a more general problem-solving capability. It often came down to pure math. To thrive, every team needed at least one "very math-oriented" person, Oncescu said. Students working in teams of three were asked to create code that provided a solution to an abstract puzzle, but only one team member at a time wrote the code.

The coding challenges at the 2019 I.C.P.C. were fiendishly difficult. An example: "Your university's board game club just hosted a checkers tournament, and you were assigned to take notes on the games. Unfortunately, while walking home, you dropped all of your papers into a puddle! Disaster! Much of what you wrote is now unreadable; all you have left are some lists of moves played in the middle of various games. Is there some way you can reconstruct what happened in those games?" The code that the students built needed to solve this problem in no more than a second. Oncescu said that, to win the competition, you had to work fast, collaboratively, and creatively. "The hardest part isn't the coding," he told me. "It's the *thinking*."

He added that there was a lot of overlap between contestants at these kinds of competitions and the "next generation" of top programmers and researchers. He could also imagine how such competitions might develop the skills of a criminal hacker, because "once you've found something weird about the way a system works, then it does become a mathematical problem in trying to take advantage of that." The coding and the analytical skills on display at such events were like the Force in the "[Star Wars](#)" movies: it could be used for the light side, or for the dark.

According to many estimates, about seven thousand North Koreans work in the country’s cyber program. Employees are split between the General Staff Department of the military, which assists the Army’s operations, and the Reconnaissance General Bureau, which is akin to the Office of the Director of National Intelligence in the U.S. The 2019 Korea University paper featured an analysis of how hackers were divided within these silos. The General Staff Department has among its subgroups the chillingly named Enemy Collapse Sabotage Bureau, which is responsible for “information and psychological warfare.”

Most of the criminal work is performed by the Reconnaissance General Bureau. According to the Korea University researchers, a section of the R.G.B. known as Unit 180 is responsible for “conducting cyber operations to steal foreign money from outside North Korea.” The Lazarus Group is the best-known unit of North Korean commercial hackers, but this entity may include—or have been partially replaced by—other groups, which are known to Western law-enforcement and intelligence agencies by such names as the BeagleBoyz, *Hidden Cobra*, and *APT38*. (“*APT*” stands for “advanced persistent threat.”) Nobody seems to have a firm grasp on how many people work for each group or which group makes the most money.

Another tantalizing question is where, geographically, North Korea’s hackers do their work. Moriuchi, the Harvard fellow, has spent years tracking the metadata of North Korean Internet users. Between 2017 and 2020, she looked at North Korea’s tiny online footprint. At any moment, as few as a couple of hundred I.P. addresses in the country might be in use. From this and other clues, she concluded that most of the country’s coders were working outside North Korea, in China and parts of Southeast Asia. Certainly, Moriuchi said, most of North Korea’s new I.T. graduates appeared to spend a period of time abroad in such countries, where they learned valuable “real world” skills. These foreign units were, in essence, both profit generators and training grounds.



"He's older and fatter, but that's definitely the same guy in the painting."
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

Recently, an American analyst showed me the digital footprint of a cell that, he ascertained, consisted of North Koreans working in the border town of Dandong, China. The unit's work was seemingly anodyne—there was no evidence that it engaged in malicious hacking. Communicating through the e-mail address bravemaster619@hotmail.com, the group solicited for freelance gigs on coder sites, in almost flawless English. Bravemaster619's profile on GitHub reads, "Wanna have your own website? Wanna add some features or customize the design of your existing system? Wanna improve your site to the next level? Hold my seasoned development skills!" The North Korean workers in Dandong did not advertise their nationality—presumably because of the sanction provisions—and appeared to charge competitive rates.

Last year, I spoke to Lee Hyun Seung, a thirty-five-year-old who defected from North Korea in 2014 and now lives in the United States. He had worked in a trading business owned by the D.P.R.K. government, and in that capacity he had lived for a time in Dalian, China. He said that he had no special knowledge of the hacking program, but that when he worked in Dalian he knew there were three teams of North Korean "I.T. workers" based in the city. Lee told me that he once visited a so-called hacker dorm in Dalian. The men there lived four to a room—sometimes six. The ten or so

men who worked in one such unit told Lee that they spent most of their time making “big money” by designing mobile-phone video games for the Japanese, South Korean, and Chinese markets. A Chinese intermediary sold their products. Lee suggested that, though this coding work was mundane, the North Koreans he met rarely wanted to be promoted—because a promotion would mean returning to Pyongyang.

This anecdotal evidence was buttressed by another defector, who runs a South Korea-based clandestine radio network whose broadcast signal penetrated North Korea. He told me that he was familiar with the D.P.R.K.’s cyber program, and, as he understood it, the work performed by North Korean I.T. workers outside the country tended to be “low level.” The stars of the program either were kept in Pyongyang or were returned there to do their most important government work—a tactic that prevented hackers engaged in high-priority operations from being caught while abroad. The defector told me that the best hackers in Pyongyang, who were involved in schemes that collected millions of dollars’ worth of foreign currency, were rewarded with cars or comfortable houses, or with other material benefits known as Kim Jong Un’s Special Gifts, which were impossible for ordinary citizens to obtain. This information, the defector said, came from a friend in North Korea whom he could “absolutely trust,” but who could not speak with me without risking his life.

An American investigator of sanction breaches, who works at a prominent N.G.O. but was not authorized to talk on the record, was similarly convinced that the élite cadre of North Korean hackers was based in Pyongyang. Most likely, these operatives used foreign V.P.N.s—virtual private networks—to access the Internet from outside the country, thus masking their location.

John Demers, of the Justice Department, suspects that the Chinese state assists with North Korean cybercrime, because it “does not want North Korea to fail.” The American investigator of sanction breaches noted that “North Korea is connected to the world through essentially Russian and Chinese infrastructure,” adding, “There are strong indications that Russia and China are well aware of what’s going on and actively have facilitated some of it.” A certain amount of legal and illegal trade continues across North Korea’s borders with Russia and China, both of which have historically been allies. According to the U.S. Cybersecurity and

Infrastructure Security Agency, no financial institution in Russia or China has been targeted by North Korean hackers.

The most common target of North Korea's cyber army is its sworn enemy, South Korea, which has suffered many hundreds of major attacks. Recently, I spoke to Simon Choi, a security-intelligence analyst who lives in Seoul. In 2008, while performing mandatory military service, he learned about North Korea waging a cyberattack on the South Korean Army—an unsuccessful attempt by the Reconnaissance General Bureau to deploy malware in order to steal highly classified weapons secrets. Choi became fascinated with the threat posed by North Korean hackers. “I realized the cyber war was *real*,” he said.

After completing his military service, Choi took a job in online security. He also began to organize a team of volunteers in South Korea, called the IssueMakers Lab, which pores over malware attributed to the North Koreans, in order to understand it better. The group now numbers ten people, and includes men and women. Although the members are amateurs, not spies, their assessments are considered to be rigorous and acute. In his day job, Choi trawls the dark Web, investigating drug deals and other crimes on behalf of law-enforcement agencies; after hours, he thinks about hackers in Pyongyang.

Choi told me that about eleven hundred North Koreans have written malicious scripts. He showed me some malware code, written in 2016, that had been designed to cover the tracks of a North Korean bank heist. The malware consisted of rows of seemingly random letters and numbers flowing down a page, in pairs. In the margins were some recognizable English-language words—“Windows,” “everyone”—connected by cryptic punctuation. Choi could fluently and sensitively parse all this. Chinese and American coders were the best in the world, he said, but Russians and North Koreans were tied for second. Of all the malware that Choi had examined, he reserved his greatest admiration for the Stuxnet worm, which had been used in a successful joint Israeli-American attack on Iran’s nuclear centrifuges, in 2010. He spoke about the Stuxnet code in the way that an art historian might discuss “The Night Watch”: it was “elegant,” “precise,” “sophisticated.” Choi told me that North Korean code was “masculine” in its brute concision: “Very simple, very practical, and they always go straight for

their aim and goal.” He added, “The key to their success is their relentlessness—they just attack, endlessly.”

Sometimes, he explained, coders embedded signatures or initials into their scripts. It was a form of tagging, or maybe even bragging. He had occasionally noticed the initials of former International Math Olympiad competitors in malware that he examined. Once, when examining code related to a 2013 spear-phishing attempt on I.C.I.C.I., an Indian bank, Choi noticed a tag, `kut_rsc1994`, belonging to a coder who had studied at Kim Chaek University. (“KUT” is an established tag for the school.) On further inspection, Choi came to believe that the coder was Ryu Song Chol, who had won a silver medal for North Korea at the I.M.O., in Amsterdam, in 2011. Later, Ryu posted this tag on a hacking Web site, seemingly confirming the link.

Choi was circumspect about attributing coding tags to real-life people: who could know for sure which person was behind which persona? The North Koreans could well have swapped identities. He felt confident, though, that he had never examined code written by a North Korean woman. I laughed when he told me this. How could he possibly know? “These are all guys,” he repeated. North Korea, he said, remained a traditional, male-dominated society, and it was extremely unlikely that the Reconnaissance General Bureau would train women for such work.

The IssueMakers often gave nicknames to the most accomplished North Korean hackers, although Choi wouldn’t tell me the names of anybody currently working for Pyongyang. I wondered whether he had ever felt as if he understood these coders as people. “I think we have a mutual awareness,” he told me. “They must see what we analyze as well, because we publish it. That’s my feeling—that we are both aware of each other.”

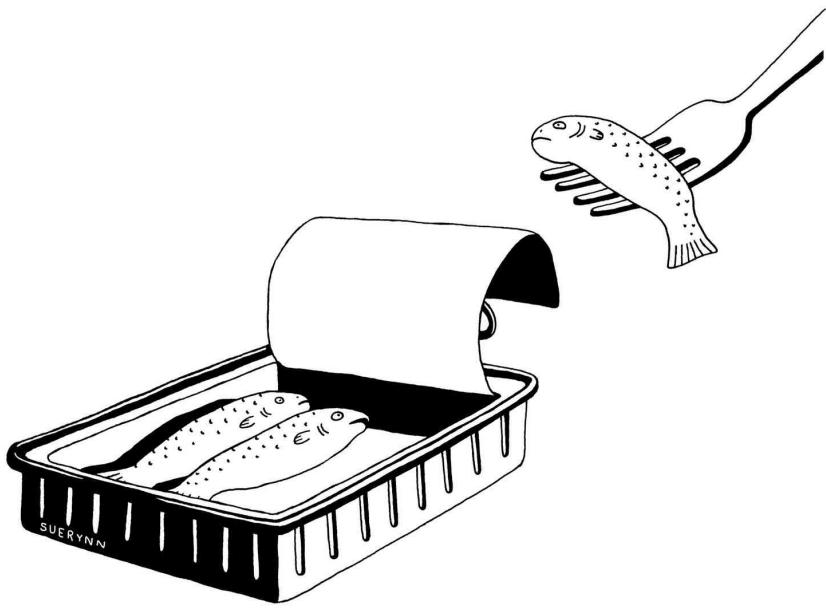
The Internet, to abuse John Donne, makes one little room an everywhere. North Korea’s hackers have conducted operations in more than a hundred and fifty countries. In November, 2018, a programmer in Santiago, Chile, was recruited for a high-level position at a foreign firm. The programmer, who worked at Redbanc, a network that connects all the A.T.M.s in Chile, was invited via LinkedIn to apply for a position developing software at Global Processing Centre, a third-party-payment processor in St. John’s,

Antigua. The position was lucrative and part time: the programmer could supplement his income without impinging on his work for Redbanc.

Global Processing Centre's job offer came from someone purporting to be Justin Stuart-Young, the company's chief information officer. The Redbanc programmer was directed to a private e-mail address for Stuart-Young. The courtship progressed to a video interview, in which Stuart-Young interviewed the programmer in Spanish. After at least three more interviews, during which Stuart-Young said that he was looking forward to visiting Chile someday to meet in person, the Redbanc employee was asked to download and run a program that generated a PDF of a résumé. He did as instructed, but he never heard from Stuart-Young again. (The Redbanc programmer has since resigned, and the company would not identify him.)

While the programmer and Stuart-Young were corresponding, a cybersecurity professional named Juan Roa Salinas started in a new role at Redbanc. As he inspected the company's internal network, he saw signs that it had been compromised. There were unusual connections to Internet domain names that he would not have expected to see on the network.

A voracious reader of tech news, Roa had been fascinated by the North Korean attack on Bangladesh Bank and had studied the activities of the Lazarus Group and *APT38*. He had learned about North Korea's FASTCash attacks, such as the one deployed in Japan. As he investigated the "strange behavior" in the Redbanc network, he and members of the company's response team concluded that the business was under attack from a nation-state actor, most likely from Pyongyang. Among other clues, a Redbanc terminal had inexplicably looked up an I.P. address in North Korea. Roa, judging that the threat was severe, recommended that Redbanc shut off its Internet for a week.



"Guess we better find a subletter by the end of the month."
Cartoon by Suerynn Lee

Roa remembers that his bosses found his request “shocking,” but they complied. An internal inquiry after the shutdown revealed that the company had indeed been in the middle of an attempted FASTCash breach. Such assaults normally take several months to execute. The hackers had first used a third-party criminal group for “social engineering.” The social engineers had mimicked a job offer from a real company in Antigua, using fake but convincing e-mail addresses and even impersonating an executive, Justin Stuart-Young, using a Spanish-speaking actor who roughly fit his description. (When I spoke to the real Stuart-Young recently, it was the first time he had heard of the Chile attack, and of his identity being stolen.)

When the Redbanc programmer had run the infected program, it had activated a “dropper,” which granted hackers remote control of his computer. The hackers then made a series of lateral moves across other computers on the company’s network. Their goal was to compromise Microsoft’s Active Directory system at Redbanc, which connects users with resources. By the time Roa noticed the intrusion, the hackers had not yet achieved this objective. The next stage of the operation would have been to gain control of the mainframe at Redbanc, and then to initiate the FASTCash attack itself, which would use malware to conceal fraudulent withdrawal

requests made at A.T.M.s. Roa purged the hackers from the Redbanc network before they could overtake the mainframe.

After the attempted raid, Redbanc did what many companies subjected to such threats do: it kept quiet and improved its security. The FASTCash attack at Redbanc became public only because Felipe Harboe, then a Chilean senator, heard about it at a meeting of security experts and decided to tweet the news. Harboe told me last fall that he had broken Redbanc's silence because South American institutions were now under constant threat from North Korean and Russian hacking groups. Redbanc officials, he said, were "surprised and upset" that Harboe had exposed their breach, but he felt that the problem required more transparency. There had been other A.T.M. attacks in Chile, and ransomware schemes—in which hackers take control of a computer network and demand a fee for returning systems to normal—were even more common. Many ransomware operations started like the one at Redbanc, relying on a single weak point of entry.

The North Koreans' failure at Redbanc was only a minor inconvenience. The hackers' strategy is to catch many fish by casting a wide net. The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency has noted that, around the time of the attack on Redbanc, North Korean actors set in motion successful FASTCash assaults on dozens of banks in Asia and Africa, stealing tens of millions of dollars. In a single breach in 2017, money was simultaneously withdrawn from A.T.M.s in more than thirty countries.

Priscilla Moriuchi believes that in the past two years the aesthetic of North Korean cybercriminals has become subtler. In addition to targeting big financial institutions, they have developed a faster, less flamboyant "operational tempo." She explained, "They've managed to routinize financial fraud, attacks on smaller financial institutions and regular citizens. They're much more like a normal criminal group now."

A report published in March by the U.N. panel of experts noted that one new avenue for North Korean cybercriminals is the theft of military information, either to sell or to harvest for the country's weapons program. But the most reliable money-maker for North Korea has become the theft of cryptocurrency.

Jesse Spiro, who is in charge of policy initiatives at Chainalysis, a private company that investigates cryptocurrency-related crime, told me recently that North Korean hackers have stolen at least \$1.75 billion in digital coins from trading exchanges. This revenue stream alone could cover about ten per cent of North Korea's total defense budget.

North Korea's crypto-exchange hacks have a relatively straightforward methodology. Exchanges that trade bitcoin and other types of [cryptocurrency](#) typically hold escrow accounts full of their customers' coins. These storage facilities are known as "hot wallets," because they are connected to the Internet. (A more secure but laborious method of storing coins is in an offline "cold wallet" containing, say, QR-code printouts that contain the keys to blockchain accounts.) Hackers from North Korea often gain access to an exchange's internal systems using the same types of manipulations involved in the failed attempt in Chile. Real-sounding people propose real-sounding schemes, then persuade a network user at a targeted company to download an infected document. Typically, one or two admin-level members at a cryptocurrency exchange have access to a hot wallet's private keys. If hackers can compromise a sufficiently senior figure, they can reach the wallet and steal its coins.

Tom Robinson, the chief scientist at the blockchain-analytics firm Elliptic, who tracks the proceeds of cryptocurrency hacks for governmental and private clients, told me that cryptocurrency trades have become attractive targets for North Korean hackers: "Once the funds have moved out of the exchange, you can't reverse those transactions, like you can maybe with a traditional bank payment. Once they're gone, they're gone. And there's no intermediary, there's no controller of bitcoin, who you can go to and say, 'Those funds are stolen. Give them back to me.' It's completely decentralized. It can also be fairly anonymous—you don't need to enact the scheme through accounts linked to your identity."

Robinson said that one of the most successful fake personas used by the Lazarus Group was Waliy Darwish—a man who supposedly worked for a cryptocurrency company, based in Michigan, called Celas L.L.C. The Lazarus Group invented both Darwish and Celas. LinkedIn profiles and other pages related to the persona and to the company are still active. On LinkedIn, Darwish poses as a graduate of the Rotterdam University of

Applied Sciences and says that his interests include Rolls-Royces. He also claims, ungrammatically but somewhat truthfully, to “know how to act the blockchain in cryptocurrency.” In February, an F.B.I. [indictment](#) against three suspected North Korean hackers noted that some malicious software created by the Lazarus Group and purporting to be a cryptocurrency-trading program was called Celas Trade Pro.

In the spring of 2018, the Darwish-Celas mirage was convincing enough to bait employees of a cryptocurrency exchange in Hong Kong into downloading infected software. (An investigation into this operation continues, and investigators believe that confirming the identity of the exchange might damage an ongoing inquiry.) Within a few weeks of the malware’s installation, the hackers had stolen about ten thousand eight hundred bitcoins from the exchange’s hot wallet. The coins, then worth around ninety-four million dollars, would now be worth more than half a billion dollars.

The money-laundering patterns that typically follow such raids are dizzying. Elliptic has traced what happened to the coins from the Hong Kong-exchange hack. Robinson explained that all the stolen coins were forwarded to a wallet maintained by the hackers, then split into dozens of small amounts and sent, through different routes, to another exchange. Such an atomized transfer of money is known as a “peel chain.” When Robinson showed me a diagram of the dispersal of coins, I was reminded of an airline-magazine route map in which several lines sprout from one dot and then converge on another.

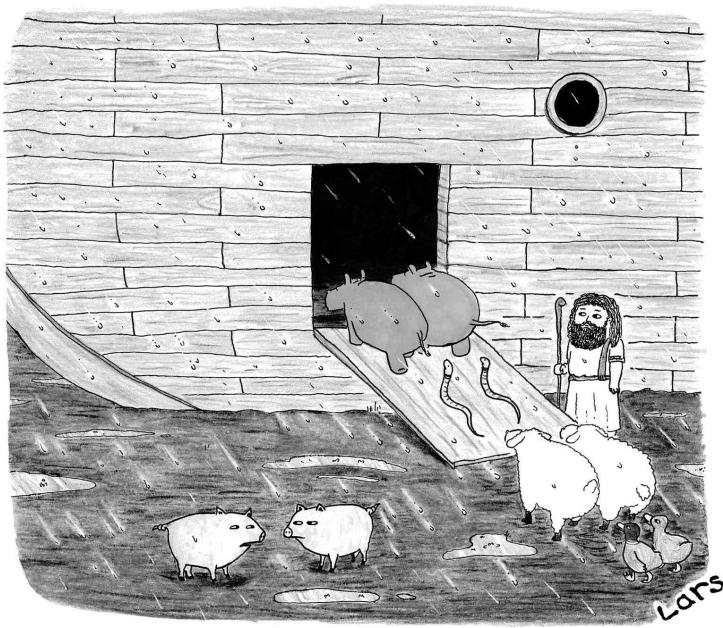
A peel chain is designed to outwit automatic alerts, which search for the transit of a precise volume of cryptocurrency. The stolen coins were sent to two Chinese men, Tian Yinyin and Li Jiadong, who had opened accounts on other exchanges, including one in the U.S., using fake pictures and fake names. They then cashed out the coins and transferred the money to Chinese banks. According to the U.S. Treasury, several financial institutions in China offer accounts to North Koreans, or to front companies that have relationships with Pyongyang. Last year, Tian and Li were [indicted](#) in the United States for allegedly laundering “over a hundred million dollars’ worth of stolen cryptocurrency to obscure transactions for the benefit of actors in North Korea” between 2017 and 2019. They remain at large.

In 2019, the U.N. listed dozens of cryptocurrency exchanges that had been hacked by the North Koreans. One exchange in Seoul, Bithumb, was successfully raided four times—a tremendous failure of security. Since the U.N. report was published, the refinement of the attacks has only deepened, as has the skill with which the proceeds of crime are laundered. According to Jesse Spiro, of Chainalysis, fifteen cryptocurrency heists have been reported so far this year. It is too early to say how many will be attributed to North Korea.

Spiro noted that the authorities were increasingly on the lookout for such schemes. Awareness of peel chains, for example, has become widespread; the tactic is “relatively easy to trace if you have blockchain forensics or analysis capabilities,” he said. But new obfuscation techniques have emerged. Professional money launderers offer such services as CoinJoin, which mixes stolen and non-stolen coins to confuse forensic analysts.

If one compared the industry and the manpower that went into planning and executing the Bangladesh heist with the almost casual way in which digital tokens are often stolen, it would be evident why the North Koreans have come to favor such exchange heists. Spiro told me that private forensics firms and law-enforcement agencies were finally addressing the problem with the seriousness it deserved. Understanding how to track cryptocurrency is an increasingly important skill, not least because North Korean hackers, and members of many criminal gangs, accept ransomware payments in digital currency. Between 2019 and 2020, according to [Chainalysis](#), ransomware incidents rose by more than three hundred per cent.

Even if other laundering techniques become well known and stolen coins could be readily flagged, the key to making such heists unprofitable is to stop thieves from cashing out. This is unlikely anytime soon, Spiro said, because of the lax practices of certain Chinese, Eastern European, and Southeast Asian exchanges. At a press conference to announce the February indictments against the three North Korean hackers, John Demers, of the Justice Department, made a pointed reference to such facilitators, saying that it was past time “for Russia and China, as well as any other countries whose entities or nationals play a role in the D.P.R.K. revenue-generation efforts, to take action.”



"I just don't know if I'm ready to take mass transit yet."
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

What good will such statements do? The U.S. has failed for a decade to find an effective response to the North Korean cyber threat. Luke Dembosky, the former Deputy Assistant Attorney General, worked with Sony throughout the 2014 crisis. At the time, some security experts doubted that North Korea was capable of such an attack. Dembosky told me that “we would not have sent Obama to the podium lightly,” but when the President did speak it was in measured terms. North Korea was accused of “vandalism” instead of a more serious crime. David Maxwell, a former Special Forces colonel who is now a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a conservative think tank, told me that it was hard to know what to do about a country behaving like a gang: “North Korea often operates below the threshold of a strategic response. Something like the Sony hack—that was an attack on a company. It wasn’t something that our government *defended* against.”

Several government agencies—including the F.B.I., the N.S.A., and the Secret Service—are now working aggressively to address the threat. The F.B.I.’s indictments against hackers from the Lazarus Group outline the unit’s alleged crimes in detail. One indictment noted that the hackers had “attempted to steal or extort more than \$1.3 billion” from “entertainment companies, financial institutions, cryptocurrency companies, online casinos,

cleared defense contractors, energy utilities, and individuals.” The F.B.I. also recently arrested and charged a Canadian-American man who allegedly laundered money for the North Koreans.

Similarly, an American blockchain expert named Virgil Griffith was indicted in January, 2020, in the Southern District of New York, for contravening U.S. sanctions against North Korea. Griffith had travelled to Pyongyang in 2019 to give a speech at a cryptocurrency conference. The [complaint](#) against Griffith alleges that he was instructed by his North Korean hosts to focus his presentation on “the potential money laundering and sanction evasion applications of cryptocurrency and blockchain technology.” Griffith has pleaded not guilty.

The unsealed indictments are a boon to journalists and researchers, but the chances of any North Korean hacker being prosecuted successfully are vanishingly slim. There is, however, a growing recognition in America of the threat presented by cybercriminals. President [Joe Biden](#) has secured ten billion dollars for federal agencies dealing with the issue of cybercrime. A government adviser told me that one major remedy being considered is the establishment of new protocols that will allow agencies to work much more closely with private security companies, which often perform the best cybercrime forensic work.

The national-security threat posed by North Korean hackers is less obvious than the one posed by Russian hackers, who have notoriously interfered in U.S. elections. The Obama Administration’s special adviser on cybersecurity, Michael Daniel, is now the president and C.E.O. of the Cyber Threat Alliance, a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the sharing of intelligence about the threats posed by online crime. He told me that North Korea presented unique difficulties for law-enforcement agencies, not only because its criminal activity was mixed up with its intelligence-gathering capabilities but also because its gangsterism now interferes with crucial networks in other countries, such as health-care operations. “When you get ransomware hitting medical systems during a pandemic, that’s no longer just a monetary threat,” Daniel said.

North Korea’s cybercrime perpetrators often seem like faceless, amoral criminals. They also seem like victims. Costin-Andrei Oncescu, the Oxford

programmer, was saddened to think of brilliant young North Korean minds being wasted in schemes to rob banks and install ransomware. But it is almost impossible to learn the stories of people from the program. David Maxwell, the former Special Forces colonel, told me that the few defectors from the Reconnaissance General Bureau's cyber units had generally immigrated to South Korea, where they had immediately fallen under the supervision of the country's intelligence services. Occasionally, however, it is possible to glimpse the path imposed on Kim Jong Un's "brave warriors."

Ri Jong Yol was a mathematics prodigy. He was born into an academic family outside Pyongyang in 1998. By the time he entered first grade, at the age of seven, he had been studying daily with a private tutor, and had already mastered the entire elementary-school syllabus. In middle school, he entered and won a national mathematics competition, and he was selected to attend a high school for gifted children. At fifteen, he was the youngest member of North Korea's team at the 2013 International Math Olympiad, in Santa Marta, Colombia.

Ri was a tall, gregarious, good-looking boy who liked playing volleyball and Ping-Pong. Unlike his teammates at the I.M.O., he enjoyed meeting the kids from other countries. He saw foreign teen-agers accessing the Internet in their spare time and wondered if he might give it a try. He had never been online. (The few computer terminals that he'd seen in village schools weren't connected to the Internet, and he'd never even seen the machines turned on, because the schools rarely had electricity.) In the end, Ri did not submit to temptation. He knew that he would be severely punished if he was caught.

Ri won a silver medal at his first I.M.O.—an exceptional result for such a young contestant. In 2014 and 2015, he made the team again, travelling to Cape Town, South Africa, and then to Chiang Mai, Thailand. He won silver medals at both events. Ri remembers how happy he was seeing other contestants who returned year after year. He also struck up friendships with South Korea's team members, with whom he shared a language. They were meant to be his enemies, but Ri couldn't see the harm in talking to them.

After he returned from the 2015 I.M.O., an acquaintance who worked at a local Workers' Party office told him that senior figures from a secretive

government agency were interviewing Ri's friends and relatives. He instantly knew what was about to happen: the state would harness his talent for numbers by giving him a job as a hacker, or as a functionary in the nuclear program. Apparently, the state had decided that he didn't need to go to college before he began a career of secretive labor. The prospect filled him with dread. Working in the most guarded sections of the military meant that you were cut off from society. He would have no freedom whatsoever. He also realized that if he were instructed to join such an agency he could not refuse.

Ri knew that he could compete in the I.M.O. until he was eighteen, which meant that he could participate in one more competition before being recruited: an event at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. The North Korean mathletes were not heavily supervised at the competition, and Ri was on friendly terms with the teachers who accompanied the team. After winning another silver medal, Ri took his chance. He walked out of the dorm where he was staying and hailed a cab to the airport, where—with the help of a friendly airline worker—he found the address of the South Korean consulate. He took another taxi there and told a South Korean diplomat that he wished to defect. He then spent seventy days in Hong Kong, waiting nervously while the South Korean delegation negotiated his safe passage to Seoul. (After Ri's defection, North Korea suspended its I.M.O. program for two years, and now sends a government agent with the team, to insure that nobody escapes.)

Ri is now twenty-three and goes by a South Korean name. He is studying mathematics at Seoul National University. He has not seen his parents since he defected. In a recent conversation, he told me that he had developed his escape plan without any outside help, but he may have been protecting his loved ones. In North Korea, the families of defectors often meet grim fates. Ri said that he had no regrets about leaving his native country. Since his escape, he has considered how his talent would have been squandered had he stayed in Pyongyang. In Seoul, he saw only possibilities. He told me, with excitement, that he was hoping to spend a year in the United States, on an exchange program.

One of the first things that Ri did after he landed in South Korea in 2016 was go online. With the help of a mentor, he set up a Gmail account. The mentor

then encouraged him to make his first Google search. He was momentarily at a loss. In North Korea, where information was strictly controlled, Ri's curiosity had been insatiable. But now, with the world seemingly at his fingertips, he felt overwhelmed by choice. There was so much to know. Ri opened a search box and typed “ 北韓”: “North Korea.” ♦

An early printing of this story misstated the approximate latitude of the border between North and South Korea. An earlier version misstated the name of the think tank the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

Annals of Medicine

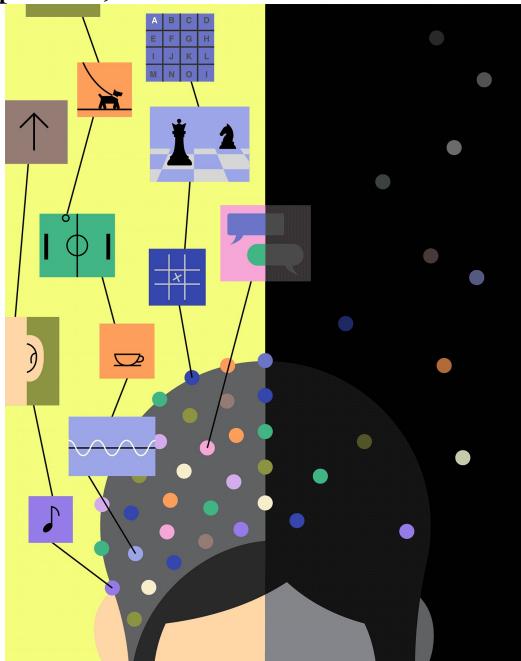
- **Do Brain Implants Change Your Identity?**

Do Brain Implants Change Your Identity?

As neural devices proliferate, so do reports of personality changes, foundering relationships, and people who want to leave their careers.

By [Christine Kenneally](#)

April 19, 2021



The first thing that Rita Leggett saw when she regained consciousness was a pair of piercing blue eyes peering curiously into hers. “I know you, don’t I?” she said. The man with the blue eyes replied, “Yes, you do.” But he didn’t say anything else, and for a while Leggett just wondered and stared. Then it came to her: “You’re my surgeon!”

It was November, 2010, and Leggett had just undergone neurosurgery at the Royal Melbourne Hospital. She recalled a surge of loneliness as she waited alone in a hotel room the night before the operation and the fear she felt when she entered the operating room. She’d worried about the surgeon cutting off her waist-length hair. What am I doing in here? she’d thought. But just before the anesthetic took hold, she recalled, she had said to herself, “I deserve this.”

Leggett was forty-nine years old and had suffered from epilepsy since she was born. During the operation, her surgeon, Andrew Morokoff, had placed an experimental device inside her skull, part of a brain-computer interface that, it was hoped, would be able to predict when she was about to have a seizure. The device, developed by a Seattle company called NeuroVista, had entered a trial stage known in medical research as “first in human.” A research team drawn from three prominent epilepsy centers based in Melbourne had selected fifteen patients to test the device. Leggett was Patient 14.

Her seizures had taken many forms. At school, she would zone out, coming to only when a teacher threw something at her or her classmates jeered. Once, as an adult, she was drying dishes when, with a small shout and no warning, she sent a dinner plate flying into the air and then, oddly, managed to catch it again. Not all the seizures were so mild. There was a time when she fell down some stairs and awoke days later in the hospital, her jaw so badly broken that surgeons had had to take a piece of her rib to reconstruct it. Leggett was a single mother of four children, and, another time that she was hospitalized after a violent seizure, her teen-age sons were accused of having beaten her up.

When Leggett’s neurologist asked if she wanted to participate in the NeuroVista trial, she didn’t hesitate. Two months later, she was in the operating room having a small hole drilled in her skull. Morokoff had carefully braided her hair, so that she would lose as little as possible. Once he had made the hole, he slid a cross-shaped silicone strip inside and laid it across the surface of her brain. The strip was studded with sixteen electrodes, and Morokoff ran wires from them under Leggett’s skin, behind her ear and down her neck to connect with a device that he implanted in her chest. This device would receive the data recording Leggett’s neural activity and transmit it wirelessly to an external processing unit, which she was supposed to keep with her at all times.

The external unit was the size of two flip phones stacked together, and it took some getting used to. If the system predicted that a seizure was imminent, the unit would warn her with a red light and a beep, though she found the beep uncomfortably loud and turned the sound off. The company had her try carrying the device on a shoulder strap, which bothered her, or in

a little holster on a belt, which worked better. She was told to keep a diary, noting every time she experienced a seizure.

While Leggett acclimated herself to the device, the device was, in effect, acclimatizing itself to her. The electrical signals detected by the apparatus in her head were transmitted to a lab, where a cluster of computers started to read the patterns of her neural activity, constructing an algorithm tailored to her needs.

Initially, the readings recorded by NeuroVista patients' devices were so strange—unlike either normal brain activity or the patterns that were typical of epilepsy—that the trial was almost abandoned. Later, the researchers realized that the brain was simply reacting to having been tampered with—the electrical equivalent of a postoperative wound. This disturbance settled down after a couple of months, and then the system's learning began. Once the device had recorded perhaps half a dozen of Leggett's typical seizures, the researchers were able to fine-tune the algorithm to the unique electrical signatures of her brain, readying the interface to move from observation to prediction.

The first time the device sent an alert, Leggett was at the hairdresser, a couple of blocks from her home. The external unit displayed a white light, and then a red one. She still remembers the shock of it—the strangeness of having a machine communicate with her and advise her what was about to happen in her head. She'd been told that the device would be able to warn her about fifteen minutes before a seizure hit. This gave her time to leave the hairdresser and get safely into bed at home.

Scientifically, the NeuroVista trial was a success, validating its underlying concept and generating a wealth of useful data. It was a success for Leggett, too, but in a way that was deeper and more complex than either she or the researchers had anticipated. The goal had been simple: to improve her life by giving her more control over her condition. The effect, though, had been to make Leggett feel like an entirely new person. She had never had a self that she could trust before. When I talked to her, she spoke of the device as if it were a partner. "We were calibrated together," she said. "We became one."

It is almost a quarter of a century since the F.D.A. first approved the use of a deep-brain-stimulation device—to treat essential tremor and advanced Parkinson's disease. Today, at least two hundred thousand people worldwide, suffering from a wide range of conditions, live with a neural implant of some kind. In recent years, [Mark Zuckerberg](#), [Elon Musk](#), and Bryan Johnson, the founder of the payment-processing company Braintree, all announced neurotechnology projects for restoring or even enhancing human abilities. As we enter this new era of extra-human intelligence, it's becoming apparent that many people develop an intense relationship with their device, often with profound effects on their sense of identity. These effects, though still little studied, are emerging as crucial to a treatment's success.

The human brain is a small electrical device of super-galactic complexity. It contains an estimated hundred billion neurons, with many more links between them than there are stars in the Milky Way. Each neuron works by passing an electrical charge along its length, causing neurotransmitters to leap to the next neuron, which ignites in turn, usually in concert with many thousands of others. Somehow, human intelligence emerges from this constant, thrilling choreography. How it happens remains an almost total mystery, but it has become clear that neural technologies will be able to synch with the brain only if they learn the steps of this dance.

For three years after her operation, Leggett lived happily with her device. But in 2013 her neurologist gave her some bad news. NeuroVista had run out of funding and ceased operations. Leggett's neural device would have to come out.

In January, 2020, toward the end of the Australian summer, I drove fifty kilometres along the Riddoch Highway, past pine plantations and remote estates, to the small town of Penola, South Australia. It was a hot, dry day, but though fires were burning in most of the country they hadn't reached here. Rita Leggett lives at the edge of town in a pretty Colonial-style house. Behind it, a gnarled gum tree more than a hundred years old spreads its branches over the old iron tracks of a disused railway.

Now in her late fifties, Leggett wore her long hair in a dancer's bun. She was animated, swinging between goofy jokes and an arresting sincerity that

seemed born of a lot of suffering. As she told me her story, I noticed her long fingers continually in motion, twining and clasping and pointing while she spoke. Born in 1961, the first of six sisters, she grew up in a small town in Victoria. Her father left the family when she was nine, and she remembers her mother driving her back and forth on many long trips to a children's hospital in Melbourne. At school, Leggett had no friends and was often bullied because of her epilepsy. She never understood why people were mean to her because of something that she could not control. She wanted to hide all the time.

