

PRICE \$8.99

DEC. 7, 2020

THE NEW YORKER



- [A Critic at Large](#)
- [A Reporter at Large](#)
- [Books](#)
- [Brave New World Dept.](#)
- [Classical Music](#)
- [Comic Strip](#)
- [Comment](#)
- [Dept. of Values](#)
- [Fiction](#)
- [Legacies](#)
- [Letter from Los Angeles](#)
- [Musical Events](#)
- [On Television](#)
- [Poems](#)
- [Portfolio](#)
- [Shouts & Murmurs](#)
- [Social Contract Dept.](#)
- [Tables for Two](#)
- [The Current Cinema](#)
- [The Firm](#)

A Critic at Large

- What Henry Adams Understood About History's Breaking Points

What Henry Adams Understood About History's Breaking Points

He devoted a lifetime to studying America's foundation, witnessed its near-dissolution, and uncannily anticipated its evolution.

By [Dan Chiasson](#)

November 30, 2020



Away we go into a Presidential transition, one of the most worrisome since 1860-61, when the unity of the nation hung in the balance. Henry Adams, not quite twenty-three, the grandson and great-grandson of U.S. Presidents, passed that season in Washington, serving as personal secretary to his father, Charles Francis Adams, a congressman from Massachusetts, while making the social rounds and working behind the scenes as an anonymous correspondent for the Boston *Daily Advertiser*. Adams was also drafting a magazine essay and sending voluminous letters to his brother Charles, in which he promised to supply “all the gossip.” These private letters were nevertheless intended, Adams wrote, to be read “a century or two hence,” as a “memorial of manners and habits at the time of the great secession of 1860.”

Adams’s point of view in his Washington play-by-play remains elusive, since it was deeply vested in personal motives and relations. He wrote about power “from within,” as David S. Brown puts it in his new biography, “[The Last American Aristocrat: The Brilliant Life and Improbable Education of Henry Adams](#)” (Scribner). Adams approached that winter in Washington as some combination of reporter, satirist, historian, and political operative. In his correspondence, his tone was frequently upbeat (“We’re chipper as can be,” he told his brother), and in his anonymous reporting he often channelled the moderate Republican positions he’d been fed in his father’s parlor. But in the longer essay he was working on, not published until half a century later, Adams was less cautious. “The credit of the Government was tottering,” he warned.

Adams feared that the Constitution, a document that his family had been arguing about for decades, had licensed a “sectional power within the Government,” which had now “raised its hand to destroy that Government.” The corruption of the outgoing Buchanan Administration seemed to him grotesque: “The frauds discovered . . . had begun to assume a vague and astonishing size,” while “public confidence and courage were shattered.” Looking back on the period, in 1907, Adams filled out the picture: the secessionists were “unbalanced in mind,” “fit for medical treatment, like other victims of hallucination,” “haunted by suspicion,” and prone to “violent morbid excitement.”

Adams was an antislavery Northerner with a caste affinity for Southern gentlemen like his college friend William (Rooney) Lee, Robert E. Lee's son. Adams had made a faster start in politics than even his distinguished ancestors, but his sentences imply that he already envisioned a different form of power. He was constructing a sensibility that could organize a wide variety of information, "a hodge-podge of world-fact, private fact, philosophy, irony," according to his friend William James. His prose often made intricate beauty out of the ironic arrangement of proprietary facts. It was a style that could be written only from a front-row seat on the sidelines, since it made a show of both its access and its independence.

Henry Adams was born in 1838, "under the shadow of Boston State House," according to the famous opening sentence of his book "[The Education of Henry Adams](#)." The "nest of associations" that surrounded him from birth put him within earshot of power from the start. He grew up tiptoeing around a man whom everyone in his family called "the President": John Quincy Adams, his grandfather. He passed summer afternoons reading Sir Walter Scott on a bed of deteriorating congressional documents. His destiny was, he wrote, to be a "stable-companion to statesmen." Early in his life, he documented their power. In old age, he recorded their inconsequence. Once, during the Wilson Administration, Adams welcomed the Assistant Secretary of the Navy to his home on Lafayette Square, which looked out on the White House. "Nothing that you minor officials or the occupant of that house can do will affect the history of the world for long," he told his visitor, Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Anyone writing about Adams's life has to trellis the narrative to "The Education," written during Adams's strange, Gnostic last period, under the influence of medieval stained glass and stonework, and not made public until after his death, in 1918. It is an astonishing performance in the key of autobiography, a kind of lucid dream through which historical names and events stray. A theme develops early: "life was double." Childhood summers in Quincy, "a two hours' walk from Beacon Hill," were peonies, the smell of hay, "peaches, lilacs, syringas"; winters in Boston were "cold grays" and "muddy thaws." Weakened by scarlet fever and smaller than his brothers, Adams noted in his "character and processes of mind" a "fining-down process of scale." While men like his grandfather had sat in "the best pews" since "the glacial epoch," he found a kindred spirit in "the Madam," his

grandmother, Louisa Catherine Adams, who kept a quietly appointed life apart, and represented art and interiority:

The Madam was a little more remote than the President, but more decorative. She stayed much in her own room with the Dutch tiles, looking out on her garden with the box walks, and seemed a fragile creature to a boy who sometimes brought her a note or a message, and took distinct pleasure in looking at her delicate face under what seemed to him very becoming caps. He liked her refined figure; her gentle voice and manner; her vague effect of not belonging there, but to Washington or to Europe, like her furniture, and writing-desk with little glass doors above and little eighteenth-century volumes in old binding, labelled “Peregrine Pickle” or “Tom Jones” or “Hannah More.”

In these staged contests with the flinty, Adams always sides with the sumptuous. He prefers women to men, the humidity of Washington to the cold of Boston, Paris to London; in some real way that he needed to monitor carefully, he preferred the South to the North. But he seemed to require both sets of values: his sentences mix long clauses with short quips, the leisurely punctuated by the terse, description by maxim.

Adams's writing can be understood as his lifelong attempt to draw out the implications of his famous name. Late in life, trying to escape himself, he travelled to Samoa. But even there the locals, fondly recalling a visit from the U.S.S. John Adams, knew who he was. Adams may be the first American writer to have checked his privilege, as we would put it. Brown's term “American aristocrat” would have struck Adams as an oxymoron, but he took for granted a social position so fixed that it could be wielded against itself. He enjoyed both what he called the “safeguards” of the Adams pedigree and the spoils of a large fortune inherited from his mother. Brahmin was the name given by Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., around 1860 to members of Boston's Old Guard families, who, wealthy from industries whose economic miracle depended on free or exploited labor—the China trade, the railroads, manufacturing—began to supply themselves with heraldry and property. More statesmen than merchants, the Adamses were secure enough in their status to break many of the Brahmin codes, but Adams concluded that he was “held up solely by social position and a sharp tongue.” That “solely” is a classic Adams note of overstatement: those two

ingredients not only held him up but fed a lifelong literary project of situating a single human imagination inside concentric rings of historical time, a presence at once puny and, since it spoke so grandly of its inconsequence, huge.

The title “The Education of Henry Adams” recalls novels like “*The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*.” But its structure reverses the classic formula of a charismatic nobody rewarded, in a final turn, with his rightful wealth and pedigree. “Probably no child, born in the year, held better cards than he,” Adams writes of himself. Just like that, one very useful narrative structure, that of adversity overcome, is ruled out. Instead, Adams tells the story of failing up: he notes, with each unearned success, the bankruptcy of the very distinction between winning and losing. At Harvard, he carouses with Virginians, graduates in the middle of the pack, and is chosen as class speaker. He meanders through Europe, fails to master German, loses interest in studying law, and is made his father’s chief Washington aide. When Lincoln then appoints his father minister to the Court of St. James’s, Adams heads to London and plays a role in keeping the British government neutral during the Civil War, while his brother Charles stays and fights with bravery in the Gettysburg campaign. After a brief turn as a pundit calling for government reform, Adams is invited to teach medieval history at Harvard. He protests, very honorably, that he knows nothing about the subject; he is given the job anyway.

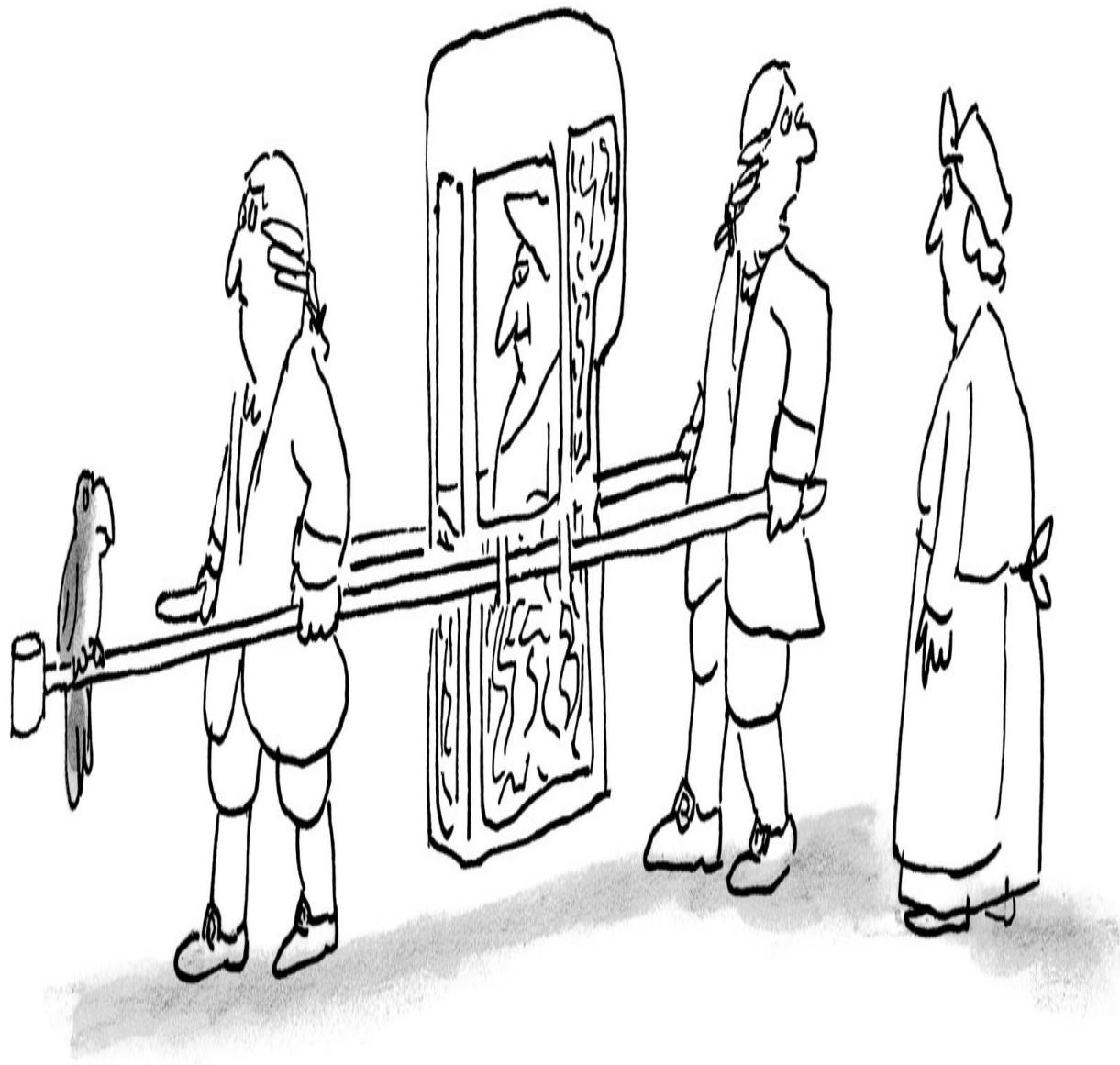
The pace of the book in its early chapters implies an even distribution of these life incidents across its length, as in a conventional autobiography. But “*The Education*” is not conventional, and not even quite an autobiography. Adams usually refers to himself in the third person, adding a grand study of failure to the library of volumes written about his family’s legendary statesmen. Adams saw himself as a passenger in his life, riding his own name. “He accepted the situation,” he wrote, “as though he had been a party to it, and under the same circumstances would do it again, the more readily for knowing the exact values.” At times this Henry Adams resembles a persona, a little like the feckless antihero whom T. S. Eliot called J. Alfred Prufrock.

The sense that your life is happening not to you but to a kind of emissary dispatched into social and historical space is something many writers have

felt. Henry Adams writes sentences; “Henry Adams” goes to soireés. Adams’s choice makes “Henry Adams” the subject of gossip between the writer and the reader; even more than before, Adams could claim to be the ultimate insider. “I am trying to persuade myself that there is any such thing as me,” he wrote to a friend in 1915. “More and more I am forced to admit that the whole show is a piece of idiocy.”

He published as a game of peekaboo—by half measures, back channels, and guises. The obvious differences aside, he recalls Emily Dickinson, his contemporary, in the ways that he constructed alternative platforms for publication within an eager coterie. His writing was sometimes cultivated, like a hobby farm, as a wealthy man’s pastime. When he published a novel, “[Democracy](#)” (1880), anonymously, and another, “[Esther](#)” (1884), under a pseudonym, their authorship fuelled speculation among readers, which Adams clearly enjoyed. A serene book about the Middle Ages, “Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres,” was initially written as a gift to his nieces and privately distributed. Adams’s strangest book was “Tahiti: Memoirs of Arii Taimai,” dictated to him by a Tahitian queen during his late-in-life travels. His name appears nowhere on it or in it: he calls himself Tauraatua I Amo, the honorific given him by the clan. “The Education” was initially circulated only among a small group of Adams’s friends; when it was officially published, in 1918, it appeared with a preface written by Adams yet signed by his old student and friend Henry Cabot Lodge. The preface concluded that Adams, a “small” artist, had failed to find sufficient “literary form.”

He was mercurial and restless, but he toyed with a respectable life in the Boston bubble and among the Washington élite. In 1872, at thirty-four, Adams married Marian Hooper, known to everyone as Clover, a witty “Voltaire in petticoats,” according to her childhood friend Henry James. (Clover famously said of him, “He chaws more than he bites off.”) Soon Adams resigned his job at Harvard and the couple moved to Washington in search of a social life. The scene in Cambridge, according to Adams, was like a “faculty-meeting without business,” so desolate that it would have “starved a polar bear.”



"His parrot goes everywhere he goes."

S. Gross

Adams's life as a Bostonian in Washington, hiding out in the spotlight, is the focus of Ormond Seavey's "[Henry Adams in Washington: Linking the Personal and Public Lives of America's Man of Letters](#)" (University of Virginia). By 1880, a tight circle of intimates, who christened themselves "the Five of Hearts"—the Adamses, John and Clara Hay, and the eccentric geologist Clarence King—had formed. The group later incorporated officially, even designing its own china pattern. Adams went to work every day at the State Department library, returning in the evening to the large house he and Clover rented on H Street to socialize with friends and famous callers, including Matthew Arnold on a U.S. tour sponsored by [P. T. Barnum](#). The Hays and the Adamses bought a parcel of land facing on Lafayette Square and hired the renowned architect H. H. Richardson, their old friend, to design a conjoined house in the Romanesque style, looking across the square at the White House.

The consuming work of this period was Adams's nine-volume history of the fifteen years after his great-grandfather's Administration, "[History of the United States of America During the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison](#)." It was traditional for Adams men to lose themselves in the family papers, but Adams chose the careers of his ancestors' rivals. To many, it is the greatest work of history written by an American. In its opening survey of America in the year 1800, Washington is seen as "a fever-stricken morass," the "shapeless, unfinished Capitol" backed by swampland. A visitor would see only "a government capable of sketching a magnificent plan, and willing to give only a half-hearted pledge for its fulfillment."

For pages at a time, Adams's "History" is a jigsaw design of juxtaposed facts and quotations. It is hard to imagine the archival work necessary to write even a single one of its paragraphs. Very few lay readers have delved in. (When [Elizabeth Hardwick](#) was asked whether her divorce from Robert Lowell had been painful, she reportedly replied, "Oh, not at all, except, of course, the usual intellectuals' quarrel over which of us should get Henry Adams's History.") It struck some at the time as a quixotic, monkish endeavor, or merely as a way of keeping a daily appointment with his desk at the State Department, where no doubt many other men of means scribbled their days away. The volumes were published between 1889 and 1891, but

Adams's interest in the project petered out. "As long as I could make life work, I stood by it," he remarked cryptically, when he was rounding the bend.

Adams alludes to his "History" only once in "The Education," and only to disparage it:

He had even published a dozen volumes of American history for no other purpose than to satisfy himself whether, by the severest process of stating, with the least possible comment, such facts as seemed sure, in such order as seemed rigorously consequent, he could fix for a familiar moment a necessary sequence of human movement.

Indeed, "The Education" leaves out everything from Adams's busiest and most productive period. He abruptly hops off the time line in 1871, leaping over his marriage to Clover as well as her tragic death, by suicide, in 1885. Clover's name never appears in "The Education." The story picks up in 1892, with barely a note of explanation: suddenly, it's simply "Twenty Years After." Part of the book's fascination derives from this twenty-year black hole. Though Adams may have intended "The Education" as a caution against biography, he had to have known the void would be filled. Brown's "The Last American Aristocrat" follows two multivolume biographies of Adams, by Ernest Samuels and Edward Chalfant, and a recent [biography](#) of Clover, by Natalie Dykstra. The Adamses, Brown suggests, could not conceive a child; Adams worked long hours, and Clover's days settled into tedium. The couple walled themselves off from the world beyond their exclusive set. Their barbs became too severe, their gossip too corrosive, the Five of Hearts too impenetrable.

Suicide and mental illness were so rampant in Boston's ruling class that secrecy about it sometimes appears to be the key to the entire Brahmin code. Clover once joked to her father, "The insane asylum seems to be the goal of every good and conscientious Bostonian." (In the years after Clover's death, her sister, Ellen, threw herself in front of a train, and her brother, Edward, jumped from a third-story window.) Clover broke down on the Adamses' wedding trip, in Egypt, and again when her beloved father died, in the spring of 1885. Before she killed herself, she had been "off her feed," Adams wrote, for months. Clover had taken up photography and showed a real

mastery of its rapidly developing technology, but her last photos, taken on a trip to West Virginia to buoy her spirits, look vacant when compared with the warm scenes she'd once captured. On the afternoon of December 6, 1885, Adams returned home from the dentist and found Clover dead, a vial of potassium cyanide, one of her darkroom chemicals, drained beside her.

After Clover's death, Adams seems to have decided that he would lead a "posthumous" life. In the opening pages of "*The Education*," Adams—who lived for eleven years after its completion—embeds his death notice: "To his life as a whole he was a consenting, contracting party and partner, from the moment he was born to the moment he died." At what moment in Henry Adams's life did "Henry Adams" die? The "Adams" whose story is told in the book's second half is a man whose way of understanding time and space has been permanently altered. His life as a sequence of events has been overtaken by what he calls "force." Historians, he wrote, had always crafted stories of individuals and institutions which assumed "in silence a relation of cause and effect"; Clover's death was a random event within the system which could cause the whole thing to seize. Like Mrs. Madeleine Lightfoot Lee, the heroine of "*Democracy*," who moves to Washington "to touch with her own hand the massive machinery" of power, life had rattled him, and he longed for a new scale. "I want to go to Egypt," Mrs. Lee exclaims at the novel's close. "Oh, what rest it would be to live in the Great Pyramid and look out for ever at the polar star!"

Beginning in 1886, at the age of forty-eight, Adams struck out for his own polar star, travelling to Japan, Polynesia, Cuba, Mexico, and elsewhere. His adventures put him in touch with expressions of spiritual unity that he envied and, like many wealthy Americans at the time, sought to appropriate. He was kept abreast of Washington's ups and downs while abroad, and embarked on a years-long collaboration with the sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens to design a memorial for Clover in Rock Creek Cemetery. Like the twenty-year gap in "*The Education*," it was meant as an enigma: enormous, shrouded, neither male nor female, with no plaque or inscription. It has been described as the greatest work of sculpture of its time. Adams liked to ride out to the cemetery and hide in the hedges, listening to people's ham-fisted interpretations of the monument. It's one of the few gestures he ever made that put him even within scoffing distance of the general public.

The real fruits of Adams's "posthumous" life are his books; above all, "The Education," "Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres," and a short, little-read volume called "A Letter to American Teachers of History." He seemed to grasp that literary power, unlike that of Presidencies and political parties, had a chance to outlast its moment. In "The Education," he describes the elusive work of deciding which artifacts of the past matter: a "cane-bottomed chair" is prized at auction long after its historical context has passed; meanwhile, we pay pennies for the "philosophy and science" of a bygone era.

His writing in these late works is designed to hold its value, even once the world he observed has expired. In old age, Adams conducted himself with the shocked air of someone who had returned from a sojourn into the future. In Chicago, in 1893, and in Paris, in 1900, he attended World Expositions of the new century's technology. The historian in him detected in the huge, silent machines on display "a rupture in historical sequence." Adams, according to Brown, "could appreciate Chicago's flux because he felt it in himself." Seeing the "chaos" of his mind reflected in the world changed him. The word "ecstasy" comes from the Greek *ekstasis*—to stand outside oneself. Adams experienced, in his later years, a period of wonder that, on the page, is ecstatic, psychedelic.