When she was twelve, a miracle occurred: the seizures stopped, and her doctors, after monitoring her for a while, told her that she no longer needed to come to the hospital. "I was normal," she recalled. "Wow!" She left school at sixteen and soon got a job at Target, saving her money to buy a car. But one day, when she was eighteen, she woke up confused and sore on a stretcher in the locker room at work, having no idea how she had got there. The seizures were back, and, from then on, she had one every week or so. They would last only a few minutes, but she never knew when they would come. She couldn't drive or swim. She saw many different neurologists and tried many medications, none of which worked.

I asked Leggett to describe what it was like to have a seizure. She didn't know. When one took hold, she was ripped out of her consciousness; she wasn't there. Afterward, there was a terrible sense of having been absent. She would feel mortified in front of anyone who had witnessed the seizure and alarmed as she took stock of the injuries that she often suffered. Even worse, she said, was that epilepsy stole her memories. Every time she had a seizure and then returned, she seemed to have left some of her memories behind her.

Many individuals with epilepsy feel profoundly misunderstood. The condition still carries a significant stigma. Something about it—the way it comes from nowhere and hijacks the self—terrifies people. Although epilepsy affects more than fifty million people worldwide, some fifteen million of whom do not respond to medication, epilepsy research struggles to obtain funding. In the United States, multiple sclerosis, which affects an eighth of the number of people that epilepsy does, nonetheless attracts roughly five times more research money per patient from the N.I.H. Even

now, epileptic seizures are not fully understood. Leggett's neurologist, Terry O'Brien, told me of a recent four-day symposium he'd attended devoted to defining a seizure. Specialists know one when they see one, he said, but at the end of the symposium nobody had come up with a unifying description. At the most basic level, he said, a seizure is a rogue electrical discharge, an oscillation that moves in time and space, a bit like a tornado. Understanding isn't helped by the fact that epilepsy is not a single disease, but rather the brain's response to a variety of pathologies. Consequently, people with epilepsy often struggle with other conditions. Leggett had severe migraines and suffered from depression. The suicide rate for people with epilepsy is between two and three times higher than it is in the rest of the population.

For neurologists, predicting seizures has long been an elusive goal. They occur once a year for some people, many times a day for others, and it's common for sufferers to be unable to say whether they've had one or not. Before the NeuroVista trial, there was no consensus that prediction was even possible. Yet the new device was remarkably effective for three of the ten patients who completed the trial, and Leggett was one of them. During the years she had it, she said, the device "told me what I needed to know, and it did that well." If the warning light came on, she took anti-seizure medication; the algorithm's predictive power was such that there was enough time for the medication to be absorbed. As a result, she didn't have seizures.

When I met Leggett, she had been without the NeuroVista brain-computer interface for six years, but, as soon as I began asking how she felt about it, she looked out the window and started to weep. "I miss my device," she said. Leggett felt grateful that everyone involved was sympathetic to her plight. They let her keep the implant as long as possible. But the demise of NeuroVista—after spending seventy million dollars to develop the technology and conduct the trial, it struggled to find further investors—made removal inevitable. If the battery ran out, or a lead broke, or the site of implantation became infected, the company would no longer be there to provide support. She remembered a solemn drive to Melbourne for the surgery, and then coming back home without the device. It felt as if she had left a part of herself behind.

In 2015, two years after Leggett's brain-computer interface was removed, she heard from a man named Frederic Gilbert. He was a philosopher at the University of Tasmania specializing in applied ethics. "He rang all the way from Tasmania," Leggett recalled. "I can't remember how he worded it, but I was so willing to talk to him about it, because, you know, no one else had asked." There had been no counselling after the trial ended, and Leggett had never spoken with the other patients, but Gilbert had managed to track some of them down; Leggett was the sixth and last he reached. He went to visit and asked her questions no one else had about her feelings toward the device and its removal. He had a French-Canadian accent, which she liked. "He's not bad-looking, either," she said.



"And it shall be called peanut butter. And it shall appear as if perishable or in need of refrigeration but in truth it shall remain shelf-stable for months, though the oil may separate and require stirring. And there shall be a crunchy variety and there shall be a smooth variety. And . . ."
Cartoon by David Ostow

Gilbert followed a standard series of questions in his interviews, but at some point that afternoon he abandoned the script. He hadn't met anyone who spoke so revealingly about the subjective experience of merging with a brain-computer interface. "With the device, I found myself," Leggett told him. "The device became me." He kept asking her to tell him more. What did she mean, that she found herself and that it became her? When she expressed frustration with the way it all had ended, Gilbert wanted to dig into that experience. His questions were straightforward, but he could sense that for her they were a release and a revelation.

Gilbert thought that neurotechnology was destined to be so integral to our lives that it urgently needed to be scrutinized and regulated. For four years, he had been assembling a unique body of evidence in support of his view, by finding people with brain implants and learning about their experiences. He believed that what Leggett had undergone was more than the removal of a device. When the device and Leggett began to work together, a new person emerged—a de-novo identity, a symbiosis of machine and mind. Gilbert likened the situation to the film “Blade Runner,” in which humanlike androids develop a sense of self and run away from their creators.

The University of Tasmania, where Gilbert has worked since 2010, is in Hobart, in the foothills of the Wellington mountain range, and it overlooks the vast River Derwent. When I visited him there, it was an atypically hot day, and walking up a steep hill to his car felt like climbing a ladder. Gilbert, who is in his forties and—unusual for a philosopher—a former professional football player, didn’t pause for breath. He hikes as often as he can in the forests nearby, some of the wildest in the world, and his boss later told me that he is the only person she knows of who achieved a personal best on Tasmania’s South Coast Track, a six-day mountain trek through wilderness, by reducing the amount of water that he carried.

Gilbert grew up in an enormous extended family on a farm outside of Quebec City. He did chores on the farm and spent hours playing in nearby forests with his siblings and his many cousins. Gilbert was on a football team and was an especially fast runner. When he was nineteen, an American-football team in France, the Giants de St. Étienne, offered him a place. He travelled with them in Europe, and after a year he returned to Quebec to play college football, but he overtrained and injured himself. When you build your identity in one context, he told me, losing your ability to be useful in that context ruptures your identity. “You feel useless, futile,” he said. He decided that he needed a break from himself.

Gilbert moved to Switzerland and enrolled at the University of Geneva, studying philosophy. He found that philosophical concepts gripped him most when they had tangible importance in people’s lives. At the time, cloning was a hot topic, and Gilbert wrote his master’s thesis on it. For him, the assumption that cloning could perfectly reproduce an individual made no sense, given that none of us is the same person we were five or ten years

ago. Progressing to his Ph.D., he studied free will and began hanging out with scientists at the university's Frontiers in Genetics lab. This made him think about determinism in a scientific way. If there was such a thing as free will, he decided, it had to be biological.

That was in the early two-thousands, around the time that the F.D.A. extended its approval of deep-brain stimulation as a general treatment for Parkinson's. Research into brain-computer interfaces, much of it by the Department of Defense, was advancing rapidly. The field had fascinating implications for Gilbert's work on free will. Suppose that someone whose brain was artificially stimulated committed a crime: were they responsible for their actions?

For the great majority of patients, deep-brain stimulation was beneficial and life-changing, but there were occasional reports of strange behavioral reactions, such as hypomania and hypersexuality. Then, in 2006, a French team published a study about the unexpected consequences of otherwise successful implantations. Two years after a brain implant, sixty-five per cent of patients had a breakdown in their marriages or relationships, and sixty-four per cent wanted to leave their careers. Their intellect and their levels of anxiety and depression were the same as before, or, in the case of anxiety, had even improved, but they seemed to experience a fundamental estrangement from themselves. One felt like an electronic doll. Another said he felt like RoboCop, under remote control.

Gilbert describes himself as "an applied eliminativist." He doesn't believe in a soul, or a mind, at least as we normally think of them, and he strongly questions whether there is a thing you could call a self. He suspected that people whose marriages broke down had built their identities and their relationships around their pathologies. When those were removed, the relationships no longer worked. Gilbert began to interview patients. He used standardized questionnaires, a procedure that is methodologically vital for making dependable comparisons, but soon he came to feel that something about this unprecedented human experience was lost when individual stories were left out. The effects he was studying were inextricable from his subjects' identities, even though those identities changed.

Many people reported that the person they were after treatment was entirely different from the one they'd been when they had only dreamed of relief from their symptoms. Some experienced an uncharacteristic buoyancy and confidence. One woman felt fifteen years younger and tried to lift a pool table, rupturing a disk in her back. One man noticed that his newfound confidence was making life hard for his wife; he was too "full-on." Another woman became impulsive, walking ten kilometres to a psychologist's appointment nine days after her surgery. She was unrecognizable to her family. They told her that they grieved for the old her.

Not everyone in the NeuroVista trial loved their device the way Rita Leggett did. South of Melbourne, I met Hannah Galvin, a quirky, ethereal woman in her early thirties, who told me in looping, heartfelt narratives how she came to hate hers. As a child, she told me, she had lived for dance, but when she was sixteen she had her first grand-mal seizure, shortly before an important performance. She was shattered to learn that she wouldn't be allowed to perform.

For years, Galvin resisted her diagnosis. She told friends that if she had a seizure they should make a joke of it. She continued going to auditions, even though she would have small seizures throughout them. As far as she was concerned, the seizures weren't an aspect of her life but rather a quick step out of it. "I'm gone and I come back and that's that. And then my life continues," she explained. "I didn't want to know anything else about it." Nonetheless, she noticed other changes. She'd always been good at math but, once her epilepsy began, that part of her just seemed to vanish. She had always been happy, too, but three years into her epilepsy, struggling to get the right dose of medication, she became suicidally depressed.

When she was twenty-two, she joined the NeuroVista trial. Her antipathy to her device was almost instant. It felt as if there were someone inside her head, but it wasn't her. She hated the telemetry unit embedded in her chest—"the tit antenna," she called it. She hated having to carry the external unit around, and never knew where to put it. Worst of all, the unit's warning light flashed at her all the time. It wasn't faulty; it was correctly predicting as many as a hundred tiny seizures a day. Neither she nor her doctors had had any idea that she was so affected. She even had seizures when she was asleep.

Galvin had found it hard enough to accept that she had epilepsy to begin with. Now this gadget constantly harangued her, and she sank again into depression. She recalled being interviewed by a journalist, who asked how she felt about joining the trial. She said that her life was fine. But it wasn't. "I was too young to tell the truth," she said to me. Galvin complained about the device but didn't feel that anyone at NeuroVista took her seriously. When it was finally removed, she was enormously relieved.

As different as Galvin's and Leggett's reactions to the device were, they shared a sense that experiences like theirs are something that the field needs to learn from. Gilbert, too, believes that patients' perspectives are vital, and that we are only just starting to understand how a person's selfhood can affect—and be affected by—an intelligent neural device. Observing a number of first-in-human trials, he has noticed that he sometimes stops hearing from patients for whom the results were poor. He knows of a number of patients who killed themselves after an implant.

Ethical issues are in constant danger of being overshadowed because of how rapidly technologies are developing. So far, the F.D.A. has approved deep-brain stimulation for a variety of conditions that affect movement, but Gilbert said that trials are under way that will test intelligent neural devices on patients with dementia and psychiatric conditions including anorexia, schizophrenia, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and Tourette's syndrome.

Gilbert believes that the medical-device industry has too much influence on how trials have been run. Most published papers don't mention ethics or risk, and, he said, because companies have no obligation to publish the outcomes of failed trials, the results over all appear to be ninety-nine per cent positive. Gilbert has been working on protocols to prevent harm: Neurosurgeons must declare financial interests. The risks described on consent forms need to be better articulated. Participants in early trials must understand that irreversible consequences of the trial might prevent them from receiving the better therapy they are helping to develop. All trials should express interest in the autonomy of a patient after implantation and after explantation. International research projects must also contend with national differences in ethical standards. A few years ago, Gilbert withdrew from a project with a Chinese team after learning that one of the researchers

had previously carried out surgery on women with anorexia, resecting a part of their brains associated with pleasure.

Gilbert worries most about the coercion of vulnerable people. In 2013, a woman wrote to him saying that she had been implanted with a neural device as part of a trial that used deep-brain stimulation to treat depression. Launched in 2008 and known as the *BROADEN* trial (an acronym derived from the brain region it targeted), it was poorly managed and eventually shut down. The woman told Gilbert that, after her surgery, she had experienced a dramatic feeling of depersonalization and soon became suicidal. Her doctors, alarmed, wanted to remove her implant, but the woman was unwilling; she believed that she hadn't yet had a chance to experience all its potential benefits. Her doctors told her that she was not competent to make the decision, and yet the long e-mails she wrote to Gilbert seemed perfectly coherent and rational. In such a situation, Gilbert thought, the removal of the device was arguably a violation of human rights. After a year, the woman stopped writing to Gilbert. He looked for her online for years afterward but was never able to find her.

While Leggett still had her device, she tried online dating. She'd never done anything like that before. At the time, she was living in Victoria, but she met a man who was willing to drive hundreds of miles from his home, in South Australia, to spend time with her. They were both around fifty and soon reached a point at which they decided to close the previous chapters of their lives and start a new one together. They got married, and on the day she walked down the aisle she took her external processing unit off and put it aside. It didn't go with her dress, she said, and she had a feeling that she was going to be O.K.

When Leggett was told that she wouldn't be able to keep her device, her new husband sat with her and her neurologist and asked if there was anything he could do to prevent her having to give it up. When she returned to the hospital to have it removed, he was there with her.

Leggett's identity changed again once the device was gone. Now she knew great loss, but she also knew things that had been impossible to understand before the device. Like many people with epilepsy, she had often found herself fuzzy for a considerable amount of time after a seizure. That state

made it very difficult to notice the signs that preceded seizures which could act as a natural warning light. These days, when she gets a funny, flip-floppy feeling inside, she takes anti-seizure medication. She's not always sure. Sometimes she gets her husband to weigh in. He says, "Go with your first instinct," and usually she takes a pill. She is now seizure-free.

"Losing it was terrible, but, looking back on it now, what I've gained from it is valuable," Leggett told me. "Would I have another one? Yes, I would love it." ♦

Art

- [The Painted-Steel Whimsy of Yayoi Kusama](#)

[April 26 & May 3, 2021 Issue](#)

The Painted-Steel Whimsy of Yayoi Kusama

Works by the nonagenarian Japanese artist grace the grounds and interiors of the New York Botanical Garden through Oct. 31.

April 16, 2021



Photograph by loulex for The New Yorker

The nonagenarian Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama was born into botany: her grandparents ran a nursery in Matsumoto, where she grew up. Through Oct. 31, her crowd-pleasing works grace the grounds and interiors of the New York Botanical Garden in **"Kusama: Cosmic Nature."** (Timed tickets, available via nybg.org, are required.) "My Soul Blooms Forever" (above), a painted-steel whimsy from 2019, is installed under the newly restored dome of the Palms of the World Gallery, in the Enid A. Haupt Conservatory.

Books

- [Did Home Economics Empower Women?](#)
- [The Reorientations of Edward Said](#)
- [Briefly Noted](#)
- [What Do We Want in a First Lady?](#)

Did Home Economics Empower Women?

For pioneers of the field, it was a gateway to the male-dominated world of science; for those it purported to help, it could be yet another domestic trap.

By [Margaret Talbot](#)

April 19, 2021



Of all the paradoxes in the paradoxical field known as home economics, perhaps the most peculiar is the practice house, with its practice baby. Colleges and universities that offered home-ec majors—and there were many in the twentieth century, including historically Black colleges, land-grant universities, and Ivy League institutions—often had a cottage or an apartment on campus where female home-ec students could keep house. Some of them were preparing for careers in education or industry, but most saw home ec as training for their inevitable futures as wives and mothers. Often, practice-house life entailed caring for practice babies, actual human ones, lent by adoption agencies, orphanages, or sometimes the mothers themselves. At Cornell University, the students called their first practice baby—borrowed in 1920, when he was three weeks old—Dicky Domecon, for “domestic economy.” Couples looking to adopt were eager to get their

hands on practice infants, figuring that these demonstration models had had a good start in life, doted on by a team of young women trained in up-to-date child-rearing techniques.

Yet the experiments were collectivist projects, nothing like the domestic lot of most American women, or the idealized futures that home ec touted. The students shared and traded off their infant-care duties equally, relieved by immersion in demanding science courses that fed their intellects. There were no men living in the homes to play the role of husband. As Danielle Dreilinger writes in her deeply researched and crisply written new book, “[The Secret History of Home Economics: How Trailblazing Women Harnessed the Power of Home and Changed the Way We Live](#)” (Norton), “practice homes looked less like the married, heterosexual, nuclear household for which they ostensibly prepared students than the feminist communes of a later era.”

Home economics was a movement that emerged in the late nineteenth century with high ambitions. Though it had precursors in the domestic-advice manuals of writers like Catharine Beecher, earlier in the century, the conference that officially heralded the discipline’s arrival was held in 1899, in Lake Placid, New York. For a field that sought to elevate the domestic sphere and women’s place in it by bringing science, efficiency, and professionalism to bear on household tasks, this was an auspicious time: the study of nutrition was coming into its own, with Wilbur Atwater’s work on the calorie as a unit of dietary measurement; colleges were, in some cases reluctantly, opening their doors to women; and urbanization and industrialization were generating the problems of public health, food purity, and sanitation which would preoccupy Progressive reformers.

But contradiction—“hypocrisy” is a word that Dreilinger uses at one point—characterized the field from the beginning. Maybe it characterizes every endeavor in which people are compelled to use the side door when they ought to be able to use the front. Women were always having to concoct unnecessarily ingenious arguments for why they ought to be able to do something—go to school, hold a job, vote—and home economics was, in part, an elaborate argument for letting them acquire and demonstrate expertise. Its practitioners believed in science as a means to “liberate people from onerous and repetitive household labor,” Dreilinger writes. Home

economists offered a feminism palatable to non-feminists, a social-reform vision that highlighted personal habits. They promoted training in baby care on a utopian model, as in the practice houses, but for the most part did not agitate for shared or government-subsidized child care. And there was a larger paradox. The early home economists, as the food historian Laura Shapiro has written, “chose domesticity as a way of getting out of the house.” The field eventually filled with worldly career women who told other women that it was best to stay home.

Who were these experts on the well-run home? For most of them, home economics represented the only way they could enter scientific fields. Ellen Swallow Richards, one of home ec’s founders, wanted to be a chemist, and managed to get M.I.T. to accept her as its first female student, in 1870, and later as its first female instructor. So that other women could study there, she talked philanthropists into funding a women’s laboratory for research into sanitation and nutrition—close enough to proper feminine pursuits, if you squinted. When Martha Van Rensselaer arrived at Cornell, in the first years of the twentieth century, she tried to persuade a skeptical bacteriology professor to admit her to his course, despite her sex, because she would use the knowledge to explain the importance of a clean dishcloth. (He replied that there was no need—just tell women it was “nicer” that way.) With a clever home-ec fix, Lillian Gilbreth was able to support her eleven children after her husband, Frank, an industrial engineer with whom she conducted time-motion studies, died suddenly, in 1924. Gilbreth, who was Berkeley’s first female valedictorian, transferred the couple’s signature efficiency advice from factories to homes, figuring that manufacturers would listen to a female engineering consultant if the subject was housework. (Among her contributions was a compact, L-shaped kitchen, which she designed with an eye to minimizing the number of steps a person had to take while preparing a meal.)

As Dreilinger shows, these home economists had remarkable pragmatic success. They created the seven food groups, the recommended daily allowances, and other approaches to virtuous eating. They invented clothing-care instruction labels, showed Americans how to stretch their food budget in wartime, sent agriculture-extension agents into thousands of rural homes to dispense advice to farmwives, and helped start the school-lunch program. They helped create brand avatars like Betty Crocker, dreamed up

commercialized sources of homey advice like the Butterball hotline, and concocted reams of recipes. They produced the textbooks and other curricula on marriage and family life used by millions of secondary-school and college students—which made them especially influential in the nineteen-fifties, when such courses were among the more insistent peddlers of what Betty Friedan excoriated as the feminine mystique. Starting in the nineteen-seventies, though, home-ec teaching accommodated itself to second-wave feminism, becoming less “prescriptive” and “patriarchal,” Dreilinger says, and more sympathetic to working mothers.

Other writers have had a bit more fun than Dreilinger, a former education reporter, does with home ec’s very particular approach to food and eating. The field’s preoccupation with premium digestion and efficient deployment of calories, along with its commitment to dignifying appetite through science, meant that it had little to say about the sensual pleasures of the table. And its predilection for blandness and food that stayed obediently in one place on the plate led to an odd overreliance on gelatine, white sauce, and salads agglomerated with mayonnaise (potato, macaroni, Waldorf), as well as an abhorrence of strong odors and spices, not to mention lettuce. The first domestic scientists considered green salads an eccentricity enjoyed chiefly by Italian immigrants, with their Old World attachment to vegetables that, contrary to expert advice, had not been boiled at length to render them salubrious. In the wonderfully readable 1986 book [“Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century.”](#) Laura Shapiro writes, “There was virtually no cooked food that at one time or another was not hidden, purified, enriched, or ennobled with white sauce—among scientific cooks it became the most popular solution to the discomfiting problem of undressed food.”

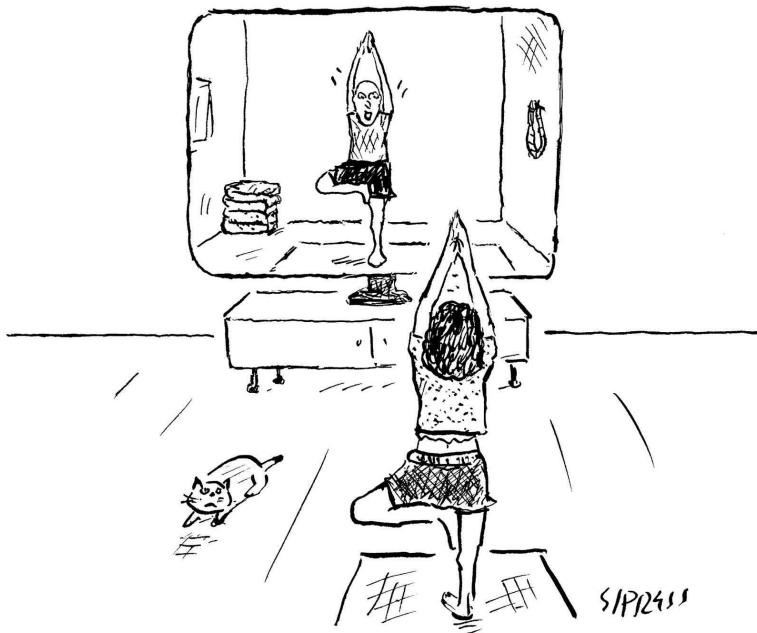
Later, home ec collaborated cozily with the food industry, encouraging women to favor canned and frozen goods and cake mixes, and coming up with recipes that promised convenience and generated sales for their products—inventions that ranged from the sublime (Toll House cookies) to the ridiculous (Fritos prune whip). One that puzzled me for years as a child was the Mock Apple Pie recipe on the back of the Ritz-crackers box. Even then, I wondered what circumstance a person might find herself in where she had access to Ritz crackers, cream of tartar, and lemon juice, but absolutely none to apples.

It's possible that some of the more baffling trends in home economics arose from a disconnect between the program's designers and those it was meant to benefit. Many of home ec's leading authorities on family life never married or had children. (Some, like Van Rensselaer and her colleague Flora Rose, who together ran a celebrated home-economics program at Cornell, lived in domestic partnerships with other women.) As teachers, college professors, business consultants, food chemists, nutritionists, radio hosts, and civil servants, they pursued full and active careers, unusual for the time. Those who did have husbands and children often employed domestic servants or enjoyed egalitarian marriages or both. Lillian Gilbreth hated to cook. Her children, two of whom went on to write the enduringly popular memoir of their family life, "Cheaper by the Dozen," referred to the chipped-beef dish their mother made as DVOT, for Dog's Vomit on Toast.

Dreilinger wants to give the movement its due, despite its culinary missteps, and admires it for doing the important work of trying to render housekeeping visible—worthy of notice and study. Yet, as she makes clear, it was also the province, for the most part, of educated, self-consciously modernizing white women, who often subtly and not so subtly disparaged the ways that other women—especially immigrants or Black and working-class women—had managed their households for generations. Reducing the dreaded drudgery meant identifying other women as drudges. Dreilinger notes that a few of the discipline's founders, particularly Annie Dewey and her husband, Melvil, of the Dewey decimal system, were drawn to eugenics, and saw home economics as a way to stem the "race degeneration" of white Americans. (From white sauce to white supremacy in five easy steps.) The Lake Placid conference that launched the movement was held at a resort, run by the Deweys, that banned African-Americans and Jews. The American Home Economics Association continued to practice segregation for much of the twentieth century.

But Dreilinger also does much to showcase the work of Black home economists, such as Margaret Murray Washington, who, as "Lady Principal," oversaw female students at the Tuskegee Institute, and who, like her husband, Booker T. Washington, believed in racial uplift through temperance and respectability—and thrifty housekeeping. Or Flemmie Pansy Kittrell, the daughter of North Carolina sharecroppers, who earned a doctorate in nutrition from Cornell and, starting in the nineteen-forties,

travelled throughout Africa and Asia conducting nutrition surveys and advising schools. Among the home demonstration agents whom the U.S.D.A. dispatched to rural areas and the home economists who advised school-lunch programs, many saw their job as supplanting benighted folkways with Americanizing expertise, including plain, middle-class, homogenous cuisine. But Dreilinger found at least one adviser, Fabiola Cabeza de Baca Gilbert, a Latina extension agent working in New Mexico in the nineteen-thirties and forties, who saw value in indigenous traditions such as preserving food by dehydration—she loved the garlands of dried, wrinkled red chili peppers she saw in the homes she visited. (The service still recommended canning most fruits and vegetables.) In 1931, Cabeza de Baca produced “[Historic Cookery](#),” a cookbook that featured recipes for dishes she’d eaten with her own family and collected from villagers in New Mexico, including chiles rellenos, the hominy soups known as pozoles, a sprouted-wheat pudding called panocha, and calabacitas (summer squash) with chile verde.



"This pose is excellent preparation for all those times when you have to stand on one foot with your arms above your head."
Cartoon by David Sipress

Dreilinger has a soft spot, too, for farm girls like Louisan Mamer, who made her way to the University of Illinois after a girlhood of unrelenting labor on a farm with no electricity. During the Depression, Mamer went to work for the Rural Electrification Administration, trying to persuade farmers to get

over their fears of fire or electrocution or the new, and sign up to join coöperatives that provided electricity. This was home ec at its most passionate and endearing. Mamer “saw a longer, healthier, fuller life for women,” Dreilinger writes. “No more headaches caused by squinting at books or mending under a sooty kerosene lamp. She saw laundry day freed of its shoulder-busting agony—lugging tubs of water from the pump up onto the coal stove, boiling dirt-encrusted clothes and linens, rubbing them by hand, wringing them through a hand-turned wringer, hanging them to dry, and ironing them with a seven-pound hunk of metal.” Women on farms worked, on average, between sixty-four and seventy-seven hours a week, and this, along with bearing many children, was killing them young. Mamer, a high-wattage energy generator herself, began touring small towns and farm areas with what became known as her electric circus, setting up ironing races between electric irons and the old-fashioned kind, and demonstrating bright lights, chicken brooders, refrigerators that chilled the ice-cream treats she whipped up for the audience, and other galvanic wonders. It was always a high point when she summoned up a couple of male pillars of the community, tied aprons on them, and set them to cooking in an electric kitchen. Dreilinger writes, “The funniest way possible to show the simplicity of electric ranges, she realized, was to show that even a man could use them.”

In the mid-nineteen-seventies, when I took sewing and cooking at my big public junior high in the San Fernando Valley, Title IX, the federal civil-rights statute barring sex discrimination in education, had just been adopted. That meant that boys could have been encouraged to take cooking or sewing, but I don’t recall any boys in those classes, or any girls who enrolled in woodshop or auto shop. Cooking class was taught by Mrs. Shaw, an elderly, muumuu-wearing transplant from somewhere in the South, and was dominated by a clique of boisterous girls who ate brown sugar by the handful straight out of the cannisters. Their leader was Shari, who towered over the rest of us.

“I see you girls cutting up back there,” Mrs. Shaw would say, and Shari would snigger, sugar crystals coating her lip-glossed mouth like salt on the rim of a margarita glass. We made English-muffin pizzas in a toaster oven and pigs in a blanket with cut-up Oscar Mayer wieners and Pillsbury Poppin’ Fresh biscuit dough. Every other savory recipe we learned seemed

to start with opening a can of Campbell's cream-of-mushroom soup. Mrs. Shaw often told us how much this fare would please our future husbands. "Don't make me laugh," Shari said, reasonably.

I can still remember the peasant blouse I produced in sewing class, with its square yoke and its pattern of wild strawberries. I was proud of it. I'd made it, and I could actually wear it: win-win! But my teacher maintained absurdly high standards. I got a D-plus in the class, which is just kind of sad—why bother with the plus? As I look back, these seem like missed opportunities. Both my parents cooked, and I picked that skill up eventually at home. But I never did learn any more sewing, and I wish I had. Like writing, it has the magical virtue of conjuring something that did not exist in the world before you put your hand to the task.

Besides, it would have been such a good moment, with the advent of Title IX, and second-wave feminism lapping even at the doors of junior high, to discuss issues like the division of labor inside households. In 1969, the Redstockings, a feminist collective, had begun distributing Pat Mainardi's influential essay, "The Politics of Housework," analyzing the frustrating dialogue she had over and over with her male partner:

"I don't mind sharing the housework, but I don't do it very well. We should each do the things we're best at." *MEANING*: Unfortunately, I'm no good at things like washing dishes or cooking. What I do best is a little light carpentry, changing light bulbs, moving furniture (how often do you move furniture?).

Shari might have enjoyed batting that around. There was also a hippie-led reclamation of craft and wholesome cooking going on—a kind of homespun, D.I.Y. repudiation of the business-friendliness and convenience-food orientation of home ec that would have been a good topic for debate. We could have sewn with help from "[The Illustrated Hassle-Free Make Your Own Clothes Book](#)," the manifesto-like introduction to which declared that "clothes should feel good—comfortable, sensual; We also think they should be easy to make within a relatively short period of time, fairly inexpensive and groovy to look at." So true! Moreover, "Men should be able to get over their uptightness about making clothes, about doing all kinds of things they have been brainwashed into relegating to women"—even truer! In the

coming years, students like me could have prepared winsome, vegetable-forward dishes from “[The Moosewood Cookbook](#)” or “[The Enchanted Broccoli Forest](#).¹” Countercultural, back-to-the-land cooking was one stream feeding the incipient farm-to-table food revolution; we would have been ahead of the game.

Today, home ec isn’t the cultural force it once was, but it’s still around. Students in middle schools and high schools and colleges across the country take courses in it, although, starting in the early nineties, many schools and universities rebranded it as family and consumer sciences. Still, Dreilinger argues that it is due for a broader revival. She isn’t alone in this; there have been plenty of calls to reclaim home ec. Busy parents, the argument goes, no longer have the time or the inclination to instruct their kids in cooking and cleaning and household maintenance. Takeout and technology have deskilled us. Young people leave school unprepared for adulting, clueless about laundry, primed to annoy one another when they cohabit with housemates or partners. Dreilinger thinks family and consumer sciences should change its name back to home ec—“home” is more inclusive than “family”—and be made mandatory in schools. It always benefits something or someone—an institution, an ideology, a spouse—“when housekeeping and caretaking are invisible,” she maintains; teaching those formally to kids of all genders in school is a way to make them visible. (For example, though the percentage of men who do some food preparation and cleanup each day increased from thirty-five per cent to forty-eight per cent between 2003 and 2019, according to the American Time Use Survey, they still do less than women, seventy per cent of whom engage in those tasks each day.) And Dreilinger suggests, appealingly, that a new generation of home-ec courses could be deployed to help limit and cope with climate change—focussing on energy-saving households and design responses to rising temperatures.

But some of what she says could be taught in home-ec classes—how the sewing machine was introduced, or the role of sweatshop labor in clothing manufacture—could be taught in, for example, history classes, and I’d rather shore those up at a time when the humanities are losing majors and funding. A range of fields, from nutrition to industrial design, draw on some of the impulses that once led people to home ec. Women, fortunately, can go into science now without insisting that they’re doing so in the service of tidier homes. And, when it comes to learning domestic arts—cooking, especially

—we live in a golden age of instructional YouTube channels and TV shows for every culinary obsession and skill level.

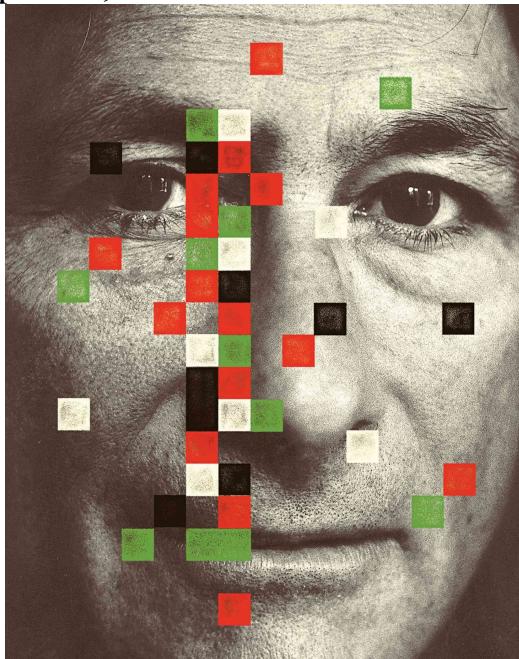
Nobody need depend on the imperious style of, say, the nineties Martha Stewart—or on the know-how of their parents or high-school teachers, for that matter. They can get YouTube cooking lessons from the studiedly unintimidating “Emmymade” or “Binging with Babish.” They can watch reality shows like “Queer Eye” or “The Great British Baking Show,” experiences more like the home-ec class I wish I could have taken—gentle, collegial, inclusive, but still chockablock with handy household hints. These shows tend to foreground emotional labor—consolation, encouragement—along with their choux pastry and kitchen redos. And, if there is something less than liberating in the transfer of such experiences from real-life neighborhood potlucks to reality TV, it might be worth remembering that not everybody’s neighborhood was that warm and welcoming. The new banquet of food shows and how-to videos tend to be clear on one thing: neither the cooking nor the comforting is women’s work only. ♦

The Reorientations of Edward Said

Steeped in Western culture, the great critic of Western narratives came to his post-colonialist convictions gradually but with growing intensity.

By [Pankaj Mishra](#)

April 19, 2021



“Professor of Terror” was the headline on the cover of the August, 1989, issue of *Commentary*. Inside, an article described Edward Said, then a professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University, as a mouthpiece for Palestinian terrorists and a confidant of Yasir Arafat. “Eduardo Said” was how he was referred to in the F.B.I.’s two-hundred-and-thirty-eight-page file on him—perhaps on the assumption that a terrorist was likely to have a Latin name. V. S. Naipaul willfully mispronounced “Said” to rhyme with “head,” and asserted that he was “an Egyptian who got lost in the world.” Said, an Arab Christian who was frequently taken to be Muslim, recognized the great risks of being misidentified and misunderstood. In “[Orientalism](#)” (1978), the book that made him famous, he set out to answer the question of, as he wrote in the introduction, “what one really is.” The question was pressing for a man who was, simultaneously, a literary theorist, a classical pianist, a music critic, arguably New York’s most famous public

intellectual after Hannah Arendt and Susan Sontag, and America's most prominent advocate for Palestinian rights.

Multiple and clashing selves were Said's inheritance from the moment of his birth, in 1935, in West Jerusalem, where a midwife chanted over him in both Arabic and Hebrew. The family was Episcopalian and wealthy, and his father, who had spent years in America and prided himself on having light skin, named him after the Prince of Wales. Said always loathed his name, especially when shortened to Ed. Sent as a teen-ager to an American boarding school, Said found the experience "shattering and disorienting." Trained at Princeton and Harvard as a literary scholar in a Euro-American humanist tradition, he became an enthusiast of French theory, a partisan of Michel Foucault. In "Orientalism," published two decades into a conventional academic career, Said unexpectedly described himself as an "Oriental subject" and implicated almost the entire Western canon, from Dante to Marx, in the systematic degradation of the Orient.

"Orientalism" proved to be perhaps the most influential scholarly book of the late twentieth century; its arguments helped expand the fields of anti-colonial and post-colonial studies. Said, however, evidently came to feel that "theory" was "dangerous" to students, and derided the "jaw-shattering jargonistic postmodernisms" of scholars like [Jacques Derrida](#), whom he considered "a dandy fooling around." Toward the end of his life, the alleged professor of terror collaborated with the conductor [Daniel Barenboim](#) to set up an orchestra of Arab and Israeli musicians, angering many [Palestinians](#), including members of Said's family, who supported a campaign of boycott and sanctions against Israel. While his handsome face appeared on the T-shirts and posters of left-wing street protesters worldwide, Said maintained a taste for Rolex watches, Burberry suits, and Jermyn Street shoes right up to his death, from leukemia, in 2003.

"To be a Levantine is to live in two or more worlds at once without belonging to either," Said once wrote, quoting the historian Albert Hourani. "It reveals itself in lostness, pretentiousness, cynicism and despair." His melancholy memoir of loss and deracination, "[Out of Place](#)" (1999), invited future biographers to probe the connection between their subject's cerebral and emotional lives. Timothy Brennan, a friend and graduate student of Said's, now warily picks up the gauntlet, in an authorized biography, "[Places](#)

of Mind" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). Scanting Said's private life, including his marriages and other romantic liaisons, Brennan concerns himself with tracing an intellectual and political trajectory. One of the half-concealed revelations in the book is how close Said came, with his Levantine wealth and Ivy League education, to being a somewhat refined playboy, chasing women around the Eastern Seaboard in his Alfa Romeo. In Jerusalem, Said went to St. George's, a boys' school for the region's ruling castes. In Cairo —where his family moved in 1947, shortly before Jewish militias occupied West Jerusalem—he attended the British-run Victoria College. There he was chiefly known for his mediocre marks and insubordinate ways; his classmates included the future King Hussein of Jordan and the actor Omar Sharif.

Cairo was then the principal metropolis of a rapidly decolonizing and politically assertive Arab world. The creation of the state of Israel—following a U.N. resolution, on Palestinian land—and the refugee crisis and wars that ensued were on everyone's mind. Yet Said inhabited a bubble of affluent cosmopolitans, speaking English and French better than Arabic, and attending the local opera. When he was six years old, he started playing the family piano, a Blüthner baby grand from Leipzig, and he later received private lessons from Ignace Tiegerman, a Polish Jew famous for his interpretations of Brahms and Chopin. Said's father, who ran a successful office-supply business, was socially ambitious, and his time in America had given him a lasting admiration for the West. At one point, he considered moving his entire family to the United States. Instead, in 1951, he contented himself with dispatching his son to Northfield Mount Hermon School, in rural Massachusetts.

Brennan shows how much Said initially was, as he once confessed, a "creature of an American and even a kind of upper-class *WASP* education," distanced from the "uniquely punishing destiny" of an Arab Palestinian in the West. Glenn Gould recitals in Boston appear to have registered more with him than the earthquakes of the post-colonial world, such as the Great Leap Forward or the anti-French insurgency in Algeria. The Egyptian Revolution erupted soon after Said left for the U.S., and a mob of protesters burned down his father's stationery shop. Within a decade, the family had moved to Lebanon. Yet these events seem to have had less influence on Said than the political currents of his new country did. Brennan writes, "Entering

the United States at the height of the Cold War would color Said's feelings about the country for the rest of his life." Alfred Kazin, writing in his journals in 1955, already worried that intellectuals had found in America a new "orthodoxy"—the idea of the country as "world-spirit and world hope." This consensus was bolstered by a professionalization of intellectual life. Jobs in universities, media, publishing, and think tanks offered former bohemians and penurious toilers money and social status. Said began his career at precisely this moment, when many upwardly mobile American intellectuals became, in his later, unforgiving analysis, "champions of the strong."

Nonetheless, his own early impulse, born of an immigrant's insecurity, was, as he later put it, to make himself over "into something the system required." His earliest intellectual mentors were such iconic figures of American literary culture as R. P. Blackmur and Lionel Trilling. He wrote a prize-winning dissertation on Conrad; he read Sartre and Lukács. In his early writings, he faithfully absorbed all the trends then dominant in English departments, from existentialism to structuralism. Devoted to Chopin and Schumann, he seems to have been as indifferent to blues and jazz as he was to Arabic music. He adored Hollywood movies, but there is no evidence that, in this period, he engaged with the work of James Baldwin or Ralph Ellison, or had much interest in the civil-rights movement. When students protesting the war in Vietnam disrupted a class of his, he called campus security.

Brennan detects a hint of what was to come in a remark of Said's about the dual selves of Conrad: one "the waiting and willing polite transcriber who wished to please, the other an uncooperative demon." Much impotent anger seems to have long simmered in Said as he witnessed "the web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, dehumanizing ideology holding in the Arab or the Muslim." In a conversation filmed for Britain's Channel 4, Said claimed that many of his cultural heroes, such as Isaiah Berlin and Reinhold Niebuhr, were prejudiced against Arabs. "All I could do," he said, "was note it." He watched aghast, too, the critical acclaim for "The Arab Mind," a 1973 book by the Hungarian Jewish academic Raphael Patai, which described Arabs as a fundamentally unstable people.

It's not hard to see how Said, upholding the "great books" courses at Columbia, would have come to feel intensely the frustrations that writers and intellectuals from countries subjugated by Europe and America had long experienced: so many of the canonical figures of Western liberalism and democracy, from John Stuart Mill to Winston Churchill, were contemptuous of nonwhite peoples. Among aspiring intellectuals who came to the U.S. and Europe from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, a sense of bitterness ran especially deep. Having struggled to emulate the cultural élite of the West by acquiring a knowledge of its literature and philosophy, they realized that their role models remained largely ignorant of the worlds they had come from. Moreover, the steep price of that ignorance was paid, often in blood, by the people back home.

It was the Six-Day War, in 1967, and the exultant American media coverage of Israel's crushing victory over Arab countries, that killed Said's desire to please his white mentors. He began reaching out to other Arabs and methodically studying Western writings about the Middle East. In 1970, he met Arafat, initiating a long and troubled relationship in which Said undertook two equally futile tasks: advising the stubby, pistol-toting radical on how to make friends and influence people in the West, and dispelling Arafat's impression that he, Said, was a representative of the United States.

In "Orientalism," Said's uncoöperative demon at last burst into view. He boldly defined himself as the "product of the historical process" of colonialism, and set out to "inventory the traces" upon him of a culture "whose domination has been so powerful a factor in the life of all Orientals." The book's main thrust was a critique of Western intellectual culture; as Brennan puts it, "The media, think tanks, and universities were witting or unwitting collaborators in the foreign policy adventures of their respective states." For a book that launched a thousand academic careers and plenty of opaque jargon, this was a simple point. It was also by no means original. Noam Chomsky had been making much the same argument since the nineteen-sixties, and anti-imperialist thinkers and activists had long noted the nexus between knowledge and power in imperialist countries. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, in the late nineteenth century, had denounced Reuters for its biased coverage of anti-British protests in Iran; Simone Weil had called for a sustained reflection on the experience of the colonized. At Said's own

university, Franz Boas had attacked the pseudoscientific racial theories used as justification by white supremacists.

What made “Orientalism” distinctive was its immense panoply of Western learning—the fruits of Said’s Ivy League training—and its audacious crossing of disciplinary boundaries: history, philology, anthropology, literary studies. It was also striking that Said, avowedly indebted to Foucault, concerned himself with representations rather than with the represented—with the *discourse* of imperialism rather than with its actual workings or its manifestation in social and economic inequality. “Orientalism” had little to say about the role of overwhelmingly male class interests in imperial conquest, the expansion of industrial capitalism, or the fate of women, peasants, and workers. Nor did Said confine his time frame to the previous two centuries, when the modern imperialisms of Europe and America became globally powerful, primed to generate widespread if largely defective knowledge about Orientals. He insisted that Orientalist thinking justified colonial rule not after the fact but “in advance,” positing an unbroken Western tendency to represent Orientals as inferior, running from ancient Greece through Renaissance Italy to the *New York Times*.

Perhaps against Said’s own wishes, “Orientalism” ended up describing an eternal and unbridgeable gulf between Western and non-Western societies. While discrediting much knowledge produced in Europe and America over two millennia, the book displayed no awareness of the vast archive of Asian, African, and Latin-American thought that had preceded it, including discourses devised by non-Western élites—such as the Brahminical theory of caste in India—to make their dominance seem natural and legitimate. Unsurprisingly, upper-caste ideologues of Hindu supremacism approvingly cite “Orientalism” when railing against Western scholars of Indian religion and history. The book’s critique of Eurocentrism was in fact curiously Eurocentric, and its vision of an internally consistent and coherent “West” had much in common with the “Plato-to-NATO” genealogy of the free world popularized during the Cold War. In both narratives, the ancient Greeks, Renaissance Italians, and French sages of the Enlightenment had all contributed to the making of “Western Civilization.”

When the book was attacked by old-style Orientalists such as Bernard Lewis, who questioned its author’s grasp of Arab and Islamic history, Said

could effortlessly defend himself. Lewis, later a favorite historian of Dick Cheney and a theorist of “Muslim rage,” was too damning an illustration of Said’s thesis. Said was much more vulnerable to criticisms from the Oriental subjects whose debasing misrepresentations he had set out to expose. The most devastating of these came from the Indian critic Aijaz Ahmad. Writing fourteen years after the publication of “Orientalism,” Ahmad examined why and how a book with many obvious and great flaws became a cult classic among academics. He noted that Said’s preoccupation with representations rather than with material interests, and his prioritizing of racial inequities over class and gender oppressions, had proved especially useful to upwardly mobile academics who came to American universities from the developing world. These intellectual émigrés, largely male, were often members of ruling classes in their respective countries—even of classes that had flourished during colonial rule. Yet, Ahmad wrote, Said’s book furnished them with “narratives of oppression that would get them preferential treatment, reserved jobs, higher salaries.” For a posher kind of Oriental subject, denouncing the Orientalist West had become one way of finding a tenured job in it.

Ahmad also pointed out that Said, critiquing an evidently corrupted humanist tradition, offered, as an antidote, merely a lit-crit version of humanism—“very textual attitudes towards the histories of colonialism and imperialism.” In the nineteen-eighties, “Orientalism” helped forge a seminar-room mode of activism. By 1992, Richard Rorty could take aim at an instantly recognizable type: “One of the contributions of the newer left has been to enable professors, whose mild guilt about the comfort and security of their own lives once led them into extra-academic political activity, to say, ‘Sorry, I gave at the office.’” In retrospect, “Orientalism,” no less than Orientalist books about Muslim rage and the clash of civilizations, seems to belong to an era of cramped political horizons. Politicized young people today are unlikely to confine themselves to Foucault-style discourse analysis when they confront the crushing realities of inequality, gutted public services, mainstream racism, and environmental calamity.

Said moved on from his trendsetting book almost as quickly as he had moved on from the various English-department trends he once embraced. Brennan writes that, though appreciative of efforts to “diversify faculties in terms of ethnicity and national origin,” Said was troubled by the way

“Orientalism” encouraged “fixations on personal ‘identity’ ” in academia. Having helped create the field of post-colonial studies, Said began to wonder whether post-colonialism was even a valid category, given the ongoing depredations of colonialism in large parts of the world. As if to deride academia’s cult of specialism, he pointedly extolled the figure of the freelance intellectual and the unaffiliated amateur. He started to read widely in non-Western literatures, and to invoke, sometimes too indiscriminately, Asian and African writers and thinkers whom he had left unmentioned in “Orientalism.” With the support of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, then an editor at Doubleday, he helped usher Naguib Mahfouz’s fiction into English. Most important, in a series of books, articles, and television appearances, Said assumed the often cruelly discouraging task of educating Americans about Palestine.

His publisher, Pantheon, rejected “[The Question of Palestine](#)” (1979), the first of Said’s many book-length attempts to make Americans understand the fate of the Palestinian people. Eventually published by Times Books, “The Question of Palestine” made him, Brennan writes, “a pariah among the pro-Israel wing of New York publishing.” Meanwhile, a prospective Beirut publisher asked Said to remove his criticism of Syria and Saudi Arabia from the book. Political disasters in the Middle East also kept undermining his cause. Israel’s Prime Minister, Menachem Begin, who doggedly opposed a Palestinian state, was encouraging Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, territories seized from Palestinians in 1967. In June, 1982, Begin authorized a military invasion of Lebanon—where many Palestinian refugees had fled—ostensibly to drive out Arafat and militants. Thousands of civilians died, and infrastructure was left in ruins.

At home, Said found himself up against a reactionary right that, rolling back the gains of the progressive movements of the nineteen-sixties, had created a much stronger basis for itself than the academic left had. Embedded deep within the Reagan Administration, it could, Kazin wrote in 1983, “always be depended upon to support Begin.” This right-wing network exercised outsized influence. Saul Bellow, who recoiled from Begin, nonetheless seemed to believe *Commentary*’s description of Said as a professor of terror, and endorsed a 1984 best-seller, Joan Peters’s “From Time Immemorial,” that denied the existence of Palestinians in Palestine before the Zionists arrived. An article in the *Wall Street Journal* in 1999, titled “The False

Prophet of Palestine,” claimed that Said had fabricated his childhood in Jerusalem, a defamatory accusation later repeated in *Time*. In 2003, testimony against Said from a fellow at the Hoover Institution became a centerpiece of hearings for a House bill that sought to regulate much post-colonial scholarship.

Struggling to present “Zionism from the standpoint of its victims” in these circumstances, Said did not sacrifice nuance and, for his pains, was frequently attacked from all sides. Palestinians, along with many people in Asia and Africa who were ill-informed about the Holocaust, saw Israel as just another white colonialist power, of the kind that had stolen and occupied the lands of darker-skinned peoples for centuries. But Said infused moral complexity into what he called the “politics of dispossession,” describing Palestinians, often to their outrage, as indirect casualties of unprecedented European crimes against Jews: “victims of victims.” Conversely, he told his American audience that criticism of Zionism should not be equated with anti-Semitism, nor the struggle for Palestinian rights conflated with support for the Saudi royal family and other Arab tyrannies.

Said had pushed for negotiation with Israel and for a two-state solution long before Arafat accepted both, in 1988. This major compromise by the Palestinian leader, which Said helped draft in Algiers, implicitly recognized Israel’s right to exist and cleared the way for the peace process that led, in 1993, to the first Oslo Accord. However, by the time that Arafat and the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin hesitantly shook hands on the South Lawn of the White House, Said was denouncing the accord as “an instrument of Palestinian surrender, a Palestinian Versailles.” In his view, an old, exhausted, and increasingly venal Palestinian leadership had succumbed to American and Israeli blandishments and pressure. Palestinian leaders, ignorant about facts on the ground created by Zionist settlers in the West Bank and Gaza—Arafat hadn’t even seen the occupied territories since his departure in 1967—had consented to a new and quasi-permanent form of occupation. The Palestinian Authority responded by proscribing Said’s books. Brennan writes that many intellectuals in Palestine, too, resented Said’s references to “the suffering of the Jews,” and saw him as too Americanized. Said did not relent. Maintaining that a Palestinian state had been rendered impossible, he began to advocate—daringly and, it now

seems, presciently—for a one-state solution: a secular democracy guaranteeing equal rights to Jews and Arabs.

Said, having once been slow to express his political views, made up for lost time in his last decade. He repeatedly skewered Fouad Ajami, Daniel Pipes, Kanan Makiya, and others anointed as experts on the Middle East by the mainstream media and think tanks. He often attacked Naipaul, whose powerfully literary but intellectually languid journalism about Muslim societies was embraced by both establishment liberals and conservatives. Naipaul, in Said's view, had acquired his gilded Western reputation as a truthteller about the developing world because he elided the West's damaging presence in it, while depicting Asians and Africans as intellectually helpless and politically confused. Said brusquely dismissed many left-leaning thinkers as well, describing Jürgen Habermas's writings as "all just hot air." He became disillusioned with Foucault and Sartre, and even scolded the Marxist critic Fredric Jameson ("I wish you were more active politically. . . . There's a lot to be done"). Toward the end of his life, he renounced another idol, Theodor Adorno, judging the German critic's habitual pose of disillusionment to be too lofty.

Brennan reports that Said's "battle to make the Palestinian story as sophisticated and persuasive as Israeli *hasbara*" had some small successes. Mary-Kay Wilmers, the co-founder and editor of the *London Review of Books*, though once reflexively pro-Israel, came to think that "the Palestinians had a more or less unanswerable case." Fan mail came from Nadine Gordimer, Kenzaburo Oe, Jodie Foster, and Emma Thompson. It is not clear what Said made of an admiring letter from Patricia Highsmith, who was possibly motivated more by anti-Semitism than by any solidarity with Palestinians. He was most likely gratified by a note from I. F. Stone that praised his ability to "affirm the great gifts and worth of your oppressed and rejected people" and concluded by stating, "Yours have become the sensitive 'Jews' and mine the 'goyim.'" In his final years, which were marked by much rhetorical bravura, Said started to call himself the "last Jewish intellectual," and mused that the partisans of Israel had no idea what it "means to be a Jewish intellectual, one committed to worldliness and universal justice." He suggested that James Baldwin and Malcolm X were his soulmates.

At the same time, Said was aware of how little true influence he had. After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, his old adversary Bernard Lewis emerged as the chief theoretician of American wars in the Muslim world, and “The Arab Mind” became a guidebook for military officers in Iraq. (“You’ve got to understand the Arab mind,” one of them told a reporter outside a village that he and others had encased in razor wire. “The only thing they understand is force.”) The mollycoddling of murderous Arab despots by Donald Trump, or the Israeli government’s recent resolve to annex Palestinian lands, would not have surprised Said. Besieged for much of his life by “the superior power of incessantly repeated lies,” Brennan writes, “he knew he was not going to win.”

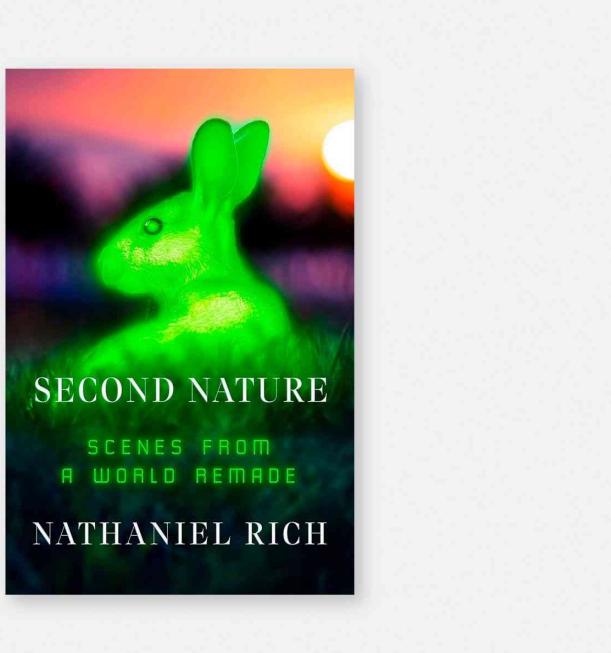
Physically ravaged by leukemia by the end of the nineteen-nineties, Said still pushed back vigorously against the champions of the strong. “Where cruelty and injustice are concerned,” he wrote to a well-wisher, “hopelessness is submission, which I believe is immoral.” There is something bracing about Said’s late style of being in the world, lucidly acknowledging defeat yet resolved even more firmly to stand with a rejected people. To the question of “what one really is,” he ultimately gave a defiant reply: I am a Palestinian. It is a measure of his nobility that, among the many selves available to him, Said assumed the one that caused him the most pain. ♦

[April 26 & May 3, 2021 Issue](#)

Briefly Noted

“Second Nature,” “Finding the Raga,” “The Final Revival of Opal & Nev,” and “The Elephant of Belfast.”

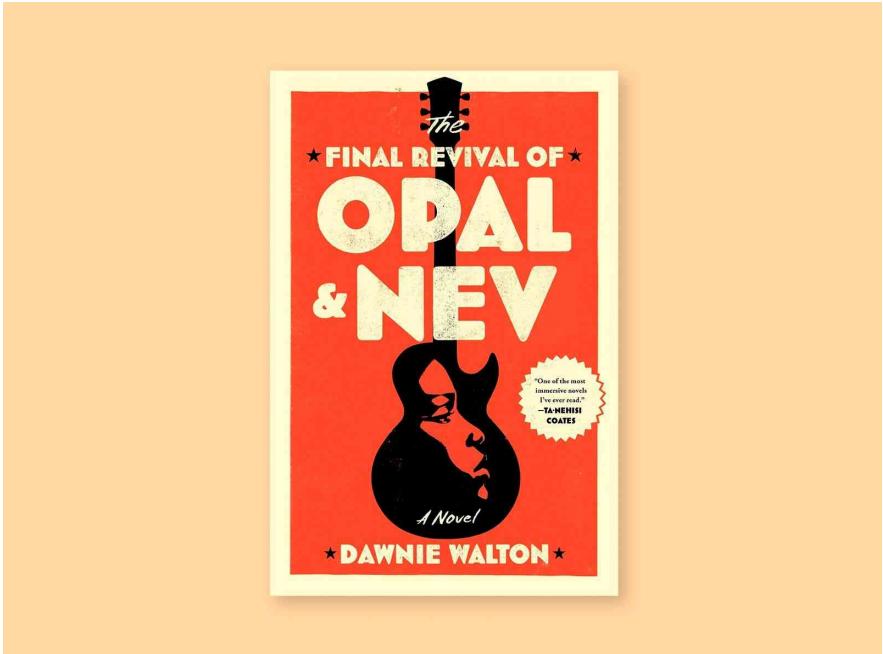
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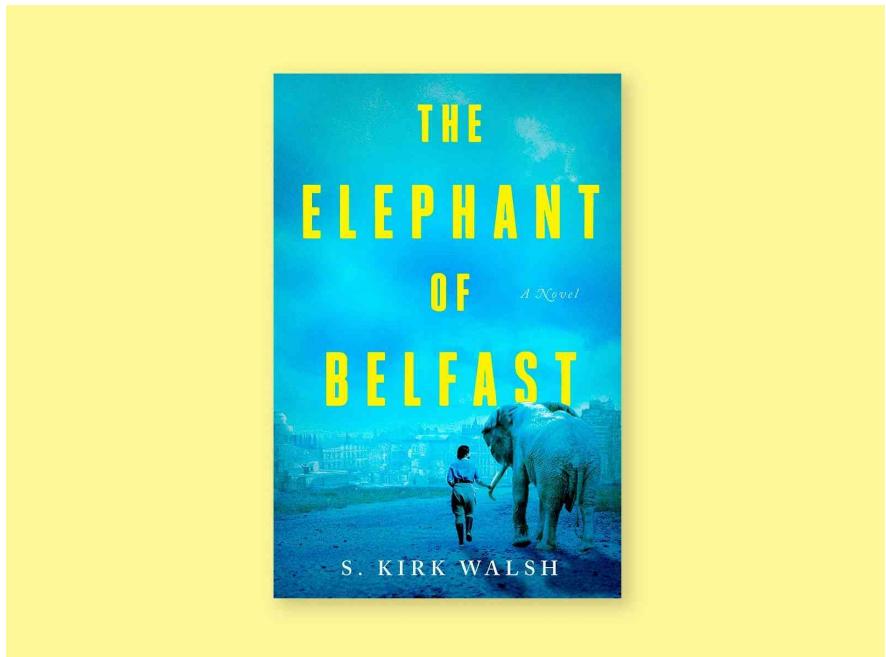
Second Nature, by *Nathaniel Rich* (*Farrar, Straus & Giroux*). Tales of greed, corruption, and indifference abound in reporting on climate change and ecological disaster, and there are plenty in this vibrant book: DuPont and the poisoning of Parkersburg, West Virginia; SoCalGas and the poisoning of Porter Ranch, California. But there are also stories of bravery, passion, and inventiveness, like the quests to bring the passenger pigeon back from extinction, and to create eggless egg and meatless meat. Rich has an appreciation for dreamers, even for billionaires whose idealism may be indistinguishable from hubris. Will the three-hundred-foot-tall clock Jeff Bezos is building inside an excavated mountain in Texas really make humanity think more about its future?



[**Finding the Raga**](#), by Amit Chaudhuri (*New York Review Books*). The author of this compelling meditation on Indian and Western art-making is both a novelist and a performer of Indian classical music. Whereas Western classical music enjoys a kind of élite status, educated Bengalis seem to keep their region's classical music, freighted with religious overtones and musty traditions, “at arm’s length.” Chaudhuri writes absorbingly on the divergences between two cultural modes of listening to and making music. A symphony may evoke images or moods, and it is unchanged by the time or location of a performance. But the melodic framework of a raga is nonrepresentational and “of the world”: a raga sung at the wrong hour suffers “jet lag.”



[**The Final Revival of Opal & Nev**](#), by Dawnie Walton (37 Ink). In this début novel, set in the nineteen-seventies, the author, a music-industry veteran, mimics the form of rock oral histories to deliver a portrait of an iconoclastic artist. Opal Jewel, a Black singer from Detroit, sings less well than a sister she performs with, but she is punk, and the Zeitgeist is with her. Nev Charles, a white British singer-songwriter, sees in her the “difference I wanted,” and plucks her from obscurity. Together they plunge into New York’s anarchic music scene, in a fruitful collaboration that nonetheless moves toward tragedy. The novel offers a lively take on the music industry’s commercialism, racism, and sexism, and also a commentary on how history and memory are refracted through changing cultural currents.



The Elephant of Belfast, by S. Kirk Walsh (*Counterpoint*). Based on real events, this engrossing novel takes place a year into the Second World War. A three-year-old elephant named Violet arrives at Belfast's Bellevue Zoo, where Hettie Quin, a young zookeeper mourning the recent death of a sister, finds purpose and solace in caring for her. Hettie “preferred animals to people,” but is pursued by several men, including her sister’s widower, who is active in the I.R.A. When the Luftwaffe begins bombing Belfast, many of the zoo’s animals face euthanasia. The novel vividly evokes the speed with which war makes the commonplace surreal, as Hettie and Violet become fugitives in a ruined city.

What Do We Want in a First Lady?

Lady Bird Johnson and Nancy Reagan grappled with the contradictions of a role that is at once public and private, superficial and serious.

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)

April 19, 2021



On January 18, 1968, Lady Bird Johnson welcomed about fifty guests to the White House for a Women Doers Luncheon. This wasn't her first Doers do; an earlier one was focussed on "beautification," Lady Bird's personal cause—something every modern First Lady is expected to have—and had as its featured speaker the urbanist Jane Jacobs. The January luncheon was concerned with juvenile delinquency and "crime on the streets." Some of the Doers were involved in organizations such as the Y.W.C.A.; others were journalists or the wives of politicians. And one was Eartha Kitt, the singer, who was invited because of her work with a youth group. Her fellow-guests might also have heard her rendition of "Santa Baby" or seen her on television, earlier that month, as Catwoman, in "Batman."

After the luncheon was under way, with polite discussions of street lighting in Indianapolis and a drop-in by L.B.J., Kitt raised her hand and, in a freewheeling soliloquy, declared that one couldn't talk about juvenile

delinquency without also talking about the war in Vietnam. “You take the best of the country and send them off to a war and they get shot,” she said. The war meant that “it pays to be a bad guy,” since a criminal record could keep young men from being inducted into the military—an upside-down version of student deferments. “They can’t come to you and tell you, Mrs. Johnson,” Kitt said. “They cannot get to President Johnson and tell President Johnson about it. They rebel in the streets; they will take pot.”

Bedlam ensued. Another guest—also a first lady, of New Jersey—stood up to say that “anybody who’s taking pot just because there is a war in Vietnam is some kind of a kook.” Lady Bird, her voice trembling, said that the war did not “give us a ticket not to try to work on bettering the things in this country that we can better.” In an audio diary she kept, she said that she feared that her luncheon would be seen as “a riot.” If so, the target was Kitt, who, in the following days, was pilloried as disruptive and “ill bred.” Lady Bird put out a statement calling her “the shrill voice of anger and discord”; the Secret Service asked the C.I.A. for a dossier on her. It mattered that Kitt was Black; one of the few public figures to support her was Martin Luther King, Jr. She lost work, and moved to Europe. One thing the episode illustrates is that the First Ladyship does come with power.

If the job of a First Lady is to be a model of hospitality and grace, Lady Bird was, in this case, a bad one; if the job is to back up her husband and undercut his opponents, she was a good one. Kitt, in a memoir, suggested that her mistake was thinking that the event was really meant to come up with ideas about young people and crime: “Was this a sounding board, or was this simply a theme luncheon to no end?” The problem of the luncheon, then, was also an inherent problem with the institution of the First Lady: how much of it is for real?

Two new books—“[Lady Bird Johnson: Hiding in Plain Sight](#)” (Random House), by Julia Sweig, a fellow at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, at the University of Texas at Austin, and “[The Triumph of Nancy Reagan](#)” (Simon & Schuster), by Karen Tumulty, a *Washington Post* columnist—offer perspectives on the confusion of the public and the private, and of seriousness and sham, that is the First Ladyship. Sweig’s book is focussed on Lady Bird during the Johnson Administration, and her main contention is that Lady Bird, in some broad sense, mattered. The author’s

fondness for her subject is evident—too much so, at times. Tumulty’s book is more ambitious than Sweig’s—it is a full biography—and more successful. She doesn’t make excuses for her subject, and her clarity about Nancy (as she calls her throughout; her husband is “Ronnie”) gives substance to an engaging, well-written narrative. Tumulty’s Nancy is humanly comprehensible and compelling, and comes out looking better than do many of her worst critics and her husband’s strongest allies—two categories that often overlapped.

The harder assessment is which of the authors’ subjects is the better First Lady. In part, that’s because there is no agreement on what a First Lady should be. A President’s wife can be praised for being a doer (promoting children’s literacy, supporting military families) and attacked for doing too much ([Hillary Clinton](#) and health care). She can be variously admired or targeted for breaking barriers (as [Michelle Obama](#) was). Some people prefer one First Lady to another because they prefer one Presidential husband to another. Or they may condemn Mary Todd Lincoln because her personal difficulties meant that she didn’t do enough to support her husband, while condemning [Melania Trump](#) because she didn’t do enough to sabotage her husband. An overarching question is how one can admire a First Lady who is part of an Administration one disdains. On top of everything else, is it her job to make sure the President is good?

When Lady Bird published “[A White House Diary](#),” in 1970—consisting of edited excerpts of her dictated audio-diary entries—a *Times* reviewer found the book “motionless” and “unrevealing.” Sweig thinks the review reflected an obliviousness about Lady Bird’s real influence. The unredacted diaries form the backbone of Sweig’s book, which offers little more than a sketch of her life before and after the Presidency.

Lady Bird, the daughter of a prosperous businessman, was born and raised in a grand house in small-town East Texas. Her given name was Claudia Alta Taylor; it was her Black nanny who began calling her Lady Bird. She studied history and journalism at the University of Texas at Austin, and met Lyndon Johnson when he was a congressional aide in his mid-twenties. The “L.B.J.” monogramming operation was later extended with their daughters, Lynda Bird Johnson and Luci Baines Johnson. (Both had big weddings

during their father's Presidency; Lynda, who married Chuck Robb when he was a marine captain, became the first lady of Virginia.)

Lady Bird's image as the consummate Southern lady was one that the White House capitalized on when it deployed her to help sell the Civil Rights Act of 1964—or at least to get Southerners to vote for her husband despite the legislation—with what Sweig calls a “gently prodding message” of conciliation. Still, “beautification” is the word most associated with Lady Bird, and in discussions of her legacy it can take on a sardonic ring, as if it were no more than an attempt to adorn a disastrous decade with flowers. Lady Bird certainly engaged in a fair amount of flower planting, including a couple of million daffodils and more cherry trees in Washington, D.C. But flowers would probably be part of the First Lady's job description, if there were such a thing. (Michelle Obama preferred vegetables.) First Lady Helen Herron Taft was behind the arrival of the capital's first batch of cherry trees, in 1912; Ellen Wilson created the Rose Garden the following year, and a half century later Jackie Kennedy brought in her heiress friend Bunny Mellon to reconfigure it. Melania Trump's Rose Garden revision (which involved removing some trees and upgrading drainage) was greeted with anger, largely, one suspects, because it was a reminder of what can be the most maddening thing about First Ladies: they are expected to beautify the Presidency.

Yet Lady Bird's beautification campaign encompassed the social impact of urban design and many concerns of the environmental movement, including how the highway system affected the landscape. Sweig is at her best when she makes a case for the depth of Lady Bird's call for beauty and its connection to Great Society programs. Stewart Udall, the Secretary of the Interior and an advocate for conservation, was a close ally. Jane Jacobs's presence at a Doers lunch was not an aberration.

In 1965, Lady Bird had organized a White House Arts Festival, which went off the rails when John Hersey announced plans to read from his reporting on Hiroshima. It included a passage about the wildflowers, which he portrayed as having been unnaturally stimulated by radioactivity, “in bloom among the city's bones”—not a subtle allusion. Two years later, Lady Bird visited Williams College for the opening of a pioneering environmental-studies center, only to be confronted by students chanting, “Shame, shame”:

the war, again. (In her diary, she said she sensed an “animal passion” in the crowd.) At Yale, which she visited the next day, signs said “Stop Beautifying Vietnam.”

Sweig often depicts the war almost as if it were an unfortunate distraction that kept intruding on Lady Bird’s fine works. But Vietnam wasn’t something that just happened to the Administration. Precisely because so much of the First Lady operation is staged, it can serve as a rebuke to the idea that any aspect of the Presidency can be neatly cordoned off. Twelve days after the Women Doers luncheon, the Tet Offensive began.

“If I’d written a book like Lady Bird Johnson’s, why write it?” Nancy Reagan asked an interviewer for the *Los Angeles Times*, following the publication of her memoir, “[My Turn](#),” in 1989, soon after her husband left office. Nancy’s book was certainly not motionless. Karen Tumulty notes that it was nicknamed “My Burn,” owing to its sharp commentary on everyone from her husband’s Vice-President and successor, George H. W. Bush, to her predecessor, Rosalynn Carter, to the four Reagan children: Ron and Patti; and Maureen and Michael, Ronnie’s children with his first wife, Jane Wyman. “So hurtful, so painful, so embarrassing, so pathetic,” Sally Quinn wrote in the *Washington Post*. And yet, Tumulty writes, “Nancy’s assessments of the people around her husband come off as pretty close to the mark.”

Assessing those people—campaign advisers, staff members, politicians, donors—was her great talent. “No first lady in memory was more in the middle of White House personnel matters than Nancy Reagan,” Tumulty writes. When she prevailed in what Tumulty calls her “guerrilla campaign” to get her husband to fire Donald Regan, his chief of staff, William Safire wrote that she had made her husband look “wimpish.” That didn’t quite square with the caricature of her as a vapid clotheshorse, Tumulty notes. In truth, Regan was a petty autocrat who, in his eagerness to shore up his position, had failed to notice that various national-security officials, most notably Colonel Oliver North, were running a covert operation that spiralled into the Iran-Contra affair. (It involved selling arms to Iran in exchange for hostages held in Lebanon and siphoning the proceeds to the right-wing insurgency in Nicaragua—all in violation of multiple federal laws.)



"If you think you can earn my forgiveness with snacks, then you're absolutely correct."
Cartoon by Sarah Akinterinwa

Nancy was mocked for “the gaze”—the look of abject devotion she directed at her husband. The adulation was real, but it was expressed as constant worrying, fiddling, and arranging, rather than as deference. It was Nancy who realized that the Iran-Contra affair presented a threat to the Presidency, Tumulty writes, and she did not stop telling him so, even in the face of his stubborn defensiveness. (One weekend at the height of the scandal, at Camp David, an aide heard the President yell, “Get off my goddamn back!”) She got rid of Regan, persuaded her husband to give an address accepting responsibility, and chose the speechwriter to insure that the tone was right. (“I told the American people I did not trade arms for hostages. My heart and my best intentions still tell me that’s true; but the facts and the evidence tell me it is not.”) The speech helped turn public opinion around. In Tumulty’s view, “Nancy came through for Ronnie, when so many of the supposedly smart men in his administration had failed him.”

Regan soon published a memoir, writing, on the first page, “Virtually every major move and decision the Reagans made during my time as White House chief of staff was cleared in advance with a woman in San Francisco who drew up horoscopes.” This was a gross exaggeration, although the truth, as Tumulty writes, “was weird enough”: after Reagan was shot and nearly killed by John Hinckley, early in his Presidency, Nancy became fixated on

the idea that he would be safer if he travelled or held events on astrologically propitious days and hours. Members of the staff might be told that Air Force One had to take off at exactly 2:11 A.M. “*Nobody was hurt by it*—except possibly me,” Nancy wrote about the use of astrology, and the ensuing bad publicity. Not quite: the astrological demands contributed to the burnout of White House staffers.

Nancy castigated her husband’s aides after they scheduled a wreath-laying ceremony at a military cemetery in Bitburg, Germany, in 1985 without realizing that members of the Waffen-S.S. were buried there. Fair enough; they had messed up. Reagan, out of a sense of obligation to West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, insisted on going anyway, despite public outrage and his wife’s pleas. (“I was furious at Helmut Kohl for not getting us out of it,” she wrote in her memoir.) Instead, a speech at Bergen-Belsen was added. Nancy policed the logistics to reduce Reagan’s exposure, which was helpful. She also had his arrival time at Bergen-Belsen moved twenty-five minutes to align with the stars, which was not.

Tumulty argues that Nancy had a brilliant grasp of her husband’s strengths, what he needed to be at his best (sleep, the right speech), and what voters wanted from him. She pushed for summits with Mikhail Gorbachev because she was sure that if Ronnie sat down in a room with him enough times world peace would ensue, and she wasn’t entirely wrong. (Nancy couldn’t crack Raisa Gorbachev, whom she described as “one cold cookie.”) She didn’t think it would be good for his legacy if nuclear war broke out on his watch—what the bombs might do to the planet seems to have been secondary.