"The Education" begins as Louis Seize and ends as steampunk. Near its conclusion, Adams beholds the hall of dynamos at the Paris Exposition of 1900. "As he grew accustomed to the great gallery of machines," Adams writes, "he began to feel the forty-foot dynamos as a moral force":

In these seven years man had translated himself into a new universe which had no common scale of measurement with the old. He had entered a supersensual world, in which he could measure nothing except by chance collisions of movements imperceptible to his senses, perhaps even imperceptible to his instruments, but perceptible to each other, and so to some known ray at the end of the scale.

One "instrument" that did pick up those signals from the future was Adams's prose. And so we have, in his book, the eerie double exposure of a person from the distant past almost stepping on our toes as he describes the technological future. "After so many years of effort to find one's drift,"

Adams writes, “the drift found the seeker, and slowly swept him forward and back, with a steady progress oceanwards.” When I read the last chapters of the book, I always think of another great work that ends with a delegate of historical time gazing at his own obsolescence: Stanley Kubrick’s film “[2001: A Space Odyssey](#).” Henry Adams, who considered himself “a child of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,” who washed ashore in the twentieth, knew that he’d glimpsed our world. ♦

A Reporter at Large

- [When One Parent Leaves a Hasidic Community, What Happens to the Kids?](#)

[December 7, 2020 Issue](#)

When One Parent Leaves a Hasidic Community, What Happens to the Kids?

The irreconcilable differences between Orthodoxy and secularism increasingly end up in court.

By [Larissa MacFarquhar](#)

November 30, 2020



Not many people leave ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities. Most who do try to keep it secret, because, if everyone knew, the marriage prospects of their siblings could be irreparably damaged. The shame of leaving is very great. It is said that anyone who leaves must be a ruined person—penniless, homeless, probably on drugs, maybe a prostitute, living like an animal, for carnal appetites alone, like the goyim, or else mentally ill.

It's true that leaving is traumatic. Many people do fall apart at first. There are suicides, and near-suicides. Some who lose their faith would give anything to have it back. Others who think about leaving can't bring themselves to do it. Leaving means giving up everything you know, and a close, enveloping community where you are never alone, with little sense of what could replace it. Your spouse might divorce you, your parents reject you. You have to be desperate.

Twenty years ago, those who left could feel that they were stepping into a void. They might know no one else who had done what they were doing. There was a network of blogs written by people who no longer believed but continued to go through the motions; some called themselves Reverse Marranos, for the Jews in medieval Spain who faked renouncing their religion in order to survive. But many Haredi communities—their preferred term for ultra-Orthodox, which means “those who tremble before God”—restricted access to the Internet.

Then, in 2003, Malkie Schwartz, who had left the Lubavitch group in Crown Heights, founded Footsteps, an organization for people who had left Haredi communities. She started it as a support group, but she found that people who had left were usually in need of help with practical things as well: improving their English, since Yiddish was often their first language; figuring out how to go back to school or find work with few secular qualifications; finding somewhere to live. Over the years, Footsteps expanded into a fully fledged nonprofit. In 2010, Schwartz was succeeded by Lani Santo, who had a master's degree in nonprofit management from N.Y.U. At that point, around five hundred people had gone to Footsteps for help; by 2020, around eighteen hundred had, and still more had contacted other groups that had sprung up. By then, Footsteps had become notorious among Haredim, suspected of preying on vulnerable people who were

struggling in their faith. Some who sought its help first heard of it when they were accused of being members.

One of the most painful difficulties that leavers faced was the risk of losing their children. In the early days, the few who left had not attracted a lot of attention, and some got custody of their kids without much of a fight. But, as more people defected, communities alarmed by the prospect of so many children lost to Haredism mobilized to keep them. Secular courts were called upon to determine the best interests of children who were being torn between two irreconcilable ways of life: what to one parent was a basic human freedom might be, to the other, a violation of the laws of God. To many Haredim, the loss of a child to secular life was unbearable, because it meant that the child's future, and that of all his descendants, would be ruined, not only in this world but also in the next.

Chavie Weisberger grew up in Monsey, a hamlet in [Rockland County](#), just north of New York City, with a large Hasidic population. Her grandfather Rabbi Moshe Wolfson was the venerated founder of the Emunas Yisroel Hasidic group to which she belonged. Emunas Yisroel, like all Hasidic groups, traced its lineage to an eighteenth-century charismatic movement in Eastern Europe. Hasidism valued joy and emotional connection with the divine as much as Torah study. It also concentrated power in its rebbes, who acted as intermediaries between believers and God.

Chavie was the fifth of ten children. She saw herself as a good girl, a rule-follower, but she never really believed that the rules were important. When nobody was looking, she would put on the lights on Shabbos, or turn on the air-conditioning. She never really prayed; she just mumbled the words. She knew that she ought to be ashamed of this, and she was, but she wasn't afraid of God; she was afraid of getting caught.

Her community believed the secular world was sinful, but she was curious about it. She sneaked glances at the TV in the doctor's waiting room; she stared at people in the mall. In high school, she discovered that she was attracted to girls, and she slept with a few of them, especially at summer camp. She knew that what she was doing was wrong, because it was immodest to show your body to another person, but she didn't think of it as gay sex—she didn't know that it was sex at all. She certainly never

connected the experience with the fact that in a few years she would be married to a boy.

A matchmaker paired her with Naftali Weisberger, a boy from her neighborhood, and they married in 2002, when she was nineteen. The wedding night was horrific. It felt to Chavie as though they were violating each other. It wasn't that he was rough—he was meek and shy. But they had been told that they had to consummate the marriage that night, and if they were having trouble they should call the rabbi, so they did. For her, there was no way to come back from that night. She couldn't imagine loving the person who had put her through it. And although she had not previously connected her relationships with girls with marriage to a boy, now she thought, This isn't love. I know what love is, because I have felt it.



Cartoon by Edward Koren

After a year, Chavie told her parents that she was unhappy in the marriage, and they sent her to a Hasidic therapist. The therapist told her that people became gay because they were abused in their childhood. When she told him that she hadn't been abused, he hypnotized her to try to get her to remember, and taught her to self-hypnotize when she was having sex with her husband. Six years into the marriage, Chavie and Naftali had three children, the youngest a few months old. That summer, Chavie, Naftali, and the kids went away to a camp in the Catskills. Being back in that place, Chavie remembered vividly what it had been like to be there as a girl—how fun and innocent summer camp had been—and she felt more than ever that her husband was dragging her down.

A few months later, early one morning, Naftali was changing the baby's diaper when she fell off the bed and broke her leg. Chavie bolted upright in bed when the baby screamed and said they had to take her to the hospital right away, but it was Saturday—Shabbos—and they were staying with her husband's family for the weekend. Her father-in-law asked a neighbor, who was an emergency medical technician in the religious ambulance corps, to examine the baby, and the technician concluded that the baby's injuries were not serious enough to warrant driving on Shabbos. (A lawyer for Naftali Weisberger declined an interview requested on his behalf.) All through the day, as Chavie held the screaming baby, she grew angrier and angrier. As soon as Shabbos was over, the family went to the hospital, but the doctor was so disturbed by the broken femur, and by the fact that they had waited nearly ten hours to bring the baby in, that the hospital called child-protective services. That night, while Chavie slept in the hospital with the baby, she was watched by a child-protection worker, for fear of abuse.

Not long after, Chavie decided she was done. She knew that husbands were often reluctant to give their wives a *get*—a religious divorce—so when Naftali agreed to give her one and they went to the *beis din*, the rabbinical court, she readily signed whatever papers she was given. She didn't pay much attention to a clause requiring her to raise the children Hasidic. In March, 2009, they were officially divorced. Later that month, Naftali married again. After he remarried, he told Chavie that he needed to focus on his new wife, and he stopped seeing their children regularly. Sometimes he took them out for pizza, but he didn't have them over to his new house. He

didn't pay child support. Soon he and his wife began having babies of their own.

It was at this point that Chavie allowed herself to think, If I am raising these children alone, how do I want to do it? And what do I actually want in my life? She consulted a Modern Orthodox rabbi, hoping he would tell her that she could be both gay and religious, but he said that if she was really a lesbian she had to be celibate. And so her choice slowly became clear to her: she could be celibate; she could live a secret life and lie to everyone; or she could leave the community. This last possibility was so extreme that it took several years to form in her mind.

Outwardly, she was still a good girl. She worked at a community magazine, she was involved with the PTA. But she must have had some kind of air about her, because people started confiding their own weird stuff. This one wished she could wear shorter skirts; that one wanted to go to the movies. Some women were meeting strangers they had found on Craigslist. One day, she heard her co-workers gossiping about a woman named Chani Getter. Chani was a little older, but Chavie knew who she was—she had grown up on the next block. Someone said, Did you hear? Chani is a lesbian now, and she's running crazy wild retreats for lesbians, and she takes her *kids* there. The co-workers were horrified, but Chavie went home, Googled Chani Getter, and called her.

Marie was an Army brat—she grew up half in Germany, half in the U.S. (“Marie” is a pseudonym.) Her father was a Christian, an American soldier; her mother came from a Haredi German family. Neither was religious, and they celebrated holidays in an irregular fashion—a bit of Hanukkah, a bit of Christmas. When Marie was a child, her mother told her stories about growing up Haredi, and the one that stuck in her head was about how if she used the wrong fork and made it un-kosher she had to go outside and thrust it into the ground, and sometimes it was so cold and the ground so hard that it was difficult. At the time, Marie thought this sounded crazy—something that only bizarre, mean parents would force their children to do—and certainly her mother was very bitter about her religious upbringing. But, as Marie grew older, her mother’s stories piqued her interest. She was looking for a way of life that was more spiritual and structured than the way she’d grown up, and, after moving every three years from place to place and

country to country, she wanted a community to belong to. By the time her parents settled in Killeen, Texas, near Fort Hood, when she was in high school, she had found herself wanting to become Orthodox.

She couldn't force her family to keep kosher, so she ate vegetarian. She babysat and mowed lawns in order to earn money to buy an extra set of dishes, so they wouldn't be tainted by her family's non-kosher food. She stopped wearing pants. Her mother was appalled; she said that Marie was spitting on her family's way of life. Eventually, this caused so much strain that Marie went to live with a religious friend she knew from her synagogue. After graduating from high school, she went to Baylor to study premed.

While she was in college, Marie met a rabbi from Monsey. He told her that in Monsey there were men who were a little older than she but still unmarried because for some reason they weren't considered a catch. If she wanted to marry a Haredi man, he said, she should look for a man like that, because with her dubious religious background she wasn't a catch, either. It took her a while to get used to the idea of marrying a man she didn't know, but she believed that she should trust God without questioning, so she did. She met a twenty-seven-year-old man in a religious chat room, and left college to marry him in the fall of 2001.

When Marie first arrived in Monsey, it felt wonderful to her to be in a place where nobody thought she was strange for being religious. There were kosher stores everywhere, lots of people were modestly dressed. People in the community spoke Yiddish, but Marie understood them because she spoke German. Early on, a woman walking near her on the street grabbed her shirt and yanked her over to let a man pass by, so that he wouldn't have to walk behind or between them, and that startled her, but she told herself that she was new to this, and there were bound to be customs she didn't know about.

The marriage, though, was difficult from the start. She wanted to go back to college—she still hoped to become a doctor—but she was scolded for trying to overthrow her husband. (Marie's husband, too, declined to be interviewed.) She saw that as a bride she had not received the same kinds of gifts as other daughters-in-law; her husband told her that she should be

grateful that his family took her in after the way she had been raised, like an animal in a zoo.

When she and her husband had their first child, a daughter, she became absorbed in being a mother and felt happier. A couple of years later, they had a son. But the marriage grew worse. Her husband controlled the household money, and told her that in order for him to give her some, even to buy basic items such as sanitary napkins, she had to deserve it. He called her names, and when their daughter was around six or seven he started calling her names, too—ugly, fat, stupid. Finally, in 2012, they went to the *beis din* to get a divorce. She got custody of the children; he was to see them for dinner a couple of times a week and every other Shabbos.

After her husband moved out, Marie began seeking out family and old friends. Before she had kids, she had been estranged from her parents, but now they travelled from Texas to visit her. Her family knew that she hadn't had a minute to herself during the more than ten years that she was married, so they gathered together some money and told her to take a vacation. One of the friends Marie reconnected with was an Indian-Jewish woman whom she'd met in college and who had moved back home afterward, and this friend invited her to visit. Marie arranged for the kids to stay with a family in Monsey for two weeks and bought a ticket to India.

Issac was born in Borough Park, [Brooklyn](#), the ninth of ten children, in what would become the Bobov-45 group. (Issac is not the name he usually goes by.) His father was exceptionally devout and rigid about rule-keeping, but Issac was always getting into trouble. When a teacher hit him, he called the Fire Department. When one of the school principals made him angry, he squirted ketchup and mustard all over all the principals' lunches. He was bullied by the other kids. When he prayed, he tried to feel a connection to God, but it never worked. Mostly, praying meant nothing to him. His father was always telling him stories about people burning in Hell, and those would frighten him for a while, but then it wore off. He didn't doubt the existence of God, exactly; he didn't have a strong belief one way or the other.

He was sent to sleepaway camp for the first time when he was nine or ten. On visiting day his father came to see him, and while the other parents played games, or took their kids out boating, Issac's father took him into the

empty shul and said, Let's review what you have studied these past two weeks. The summer that Issac was fifteen, he had a rough week at camp and decided to kill himself. Luckily, he didn't know how to do it—he took forty Benadryl pills and went to bed. The camp nurse gave him water the next day to flush his system, but apart from that no one did much; mental illness tended to be hushed up, because it could affect the marriage prospects of everyone in the family. Issac didn't see a therapist until about six months later, and that was to deal with attention deficit disorder. He was advised to tell nobody about the therapy, not even his brothers and sisters.

When Issac turned eighteen, in 2006, it came time for him to marry, and matchmakers started getting in touch. Normally, a person had only one *shidduch*—one match. Eight of Issac's nine siblings married the first person they met, but Issac met five girls, and five times he was rejected. Part of the problem might have been that he wasn't a yeshiva boy anymore—he worked in an office-supply store—and having a job was less prestigious. One matchmaker told him that she'd fibbed on his behalf, saying that he learned with a study partner every night, but it made no difference. He was told that one girl rejected him because he talked too much. By the time a matchmaker suggested a sixth girl, he no longer gave a shit. He agreed to go through with the meeting only to pacify his father. The matchmaker didn't know him or the girl personally—presumably, she had picked a girl for her failings, to go with his.

His father mentioned the girl one day when he got home from work, and Issac drove up to Monsey to meet her. He was done trying to make himself look good—he thought, Let's just get through this and go home. But he liked her. She was devout, but not stiff or judgmental. She was very attractive. She had had a difficult childhood and wasn't living with her family. They talked for about an hour, and, fifteen minutes after Issac left, the matchmaker called both of them and told each that the other wanted to meet again, although in fact neither had said anything about it. They met the following afternoon, and then a third time. At this point, Issac had begun to think that something might actually come of it, so they talked seriously for four or five hours. He asked the girl, Faigy (a pseudonym), if she had any questions for him, and she fetched a list she'd drawn up. Faigy told him about her childhood, and he asked her if she was in therapy. She admitted that she was. Issac told her, "If

you weren't, there is no way I would consider this." She said, "I want to marry you."



After her divorce, Marie felt hemmed in by scrutiny and gossip. She believed that her ex-husband was trying to find dirt on her, in order to get the kids back. He told people in the community that she didn't keep kosher, that she didn't keep Shabbos. People rammed their shopping carts into hers at Rockland Kosher. Her employers, who had heard that she was no longer Jewish, fired her. Photograph by Dawit N.M. for The New Yorker

The first year of their marriage was easy. His wife was the opposite of his parents, he thought—she never told him what to do. He felt that life with his parents had been a constant struggle, and now the struggle was over. Nine and a half months after their wedding, he and Faigy had a daughter. But being happily married to a religious woman didn't change Issac's feelings about religion, and, left to his own devices, his observance started to slip. He still did the basics, showing his face in shul when he had to, but he wasn't praying every day.

Everything changed when his daughter, the summer before preschool, was rejected by the Bobov yeshiva because, he and Faigy were told, Faigy, who had been brought up in a community with slightly different rules, drove a car. He and Faigy had been pleading with the school for months, and finally they asked for a meeting with the grand rabbi in Borough Park. The rabbi didn't understand why Faigy insisted on driving. Couldn't she give it up for the sake of her children? Issac said that maybe the Bobov school was the best school, maybe it wasn't, but he wasn't willing to chain up his wife to find out. Afterward, as he and Faigy walked away, down Fifth Street, he didn't feel angry; he felt peaceful. He said to Faigy, "It's over—the book is closed on Bobov."

The next day, he realized that he was done with more than the school. He said to Faigy, "If I don't have to follow the rules for the yeshiva, then why do I need to follow them at all?" He told her, "I think I can keep Shabbos, I think I can keep kosher, but beyond that I'm not sure." This was intensely painful for Faigy, who was deeply pious. Issac had been untethered from religion inside his head for a long time, but to her it felt as though everything she knew about her family had suddenly exploded into pieces.

Up to this point, whatever Issac had done or not done at home was between him and Faigy. Outside the house, he still looked and behaved more or less like a religious man. But now he felt an urge to go to the barber and have his beard shaved and his *payos*—sidelocks—cut off. At that point, his apostasy would become irretrievably public. He wanted to do it right away, but he decided to think about it, to make sure that he would have no regrets. So he

set a calendar reminder in his phone for four weeks from that day, to give himself a chance to change his mind.

Chavie had been afraid to talk to such a wild-sounding person as Chani Getter, but on the phone Chani was very friendly. She invited Chavie to attend a retreat for L.G.B.T.Q. Orthodox Jews. At the retreat, Chavie was asked to speak about herself, and she saw that people were moved by what she said, and she thought, This is real, this is actually who I am. At the retreat, she met many queer parents who were there openly with their children, not hiding or lying to them. She thought about how she had been behaving with her own children, putting them to bed and then locking herself in her bedroom and watching a movie. Her children were four, six, and eight, so it wasn't too hard to keep them in the dark, but she thought that as they grew older it would be impossible to keep lying and be a good parent. At another retreat, one of her new friends said to her, "I dare you to take your wig off." Chavie was shocked—this felt even more exposing than being naked, especially since, unbeknownst to anyone, she had let her hair grow out into a Mohawk and dyed it in rainbow stripes—but she did it. After that, things started moving very fast. A month later, she went to the friend's house for the weekend and rode in a car on Shabbos and ate bacon, and it didn't feel frightening or sacrilegious—it felt normal and right. And she realized, I guess I never believed in any of this.

She began introducing her children to her new friends—a lesbian couple, a trans woman. She felt that she and her kids were pushing open the door of their ghetto together, and it was both scary and thrilling. She thought that, since she was abandoning the values of the community, she should come up with alternatives, so she started a "values wall" in her house, and when she read a book with the kids they would extract a value from it and paste it up: kindness, inclusivity, social justice. She believed that a family should have rituals, so for every ritual she abandoned she invented a new one to take its place. She was worried that when the community saw what she was up to it would try to turn her children against her—she had seen that happen. But the key was she had time. Outwardly, they were still a good Hasidic family, so no one was paying attention.

For three years after the divorce, Chavie didn't tell her children that she was queer. But then, in 2012, she thought that her older daughter suspected it,

and Chavie told her that she was. That fall, a transgender friend of hers had a fire in their apartment, and she invited them to stay with her, at her home in Borough Park. They brought their cats; pets were not exactly prohibited in the community, but they were a tell. Chavie grew bolder. She allowed the kids to eat non-kosher food a few times. She let the girls wear pants inside the house. She let the kids watch a movie called “How the Toys Saved Christmas.” She told them that certain Hasidic beliefs were sexist and homophobic, and that she was an atheist. Finally, she thought, I am done trying to please people. One day, she impulsively went outside in her neighborhood wearing secular clothes, with her hair—now short and blond—uncovered for everyone to see. She walked past a group of mothers waiting at a bus stop. At first, they didn’t recognize her, and then they did, and grew very quiet, but she kept walking.

She decided to come out publicly as a lesbian, and was promptly fired from her job at the magazine. The community was horrified that Rabbi Wolfson’s granddaughter had turned out to be such a shocking person. People wrote her letters telling her that she was disturbing the soul of her father, who had recently died. But she never imagined that she would run into custody problems. Her ex was busy with his new children. She figured that, even if he did take her to a secular [family court](#), the judge would side with her, because she was progressive and wanted her kids to get a good education.

It turned out that she was wrong about this. In November, 2012, she received an emergency order to show up in Kings County Supreme Court. The judge told her that she was confusing and harming her children by making such drastic changes in their upbringing, and ordered them removed from her and sent to stay with their father that very day.

A few days later, the judge issued a temporary order decreeing that Chavie’s children could live with her for three nights a week, on the condition that while they were with her, and whenever she was in Borough Park, she dressed and acted like a proper Hasidic woman. In a subsequent hearing, Naftali told the judge he had assumed that Chavie would have relationships with women after the divorce, but he had expected her to keep them secret from the children. Chavie said that a parent who hid her authentic self from her kids, and raised them according to values that she didn’t believe in, was

not a parent but a nanny, and to deprive children of a parent was a terrible thing.

The judge summoned several experts to give testimony on the family. A therapist testified that, ever since Chavie had begun openly flouting Hasidic rules, her older daughter said that she could not have normal friendships with her classmates in school, and that she and her siblings were afraid of being seen in the streets with their mother wearing secular clothing. A psychologist testified that her son's behavior in yeshiva had grown disruptive and defiant. Both said that Chavie's criticisms of Hasidism had left the children deeply confused. A forensic psychologist testified that although Chavie was a loving mother who had a strong bond with her children, by disparaging the Hasidic way of life in front of them she had put her own needs ahead of theirs; she should have shielded them from anything that could turn them against their father and his community. The judge, appalled by what he felt was Chavie's "remorseless" violation of her agreement to raise the kids religious, made his temporary ruling permanent.

Chavie appealed, and, two years later, the ruling was overturned, on the ground that a religious-upbringing agreement could be enforced only so long as it was in the best interests of the children. The appeals court was more impressed by Chavie's care of the kids, and by Naftali's spotty visitation and child-support record, than by Chavie's rogue behavior. The appeals judges accepted Chavie's argument that it was not in the children's interests for her to conceal her beliefs from them. They pointed out that the plain language of the agreement required a Hasidic upbringing for the *children*, but did not specify any requirements as to the behavior of the parents; nor was it acceptable for a court to compel an adult to practice a religion. The solution was to split the difference: Chavie was to make sure that the children dressed and acted like Hasidic kids when visiting their father or attending school, but she could dress or act as she liked.

Chavie had been lucky, but she had also had help. Around the time of her appeal, in 2017, Footsteps hired Julie F. Kay, a human-rights lawyer, who began recruiting attorneys from top Manhattan firms to represent Footsteps members in custody cases pro bono. For a long time, Footsteps members had been at a disadvantage in court because they couldn't afford to pay lawyers.

Many Hasidic parents were also poor, but they could turn to the community for help, raising money in crowdfunding campaigns:

To all Jews and Community Leaders:

Since my friend, a father of 7 children is unfortunately fell into a bitter situation after his wife was unfortunately caught in the bitter net of FS (Footsteps) . . . I don't understand how can it be that there is a group that cuts from us pieces and pay monies and more monies to catch souls from the Jewish people and how can it be that the world isn't shaking from all of this? . . .

I think to myself what kind of face will the Jewish nation have if right by the breakthrough in this case they will God Forbi[d] they will take over the kids with two hands—This can never be allowed to happen—How shameful will that be?

Chavie's case had established that courts could not compel a parent to follow religious strictures; Kay hoped next to convince the courts that compelling a parent to monitor her children's observance was not significantly different from compelling her to be observant herself. There was, of course, a long history of decisions in religious custody cases. For instance, a judge on the Pennsylvania Supreme Court had written, in 1990, in *Zummo v. Zummo*: "The government is inherently and constitutionally incompetent to determine whether stability or instability in religious beliefs would be in the best interests of a child." But state courts were under no obligation to defer to precedents set by other jurisdictions, so each principle that Kay hoped to establish had to be litigated in New York. One of the problems with Rockland County courts handling custody cases, Kay believed, was that their judges were elected, and no group in Rockland County voted with such discipline and unanimity as the Haredim.

In the years after Chavie's appeal, and with the assistance of the pro-bono lawyers, Footsteps members became more assertive: they regularly claimed that it was unconstitutional to force them to adhere to religious practices they didn't believe in. These tactics could backfire, however; judges in custody cases were apt to become irritated by lofty arguments about parents' rights, and didn't like to get involved in disputes about religion. For this reason,

lawyers for the religious parents tended to frame their arguments as commonsense pleas for stability. Courts placed enormous value on stability—as much value, sometimes, as on the preservation of a relationship with both parents. Going back and forth between households with irreconcilable customs and beliefs caused the children to feel bewildered and lost, the lawyer for the religious parent would say. The secular parent had become so caught up in the journey of her evolving desires that she jeopardized her children’s mental health. The Footsteps lawyer might argue that children were resilient, that they could cope with change. But the lawyer for the religious parent would point out that, if the children lived in a household that did not conform to the norms of their group, they might be shunned at school by their classmates, and possibly expelled, which would remove one of the few constants from their already rocky lives. And this was true.



SARIA WARREN

"By the time we find a spot, there'll be nothing left to pillage."

Another factor was the feelings of the children themselves. Once children were old enough to express their views, judges were inclined to listen to them. Chavie's case was unusual: because her ex-husband had been preoccupied with his second family during the years she was moving away from religion, she had had time to bring her children with her. Others were not so lucky.

While Marie was in India, she spent time with a cousin of her friend's, who had a Jewish mother but a Muslim father. She had met this cousin before, when he visited her college, in Texas, but he was several years younger than her and she hadn't taken much notice of him. Now they bonded over family troubles, and over the difficulty of being Jewish while having a non-Jewish father. After she returned home, they stayed in touch. Back in Monsey, Marie felt hemmed in by scrutiny and gossip. She believed that her ex-husband was trying to find dirt on her, in order to get the kids back, and that people were watching her on his behalf, looking to see if she had stopped being observant, or if she was entertaining men in her house, getting drunk, shooting up drugs. He told people in the community that she didn't keep kosher, that she didn't keep Shabbos. People rammed their shopping carts into hers at Rockland Kosher.

She found work as a home health aide for elderly people, and tried to focus on being a mother. She had custody of the kids, but the one important thing that she had no control over was their education, and what she saw in the yeshivas alarmed her. In the long school day, little time was devoted to secular subjects such as English and math. Many Hasidic children spoke Yiddish at home, and might leave school without being fluent in English. Marie wanted her kids to be able to go to college, so she hired Elana Sigall, an educational consultant. Sigall had found that most judges had almost no understanding of what went on in a yeshiva. They seemed to have a vague sense that Jews valued education and therefore Jewish schools must be rigorous; but several yeshivas had told Sigall that by the conclusion of their education their boys were typically reading English at a third- or fourth-grade level. This was not regarded as a failure by the yeshivas: from their point of view, no more was necessary to live a pious life.

In Haredi divorce cases, judges almost always ordered that the children should stay in the same school, partly to insure that one feature of the child's life remained stable, but also because it was extremely difficult for children to be part of a Haredi community if they went to a public school, or even the yeshiva of another group. Yeshivas required adherence to a code of conduct that dictated nearly every aspect of not only the children's lives but those of the parents as well. Children attended yeshiva six days a week; older teenage boys might be at their yeshiva from eight in the morning until eight at night, eating all three meals there, going home only to sleep. In many ways, the yeshiva was a child's third parent, with more authority than the other two.

Meanwhile, as Marie's educational petitions were pending in the court, a year after her first trip she went to India again. She spent more time with the cousin, and they became engaged, and, a year later, they married, although, for visa reasons, her husband did not move to America for many months. Her children were upset that she had married a man they had never met, and Marie's ex-husband began telling people that Marie had married a Muslim and was no longer Jewish.

Once this got around, the elderly people whom Marie had been taking care of didn't want her in their homes any longer, and she lost her income. At the same time, in the late spring of 2016 her landlord gave her thirty days' notice to move out of her apartment. Her government housing subsidy allowed her thirty days to find a three-bedroom apartment in Monsey for fifteen hundred dollars including utilities, which was nearly impossible. She called friends of her ex-husband's and begged them to help her find somewhere to stay, but nobody did.

This was, as she thought of it, her in-case-of-danger-break-the-glass moment. She had nowhere to live and no money to pay for it; the only place she had friends or family was Texas. She had full custody of her daughter, but she was not allowed to take her son out of the state for more than a brief trip. She considered going to a shelter, but she figured that a court would hold that against her, too—it was lose either way. So she called her parents. Her plan, she told the kids' yeshivas, was to make some money in Texas over the summer, then come back in time for the next school year.

She had to be out of her apartment by Sunday. On Friday afternoon, there was a knock on the door, and she was served with a restraining order forbidding her to take her children out of New York. Her parents were already on the road, driving from Texas in a U-Haul; she had intended for them all to leave Monsey the following evening, right after Shabbos. In a panic, she called her lawyer, who told her that there was no room in the shelter, but that she should on no account leave the state with her kids. But she thought, Where else can I go? The next night, she piled the kids into the truck with her parents and left.

The day after they got to Texas, the police arrived early in the morning. Marie's ex-husband was with them. The police got the children out of bed and took them away. Marie went to stay with her brother, in Pennsylvania, and commuted to court dates in New York. The judge was outraged that Marie had ignored the order not to leave the state, and agreed with her ex-husband that the sudden eviction had been traumatic for the kids. The court awarded her ex-husband temporary sole custody of both children.

In court, Marie was pressed to prove that she hadn't married a Muslim. Her ex-husband's lawyer displayed photographs of her at her wedding wearing traditional Indian clothes, with wedding henna on her skin. The judge, saying that she needed to assess Marie's credibility, told her that she should produce a valid ketubah to prove that her wedding was Orthodox. Although the judge had ordered both parents not to disparage each other in public, an associate of her ex-husband's posted a video online, soliciting money to pay legal fees. "He woke up and found himself alone," a male voice narrated, in English, over dramatic music. "No wife; no kids. Thousands of miles away, his wife converted to Islam and married a Muslim man. He almost lost his children forever. After a lengthy battle in the courts, he now has his kids back. But that may change soon if he doesn't come up with two hundred and fifty thousand dollars for his lawyers." Then Marie's ex-husband appeared and pleaded, in Yiddish, "Dear brothers, it is not easy to turn to you, but what doesn't a father do for his children. I'm begging you, help me."

All the time she wasn't seeing her kids, Marie kept texting her daughter, asking her what was going on, and her daughter told her that her father's family was asking, Why is your mother texting so often, is she stalking you, is she crazy? Soon the daughter began echoing the same words: Are you

stalking me? Let me breathe, leave me alone. Marie found out in court that her ex-husband's mother had told her daughter that if she talked to Marie she would be stabbing her father's family in the back. The last time Marie talked to her daughter on the phone, her daughter said that she was a bitch who had married a goy.

For a while, Marie's son tried to please both of his parents. He told Marie, I say whatever I have to say to Tati to make him happy. But then a rabbi at her son's yeshiva told the boy's therapist that if he continued to visit his mother he could be expelled from school. The therapist told Marie that her son didn't want to come for visitations anymore. Marie told the therapist this wasn't true, that her son had told her how much he liked coming to see her. The therapist said, "Talk to him, he'll tell you." Then Marie did something that, she realized later, destroyed the fragile balance her son had tried to maintain: she confronted him. As her son sat sadly, not looking at her, she let her grief get the better of her and said to him, "What would I be without my children? A mother, her days, her nights, her life—everything is her children. How can I live without you?" Later, her son's therapist testified that, because the boy loved his life in the community, awarding custody to his mother would be, for him, "a death sentence."

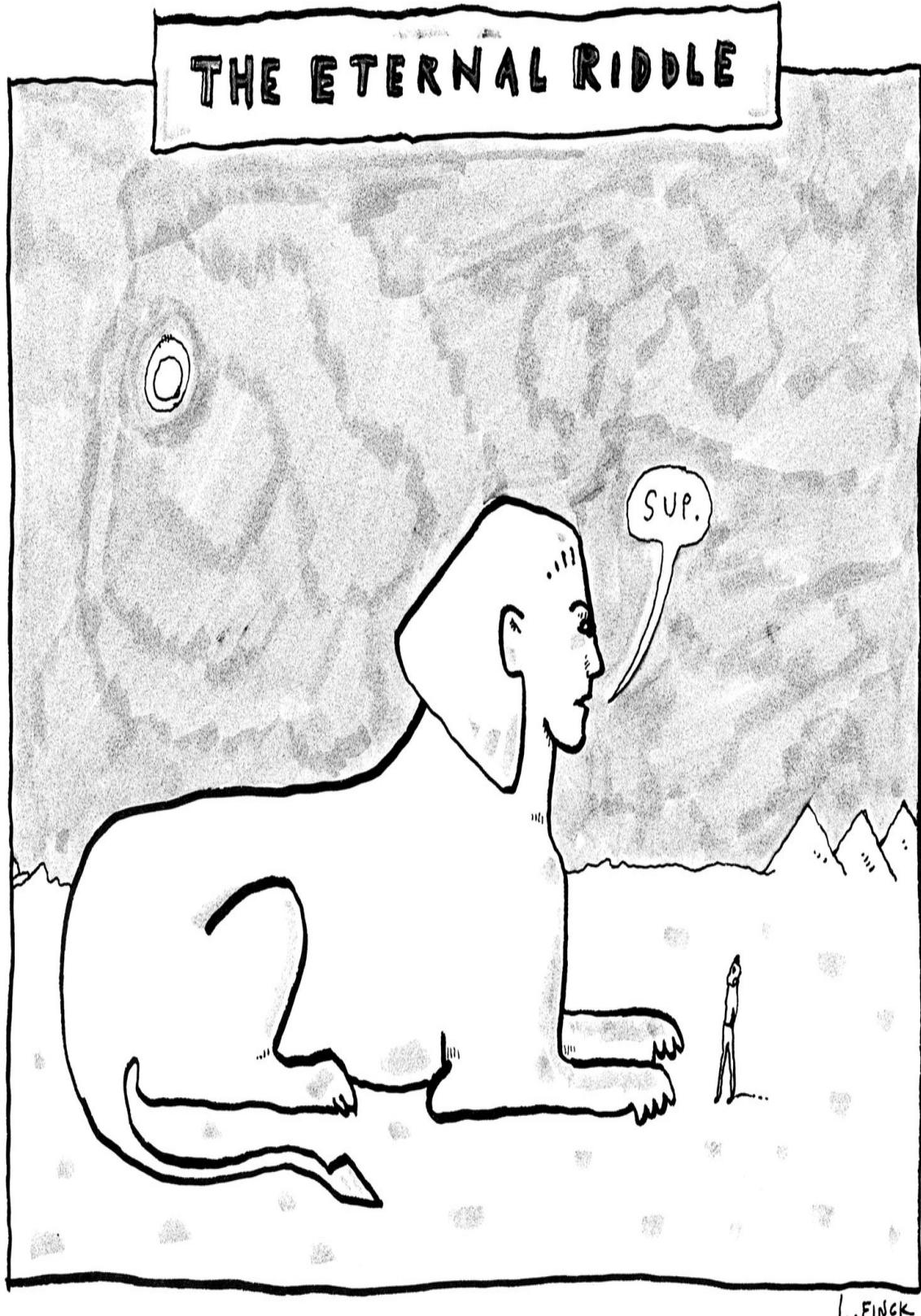
After both of her children stopped seeing her, Marie lost any lingering attachment to Hasidism. She stopped observing holidays except when her husband wanted to—he was more observant than she was now—although they always made an effort to have a nice Shabbos dinner. But she kept a kosher home, to make sure that, if her children ever came to visit her, she would be able to feed them. After a while, she realized that she no longer believed in God.

By the fall of 2020, she hadn't seen either of her children in more than two years. In theory, she still had the right to visitations, but the judge had decided not to force the children to see her if they didn't want to. Marie realized that her children had been put in the position of choosing between her and everybody else—their father, their grandparents, their cousins, rabbis at the temple, neighbors, friends, teachers at school, even God. She was their mother, but she was just one person. It was either her or their whole world.

Issac's crisis came to a head in the late summer of 2014. He and Faigy had met with the grand rabbi in May; he had cut off his *payos* about six weeks later. Then, one weekend in August, he and Faigy were in Brooklyn to spend Shabbos with his family. They walked to a friend's house to celebrate the birth of his baby, and afterward they walked the mile or so back to Issac's parents' house to join them for lunch. It was a sweltering day, and by the time Issac got there he was so hot that he took off his fur hat and coat. His father, calling him by a childhood nickname that he had always hated, said, "In my house, you wear that for the meal." His father said it quietly, but for some reason this command was the one that broke him. He thought, My father liked me when I was a child; he doesn't care for me as I am.

He ran upstairs to his childhood bedroom and broke down sobbing. Faigy ran up after him, and although it was Shabbos, right in front of her he went to the air-conditioner and turned it on. Then he took out his phone and texted a private Facebook group he was part of. Faigy was shocked by these violations of Shabbos, but she didn't say anything. She had never seen him cry like that. He stayed in his room for the rest of the day, and when Shabbos was over they left the house.

THE ETERNAL RIDDLE



During the next couple of weeks, they talked about his not wanting to keep Shabbos anymore, and Faigy grew increasingly distraught. Her therapist asked Issac to come to an emergency session and told him, “You know what, do it for your wife. You can manage twenty-four hours without a phone.” Issac thought, She’s right, and he didn’t want to break up his marriage, so the next Shabbos he put his phone away. The following day, Faigy said, “Never keep Shabbos for me.” She had seen how miserable he was—not at being away from his phone but from the feeling that he had been free and was now caged again.

Issac had friends who violated Shabbos all the time, watching sports, and just lied to their families about it. But he didn’t want to lie. The key, he realized, was his not having given a shit when he and Faigy first met. Because he had shown her who he really was, right from the beginning, he wasn’t afraid to tell her what he was thinking, even when he knew that it might upset her. As a result, they talked about his wanting to break the rules before he did. Years later, Issac would get phone calls from other men who’d been pulling away from observance but had never talked about it with their wives, and by the time they called him there was such a vast gulf between the person their wives thought they were and the person they’d become that Issac thought there was no chance of the marriages surviving, because they were built on lies.

For years, Issac and Faigy talked about Issac’s problems with religion. They had many painful conversations, and they avoided other conversations because of how painful they would be. When Issac stopped observing, it had felt, to Faigy, like the end of the world. She had been raised to fear a vengeful God, and to see her husband breaking God’s laws was to her incomprehensible and terrifying. But then she went to a rabbi for advice, and the rabbi told her that she was wrong to think of God that way—that God was a loving God. A mentor asked her, “What is there in you that you cannot accept your husband?” Gradually, she came to believe that the rabbi was right, that God was indeed a loving God, and that her terror was just another demon from her past. She came to believe that God had given her Issac for a husband to make her understand what faith was really about.

The rabbi advised her to compromise for the sake of her marriage, and, over time, she let some things go. She stopped worrying if a little of her natural

hair was visible under her wig. She bought food with a more lenient kosher certification. But she didn't feel, as Issac did, that Haredi rules constricted her freedom—she felt that God's commandments were given in love, as guideposts, to form a structure for her life. To her, it was a joyful thing to be part of a community and a religion that were larger than she was, that had been around for thousands of years.

Faigy never told Issac not to do something, but she asked him not to do it in front of her. Once he started going to Footsteps meetings, he made secular friends, and she feared that they would pull him away from her. It was especially frightening that he had female friends; in her world, there was no such thing as a grown man being friends with a woman. But, after a while, she said it was O.K. with her if he brought these secular friends to their house. To her, their lives seemed very hard, and she felt grateful that she had God to support her.

As time went on, Issac became more and more awed by her. He saw that she loved and accepted him even though many religious women would have thrown him out of the house and barred him from seeing his kids. He knew from talking to other people that his situation was vanishingly rare. He saw that, because of her miserable childhood, Faigy appreciated his being a loving husband and father, despite his apostasy and whatever other failings he had. She remembered how, at the beginning of their marriage, when she was having nightmares about her past, even though he hardly knew her then, he supported her and loved her and encouraged her to go back into therapy.

Faigy believed it was worse for the children to think that their father was evil than for them to doubt that a person who broke the rules would go to Hell. She and Issac explained to the kids that there were rules they had to follow, but that when they were grownups they would be able to make their own choices. She bought the children journals and told them that if anything bothered them they should write about it before they went to sleep, and every night she read the journals and wrote back.

Issac tried not to do anything that would desecrate Shabbos for the rest of the family. He would have preferred to have the kids go to public school, but he didn't push it—he knew how important it was to Faigy that they be brought up to love their religion. But sometimes he would poke at it, just a little. If

the kids were praying and addressing God as He, he would say, “How do you know God’s not a She?” But in the end he didn’t mind too much if his kids were religious. Even though the blessing sung after a meal had always annoyed him—he thought it was too long—he loved to hear his children sing it. The bottom line was that he felt he had no right to force anything on his kids, any more than he had a right to force anything on Faigy, or she on him. A few people had told him that he should write a book, and though he doubted that he would, he had a title: “You Don’t Fucking Own Nobody, Nobody Fucking Owns You.”

At some point, they decided to buy a house, and, because Issac was sick of parking his car fifteen minutes away so that if he wanted to drive on Shabbos he didn’t rile up the entire neighborhood, they ended up buying a house in a part of Rockland County where there were very few Jewish families. There was one observant family nearby whose children were similar to theirs in age, and they had had a meal with them once, but then the father saw Issac driving on Shabbos and that was the end of that. They didn’t have a synagogue community, because Issac didn’t pray anymore, and women in their neighborhood didn’t go to synagogue except on special occasions. They still had a few friends from Borough Park, and Issac had some secular friends from Footsteps, but they didn’t know any couples like themselves.