Inevitably, Tumulty has to reckon with the notorious unauthorized [biography](#) of Nancy by Kitty Kelley. The book, published in 1991, was so scurrilous that it garnered sympathy for Nancy. (Marlene Dietrich wrote to the Reagans to urge them to sue Kelley: “That pig of a woman—and Simon & Schuster—should suffer.”) It also entrenched anecdotes that were no more than gossip, such as Nancy’s supposed affair with Frank Sinatra. Tumulty discards much of it, while acknowledging that Kelley unearthed aspects of Nancy’s early life that she had obfuscated.

Her name at birth was Anne Francis Robbins; her mother was an actress named Edith Luckett, whose marriage to Nancy's father ended when Nancy was a baby. The usual shorthand version of her childhood is that, after a few itinerant years, Edith married a prominent Chicago doctor named Loyal Davis, after which they were ensconced in prim, placid respectability. But Edith's show-business life didn't end with her marriage—she played multiple parts on a radio serial, hosted a talk show, ghostwrote speeches for Chicago's mayor (he seems to have paid her with city funds, by putting her on the books as a police officer). Edith turned their apartment on Lake Shore Drive into a way station for entertainers. Spencer Tracy stayed there to "dry out" during his struggle with alcoholism. Nancy's godmother was Alla Nazimova, a legendary, lesbian silent-film star. It was Edith who propelled her husband to social prominence.

After graduating from Smith College, Nancy tried acting in New York, without much success, though she appeared in some early television programs. The consensus among her mother's friends seems to have been that she was only marginally talented, but they liked Edith enough to try to help. When Nancy was offered a screen test in Hollywood, Tracy made sure that she had the best setup possible. Her biggest role was in a movie about God addressing humanity through a radio program, which did not do well. By then, she had met Ronald Reagan—a far bigger star, though a waning one—and her path in life became clear to her. It took Ronnie longer to realize it; he wasn't over Jane Wyman. But, as Tumulty writes, he became intensely devoted to Nancy. His letters to her are spun-sugar confections. It's often been observed that Reagan, though amiable, seemed to have a closed-off chamber in his character—a sort of sunken place. (His biographer Edmund Morris was practically destabilized trying to understand him.) Nancy seems to have plumbed it. Reagan said that she saved his soul; certainly, he wouldn't have become governor of California or President without her.

Nancy's acting career ended soon after her marriage. Joan Didion, in a 1968 profile, "Pretty Nancy," said that, as the first lady of California, Nancy appeared to be "playing out some middle-class American woman's daydream, circa 1948." She was portrayed, then and later, as a "helpmeet" with no vocation. Yet the work she did for her husband, from scheduling and

hiring staff to fund-raising (she closed many deals with donors), is the sort for which professional political operatives are highly compensated.

The question of how a First Lady can or should maintain a separate career is not simple. It works well enough for Jill Biden, whose teaching career at a community college is relatively self-contained. Lady Bird's active ownership of broadcasting stations in Texas—which, as Robert Caro documented, had benefitted from political cronyism in the granting of licenses—was more conflict-prone. As First Lady, she put her shares in a trust. The cause that a First Lady is expected to adopt (in Nancy's case, drug use among young people, whom she urged to “just say no”) has something in common with the obligation placed on celebrities and minor royals to serve as ambassadors for good causes.

Nancy was not always ambassadorial. The subplot of her conflict with Barbara Bush lights up every page of Tumulty's book it appears on. Barbara, the Second Lady, was seen as more patrician; she, too, went to Smith but didn't graduate. Nancy was incapable of hiding her loathing for Barbara, who, in turn, dropped comments in the press about how she—unlike some people—did not bother with fancy clothes. (Even if, as Tumulty notes, Barbara's preferred labels were Bill Blass and Scaasi.) Nancy didn't help her image when she borrowed designer clothes and jewelry for events and often failed to return them, a practice that might have seemed normal in her Hollywood years. For what it's worth (and how much it's worth is another First Ladyship conundrum), Nancy's clothing choices stand up remarkably well, especially given the gruesome temptations of eighties fashion. Her purchase of expensive new china for the White House, with donated funds, came across as an unforgivable extravagance, even as she argued that there hadn't been a new set since the Johnson years, when Lady Bird bought lunch service with, of course, a wildflower pattern. (One experience that Nancy and Lady Bird shared was being scorned for doing the things for which Jackie was lauded.)

Then again, every aspect of the Nancy-Barbara battle points to how jumbled and gendered the expectations for a First Lady are, perhaps above all in the matter of how maternal she is supposed to be—how much we want her to be a carer, more than a doer. The fantasy is that a good mother wouldn't let her husband gut social programs, as Ronnie did. There is a litany of parenting

complaints in the Reagan family, and hurtful acts all around, the essential point being that Nancy and Ronnie, deep in their own love story, shut out their children. Neither Reagan really denied the charge, though only in Nancy's case was it treated as a deviancy. But which, ultimately, was less damaging for the nation: Nancy's dim view of her children, or Barbara's belief that not one but two of her own children were fit to be President?

Nancy could push her husband only so far, as became clear when she tried to get him to respond to the *AIDS* crisis. For years, Reagan didn't even speak about *AIDS* in public; he told Morris that he wondered if "the Lord brought down this plague." Tumulty documents Nancy's many efforts to get him to address the issue, including arranging for him to sit down with the wife of one of the co-stars of "Starsky & Hutch," who had been infected through a transfusion while giving birth and passed the virus to her child. Reagan was moved, but his course was little altered, and Nancy did nothing to get ahead of him publicly. When he finally devoted a major speech to the crisis, at a dinner for amfAR, Elizabeth Taylor's *AIDS* charity, Nancy fought a pitched battle with officials who wanted him to use the occasion to condemn homosexuality. She prevailed on that point, but the speech was rightly judged to be inadequate. "What people in the audience didn't know was how much worse it could have been had Nancy not intervened," Tumulty writes.

Of course, from the perspective of conservatives at the time, it would have been better without her. As with the Gorbachev summit, her "triumph" involved a bet with history about her husband. The Reagan model of First Lady observes her husband from a vantage of both intimate nearness and greater temporal distance than do the partisans and ideologues around him. Nobody elected Nancy Reagan, but, then, no one elected Don Regan or Pat Buchanan—a Reagan speechwriter and a frequent Nancy target—either. In contrast, Sweig offers no evidence that Lady Bird was anything but supportive of her husband when it came to Vietnam, as much as she worried about the strain that the war placed on him. That makes Vietnam her tragedy, too.

Nancy said that she thought the First Lady was, first and foremost, "a wife"—a word that substitutes one set of mysteries for another. What will it mean when a President has a husband or, for that matter, a nonbinary spouse? (Doug Emhoff, Kamala Harris's husband, should in the next few

years provide a test run for the long-overdue presence of a First Gentleman.) Reagan was diagnosed with Alzheimer's in 1994, and Nancy was widely praised for her attentive, tender support for him until his death, a decade later. And yet Nancy, who lived a dozen years more, subsequently angered many Republicans by speaking out in support of embryonic stem-cell research. Scientists hoped such studies might help cure Alzheimer's; anti-abortion advocates viewed them as anathema. Michael Deaver, a former White House aide, described getting a call from a Republican representative who said, "Reagan would never have approved of stem-cell research!" Deaver answered, "Ronald Reagan didn't have to take care of Ronald Reagan for the last ten years." One way or the other, Nancy did her job. ♦

Comment

- [Biden Inherits F.D.R.'s Supreme Court Problem](#)

April 26 & May 3, 2021 Issue

Biden Inherits F.D.R.'s Supreme Court Problem

Roosevelt tried to pack the Court to protect his ambitious agenda from conservatives. Biden, facing a similar threat, has appointed a commission to study options.

By [Evan Osnos](#)

April 18, 2021

The [Supreme Court](#), by design, is undemocratic, but is there a point beyond which its insulation from the will of the people becomes unjust? Much has been said about the fact that the makeup of the current Court does not reflect that of the elected branches of the federal government. In response, on April 9th, [Joe Biden](#) signed an executive order establishing a bipartisan Presidential commission, to study the prospect of changing the Court's composition and culture. The Court can be shrunk or expanded by a simple majority vote in Congress, and the dream of doing just that has occasionally tantalized Presidents beset by judicial opposition—most famously, the predecessor whom Biden cites frequently as an inspiration: Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In the Oval Office, Biden has awarded prime real estate—right above the mantel—to a portrait of F.D.R. But, on the issue of the Court, his fondness belies contrasts in the two leaders' political instincts.

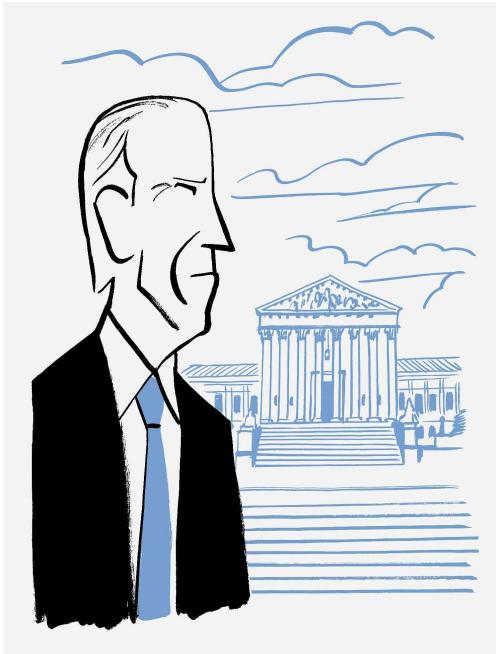


Illustration by João Fazenda

After a landslide reëlection in 1936, Roosevelt, frustrated that one popular [New Deal](#) program after another had been struck down in a Court dominated by a group of conservative Justices known as the Four Horsemen, plotted a counterattack: a law that would increase the number of Justices from nine to fifteen, altering the size of the Court for the first time in sixty-eight years. For months, he kept the idea secret, even when Justices dined at the White House. He told an adviser that he could either enjoy “one cocktail before dinner and have it a very amiable affair,” or reveal his explosive plan and “take three cocktails.” Finally, on February 5, 1937, he proposed legislation that would add as many as six new Justices—one for every member of the Court over the age of seventy years and six months—camouflaging his plan as an effort to insure a “systematic addition of younger blood.”

But Roosevelt had miscalculated. Critics accused him of trying to “pack” the Court. “Tell your President, he has made a great mistake,” the liberal Justice Louis Brandeis said. Lawmakers were deluged with mail opposing the plan, and even other Democrats worried that it would erode the separation of powers. In July, after months of controversy, Congress rejected the bill. By then, however, the threat had achieved its effect: Owen Roberts, a Justice who had often voted with the conservatives against the New Deal, had switched sides, and one of the Four Horsemen, Willis Van Devanter, had retired, and the Court never barred another major plank of Roosevelt’s

program. As Russell Wheeler, a Supreme Court scholar at the Brookings Institution, put it, “The fuse was stamped out before it got to the dynamite.”

The political obstacles to expanding the Court today remain steep. Doing so would require overcoming a Republican filibuster—or, short of that, uniting enough Democrats to scrap the filibuster itself. But the idea has regained popularity among Democrats since 2016, when [Mitch McConnell](#), then the Senate Majority Leader, prevented President [Barack Obama](#) from filling the late Justice Antonin Scalia’s seat, on the dubious claim that it was inappropriate to confirm a Justice in an election year. That November, [Donald Trump](#) lost the popular vote but won the Presidency, and in his one term he installed three Justices, establishing a 6–3 conservative majority. The third instance, filling the seat of [Ruth Bader Ginsburg](#), who died in September, 2020, came when votes in the Presidential election were already being cast. McConnell abandoned his previous objection and rushed through the confirmation of Amy Coney Barrett.

During the 2020 Presidential campaign, many Democratic contenders argued that McConnell’s manipulation constituted its own form of court-packing, and thus forced them to consider radical reforms, including adding seats. But Biden, who arrived in Washington in 1973, is loyal to many of its traditions. In 1983, as a senator, he called Roosevelt’s maneuver a “bonehead idea”; in 2005, he praised the courage of those who resisted it, and, in 2019, during the primaries, he reiterated his objection to a Democratic-led expansion, saying, “We’ll live to rue that day.” But, after Ginsburg’s death, Biden, under pressure from the left, promised to appoint a panel that would examine a range of reforms, including court-packing, term limits—some scholars have suggested instituting staggered eighteen-year terms—and a code of conduct. (Several Justices have been criticized for appearing at partisan events, failing to recuse themselves from certain cases, and the like.)

Still, Biden’s commission seems designed to project stately deliberation rather than activist urgency. It is charged with holding hearings over the next six months and publishing an analysis, but not with making policy recommendations to the President. Its roster, composed of thirty-six members, features prominent academics and former federal judges, many of whom have been Supreme Court clerks. It includes Laurence Tribe, a

leading liberal at Harvard Law School, and Sherrilyn Ifill, the head of the N.A.A.C.P. Legal Defense and Educational Fund, as well as Thomas Griffith, a former judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit, who wrote an opinion, later vacated, that would have invalidated crucial parts of the Affordable Care Act. Yet the announcement of the commission satisfied almost nobody. McConnell described it as a “direct assault on our nation’s independent judiciary.” Many saw it as a sop to the left, but progressives, too, were dismissive; Demand Justice, an advocacy group that calls for adding four seats to the Court, said in a statement that the commission is “unlikely to meaningfully advance the ball.”

After decades of careful centrism, Biden has proved to be more radical on policy than many Americans predicted. Yet, when it comes to the institutions of American democracy, his instinct is for restoration, not revolution. Even as the Republican Party remains mired in the seditious fervor of Trumpism, Biden is hostile to overt partisanship. That puts him in chronic tension with the progressive frontier of his party—and it means that, like Roosevelt, he could find some of his most ambitious achievements undone by conservative Justices. But, for a President who pledged at his Inauguration to put his “whole soul” into “bringing America together,” expanding the Court runs counter to his belief in the possibility that it can retain at least a shred of insulation from partisan politics.

More than eighty years after Roosevelt’s gambit, another Justice Roberts may concur with that belief. John Roberts has lamented what he calls a “misperception” that the Court’s behavior is preordained by its political makeup, and he has emerged as a centrist vote. Wheeler, of Brookings, sees historical lessons at play. “Roosevelt’s proposal went nowhere, but the Court got the message and changed its jurisprudence,” he said. “I can’t imagine John Roberts doesn’t have that in the back of his mind.” ♦

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Wednesday, April 14, 2021](#)

April 26 & May 3, 2021 Issue

The Crossword: Wednesday, April 14, 2021

A moderately challenging puzzle.

By [Patrick Berry](#)

April 14, 2021

By [Elizabeth C. Gorski](#)

By [Wyna Liu](#)

Fiction

- “Old Babes in the Wood”

Old Babes in the Wood

By [Margaret Atwood](#)

April 19, 2021



Audio: Margaret Atwood reads.

“Pants or dead leaves?” Lizzie says.

“My guess is pants,” Nell says. The two of them stand on the dock in their age-inappropriate bathing suits and stare at the dark patch under the water.

An hour earlier, Nell was toasting her laundry on the dock, which was the best place to dry it: it had been the best place for seventy years. But she didn’t put rocks on top of her cotton yoga pants, though she ought to have known better, and then she went back up the hill to the house, through the sighing and rustling trees. The pants are lightweight, and they seem to have blown away. Logic dictates that they must be somewhere in the lake. Other pants she might have kissed goodbye, but she’s fond of these.

“I’ll go in,” she says.

“Maybe it’s not pants,” Lizzie says dubiously. Waterlogged leaves accumulate on the sandy, rocky lake bottom. Their older brother, Robbie,

sometimes rakes them out as a courtesy to others, along with the tiny water weeds that grow if allowed, and puts the resulting sludge into a large zinc washtub, after which its fate is unknown to Nell. The rake and the tub are leaning against a tree, thus he must have done this recently. Though only on the other side of the dock. So it might still be leaves.

Margaret Atwood on loss and memory.

Nell sits on the edge of the dock, then gingerly eases herself down, conscious of possible splinters. She and splinters have a long history. Splinters in the bum are especially bad because you can't see to pull them out.

Her feet hit sand. The water is up to her waist.

"Is it cold?" Lizzie asks. She knows the answer.

"It's been colder." This is always true. Did the two of them really once hurl themselves off the end of the dock into the freezing, heart-shocking water, laughing their heads off? Did they cannonball? They did.

Nell has a flash of Lizzie at a much younger age—younger even than the cannonballing—two or three. "A pider! A big pider!" she was saying. She couldn't yet pronounce "spider." Pider. Poon. Plash. Nell herself had been what, at that time? Fifteen. A seasoned babysitter. It won't hurt you. See, it's running away. Spiders are afraid of us. It's hiding under the dock. But Lizzie was not reassured. She's remained that way: beneath every bland surface there's bound to be something with too many legs.

"Am I aimed right?" Nell asks. Her feet move tentatively, encountering soft tickles, oatmeal-textured gunk, sharp little stones, what feels like a stick. She's up to her armpits now; she can't see the dark patch because of the angle of reflection.

"More or less," Lizzie says. She slaps at her bare legs: stable flies. There's a technique to killing them—they take off backward, you have to sneak up with your hand—but it requires focus. "O.K., warmer. Warmer. A little to the right."

“I see it,” Nell says. “Definitely pants.” She fishes around with the toes of her left foot and brings the pants up, dripping. She can still fish things up with her toes, it seems: a minor accomplishment, but not to be sneered at. Enjoy the moment, it won’t last, she comments to herself.

Tomorrow she might tackle the wide strips of gray paint, or stain, that have flaked off the dock and are lying on the lake bottom like sinister sci-fi fungus growths. It was Lizzie who painted the dock; it was Robbie who’d wanted it painted. He thought it would preserve the planks, keep them from rotting, so they wouldn’t have to rebuild the dock yet again. How many times have they done that? Three, four?

Wrong about the paint, or stain, as it turned out: the dock is peeling like a sunburn, and water gets under the remaining patches, softening the wood. Still, they may not have to rebuild the dock themselves; this one could last them out. The younger gen will have to do it, assuming they’re up to it.

That was the kind of thing their mother used to say about her clothing: “I don’t need another sweater. This one will last me out.” Nell had hated it at the time. Parents ought not to die; it’s inconsiderate.

Pants in hand, Nell wades back to the dock. She has a brief moment of wondering how she’s going to clamber back up. There’s a decaying makeshift step on the other side, made of two boards and covered with mossy growth, but it’s a death trap and ought to be removed. A sledgehammer would do it. But then there would be a couple of lethal rusty spike heads sticking out of the huge log the step is attached to. Someone will have to go at the step with a crowbar, but it won’t be Nell. All she needs is one of those spikes popping out suddenly and backward she’ll go, into the shallows, and brain herself on the annoying pointed white rock they keep meaning to dig out but haven’t got around to.

On second thought, better to hammer the rusty spikes in, not pull them out. Now who, exactly, is going to do that?

Nell flings her soaking-wet pants onto the dock. Then, placing her feet carefully on the slippery logs of the underwater crib that holds the dock in place and gripping the nearest wooden tie-up cleat, she hoists herself up.

You old ninny, you really shouldn't be doing this, she tells herself. One of these days you'll break your neck.

"Victory," Lizzie says. "Let's have tea."

Having tea is sooner said than done. To begin with, they're out of water, a problem they've anticipated by bringing a pail down the hill. Now they must wrestle with the hand pump. It's creakier than ever this year, the flow of water is diminished, and there's a pronounced iron tang, which probably means that the sand point far underground is clogging up or disintegrating. "Ask Robbie about sand point," Lizzie has written on one of the numerous lists she and Nell are endlessly making and then either losing or throwing away.

The choices are: dig the thing up, a nightmare, or sink a new point, also a nightmare. They'll end up with one of the sons, or grandsons, or two of them, being called upon to do the actual sledgehammering. No one can expect old biddies of the ages of Nell and Lizzie to do it themselves.

No one, that is, except the two of them. They'll start, then they'll injure themselves—the knees, the back, the ankles—and the younger gen will be forced to take over. They will do it wrong, of course. Of course! Tongue-biting will be in order from Lizzie and Nell. Or, better, they'll say they have headaches so they won't have to watch, then they'll wander up to the cabin and read murder mysteries. Lizzie has the family's accumulation of flyspecked and yellowing paperbacks arranged by author on a shelf in her room, ever since a large mouse nest was discovered behind its former location.

They take turns with the pump handle. Once they've got a pailful—or a half pail, because neither one of them is up to lugging a full pail, not anymore—they stagger up the steep hill, which is inset with tripping hazards in the form of steps made of flat rocks, switching the pail back and forth until they arrive at the top, breathing heavily. Heart-attack city, here I come, Nell thinks.

"Why the fuck did he have to put it at the top of this fucking hill?" Lizzie says. "He" changes its referent depending on what they're talking about;

right now, “he” is their father. “It” is the log cabin he built, with axes, crosscut saws, crowbars, drawknives, and other tools of Primitive Man.

“To discourage invaders,” Nell says. This is only partly a joke. Every time they see a boat trolling unpleasantly close to them—their sandy point is a known spot for pickerel—they have the same reaction: invaders!

They make it in through the screen door of the cabin, spilling only a little of the water. “We need to do something about the front steps,” Lizzie says. “They’re too high. Not to mention the back steps. We’ve got to get a railing. I don’t know what he was thinking.”

“He didn’t intend to get old,” Nell says.

“Yeah, that was a fucking surprise,” Lizzie says.

They all helped build the cabin, once upon a time. Their father did most of the work, naturally, but it was a family project, involving child labor. Now they’re more or less stuck with it.

Other people don’t live like this, Nell thinks. Other people’s cottages have generators. They have running water. They have gas barbecues. Why are we trapped in some kind of historical-reënactment TV show?

“Remember when we could do two pails?” Lizzie says. “Each?” That wasn’t so very long ago.

It’s too hot to have the woodstove on, so they heat the water on the ancient two-burner propane-cylinder camping stove. It’s rusting out around the intake pipe, but so far there have been no explosions. “New propane stove” is on the list. The kettle is aluminum, of a type that has surely been outlawed. Just looking at it gives Nell cancer, but an unspoken rule says that it must never be discarded. The cover will fit only if placed just right: Nell marked the position years ago, with two circles of pink nail polish, one on the lid, a corresponding one on the kettle itself, which must be stored upside down so that mice won’t make their way down the spout and starve to death and make a horrible smell, plus maggots. Learn by doing, Nell thinks. There have been enough dead mice and maggots in her life.

The tea in the lidded nineteen-forties enamelled roasting pan labelled “Tea” is practically sawdust; they keep meaning to throw it out. Lizzie has come prepared, with her own tea bags in a plastic ziplock. Bags are easier to discard than soggy tea leaves, even though everyone knows that tea bags are made from floor sweepings and mud. In the days of Tig, he and Nell had always used loose-leaf, which he bought at a little specialty shop run by a knowledgeable woman from India. Tig would have derided the tea bags.

The days of Tig. Over now.

High up on the wall, above the woodstove, hangs the flat oblong griddle that Nell and Tig bought at a farm auction forty-odd years ago, and on which jovial sourdough pancake fryings often took place, Tig doing the flipping, back when largesse and riotous living and growing children had been the order of the day. Coming up! Who’s next? She can’t look directly at this griddle—she glances up at it, then glances away—but she always knows it’s there.

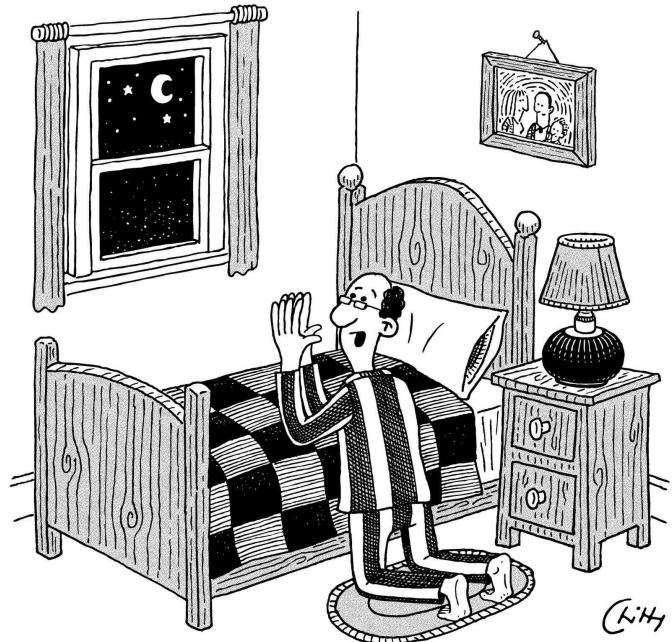
My heart is broken, Nell thinks. But in our family we don’t say, “My heart is broken.” We say, “Are there any cookies?” One must eat. One must keep busy. One must distract oneself. But why? What for? For whom?

“Are there any cookies?” she manages to croak out.

“No,” Lizzie says. “But there’s chocolate. Let’s have some.” She knows that Nell’s heart is broken; she doesn’t need to be told.

They take their cups of tea and their treat—two squares of chocolate each, salted almond—and sit at the table that’s out on the little screened porch. Lizzie has brought the current list so they can update it.

“We can scratch off ‘Boots and Shoes,’ ” Lizzie says.



"Hate to bug you, but it's been a few weeks—just wondering if there's a tracking number?"
Cartoon by Tom Chitty

“Yippee for that,” Nell says.

They spent the previous day going through the plastic bags hanging from nails in Robbie’s old bedroom. Each contained an ancient pair of shoes and a mouse nest. The mice liked nesting in shoes; they filled them with chewed-up bark and wood and fabric threads they’d filched from the doorway curtains and anything else that suited their purposes. A mouse had once tried to pull out some of Lizzie’s hair during the night.

The mice had their babies inside the hung-up shoes and pooped into the bottoms of the plastic bags, when they weren’t pooping on the kitchen counter or around the sink in the washroom, leaving tiny black seeds everywhere. Lizzie and Nell habitually set a trap for them, which consisted of a tall swing-top garbage pail with a blob of peanut butter strategically placed on the cover. In theory, the mouse leaps onto the cover to get the peanut butter and falls into the pail. Usually it works, though sometimes the peanut butter is gone in the morning and there is no mouse. The trapped mice make a sound like popcorn as they jump up, hitting the top of the container. Nell and Lizzie always put some raisins in the pail and a paper towel for them to hide under, and in the mornings they canoe the mice across the lake—they’d come back otherwise, they’d seek out their nest smell—and release them on the far shore.

Robbie is more severe. He uses mousetraps. Nell and Lizzie believe that this practice is detrimental to owls, as owls prefer to hunt live mice, but they don't say this, because Robbie would laugh at them.

Yesterday Nell and Lizzie lined up the mouse-nest shoes, plus a rubber boot with an epic nest in it, and took pictures on their phones, and sent the pictures to Robbie: Can we throw these out? He replied that they should leave all footgear until he himself came up; he would then decide what should be saved. Fair enough, they said, but no more hanging shoes in plastic bags: mouse nesting was a crime of opportunity and must be discouraged.

“Write ‘Snap-Top Container for Robbie’s Shoes’ on the list,” Nell says. Lizzie does so. Lists procreate; they give rise to other lists. Nell wonders if there’s a special therapy for excessive list-making. But if the two of them don’t make lists, how will they remember what they need? Anyway, they like crossing things off. It makes them feel that they are getting somewhere.

After supper, which is pasta—“Write ‘More Pasta,’ ” Nell says—they walk out to the sandy point, where they’ve set up two camping chairs, the folding kind with a mesh pocket in one arm to put a beer can in. One of the chairs has a hole in it, eaten by mice, but it’s not a major hole. Anything you don’t actually fall through is not a major hole. The chairs face northwest; Nell and Lizzie sit in them every evening and watch the sunset. It’s the best way of predicting the next day’s weather, better than the radio or the different Web sites on their phones. That plus the barometer, though the barometer isn’t much help because it almost always says “Change.”

“It’s a little too peach,” Lizzie says.

“At least it’s not yellow.” Yellow and gray are the worst. Pink and red are the best. Peach can go either way.

They stay out there as the clouds fade from peach to rose, and then to a truly alarming shade of red, like a forest fire in the distance.

Sure enough, when they make it back to the cabin, a trip they can both do in the dusk, which is just as well because they forgot the flashlight, the

barometer has moved up slightly, from the “a” to the “n” in “Change.”

“No hurricane tomorrow,” Lizzie says.

“Hallelujah!” Nell says. “We won’t go to Oz in a tornado.”

There actually was a tornado here, in the days of Tig. It was only a little one, though it snapped off some tree trunks just like matchsticks. When was that?

Once it’s truly dark, Nell puts on her headlamp and takes a flashlight and shuffles her way to the dock. She used to walk around at night without lighting—she could see in the dark—but night vision is one of the things that go. She doesn’t want to hurtle down the hill, crippling herself on the pieces of geology that serve as steps or were stashed here and there by her father for some arcane purpose, forgotten now; nor does she want to step on any small toads. These come out at night and hop around, bent on adventures of their own, and are slippery when squashed.

She’s going to the dock to view the stars, out over the lake, with no treetops obscuring them. It’s a clear night, no moon yet, and the constellations have a depth and brilliance you’d never be able to see in the city.

Tig used to do this. He’d go down to the dock to brush his teeth and stargaze. “Amazing!” he would say. He had a great capacity for being amazed; the stars gave him such joy. There may be some falling stars: it’s August, the time of the Perseids, which always coincided with Tig’s birthday. Nell would make him a cake in the woodstove oven—scorching it on the top sometimes, but that part could be scraped off—and decorate it with cedar cones and tufts of club moss and whatever else she could find. There might even be a few strawberries, left over from the patch that had grown in what used to be the garden.

She makes it to the bottom of the hill without mishap, an achievement. But, once she’s on the dock, she can’t follow through. She’s not feeling any amazement or joy, only grief and more grief. The old griddle hanging on the wall above the stove is one thing—easy enough for the gaze to avoid it—but the stars? Will she never be able to look at the stars again?

No stars, not for you, not ever, she mourns. And in the next breath: Don't be so fucking maudlin.

She hauls herself back up the hill, guided by the light that has now come on inside the cabin. She half expects to see Tig in the evening lamplight, uttering whoops of enthusiasm over whatever he might be reading. Not half. Less than half. Is he fading?

In the olden times, which are numerous, Nell and Lizzie and Robbie used kerosene lamps, which had to be treated with the utmost caution—the wicks or mantles were prone to flare up or carbonize—but the modern age has taken its toll and now they have a marine battery, recharged by a solar panel during the day, into which they plug an electric lamp. By the light of this lamp, Nell and Lizzie set out to do a jigsaw puzzle. It's one they did before, thousands of years ago—a wetland with a lot of bulrushes and waterbirds and vine-infested vegetation—and, as they work on it, Nell begins to remember its fiendish intricacies: the root clumps, the patches of sky and cloud, the deceptive spikes of purple flowers.

It's best to solve the edges first, and they do make some headway. But there are two edge pieces missing—has somebody lost them? Some member of the younger gen, invading Lizzie's hoard of sacrosanct jigsaw puzzles? "How irritating," they mutter to each other, though Lizzie discovers one of the keystone pieces stuck to her arm.

They give up on the puzzle, eventually—the underground clumps of roots are too daunting, after all—and Lizzie reads out loud. It's a Conan Doyle mystery story, though not a Sherlock Holmes one, about a train that's diverted off its tracks and into an abandoned mine by a master criminal, in order to destroy a witness and his bodyguard.

While Lizzie reads, Nell deletes photos from her computer. Many of them are pictures of Tig, taken in the last year, when they were making a valiant effort to do the things Tig wanted to do, before— Before what was not said. Nor did they know the exact timing. But they both knew that this year they were moving through with at least a minimum amount of grace was quite soon before. They didn't think it would be two years. Nor was it.

The photos Nell is throwing out are of Tig. In them he looks lost, or empty, or sad—Tig on the wane. She doesn't want to remember him looking like that, or being like that. She keeps only the smiling ones: when he was pretending that nothing was wrong, that he was still his usual self. He did pull that off a lot of the time. What an effort it must have cost him. Still, they managed to squeeze in some happiness, from hour to hour.

She throws out photos until Lizzie reaches the end of the story, where the megalomaniac criminal who planned the disappearance of the train is crowing over his perfect crime: the two doomed men, stuck on a train hurtling into an abyss, their faces looking aghast out the open train windows, as they watch their fate approach, the yawning blackness of the mine's mouth, the precipitous drop, the plunge into oblivion. Nell is afraid this story will give her nightmares; it's the kind of thing that does. She's never liked heights or cliff edges.

The dream she has that night isn't a nightmare, however. Tig is in it, but he isn't empty and sad. Instead, he's quietly amused. It's a spy story of some kind, though a leisurely one; a Russian named Polly Poliakov is involved, but he isn't a woman, so his name shouldn't be Polly.

Tig isn't an action hero in this dream—he's just there—but Polly Poliakov doesn't seem to care about Tig's presence. He's very anxious, this Polly. There's something that Nell urgently needs to know, but he has no luck at all explaining what it is. As for Nell, she's happy that Tig's in the dream; that's what she's mostly focussed on. He smiles at her as if enjoying a joke they're sharing. See? It's all right. It's even funny. It's idiotic how reassured she feels, once she wakes up.

The next day, after they've found the last missing piece of jigsaw on the floor, after they've had breakfast and relocated the night's trove of mice, chewed-up paper towel, gnawed raisins, and mouse poop to a hospitable decaying log, and while they're making a pretense of going for a swim—"I've changed my mind," Lizzie says—Nell whacks one of her toes on the pointed white rock under the water. Of course she does. She was bound to injure herself sooner or later; it's part of the grieving process. Barring bloodletting and clothes-rending and ashes on the head, a person in mourning has to undergo a mutilation of some kind.

Has she cracked a toe bone, or is it only a bruise? It's not a major toe; she can still more or less walk. With a pirate Band-Aid decorated with skulls and crossbones left over from a layer of children—hers? Robbie's? grandkids?—she tapes the offended toe to its neighbor, as instructed via her cell phone. Not much else to be done, according to the Web sites.

“ ‘Dig up white rock,’ ” Lizzie adds to their list. Her idea is that they will wait until autumn, when the water is lower, or else spring, when it may be lower still, and then go at it in a sort of exorcism, with shovels and pitchforks and the inevitable crowbars. The vampire white rock must go!

How many times have they made such a plan? Many.

The week proceeds. They wend their way through time as if through a labyrinth, or that is what Nell feels; Lizzie, possibly not so much. Nell's injury is good for a few distracting conversations. They both examine the victimized toe with interest: how blue, how purple, will it become? Such observations of the wounded body are cheering: you don't get bruises or pain unless you're still alive.

“Or mosquito bites,” Lizzie says. They both know from their murder books that mosquitoes ignore dead people.

You have been mistaken in the time of death, *mon ami*. How so? There were no mosquito bites upon the corpse. Ah! Then that means . . . but surely not! I tell you it must be, my friend. The evidence is before us, it cannot be disputed.

“Small mercies,” Nell says. “You don't have to be dead and itchy.”

“I'll take Option B,” Lizzie says.

Others have been through this particular time labyrinth before them. The whole cabin is strewn with little ambushes in the form of the written word. In the kitchen, “Put No Fat Down Sinks”: this in their mother's handwriting. The cookbook always kept up here has tiny remarks in pencil, also by their mother: “Good!!” Or: “More salt.” Not exactly the wisdom of the ages, but solid, practical advice. “When feeling down in the dumps”—What, exactly,

were these dumps? Who still knows?—“go for a brisk walk!” This isn’t written; it just hovers in the air, in their mother’s voice. An echo.

I can’t go for a brisk walk, Nell tells her mother silently. My toe, remember? You can’t fix everything, she wants to add, but her mother is well aware of that. Sitting in the hospital while he was possibly dying—“he” again referring to Nell’s father, once of the axes, once of the crosscut saws, once of the crowbars—her mother said, “I won’t cry, because if I start I’ll never be able to stop.”

The day before Nell and Lizzie are due to leave for the city, Nell comes across a note written by Tig, long ago, when the two of them installed mosquito nets over the beds as a communal service. The mosquitoes can be thick as fur on the outsides of the screens, especially in June; they can squeeze through the tiniest cracks. Once inside, they whine. Even if you’ve got repellent on, they can ruin your night.

“Large mosquito netting: At the end of the bug season the large netting should be packed in this bag. The wooden frame, once collapsed, is inserted in the inner compartment of the green bag—Thanks.”

What green bag? she wonders. Probably it got mildew and someone discarded it. In any case, no one had ever followed these instructions of Tig’s; the mosquito netting is merely left in place and tied into a bundle when not in use.

She smooths out the piece of paper carefully and stores it away in her bag. It’s a message, left by Tig for her to find. Magical thinking, she knows that perfectly well, but she indulges in it, anyway, because it’s comforting. She’ll take this piece of paper back to the city, but what will she do with it there? What does one ever do with these cryptic messages from the dead? ♦

By [Deborah Treisman](#)

By [Margaret Atwood](#)

Infrastructure Dept.

- [A New Sky Garden for London](#)

April 26 & May 3, 2021 Issue

A New Sky Garden for London

Like New York's version, the Camden Highline will be designed by James Corner, occupy a former rail track, and attract selfie-taking tourists. Unlike New York's, it may not invite a boom of luxury condos.