They wanted to find a place where there were like-minded people living nearby—people they could say hi to on the street, families whom they could have meals with sometimes, who had kids that their kids could play with, and whom they didn’t have to put up a façade with. To Issac, it felt like a lot to ask. They looked at Teaneck, New Jersey, which felt right from a religious point of view—the families there were mostly Modern Orthodox—but the Teaneck Jews all appeared to be upper-middle-class. It seemed that everyone had gone to college, many were doctors or lawyers. Issac had the equivalent of an eighth-grade education and worked in a supermarket; he felt that he and Faigy wouldn’t fit in with people like that.

After Issac stopped being religious, he decided that he didn’t want to have another baby. It was hard enough to work out the religious conflicts with the two girls they had. And what if a third child was a boy? He knew that Faigy would insist on circumcising him, and he couldn’t tolerate the idea of a synagogue full of people celebrating the cutting of his son’s penis. Then,

when the boy was older, people would expect Issac to take him to synagogue on Saturdays, and he wasn't going to do it, and that would be another source of misery for Faigy, every single week. But he told Faigy that if she wanted to talk about it they should talk about it, and, every now and again, they did. He saw how much she wanted another baby, and sometimes he would say to himself, or to his therapist, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if I told her we should have one?" But then he thought, I don't want another baby, and it's not right to have an unwanted baby—pleasing Faigy is not a good enough reason. For a year, he thought about it and thought about it, working through his own objections. He thought that if they had a boy they could circumcise him in a doctor's office, with no people. Finally, he realized that he was ready, and he told Faigy. The baby came, and it was a girl.

The experience of having the baby astonished him. It was different from anything he had experienced before. "It's amazing," he kept saying, as he looked at the baby's face. "It's amazing." He thought, I guess this is how it is meant to be—making a baby with love. He and Faigy had loved each other before, but having the first two babies hadn't been a decision—they did what they were supposed to do and the babies came. This time, it was conscious. Issac remembered that his father had told him before his wedding that during sex you should think of holy things, so that your child would be holy, and he thought, This baby is the culmination of our five-year struggle. Every day I see her and I think, She is our love. ♦

A previous version of this story misidentified the speaker who asked Faigy why she could not accept her husband.

Books

- [Why New York's Mob Mythology Endures](#)
- [Briefly Noted Book Reviews](#)

Why New York's Mob Mythology Endures

We hang on to legends of the Mafia's inner workings as parables for the wider world.

By [Adam Gopnik](#)

November 30, 2020



If some nativist in this country had warned in 1900 that mass Italian immigration would bring us vendetta-obsessed crime clans, capable of getting their tentacles on the public life (and budgets) of major American cities while also corrupting the American labor movement for most of the coming century, he would have been dismissed, correctly, as a bigot. The oddity is that something like this happened, and, on the whole, no one seems to mind. Quite apart from the overwhelming positives of the Italian presence —the usual parade of professional eminences, from attorneys to zoologists, along with many of the best ballplayers, most of the passionate actors, all the great rhapsodic movie directors, and nearly all the (white) singers worth hearing—the existence of those bad guys, far from being seen as an excrescence, has become another positive: it has supplied our only reliable, weatherproof American [mythology](#), one sturdy enough to sustain and resist debunking or revisionism. Cowboys turn out to be racist and settlers genocidal, and even astronauts have flaws. But mobsters come pre-disgraced, as jeans come pre-distressed; what bad thing can you say about the Mob that hasn't been said already? So residual virtues, if any, shine bright.

You could still imagine that books debunking the Cosa Nostra, revealing a truth less glamorous if not more virtuous than what has been peddled, would be plentiful. But, where you could not get a popular historian to repeat the story of, say, Clara Barton and the American Red Cross without much close squinting and revision, a book about the Mob in New York will happily repeat the same twenty stories already known, without probing the possibility that, given the Mob's secrecy and need for self-generated storytelling, much of what we think we know may not be remotely true. When revision does occur, it meets a stony response. David Nasaw, in "[The Patriarch](#)," his 2012 biography of the elder Joseph Kennedy, took on one of the harder myths of the Mob in America: that, in the nineteen-twenties, Kennedy, Sr., was a bootlegger with Mob ties, and that the ties continued into later years, playing a role in his son's election and, perhaps, his assassination. Nasaw dismissed this as a late-arriving myth propagated by aging mobsters, one at odds with Joseph Kennedy's single-minded goal of making his eldest son President. Kennedy, Sr., knew what would work to his advantage and what would not—and Mob involvement would not. It seems now that he was confused with another, *Canadian* Joseph Kennedy, who really was a bootlegger, and put his name on his bottles—with the confusion

boosted by mobsters' natural temptation to claim collaboration with the powerful. ("Senator, we're both part of the same hypocrisy," Michael Corleone says to the senator from Nevada; real mobsters love being able to say that, too.) Nasaw's conclusion, in turn, annoyed the Sinatra biographer James Kaplan, in his fine life of the singer: if the Kennedys weren't involved with the Mob, then Sinatra's role as a middleman with the Mafia recedes in importance, and, since Sinatra's own Mob ties turn out to be largely ornamental, with no Kennedy connection he is merely another occasional hanger-on, a stickpin rather than a stiletto. To keep Sinatra interestingly sinister, Kaplan has to debunk Nasaw's debunking.

We all, in other words, have a lot invested in the Mafia mythology. You can still find the rare deflationary history. Robert Lacey's "[Little Man](#)," a 1991 biography of the legendary Meyer Lansky, known as the Mob's moneymen, made it plain that, while quick with numbers and a good casino manager, Lansky wasn't a genius, or much of a mobster, or even very rich. The truly smart guys didn't run Cuban casinos; they opened Las Vegas hotels. The average unnamed businessman who bought a strip mall outside Reno must have made more money than the legendary "genius" of the Mob.

Yet it is almost impossible to demythologize the Mob. "[Wiseguy](#)," the oral memoir of the small-time mobster Henry Hill which Nicholas Pileggi put together, and "[Goodfellas](#)," the Scorsese movie it became, were intended to replace the myth of melancholic men of honor with the reality of street-rat scrapping. Instead, the rats themselves became legendary, and even, in a black way, lovable. Tommy DeSimone, the original of the Joe Pesci character in "*Goodfellas*," was not a cute if murderous psychopath but a murderous psychopath *tout court*. Yet even DeSimone has become so mythologized that you can far more easily find material about his life and death than about, say, the life of Abe Beame, a small man who was the mayor of New York around the time DeSimone was doing heists. Once a myth fills some imaginative need, it becomes infinitely adaptable: King Arthur probably began as a pan-Celtic hero, then got taken up by the people he had been fighting, then got made mystical and feminized by the French Grail romances, only to end up, in Tennyson's hands, as a melancholic Victorian. The point of a myth is to be mythical, and no amount of archeology can shake the fairy dust from its heels.

Generally, in Mob stories, the cute bits are not real, and the real bits are not cute. Given that grim truth, there's something to be said for just shutting your eyes and repeating the cute bits. In the new book "[Big Apple Gangsters](#)" (Rowman & Littlefield), Jeffrey Sussman repeats the genesis myths and *exempla virtutis* of the New York City Mob pretty much straight, no chaser. Sussman starts off with an obvious error—he thinks that Damon Runyon's fictional version of Arnold Rothstein is Nathan Detroit, a small-time craps dealer, when it's really a very different character called the Brain, whose sad demise closely imitates the gambler's—and yet his dependence on received wisdom is the best feature of his book. He offers the familiar stories in almost fossilized form, in a manner rather like the "Golden Legend," the medieval collection of saints' lives. So we hear once again about Rothstein as the mother wolf of the Mob, the man who fixed the 1919 World Series, who suckled the organization's Romulus and Remus, the street boys Lucky Luciano and Meyer Lansky, who in the twenties jointly created the Mob as a kind of Italian-Jewish cross-immigrant compact. We hear about that first, rom-com meet-cute of the very young Lansky with the very young Luciano:

Luciano's gang attempted to shake down the scrawny protection racketeer, who was short and skinny, hardly posing a potential threat to a gang of strong young Italian toughs. Yet, Lansky not only refused to retreat, but he also told Luciano to go fuck himself. Luciano was so impressed by the kid's moxie that he invited him to join his protection racket. The two future crime bosses cemented an alliance that lasted until Luciano's death in Italy.

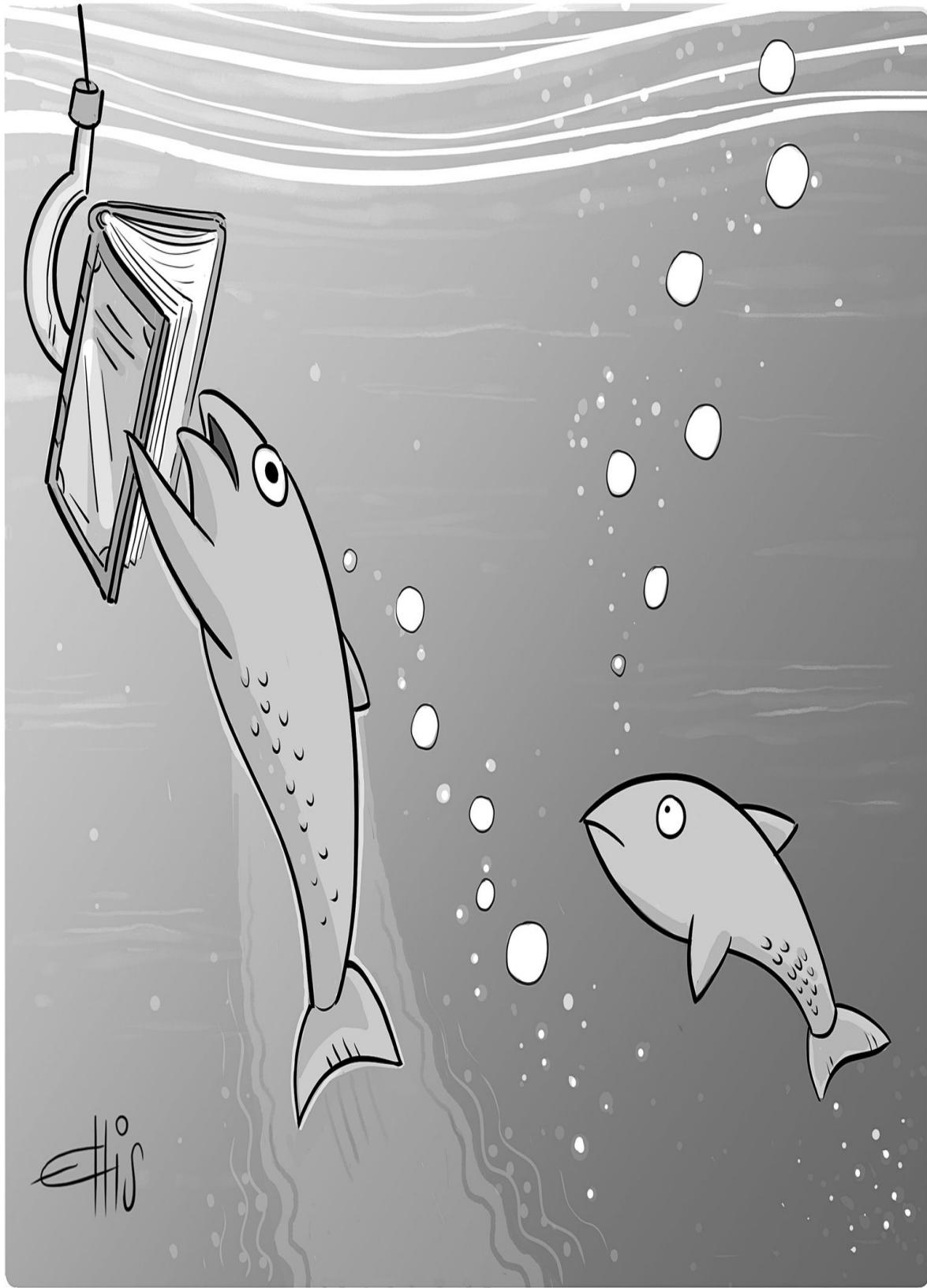
This story has the omnipresence in the Mob literature of flood myths in the ancient Near East. The moment one scrutinizes it, though, it smells, rather like the flood, utterly fishy. The response of a teen-age gangster being told to fuck himself would be to be impressed by the other kid's moxie? (And what did all the other kids in the gang think as Lansky dissed Lucky?) Even if there's a shred of truth in this tale, we are in the presence of myth—meaning not simply a falsehood but some piece of reality shaped to supply a significant moral, a parable of the tenements.

The moral, in this case, is that brawn alone is not enough. Every Luciano must have his Lansky. In the magisterial 2005 history "[Five Families](#),"

Selwyn Raab, the Gibbon of the New York Mob, even quotes the Jewish Mob lawyer George Wolf remarking on the “surprisingly good harmony” between the two immigrant groups, “the Italians respecting the Jews for their financial brains, and the Jews preferring to stay quietly behind the scenes and let the Italians use the muscle needed.”

The legend continues with the emergence of the five Mob families, which New York children used to be able to recite in their sleep: Gambino, Bonanno, Genovese, Colombo, Lucchese. All the famous incidents and players of the five families make their appearance in Sussman’s book in energetically neat outline form—each, one realizes, with a summary moral attached. Frank Costello, the original of Vito Corleone, narrowly misses being assassinated in the lobby of his Central Park West apartment building by Vincent (the Chin) Gigante, and wisely recedes from the fray, becoming one of the few important mobsters to die in bed, the moral being that discretion can be the better part of valor. Joey (Crazy) Gallo breaks the rules of that decorum, shooting many gangsters, and then being shot himself, at Umbertos Clam House. His life proves that crazy doesn’t pay. The Chin returns, wandering the streets of Greenwich Village in his bathrobe, mumbling incoherently, in what turns out to have been an impersonation of psychosis as he secretly fired off orders to his underlings: crazy *can* pay, if you commit to it.

The preponderance of the Mafia stories that Sussman relates, however, have the simplest and oldest of lessons: pride comes before a fall. Again and again, some mobster or another becomes infatuated with his clippings, and then gets clipped. This leads eventually to the Theban plays of Mob tales, the long John Gotti cycle, a classic story of hubris duly punished. Had Gotti been content to wait his turn (i.e., not whack his boss, Paul Castellano, the head of the Gambino family), or even, having whacked him, been content to appeal humbly for pardon to the other dons, he might have died at home. As it was, he was left largely friendless and at the mercy of the F.B.I. Like Oedipus, he had asked for it.



"I can't put it down! The characters are so richly developed!"

All of this takes place against a dubiously fact-checked background. Part of the lore that Sussman repeats is that Luciano and Lansky collaborated to form the National Crime Syndicate, established around 1929, along with a judicial commission to oversee its disputes and rigid organizational discipline. If you couldn't get a hit authorized by the commission, you couldn't do the hit. This organization, over the decades, came to have a whiskered history of its own, with a supposed list of past bosses, like university presidents. Yet some chroniclers reasonably wonder how real it ever was. People like Lacey don't deny that there's collaboration among gangsters, but they suspect it's more implicit than highly orchestrated, rather like collaboration among book reviewers in the "New York literary mafia" (which was also sometimes called the Family) in the fifties and sixties. Lizzie loved Cal, who was protected by Bob, who was watching his back for knives from Philip—but there was never a secret yearly meeting, as those who were left out always suspected, where the editors of *The New York Review of Books* and *Partisan Review* got together to decide who was going to get whacked in their pages. Mafias act more by tacit collaboration over shared interests than by actual conspiracy.

So, just like the conspiracies that paranoid (read: all) authors imagine are rampant among book reviewers, the arguments persist over why Tommy DeSimone got whacked. Was it, as represented in book and film, because he had violated a cardinal rule by whacking a "made man," Billy Batts? Or because John Gotti hated him? ("DeSimone whacked two of my top earners, and I let it go for a long time," one source has Gotti telling a fellow-capo. "Now he wants to be made, and I'm not gonna sit quietly. . . . I wanna whack the bastard, and I want you to give me the green light.") Or was it instigated by the Lucchese capo Paulie Vario, who shrewdly egged on Gotti because DeSimone had assaulted Henry Hill's wife, with whom Vario had been having a secret romance? Or, as another source suggests, was DeSimone's close friend Jimmy Burke—the De Niro character—behind it, intent on covering his tracks in a heist he'd masterminded? The answer may be: all of the above. As with the reviewers of Norman Mailer's later fiction, there was no need for a conspiracy. Everyone separately decided to have him whacked.

In talking about the Mob, we airily use words like “mythological,” but there’s a sense in which the allegorical, rather than the strictly mythological, level of meaning is what makes the Mob irresistible. The Jewish-Italian connection is so central to the Mafia legend that one senses it must be operating on a kind of meta-level, where a larger conversation about Jews and Italians in American culture can get dramatized. We can readily convince ourselves that what might or might not be true about the Mob in New York—that the Italians have the passion and the Jews the production savvy—is true about movies in Hollywood, and we use the New York myth to heighten our understanding of the wider world.

It is certainly true of the masterpieces of the modern gangster movie—“[The Godfather](#)” and “[Once Upon a Time in America](#)” and “Goodfellas”—that the directors are all Italian while the producers are all Jewish, as if the New York Mob had replicated its ethnic synthesis in Hollywood. We use gangster mythology not just to tell stories about the mafiosi but to tell stories about ourselves. We want the Jewish-Italian axis to be true of the streets because it gives a dramatic form to the corresponding, if much less epic, reality of our entertainments.

Indeed, one of the best ways to understand the “Godfather” movies is as an extended allegory of the rise and corruption of the Actors Studio, in New York, with Brando, the fading but formidable don, teaching the Method to Pacino and De Niro. Here, the general moral narrative is that of the sellout of East Coast to West Coast—symbolically, of theatre to the movies. So the elderly Brando weeps, really, at the surrender of his theatrical career, while Pacino had only a partial one, and De Niro never really had one at all. The tale of corruption and idealism, with the Western half of the country (Las Vegas, Hollywood) luring authentic New Yorkers for what turns out to be meaningless dollars, is a perpetual one. This process arrived at an inevitable twist in the television series “Happy Days,” where Fonzie, the Italian tough, is played by a Jewish actor, and the creator, Garry Marshall, is an Italian.

Beneath mythology and allegory is the shabby and sordid truth: the price truly paid by America for the Mob was the price paid by organized labor. As all the books demonstrate, in the nineteen-twenties, the unions in New York made a kind of deal with the Devil, with the result of all deals with the Devil: the Devil takes the last trick. The unions, turning to gangsters to

protect themselves from strikebreakers, quickly discovered that the gangsters were just as willing to play the other side of the street for a better offer. In short order, the gangsters controlled both sides. The few brave union souls who continued to resist the Mob get a surprisingly cursory look in the mythologies. Several movies have been made about Jimmy Hoffa and the Teamsters, with the mobbed-up Hoffa still presented as a kind of working-class hero; in fact, the American labor movement did have working-class heroes, and Hoffa was not among them. Hoffa has been played by Pacino and Jack Nicholson. Walter Reuther, of the U.A.W., a genuine hero, has never been played by a star. A better moral than usual might be found in a movie about the struggle, largely successful, to keep the Mob out of a key New York City union, the International Ladies' Garment Workers'. We hear too little about, say, Min Matheson, the heroic woman union organizer who, in northern Pennsylvania, faced down thugs organized by the Mob boss Russell Bufalino—the mostly sympathetic character played by Joe Pesci in "[The Irishman](#)"—and maintained the integrity of the I.L.G.W.U. in the region.

What ended the power of the Mob in New York? The standard answer, replicated in Sussman's book, is the prosecution of the Mob bosses by Rudolph Giuliani and other Feds in the nineteen-eighties and nineties. The F.B.I. got a bug into an apartment above the Gotti headquarters, at the Ravenite Social Club, and produced an incriminating series of tapes of the crew at work. Add to this the creation of the *RICO* statutes that, with perhaps dubious constitutionality, made it possible to send a crime boss to prison for life for a pattern of racketeering, instead of having to nickel-and-dime the smaller charges.

A persuasive alternative account makes less of *RICO* and more of porno. The former Mafia prosecutor John Kroger, in his 2008 book, "[Convictions](#)," details his team's victories against the Mob but admits, with some chagrin, that the Mob was really defeated not by charges but by changes. Crime battens on prohibition. The lotteries stripped the numbers racket of its appeal; Internet porn took a toll on the prostitution and smut business; easily obtained credit cards robbed the loan sharks of their monopoly. A more permissive society—with gambling, sex, and debt regularized—was a less Mafia-friendly one. Being a criminal is always a bad career choice; the risks are too high and the hours too long. It has now become a ridiculous one.

You're better off actually being in waste management than using it as a cover.

According to a new foreword to Selwyn Raab's big book, however, the story of the Mob's vanishing in New York may itself be another, newer myth. There are signs that the Mob is holding on to life. A new generation of mobsters stay well below the radar and pursue their little scams away from the headlines, with minimal attention. The final irony there is that Donald Trump, who idolized the Mob bosses of the eighties, modelled his own behavior on theirs without actually being sharp enough to play in their league. National politics proved easier to con than the concrete Mob in New York. He learned the tabloid truths without having the tough-guy stones.

If the old Italian Mob of New York fame is passing, one of its oddest legacies is the word itself. Though the term is Sicilian in origin, everyone has a "mafia" now, including Russians, Colombians, Chechens, and Corsicans, not to mention those book reviewers. When moviemakers want to indicate pure evil now, they employ the Albanian mafia, as in the Liam Neeson movies—Albanians presumably being judged less likely to be offended than other nationalities, or at least less well organized in their offense. Had the Mafia never left rural Italy for fame in New York, the world would have been deprived of the winning name for a universal concept. It's a peculiar American triumph. ♦

December 7, 2020 Issue

Briefly Noted

“Wintering,” “We Keep the Dead Close,” “Bring Me the Head of Quentin Tarantino,” and “Music for the Dead and Resurrected.”

November 30, 2020

"A TRULY BEAUTIFUL BOOK."

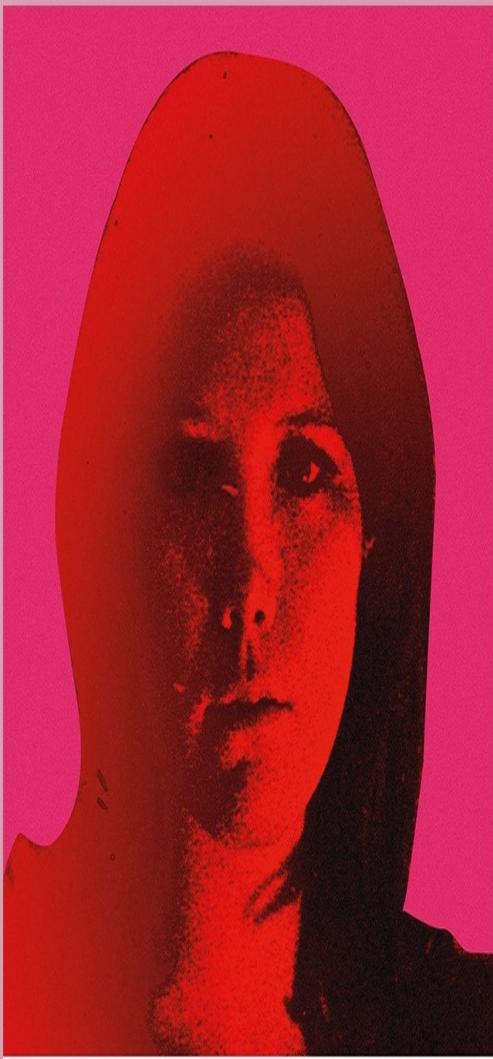
—ELIZABETH GILBERT

Wintering

THE POWER OF
REST AND RETREAT
IN
DIFFICULT TIMES

Katherine
May

Wintering, by Katherine May (*Riverhead*). This timely memoir details seven months that the author, suffering from a mysterious illness, spent sequestered at home. For May, who saw life as “linear, a long march from birth to death,” the enforced hiatus comes to feel like nonexistence. Yet it inspires unusual investigations—into hibernating animals, deciduous trees, the cultures of places with long winters, and the ritual pauses that once shaped human society. May’s message isn’t about how to be cheery during a personal winter but about how to embrace the “negative presence” of these moments, and to allow the rebirth they naturally engender. “We have seasons when we flourish and seasons when the leaves fall from us,” she writes. “Given time, they grow again.”



WE KEEP THE DEAD CLOSE

A MURDER AT HARVARD
AND A HALF
CENTURY OF SILENCE

BECKY COOPER

We Keep the Dead Close, by Becky Cooper (*Grand Central*). The woman at the center of this biography-cum-detective story is Jane Britton, a doctoral student in archeology at Harvard who was brutally murdered in 1969. Cooper, a Harvard alumna, tracks down people involved in the case—the neighbor who found the body, a policeman, university museum staff—and charts how Britton’s story has metamorphosed, through successive generations of students, into a “myth” about the dangers that women in academia face. While projecting her own life onto Britton’s, Cooper weighs the responsibility to accurately narrate the past: “Is it ever justifiable, I wondered, to trap someone in a story that robs them of their truth, but voices someone else’s?”

**BRING ME
THE HEAD OF
QUENTIN
TARANTINO**

STORIES

*Translated from the Spanish by
Christina MacSweeney*

**JULIÁN
HERBERT**

"[Julián Herbert is] among the more interesting and
ambitious prose stylists of our time." —*Los Angeles Times*

Bring Me the Head of Quentin Tarantino, by Julián Herbert, translated from the Spanish by Christina MacSweeney (Graywolf). Conceptual artists and *sicarios* share a capitalist Wild West in this Mexican writer's phantasmagoric stories. A "personal memories coach" extorts his clients; a crack addict impersonates a famous writer; and, in the titular story, a film critic tutors the leader of a cartel who, bearing "the face of Quentin Tarantino," has put a bounty on his doppelgänger. Giddily undermining authorial convention—one character delights in "depositing a little vomit on those readers who adore straightforward literature"—the stories show that, as the hapless film critic notes, "parody and the sublime are complementary, even at times interchangeable, aesthetic concepts."

Music for the Dead and Resurrected



Valzhyna Mort

Poems

Music for the Dead and Resurrected, by Valzhyna Mort (*Farrar, Straus & Giroux*). Memory, metaphor, and myth intermingle to sometimes nightmarish effect in this collection by a Belarus-born poet. Mort excavates the individual and communal traumas wrought by a violent and repressive national history, and calls herself “a test-child exposed to the burning reactor of my grandmother’s memory.” Her poetry can be stark in its sorrow and startling in its horror, but it is enlivened with gallows humor and a surreal sensibility. “Why does unfolding this starched bedding / feel like / skinning someone invisible?” she asks. “Why can’t the spoons, head-down in glasses, stop screaming?” Incantatory refrains evoke the wails of an accordion, an instrument that provides a leitmotif.

Brave New World Dept.

- [What if You Could Outsource Your To-Do List?](#)

What if You Could Outsource Your To-Do List?

Virtual assistants are one click—but often one continent—away. A new industry for bringing order to our work lives could shift the order of our workforce.

By [Nathan Heller](#)

November 30, 2020



Back when the world seemed bright and ambitious—another century, it might have been—I managed to convince myself, despite a lot of evidence to the contrary, that what I really needed in my life was an assistant. This was December, the month when traditionally I can no longer outrun the clerical tasks that have stalked me since the middle of the year. I had weeks of crinkled receipts to expense: the year-end tax on negligence. I was halfway through the process of contesting the charge on a vaccine shot that my insurance company had refused to cover, and I had to transcribe hours of interviews before I could begin to write—the only use of my time which generates an income. As a moonless night wore on, filled with snacking and monsters, I futzed with the formulas in my sad expense spreadsheets and knew that these were hours of life I'd never get back.

In the matter of assistant-having, I was not (as Titian might have said of Venus) without models. My introduction came the first time I answered a peer's e-mail and realized with a start that we were not alone. "Julianne can help us find a time," my correspondent wrote. Who? But here was this unknown person in the CC field, suddenly at my side like an attendant bearing Q-tips in a German men's room. I felt betrayed and then, immediately, envious. Tuesday or Wednesday? Why didn't *I* have one of these e-mail lurkers? I reflected for a moment and remembered that I couldn't afford one.

This made me doubly a loser. People usually get recognized and elevated for the achievements they have time to make, not for the hours they spend maintaining filing systems. One answer to the primal question about Wonder Women and Men—how do they do it?—comes down to help: bookkeepers, housecleaners, lawyers, strategists, and nannies. Many of the best have managed thus. Mark Twain, not thought to be a highfalutin man, enjoyed the help of a private secretary and a butler (named Claude). Mother Teresa had personal assistants (her good deeds seemingly did not extend to paperwork), and Malcolm X depended on a secretary whom he'd hired away from this magazine. Highly effective people may share certain habits, but what they usually share more generously are tasks that get in the way of their being highly effective.

Odd, then, that, in an age of harried two-income households, assistantship is on the wane. Over the past twenty years, the number of people in the U.S.

employed as executive secretaries and administrative assistants has more than halved, according to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which expects assistantship across industries to decline nine per cent by 2029. In part, that's due to changes in the nature of the work: bits of what a secretary would have done thirty years ago are handled today by technology and by jobs with different titles. But the shift is economic, too. Assistance positions are often among the first to go when companies cut costs, and financially strapped middle-class workers have less to spend on help outside the office, even if they need it more.

The problem of efficiency, productivity, and how to make a market out of some but not really enough disposable income is an obvious target for startup tech, and the brigades have already come through. “If you think about what exists in the movie ‘Her’ or ‘Iron Man’—a super-powerful assistant service that knows you and takes care of the world around you—it’s a really healing version of the future,” the entrepreneur and venture capitalist Sam Lessin told me not long ago. In 2015, he co-founded a company, called Fin, that released a virtual-assistant app with actual humans on the other end. The competition was weak; the closest most of us have got to “[Her](#)” is Siri (a known moron), Alexa (a known snoop), or that officious paper clip from the nineties. But Fin, like other companies, ultimately gave up on virtual assistance (it now does data analytics), because the business turned out to be hard. People anticipate human error from human assistants, but from tech they want perfection. And the model was strained by employee management. “You end up hiring thousands and thousands of people to get the scale,” Lessin said.

Faced with personnel challenges, some assistance startups have turned to poor nations abroad. A wage that's illegal in the United States will keep you well fed in Kenya, American entrepreneurs have noticed. Lately, some companies have sought to shift the burdens of a struggling American middle class to workers in Africa, South America, Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and elsewhere. To manage the mundane tasks of their narrow worlds, the thinking goes, small businesses and busy parents can turn to the wider one.

One of those companies is Invisible Technologies, which launched in 2015 and now has staff in thirty-five countries, from Malaysia to Ghana, Serbia to

Pakistan. It emerged in part from the idea that great savings can be harvested from the developing world. “Labor is incredibly cheap, and the biggest arbitrage opportunity in the world is the fact that you’ve got the largest labor market in history, with people who are connected to the Internet, speak English, and have amazing attitudes,” Francis Pedraza, Invisible’s thirty-one-year-old C.E.O. and founder, told me. “The ability to tap into that and create things is infinite.”

Besides these savings, Invisible grew from two ideas, one about bigness and the other about smallness. The bigness idea was that processes in a business or a life ought to be managed by one entity—a virtual super-assistant who can deal with anything. The smallness idea was that complex processes can be broken down and run in bits. Pedraza’s inspiration, on the latter point, was Henry Ford. “Every year, the price of Ford motor cars kept dropping and the quality kept improving,” he said. The key was separating production into simple tasks, such as screwing in a single lug nut, and then snapping those tasks together like Legos on the factory floor, allowing processes to be built without hiring new teams, then tightened to the inch.

Pedraza has brown hair, streamlined into a short crop; a long, chiselled face; and a predilection for what he calls “books by dead people.” (“You should distrust the *New York Times* best-seller in the airport bookshelf,” he told me. “Trust ‘Self-Reliance,’ by Ralph Waldo Emerson, because people are still reading Emerson today.”) When I met him, he had just heard of Philip Roth for the first time, possibly because Roth had recently been alive. Some of Pedraza’s colleagues amiably call him crazy. He is known for saying uncommon things in surprising ways. “Ideas are almost like aliens trying to come into the real world, and we’re just pregnant with them,” he has said. He has published more than two thousand essays on his Medium blog, and during this summer of unrest he wrote against “silencing all disagreement as evidence of oppression”—a position that he also claimed for Socrates, Diogenes, Tiresias, the Jewish prophets, Martin Luther, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Pedraza keeps a Roman *gladius* in his closet, for athletic practice, and speaks of “human potential” in the way some people talk about their favorite football team. He sees Invisible as a tool for realizing that potential by breaking past the clutter of modern life; he describes the company’s workflow as a “digital assembly line.”

Compared with sprawling labor-for-hire marketplaces like the site Upwork, where users enlist jobbers for specific tasks such as copywriting or data processing, Invisible is about order and scale. Most of the assistance it does is for entire companies. For businesses of one—say, a hapless writer—it offers an “executive support” service, which connects an individual with a virtual character to whom he or she can assign wishes and tasks.

Pedraza named his own assistant character John Keats, for his favorite dead poet. The character is not pupeted by one person: behind him is a team of people, which, unlike a real assistant, can do an endless number of things at once. When Pedraza includes John Keats’s address on an e-mail—for example, an e-mail about meeting with me—a hidden system moves into action. One meeting is broken into multiple tasks, appearing in a queue on the company’s proprietary delegation software, where they are claimed by workers around the world. Someone in, say, Bangladesh goes into Pedraza’s Google calendar to find times; someone else, maybe a few continents away, in Guatemala, compiles a briefing memo about the participants. Often, in Pedraza’s case, the tasks are not strictly professional. He recently had John Keats book him an elaborate laser hair-removal procedure he’d been hoping to get. (“There was some, you know, confusion about what, uh, areas were covered by this,” he said. “Invisible just handled it for me.”) Sometimes, he has John Keats trawl through his first- and second-degree connections on LinkedIn for contacts who might be interested in Invisible, and begin corresponding with them from his e-mail account, under his name. Some express interest, and meetings are set up. Until Pedraza goes to those, the whole process churns on like a software update in the background of his life. He likes to sign his e-mails (or someone does) “Efficiently yours.”

The average pay for foreign workers at Invisible—known as “agents”—is five dollars an hour. High-performing agents can make up to ten. “We are gathering all of their training data, all of their performance data,” Pedraza told me. Agents are monitored in an endless screen share, with superiors looking over their shoulders all the time to see what they’re doing and how long it’s taking. Instead of replacing humans in slow parts of the assembly line with robots (Ford’s practice), the company writes software to speed through rote steps once they’re set.



"Give in and buy a space heater."

Offshore outsourcing, which included more than fourteen million workers in 2018, has been linked to unemployment and wage stagnation in the American workforce: it's harder to get a raise if your competition abroad works for much less. Pedraza often boasts that Invisible, which hires six per cent of applicants, is more selective than Harvard. At the moment, in fact, Harvard's acceptance rate is five per cent, and many people go there because it is thought to open wormholes to the world of the élite, while most agents at Invisible simply want a decent job.

Once, it was big companies such as Nike or Google that did most outsourcing. But today the practice appeals to small businesses weathering [COVID-19](#). Invisible's revenue has more than tripled since the beginning of the year, and its agents in the developing world now handle some of the clerical work involved in setting restaurants up on several of the largest food-delivery platforms. We hear a lot about changes to the American labor market during the pandemic, but this one is likely to linger when it ends.

"In mid-April, we had to let forty per cent of our company go," the director of revenue operations at one mobile-commerce startup told me. "Before, we probably had ten people doing the work—but the reality is that Invisible is doing such a good job, and we're seeing such cost efficiencies, that post-coronavirus we're maybe not considering employing for these tasks again."

In a spirit of adventure, I signed up with Invisible myself. Over e-mail, I was introduced to my new assistant, William Blake. (Not my favorite poet, but whatever.) I had planned to ask for his help transcribing an interview, but I faltered at the crucial question. How to address him? "William" felt ludicrous. "Blake"? Unfair to art. I settled on "Mr. Blake"—appreciative and respectful, like Mr. Darcy, Mr. Robot, Mr. Shawn—and wrote him a long, solicitous set of instructions. An eighty-five-hundred-word transcript came back the next day.

Invisible's executive-support clients are required to spend at least two thousand dollars on services per month. This is not cheap, though it's worth noting that a full-time-ish assistant somewhere like New York costs much more. Hayley Darden, the company's marketing director, advised me to regard Mr. Blake less as a personal assistant than as a process assistant: not

good for random errands—such as haggling with Verizon customer service—but excellent with repetitive, mind-numbing chores. “Whatever you most hate doing in your life is perfect,” she told me.

I decided to assign Mr. Blake one of my saddest tasks, filing expenses. At *The New Yorker*, this is done via a cryptic online platform. I walked through the rigmarole with Sam Mata, one of Invisible’s “delivery managers.” He works from his home in the Dominican Republic, meeting with new clients to gauge their needs—a conversation that Invisible calls “discovery,” and that often has a therapeutic mood. (In workflows as in life, people rarely see the heart of their problems clearly.) Did I want receipts filed separately, or in bundles? Mata asked. And how often should Mr. Blake check for new ones? Darden had explained that a first-rate assistance operation would intercept the work before it even reached my radar screen. Ideally, Mr. Blake would log in to my e-mail account, look for receipts, and file them on his own.

Log in to my e-mail? I had visions of my not-favorite poet pawing over inchoate notes I’d sent myself, weird forwards from Mom, love letters I’d received in the Obama years. I could hear him snickering over embarrassing purchases, such as—just to give an extremely hypothetical example—a twenty-five-minute sleep meditation narrated by Diddy. Not to fear. The agents would use a secure-key client and never see my passwords. And, I was assured, their bosses would be watching for any funny business.

The next morning, I sat down at my desk to find ten e-mails from the dreaded *New Yorker* expenses portal: my submissions had been approved. My personal dashboard on the Invisible site revealed a breakdown of the job by unit cost (rounded to \$1.83 per expense) and total (\$27.50). I felt as if someone had broken into my home and scrubbed my bathroom while I slept. For all the quantitative specificity, though, I couldn’t see the names of the agents who had worked on the job behind Mr. Blake’s façade.

Next, I arranged for Mr. Blake to book my meetings. Mata sent me templates for Mr. Blake’s e-mails, which turned out to be a dangerous overture; my writer’s compulsions kicked in as soon as I opened them. Mr. Blake made first contact by writing:

Hello [Name],

Happy to help you and Nathan connect. Below are suggested . . .

But did “Happy to help you and Nathan connect” maybe sound slightly grudging? With that phrasing, it was easy to envision Mr. Blake as a twenty-four-year-old Bard graduate, cooler and smarter than me, returning to his three roommates each night with stories of his effete boss, Nathan, who was incapable of scheduling his own meetings and who *needed to have everything printed out*. I changed it to:

Delighted to help you and Nathan connect.

This had the ring of job contentment. I spent fifteen more minutes turning the sentences around before going back to my work. Ah, efficiency.

A few days later, I Zoomed with Prabhat Hira, an agent who had worked on my expense filing. He was based in New Delhi, and appeared in a collared jersey for the Gryffindor quidditch team. “The delegations I worked on for you were kind of exciting!” he said—the most enthusiasm for expense filing that I had ever heard. Hira had started working as a freelancer online in order to spend more time at home with his young family. He spoke fondly of his “journey through Invisible” and, like all the workers whom I met, described the company’s collegiality. “It feels really good to talk to people from different countries, from different cultures,” he said. Still, most of the people he was talking to were other agents. During the nearly three years he had worked at Invisible, Hira told me, I was the first client he’d ever met.

For a long time, the de-facto genre of assistantship stories was comedy, because societal roles were thought to be fixed, and straining against the order of things had funny outcomes. Malvolio, the imperious steward in “Twelfth Night,” chafes against the limits of his station and gets punished with ugly socks. [P. G. Wodehouse](#) drew on a long tradition of stories about clever servants acting beyond their master’s ken: Jeeves and Bertie Wooster are crossed by the order of things, the boss set to task and taste by his assistant, and the injustice is comic because both of them are powerless to correct this misarrangement.

In the middle of the twentieth century, the old nonsense about class and station started to fall away in the West. With the turn toward supposed

meritocracy, a different literature of assistance emerged. Recent stories look more like bildungsromans; the transgression of roles is where the drama, not the comedy, comes through. “[The Devil Wears Prada](#)” and “[Clouds of Sils Maria](#)” are narratives about assistants becoming or choosing not to become, and about bosses who watch their pasts replay from the far side of life choices that they can’t reverse. Assistance may be where people start out, but it is no longer necessarily where they end up, and that knowledge makes for friction in the daily grind. The curse of opportunity is the mandate to be always striving.

And so, just as many assistants have been slightly terrified of their powerful bosses, a number of powerful bosses now appear to be slightly terrified of their assistants. Business kingpins fret over being sold out. Luxury-industry leaders worry about assistants absconding with goods or money. A surprising number of Hollywood types seem to share a fear that their assistants will experience a Norma Desmond moment and attack them with a weapon. In theory, Invisible’s assistance presents no such human perils. Pedraza can be sure that John Keats isn’t trying to take his job, embezzle, or have sex with strangers in his favorite chair, because John Keats is just a big tin man of fragmentary shared processes and incoherent passions.

In practice, though, the mandate to strive is spread across the globe. Even before *COVID-19*, Invisible had no office, and not long ago I went to visit Pedraza at his apartment and operations center in Brooklyn, a shimmering, Jenga-like glass tower on the East River. In deference to the pandemic, I had proposed a virtual meeting. But Pedraza, who described himself as being “risk-friendly,” preferred something more personal. In the lobby, one doorman guided me to another doorman, who guided me to a large elevator bank, and I went up.