By [Rebecca Mead](#)

April 19, 2021

It's a dozen years since the High Line, a narrow strip of park on an abandoned elevated train line, opened on Manhattan's West Side and was swiftly embraced as a local resort and an international destination, as well as becoming a powerful if flowery engine of commerce. Other cities around the world have been inspired by the project's success—and by that of the Promenade Plantée, in Paris, which transformed an old rail line and viaduct into a civilized retreat in 1993—to revivify abandoned infrastructure of their own. Sydney has the Goods Line, which turned a former heavy-goods rail line into a walkway bordered by fig trees and supplied with Ping-Pong tables. In Seoul, the Seoulllo 7017 is a verdant, if noisy, garden built on a former highway overpass, with trees and shrubs arranged in hundreds of concrete planters above a snarl of traffic.



The latest city to enter the urban sky-garden game is London, with the Camden Highline. Currently in the planning stages—and having recently appointed James Corner, the head designer of the original High Line, as its lead landscape architect—the project is to be built atop a three-quarter-mile stretch of disused rail track in North London, extending from Camden Town to just north of King's Cross station. With an estimated budget of fifty million dollars, it should be open within three years—at least, that is the aspiration of Simon Pitkeathley, the Camden Highline's C.E.O., who agreed recently to take a walk beneath the as yet unrealized park to discuss the project. London, like the rest of England, was still under strict lockdown, with restaurants and all but essential shops closed: a good time to look up and dream.

The route begins, on one end, at Camden Gardens, a triangular pocket park a short walk from a number of hallowed live-music venues and close to Camden Market, which for generations has served as a scuzzy hub for teens in pursuit of outfits and substances contrived to upset their parents. (Where are the bondage trousers of yesteryear?) “Camden Town has always been a place for young people to do creative-industry-type stuff,” Pitkeathley said, observing that a hundred years ago the area was a center of piano manufacture. “It’s always had that feel of being slightly anarchic, slightly away from the mainstream.”

Pitkeathley moved to London thirty years ago to be in a band. “So, Camden was the obvious Mecca,” he said. His music career did not pan out, he explained, but a political one did: he worked on numerous winning campaigns for Tony Blair, the former Prime Minister. Since 2007, he has headed Camden Town Unlimited, a business-improvement district.

At Camden Road station, Pitkeathley paused and looked up. Overhead, a structure of blue-painted iron ribs loomed. A few feet away lay a still functioning train track. One feature of the Camden Highline that differs from its New York inspiration is that it is adjacent to a working Overground line. “They trundle past—they are all speed-limited,” Pitkeathley said. “But it’s quite surreal to have these big machines trundling past you.” A little farther on, he ascended a staircase to the point on the route where a pedestrian with imagination can currently get the best view of what might come: instead of weeds, well-chosen plantings; instead of discarded plastic bags and paper cups, ice-cream stands and venders of artisanal kombucha.

Another difference between the Camden Highline and its Manhattan precursor is the kind of urban fabric through which it weaves. In New York, the High Line caused at least a doubling of property values in its immediate vicinity and prompted the construction of cantilevered condos supplanting former industrial sites. The Camden Highline passes above streets where terraced houses already sell for millions, but—in keeping with the heterogeneous, patchwork patterns common in this part of London—it also threads through four public-housing blocks. “They are not going to change just because there’s a nice Highline next door,” Pitkeathley said. “You’re not going to get as many individuals or commercial owners benefitting from the uplift.”

The walk along the Highline should take a brisk ten minutes from one end to the other—unless, like its New York precursor, it becomes chronically clogged with selfie-taking tourists, in which case, budget half an hour. At its eastern end, the Camden Highline runs alongside the Maiden Lane Estate—an expanse of red brick pedestrian paths and brutalist blocks built by Camden Council in the seventies and eighties. A number of apartments have balconies facing the projected walkway. Will the Highline present a potentially cacophonous new neighbor for the residents? Pitkeathley was optimistic as he neared the route’s conclusion. “They’ve got the trains there

already,” he said. “So I think people walking alongside the trains is probably going to be less intrusive than the trains themselves.” ♦

Maine Postcard

- [Conjuring Maine's Clairvoyant Kush](#)

[April 26 & May 3, 2021 Issue](#)

Conjuring Maine's Clairvoyant Kush

A company in Portland has dispatched psychics across the state—where marijuana is legal but delivery isn't—to find a wide selection of your lost weed and drop it off at your home.

By [Charles Bethea](#)

April 19, 2021

Justin lives in Portland, Maine, where he does woodworking, listens to harp music on vinyl, and, after the kids fall asleep, smokes pot. Maine legalized recreational marijuana in 2016, but the state didn't rush the rollout: it wasn't until last fall that it began being sold, with various restrictions. In the intervening years, a neighbor told Justin about a weed-procurement work-around—an online operation that questioned the very nature of property itself. "Their site is kind of weird," Justin said the other day from his basement, referring to the Internet home of [Incredibles.me](#). "Makes more sense if you're high, maybe."



There's a lot of text on the site, some of it in capital letters, all of it redolent of stoner metaphysics. "We have Psychics roaming all over Portland communicating with their deity, their spirit guides, and having religious moments of clarity," it reads. "We can guarantee to find your *LOST WEED!!*" It goes on, "Just login to this site, and select the cannabis or cannabis products you lost, and give us your address. We will find *YOUR* weed and get it back to you *ASAP.*"

Justin gathered that there would be a cost—both psychic and monetary. That cost is calculated, the site explains, "based on the time it takes us to find your weed, the quantity of weed we have to locate, and the distance in which we have to travel to get *YOUR LOST* weed back to you." A few other points: The weed psychics accept only cash and bitcoin. They can't return weed lost within a thousand feet of a school or to anyone under twenty-one. A ten-percent tip is recommended for "psychic drivers," who do not carry change. There's also an eighty-five-dollar minimum for schlepping out to Kennebunkport to find weed, and a hundred for finding weed in the boonies of Ogunquit. Just fifty for Portland.

The comments page is full of questions and hope. "How long does a delivery take (roughly) if I lost my stuff in Kittery?" wrote someone named EM. (Usually thirty-five minutes, an admin wrote back.) "Visiting next weekend," a commenter named Chris said. "I hope you locate the weed I'm bound to lose!"

For years, people have found ways—clever, clumsy, brazen—to circumvent outdated marijuana laws. New Yorkers could get weed delivered to their doors long before the state legalized it, last month. But Incredibles has made industry experts take note.

Hannah King, a lawyer in Portland, advises four hundred clients throughout the Northeast on the cannabis business. "They are not a client of mine," King said of Incredibles. "And I would never represent somebody engaged in their business model—even if I believed in psychics." She mentioned a donation-based model—now prohibited—"that actually allowed people to say, 'Hey, I have this really nice cat. You can pay me fifty dollars to pet my cat, and I'll give you some marijuana.' That was my favorite one for a while."

“It obviously doesn’t pass the straight-face test,” David Boyer, the former head of the Marijuana Policy Project in Maine, said from his home, in the town of Poland. “But it’s hard to blame the psychic people for trying. They’re serving a need.” Boyer figures that the need will continue to exist for a while. “At least until lobbyists get paid enough to fix it,” he said. Although it is now legal to buy recreational weed in Maine, getting it delivered is still prohibited.

So Justin has remained an Incredibles patron. Earlier this month, he suddenly lost an eighth of an ounce of Bop Gun (sativa hybrid) and another eighth of Raspberry Diesel (indica hybrid). He’d lost other types before but not these. He inquired with Incredibles about recovering them after a jog one afternoon. “We have started to use our Psychic Power to find your lost products,” a text message came back. “Our Psychic is on the way to your location now!” The psychic arrived within five minutes, before Justin had time to take off his socks. The smiling driver passed two sealed jars through the window of the car.

“Found your stuff,” the psychic said.

“Your powers really work,” Justin replied. He handed the psychic a hundred-dollar reward.

“We’re well trained,” the psychic said.

Before Justin could enjoy his recovered weed, however, he had to find his bowl. “And, for some reason,” he said, “the psychics can’t help with that.” ♦

Our Local Correspondents

- [The E-Scooters Loved by Silicon Valley Roll Into New York](#)

[April 26 & May 3, 2021 Issue](#)

The E-Scooters Loved by Silicon Valley Roll Into New York

Fleets of electric scooters have taken over city streets worldwide. With New York finally climbing aboard, do they represent a tech hustle or a transit revolution?

By [John Seabrook](#)

April 19, 2021



New York City used to be an early adopter of new transportation modes. In the late eighteen-sixties, New Yorkers took up the velocipede, a primitive version of the bicycle. Half a century later, the city embraced the automobile, and eventually made free parking available for the fossil-fuel-burning machines—a remarkable giveaway of expensive public space that many carless citizens would like back now. New York also engineered and built a subway system, above ground and below ground, which, before the [Covid-19](#) pandemic hit, carried five and a half million riders every weekday—a landmark of American people-moving the city may never reach again, if remote work is here to stay.

But when it comes to shared electric scooters—the adult, motorized versions of the standing “kick” scooter that you push with one foot—New York has taken the slow lane. As with its bike-share scheme, Citi Bike, which launched in 2013, years after most other big cities, New York has adopted a conservative approach to this ballyhooed new mode of getting around town.

Beginning in Southern California, Bird and, later, Lime, both venture-capital-backed tech startups, dropped fleets of rentable electric scooters onto the streets of Santa Monica, where Bird’s vehicles appeared in 2017, and San Diego, Lime’s first city, in 2018. Bypassing municipal regulators, the companies hoped to attract customers as quickly as possible. Under Uber’s former head of international growth, Travis VanderZanden, Bird got its black-and-white scooters into a hundred cities globally during a yearlong blitzkrieg. Blindsided city governments, struggling to respond to this onslaught, temporarily banned scooters in Seattle, West Hollywood, and Winston-Salem, among other places.

Although Bird wasn’t close to profitable, it soon reached unicorn status—a billion-dollar valuation. Lime then joined Bird in the unicorn paddock. Investors went all in on “micromobility”—the buzzy, catchall term for bicycles and lightweight electric vehicles—hoping to stumble onto the next Uber. Within a year, more than thirty scooter-share startups had popped up around the world.

In many cities, scooter-sharing was adopted faster than bike-sharing, and by a broader demographic of ridership. Bird amassed more than ten million rides in its first twelve months. Users loved the scooters for their convenience. In Austin, Texas, for example, during South by Southwest, scooters proved to be ideal for hopping between venues. On the West Coast, Venice Beach sizzled with the sound of scooter wheels. By 2019, the long-necked, flat-bottomed machines had become a fixture of the urban landscape in Paris, Vienna, Madrid, and Mexico City, like for-hire mechanical swans clustering on sidewalks.

Transportation wonks hailed scooter-sharing as the best solution to their “last-mile problem,” when the trip between the train station and home is a little farther than walking distance—around a quarter of a mile, for most people. Futurists saw it as the first transportation mode to incorporate

mobile-computing and global-positioning technology in its core design, and touted the e-scooter as a harbinger of the battery-powered, software-controlled car of the future. But to detractors e-scooters were a fad, and scooter-share programs were a tech hustle that exploited a limited public resource—city streets—to enrich private investors.

Bird and Lime attracted lawsuits from injured riders, and passionate animosity from lots of people who encountered the dockless scooters that were left in the middle of sidewalks. In May, 2018, San Francisco, after receiving almost two thousand complaints, issued cease-and-desist orders to Bird, Lime, and a third operator, Spin, which was bought by Ford in November, 2018. A class-action suit in Los Angeles the same year accused Lime, Bird, and others of “aiding and abetting assault.” Scooter vandalism became a performance art. The Instagram site Bird Graveyard documented busted Birds, trashed Birds, Birds in the Bay, and Birds flambé.

Among the big transportation hubs in the West, only New York and London stood fast during what is now seen as the Wild West phase of scooter mania. Then came the pandemic, scrambling transport habits around the globe, and creating rare opportunities for what transportation theorists refer to as “mode change.” To judge from New York’s increasingly crowded bike lanes, the scootering mode has arrived.

E-scooters aren’t the first standing electric vehicles to attempt to enter New York’s transportation system. The Segway, a two-wheeled “human transporter,” was released in December, 2001, and hyped by [Jeff Bezos](#) as “one of the most famous and anticipated product launches of all time.” There were photographs of Bezos and the Segway’s inventor, Dean Kamen, riding the machines on sidewalks around Times Square.

Today, the human transporter is perhaps best remembered as the electronic steed that Paul Blart mounts in “Mall Cop,” a 2009 film that leans heavily on the sight gag of a casually standing person who is in motion. But the Segway’s influence lingered in the broad set of state and city laws that banned most forms of single-person E.V.s from the streets and sidewalks, including e-bikes and e-scooters.

In the late two-thousands, the first wave of e-bikes arrived in the city as food-delivery workers, virtually all immigrants, began using them. For a fifteen-hundred-dollar investment in an e-bike, a worker can increase his nightly earnings by two dollars an hour—which could amount to thousands more in yearly earnings. Some Yuppie early adopters had also taken to the outlawed bikes: my sister-in-law's elbow was shattered in Manhattan, in 2010, by an e-biking filmmaker who was going the wrong way in a bike lane.

A crackdown began in 2017, shortly after a sixty-year-old Upper West Side investment banker, Matthew Shefler, who used a speed gun to clock cyclists in the Columbus Avenue bike lane, called in to “Ask the Mayor,” on WNYC’s “The Brian Lehrer Show,” and decried the dangers of the modern-day velocipedes to [Bill de Blasio](#).



You say 'raised by wolves' like it's a bad thing."
Cartoon by Liana Finck

The following year, the N.Y.P.D. issued delivery workers hundreds of five-hundred-dollar citations and sometimes took away their e-bikes. Workers who spoke Chinese or Spanish had their bikes confiscated at a much higher rate than those who spoke English. The Deliver Justice Coalition fought back with the support of influential local politicians, including Jessica Ramos, a state senator from Queens, and Carlos Menchaca, a City Council member from Brooklyn, but they lacked the funds to lobby state lawmakers

in Albany effectively. The status of pedal-assist e-bikes was eventually clarified as exempt from the law—Citi Bike began electrifying its fleet in 2018—but the full-throttle e-bikes favored by the city’s forty thousand delivery workers remained illegal.

During the same period, micromobility companies began to eye the lucrative New York market, despite being blocked by the Segway laws. Bird and Lime did have the funds to spend on lobbying Albany lawmakers. Bird brought in Bradley Tusk, who had designed Uber’s strategy for disrupting New York City with its gig-working drivers in the early twenty-tens; between January and June of 2019, Tusk was paid a hundred thousand dollars. Lime also spent heavily on lobbying.

Phil Jones, Lime’s senior director of government relations, took a leading role in crafting the new law for the scooter companies. “There were a lot of overarching state laws put into place that made two-wheeled electric vehicles illegal, inspired by the Segway,” he told me. “That’s what we were up against, and that’s what delivery workers were up against.” Jones helped consolidate five bills aiming to legalize two-wheeled E.V.s into a single piece of legislation, Senate Bill 5294A, sponsored by Jessica Ramos. With the financial capital of the scooter bros and the political capital of the persecuted *deliveristas*, the bill was passed by the New York Assembly in 2019, but Governor Andrew Cuomo vetoed it, ostensibly because he wanted all e-scooter and e-bike riders to wear a helmet. According to insiders, the underlying reason was the Governor’s hostility toward Ramos, a rising star in state politics.

On March 20, 2020, Cuomo put the state into lockdown. Within weeks, the food-delivery workers whom the N.Y.P.D. had been harassing were being hailed as frontline heroes. During the terrifying early days, particularly, it seemed as though ambulances and delivery e-bikes were the only vehicles moving. Cuomo, who had backed down on his demand for helmets, as long as a rider is older than eighteen, signed the bill that April.

In July, the City Council mandated a scooter-sharing pilot. In October, the Department of Transportation issued a Request for Expressions of Interest; the D.O.T. would award up to three of the applicants with contracts. New York is one of the world’s largest potential markets for micromobility, and

an invaluable proving ground for the concept, so the scooter pilot attracted intense interest from dozens of companies—not only Bird and Lime but also many smaller operators that hoped to prevail over the two Goliaths. One of these was Link, which is owned by Superpedestrian, an engineering and robotics firm based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Link’s fleet of fluorescent-yellow scooters can be rented in Seattle, Oakland, Madrid, Rome, and seventeen other cities.

By January, 2021, the field in New York’s pilot competition had narrowed to seven. On an arctic day at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, the finalists were invited to demo their scooters and operating software for D.O.T. observers.

“We are definitely the underdog here,” Paul Steely White, Superpedestrian’s policy director, said as he glanced around at the reps from the other companies that were setting up their scooters on the frigid, windswept pavement.

Bird and Lime were at the Navy Yard, too; Ford’s Spin; Voi, a Swedish company that operates in European cities, where the bicycle-friendly infrastructure makes scootering less daunting than it is in New York; Beryl, a British company; and Veo, a Chicago-based startup.

White pointed to Superpedestrian’s victory over Bird in its bid for Seattle, in September, 2020; Link was one of three operators that were issued permits. (Lime and Wheels, a California-based maker of a hybrid scooter-bike, received the others.) White attributed Bird’s defeat to its disruptive history as well as to the company’s use of gig labor to service its scooters. He hoped that Link, which has a perfect compliance record in the twenty-one cities in which it operates, and has never used gig labor, would have a similar advantage over Bird with regulators in New York, where gig labor won’t be allowed. Both Bird and Lime, for their part, say that they have moved past the early years of disruption, and have become compliant government partners. More recent generations of Bird’s scooters, such as Bird Two, in scratch-resistant silver, are much sturdier than its early models, as are Lime’s.

To unlock the dockless shared scooters, users download a smartphone app. Rides generally cost a dollar to start and then twenty-five cents a minute,

which makes them economical for short, fast trips, but costly for recreational larking. In renting a scooter—or a bike—you provide the hire company with information about you, your route, your travel speed, your driving style, and your destination. Cities grant scooter concessions in part to have access to these data, which are aggregated and anonymized according to rules that underpin the Mobility Data Specification, an open-source digital tool. This information is far more granular than the data that can be gleaned about subway or bus ridership. What to make of the fact, according to a study commissioned by the Dublin City Council, which fitted cyclists with sensor-enabled lights made by the cycling-technology and data firm See.Sense, that women swerve more than men when they ride, and that they stay closer to the curb, even though the road is rougher there? See.Sense's Irene McAleese told me, "They could be cycling close to the gutter to feel safer, if good-quality cycle infrastructure is not available."

Both White, fifty, and a colleague, Graham Gullans, thirty-six, wore heavy parkas, mittens, hats, and face masks. Their eyes lit up as the D.O.T. observers began arriving. One at a time, the observers tried Link's yellow scooters, heading toward a set of orange cones. Gullans sprinted behind each one to call attention to the precision of Link's geofencing. A data-driven form of collective intelligence employed in scooter fleets, geofencing uses G.P.S. to create virtual boundaries around terrestrial places. The technology can keep scooters off sidewalks and away from restricted areas by automatically cutting the power to the motor when the scooter crosses the geofence. Geofencing also requires users to end rides in designated scooter-parking areas, reducing sidewalk clutter. You could still pick up a parked scooter, though, if it isn't locked to anything, and throw it into the East River.

The finalists in the New York pilot all employed a version of geofencing, but they differed in significant ways. Some systems rely on cloud computing, which can entail delays of up to thirty seconds when the scooter hits a boundary. Link does all the mapping and computing on three microcomputers built into the scooter, so its geofencing system kicks in almost instantly.

Gullans wanted to be there when Link's scooters hit the geofence at the orange cones and stopped. "I was just really excited to show off our system,"

he told me. “I was also trying to stay warm.” If nothing else, the day would prove conclusively that scootering is not the best mode of travel in the dead of a New York winter. You can’t put your hands in your pockets while driving or lean into the wind. In a lot of ways, walking that last mile works better, and it’s free.

Still, “we showed that we’re trying really damn hard,” White told me. “I think this is part of the underdog mystique that ultimately wins them over.”

Paul White has been at the forefront of micromobility since before it was a concept. He’s risen to be a colonel in the war on cars during his career, with most of it spent at Transportation Alternatives, a nonprofit founded in 1973 to fight the supremacy of the automobile in the city. As T.A.’s executive director starting in 2004, White was the public face of cycling in New York, calling for better, safer bike infrastructure, and eulogizing riders killed by cars and trucks. He was friends with the dynamic D.O.T. commissioner under [Michael Bloomberg](#), Janette Sadik-Khan, who created hundreds of miles of bike lanes. He was instrumental in getting cars banned from both Central Park and Prospect Park, and in helping to persuade the city, under the Bloomberg administration, to build the Prospect Park West bikeway, which was installed in June, 2010. Anthony Weiner, who opposed the bike-lane boom when he ran for mayor in 2013, vowing to rip the lanes up if elected, called White and his colleagues “policy jihadists.”

It therefore came as a shock to many in the bike-advocacy community when, in the fall of 2018, White announced that he was leaving the nonprofit world to join Bird, the [Silicon Valley](#) unicorn. The company had offered to make him part of its public-policy “dream team,” and after discussing the role with a former colleague, Melinda Hanson, the founder of Electric Avenue, an E.V. consultancy, he decided to take the job. “I was pushing fifty, and I had been at T.A. fourteen years,” White told me. “Young Jedis were coming up through the ranks.” Being an executive director mostly meant fund-raising, and, he said, “that wasn’t what I originally signed up for in terms of trying to kick down doors.” Community boards, which tend to be dominated by car drivers who don’t want to lose their free parking, fought back against bike lanes. Under Mayor de Blasio, City Hall’s top priority was the Vision Zero program, which focussed on reducing auto-related fatalities, rather than on building cycling infrastructure. The pandemic has proved to be a disaster in

this regard. Drivers, delighted to find the roads empty for once, floored it. Road fatalities have been the highest since Vision Zero began.

“I saw what was happening with scooter mania,” White explained. “Yes, there were all these issues with sidewalk clutter, but just look at the numbers. More women were riding, more low-income people were riding, and it was more racially diverse.” White felt the same energy around the micromobility movement that he had experienced in bike advocacy during the Bloomberg years.

The lockdowns in the face of the pandemic brought scooter mania to an abrupt halt. After mid-March, 2020, no one wanted to share anything, and, with no one going anywhere, scooters’ data-gathering capabilities were useless. Across the U.S. and Europe, the metal swans went into hibernation, which meant removing thousands of scooters from city streets.

Layoffs followed throughout the industry, and Lime eventually lost its unicorn status. Still, when White got an e-mail from Bird’s management summoning him to a Zoom Webinar on March 26, 2020, he had no inkling of what was to come. A woman’s voice read a statement collectively firing more than four hundred Bird employees, including everyone on the Zoom call. (The mass termination is preserved on YouTube.) “It was pretty brutal,” White said. Immediately after the ninety-second call ended, screens on the company-issued laptops, on which people had been working from home, went to gray and everyone was locked out of e-mail and Slack.

White was “really low” for a couple of weeks, he said, and he considered leaving the transportation field altogether. In 2019, he and his wife, Zoe Ryder White, a poet, and their three children had moved to a six-acre farm in Ulster County. He had lots of projects in mind. But, as lockdowns eased and scooter-sharing returned to cities in the summer and fall of 2020, he began lobbying to join Superpedestrian.

“I wanted to work for the good guys,” he said. “I just have so much invested in this personally. I feel like if we don’t win New York, I’m going to be filling potholes for the Ulster County Department of Transportation.”

Electric scooters don't look like the coming revolution in transportation, but to Horace Dediu, a business analyst and micromobility's leading evangelist—he coined the term—that is part of their appeal. "The next revolution in transportation will come from the bottom," Dediu has said. Dediu was born in Romania and came to the U.S. as a child; he attended Tufts and the Harvard Business School. He now lives in Finland, where he is multimodal. On YouTube, he philosophizes about urban mobility while riding his bicycle.

Dediu argues that, just as the heavy desktop computer has been superseded by lighter laptops, tablets, and smartphones, so the automobile will be "unbundled" into much lighter, cleaner, and less resource-dependent E.V.s that can be used for most of the trips people now make by car. (In the U.S., sixty per cent of all car trips are less than six miles.) Lithium-ion batteries, first introduced to consumers by Sony in high-end camcorders, today power an ever-expanding array of mobile devices—not just our phones and laptops but also vehicles like e-bikes, e-scooters, e-monowheels, e-skateboards, and other continually evolving forms of micromobility that no longer require the user's energy to move them.



"This place is too crowded—let's check the Internet for a spot no one knows about."
Cartoon by E. S. Glenn

Dediu calls e-scooters "smartphones on wheels." No other vehicle on the road has a higher proportion of brains to brawn. Scooter riders, however, are

less reliably intelligent. In the Wild West days, reckless driving and cheaply made scooters reduced the life span of some scooters on the streets to just over twenty-eight days. When Bird and Lime launched, they deployed consumer scooters bought from the Chinese manufacturers Segway-Ninebot and Xiaomi, which weren't made for the hard-knock street life of a public-transit vehicle. In San Francisco, brakes failed as some users were scootering down steep hills, leading to class-action lawsuits. In Auckland, New Zealand, a software glitch caused scooters to brake suddenly. In October, 2018, Lime recalled two thousand of its scooters from fleets in Los Angeles, San Diego, and Lake Tahoe over fears that the batteries, which are installed under the standing platform, might explode. Lithium-ion-battery fires can occur on rare occasions when a short circuit causes the battery to release a large amount of its stored-up energy at once; that's why airlines won't allow lithium-ion batteries in checked baggage. There was a fire at Citi Bike's main charging hub in Brooklyn, in May, 2019.

Still, Dediu believes that today's scooters could evolve into tomorrow's automobiles. The technologies embedded in a state-of-the-art e-scooter and e-bike—mobile communications, autonomous driving capability, and artificial intelligence—will be central to the cars that Apple or another tech company might make in the future. If cities are going to meet the zero-emission goals they've set and if automakers like Ford and G.M. are going to electrify their fleets by 2030 and 2035, respectively, as they have pledged, automobiles will have to become smaller, lighter, and more efficient, particularly given the limits of lithium-ion-battery technology. Four-wheeled, covered quadricycles, electric rickshaw-taxis, and electric minibuses resembling three-wheeled tuk-tuks are all possibilities.

But the disposability of shared scooters also raises the question of just how green this new mode of transport really is. There is still no commercially reliable way to recycle lithium-ion batteries—a huge caveat for the sustainability of E.V.s in general. All the superannuated scooters eventually end up in landfills, as did shared bikes, which were widely embraced in China early in the past decade, then abruptly cancelled in many places, leading to shocking photographs of enormous bike-burial sites. Added to the environmental costs of discarded batteries and scooters are the emissions produced by the trucks and vans that bring the scooters to charging stations—or, in some cases, to gig workers' homes. On important issues, such as

labor practices and sustainability, the Wild West of micromobility remains unsettled, even as the go-go early days of disruption have given way to the courtship of regulators like New York's D.O.T.

To get a better sense of scooters as proto-vehicles of the future, I visited Superpedestrian, the home of Link. The company currently has a hundred and ninety employees, many of whom work at its R. & D. lab, in a former machine shop on a quiet back street in Cambridge. Assaf Biderman, the company's Israeli-born forty-three-year-old founder, joined me on Zoom for a tour, beaming in from an island in Greece where he, his wife, the Israeli singer-songwriter Nili Ohayon, known as Onili, and their six-year-old daughter, Livia, were spending the pandemic. When they return to the U.S., the family plans to settle in Brooklyn.

After completing his military service in Israel, Biderman majored in physics and architecture at M.I.T. At the university's Media Lab, he worked under Hiroshi Ishii, whose research into human-computer interfaces was pioneering in the early nineties. Collaborating with Ishii, Biderman told me, "brought me into the idea of using new sensors and digital tools to create a meaningful connection between humans and machines." Biderman was also inspired by Bill Mitchell, the Australian-born dean of architecture at M.I.T., who foresaw the profound effects that data would have on architecture and city planning. As Biderman put it, "When the urban environment starts to emit data, you can begin to plan it with quantitative tools."

In 2003, Biderman and Carlo Ratti, a former postdoc in Ishii's lab who is now a professor at M.I.T., founded the Senseable City Lab, within M.I.T.'s Department of Urban Studies and Planning, to explore how introducing digital technologies into the built environment can aid in the study, design, and management of cities. As the lab started consulting with cities around the world, Biderman told me, he kept hearing that demand for urban mobility is expected to triple by mid-century. "Growth in global population, growth in urbanization, and rising incomes are all driving it," he said. "But the streets we have are what we've got. How can you use those streets to move more people more efficiently?"

Superpedestrian was launched in January, 2013. Biderman assembled a team of forty robotics engineers, who spent the next four and a half years coding a

machine-learning-based operating system that could be used in any small electric vehicle, including a car, and for which they eventually received thirty-seven patents. “A self-sensing control system” is how Biderman describes it.

In 2017, the company brought out the Copenhagen Wheel. By replacing the back wheel of a conventional bike with the Wheel, you could convert it into an e-bike. In addition to its vehicle intelligence, the Wheel could sense and learn from the city’s infrastructure. It recorded carbon-monoxide levels, reported on traffic congestion, and used algorithms to detect potholes. The Wheel also had the machine-learning capacity to adapt to a rider’s unique pedalling style and pace.

Priced at seventeen hundred and fifty dollars, the Wheel went on sale in 2017. The only thing it couldn’t do was sell. “It offered too much for its price,” Biderman told me. “We should have charged four or five thousand for it. Then people would have understood they’re getting the best.”

In 2018, Biderman entered the scooter-share market. He asked his engineers to design a high-tech scooter, and they loaded it with all the intelligence and self-diagnostic capacity that the Copenhagen Wheel had, as well as many new features. During my visit to the lab, Graham Gullans showed me Link’s Seattle fleet on a monitor. The individual scooters, represented as green dots, were zipping around the city in real time. Choosing a random dot and clicking on it, Gullans explained how Superpedestrian’s operating system was performing more than a thousand autonomous maintenance checks a second—brake issues, battery-cell-temperature imbalances, severed internal wires, water penetration—so that an algorithm that has learned to detect signs of incipient scooter failure can take the vehicle out of service before a serious malfunction occurs that might land the machine in the shop and the rider in the hospital. (The system can also detect collisions and report unsafe driving to local control centers.) As a result of this regimen of automated self-care, Link scooters require maintenance once in every two hundred and fifty trips, versus the industry standard of once in every fifteen to forty trips.

“The scooters even open their own service tickets!” Biderman exclaimed. “With the instructions on what needs to be fixed for the mechanics. And, once it is fixed, the scooter tests itself to see if the work was done correctly.”

Last November, I bought an electric scooter for my wife, as a birthday gift. It was a portable model, with a steering column that folds. You can get one for five hundred dollars, and a fair number of people who rent scooters and enjoy getting around on them eventually do buy their own. That poses problems for the long-term viability of scooter-sharing. “The best customers end up leaving the market,” David Zipper, an urban-mobility and technology-policy expert and a visiting fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School’s Taubman Center for State and Local Government, told me.

As a gift, the scooter was a disaster. My wife rode it maybe fifty yards down the unprotected bike lane on our street in Brooklyn, went over a speed hump, and that was that. Like the women in the Irish cycling study, she didn’t feel safe. Horace Dediu, the micromobility seer, told me that he considers women to be an “indicator species” when it comes to new forms of transportation. “In Europe, whenever women begin to use a mode it becomes mainstream very quickly,” he said. Cycling has long skewed male, but in Denmark more women cycle than men, a fact that Dediu attributes to the country’s investment in infrastructure.

After taking a few spins on our street, I felt safe enough. (“Lord, grant me the confidence of a mediocre white man,” the writer Sarah Hagi memorably tweeted in 2016.) So I set off for a test commute into Manhattan, following my usual bike route.

In a 2018 study of Austin scooter injuries conducted by the Austin Public Health Department and the Centers for Disease Control, a third of the accidents occurred on the first ride, so I went cautiously, wearing a helmet, but I soon got the knack. Cruising down Carlton Avenue, I caught the giddy appeal of e-scootering. “It’s like supercharging yourself for a few minutes,” as Assaf Biderman put it to me. You stand there, and with virtually no effort at all—only the slightest pressure of your index finger on the trigger-shaped throttle button—you’re skimming along through the air. But the standing position also accounts for the P.B.E. (Paul Blart Effect): you look like a blissed-out dork. [Elon Musk](#) told the journalist Kara Swisher that scooters “lack dignity.”

On my outbound trip, I almost lost my balance on the rough blacktop around the perpetual construction on the protected Flushing Avenue bike lane. In

downtown Manhattan, I steered around potholes and other gouges caused by the freezing and thawing of pavement and the plowing of snow. Cities in more temperate climates, such as Southern California, where scootering first took off, don't have New York's pothole problems; in 2020 alone, the D.O.T. filled 120,561 of them. The standard size of a wheel on an adult's bicycle is twenty-six inches in diameter, and it will roll through all but the deepest ruts. Scooter wheels, by contrast, have a much smaller diameter—mine are ten inches—and can't negotiate the hairier craters as easily.

Even cities with smoother infrastructure have reported an epidemic of certain types of injuries at the beginning of sharing programs. Wally Ghurabi, the medical director of the emergency center at UCLA Health Santa Monica Hospital, participated in a 2018 study, conducted by the university, of two hundred and forty-nine patients admitted to the E.R. after scooter accidents, of whom ten had worn helmets. A hundred of them had head injuries. "You take a seventy-kilogram person going, let's say, fifteen miles an hour," Ghurabi told me. "He topples, loses his scooter, and lands on his head. Imagine the force of seventy kilos times fifteen miles an hour, hitting the asphalt. Asphalt is not forgiving. I've spent hours upon hours taking asphalt out of people's faces in the forty years I've been doing emergency medicine. And, because they're unprotected heads, you have brain bleeds. People have to have surgery to evacuate the blood."

Ghurabi compares the enthusiasm for electric scooters to the in-line skating craze of the early nineteen-nineties. "Roller skates put my kids through college, man!" he said.

I got home safely, and soon I was regularly scootering around Brooklyn and into Manhattan. If nothing else, it was a half hour of lightheartedness in the day, although my mellow was somewhat harshened by hostile vibes I detected from other users of the bike lanes. Human-powered cyclists—my erstwhile mode buddies—seemed especially peeved at me. Was it my lack of body language, which seemed to make it difficult for oncoming riders to anticipate my projected path? Was it mode rage? Purists, like my friend Rob, think that bike lanes should not be for motors of any kind, including e-bikes, and certainly not for e-scooters. But, if you forgo the dangers of the open road, and scooter on the sidewalk, you menace pedestrians; in addition, some city sidewalks, which are maintained by property owners, are in worse

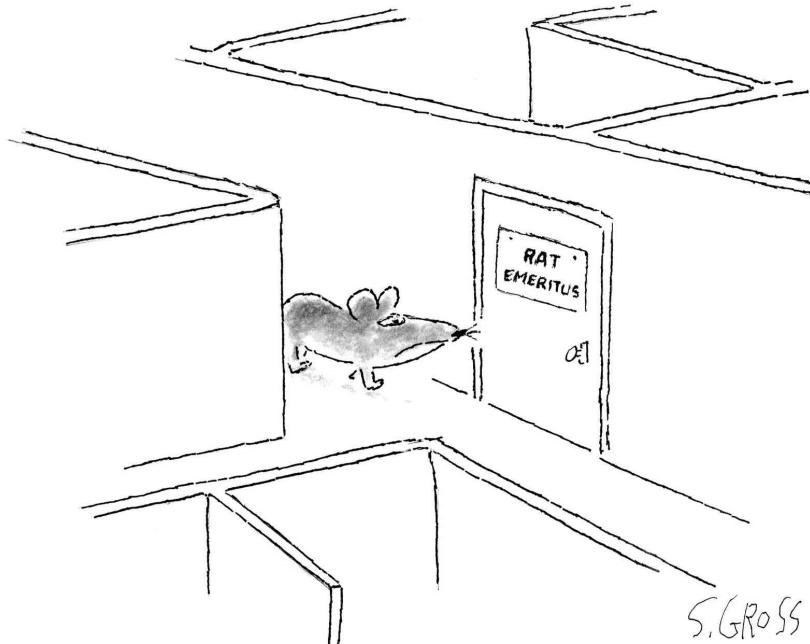
shape than the streets. (It's also illegal.) In vain, I searched the eyes of passing scooterists for some inter-modal camaraderie, but I found only a shared sheepishness.

In December, as I was leaving a community-outreach event on scooter safety which Paul White and a colleague, Paul Mondesire, were staging at Bedford-Stuyvesant's Restoration Plaza, I hit a hole. I had scootered over from Fort Greene—a harrowing two-mile trip along Fulton Street, which, like many city streets, has only two stripes of faded white paint for bike lanes, and for some stretches not even that. After watching community residents try e-scooters for the first time, with mixed levels of enthusiasm, I said goodbye to the two Pauls and scootered across the plaza. A chunk was missing between the plaza and the adjoining concrete—more pockmark than pothole—and the front edge of my scooter caught it, instantly ending my joyride and sending me hurtling toward the pavement face first.

Newton's third law, that every action has an equal and opposite reaction, is a tired maxim of everyday physics, but when your face is involved in the equation the third law becomes the only thing in the universe that matters. The prow of my bicycle helmet was probably going to save my head from a brain bleed, but it wasn't going to protect my nose, teeth, and skin from skidding across the concrete.

Because I was travelling at eight miles an hour, about half the scooter's top speed, I was able to get my hands out, just. Mondesire rushed over to help me, but I jumped up, with gravel embedded in the heels of my palms and a bloody knee, more shocked than hurt. Had I been going any faster, it would have been very ugly.