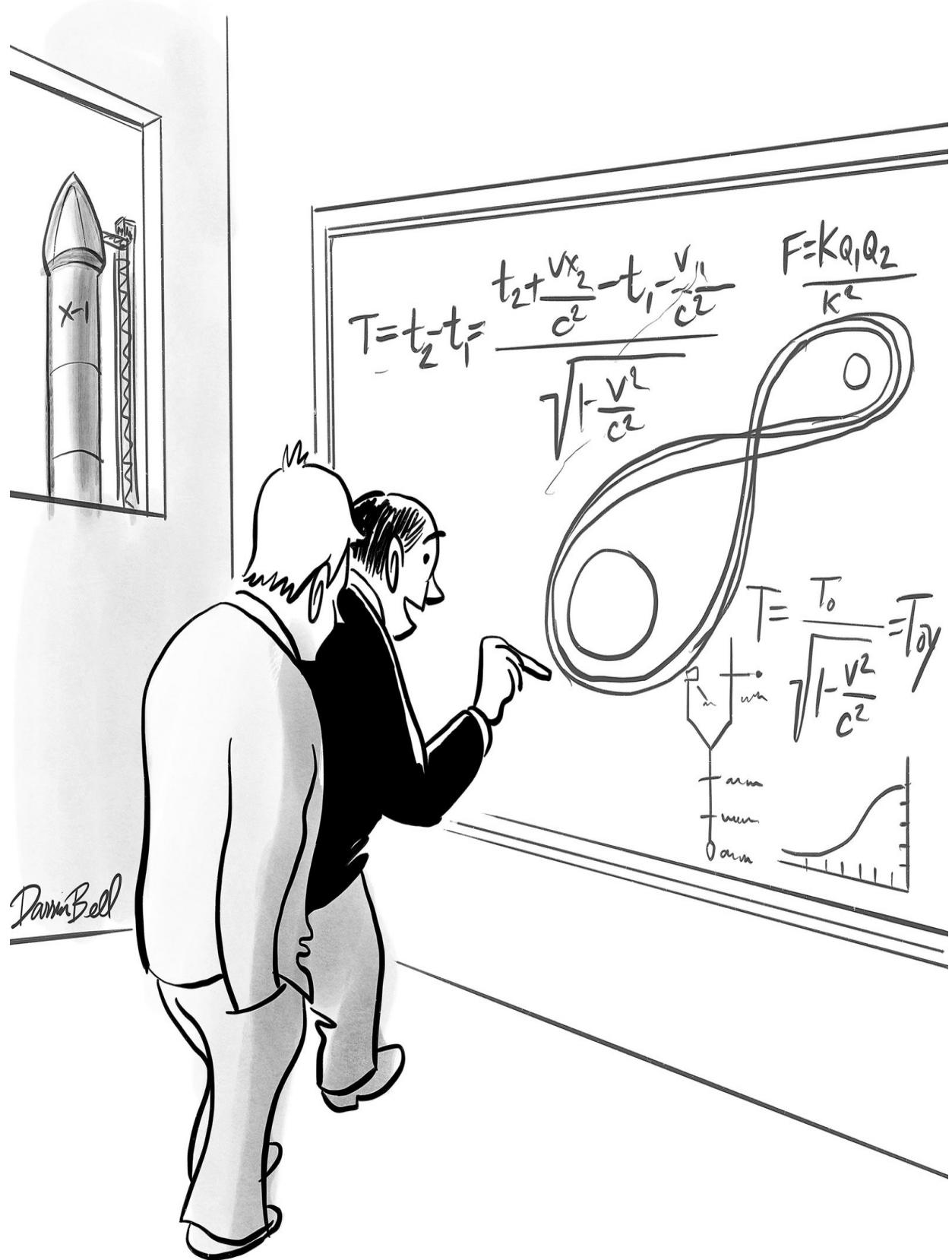
The apartment where Pedraza leads a growing empire of work was not much larger than a college dorm room. The kitchen spanned a counter near the door. The rest of the space was dominated by a platform bed with an uncovered duvet.

“Sometimes I have guests here. I’ll cook a meal,” Pedraza told me. It was nice to imagine. He sat down by a desk. He was wearing a black shirt, white

shorts, and white canvas shoes. I sat on a small gray couch. There was one window—the death-prevention kind that opens only a few inches.

Pedraza grew up in San Diego, with parents who come from immigrant families. (His mother, a former entrepreneur, is Persian; his father, an architect by training, was brought up largely in Venezuela and Japan.) When he was in elementary school, he was bullied. “I was ready to be friends with everybody,” he told me, “but I wasn’t willing to go through the hazing rituals of ascending the hierarchy.” At twelve, he enrolled in a five-year Skype course on “the great books of Western civilization” and his world changed. He learned to inhabit a private order drawn from books and personal dreams. On his darker days, he identified with Don Quixote. On brighter days, too. “The most wonderful and exciting future is one in which as many individuals as possible are expressing as much of their potential as possible, and everyone has their own ideas about what the future is going to look like,” he said.

Pedraza went to Cornell with high hopes, but the giant lectures vexed him. He spent a year abroad, at Oxford, and liked its one-on-one research tutorials. Back in Ithaca, he started a line of Livestrong-like bracelets that he called DoBands. Wearers would commit to doing something, such as running a marathon, and, when the task was completed, log their achievement in an online database and pass the bracelet on to someone else. When Pedraza graduated, he moved to Palo Alto and tried to launch a social iPhone app to help people achieve personal goals. He found no investors until he lucked into an introduction to the venture capitalist [Peter Thiel](#), who invested fifty thousand dollars; \$2.5 million in additional funding followed. The app was called Everest, and it had around half a million downloads, but the company failed after three years. “The fatal flaw,” Pedraza told me, “was that people would quit working on their goals.”



"Thanks to the effects of time dilation, only three days will have passed for us, but when we return to Earth the Trump Presidency will have just ended."

Invisible is plainly oriented toward its clients' achievement, but Pedraza believes that it helps its workers along, too. He's an advocate of employee-owned business; fifty per cent of Invisible is currently in the hands of its staff. If agents in distant countries show outstanding initiative, he says, they can take equity, too. So far, only two out of two hundred and seventy-nine have reached his standard, but he holds out hope for the rest. He told me, "Invisible in its very, very long-term strategy is sort of a back door into an education company." He means that it can serve as a kind of school: Invisible offers skills that, in theory, can be transferred to other desirable jobs. Nadine Jost, an agent in Pretoria, told me, "You have a test every week, and, if you test low, they will tell you that you need to be retrained."

Although virtual characters like John Keats or William Blake make the interface accessible to individuals, the heart of Invisible's business is churning through labor-intensive processes for small or medium-sized companies. "This is a juicy, juicy market," Scott Downes, Invisible's forty-nine-year-old chief technology officer, told me. Roland Ligtenberg, a co-founder of Housecall Pro, a business platform catering to home-service companies—plumbers, carpet cleaners, and so forth—uses Invisible to help coordinate the sorts of growth efforts that a young startup needs. "Being able to have an extra set of hands you can spin up at any moment is a huge competitive advantage—the reason being that you're trying a lot of little things, and, once you see one working, you want not to just double down but to double down on the double-down," Ligtenberg said. Without outsourcing, he'd have to undertake a round of hiring every time he wanted to start a new initiative—and a round of firing if it didn't work out.

In Silicon Valley, the conventional wisdom is that companies must grow quickly and focus on a narrow band of the market (often called "going vertical"). Pedraza favors margins over fast growth—Invisible aspires to be profitable by next fall—and thinks that gains accrue horizontally: a little Lego piece is invested for one process in one industry, but it can be used in others, and the skills that agents learn have concomitant range.

Pedraza's other education goal for agents is more numinous: "Teach them how to think, teach them how to create, help them to discover their da Vincian potential." To this end, he often chats with agents on Slack. Last

year, he undertook a world tour to meet some in person. “It was a magical trip, you know, and a couple of things were eye-openers for me,” he told me. “One is that our agents are nearly all college graduates.” Pedraza tries to share his intellectual interests; for example, he posted clips of himself on YouTube reading Bastiat’s economic essays. “As a company, every day, we’ll read a chapter in a book I love,” he told me. “Right now, we’re reading Aesop’s fables. They’re wonderful, and so simple anyone can understand them.”

The hope for shared aspirations across the globe isn’t unique to Invisible. Phoebe Yao is the founder and C.E.O. of another outsourcing startup, Pareto, based in San Francisco. Its mission is to spread female empowerment; it draws on a labor pool of mostly Filipino women, whose pay starts at four dollars an hour. “Essentially what we’re teaching these women is how to think critically about the world and the world’s problems,” she told me. “We go through this monthlong process of teaching them to ask the right questions.” I asked for an example. “First, it’s that you *can* ask questions,” Yao said. “And then, when they ask, it’s usually things like ‘Is it O.K. that I’m doing something like this?’ ‘Is this something that you want me to be doing?’”

When Pedraza shares insights from his ten years of entrepreneurship, he likes to emphasize an up-and-at-’em attitude. He told me he wants agents to overcome the “mental block” to success—the voice that says, “No, I couldn’t start a company that’s worth millions of dollars.” “No, actually, you can,” he insisted to me. “Like, I know you’re in Kenya, and I know it’s harder there, but, like, look—I’ll help you.”

Yet global assistantship as apprenticeship remains more notional than actual. Not long ago, I spoke with one of Invisible’s agents in Kenya, Brighton Ooko. He is thirty years old, and he excelled as a programming student at the Multimedia University of Kenya. In 2017, he became the second agent hired at Invisible. He has since been promoted to middle management, at ten dollars an hour, and he oversees a team of fifteen. His income is a healthy one in Kenya; he bought a plot of land in Malindi and had a house built for his wife and son. But the grind is real. Ooko begins his workday at 4 p.m. and continues through to morning, logging in sixty or seventy hours a week. The nonstop nocturnal schedule, plus the business of raising a family, is less

than totally conducive to flights of entrepreneurial imagination; when I asked Ooko about his long-term ambitions, he referred me to Invisible's corporate goals.

Up in his tiny apartment in the Jenga-like tower, Pedraza was giving me a tour of everything he'd imagined but hadn't had a chance to execute. On the little desk lay a stack of Moleskine notebooks filled with ideas: other businesses he'd dreamed up, sketches, poems. On the wall to my right were pictures Pedraza had drawn, projections of unbuilt buildings from his imagination. "I'm an amateur in the sense of the word *amator*," he told me. "I think bad art is the secret to good art. You just have to do it and not let your ego stop you."

"That's my Narcissus," he said, pointing to a portrait of a long face with close-set eyes. "I think narcissism—clinically, psychologically—is a very bad term, and also a term we use a lot casually, but in a classical sense it's not necessarily a bad thing. To know thyself is the beginning of wisdom." Another picture, of a black figure trapped in a gray oval, the walls closing in, was inspired by reading Heidegger. "In your inner mind you can be screaming into the abyss," Pedraza said.

I looked around the little studio, with Pedraza's paintings tacked up, and asked how all his amateur production fitted with his churn of global efficiency at work.

Pedraza was silent for a while. "You're touching on an insecurity of mine—really, a nest of insecurities," he said at last. "Am I focussed? Is all this"—he ran his eyes over the room—"a distraction?" These questions arose sometimes when he chose to read a novel or a philosophy book instead of a business book, and he feared that he was shirking, maybe not being efficient enough. He worried that if he didn't keep up he'd be left behind, because some people were running so quickly and with such focus that, if you didn't do the same, you risked betraying your future.

He told me this, then turned back to his computer, to check what John Keats had scheduled next. Recalled to the clockwork of his day, he seemed to shake off his uncertainty and rejoin the flow of necessary work. He'd more than halved the company's burn rate this year. He was giving his investors

reason to be pleased. “The products are getting better, and the operations are getting better,” he said. Before I left, he rose to crack open the window behind me, to catch a little of the breeze outside, and as he undid the latch I felt a wave of vertigo, although I didn’t know whether it came from looking up or looking down. ♦

Classical Music

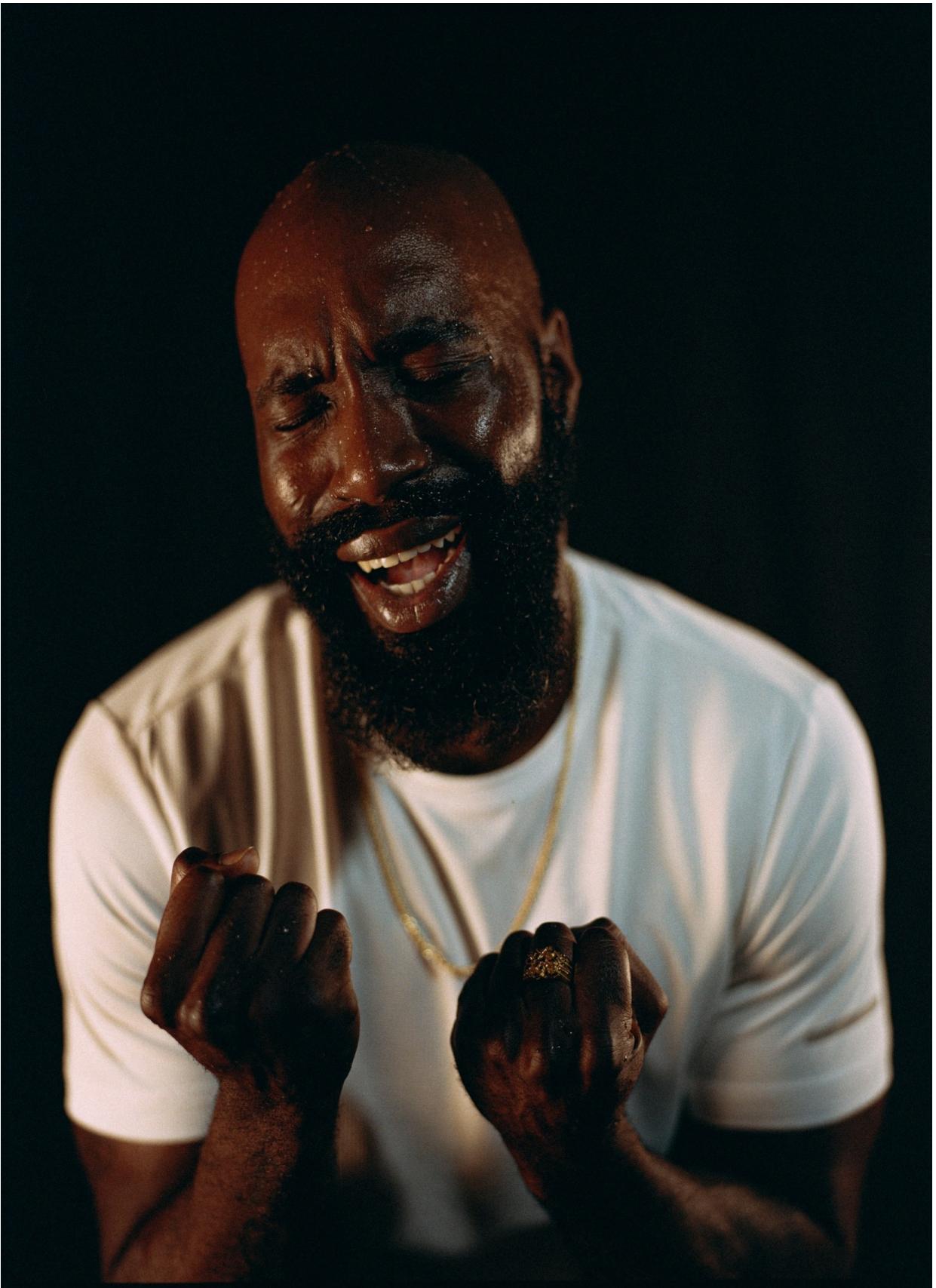
- A Prisoners' Chorus in “Breathing Free”

[December 7, 2020 Issue](#)

A Prisoners' Chorus in “Breathing Free”

The Heartbeat Opera’s new streaming show pairs excerpts of Beethoven’s “Fidelio” with spirituals and works by Black composers to consider the racial disparities in classical music and the prison system.

November 27, 2020



Photograph by Shikeith for The New Yorker

The most memorable moment in Heartbeat Opera's "Fidelio," from 2018, was a video of several prison choruses—dozens of men and women, including Michael Powell (pictured)—singing. Heartbeat's new streaming show, "**Breathing Free**" (Dec. 4-12), pairs excerpts from the Beethoven opera with spirituals and works by Black composers to consider the racial disparities in classical music, the prison system, and beyond. Powell, who was released from prison in May amid a *COVID-19* outbreak, joins a panel discussion on Dec. 5.

Comic Strip

- [A Cheery Story](#)

December 7, 2020 Issue

A Cheery Story

By [Roz Chast](#)

November 30, 2020

A CHEERY STORY

Comment

- [The Cost of Trump's Assault on the Press and the Truth](#)

December 7, 2020 Issue

The Cost of Trump's Assault on the Press and the Truth

The President is being forced to give up his attempt to overturn the election. But he will continue his efforts to build an alternative reality around himself.

By [David Remnick](#)

November 29, 2020

Presidents have always complained about [the press](#). At awards ceremonies and journalism-school conferences, Thomas Jefferson is often remembered for his principled support: in 1787, he wrote to the Virginia statesman Edward Carrington, “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate to prefer the latter.” Yet, by 1814, having endured the Presidency, Jefferson was not quite as high-minded, whining by post to a former congressman about “the putrid state” of newspapers and “the vulgarity, & mendacious spirit of those who write for them.”

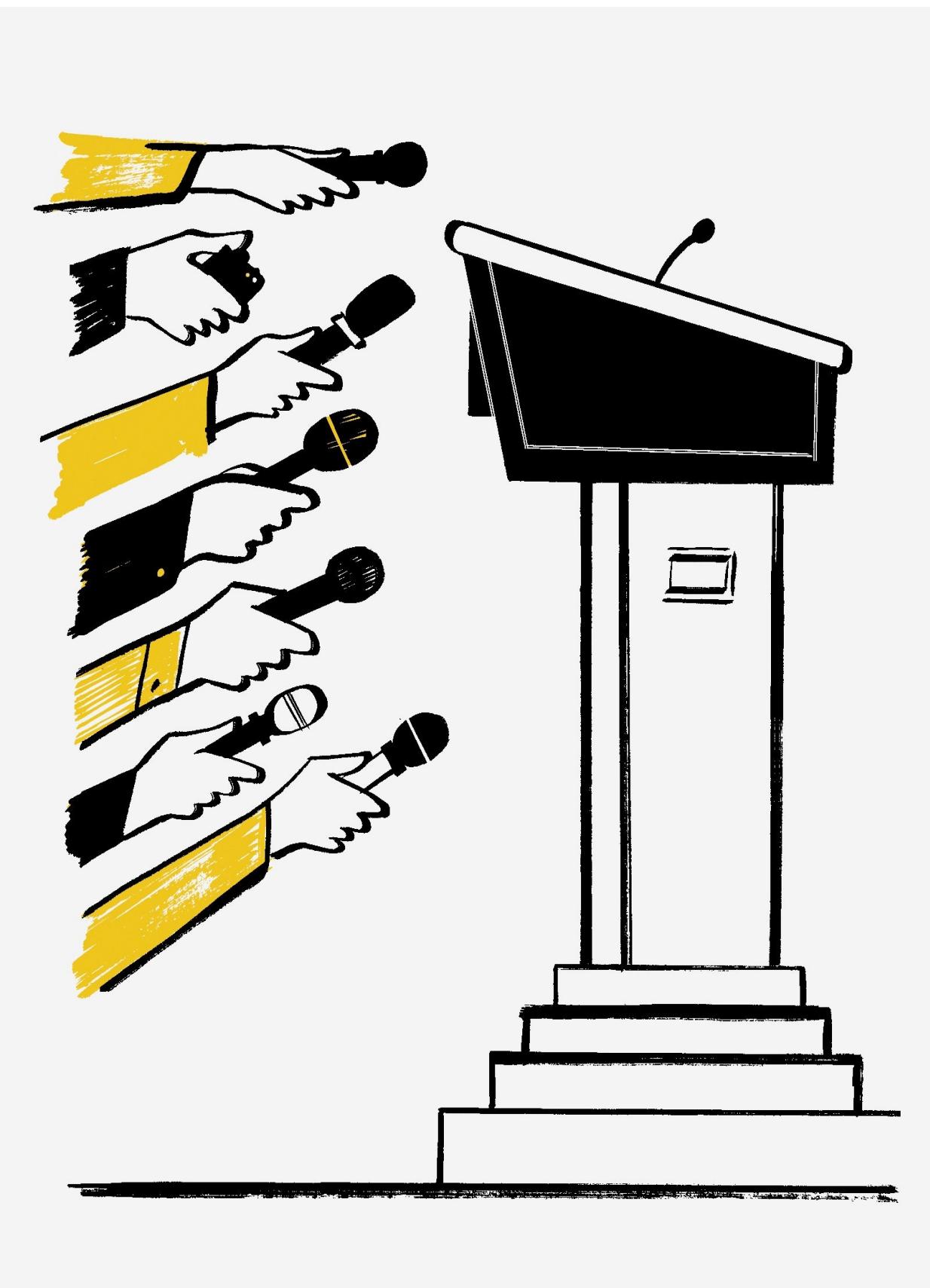


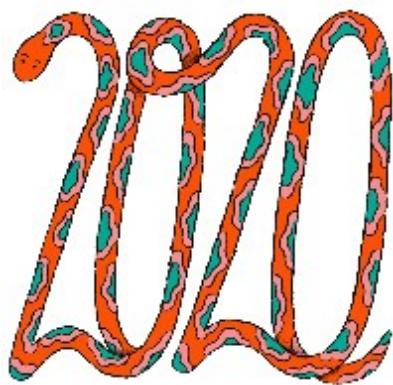
Illustration by João Fazenda

You could hardly blame him. How would you like to read that one of John Adams's surrogates has branded you a “mean-spirited, low-lived fellow”? No President escapes scrutiny or invective. In 1864, *Harper’s* listed the many epithets that the Northern press had hurled at Abraham Lincoln: Filthy Story-Teller, Despot, Liar, Thief, Braggart, Buffoon, Monster, Ignoramus, Scoundrel, Perjurer, Robber, Swindler, Tyrant, Fiend, Butcher, Ape, Demon, Beast, Baboon, Gorilla, Imbecile.