“Textbook fall!” White shouted.



Cartoon by Sam Gross

The pandemic has brought a temporary mode shift to urban transportation systems around the world. Anne Hidalgo, the mayor of Paris, has seized on the opportunity presented by the pandemic to accelerate her vision of *la ville du quart d'heure*—a city in which mobile citizens can avail themselves of multiple modes of transportation to get anywhere in fifteen minutes. An app like Google Maps, which already lists trip times for driving, mass transit, biking, and walking (and plans to add scootering soon), could calculate the best mode to use for certain segments of the trip, and when to switch.

Hidalgo has closed quayside Seine roads and the Rue du Rivoli, restricted car use on the Champs-Élysées, Paris's busiest street, and introduced hundreds of kilometres of *coronapistes*—pop-up protected bike lanes that can be installed virtually overnight. More than half the people using them are new to cycling or scootering. Since the pandemic started, Sadiq Khan, the mayor of London, has added almost two hundred miles of protected lanes, and London's cycling population has grown two hundred per cent.

“This is it!” David Zipper, the urban-mobility expert, said to me, of the possibility for transportation reform in New York. “This is our window! And if you miss this opportunity it’s not going to come around again.”

In New York City, the Mayor recently announced a new road-level bike lane on the Brooklyn Bridge; the Queensboro Bridge is getting a two-way bike lane on the north side and a pedestrian walkway on the south. But if the recent opening of the Daniel Patrick Moynihan Train Hall, the \$1.6-billion addition to Penn Station, is any indication, multimodalism may not come naturally to city planners: there is no bike parking at all, except for a Citi Bike rack out front. The new commissioner of the city's D.O.T., Hank Gutman, has promised ten thousand more parking racks for bicycles across the city.

At a recent forum on transportation in which eight of the Democratic candidates vying for office in November's mayoral election took part, much of the discussion focussed on how they would meet Vision Zero's goal of zero road fatalities by 2024, the importance of dedicated bus lanes, and whether there should be more N.Y.P.D. officers on the subway. The question of expanding cycling infrastructure came up only briefly, and none of the candidates mentioned e-scooters. Andrew Yang, the former Presidential contender, committed to biking to work at City Hall if elected, although he allowed that he might need to take a car now and then, "to make phone calls."

Even before the pandemic, transport planners knew that many people who take up biking are shifting from public transit, or walking, and not from cars. The micromobility gains in Paris and London are mostly at the expense of their Métro and Underground systems. Post-pandemic New York needs to act on two fronts. It has to better protect its bike lanes, so that more cyclists and scooterists feel safe enough to use them—in 2019, cars and trucks killed twenty-nine cyclists in the city, a twenty-year high. And it has to make sure that the older forms of mass transit recover so that New Yorkers who have absolutely no desire, or ability, to jump on the latest micromobility vehicle can rely on them as they used to.

As people go back to working in offices and shopping in stores, but potentially remain leery of trains, buses, and car pools, many will mode-shift to four wheels rather than two. Ridership on the subway is still at only thirty-five per cent of its pre-pandemic levels; bus ridership is about fifty per cent. Traffic, however, is already reaching pre-pandemic levels at the river crossings and on interborough expressways open to commercial traffic, even

as it remains depressed in midtown. According to Sam Schwartz, a longtime New York transportation analyst, the city is facing a “scary” traffic scenario this fall, unless something is done to redirect the public’s atavistic retreat to private automobiles.

If seventy-five per cent of remote workers return to their Manhattan offices, he explained, but twenty per cent of them remain fearful of public transit and mode-shift to driving, the number of vehicles entering the central business district in Manhattan will increase by two hundred and nine thousand cars over the 2018 peak, when midtown traffic crept along at an average of five miles an hour. (Congestion pricing, the plan to toll drivers crossing the East River and entering Manhattan below Sixtieth Street, seems all but inevitable now.) Unless the M.T.A. receives additional funding, there will almost certainly be cuts to subway and bus service to make up for missing fares. Instead of the fifteen-minute city, we may be looking at a ninety-minute one.

Three weeks after the Navy Yard event, the D.O.T. announced that it had selected the northern part of the East Bronx—including Eastchester, Wakefield, Pelham Parkway, and Co-op City—for the first phase of the e-scooter pilot. The borough has the lowest median household income in the city, and eighty per cent of its residents are Black and Latino. Transportation options are sparse, and there are no Citi Bikes, partly because the city skipped many lower-income neighborhoods in its bike-share rollout. Will Carry, a D.O.T. official involved in the development of the pilot, told me, “D.O.T. wants the e-scooter pilot to be a success, but we also do not want to hurt Citi Bike—so we sited the pilot entirely outside Citi Bike’s service and planned expansion areas.” Geofencing will be used to corral scooters in busy areas, but not on quieter residential streets, he said. The plan is to expand into the South Bronx next year, and other boroughs after that.

What if shared scooters turn out to be just another Segway: a human transporter that people don’t need? “If people are not that into it, we would take that into consideration,” Carry allowed.

Superpedestrian’s Paul Mondesire grew up in the Gun Hill Houses and later in Co-op City, so the D.O.T.’s choice of his home turf, where Link had done a community-outreach event, seemed to bolster the company’s chances.

But it was not to be. The winners, which were announced last week by Commissioner Gutman, in a ceremony held in Pelham Parkway, were Bird, Lime, and the Chicago-based company Veo.

“We’re just puzzled,” Biderman told me, on a Zoom call with White. “We know we have the best vehicle—the best technology, the highest safety rating, and we’re the only operator with a one-hundred-per-cent compliance record.”

White said, “We didn’t invest in lobbyists.” He added, looking crestfallen, “Still, this stings.”

“We’ll be fine,” Biderman said. Only days before, he had reached an agreement with an automotive company to license Superpedestrian’s intellectual property for use in a new four-wheeled electric vehicle. “Our business is not only about the operations of a rental business,” Biderman went on. “We are an engineering company that makes a platform for microvehicles. And the world is going micro.” ♦

An earlier version of this story misidentified a participant in the D.O.T.’s demo and a location of its pilot program, and misspelled the names of Zoe Ryder White and Graham Gullans.

Poems

- “[In the Presence of Sunlight](#)”
- “[The Way Things Were Up Until Now](#)”

[April 26 & May 3, 2021 Issue](#)

In the Presence of Sunlight

By [José Antonio Rodríguez](#)

April 19, 2021

Audio: Read by the author.

Our bodies had limits, perimeters,
Edges marking the end of us and the beginning of not us:
The flies hovering in space, the dirt floor stubborn beneath everything.
The table, too, was rectangular every time,
As was the door facing west
And its modest field of corn or sometimes sorghum,
A mesquite in one corner,
A mulberry tree in the other,
And when they started losing their traces,
Branches blending in with the purpling sky behind them,
I knew to turn back to the kitchen so as not to miss it—
My family slowly fading away, beginning at the edges,
The nearest part of their bodies always the last to go,
Then the glint of the eyes,
Then hardly shadows with voices
Humbly calling out, “The sun is leaving us.”

I've written about this so many times.

[April 26 & May 3, 2021 Issue](#)

The Way Things Were Up Until Now

By [Bianca Stone](#)

April 19, 2021

Audio: Read by the author.

I am bored of all the excuses.
Bored as Mayakovsky
at the Finnish painters' exhibition
barking like a dog through the foreign minister's toast
until he cried and sat down. Deadly serious.
I am bored as an elegy. I mean,
why care at all, speaking as a pitfall
in a world of pits. But we do. To the death.
We all agree to garden this year.
And my raspberry bushes,
picked over by wrens—
I'll make them great again
and let America go wild.
It'll be all trumpets and leeks and lilacs
from here on out.
Let's stop paying for it, get it free.
Let's plan our victory gardens to supplement grief,
boost morale, as though something new
and uncontrolled were available—
it is the original new hot future joy.
We're making it out of dough.
And the illusion of separateness,
let it go back into remission.
Just look at you—you look
like a resurrected child.
A serious drama in a cosmic joke.
Scarred, masked, dangerous.
And what of the new Eucharist?
How hungry I always am. How I long to lack.

Though in Walmart
my heart beats a little faster.
I want the world to heal up.
And the world is a field—as if it were indeed flat, curving
and caving, as if it were a piece of paper,
a Gustave Doré engraving
from the *Divina Commedia*,
the one with the silhouettes of Dante and Beatrice
standing in front of the blinding
exploding white rose
that you realize when looking more closely
is all made up of bodies and wings twisting together;
the “saintly throng,” they call it, mashed and hurtling,
an image of Heaven, and the creation of angels, though it is
frenzied as any image of Hell, around a divine nipple,
Odin’s lost eye in the well, the drain to the other side,
joy that gets more frantic
the more you try to quiet it down.

Pop Music

- [The Afrofuturist Sounds of Dawn Richard](#)

The Afrofuturist Sounds of Dawn Richard

On her new album, the former Danity Kane singer combines electronic beats with references to the cultural touchstones of New Orleans.

By [Amanda Petrusich](#)

April 19, 2021



In 2003, the rapper and entrepreneur Sean Combs—then operating under the nom de plume Diddy—launched the third iteration of “Making the Band,” a reality-competition series that had débuted in 2000. The show was predicated on the idea that it was possible to manufacture a musical group from parts, much as a person might, with time and focus, successfully assemble a sideboard from *IKEA*. The first season was hosted by Lou Pearlman, the talent impresario behind the Backstreet Boys and ’NSync. (In 2008, Pearlman was imprisoned for overseeing one of the longest-running Ponzi schemes in American history, and died in federal custody in 2016.) Diddy took over for “Making the Band 2,” relentlessly testing the mettle of Da Band, a hip-hop group he’d put together through an arduous audition process. Between rehearsals, Diddy, usually wearing a tracksuit and sunglasses, assigned the group members character-building tasks, one of

which involved walking from Manhattan to Brooklyn to get him a wedge of cheesecake from Junior's. The group released one successful album, "Too Hot for TV," in 2003. Diddy, eternally unsatisfied, dissolved Da Band in 2004.

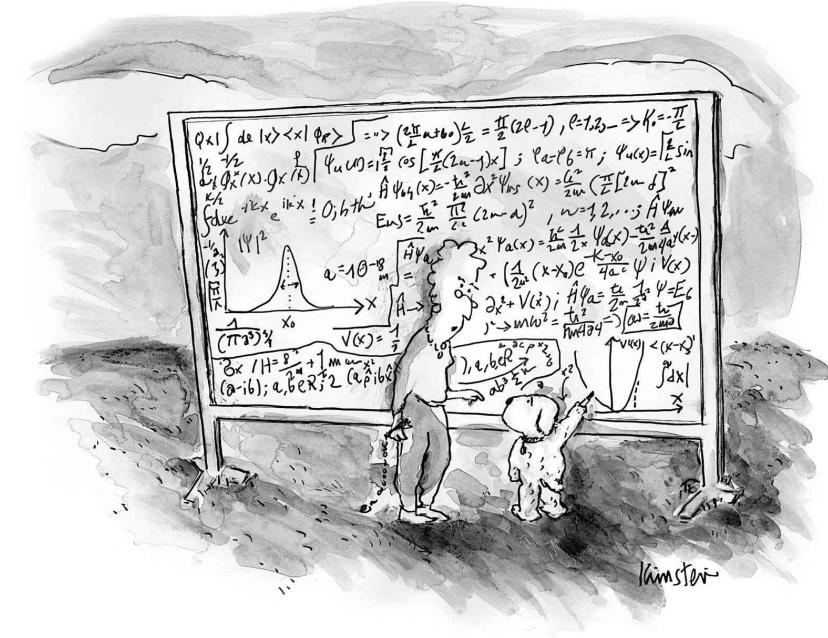
For "Making the Band 3," he set out to create what he called an "international female supergroup," selecting nineteen promising young women to live with one another in a sprawling apartment in New York City. In the first episode, the music manager Johnny Wright, the choreographer Laurieann Gibson, and the vocal coach Doc Holliday welcomed the contestants. "A lot of you guys are here by the skin of your teeth," Wright announced. "Puff didn't really like anybody." The drama of the show was based on the (flimsy) notion that harsh criticism is a more effective motivator than praise. The women were evaluated on their ability to sing, to dance, and to look enticing while doing both. Each week, Gibson would bark "Boom-kat boom-boom-kat!" as the women gyrated in a mirrored dance studio, attempting to master new choreography. Gibson often seemed offended by the results, and reminded the contestants that they were nothing special: "No time to play! There's a batch full of new kittens ready to lick that milk!" She demanded expertise, self-sacrifice, and modesty. "A star is someone who is humbled by the opportunity," she told a singer who'd expressed too much confidence (and was later booted for it). Diddy sometimes arrived for judgment day in a helicopter with a team of scurrying porters wearing red jumpsuits, who hurriedly collected his Louis Vuitton luggage.

Ultimately, Diddy begrudgingly created Danity Kane, a five-piece R. & B. girl group featuring Dawn Richard, Aubrey O'Day, Aundrea Fimbres, Shannon Bex, and D. Woods. Richard, a singer, songwriter, and dancer from New Orleans, was an early favorite on the show. She was the group's least peacocking member, bringing a measured elegance to the proceedings. Danity Kane got its name from a superhero character that Richard had invented and illustrated. (Richard has also worked as an animator and, in 2020, became the first Black artist to serve as a creative consultant for Adult Swim, a popular nighttime programming block on Cartoon Network.)

Danity Kane released its self-titled début LP in 2006. The first single, "Show Stopper," reached No. 8 on the *Billboard* Hot 100. The song is a dated

artifact, but it is a supremely shiny and pleasurable one. “We in the car / We drive slow / We doin’ things that the girls don’t do,” the women coo. They seemed primed for global success, hitting the road as an opening act for Christina Aguilera. But the band was plagued by internal conflict, and after a second album was released, in 2008, O’Day and Woods left the group, and were soon followed by Bex and Fimbres. Richard, with the singer Kalenna Harper, formed Dirty Money, a duo that frequently provided backing vocals for Diddy. In 2013, Danity Kane briefly got back together, but the reunion didn’t last. Various configurations of the band have popped up since: O’Day, Bex, and Richard; O’Day and Richard. Today, Danity Kane, as we once knew her, seems gone for good.

This month, Richard, who is thirty-seven, will release “Second Line,” her sixth and best solo album. Richard’s solo career began in 2005, shortly before she joined Danity Kane, but it didn’t take off until 2013, when she was freed from her commitment to Diddy and started releasing idiosyncratic, genre-thwarting music. For “Second Line,” an electronic album, Richard signed with Merge Records, a storied independent label based in Durham, North Carolina. Merge was founded, in 1989, by Mac McCaughan and Laura Ballance, two members of the beloved indie-pop band Superchunk. The label has since released a number of critically adored rock records, including Neutral Milk Hotel’s “In the Aeroplane Over the Sea,” Spoon’s “Kill the Moonlight,” and Arcade Fire’s “Funeral.” Merge’s aesthetic is scrappy but tuneful: its best-known acts write melodic yet spiritually rebellious songs that resist the Zeitgeist.



"Bad dog! I said 'Sit,' not 'Quantum equations'!"
Cartoon by Ken Krimstein

Richard was an unusual signing for Merge, which does not typically dabble in mainstream pop, electronic music, or R. & B. "We are always deliberative when it comes to taking on new artists, because we are a small label," McCaughan told me recently. "Dawn's New Orleans roots and musical story to this point had me interested even before we heard what she was working on. Once we got an early version of 'Second Line' to hear, I kept coming back to it." He continued, "Artists like Dawn are what have always driven Merge from the beginning, regardless of the style or genre of the music."

Richard has said that "Second Line" represents a "movement to bring pioneering Black women in electronic music to the forefront." The record contains musical elements that are particular to Richard's home town, including references to Creole culture and to New Orleans bounce, a hip-hop style that originated in the late nineteen-eighties and is marked by gleeful, sometimes hypersexualized call-and-response vocals, which borrow both rhythm and spirit from the centuries-old chants of Mardi Gras Indians. (The album takes its title from a style of musical parade that was inspired by processions held by enslaved West Africans in Louisiana and that is still used to commemorate weddings, funerals, and other significant events.) "Second Line" is also explicitly inspired by Afrofuturism, an aesthetic that combines cultural touchstones of the African diaspora with elements of

science fiction. (Aspects of Afrofuturism are also present on records by Parliament-Funkadelic, Afrika Bambaataa, and Sun Ra, and in the art of Jean-Michel Basquiat, among others.) The results of all this intermingling are rich. “I am the genre,” Richard announces on “King Creole (Intro),” the album’s opening track.

King Creole is Richard’s alter ego, another visionary Black artist from the South who has found herself at a spiritual crossroads and is scouring the horizon for a path forward. Several of the tracks on “Second Line” include snippets of Richard in conversation with her mother, Debbie, posing the sorts of questions that people sometimes ask when they’re trying to make sense of circumstances that seem fundamentally inscrutable. (“How many times have you been in love?”) My favorite track on the album, “Mornin / Streetlights,” sees Richard at her most vulnerable. It’s a slow, groove-oriented jam about how love transforms us, whether we want it to or not. Eventually, the song dissolves into a kind of spectral electro-fever. “Every time you wake up, I want you to know that I’m the only girl you need,” she sings. “You gon’ remember this in the morning.”

At the start of “Jacuzzi,” Richard samples her mother saying, “I’m a Creole girl.” The song—a cocksure celebration of sex—features silken synthesizers and fidgety electronic beats, which give the track a vaguely surreal feel. But Richard remains human in her expressions of desire. “Keep it right there / Keep pulling my hair,” she sings, her voice soft. In these moments, Richard appears certain of the validity and the release of pleasure. On “FiveOhFour (A Lude),” a half-spoken interstitial piece that Richard produced, she manipulates her voice, transforming it into something deep, nearly robotic. “You heauxs is frugazy / And my floss is too wavy / I’m every time / And you maybe,” she declares.

It’s perhaps too easy to compare Richard to stars such as Janelle Monáe and Beyoncé, yet all three have written or performed hugely palatable pop songs while maintaining their own sound, adroitly mixing the unexpected and the familiar. Richard’s voice is dynamic and pliable, and “Second Line” can be both jubilant and pleasingly dark. On the throbbing, shadowy dance single “Bussifame,” Richard is boastful and daring: “Hopscotchin’ on you hoes, trick the watch the feet / They tell me slow down, bitch never me.” Richard

has her eye on something that looks like the future, and she's too close to it to stop now. ♦

Profiles

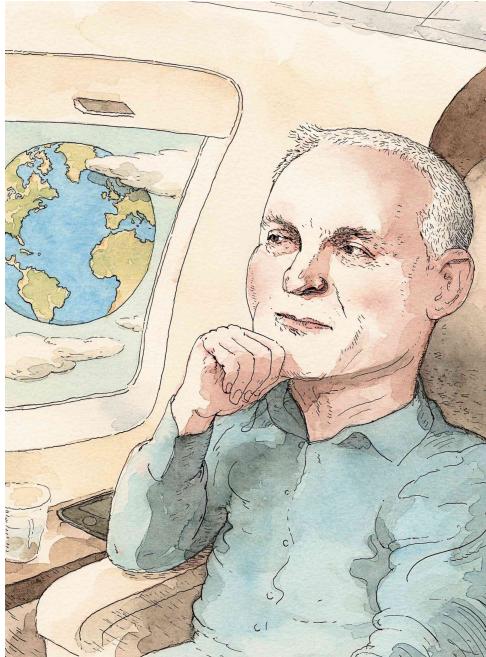
- [Ari Emanuel Takes on the World](#)

Ari Emanuel Takes on the World

Hollywood's most tenacious agent tries to remake himself as a mogul.

By [Connie Bruck](#)

April 19, 2021



On February 29, 2020, [Ari Emanuel](#), the C.E.O. of the Endeavor company, and Mark Shapiro, its president, were leaving Madison Square Garden after a Knicks game. “Ari said he wanted to stop at this new bar for a drink,” Shapiro recalled. “We walk in, and boom! It’s a surprise party, for my fiftieth birthday.” Emanuel was uncharacteristically reserved. [COVID-19](#) had just begun to spread in the United States, and very few people could guess how disruptive it would be. Emanuel, however, had been discussing the dangers of the new virus with his eldest brother, Zeke Emanuel, a prominent bioethicist and oncologist. Shapiro told me that, at the bar, “everyone was saying to me, ‘What the hell’s wrong with Ari? You can’t get a hug, can’t get a kiss on the cheek, can’t shake his hand.’ Ari was saying, ‘Can’t do it, can’t do it—I don’t like where this is going!’ ”

Emanuel, who inspired the manic Ari Gold character on the TV show “*Entourage*,” is almost a caricature of a Hollywood personality; cunning, quick-thinking, charming, and heroically profane. There are three Emanuel

brothers: Zeke, the doctor and intellectual; [Rahm](#), the former congressman, White House chief of staff, and mayor of Chicago; and Ari, the businessman. All are consummate schmoozers, though Ari and Rahm balance their ingratiating manners with ferocious tempers. “He’s a loyal friend, but you don’t want to have him as an enemy,” a friend of Ari’s said.

Emanuel founded Endeavor in 1995, and went on to establish himself as one of the country’s most prominent agents, representing Oprah Winfrey, Martin Scorsese, Charlize Theron, Mark Wahlberg, and Dwayne Johnson. (In 2010, he also became [Donald Trump’s](#) agent.) But Emanuel has always seemed driven by a hunger to upend people’s expectations of him. He craves the stature of a visionary, not of a mere corporate executive. “In ten years, is anybody gonna remember Bob Iger?” he asked me, referring to the executive chairman of the Walt Disney Company. “Probably not. They’re gonna remember Steve Jobs. They’re gonna remember Elon Musk. They’re gonna remember Presidents, actors. You know, businessmen like me, they’re not *really*.”

For the past decade, Emanuel has worked to transform Endeavor into a global sports and entertainment conglomerate, with more than six thousand employees in twenty-eight countries. (Endeavor agents have represented *The New Yorker* in book publishing and in other media.) In September, 2019, he launched an I.P.O., expected to raise roughly six hundred million dollars. But the response from institutional investors was disappointing. According to a person involved in the offering, a team of bankers, led by Goldman Sachs, gave steadily declining estimates of the share price: first about thirty dollars, then twenty-four, and finally as low as twenty. The afternoon before the trading was to start, Emanuel pulled the I.P.O. “Ari called all the Goldman guys motherfuckers,” the person said. “He cursed out so many people he had to apologize a few weeks later.”

It was the biggest failure of Emanuel’s career, and some of his peers suggested that he had made a mistake in trying to reinvent himself as a mogul. “Ari was the best agent of his generation,” a former longtime Endeavor agent told me. “But there’s a disconnect between Ari the agent and Ari the everything else. I think his brain is still wired as an agent. And when you’re that successful there’s a tendency to think, Why can’t I do *that*? ”

Then the pandemic struck. Productions were cancelled. Hollywood all but shut down. Endeavor inspired particular speculation, with many people wondering whether it would go bankrupt. As Emanuel built his company, he had made more than twenty acquisitions, many of them in the live-events business. Now those bets looked perilous; with sports, concerts, fashion shows, and television and movie production in the doldrums, the company's revenues sank, and its credit rating was downgraded to junk-bond status. In a conference call on March 20th last year, Emanuel told a large group of agents that their salaries would be cut, and that there would be no bonuses. Buybacks of company stock would be postponed. People who had made more than a million dollars a year calculated that they would now make a few hundred thousand. Emanuel had announced that he would take no salary for the rest of the year, but the agents weren't appeased. The prospectus for the I.P.O. had disclosed that he had sold more than a hundred and sixty million dollars of equity in the company in 2017.

Joe Ravitch, a friend and business partner of Emanuel's, told me last spring that he was still confident. "A lot of people have wanted to take Ari down for a long time," he said. "Fifteen or twenty years ago, Ari said, 'Joe, agents are like cockroaches. We're going to survive nuclear war.' His business is more complicated now, but he's still relentless."

For his company to survive, Emanuel had to find a way to hold sports and entertainment events, even as much of the world was shutting down. In late March, around his fifty-ninth birthday, he got a call from Khaldoon Al Mubarak, a partner in Abu Dhabi and a longtime friend. Al Mubarak had an idea for a business opportunity—one that might just save Endeavor.

Emanuel and Al Mubarak first met in 2009, as Emanuel began seeking investors in Abu Dhabi. Educated at Tufts University, Al Mubarak was thirty-four and already in charge of Mubadala, Abu Dhabi's sovereign wealth fund, which is among the largest in the world. As the two men built a friendship, Al Mubarak bought a house in Brentwood, minutes from Emanuel's, and spent summers there with his family.

For someone who was not a member of the royal family, Al Mubarak was extraordinarily influential in the United Arab Emirates. He was a close adviser to Mohammed bin Zayed, the Emirates' de-facto ruler. M.B.Z., as he

is commonly known, is one of the world's richest men, and has control of sovereign wealth funds worth \$1.3 trillion. By diversifying the country's oil-dependent economy, he aimed to create a society that excelled in science, technology, warfare, and the arts. Al Mubarak has been deeply involved in this effort, becoming, as a friend of his said, "basically the C.E.O. of Abu Dhabi." In 2007, he boasted about the pace of development. "How many places can you say, 'I want world-class hospitals, universities, and museums,' and boom, the Sorbonne, Cleveland Clinic, Guggenheim, and Louvre are on the way?"

Al Mubarak was also leading Abu Dhabi's multibillion-dollar investment in sports—a passion that he and Emanuel shared. In 2008, he had been appointed chairman of the Manchester City Football Club, in England, after a member of the royal family bought the team. Al Mubarak was also interested in the Ultimate Fighting Championship, the world's largest mixed-martial-arts organization, which Emanuel had begun representing several years before they met. In 2016, Emanuel's company led an acquisition of the UFC, with help from Mubadala. The price was \$4.2 billion—at the time, the largest sports transaction in history—and some analysts thought that Emanuel had overpaid. But, two years later, ESPN agreed to pay \$1.5 billion to broadcast the league's events for the next five years.



"I wish I had a real boy so that he could show me how to work my phone."
Cartoon by Tim Hamilton

The UFC's president is Dana White, a brawny former wrestling manager who relishes his role as bombastic front man. Since early March, White had been adamant that *COVID* would not shut down the UFC. Echoing Trump, a political ally of his, White described *COVID* as no worse than the flu, and said that the entire world had "turned into pussies overnight." During the pandemic, though, the UFC had struggled to hold fights. The contract with ESPN required forty-two events that year; thus far, there had been seven. At Endeavor, managers worried that the contract could be at risk, just when the company could least afford it. Emanuel told me that Al Mubarak proposed a solution: "Khaldoon said, 'Why don't you have the UFC come here? We'll create a bubble for you.' And then everything got started."

The bubble would be on Yas Island, a popular resort off the coast of Abu Dhabi. The island features a Formula 1 racetrack, a championship golf course, a gigantic entertainment and retail complex, and luxury hotels. The airport is fifteen minutes from the island; fighters from around the world who might have been kept out of the U.S. by the Trump Administration's travel ban could fly in for bouts. And Abu Dhabi's government, which maintained strict quarantines and an elaborate surveillance system, could keep anyone who might be infected away from the island.

For Emanuel, it was an easy decision. The fights couldn't admit spectators, but they could be broadcast to fans all over the world. Moreover, Mubadala was one of Endeavor's biggest investors, and Emanuel was eager to please his friend. Al Mubarak and M.B.Z., hoping to raise Abu Dhabi's profile, had long wanted to attract the N.B.A. and other sports leagues. The pandemic, which had shut the leagues down, provided an opportunity.

Days after Emanuel and Al Mubarak spoke, another UFC fight was cancelled in the U.S. White assured the press that he and Emanuel had a new venue, in an undisclosed location, which he soon began describing as "Fight Island." As White ginned up media exposure for the deal and launched a line of branded merchandise, Emanuel talked to his brother Zeke about how the UFC could safely hold events. Zeke had already provided similar *covid* advice to the N.F.L. and the W.N.B.A., but White was unusually willing to take a risk. "In sports, they're all lemmings," Zeke said. "No one wanted to be out there first. And that's why the UFC was first. Because *there* is a guy who is not a lemming."

On July 11th, the UFC held its first fight on Yas Island, where the U.A.E. had built an elaborate octagon, the Flash Forum Arena, alongside the beach. Four fights were held there in the next two weeks, and, as sports-starved fans tuned in, White euphorically announced an enormous spike in viewership. He was planning several more bouts on the island; one would feature Khabib Nurmagomedov, the league's most celebrated fighter and a favorite of M.B.Z. Abu Dhabi was "the new fight capital of the world," White said.

During the construction of Fight Island, White had complained to the press about how expensive it was. In fact, Abu Dhabi not only built the arena and provided private planes, food, housing, testing facilities, and medical staff; it also paid the UFC for each fight, at rates that compensated for the absence of ticket sales. According to people familiar with the company's finances, the league was Endeavor's most successful business in 2020. Amid the trials of the pandemic, Shapiro said, "UFC was our saving grace." Emanuel told me, with evident affection, "Khaldoon has always been an incredible partner."

On the morning of October 28th, Emanuel delivered the opening remarks at an Endeavor "retreat," conducted virtually. Emanuel has close-cropped hair that has been going silver. He wore a black polo shirt and large, dark-rimmed reading glasses. He began by acknowledging the economic hit that many of his associates had taken. "It's been a challenging eight months," he said. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate the sacrifices you made on behalf of this company." During the spring, as part of a financial plan for enduring the pandemic, Endeavor had secured a high-interest loan of a quarter of a billion dollars, and it worked through the summer to cut costs aggressively. ("It's our new business line," one partner quipped.) But, Emanuel argued, the company had encountered difficulties before and always emerged stronger. "We're built for this," he insisted. "When the economy comes back, as it has in every major global crisis"—he struck the tabletop with his fist—"we'll be ready."

Ordinarily, when addressing colleagues, Emanuel is funny, outrageous, and supremely confident. This self-presentation, at once cocky and appealing, tends to inspire loyalty among his staffers. Mark Shapiro calls Endeavor "a cult of personality." In public appearances, Emanuel likes to extemporize,

cajole, and find a connection. He dislikes formality, and he rarely reads his speeches. He explained this aversion in 2007, when he received an award from the Lab School, in Washington, D.C., which focusses on learning differences. “I’ve never been honored by anything before,” he told the audience. He thought that Rahm had secretly arranged the award. “When it turned out to be legit, I was kind of shocked.” He explained that he had dyslexia, and felt a “dread of having to read in public.” But he wanted young people with dyslexia to understand that it could be a gift, which could provide them with “the insight to find inventive solutions to life—and in business—that others when they’re in those situations probably never find.”

Growing up in Chicago, Emanuel was impish and funny, but also ready to attack anyone who bullied him, or insulted his brothers, or even picked on a stranger who attracted his sympathy. In the third grade, still unable to read, he was diagnosed as having dyslexia and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. He was teased, and he never failed to respond. Years later, reminiscing about confronting one boy, he said, “I wanted to kill that kid—I really almost did, slamming his head into that wooden grate.”

The instinct for combat did not run in the family. His father, Dr. Benjamin Emanuel, was born in Jerusalem and served in the nascent Israeli Army during the Arab-Israeli War, in 1948. An avowed pacifist, he fought for eighteen months with an unloaded gun. He went to medical school in Switzerland. When a radical Zionist group contacted him there to ask if he would send letter bombs to England, he refused.

Dr. Emanuel arrived in New York in 1953, with thirteen dollars in his pocket and a fluent command of Hebrew, French, and Italian—but not English. Eventually, he went to work at a hospital in Chicago, where he met Marsha Smulevitz, a radiology technician and a dedicated civil-rights activist. He took her to breakfast and, a week later, asked her to marry him. They lived in Israel for a couple of years before returning to Chicago, where Dr. Emanuel built a thriving pediatric practice. The three boys went to Israel nearly every summer, visiting family. In 1967, when Ari was six, the Emanuels arrived just two weeks after the end of the Six-Day War.

Their household emphasized service to the community. Zeke wrote in his memoir, “Brothers Emanuel,” that there were many times when people who

were struggling asked if their children could stay with the Emanuels. “My father the pediatrician and my mother—the woman who always tried to do the right thing—said yes,” he wrote.

In 1973, a woman asked Dr. Emanuel if he knew someone who would adopt her newborn daughter. He proposed to his wife and sons that they take the baby, and after some discussion they agreed. The girl, whom they named Shoshana, had cerebral palsy; she had no intellectual impairment, but over the years she had to undergo several surgeries to gain greater mobility. As a young woman, she gave birth to two children, and Marsha Emanuel, who by then had become a psychotherapist, began caring for them. “I spend most of my time exhausted,” she told the *Times* in 1997. When the reporter responded that she must be very strong, she said, “If one more person tells me that, I’ll shoot them. And I’m nonviolent.”

Zeke does not mention his sister in his memoir. Her only appearance is in a photograph taken at Ari’s bar mitzvah, in which Marsha is holding a baby girl. Rahm has declined to answer questions about her. Ari does not speak about Shoshana publicly, but in 2015 he adopted one of her children. On Father’s Day in 2018, Rahm Emanuel invited his father onto his podcast, “Chicago Stories,” and asked what his proudest accomplishment was. “Having raised four kids that are honest, that are successful, that are compassionate,” he replied.

As a boy, Ari felt overshadowed by his siblings. “Zeke was always the brainy one,” he has said. “Rahm was the shrewd one. And I was just the last one.” In high school, even though he excelled in math, he was placed in a special-education class. “People made fun of me every day,” he has said. “Being an accomplished wrestler made me feel like less of an outcast, but still I got myself into a lot of fights and ended up in the principal’s office every other day.” Zeke wrote in his memoir, “It did not take much to provoke Ari because, to be blunt, he liked to fight.” He added, “The speed, danger, and risk that make other people nervous make guys like Ari serene.”

Emanuel told me, “There were some dark fucking days in my life, where they didn’t think I could graduate high school.” His mother took him to a reading teacher—three-hour sessions, which he hated. “You just have to get

to the next day. I give my mom a lot of credit here, in that she just kept on encouraging me. So, when things are tough, I don't really get that down."

After graduating from Macalester College, in 1983, Emanuel briefly played professional racquetball, and then got a job working for Robert Lantz, a New York talent agent. But he had always told his family that he wanted to make a fortune, and he began to think about Hollywood. Emanuel told me, "I read this article about Mike Ovitz," who was then the head of Creative Artists Agency and the dominant agent in Hollywood. "And I said, Fuck, I wanna fucking go to work for that dude." In 1987, he left for Hollywood and became a trainee at C.A.A.

Reading was still a struggle, but at the end of each day he took home scripts to review. He became head of the mail room, and then an agent's assistant. After two years, several former C.A.A. colleagues asked him to join a firm they'd started, called InterTalent. He went to see Ovitz to announce that he was leaving. "Mike Ovitz was God, and I was just a fucking street urchin," Emanuel told the journalist James Andrew Miller, for "Powerhouse," a book about C.A.A. Ovitz responded, "We're going to kill you guys and your careers are going to be over." Emanuel recalled, "I turned to him, got out of my Chinese chair, Japanese chair, whatever, and said, 'Are you threatening me?' And I grabbed the chair with my hands and picked it up and said, 'Because if you are, I'll fucking throw this chair right out of here right now. Don't threaten me.'" (Ovitz disputes this account.) Emanuel went on, "I was a complete moron. You don't do that stuff, but I've been a fighter all my life."

In 1993, Emanuel and his best friend, Tom Strickler, began talking about starting their own agency. They'd worked together in the mail room at C.A.A. and then at InterTalent, before moving to International Creative Management. The two were an unlikely pair. Strickler—urbane, thoughtful, instinctively gracious—had grown up on Fifth Avenue and graduated from Harvard. He could have emulated his father, a prominent Wall Street banker. But, as he told Emanuel, he wanted a job that felt satisfying and fun—"otherwise, we might as well be trading bonds." Emanuel liked the idea of creating a firm, but he had other options. The management company Brillstein-Grey Entertainment wanted him to be the head of television, at triple the salary he was making at I.C.M. To aid in the decision, Strickler

recalled, they went to Emanuel's psychiatrist and talked through his dilemma. "This was my first time to a shrink—Wasps tend not to go, although they should," Strickler told me. "He was super nice. Ari explained the pros and cons. At the end, he agreed with me. I said, 'O.K., I got the shrink's vote!'"

The two friends spent days drawing up plans on legal pads, deciding which agents to recruit and which clients to poach. Strickler believed that their firm should work intently to improve their employees' lives as well as their clients'. Emanuel didn't disagree. Strickler recalled walking together as they deliberated. "I'm not Catholic, but I dragged Ari into a few churches," he told me. "He said, 'No, I don't want to pray!' I said, 'Pray for our success.'"



"See, now I'm scared."
Cartoon by Emily Flake

On March 29, 1995—Emanuel's thirty-fourth birthday—he and Strickler started Endeavor, along with two colleagues from I.C.M. Their office, in Los Angeles, occupied a floor above an Islands restaurant on Olympic Boulevard; the smell of cheeseburgers wafted in every afternoon. Five years later, Endeavor had more than a hundred employees and a sleek office in Beverly Hills. "These guys are *everywhere*," Ovitz told a reporter for *Talk* magazine. Emanuel was in constant motion; when the reporter asked how he and his colleagues operated, he replied, "We fight and we fuck"—and then disappeared. Strickler was more accessible and less profane. Asked what

posed the biggest threat to the agency, he said, “Probably our success. Success which usually breeds hubris and arrogance in Hollywood.” Then he set out to do what he did every Friday afternoon: he made his way through the firm’s three floors and shook hands with all the employees, wishing them a good weekend.

A prominent Hollywood agent who was an Endeavor assistant in those years said that the company’s ambition emanated from Emanuel and its culture from Strickler. “I was too moralistic, Ari was too expeditious,” Strickler told me. “So we met in the middle. When we fired someone, we covered their health insurance for six months to a year. There were a thousand things like that. If you’re trying to build a business with a soul, souls are expensive.”

To strengthen Endeavor’s position in the movie business, Emanuel tried to hire Patrick Whitesell, a talented agent at C.A.A. Whitesell hesitated, and so Emanuel began calling him nearly every morning. After two years of calls, Whitesell joined Endeavor, bringing with him a client list that included Matt Damon, Ben Affleck, and Christian Bale. “At Endeavor, we didn’t really advocate for titles,” Whitesell told me, “but it kind of evolved over time that Ari and I were the two running the firm.” Whitesell grew up in Iowa Falls, and his soft-spoken Midwestern manner contrasted with Emanuel’s Chicago-style aggression; they were often described as “yin and yang.”

Emanuel’s ferocity appealed to clients. One of them was the producer Brian Grazer, who had started out developing television projects in the eighties, before founding Imagine Entertainment, with Ron Howard. Grazer had been successful in the movies—in 2002, his film “A Beautiful Mind” won the Academy Award for Best Picture—and he wanted to establish himself in TV. “I’d heard about this guy Ari, and he was just a fucking fearless guy, and I loved that,” Grazer said. “There’s a pervasive atmosphere of fear in Hollywood that seemed to have no effect on him.”

In 2004, Grazer produced a movie, “Friday Night Lights,” based on Buzz Bissinger’s book about a high-school football team in Odessa, Texas. “It got amazing reviews,” Grazer said. “And then Ari goes, ‘Let’s do a series with it.’ ” Grazer had reservations: he felt beholden to the true story, in which the team loses the championship game. “I go, ‘You’re fucking crazy. They lost the game—where’s the series?’ ” Grazer recalled. “He goes, ‘Guess what?’ ”

Get the fuck out of my way, I'm going to get you a fucking television series.' He calls up Jeff Zucker"—the head of the NBC Universal Television Group—"and jams him, and we get the series on the air."

That year, [Michael Moore](#) released "Fahrenheit 9/11," a documentary that attacked the Bush family for its close relations with the Saudi royal family. Moore was Emanuel's client. The DVD distributor was Sony. "Michael Moore and [Harvey Weinstein](#) wanted to have the DVD distributed in Ohio during the 2004 election—which we could not do, because it violated federal election laws," Michael Lynton, who was then Sony's C.E.O., told me. (Lynton is now a board member at Condé Nast.) "So Ari called me, and then Harvey and Michael got on the phone, too. They were all yelling at me, and I was trying to explain to them it was a violation, we could not do it. But Ari was fighting for his client, and he's an ardent Democrat, and he kept saying, 'You've gotta give this away for free!' And it was one of those rare occasions where there was so much yelling, from all three of them, I just had to put the phone down."

Emanuel was no less tenacious away from the office. He has said that he wooed his wife, Sarah Addington, with the same persistent approach that he used to hire Patrick Whitesell. (They were married in 1996, had three sons, and divorced in 2018.) Lynton lived next door to the Emanuel family, in Brentwood, and he and Ari became friends. Their houses were close enough that when Emanuel hit golf balls at 5 A.M., Lynton said, "I periodically had to open our bedroom window and tell him to knock it off. The guy doesn't sleep much."

Lynton continued, "Ari is just a force of will. He will call you and call you and call you and call you. And he also has a very good sense of how that town works. The favor bank there—it's complicated to see the ledger, but if you know the ledger in your head it has a lot of benefits. And I think Ari knows it six ways to Sunday."

Emanuel had a successful talent agency, but he was already meeting with prospective investors, including Casey Wasserman, a sports and entertainment executive, and Ron Burkle, a grocery-store magnate, who might help him create a larger venture. "The question with Ari was always: How fast, how big, how much of an empire can we build?" Strickler

recalled. “We were growing at twenty per cent a year. Ari would say, ‘If we grow at the rate we’re growing at, and C.A.A. grows at its current rate, when will we be the biggest?’ It was something like twenty years. Ari said, ‘We’ll be retired!’ He was not a guy who wanted to build for the next generation.”

By 2007, Emanuel had held merger talks with United Talent Agency and with I.C.M. But the William Morris Agency was the most appealing prospect. A century older than Endeavor and more than twice its size, William Morris had millions of dollars coming in each year from premium-TV packaging fees. And it had strong divisions in music and books, which Endeavor lacked.

William Morris had also been weakened by a series of internal power struggles. Most recently, in the summer of 2008, Jim Wiatt, the firm’s chairman, had tried to force out John Fogelman, the head of the movie department. A compromise was reached, but it was unstable, and Emanuel was soon in secret discussions with Fogelman. He also met quietly with Jennifer Rudolph Walsh, a favorite of Wiatt’s whom he had rapidly promoted.

By then, Zeke said, Emanuel had sharpened his innate feel for human relations. “As a kid, he always knew exactly how far to go,” he said. “He could be humorous and also put people in their spot, and he could do it instinctively. It doesn’t mean he necessarily understood what he was doing. And then, in the last twenty years or so, I think he’s taken his fast thinking and decomposed it, to try to understand—what’s really motivating people, what are they really responding to?”

Emanuel and Whitesell pitched Wiatt a vision of a hugely powerful alliance, with Wiatt presiding as chairman. Then they prepared their own team for aggressive negotiations, enlisting a Harvard Business School professor, Nitin Nohria, to help guide them. Strickler recalled that Nohria gave unsentimental advice, telling them, “Everyone will hold hands, say, ‘This is great, kumbaya.’ But that’s not what this is. There will be a winning side and a losing side.” Nohria also emphasized the importance of finding concessions that they could offer the other side without yielding power. One easy sacrifice was the name of the newly merged company—something that people often value emotionally but that has no monetary worth. “We ended

up saying, O.K., you guys win—it can be William Morris Endeavor,” Whitesell said.

Members of the two firms were scheduled to vote on the merger on April 27, 2009. The sides had agreed to harsh layoffs. Endeavor fired about fifteen per cent of its staff, and William Morris nearly a third. “It was so emotional,” Strickler told me. “This was watching something burn to the ground—we had this enormous success based on a culture that was going to be destroyed.” Early that morning, Strickler sent a company-wide e-mail, saying that he was leaving the firm. Emanuel called one of the other co-founders, David Greenblatt, to express surprise. Greenblatt picked up his phone and heard a long silence, and then Emanuel’s voice. “He never said a word,” Emanuel said, and hung up.

Strickler didn’t attend the vote, which was unanimous in his absence. Afterward, he went to a company meeting. “Ari wanted me to bless the transaction,” Strickler said. “I got up, endorsed it. I talked about the company, lots of metaphors, about how there might be rough waters ahead, but there had been when we started Endeavor, too, and I had really enjoyed those days. Then Ari came up and said, ‘Fuck you!’ It was charming—everyone laughed.” But many in the crowd were also crying. Strickler is a godfather to the children of seven people who worked for him. One agent told me, “Tom was the heart and soul of the company.” Emanuel and Strickler have not spoken at length since. “When Ari needs somebody, he’s their best friend,” Strickler said. “When that is no longer the case, he disappears. It shocks a lot of people.”

When I asked Emanuel about Strickler’s departure, he said, “He thought it was a good time to leave. It’s, like, now everybody gets to do what makes them happy in their lives. And he wasn’t running the company. I was running the company. I don’t know exactly what he’s doing right now. But he continues to get checks from the company, and he’s good.”

As the deal closed, Jim Wiatt’s position seemed well defended. “The board had five William Morris directors, and four Endeavor,” someone involved in the transaction told me. “Any decision to remove a director needed a supermajority. You’d need six votes.” But Fogelman and Walsh had promised Emanuel that they would take his side. Wiatt, realizing that his

support had collapsed, resigned before the first meeting. Emanuel and Whitesell took control of W.M.E.

Strickler and Emanuel both knew Wiatt well; he was the president of I.C.M. when they left to start Endeavor. Strickler had never been an admirer, but for him that was not the point. “You acquire a business, more than twice as big, pay nothing for it, and *you’re* in control,” he said. “It was a remarkable transaction. The whole thing begins in a lie. You tell the guy how much fun this is going to be, and then you shoot him.”

In January, 2009, Emanuel was in D.C., celebrating Barack Obama’s impending Inauguration. Rahm had been appointed Obama’s chief of staff and Zeke a health-care adviser. Ari quickly sought to establish influence. Around that time, John Podesta, who was helping to lead the transition, got a note from an aide, telling him that Emanuel wanted to suggest a member for a board being assembled to address the ongoing financial crisis. “I asked him if he was calling to schedule your appearance on *Entourage*,” the aide wrote. Despite the joke, she added Emanuel to the call sheet.

The merger of Endeavor and William Morris was still in process, but Emanuel had already started laying the foundation for an expanded company. His ally was Joe Ravitch, an investment banker at Goldman Sachs, who had covertly helped him navigate the deal. Ravitch and Jeff Sine, an executive at the multinational investment bank UBS, planned to leave their firms and start a boutique merchant bank, called Raine, with a focus on digital media, gaming, entertainment, and sports. Emanuel joined them as a partner and an investor. “Ari always wanted to create a global company,” Ravitch said. “From the start, he was willing to break glass.”



Kanin

"Don't worry, the X-ray machine doesn't actually let us see you naked—it just tells us whether you have a big or small penis."

Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

Emanuel hoped to find investors in his new company, and in Raine's private-equity fund. But, with the economy suffering from the global financial crisis, money was tight. Emanuel called a New York real-estate lawyer named Martin Edelman, whom he had met through representing the UFC. Edelman was a longtime adviser to the league's owners, Lorenzo and Frank Fertitta, veterans of the casino business. More important, he was close to the royal family of the Emirates and deeply involved in business there, serving as a senior adviser to Mubadala. "Marty Edelman figured out how to have a relationship with M.B.Z., and in the early two-thousands he started going to Abu Dhabi all the time," Ravitch said.

Emanuel told me that Edelman was receptive, saying, "Whenever I call you to come to Abu Dhabi, come to Abu Dhabi." Emanuel got the call on the day of Obama's Inauguration. "From Washington, I get on a plane," he told me. "I spend two days there. They were building the Formula 1 facility, they were building all this stuff, and I go around in the helicopter and I see the whole country—and I have a great time."

It was on this trip that Emanuel met Al Mubarak, introduced by Edelman. He returned to Abu Dhabi often that year, meeting M.B.Z., his younger brother Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed, and other members of the royal family. Emanuel said of M.B.Z., "He was always generous to me. Always. With his

time.” His ties to Al Mubarak were even closer, he said: “It’s not only a business relationship. It’s a personal relationship. Family. We do things for each other. When Khaldoon was looking for a place in L.A., I helped him get it. When his son wasn’t doing well, I helped him get doctors. These are —they’re actually friends.”

Some people who had known Emanuel since Endeavor’s early days found his new relationships somewhat confusing. They remembered that he had always identified deeply with Israel. When he bought an early Prius, a modest car for an aspiring entertainment tycoon, he explained to a friend, “I don’t want to give Saudi Arabia any more money!” His family had expressed similar views. After Rahm was chosen as Obama’s chief of staff, the Israeli newspaper *Ma’ariv* asked Benjamin Emanuel whether his son would influence the President to be “pro-Israel.” “Obviously he will!” Benjamin replied. “What is he, an Arab? He’s not going to clean the floors of the White House.” Rahm subsequently apologized to the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. But Ben Rhodes, Obama’s deputy national-security adviser, recalled in his memoir, “The World as It Is,” that when Rahm “got tired of hearing me argue that Obama had to show empathy to the Palestinians, he started calling me ‘Hamas.’ ‘Hamas over here,’ he’d say, ‘is going to make it impossible for my kid to have his fucking bar mitzvah in Israel.’ ”

I asked Emanuel what his father would say about the time he spent in Abu Dhabi. “He’d go, ‘What, what? You’re crazy, you’re crazy! What are you doing?’ ” Emanuel responded, imitating his father’s accent. “Having nothing to do with their being Arabs. He just doesn’t understand the map that I’m looking at, and how the world is changing, and how important that region’s gonna be.”

United Nations observers have accused the Emirates of human-rights abuses, including torturing dissidents and restricting the press. Before relations were normalized, last August, its government refused for decades to recognize Israel. When I asked Emanuel whether he was ever uncomfortable there, he said, “They are an incredible people, run by one of the great crown princes, one of the modern, forward-thinking crown princes. So, no, I didn’t feel any awkwardness—nothing, zero.”

Emanuel's instincts about Martin Edelman and Abu Dhabi proved right. A year after his first visit, Sheikh Tahnoun made a handshake deal with Lorenzo Fertitta to acquire ten per cent of the UFC; Ravitch finalized the deal, with the Emiratis agreeing to pay about two hundred million dollars. Later, Tahnoun's adopted son, an M.M.A. fighter, posted a picture on Facebook, showing Dana White and Lorenzo Fertitta with their arms around Tahnoun, who is wearing a UFC T-shirt and smiling broadly. In a recent interview, White said that Edelman was "how we got connected out here—and once we met Sheikh Tahnoun, it was a wrap."

Emanuel secured other important investments from the Emiratis. He described a conversation with Al Mubarak, in 2010, about the prospect of putting money into Raine. They had met in Spain to watch the Manchester City Football Club play. "There was a friendly match between Man City and I think it was either Madrid or Barcelona," Emanuel recalled. "At two in the morning, we were walking around the streets, and he turned to me and he said, I trust you. I said, I trust you. He said, I'm going to give you one hundred million dollars." Mubadala's investment launched Raine's private-equity fund. "Khaldoon has been an unbelievable backer of me, of ideas," Emanuel said. "And I think I've been a very good steward."

In March, 2010, Abu Dhabi held its first Media Summit—part of M.B.Z.'s effort to make the emirate a global presence in media and entertainment. Onstage with Emanuel, Al Mubarak spoke publicly for the first time about Mubadala's investment in Raine. "We're still learning the ropes when it comes to the media business," he said. "Rather than us going in and just learn, we've partnered with Ari, we've invested with Ari, and I think that gives us the right deal flow, the right advice." Al Mubarak has a studious, even formal demeanor, but when he speaks about M.B.Z., or about Emanuel, he shows flashes of warmth.

At the second Media Summit, a year later, Emanuel appeared on a panel with prominent figures he had brought from Los Angeles, including Skip Brittenham, a leading entertainment lawyer, and Jim Gianopoulos, the chairman and C.E.O. of Fox Filmed Entertainment. Introducing Emanuel, the moderator said, "Fans of 'Entourage' may have heard of Ari Gold. What we have is the real thing."

It was a tumultuous time in the Middle East. The Arab Spring protests had started four months earlier, in Tunisia, and spread to Egypt, where government loyalists wielded machetes and whips against protesters in Cairo's Tahrir Square. After Obama called on the Egyptian President, Hosni Mubarak, to restrain his men, the Gulf rulers, fearing discontent among their own populations, expressed anger at his temerity. A few weeks later, Mubarak resigned, under pressure; he was subsequently imprisoned.

The Media Summit took place barely a month after Mubarak stepped down. During a question period, Cynthia Schneider, a Georgetown University professor, asked how films could reflect the complex political realities in the region: "What is the way to get people to understand what is *really* going on? Because with all this talk about the people's voice, how much attention are governments paying to those people's voice?" Three panelists dodged the question, and Emanuel remained silent. They were, after all, guests in a country where activists are routinely jailed for criticizing rulers.

M.B.Z. saw the fast-moving revolt as a threat to his monarchy. Obama wrote in "A Promised Land" that, after he called for Mubarak to step down, M.B.Z. got in touch to say that "the United States is not a partner we can rely on in the long term." To tighten security, M.B.Z. turned to Asia Global Technologies, a company based in Switzerland. Its founder was Matanya Kochavi, an Israeli with a background in intelligence; its international chairman was Martin Edelman. In February, 2011, Abu Dhabi awarded A.G.T. a six-hundred-million-dollar contract to install a statewide surveillance system, a project named Falcon Eye. In effect, a source close to the project told the London-based news site Middle East Eye, "every person is monitored from the moment they leave their doorstep to the moment they return to it. Their work, social, and behavioral patterns are recorded, analyzed, and archived. It sounds like science fiction, but it is happening today in Abu Dhabi."

Kochavi decided that some of the technology might also lend itself to news-gathering. In 2013, with Edelman's help, he launched Vocativ, a New York-based company that would bring together Israeli analysts and American journalists to mine the deep Web for investigative stories. Vocativ ultimately did not thrive; in 2017, it laid off much of its editorial staff. But, for Emanuel, it looked like the future, at least for a time. W.M.E. bought a

minority stake in the company, and Emanuel negotiated a TV deal on its behalf. “As soon as I saw its technology,” he told the *Times*, “I wanted to be involved.”

Emanuel had been obsessively interested in technological change since the nineties, when he read “Life After Television,” a book by George Gilder, which predicted the revolution in digital media. He called Gilder and befriended him, as he widened his search for knowledge and connections. One night in 2004, he knocked on the door of a house in Sherman Oaks, looking for Jules Urbach, a thirty-year-old who was developing software that might transform online gaming. Urbach took Emanuel upstairs to a makeshift office and started showing him code. “Five hours later, Ari was still there,” Urbach told me. “I laid out my plan for everything I wanted to do, and he said, ‘I want to have some sort of involvement in technology—I just feel it’s important.’” Urbach told him that he needed two years.

Emanuel kept calling, and two years later Urbach was ready. At Emanuel’s request, Gilder met with him, and reported back that he was impressed. Emanuel asked him to raise money for Urbach’s company. “Ari couldn’t keep up with Jules, but he understood it well enough,” Gilder said. “He has real animal intuition about it.”

Zeke Emanuel told me, “Ari is incredibly curious about lots and lots of things.” He traces this trait to their father, who was so eager to engage people that, when their family went to a restaurant, “literally in five minutes he’d be talking to the next table.” After the pandemic started, Emanuel began reading articles about potential *COVID* medications and calling scientists to quiz them about their findings. Health is an area of persistent inquiry for Emanuel, whose interest in digestion is intense even by Hollywood standards. “You probably will not talk to anyone, except the real experts doing the research about the microbiome in the gut, who knows more about that subject than Ari,” Zeke said. “He thinks it’s the key to not having illnesses, to longevity.”

When I brought up the subject with Emanuel, he laughed and acknowledged his “craziness about health and food.” Mark Shapiro was more forthcoming. “It’s insane—all about the gut, the worms!” he said. “He’ll go to a restaurant, and he’ll say, ‘The tomatoes, are they *seedless* tomatoes?’ He’ll

constantly be fighting with the chef, who says, ‘It’s O.K., it’s O.K., this is a vegan restaurant.’ And Ari says, ‘But you’re not *my* level of vegan!’ He has a chef at home that cooks all this stuff, and when Ari goes on the road he gets on the plane with a suitcase of food. This is a guy who had his assistant call Uno’s Pizzeria in Chicago, and when we land there someone with an Uno’s uniform is at the door of the plane. Ari’s getting an Uno’s pizza in a vegan recipe they don’t even make.”

Emanuel says that he has a habit when he gets interested in a subject. “I’ll read an article, and I’ll tag it, and I’ll say, I want to talk to the person in that article, or I want to talk to that author—and I’ll just start going down rabbit holes of things that make me curious,” he said. “I call it creating serendipity. And it’s created a large web.” He mentioned cold-calling Michael Rapino, of the Live Nation events company; Emanuel is now on Live Nation’s board. Elon Musk, cultivated in the same way, will soon join the board of Endeavor. “Ari’s phone should be an appendage—24/7, he’s dialling for dollars,” Shapiro told me. Emanuel’s search for profitable connections doesn’t always yield good results, Shapiro noted, but on balance it is productive: “Can I tell you how much business we have, just from his cold calls?”

When Emanuel was raising money for Raine’s first private-equity fund, he read an article about Marc Andreessen, the Silicon Valley venture-capital executive. “I call Marc out of the blue,” Emanuel told me. “He picks up the phone, we meet, we talk, he comes down, I go to see him, da da da, we become friends. And then, after we have a relationship, I say to him, We’re raising a bunch of money. I would like you as an investor—just put in a couple million dollars.” Andreessen invested in the fund. He also introduced Emanuel to Egon Durban, a managing partner at Silver Lake, one of the leading private-equity firms focussed on technology. “We just kind of clicked,” Emanuel said. Durban, too, made an investment.



"It's come to my attention that some of you are cows."
Cartoon by Joe Dator

"We'd been talking about stuff, and meeting," Emanuel said. "And then Teddy died." This was Ted Forstmann, the prominent New York investor; Emanuel had been playing golf with him for years, trying to persuade him to sell IMG, the giant marketing group, which owned sports and fashion events—assets that W.M.E. lacked. After Forstmann's death, Durban and Emanuel had lunch at the Grill, the venerable celebrity hangout in Beverly Hills. Emanuel told me, "Egon at that lunch said, 'We want to make an investment in you, and we want to go after IMG and create this new kind of entertainment company.'" Emanuel had been putting together a financial group to pursue IMG. He recalled that Durban told him, "No, I want to do this with you. Send me your numbers."

Emanuel and Durban reached a deal, in which Silver Lake would provide cash to buy IMG, in exchange for a controlling stake in the combined companies. Mubadala also invested. In 2013, W.M.E. won an auction for IMG, with a bid of some \$2.4 billion—roughly four hundred million dollars higher than the runner-up. The combination of firms, Durban told the *Financial Times*, made for a "relatively large and complicated animal." But Emanuel kept buying companies, especially those centered on live events. He wanted to change the balance of his firm's income, so that half came

from representing talent and half from owning rights, events, and production.

In 2017, he launched Endeavor Content, to produce TV and film projects—breaking the long-standing convention against talent agencies producing or owning entertainment entities, because of the inherent conflict of interest. Other major agencies were pursuing similar arrangements, and the Writers Guild of America protested by asking members to fire their agents. The two sides both filed lawsuits, with each accusing the other of antitrust violations.

In an interview with the London *Telegraph*, in October, 2018, Emanuel dismissed the writers' concerns: "Oh, your agent's going to be your producer? Shut the fuck up. The law that they are talking about I think is from the middle of the Fifties." This February, after two years of litigation, W.M.E. became the last of the major agencies to yield; among other things, Endeavor Content agreed to reduce its stake in productions with Guild members to twenty per cent.

In March, 2017, Kacy Grine, a young investment banker, went to the Endeavor offices in Beverly Hills, to meet with Emanuel. Grine had started an investment fund, in which French and Saudi companies invested in one another. He had a proposal for Emanuel.

Shortly after Salman bin Abdulaziz became king of Saudi Arabia, in January, 2015, he appointed his son [Mohammed bin Salman](#) deputy crown prince. With the King in decline, bin Salman, a twenty-nine-year-old known as M.B.S., quickly became the most powerful figure in the kingdom. He set out to diversify his country's oil-dependent economy, and to open up an intensely conservative society to sports, entertainment, and tourism. "I asked Ari, 'What do you know about Saudi Arabia?' " Grine recalled. "He said, 'I know nothing! I know Abu Dhabi, not Saudi Arabia.'

"I told him that I have this young prince, very energetic, very ambitious, who is changing the way the sovereign wealth fund invests. He needs someone to structure how to bring in movies, music, sports—none of which exist." Grine suggested that he meet with M.B.S. "Ari said, 'I'd be happy to.' "

The Emiratis had also seen an opportunity in the changes in Saudi Arabia. M.B.Z., who had launched a similar project of modernization, had been cultivating the young deputy crown prince as a protégé. In the spring of 2017, Emanuel got a call from Tahnoun bin Zayed, who had recently become the U.A.E.'s national-security adviser. "He goes, 'I want you to fly to Saudi Arabia. I'm going to set up a meeting with you and M.B.S.,'" Emanuel told me. "I said, 'O.K., no problem.'" Emanuel flew to Riyadh, where he met Grine for a two-day visit. "For Ari, it was great," Grine said. "A new country, a new market, and a new source of capital."

At the end of the visit, Emanuel was scheduled to meet with M.B.S. at his palace. He recalls waiting in his hotel as the deputy crown prince's staffers phoned him repeatedly to postpone: "'You're gonna meet him at nine o'clock.' 'You're gonna meet him at ten o'clock.' 'You're gonna meet him at eleven o'clock.' This is at *night*. Now, I'm a guy that goes to bed at seven o'clock, right? Eleven o'clock! What do you fucking mean?" But Emanuel maintains that he didn't take the delay personally: "I'm not mad about it—I understand, he's the head of state."

The meeting, scheduled for half an hour, lasted an hour and forty-five minutes. "He doesn't speak English, but he kind of speaks English," Emanuel said. "He's telling me everything he's gonna do, which was *incredible*, at the time. Like how he's gonna change the culture, wants to spend thirty billion dollars on entertainment, bring people into the region instead of people leaving. I said, 'Listen, we want to be your partner. To bring events, to bring entertainment, sports. Thirty billion dollars, you know —yes, I'm a businessman! And you're trying to change the culture of the country and the region.' It all seemed great! And he says, 'We also want to make an investment.'"

M.B.S. said that he had an international-investment conference planned for the fall, and he wanted Emanuel to be one of the speakers. The conference seemed intended to be M.B.S.'s *début* as the presumptive next king. But there was an impediment: his older cousin Mohammed bin Nayef, a longtime U.S. ally against terrorism, was first in line to succeed King Salman. On June 20th, about two weeks after Emanuel met with M.B.S., bin Nayef was summoned to the palace, where he was held captive overnight and refused food and medication. Turki Al Sheikh, the minister of sports,

whom Emanuel had met, was among those who urged bin Nayef to step down, asking him, “How else will you leave the palace alive?” By morning, bin Nayef was brought to see M.B.S., who knelt to kiss the hem of bin Nayef’s robe. Then M.B.S. placed him under house arrest at his palace in Jeddah.

In late October, 2017, the Future Investment Initiative conference drew several thousand international businesspeople and political leaders to the Ritz-Carlton in Riyadh. M.B.S., who by then had been recognized as the new crown prince, gave an address. He disclosed his plans for a five-hundred-billion-dollar high-tech city, Neom, on a peninsula in the Red Sea. A futuristic landscape, with flying drone taxis and sand that glowed in the dark, it would have more robots than human inhabitants, not least because the tribespeople who had lived there for centuries would be removed. Two other megacities were also planned; the first, Qiddiya, would be a huge sports and entertainment complex, with movie theatres, concert venues, and theme parks.

Emanuel was interviewed onstage by the CNBC reporter Hadley Gamble. She asked about the challenges M.B.S. would face in building an entertainment industry from scratch. “I don’t know if it’s going to be a challenge,” Emanuel responded, measuring his words with uncharacteristic care. He hesitated. “If I mispronounce this—Jeddeeyah . . . When they open that town, I think you will see, whether it be live entertainment and music, food festivals, fashion, art shows—you’ll see all that come in,” he said. “Instead of money leaving the country to go to Abu Dhabi and other places, I think they want to keep it here. And hopefully we can be part of that.”

Emanuel told me that, in the months between his June meeting with M.B.S. and the conference, there had been “a very difficult negotiation” with M.B.S.’s representatives over the investment in Endeavor: “They wanted a lot of things they were never gonna get. Like a board seat, like restrictions on what we could do. I was, like, What? You’re putting in four hundred million dollars. It’s nothing!” The restrictions the Saudis wanted involved Endeavor’s ambitious sports-betting operation. “We don’t do gambling, but we give the data and the stream to all the bookies for sports,” Emanuel said. “I’m, like, No!”

Emanuel decided that he should deal with the crown prince directly. At the conference, he met with M.B.S. and closed the deal. Grine told me that IMG was to bring dozens of events to Saudi Arabia, including concerts, sports, and fashion shows. While other U.S. companies would also be involved, Grine said, “the Saudis saw Ari as their prime partner.”

Nine days later, M.B.S. launched a vicious purge of his rivals. In what his government described as an “anti-corruption” campaign, his security forces arrested more than three hundred and fifty people, including princes, government officials, and influential businessmen, and put them under guard at the Ritz. (“They locked them all up in the Ritz—probably in my room!” Emanuel said.) The most prominent prisoner was Prince Alwaleed, a major shareholder in Citibank, News Corporation, Apple, and the Four Seasons—and Grine’s client and close friend.

In January, 2018, when Alwaleed had been imprisoned for about ten weeks, Grine was interviewed by Maria Bartiromo, on Fox Business. She asked repeatedly why the prince was still being held. Grine said that he didn’t know the charges, but expressed confidence in the fair disposition of the case: “I think it’s very important for Saudi Arabia that I will add value for all of these partners, in the entertainment, Silicon Valley, and Hollywood companies, to show that there is due process behind all of this crackdown.” Clearly frightened for his friend, he emphasized that Alwaleed had always been loyal to M.B.S., “even when the crown prince was not the crown prince.”

Alwaleed was released two weeks later, after eighty-three days under armed guard at the Ritz. Some of the prisoners there had been physically abused, and one had died in custody. Many had been freed only after surrendering large portions of their money and other holdings. (Alwaleed has denied reports that he was tortured and stripped of his wealth.) Until Alwaleed’s imprisonment, Grine had been meeting with Emanuel’s Hollywood contacts who were interested in M.B.S.’s initiative, and had accompanied several to Saudi Arabia. Now he told Emanuel that he could no longer be part of the project.

In late March, M.B.S. embarked on a U.S. tour, intended to cultivate American politicians, business leaders, and the media. Shortly before he

arrived in Los Angeles, the deal with Endeavor was announced: the Saudis' investment of four hundred million dollars would buy what was said to be a five-to-ten-per-cent stake in the company. Emanuel persuaded Brian Grazer to host a celebratory dinner. ("M.B.S. will *love* your house!") At the party, the crown prince sat with Bob Iger, the Disney C.E.O., and got to discuss sports with Kobe Bryant.

On October 2nd, six months after that dinner, Saudi agents brutally murdered the expatriate Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. Soon afterward, Emanuel met a friend for lunch. "Ari said, 'What the *fuck!*!'" the friend recalled. "'It's Jekyll and Hyde! All the times we were together! He's sophisticated, smart. He told me he's a reformer.'"



Cartoon by Sophie Lucido Johnson and Sammi Skolmoski

Some of Emanuel's friends advised him to return the money that the Saudis had invested with him. But the Saudis warned that if he gave their money back he would never be able to do business in the kingdom again. "They were *threatening* me," Emanuel told his friend. To extricate Endeavor from the relationship, he eventually agreed to pay the Saudis substantially more than they had invested; Silver Lake raised the money from its limited partners. Emanuel told me that it was worth the expense. "You have to have *some* morals," he said. "And, to be candid—I mean, I'm not trying to toot

my own horn—but, out of all the companies, and all the fuckin’ hoopla, we’re the only company that gave it back.

“Let’s just be very clear,” he went on. “Governments all over the world do bad things. The United States does it, Canada does it, England does it, Saudi Arabia does it. They just don’t do it in the Turkish Embassy. With cameras. And sound. So, you know, the Israeli government does bad things, really bad things. This was—whatever. This was stupid.”

As the 2016 Presidential campaign began, Emanuel stopped representing Trump, and he did not advertise their relationship in Hollywood. But he had a connection with Trump that he did not have with Hillary Clinton. Emanuel had worked passionately for Obama in his two Presidential campaigns, speaking at Dartmouth and working the phones in New Hampshire with his friend Larry David; now he did little to support Clinton’s candidacy.

A few weeks before the election, according to the Daily Beast, Mark Cuban, the owner of the Dallas Mavericks, heard that there were recordings from the Miss Universe Organization that could be damaging to Trump. As it happened, Emanuel had control of the tapes. In 2015, after Trump called Mexicans “rapists” who brought drugs and crime into the country, NBC had cut ties with him; Trump bought out NBC’s interest in Miss Universe and sold the company to Emanuel’s firm. Cuban and other Clinton allies urged Emanuel to release the recordings, but he refused. Responding to critics, he said, “My brother is in politics, I’m not.”

Twelve days after the election, Trump met with potential Cabinet members at his golf course in Bedminster, New Jersey, and Emanuel went to see him. Photographs from the day show them shaking hands and grinning. Soon afterward, Ravitch said, Emanuel told him about the meeting. “The blood drained from his face,” Ravitch recalled. “He said, ‘It was such a thorough process that my brother did for Obama, to identify and vet Cabinet appointees. Now Trump said to me, ‘I like the way you eat your pastrami sandwich. Do you want to be in my Cabinet?’ ’ ”

Whatever his reservations about Trump, Emanuel found a way to exert influence. Zeke told me that, not long after the election, Ari asked him to collaborate with Trump on public-health issues: “Ari said, ‘You didn’t vote

for him, you don't like this guy, but he said some things on the campaign trail you can agree with.' He switched me to Fox News, so the President would see me on 'Fox & Friends'—Ari had gamed out this whole damn thing—and then he had Trump call me, in November, and I went to Trump Tower." (Zeke met with Trump a number of times, but had limited sway.)

Emanuel's foreign partners moved quickly to align themselves with the new Administration. M.B.Z. cancelled a farewell lunch with Obama, and attended a secret meeting in New York with Jared Kushner, Steve Bannon, and Michael Flynn. Emanuel already had a relationship with Kushner; he had befriended Steven Mnuchin, Trump's Secretary of the Treasury, when Mnuchin dabbled in producing films years before. When Trump was asked about Emanuel, after the election, he said, "He calls me a lot. I call him a lot, and we talk. He's very political. Even though he's not political, he's political."

For Emanuel, politics were sometimes inseparable from business. Since acquiring the UFC, he had begun to expand the organization abroad, in China, the Middle East, and Latin America. Russia was a particular target. "We have six per cent of our fighters coming out of the region," Emanuel told me. "I'm saying, We gotta have a proper partner in Russia." Khaldoon Al Mubarak set up a meeting for him with Kirill Dmitriev, who heads the Russian Direct Investment Fund; in the past several years, Mubadala had built an increasingly close partnership with Dmitriev's fund. "I go over and meet him, we meet with the minister of sports, and we get a relationship with Kirill," Emanuel said.

The news in America was dominated by reporting on Russia's interference in the election, but Emanuel remained focussed on making deals. In the spring of 2017, he and Dmitriev attended the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum. On the sidelines of the conference, they participated in a meeting with Vladimir Putin, along with Al Mubarak and others. In the coming year, they worked to solidify an agreement, and on July 18, 2018, Dmitriev announced that his fund, along with sovereign wealth funds in China and the U.A.E., would form a joint venture with the UFC. The announcement came two days after Trump met Putin at a summit in Helsinki, and the timing drew attention from the business press. "After Donald Trump called for closer business ties between the U.S. and Russia,

his old talent agent got the ball rolling,” Lucas Shaw wrote, for Bloomberg News. It may also have provided Trump with a welcome distraction. At the summit, he had stirred outrage by saying that he was more confident in Putin’s denials of Russian interference than in the consensus among American intelligence agencies.

The following April, the special prosecutor Robert Mueller released [his report](#). A section devoted to Dmitriev alleged that after the election he had worked—on orders from Putin, and with help from the Emiratis—to cultivate people in Trump’s circle. The report does not mention Emanuel, and a person close to him told me that his contacts with Dmitriev ended when the deal was announced. His interactions with the White House were more persistent, however. “Ari talks to Trump, he talks to Jared, he talks to Mnuchin,” Ravitch told me last year. As the pandemic began, Emanuel sometimes interrupted conversations with Zeke to ask him to relay medical insights to Trump. “He would say, ‘Hold on—we’re getting the President on the line,’ ” Zeke recalled. “‘You have to tell him this.’ ”

I spoke with Emanuel on January 7th, the day after a crowd of Trump supporters stormed the Capitol—the culmination of a months-long effort to discredit the election. Emanuel was not surprised by Trump’s actions, but he suggested that he was disappointed: “Right or wrong, he could have taken somewhat of a victory lap and said, ‘Stock market’s at an all-time high.’ He could have said, ‘Warp Speed is under way.’ Yet that’s not what happened. It’s a shame. It didn’t have to end as badly as it did.”

On March 29th, Emanuel turned sixty, and he held a dinner at Ivy at the Shore, a restaurant in Santa Monica. A few friends were invited—Elon Musk, Brian Grazer, Larry David, and Michael Rapino—along with several Endeavor managers. In deference to *COVID-19* precautions, the dinner was held in the restaurant’s parking lot. Guests ordered from the menu; Emanuel got a vegan salad.

At dinner, the Endeavor managers gave him a gift that seemed calibrated to evoke their difficult year: a letter from Albert Einstein to William Morris, the founder of the talent agency that Endeavor absorbed. A few months before the Second World War began, Einstein wrote to Morris, who like him was a Jewish German immigrant to the U.S., saying that “in these years of

affliction our readiness to help one another is being put to an especially severe test.” He praised Morris for his work in “rescuing our persecuted fellow-Jews from their calamitous peril.” Shapiro said, “Ari teared up. He was really touched.”