[Donald Trump](#) began his career convinced that reporters, once exposed to his myriad charms, would be willing stenographers of his story. He learned to elevate himself, his brand, and his interests largely by supplying the New York tabloids with a ready-made character, a strutting snake-oil salesman who provided an unending stream of gossip-page items about his personal and commercial exploits. It was of little concern to anyone that these items were, in the main, preposterous. Occasionally, investigative reporters, profile writers, and the courts would look more deeply into Trump’s swindles and business bankruptcies, but, as long as he skirted total ruin, he seemed to think that even his bad press added to his allure.

[2020 in Review](#)

New Yorker writers reflect on the year’s highs and lows.



Trump’s relationship with reporters inevitably changed when he shifted his occupation to the command of the federal government. First as a candidate, and then in the early days of his Presidency, he discovered that the press was a variegated beast; Cindy Adams and Maggie Haberman were not of the same stuff. He could still depend on toadying support from some quarters,

particularly the editorial holdings of Rupert Murdoch and emerging properties like Breitbart and [Newsmax](#); however, he was now getting a more scrupulous going-over from what [Sarah Palin](#) had called “the lamestream media.” Trump craved the acceptance of such institutions as the *Times* and the *Washington Post*, but he knew that his base loathed them. And so he would loathe them, too, while at the same time declaring a new, Trumpian reality, constructed of what his adviser [Kellyanne Conway](#) memorably called “alternative facts.”

On his second day in office, Trump sent his press secretary, Sean Spicer, to the White House briefing room to con the nation the way he had conned the tabloids. The crowds on the Mall for Trump’s Inauguration, Spicer insisted, were unprecedented, despite the evidence to the contrary. A few weeks later, as news coverage further nettled Trump, he took to Twitter to declare that CNN, ABC, NBC, CBS, and the *Times* were “the enemy of the American People.” The resonance was clear. In the Soviet era, to be branded an “enemy of the people” was to await a boxcar to the Gulag. Even the U.S. Senate, whose Republican majority would prove so unfailingly loyal to Trump, seemed alarmed. In August, 2018, the Senate passed, by unanimous consent, a resolution attesting to “the vital and indispensable role the free press serves.”

But Trump knew precisely what he was doing, and he never let up. During a meeting at Trump Tower, Lesley Stahl, of CBS News, asked why he kept attacking the press. “You know why I do it?” he said. “I do it to discredit you all and demean you all, so that, when you write negative stories about me, no one will believe you.”

Trump may have devoted more mental energy to his degradation of the press—through lawsuits, threats, and hundreds of tweets—than to any other issue. He called reporters “corrupt,” “scum,” and “some of the worst human beings you’ll ever meet.” And those words riled up his base, so much so that at his rallies reporters were often berated and menaced. Last year, the F.B.I. arrested a Coast Guard officer who had drawn up a hit list that included reporters at MSNBC and CNN, and an Army officer was arrested after allegedly conducting an online discussion in which he talked about blowing up the headquarters of a major TV network.

Trump's assault on the press and his assault on the truth—he made more than sixteen thousand false or misleading claims in his first three years in office, according to the Washington Post's fact-checking operation—have taken their toll. Where once American Presidents gave at least rhetorical support to civil liberties, he has given comfort to foreign autocrats, from [El-Sisi](#) to [Erdoğan](#), who routinely parrot his slogan of “fake news” and lock up offending journalists. Perhaps Trump’s most disgraceful act in this regard was his refusal to speak a critical word against the Saudi leadership after the murder of [Jamal Khashoggi](#), a columnist for the *Post*.

The costs at home are no less ominous. It is now estimated that one American dies every minute from [Covid-19](#). Every two or three days there is a 9/11-scale death count. How many of those people died because they chose to believe the President’s dismissive accounts of the disease rather than what public-health officials were telling the press? Half of Republican voters believe Trump’s charge that the 2020 election was “rigged.” What will be the lasting effects on American democracy of that disinformation campaign? Bit by bit, Trump is being forced to give up his attempt to overturn the election. But he will continue his efforts to build an alternative reality around himself. Now that Fox News has proved insufficiently servile, he is likely to join forces with, buy, or launch an even more destructive media enterprise.

As President, [Joe Biden](#) cannot battle the debasement of a reality principle in American life by executive order. But support for press freedoms ought to be a central element of his domestic and foreign policies. What’s more, the press itself needs to learn from the prolonged emergency of the past four years. Just as it must go on applying investigative and analytical pressure to all forms of power, including the new Administration, it cannot relax in calling out the deeply anti-factual and anti-democratic foundation of a movement like Trump’s. The stakes are high. Donald Trump may be moving to Mar-a-Lago, but he, and the alternative reality he has created, could be with us for a long time. ♦

An earlier version of this article misspelled the name of the CBS News reporter Lesley Stahl.

Dept. of Values

- [COVID Goes to College](#)

[December 7, 2020 Issue](#)

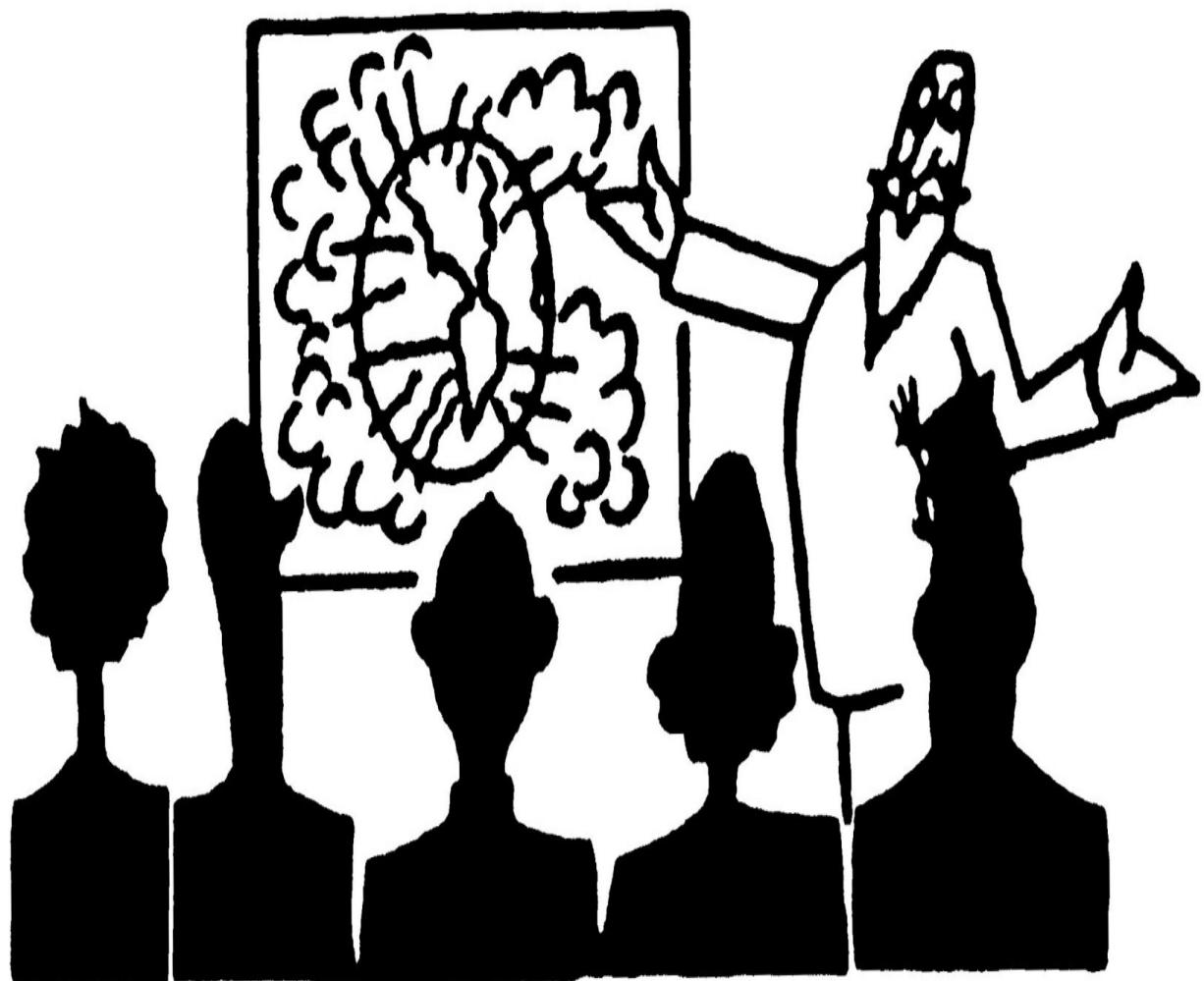
COVID Goes to College

An economics professor, comparing lives saved with the cost of the shutdown, asked students, How much is a life worth? One answered twenty-four thousand dollars.

By [Carrie Battan](#)

November 30, 2020

During a recent Zoom lecture, Terry Iverson, an economist at Colorado State University, posed a question to the students in his introductory economics course. It was one that Americans have been mulling all year. “What’s the value of a life?” he asked. “And how do we compare lives saved with the value of lost economic activity?”



For professors, particularly those in the social sciences, *COVID-19* has provided a real-time trove of case studies on which to center syllabi. Iverson began developing his course, *The Economics of COVID-19*, in April. He specializes in climate change, and as lockdowns were starting he began to draw connections between ecological disaster and global pandemic. In the lecture, he told his students, “If we think about *COVID*, we might want to add up the costs and benefits of social distancing.” Iverson, who is forty-four, had a salt-and-pepper beard and wore black-rimmed glasses. “Suppose the state of Colorado is going into lockdown for two weeks,” he said, and explained how to conduct a cost-benefit analysis, weighing the advantages against the potential economic losses.

The critical factor in making such an assessment, he said, is determining the “value of statistical life,” a variable that calculates a fractional risk for an entire population. “If we have a million people and each person has a one-in-a-million chance of dying, that would count as one statistical life.” He went on, “Does anybody have any idea what they think the value of a statistical life should be in the U.S. in 2020?” Although participation, according to the class syllabus, accounts for ten per cent of a student’s grade, no one jumped to answer. “Make a guess,” he prodded.

“Twenty-four thousand?” a young woman asked, haltingly.

Iverson seemed taken aback. “Twenty-four thousand . . . dollars?” he asked. “Uh, to put that in perspective, that’s about half the median income of a person in the U.S. Do you think that a life is only worth six months of income?”

The girl laughed nervously. “No.”

“If we looked just at people’s wages, what would be the right amount of wages?” he continued. “A year of wages, their whole lifetimes of wages? That’s an interesting question.” He asked the students why focussing on wages might underestimate the value of a life.

“Emotional impact,” a student said. Bingo. Iverson said, “That pain and trauma—the consequences kids have if they lose a parent—can have big impacts.”

Using Zoom's chat feature, a student ventured, "How much you are worth with your organs and such on the black market was what I thought of," she wrote. "100,000."

Another young woman chimed in: "Could it also be a person's wage or jobs? Like, a C.E.O. of a company has a really high income, then a doctor has a lower one. Then you'd say that the C.E.O. has, like, a more valuable life?"

"Excellent question," Iverson said. "Should society view a richer person being worth more than a poorer person?" He guided the students back to looking for a figure more representative across a population. "Throw out a number that you think is too high, since we have a number that's too low."

"I'd say half a million, or anything in that range, would be too high," a young man offered.

"Half a million feels too high?"

"Assuming I had the money to save someone's life, how much would I spend just to save some random stranger's life?" the student went on. "I wouldn't spend that much, because that would possibly bankrupt me. And I would also feel like, Why is this person special? Why not help save this other person?"

"What if that person was you, or someone you cared about?" Iverson asked. The class began to feel more like philosophy than like economics.

"It's supposed to be an anonymous person," the student noted. "It would suck, but, at the same time, I can't really help the fact that they don't know me."

Iverson was unpersuaded. "It's more like, What should society at large be willing to spend to avoid loss of life in general?" He mentioned the way in which seat-belt laws constrain personal liberties but save thousands of lives. In the chat, a student wrote that, when seat-belt laws were first passed, "people would cut them out of their car." Iverson ignored the comment and told the class that the government actually has a number. "The number tends to be a little higher when the President is a Democrat and a little lower when the President is a Republican," he said. "They tend to range from about five

to ten million dollars. So it's quite a bit higher than what you guys have thrown out there."

"How'd they get to that number?" someone asked.

"It's actually quite an interesting puzzle," Iverson said. But the class was over. They'd have to wait till next time. ♦

Fiction

- [“Dietrologia”](#)

Dietrologia

By [Paul Theroux](#)

November 30, 2020



“Listen, in the debris field otherwise known as my life, I recall one funny thing—but when I say funny I don’t mean it was funny chuckle-chuckle. It was horrible and obvious, but I didn’t have the capacity to see it then—that was a gift I developed later. At the time, it was like when you’re in the water at the beach, say, staring at something floating in front of you, and your back is turned, and you don’t realize that a monster wave is about to wash over you. Maybe a little pink slipper, like yours, that someone lost is bobbing there in the water, distracting you, while the monster wave is coming up behind you—*mangaggia!* Except it wasn’t a wave. I was in my car. It was after work, and I was tired from a long day. And here’s the funny—not funny—thing. Instead of going straight home, I drove around, not near my house but on back roads and through the woods, until it got dark. And even then I didn’t go home. Look, I didn’t want to go home. I kept on driving, not in a hurry, keeping to the speed limit, on and on, into the darkness. I did this for weeks—got out of work, set off in my car, and drove around, noticing things I hadn’t seen before. People sitting on porches, chatting away. Kids on bikes. Man going into a house—‘Hi, honey!’ Old man and old lady, scuffing along the sidewalk, holding hands—beautiful. And, after a month of this driving around, it came to me, the not very funny thing: that the monster wave in the background was the state of my marriage. My wife was the reason I was killing time, driving longer and longer, staying behind the wheel of my car. I was putting it off. See, I didn’t want to go straight home, because she was there. That was my first wife.”

“Uncle,” the girl said.

“Yes?”

“Can I have another cookie?”

“Sure,” Sal Frezzolini said, but remained seated in his rocker. “Now you can see that it was home—the idea of home—that I was resisting.”

[Paul Theroux on making sense of one's life.](#)

“Can I have a cookie, too?” the boy said.

“And me! I want a cookie!” the smallest one, a girl, bawled, batting the air with her hand.

As Sal led them indoors, the boy said, “Other people’s houses smell funny.”

“True—and that’s also part of the ambiguity I feel now,” Sal said. “By that I mean my state of mind. I’m confused.”

“Why are you confused?” the bigger girl asked, but Sal pretended not to hear, and made a business of removing the lid from the ceramic cookie jar and presenting each child with a cookie. Then they padded out to the porch again, and he was back in his rocker, and they were crouched at his feet, chewing.

“Home,” he said, “the notion of home, like the notion of marriage, requires the illusion of being indispensable to someone. And I didn’t have that illusion anymore. I can’t honestly say I have it now.”

He fell silent, squinting past them, while they watched him, as though waiting for more. But he was calm—spent and satisfied, benign again, relieved, liking the careless crunch, and the catlike way they licked the crumbs from their lips. He wanted to confess to them, *Usually I hate to see people eat, especially old people, the way they chew their food, and swallow hard, looking disgusted. Imagine having to look at that every day in the cafeteria of an assisted-living facility. But your eating is beautiful.* He said nothing; he watched the children with pleasure.

“Uncle,” the boy said. “Want to see me do wheelies?”

“Yes. But tell me your name again. I forgot it.”

“Kamana.”

“And you?”

“Bella,” the bigger girl said. “And she’s Nanu.”

“Cookie!” the child howled.

“It means ‘wave,’ ” Bella said.

They jumped to their feet and ran to the driveway and mounted their bikes—the small girl on a tricycle—and wobbled on the gravel, skidding back and forth. Kamana pulled his handlebars back and reared, balancing for seconds on one wheel and whooping. Then they made for the gate and were gone.

“They were back again today,” Sal said. “When I keep the gate closed I don’t see them—they stay away. But when it’s open—even a crack—they take it as an invitation, and come right in, running on the stones, barefoot.” His face was lit with admiration. “It gives me hope that they’ll succeed, with an attitude like that. Curious—maybe a bit *temerario*. Nice.”

He was facing away from his wife, smiling out the window at the driveway, in the direction they’d come, across the gravel, a fixed expression of welcome on his face, as though still seeing them.

“My glasses,” Bailey said, opening and closing drawers, slamming them, and sighing. “Have you seen them?”

He turned his smile on her, thinking of the children, but she went on with her clattering search, the noise she was making meant to remind him of her effort and her mood—these days more frenzied. He knew why: he saw behind the noise.

“On the counter, near the cookie jar,” Sal said. He was in his easy chair, under the lamp, a book on his lap, a drink in his hand, his usual place in the evening, waiting for Bailey to arrive. She was still opening drawers and clawing their contents. “The cookie jar,” he said, and, raising his voice, “Behind it.”

In the silence that followed, he looked up and saw that she was wearing her glasses.

“You found them.”

“Obviously,” she said. She was staring at something in her hand—her phone, he saw—regarding it with pained concentration. “I thought we agreed that the cookie jar was going, along with all that other stuff.”

Sal clucked, to indicate that he'd heard her, but, instead of replying to that, he said, "Those kids—they reminded me of that time when I was in Malabotta, that forest—my first year in Sicily, trying to be a poet. I was on a path and heard it coming, the rain, the way it announced itself, as it swept through the trees, the sound of it hitting the leaves high up in the canopy, the edge of the storm approaching. No water, just darkness and that smacking sound, like running feet, foot soles hitting pavement. And then the rain itself, the hard splash and the hiss of it, beating on the leaves, a deafening racket, the sky collapsing on me, with thunder and lightning. In one sudden flash I saw a shed—open-sided, just a thatched roof on poles. I ran under it and sheltered there and marvelled at how the bright afternoon had become *crepuscolo*, a tumbling creek of mud where the path had been. And, as I stood away from the dripping eaves, a small boy ran into the shed. He held a big, floppy philodendron leaf over his head like a parasol. He was wearing a yellow shirt, a sort of smock. Thick black curls, and his wet face gleamed. About the same age as our neighbor boy. Nine or ten, skinny legs, barefoot, peering out of the shed at the water rushing down the path. He'd found refuge. Then another lightning flash, he dropped his big leaf, and he carefully stuck a finger in each ear. And, as the thunder rumbled over us, he saw me smiling at him and stumbled in alarm, stepping back. I said something, and that was worse. More lightning, more thunder. But he was more startled by me than by the thunder. Again he put his fingers in his ears and rushed into the storm, his yellow shirt jumping, terrified."

Sal paused, hearing the thunder and, in the distortion of the lightning, catching a last glimpse of the yellow shirt twisting into the forest.

"Maybe his first *straniero*."

Bailey made a sound in her sinuses that he could not translate into words; nor could he read anything in her eyes. She had a way of snatching at the air with her fingers when she was agitated, and she was doing that now, her arms at her sides, one hand grasping, the other wagging her phone.

"I don't think I've ever told you." He felt fragile, the memory like an urgent confession.

"That those neighbor children come by? Yes, many times."

“Not that,” he said.

But she hadn’t heard. “I’ve had an awful day. The agent said she’d have an offer by this afternoon—but where is it? And I need to sign off on the unit.”

“God, I hate that word,” he said.

Bailey was walking away, the phone pressed against her ear, conspiring, he knew. “And we’ve got to do something about all those books. You promised.”

“I need them.”

“You never read them.”

“I’ve read all of them, some more than once.”

“The unit is twelve hundred square feet,” Bailey said, perhaps to him, perhaps into the phone.

“It’s not enough,” he said.

“How do you know?”

But she didn’t wait for an answer. I know, he thought, *dietrologia*.

The next day he left the gate open.