Emanuel describes the effort to pull his company through the pandemic as excruciating: the cost-cutting, the layoffs, the talk of bankruptcy. But things were looking better. Despite promising not to take a salary, he had received fourteen million dollars from Endeavor last year. He bought a new home, a twenty-eight-million-dollar French Normandy estate that sprawls across two acres in Beverly Hills. Now he and his colleagues are preparing for a new I.P.O., meeting with investors on a virtual road show.

The failure of the earlier offering lingers, but they have tried to reposition themselves. Endeavor’s prospectus focusses less on agenting and on the storytelling business; instead, it emphasizes sports and events, especially the UFC. Endeavor says that, concurrent with the I.P.O., it will buy an additional 49.9 per cent of the UFC, giving it complete ownership. To help with the acquisition, Endeavor raised more than \$1.7 billion from Mubadala, Silver Lake, and other investors. “The UFC is the best business they have,” a person close to the transaction said. “So Ari’s taking something to the market that is very different than what he took the last time.” Emanuel plans to expand his company’s involvement in sports betting, and the UFC attracts wagering from all over the world. As the person noted, the organization’s former owners, the Fertittas, were in the casino business, and “the UFC was never afraid of gambling, like some other leagues were.”

Emanuel has assembled a powerful group of investors and allies. As always, on his long ascent, some friends who are less important to his business have receded. “Ari has clients—he has few close friends,” a person who knows him well said. “He is at another level now. He’s a mogul.” He has a new house, new allies, and another chance at an I.P.O. He seems confident that he will prevail, as he has before, through dogged insistence. “The only way to get to success, you realize you are going to fuck it up and you gotta just start going to work,” Emanuel told me. “There’s a boxing or UFC analogy: You gotta bite down on your mouthpiece and start fighting! You have to be willing to take the emotional damage. People get exhausted from that beating. I don’t know why I don’t.” ♦

Shouts & Murmurs

- [Non-COVID-19 Passports That Reduce Your Risk to Society](#)

[April 26 & May 3, 2021 Issue](#)

Non-COVID-19 Passports That Reduce Your Risk to Society

Reply-Guy Passport: Documents the last time you replied to a tweet without even liking it first.

By [Zach Zimmerman](#)

April 19, 2021



Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

While electronic vaccine passports are being fiercely debated, consensus is forming around several other passports that would communicate the level of danger you pose to the world.

Flip-Flops Passport

Discloses when you last wore flip-flops in a non-nautical setting.

Sobbed-During-“Nomadland” Passport

Identifies that you cried during Swankie’s farewell monologue.

Magic-Trick-on-a-First-Date Passport

Confirms that you have never performed a card trick on a first date with a potential romantic partner.

Reply-Guy Passport

Documents the last time you replied to a tweet without even liking it first.

Parent-of-a-Child-with-a-Scooter Passport

Reveals whether you are currently a caretaker of a speed demon.

Slice-Enumerator Passport

Records the number of consecutive days you've eaten only pizza.

Potluck Passport

Shows whether the dishes you have brought to communal gatherings matched what you indicated you would be bringing in the pre-potluck Google Sheet.

Public-Toilet-Seat Passport

Catalogues when you last put your bare butt on the toilet seat of a public bathroom.

Pretended-to-Have-Seen-the-TV-Show-Everyone-Else-Was-Talking-About Passport

If true, you're under mandatory house arrest.

Chipotle-Test-Kitchen-for-Your-Anniversary-Dinner Passport

Verifies that you did not suggest the Chipotle test kitchen in Greenwich Village as a location for an anniversary dinner in 2018.

Citizen Passport

Shows if you have the surveillance-state app Citizen on your phone.

Barber/Hairdresser Passport

Identifies whether whoever cuts your hair thinks you're a good person.

Nicholas Sparks Passport

Certifies that you have not consumed media from the Nicholas Sparks cinematic universe in the past thirty days.

String-Cheese-as-an-Ingredient Passport

Discloses the last time you chopped up a piece of Starbucks-branded string cheese to use in a dish you were preparing.

Tipping Passport

Logs your history of tipping at drag shows, car washes, and combination drag show–car washes.

“The Da Vinci Code”-on-a-First-Date Passport

Confirms that you have never suggested watching Ron Howard's two-hour-and-fifty-four-minute adaptation of Dan Brown's novel on a first date with a potential romantic partner.

Taco Bell Passsport

Documents that you are currently wholeheartedly living *más*. ♦

Sketchpad

- “Fending” and Other Terms for Fridge-Foraging Dinners

April 26 & May 3, 2021 Issue

“Fending” and Other Terms for Fridge-Foraging Dinners

“Getcheroni,” “eek,” “having weirds,” “going Darwin,” “OYO” (on your own), and “farrapo velho”—Portuguese for “old rag.”

By [Roz Chast](#)

April 18, 2021



A couple of weeks ago around dinnertime, neither my husband nor I were in the cooking mood. We didn't feel like ordering out, and, since we hadn't got our second vaccine, we didn't want to go to a restaurant. I said to him what one of us says to the other at times like these: “Should we just fend?”

“Fending” is our household's word for picking around the kitchen, seeing what's there, and making a meal of it. We're not complete savages—i.e., we don't stand next to the refrigerator at any old hour shovelling food into our mouths. No. We eat together at a table, which has been set. We might even open a bottle of wine. But there is no prep, aside from maybe heating stuff up. It's very likely that we'll eat totally different things. I might have

leftover chicken fried rice, some lox and cream cheese on Triscuits, and the end of a jar of pickles. He might use up the chicken salad, Tuesday's chili, and the last of the roasted cauliflower, which, by the way, is still good.

I got curious about what other people called this activity. I polled friends. Turns out there are lots of fenders. Also scroungers, scavengers, and foragers. One friend's family called it hunt-and-peck. Then I put the question to Instagram, and in a few days I received more than seventeen hundred responses. Here are my favorites: California plate, spa plate, eek, mustard with crackers, having weirds, getcheroni, goblin meal, gishing, phumphering, peewadiddly, picky-poke, screamers, trash panda, rags and bottles, black-cow night, blackout bingo, miff muffer moof, anarchy kitchen, mush gooey, fossick, going feral, going Darwin, schlunz, goo gots, oogle moogle, you getsty, jungle dinner, dirt night, mousy-mousy, and having Pucci. Two different people used the term "ifits," as in "if it's in the refrigerator, it's fair game."

Several people liked acronyms: *OYO* (on your own), *YOYO* (you're on your own), *MYO* (make your own), *FIFI* (find it and fix it), and *CORE* (clean out refrigerator of everything). Someone told me that her grandmother called it "eating promiscuously." Someone else, as a kid, called it "orgy."

There were also some non-English expressions for fending. In Persian, it's *khert o pert*, which means "odds and ends." In Quebec, it's *touski*. That's short for *tout ce qui reste*—"all that's left." In Portuguese, it's *farrapo velho*. Translation: "old rag."

One person told me that, in her family, fending was known as "zoobecki," which was "icebox" spelled backward. Which is true, if you squint.

Tables for Two

- Pelmeni and Beyond at Dacha 46

[April 26 & May 3, 2021 Issue](#)

Pelmeni and Beyond at Dacha 46

The married chefs Trina and Jessica Quinn deftly cut through misconceptions about Eastern European food with menus that span centuries, across countries and cultures.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

April 16, 2021



When, early in their relationship, Trina Quinn gave her now wife, Jessica Quinn, a cookbook called “A Gift to Young Housewives,” first published in Russia in 1861, it was mostly a gag. Both women are professional chefs, and Jessica, a Long Island-born daughter of immigrants from Latvia and Ukraine, is fluent in Russian. The book’s instructions were intended as much for housewives as for their servants, who would be the ones actually preparing the roast goose stuffed with macaroni and the fish roulade. Jessica appreciated the joke but, at the time, didn’t bother studying the book closely. Neither she nor Trina imagined that, years later, it would become an emblem of their shared career.



The Quinns' pastry repertoire includes their versions of the sweet buns known as *vatrushki* and *kievsky*, a Soviet-era Ukrainian torte of chocolate, hazelnut, and meringue, as well as savory *piroshki*, or fried hand pies.

Jessica, who graduated from culinary school, traces her interest in food to her upbringing—both of her grandmothers were excellent home cooks—but, as Trina recalled the other day, “When we first started dating, I didn’t even know that she was Eastern European.” Eventually, Jessica brought her to family dinners and to Brighton Beach, where they bought *piroshki*, or Russian hand pies, from street vendors and shopped at specialty markets. Trina, who broke a streak of veganism to try chilled cow’s tongue and pickled herring, found the food to be “mind-blowing.” At first, Jessica resisted the idea of serving it at dinner parties—“She was just, like, ‘Nobody wants to eat this,’ ” Trina said—but dishes such as Georgian-style pan-fried chicken *tabaka* and caviar on buttered black bread proved big hits among their friends.



One of several varieties of breakfast piroshki, filled with scrambled eggs, paprika fried potatoes, Cheddar cheese, and bacon.

Then, in March of last year, Trina was furloughed from her job as the sous-chef at Red Hook Tavern, in Brooklyn. Though Jessica kept her position as the pastry chef at Manhattan's Rezdôra, her hours were severely reduced. The more they cooked Eastern European food at home, the more it excited them. By October, they'd decided to open Dacha 46, a pop-up run out of their Bed-Stuy apartment. (A dacha, in Russia, is a country cottage, often with a vegetable plot; 1946 is the year that Jessica's mother was born.) "There's a stigma attached to Eastern European food as being very plain, very brown, very heavy," Jessica said. Guided by Jessica's nostalgia and Trina's penchant for near-academic research (she has become intimately familiar with "A Gift to Young Housewives," among other eBay finds), they've cut through that misconception deftly, offering menus that span centuries of the region's history, across countries and cultures.



Dacha 46's rotating menu is available for weekly preorder from the restaurant formerly known as MeMe's Diner.

Their pastry repertoire includes versions of the courtly, finely layered, imperial-era Russian honey cake known as *medovik*, as well as *kievsky*, a distinctly Soviet torte of meringue, hazelnut, and chocolate first produced in 1956, in Kyiv, by the Karl Marx Confectionery Factory. One afternoon last month, I picked up two orders of *pelmeni*—small, circular dumplings, arguably ancient in origin, that the Quinns make using a Soviet-era honeycomb-shaped mold. I figured that they'd last for several meals; a single bite of one slippery, thin-skinned parcel, and so much for that. The first batch, filled with tender ground pork and grated onion, was tossed lightly in *smetana* (a cousin to crème fraîche) and finished with fresh-cracked pepper and dill. The second variety, in homage to the Georgian cheese bread *khachapuri*, contained a luscious, salty meld of feta, ricotta, mozzarella, and goat cheese, their butter-slicked exteriors feathered with shavings of cured egg yolk.



A vatrushka, made with brioche dough swirled around sweet cheese and sour cherries, and dusted in powdered sugar.

Thankfully, pelmeni—among a rotating array that might include sumac-dusted beef and lamb *lyulya* kebabs with cumin *plov* (a.k.a. pilaf), and *vatrushki*, buns swirled with sweet cheese and sour cherries—are available for weekly preorder, for at least the next year, at Dacha’s new semi-permanent home. The Quinns are among the first chefs to take up residence in the kitchen of the restaurant formerly known as MeMe’s Diner since its leaseholder, the chef Libby Willis, turned it into an incubator for food businesses, called Keep in Touch. (*Pastries \$6-\$12, pelmeni and kebab plates \$17-\$30.*) ♦

The Art World

- Alice Neel's Portraits of Difference

Alice Neel's Portraits of Difference

A retrospective at the Met shows the artist's deep feeling for all that she is not.

By [Hilton Als](#)

April 19, 2021



She had no business moving uptown. Generally, nice white lady artists like Alice Neel lived among their own kind, down in the Village, or they went wherever the male painters went and helped make those guys' stories happen first. But Neel always wanted a different kind of life, so in 1938, at the age of thirty-eight, she chose to leave what she disparagingly called the "honky-tonk" atmosphere of the Village and move to Spanish Harlem—where European immigrants were giving way to Dominican and Puerto Rican immigrants. She learned the place by observing and then painting what she saw and wanted to understand: a "new," diverse America, populated by men of color, single mothers sitting on stoops, and children in repose. As in Chekhov's stories, there is no "other" in her unsatirical, pointedly political work—just us, without tears. Community is the family you choose. Neel chose [Harlem](#), and said so in an untitled poem:

I love you Harlem
Your life your pregnant
Women, your relief lines
Outside the bank . . .
What a treasure of goodness
And life shambles . . .

Neel moved to Spanish Harlem with José Santiago Negron, a working-class Puerto Rican musician, who fathered her third child, Richard, the following year. (Neel's first and only husband was the artist Carlos Enríquez Gómez, with whom she had two children: Santillana, born in 1927, who died of diphtheria as an infant, and Isabetta, born in 1928, whom Gómez took to Cuba when she was two, to be reared by his family.) For more than twenty years, Neel's Harlem apartment, a railroad flat filled with the stuff of life, was her studio and way station, the home where she brought up two kids on welfare—her fourth child, Hartley, the son of the volatile filmmaker Sam Brody, was born in 1941—struggled to get them into good schools, and made work that was pretty much ignored until she became a kind of feminist cause in the early seventies. (She died in 1984.) That she managed to do any of this is just one of the moving narrative threads that run through the spectacular retrospective “Alice Neel: People Come First,” at the Met, through August 1st. Another is her faith not only in the power of other people but in the power and the necessity of articulating the deepest language that makes a self. “You know what it takes to be an artist?” Neel says in Phoebe Hoban’s 2010 biography, “[Alice Neel: The Art of Not Sitting Pretty.](#)” “Hypersensitivity and the will of the devil. To never give up.”

Born in 1900, Neel was brought up in Colwyn, Pennsylvania, about ten miles outside Philadelphia. Colwyn was a nice enough version of the “old,” or established, America that Neel hardly ever painted. (Not every artist needs to look back in order to look forward.) Her father worked for the Pennsylvania Railroad, and her mother was said to be a descendant of Richard Stockton, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Almost from the first, Neel, a sensitive girl who was prone to anxiety, felt steadied by the act of visualizing the world; painting soon became both a gateway into life and a bulwark against people who said that she wasn’t entitled to have one. According to Hoban, when Neel told her grandmother that she wanted to be a painter, the older woman said, “I don’t know what

you expect to do in the world, Alice. You're only a girl." Resistance can breed resilience. Talent must be protected, especially if it's viewed as a threat. And what's more threatening to the status quo than a visionary?

In 1921, Neel enrolled at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women. One of her early influences was the work of Robert Henri, a founder of the [Ashcan School](#)—a movement that challenged the bourgeois prettiness of the work of the American Impressionists. The Ashcan School focussed on what the Impressionists left out—poverty, dereliction, ugliness. Neel's developing realism went further. She was not Ashcan but emotional gutbucket, a miner of difficult truths.



"Jackie Curtis and Ritta Redd," from 1970. Art work © Estate of Alice Neel

The late art historian Linda Nochlin—the subject of a startlingly vivid 1973 portrait in the Met exhibition—describes, in her seminal 1971 essay, "[Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?](#)," the nineteenth-century insistence "upon a modest, proficient, self-demeaning level of amateurism as a 'suitable accomplishment' for the well-brought up young woman." A woman painter could have a place in the art world only if she knew how to keep to her place. Neel, born at the start of a new century, wasn't having any of that. And you can feel her fury and disgust when she describes some of her classmates. "There were all these rich girls who went there as a finishing school," she says, in Hoban's book. "I realized that wasn't what I was there

for . . . For three years I worked so hard because I had a conscience about going to art school." That conscience made her aware that she could go to school while many others could not. "When I'd go into the school, the scrubwomen would be coming back from scrubbing office floors all night," she said. "It killed me that these old gray-headed women had to scrub floors, and I was going in there to draw Greek statues."

You can see Neel's deep feeling for all that she is not in some of the earliest pieces in the Met show, including the remarkable "Bathing in a Furnished Room" (1927). The painting seems almost to have been rendered from below the surface of objective looking, which is to say pulled up from somewhere—the subconscious? the heart?—that is finely attuned to isolation.

A commonplace observation about great portraitists is that they are always, in some way, painting themselves. Neel's genius was to make us understand not just her interest in her subjects but why we are interested in one another. "Alice Neel: People Come First," was co-curated by Kelly Baum and Randall Griffey with clarity and rigor. They have organized the galleries according to eight dominant themes in Neel's life as a woman and an artist, including home, motherhood, and the nude. Within those categories, the paintings are mostly hung chronologically, so that we can see how Neel developed and changed vis-à-vis each theme. At first, this felt a little too regimented to me, but after a second visit I saw the logic in it: Neel has too many artistic layers for a straight chronological show. There's a profound spiritual component to the work; her intense and casual surfaces feel like a wall that she wants her subjects' souls to walk through to meet ours. At times, her focus, her desire to understand who her subjects are and, by extension, who you might be, can have you rushing out of the galleries for a breath of air.

Neel's paintings never let you rest, and why should they? She never rested. She seemed to be reaching for something her entire life. Love, perhaps, though never safety or security, which were anathema to her. After Santillana died, Neel broke down. There were multiple suicide attempts, and there were men, alternately feckless and controlling, some of whom left her and at least one of whom—Kenneth Doolittle, a sailor and an opium addict—destroyed some of her work. Conflict, absence, loss, humor, drama, and

uneasy, temporary resolution characterized her relationships, and one gets the sense that Neel was drawn to trouble in order to test her strength, her pride at being the last one standing amid the rubble and the excitement of living.

One painting in particular underlines all this. When Neel's daughter Isabella was nearly six, she visited her mother—the first time they'd seen each other since the girl was a toddler. To mark the occasion, Neel made a painting of Isabella. After Doolittle slashed the painting, Neel repainted it. In "Isabella" (1934-35), her daughter, whom Neel knows and does not know, stands nude before her, hands on hips, gazing straight ahead; she is elegant, alien, and cold, like a figurehead on a grand vintage car or a child in a horror film. She seems unsoftened by a mother's love; indeed, the absence of it may have closed her off. The picture is as much about Isabella's defiance—*Who can love me? Do you dare?*?—as it is about Neel's will to be an artist, to see objectively, even if that means seeing her child's distance from her. It's a hard painting to look at, and it's meant to be; the hard things of life went into making it.



"Ninth Avenue El," from 1935. Art work © Estate of Alice Neel

After more than twenty years in Spanish Harlem, Neel moved to an apartment on the Upper West Side. There, her fortunes began to change; younger art critics, including this magazine's Harold Rosenberg, discovered

her work, and praised and supported it. In the early seventies, while she continued to paint New Yorkers who wore their otherness as both a form of fancy dress and a wound—“Jackie Curtis and Ritta Redd” and “Andy Warhol,” from 1970, are masterpieces of this kind—her paintings gained in power, in part because of their simplicity. She didn’t show the room in which her subject sat so much as gesture toward it. (The patch of blue in many of the post-Harlem pictures indicates the light from the bare bulb that Neel used to illuminate her sitters.) This was less a matter of time softening Neel’s view than of her authority relaxing into itself.

These great, almost unbearable late works bear witness to a bravura without a trace of self-consciousness. You can see it in “Carmen and Judy” (1972), a portrait of Neel’s cleaning lady nursing her disabled child. The curators point out that it was unusual for a woman of color to expose her body to the artist in this way, and I can vouch for that. Privacy is one of the few defenses there is against poverty and racism. But Carmen was no doubt able to reveal herself to Neel because she knew that Neel would see what she needed to see: Carmen’s trust, Judy’s dependence, all those years of living in a difference that was not difference to the artist, who had her own years of loss, of children’s love, of trying to render this and so much more in works that would continue to live, despite the darkness of her obscurity and then the light of her fame. Looking at Carmen look at Neel, and thus at us, is like staring straight at the sun. We can’t do it, but we try anyway. ♦

The Current Cinema

- [“Voyagers” Gets Lost in Space](#)

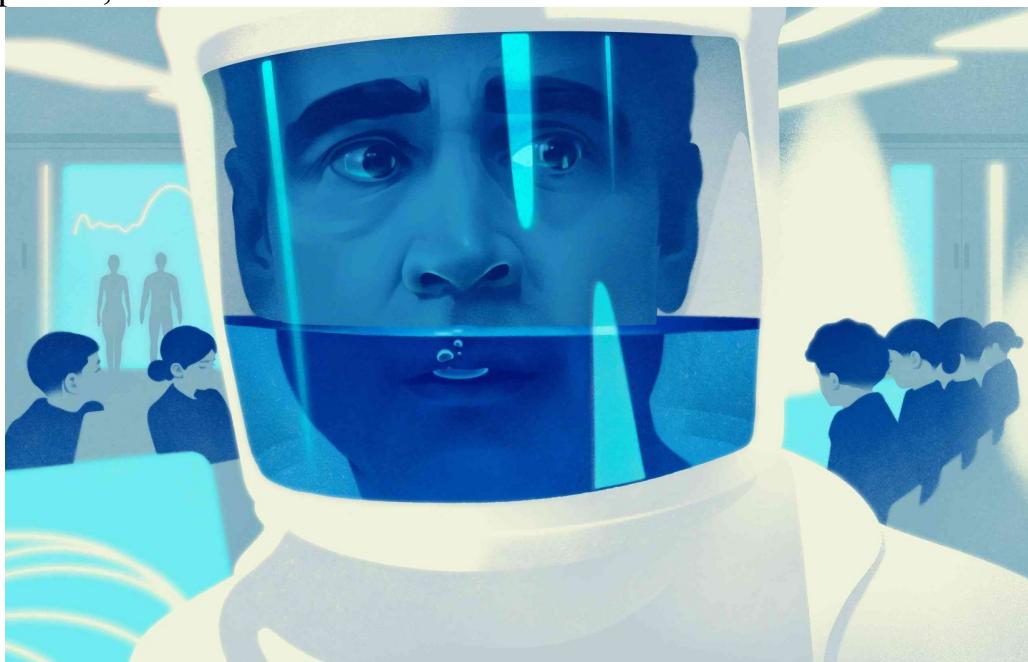
April 26 & May 3, 2021 Issue

“Voyagers” Gets Lost in Space

Neil Burger’s film, starring Colin Farrell as a leader of teen-agers whose descendants are to found an extraterrestrial home for humanity, fumbles the existential questions it tries to raise.

By [Anthony Lane](#)

April 16, 2021



Our planet being doomed, we need a replacement, and fast. A suitable candidate is located, complete with water, oxygen, and adequate parking facilities. As new homes go, it's not so distant—eighty-six years away, as the spaceship flies. The ship carries thirty teen-agers. Overseen by a single adult, named Richard (Colin Farrell), they must go forth and multiply on the mission, living and dying on board; it is their grandchildren who will arrive at the promised land and begin the long, complex, and time-honored process of messing it up.

That, at least, is the plan, as outlined in “Voyagers,” which is written and directed by Neil Burger. The film is a demographic counterblast to “Space Cowboys” (2000), in which a bunch of crusty astronauts were rocketed into

the void, thus proving that all their old skills, with the possible exception of bladder control, were intact. The kids in “Voyagers,” by contrast, are crustless prodigies of nature, each of them a product of deluxe genetic matchmaking. (“Nobel laureate in physics, say hello to M.I.T. bioengineer,” a scientist says, nursing a sperm into an egg.) They were reared and trained in isolation, here on Earth, in preparation for the journey. “The whole reason we’re raising them this way is for their mental health,” a program director explains. Yeah, that should work. Just wait until they need a plumber.

One question to be asked of any space movie is: When it’s over, what percentage of the crew can you recall? With “Alien” (1979), it’s a hundred per cent. Ditto “Galaxy Quest” (1999) and Tarkovsky’s “Solaris” (1972). “Sunshine” (2007) scores around forty per cent, and “Oblivion” (2013), true to its title, half that. The only memorable character in “2001: A Space Odyssey” (1968) is a computer, but that’s Kubrick for you. And “Voyagers”? Ten per cent, I reckon, excluding Richard. Most of the youthful actors give performances of a startling lassitude, although, to be charitable, that may be the fault of the plot—specifically, of the Blue, a nasty drink, vaguely reminiscent of toilet cleaner, which all the growing kids are required to swig. Its purpose, we learn, is to make them “dull and docile” and to flatten their sexual desire. Hang on, aren’t they supposed to be breeding?

The first people to spurn the Blue are Christopher (Tye Sheridan) and Zac (Fionn Whitehead). The latter promptly answers the call of his newborn libido by approaching Sela (Lily-Rose Depp), the in-house medic, and laying a hand on her breast. The Blue, according to Richard, was designed “to prevent exactly this kind of thing from happening,” and, for a second, you can sense Burger floating an audacious thought: How far would we go, in our well-meaning liberal displeasure, to quell inappropriate behavior? If guys could be drugged into decency, how about it? After all, who still believes in the alternatives? “You’ve got to try to be good,” Richard says—a weak dose of old-school earnestness, to which Christopher replies, “Why? We’re just going to die in the end, so why can’t we do what we want?”

Ethics in space! Categorical imperatives armed and ready, Captain! “Solaris,” of course, is stiff with astro-philosophy, as is John Carpenter’s “Dark Star” (1974), in which one crew member enjoys a Cartesian dialogue with a talking bomb on the brink of detonation. (“Are you willing to

entertain a few concepts?”) The central dispute of “Voyagers” might best be described as Nature vs. Nurture vs. Nietzsche, with one teen-ager inquiring, “Which is better: to have rules and agree or to run wild and fight?” These are topics of fervid interest, and one can imagine a film in which the heat of discussion would, all too easily, boil over into violence.

Regrettably, “Voyagers” is not that film. There *are* bouts of cruelty here, plus a breathless brawl inside an air lock, but such scenes, rather than issuing freely from the movie’s more pensive concerns, seem tacked on in semi-desperation. Christopher ends up being pursued by his peers, who cry, “Grab him, grab him!,” like the barbarized boys in “Lord of the Flies,” although Golding’s novel handled the human chase with infinitely greater care. Most of Burger’s film, in truth, is either numb or dumb. What fun there is arises from the urgent montages to which he resorts as the power of sensation, de-Blued and unblocked, floods into the hormonal systems of the young; we get roaring oceans, plants unfurling in time-lapse, and water pearling on warm skin. Ever since the coitus in “Naked Gun 2 1/2: The Smell of Fear” (1991), which was symbolized for our benefit by the sight of an Egyptian obelisk being erected, a ballistic missile emerging from its silo, nodding oil derricks, and—an immortal touch—a hot dog being tenderly laid in the cleft of a bun, I’ve been praying for a moment of even subtler and more sublime release. Here it is.

At the start of “Monday,” two Americans meet on a dance floor. One is a d.j. The other is drunk, bearing a bottle of booze. Seconds after being introduced, they lunge into a kiss, as if trying to swallow each other whole. The next thing we see is the couple waking up on a beach in the hurtful glare of the morning, as naked as Adam and Eve, and totally trashed by the roistering of the night. And get this: one of them is a *lawyer*. I have a funny feeling that “Monday” could end up as Brett Kavanaugh’s favorite film.

The director is Argyris Papadimitropoulos, and the movie is set entirely in Greece. Chloe (Denise Gough), the lawyer, has spent eighteen months in the country, whereas Mickey (Sebastian Stan), the d.j., has been there for seven years. “Do you ever think, ‘What the fuck am I doing?’ ” Chloe asks. “Not really,” he replies. She raises her eyebrows—“Never?” “I mean, sure, but it’s more, like, ‘Why don’t I just open the fridge?’ ” Mickey says. Chloe is impressed, exclaiming, “Oh, my God, you’re so lucky—that is *such* a good

way to live,” but you wonder if a warning light might already be flashing in her head. She’s older than Mickey, and she must recognize the type: the man who mistook his life for a holiday.

The first half hour of “Monday” has a peculiar charm, with the story apparently heading in reverse. This is a question not of time travel—at no point will your brain be unduly taxed, as it was during “Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind” (2004)—but of dizzy social mores. Rather than proceeding in an orderly fashion toward consummation, Mickey and Chloe have more or less instant sex and then work backward through the ungainly, if civilized, business of sizing each other up; it’s like kicking off with a chocolate sundae and winding up with soup. Arrested for public indecency on the beach, the lovers sit politely, side by side, in a police car and shake hands, ignoring the fact that those hands are tightly cuffed. (Hitchcock would approve.) Later, they shake hands *again*, as Chloe prepares to fly home to Chicago, where a serious job awaits.

She doesn’t go, of course. Mickey races to the airport and begs her to stay, “Monday” being just enough of a romantic comedy to permit this kind of behavior. I was mildly surprised not to see the cast of “Love Actually” (2003) milling around and baring their smitten hearts. Stronger by far was my conviction—undented, I’m afraid, by what happens in the rest of the film—that Chloe should really catch her plane and start afresh in Chicago. Or anywhere. Were she a fan of “Friends,” she would have recalled the courageous example set by Chandler, who was so eager to get away from his ex-girlfriend that, on impulse, he bought an airline ticket to the farthest place he could think of. That place was Yemen.

To be fair, once Chloe decides to remain in Greece, Papadimitropoulos does take the opportunity to snip away at some of the conventions of the rom-com—the rosebud-gathering principle, for instance, which Mickey upholds when he declares, “You’re always going to regret not doing something rather than doing something.” Chloe, to his amazement, returns fire. “How do *you* know what I’m going to regret?” she says, adding, “You shouldn’t make assumptions about what you think is good for me.” It’s a righteous retort, and I was sorry to hear her reeling it back in and claiming, “I didn’t mean it.” And thus a pattern is set. Time and again, Mickey says something foolish or does something inflammatory—literally so, when he torches Chloe’s

couch in the street, in the midst of an impromptu party. And, on every occasion, she gives him the benefit of the doubt. But why?

Eventually, despite a number of Dionysian interludes, not least a drug-driven scooter ride with neither helmets nor clothes, this on-off emotional rhythm grows demoralizing, and the movie becomes a less than appealing blend of rave and rut. Word had it that “Monday” was steamy and sizzling, but so is a wokful of pad Thai, and there’s a faltering haste to the carnality, as if both partners were fighting off thoughts, and possible futures, that they would prefer to ignore. Denise Gough, especially, with her deep-set eyes, makes Chloe seem haunted and hunted, even when she’s having a blast. Mickey is a simpler case, and Sebastian Stan gets to swap his heavy duties as the Winter Soldier, in the Marvel franchise, for those of a summer sybarite. What a relief. ♦

Together Again Dept.

- [Helping Martin Scorsese and Wes Anderson Find Their Groove](#)

[April 26 & May 3, 2021 Issue](#)

Helping Martin Scorsese and Wes Anderson Find Their Groove

How Randall Poster and Josh Deutsch, childhood music-geek pals in Riverdale, curate the sounds for movies, ads, podcasts, and streamers like “One Night in Miami” and “The Queen’s Gambit.”

By [Nick Paumgarten](#)

April 19, 2021

Randall Poster and Josh Deutsch met in the mid-seventies, when they were in seventh grade.



Josh Deutsch and Randall Poster Illustration by João Fazenda

“A girl I knew from sleepaway camp—maybe she was my first girlfriend—introduced us,” Poster said recently. “Probably at a bar mitzvah.”

“Not my bar mitzvah,” Deutsch said.

“Not mine, either,” Poster said.

“Although we were at each other’s bar mitzvahs.”

At the time, Deutsch, who lived in New Jersey, was attending Riverdale Country School, in the Bronx, and Poster, who lived in Riverdale, was a student at Horace Mann, next door. They were both into music. They bought and spun and talked about records, pored over the *Village Voice*, and, as they got older, accompanied each other to concerts and clubs. Poster said, “I remember getting into Studio 54 in eleventh grade and thinking, ‘I want to be a grownup.’”

A grantable wish. After college (Brown, for both), each wound up in the music business—Deutsch as an A. & R. executive at big labels and as the founder of his own record company, and Poster as a sought-after music supervisor in television and film, who works with Martin Scorsese, Wes Anderson, and Todd Haynes, among others.

Last fall, amid upheavals in, well, every business, they decided to pair up again, merging their companies under the name Premier Music Group, with an eye to getting songs into ad campaigns and podcasts as well as movies and TV shows. “Picking up the intensity of that old conversation we’ve been having about music all these years has been one of the few rewards of this strange period,” Deutsch said.

On a recent evening, the two were in their new offices, on the fourth floor of the National Arts Club, a lavish town house overlooking Gramercy Park. Some of these rooms, they said, had for decades been a couple’s pied-à-terre. The office that was to be Poster’s, with louvred skylights and a loft space—“I think I will call it my studio,” he said—was cluttered with boxes of records. A door in the hallway bore a plaque that read “Pastel Society of America.”

“We’re the only ones here,” Deutsch said.

“The Pastel Society is apparently not in session,” Poster said.

Deutsch was dressed in black—sweater, pants, sneakers. Poster wore purple cords, a gray V-neck, and Stan Smiths. They didn’t so much finish each other’s sentences as occasionally utter different ones at the same time. It had

been an oddly busy period, with a lot of work to do but almost none in the company of others. Poster had been the music supervisor on many of the pandemic's streaming hits—"The Queen's Gambit," "Tiger King," "Pretend It's a City"—as well as the films "One Night in Miami" and "Summer of Soul."

"They come out to a certain acclaim, but there's no interaction with the people who made it, no celebration," Poster said. "It's kind of a neutered experience."

"The ad side of the business is up over sixty per cent," Deutsch said. "Advertisers who couldn't shoot new material have wanted new audio to freshen up the messaging. There was a scramble to respond to the first phase of *Covid* with an 'I'll be there for you' message." He added, "Artists who have now been deprived of their touring revenue are much more open to licensing their work—some who used to be a big No."

Poster started doing music for TV ads about fifteen years ago. Film directors he'd worked with were beginning to do more commercials. "I knew nothing about advertising," he said. "The only person in advertising I knew was Darrin Stephens, in 'Bewitched.'" He went on, "In music licensing, there's no blue book. There's always a human dimension. Maybe a band hasn't licensed a song because one of the guys in the band hates the other guy so much he doesn't want him to make any money."

Many candidates sprang to mind, but Poster wouldn't name names. He stressed that the choice of a song is ultimately the director's. "The common misconception is that I pick the music," he said. "We help clients make considered decisions." He added, "Everybody I know believes that they're good drivers and that they have good taste in music."

Deutsch said, "The joke internally is that everyone is a music supervisor."

"Sometimes a movie or a show hasn't earned the piece of music the director wants to use," Poster said. "It can't carry the weight of that tune. Hopefully people want to work with me because I will tell them that." He recalled that, when he was working on the HBO series "Vinyl," the producers wanted to end an episode with a song. Poster, who wouldn't say which song it was,

didn't think it worked, in part because he'd already used it, in a film, to great effect. "It was eating me up. So finally I had to go to Marty"—Scorsese, an executive producer—"and say, 'I have to tell you that the use of this song in this episode is keeping me up at night.' And Marty said, 'O.K., we'll change it.' "

As Deutsch and Poster see it, licensing for advertising and other media has in many ways replaced a role that radio used to play. "The idea is to push an artist or a song toward discovery, or rediscovery," Poster said.

"You have sixty thousand new tracks uploaded on Spotify every day," Deutsch said. "If you're a new artist, how do you get heard?" "Branded opportunities," they say, as one once might have said "plastics." Licensing is also a shrewd way to boost the awareness and the value of established catalogues, many of which (Paul Simon, Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Stevie Nicks) have recently fetched high premiums, owing in part to the growth in streaming services.

"There's never been a better time to own the masters," Deutsch said. "I've never seen multiples like this. It's become a reliable source of revenue, like an annuity. It's why you're seeing a lot of institutional money in music rights."

Poster added, "This is where I say, 'What he said.' " ♦

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Table of Contents

[NewYorker.2021.05.03](#)

[A Reporter at Large](#)

[The Incredible Rise of North Korea’s Hacking Army](#)

[Annals of Medicine](#)

[Do Brain Implants Change Your Identity?](#)

[Art](#)

[The Painted-Steel Whimsy of Yayoi Kusama](#)

[Books](#)

[Did Home Economics Empower Women?](#)

[The Reorientations of Edward Said](#)

[Briefly Noted](#)

[What Do We Want in a First Lady?](#)

[Comment](#)

[Biden Inherits F.D.R.’s Supreme Court Problem](#)

[Crossword](#)

[The Crossword: Wednesday, April 14, 2021](#)

[Fiction](#)

[“Old Babes in the Wood”](#)

[Infrastructure Dept.](#)

[A New Sky Garden for London](#)

[Maine Postcard](#)

[Conjuring Maine’s Clairvoyant Kush](#)

[Our Local Correspondents](#)

[The E-Scooters Loved by Silicon Valley Roll Into New York](#)

[Poems](#)

[“In the Presence of Sunlight”](#)

[“The Way Things Were Up Until Now”](#)

[Pop Music](#)

[The Afrofuturist Sounds of Dawn Richard](#)

[Profiles](#)

[Ari Emanuel Takes on the World](#)

[Shouts & Murmurs](#)

[Non-COVID-19 Passports That Reduce Your Risk to Society](#)

[Sketchpad](#)

[“Fending” and Other Terms for Fridge-Foraging Dinners
Tables for Two](#)

[Pelmeni and Beyond at Dacha 46](#)

[The Art World](#)

[Alice Neel’s Portraits of Difference](#)

[The Current Cinema](#)

[“Voyagers” Gets Lost in Space](#)

[Together Again Dept.](#)

[Helping Martin Scorsese and Wes Anderson Find Their
Groove](#)

[好物推荐](#)

[安利一个优秀的英文原著阅读器](#)