He saw them, their heads bowed in their usual peculiar listening stance, taking slow steps, pressing forward, their arms out, as though moving through deep grass and parting it, the boy in front, the bigger girl just behind him, the small girl dawdling at the rear. They were halfway to him when he went to the porch rail and greeted them. But even so they walked slowly, cautiously—was it because they were barefoot on the stony driveway?

“Uncle,” the boy said, announcing himself.

“Come on up,” Sal said.

They brightened and hurried to the stairs, jostling, and, as they mounted them, Sal moved back to his chair, as though to encourage them, too, to sit.

“Let me guess your names,” he said, and pointed. “Kamana.”

The boy was dark, with short, spiky hair and the face of a cherub; his faded T-shirt read “Toon Time,” over a mass of big-eyed kittens.

“And this is Bella.”

The girl turned her red baseball cap back to front. Her T-shirt, with the words “Keiki Great Aloha Run,” showed a stencilled image of a winged foot. Her jeans were torn at the knees, the cuffs turned up.

“You’re Nanu,” Sal said. “And your tongue is blue.”

“Lollipop,” she said, licking her upper lip.

When Sal laughed out loud at this, they looked alarmed and drew back a little.



"Would you say it's more of a burning or a stabbing pain?"

“What did you learn at school today?”

Kamana began to speak, stammering badly, but Sal realized that the boy was mimicking his teacher, who'd reprimanded him for talking—imitating a scolding tone, peremptory but wordless nagging.

“I had a teacher like that,” Sal said. “Miss Sharkey. And you, Miss Bella, what did you learn?”

“Nothing,” the girl said, twisting her face as though to show futility.

“Nothing!” the small girl, Nanu, said.

“She doesn't go to school,” Kamana said.

“Uncle,” Bella said. “Can I have a cookie?”

“I don't have any cookies for you just now,” he said, and saw that they looked defeated. “But I have a story. You like stories, don't you?”

“Miss Oshiro tells us stories,” Kamana said.

“This one is true,” Sal said. “Listen, I was in Italy a long time ago . . .”

He told the story of the sudden storm in the Sicilian forest, the way the raindrops smacked the leaves, sounding like running feet, the open-sided shed and the child in the yellow shirt holding a big leaf over his head. Then the flashes of lightning, the thunder, the boy's shock at seeing him. Rising from his chair, Sal stood up and put a finger in each ear and showed how the child had darted away into the thunder and rain.

The children sat before him, their faces fixed in concentration, as though hearing music—unfamiliar music but a melody they could follow. They seemed to track its syncopation, nodding softly. And their attention encouraged him to tell the story in greater detail, more slowly, with pauses. Their listening was visible—he could see it in their faces, the progress of the story shining in their eyes, their lips moving with his.

“Ha!” Bella said. “He was afraid.”

“Maybe he never seen a big haole before,” Kamana said.

“That’s what I thought then,” Sal said. “Afterward, I had to conclude that he was employing a sort of inbuilt *dietrologia*—that he knew he had to separate himself from me. But it was a long time ago.”

“How long?” Bella asked.

“More than fifty years,” Sal said.

The children jeered at the number, Kamana shouting, “That’s silly—fifty years!”

Sal stared at their wonderment, thinking, They have just arrived on earth. Time, which is everything to me, is nothing to them. It reassured him to think that for them big numbers were impossible.

“Now can we have a cookie?” Bella said.

The cookies stilled them, seemed to tame them, made them more attentive, like the simplest sort of magic, or a drug.

“Did Miss Oshiro tell you a story today?”

Bella said, “Poem.”

“What kind of poem?”

“ ‘Itsy-Bitsy Spider.’ ”

“Here’s a real poem,” Sal said, and he recited:

If you’re senselessly unhappy
On a cloudy afternoon
And regard the hand that feeds you without wonder,
And say everything is crappy

As you blow it off the spoon—
May I please call your attention to the thunder?

Kamana frowned. “Are you afraid of thunder?”

“Yes,” Sal said. “Like that little Italian boy.”

“You said ‘crappy,’ ” Bella said.

“Because it’s in the poem. And it’s my poem. I wrote it with this old hand.”

“How old are you?” Nanu asked, her fingers in her mouth.

“Guess.”

“Twenty-five?”

“No.”

“Eighty-five?”

“No.”

“If we guess the right number can we have cookies?”

“Yes.”

Kamana said, “Fifty—a hundred—thirty.”

“All good guesses,” Sal said, and led them into the house for cookies, which he dispensed in the usual way, tipping the jar, framing each cookie with his fingers, presenting it as though awarding a medal.

Kamana began to dance on the polished wooden floor, skidding and jumping, and was joined by Bella, while Nanu squatted and watched. Sliding sideways, Kamana bumped a table and upset a large glazed plate that had been resting on a display stand. Its smash silenced them, then Kamana began to shout at Bella.

“You made me do it! It’s all your fault!”

“It’s O.K.,” Sal said. “I never liked that plate. I’m glad you broke it.”

The boy laughed as Sal swept up the glittering shards and wrapped them in newspaper, making a parcel of them and placing it in the trash bin.

Back outside, Sal said, “I wish I could tap-dance. I wish I could play the ukulele. I wish I could fly. Though I often fly in my dreams. There are so many things I want to do before I get too old.”

“I can fly,” Bella said, and ran from the porch to her bike. She mounted it and rode in circles, crunching the gravel.

“Look at me, Uncle,” Kamana called out, and he, too, skidded and howled, chased by Nanu, and soon they were gone.

That evening, Bailey said, “What happened to the majolica plate?”

“I’m having it valued,” Sal said.

“It was a wedding present,” Bailey said. She surveyed the room. She sighed and said, “God!”

He knew what she meant: All this furniture, all these books, the pictures, the vases, the house itself—dispose of it. Then proceed to the unit.

In the succeeding days, he left the gate open, but the children did not visit; nor were they playing in the neighborhood or on the road, where he often saw them. He missed them, and wondered where they’d gone, and envied them for not needing him, and was ashamed because he so badly wanted to see them. He admired them as important little vessels for his memories, and, in the hope that they’d return, began saving up stories, and secrets that were a burden to him, to tell them.

When at last they came back, unannounced, as though materializing from the emptiness beyond the gate—creeping softly down the gravel, and noiselessly up the stairs to the porch, tentative in their movements, as though stalking him—he greeted them fondly, almost tearful in his gratitude.

He surprised himself by saying, “I used to be so afraid of strangers. Come to think of it, I’m still afraid. But you’re not!”

They took their usual places before him, and crouched in their listening postures, watchful and compact.

“I’ve been meaning to tell you that I’ve spent my whole life on the periphery. But I always knew what was going on. I just didn’t know how to avoid the consequences.” When they did not react to this, he asked, “Where have you been?”

“Father’s house,” Bella said.

“He lives in town,” Kamana said. “He doesn’t live with us.”

“What about school?”

“Rudy laughed at my shirt,” Kamana said.

“Why did he do that?”

“Because it had a hole in it. He said he could see my belly button.”

“That’s terrible. I know. Lots of people used to laugh at me,” Sal said. The children looked at his shirt, as though to see whether it had a hole in it. He said, “It was because I said words wrong. I could read them. I knew what they meant. But I couldn’t say them right.”

Bella wrinkled her nose, looking doubtful. “What words?”

In a chanting tone, Sal said, “Posthumous. Elegiac. Incunabula. Oregon. Phthisic.”

The children nodded at each word and laughed when he was done, Bella saying, “Again!”

Grateful to be able to utter the words, to cast a spell that would rid him at last of his humiliation, Sal spoke them to the children, watching their bright eyes.

“Phthisic,” Kamana said.

Bella said, “Posthumous.”

Sal wanted to weep at their saying the words correctly. “Don’t let anyone laugh at you,” he said. “It hurt me that Jane Godfrey laughed at me when I said ‘post-_hew_mous.’ ”

“When did she do that?”

“Sixty-two years ago,” Sal said.

“It’s bad to laugh at people,” Bella said.

“I feel better now.” He was astonished that he had carried the memory for all those years and had only now delivered himself of it.

“Can we have a cookie?” Kamana asked, on all fours, tipping himself upright.

“One more thing,” Sal said, and indicated with his hand that the children should listen. “When people asked me what I did for a living I never told them, ‘I’m a poet.’ But that’s what I wanted to be. The truth was that I was a claims adjuster for Territorial. At a desk where I wrote poems with my left hand.”

“Cookie,” the small girl said, in a beckoning tone, as if calling to a cat.

“Even Bailey doesn’t know.” Poetry is my secret, he thought, but poetry is also my embarrassment. “By the way, Bailey insisted on keeping her maiden name. She hates my name.” He saw their solemn faces and said, “Frezzolini.”

They seemed startled by the sudden, gulping word, but followed Sal into the house, and, emboldened—because they’d been inside before—they dashed around the chairs and slid in a skating motion on the polished floor.

“You have a lot of books,” Bella said, and ran to the shelves and smacked the spines of the books. Seeing her, Kamana joined her and punched them

with his fist. Their glee, their fury, caused Nanu to squeal.

Sal said, “Why are you hitting the books?”

“Because they’re bad!” Bella said, slapping at them.

“Did you read them all?” Kamana asked.

“No,” Sal said, and again, “No.”

“Then why do you have them?”

“Because I’m a silly old man,” Sal said. “And you’re right. A lot of them are bad.” Seeing that slapping the books had somehow calmed them, he asked, “Does your father have books in his house?”

“Fred,” Kamana said. “He’s got a flat-screen TV.”

“Is he nice?”

His question silenced them, and, when he asked again, Kamana said, “He hit my mom in the kitchen.”

“What did you do?”

“Watched TV.”

“What did your mom do?”

“Cried,” Bella said.

“Does he hit you?”

“When we’re bad,” Bella said.

“He gives us lickings,” Kamana added, in clarification.

They spoke glumly but without rancor, as though they were to blame.

Bella said, “Tell us a poem.”

“The ‘crappy’ one,” Kamana said, giggling on the word.

“Let’s go outside,” Sal said, wearied and saddened by the talk of their being hit.

“Can we have another cookie?”

Feeling sorrowful, he gave them each three cookies, formally presenting them, and felt sadder when they shrieked, surprised by the number, Nanu barely able to hold them in her tiny hands, bringing them to her face and gnawing.

On the porch, he said, “A different poem,” and recited:

“I’m glad you’re back,” I lied,
You hugged me, then you cried,
“At last you’re home—we’re one!”
I feel I want to run.
With you I’m more alone
Than when I’m on my own.

They chewed, they wanted more, they insisted he recite the other poem again, for the pleasure of hearing the word “crappy.” So he said, “If you’re senselessly unhappy, / on a cloudy afternoon,” and they screeched when he spoke the word.

“Here’s another,” he said, “from long ago.”

“Anyone can skin a *gatto* when it’s *morto*.
So the Siciliano told her.
“*La più difficile da scorticare*
È la coda.”
But not just taxidermy, also other arts,
In love and work, and things essential;
Bottom line—even the fate of hearts—
Beware, or you will surely fail;
Remember that the hardest part’s
The skinning of the tail.

“That’s silly,” Kamana said.

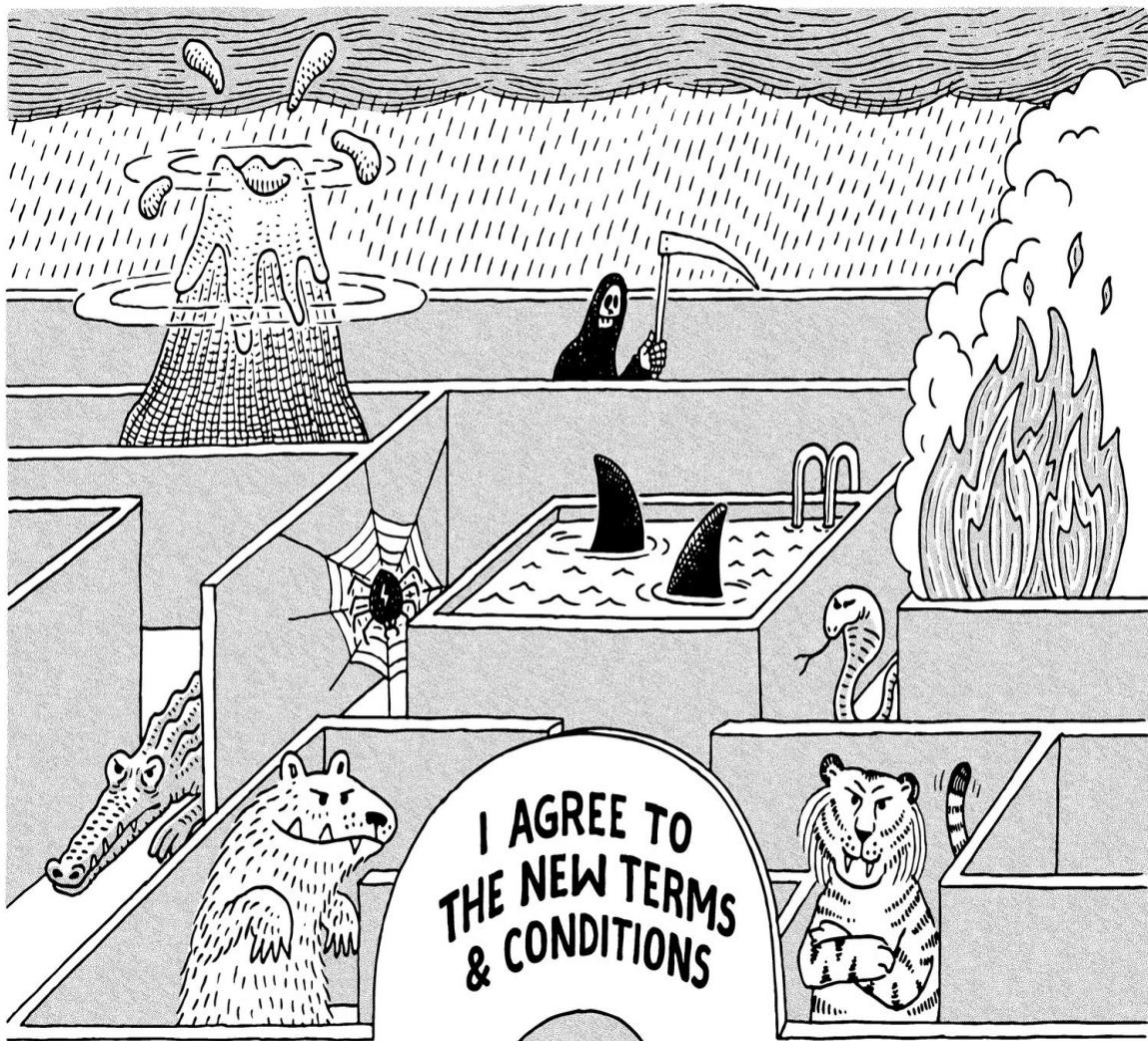
“*Dietrologia* often seems silly,” Sal said.

“What’s that?”

Sal said, “You visit me and I’m happy. You’re near and mysterious. But my *dietrologia* tells me it’s just the cookies.”

Bella said, “I know what happens when you die.”

“I wish I knew,” Sal said. “I’d put it in a poem.”



Cartoon by Tom Chitty

“When you die, they put you in a hole and you go to Heaven,” Kamana said.

“Uncle,” Bella said. “What’s going to happen to you?”

Sal clutched at his knees and thought hard and said, “I sometimes think it’s already happened.” He squinted, and savored the silence. He said, “I don’t like what I see.”

He was glad when they seemed to brush the statement aside, and Kamana said, “Tell us the story of driving around in your car, when you didn’t want to go home.”

So he told the story, slowly, now and then interrupted by the children, who corrected him when he missed a line or used a different word.

“It’s not my story anymore,” he said. “It’s yours. And, obviously, driving around in the dark was a big mistake. I should have thought of something else.”

He was relieved to be rid of the story, but when the children left, Kamana churning the gravel with his bicycle tires, Sal finished his thought: Something reckless and decisive.

The children did not appear for another week, and he came to understand the pattern. They spent the longer periods of time with their mother, who lived up the road, in a house obscured by a monkeypod tree and a mounded mass of bougainvillea, and the rest of the time they lived with their father, somewhere in town.

He longed for them to visit, especially on those days when Bailey wanted to talk about the progress of the move. He found listening to the details unbearable, and to prevent her from enumerating them—often she read from a list she’d made, holding a notepad and speechifying—he pretended a weird enthusiasm, agreeing with whatever she said. This worked better than—as in the past—begging her to stop talking, which had only infuriated her into a more detailed monologue. But it was all like thunder. He wanted to put his fingers in his ears and run.

“The idea,” she told him one day, “is that at first we just stop for lunch at Ocean View—the cafeteria—and get acquainted with the other residents, and maybe spend a night or two in the unit.”

“Good idea,” he said, stiffening, convulsed with terror at the words “cafeteria” and “unit.”

“Until the sale of the house goes through.”

“Perfect.” His throat burned with the lie.

“Acclimate to the new environment, while at the same time arranging an estate sale.”

Sal looked wildly around at books, lamps, cushions, carpets, the cookie jar, his rocker on the porch.

“What we don’t sell we can put into one of those units.”

“Our unit?” He stammered over the word.

“No, no, not Ocean View,” Bailey said. “A storage unit. And we’ll have to do something about the car.”

“Yes, yes,” he said, in a panic, wanting her to stop.

“Because we won’t need it. We’ll be near all the shops. We’ll have our meals in the cafeteria. We—”

“I’m glad you’re dealing with it,” he said, interrupting, and using his hands, too, to make her stop.

His smothering voice, his pushing hands, angered her. She said, “I don’t think you realize how much effort I’m putting into this.”

“Just take your time,” he said. But what he’d intended to calm her only angered her more.

“Time is the one thing we don’t have,” she said. “We’re on a strict schedule. Contracts. Deposits. Deadlines.”

“Yes,” he said, a panic in his voice, and when Bailey began to speak again he said, “Absolutely!”

She lowered her head, tugging down her glasses and looking over the top of the frames, a doubting gaze. She said, “I sometimes think you’re resisting this.”

“It’s such a big move.”

“Downsizing,” she said. “It’s part of growing old.”

“We’re not that old,” he said.

Turning away from him and adjusting her glasses, she laughed—a loud, knowing shout that made her seem strong. Even the way she walked was like marching, leaving him behind with the echo of her laugh.

When, a few days later, the children returned, he gave them cookies without their asking, and they sat in the afternoon sunshine, eating them in silence.

“When I was a boy I was always hungry,” he said. “I didn’t realize it until I had a meal at a friend’s house. His mother would pile my plate with food, and when I ate it all, and sometimes had seconds, she’d say, ‘You’re really hungry!’” He looked for a reaction, but the children were absorbed in their eating. “I thought it was a compliment—‘You’re a good eater, Salvatore!’ But those mothers understood what was behind my hunger. It only came to me much later—that I didn’t have enough to eat at home. A terrible thing, and they knew it.”

The word roused the children. They looked up, staring at him. Bella said, “What was terrible?”

“That we were poor. But it didn’t occur to me until thirty or forty years had passed.”

They laughed, as they always did at large numbers, finding them absurd, and he joined them, grateful that he had these children near him, like finely calibrated instruments that only he could read.

“What did you do with your father?”

“Watched cartoons.”

“Does your mother let you watch cartoons?”

“No,” Kamana said.

“What do you do with her?”

“Church,” Bella said.

Sal said, “Soul butter.”

Kamana hooted at the word, Bella said, “Butter!,” and their shouts excited Nanu, who wagged her head.

“Tell us a story, Uncle,” Bella said.

“Wait, what happened to your arm?”

She drew back when he went to touch the bluish patch, the bruise like a botched tattoo, making the girl seem older.

“I was bad.”

Sal involuntarily stood up, hurting for the girl, but feeling futile. He controlled himself enough to ask, “Fred?”

She blinked a yes.

“You need a cookie. We all need cookies.”

On the lanai he said, “Fred what?,” and Bella told him her father’s last name. “He’s a policeman.”

“Ah.”

After they had gone, he sat for a long while in the rocker, murmuring his declaration, and measuring how much he would need to say to rouse the policeman to action.

When at last he picked up his cell phone, and was connected, he replied to the gruff hello by saying, “I know what you’ve been doing to your children, Fred.”

Sal wondered, in the silence that followed, if he’d been heard. But then came the confident, blaming voice he’d expected. “I know who you are, Uncle.”

At that, Sal put the phone down and, still sitting, interrogated the shadow of the obvious. He knew just how it would play out, and he drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair, as though tapping a fast-forward button, to speed up the ensuing drama.

The future jerked before him, accelerating in sequence: the vindictive response from the man, the misapplied accusations, the unfortunate fretting of the children’s mother, the certain involvement of the police, and their intimidating visit, the howl from Bailey when she read the conditions of the restraining order. Finally, as her plans fell apart and she found that Ocean View would no longer admit him, another howl: “This will follow you, Sal!” But the disgrace would follow Fred, too, and the children would be saved.

She did not see beyond the shadow to what he saw clearly. That she’d be fine, and better off without him. Anyway, he was not thinking of himself, of his future living alone, somewhere to be determined, among his old things, but only of the children, whom he knew he’d never see again. ♦

By [Deborah Treisman](#)

Legacies

- [The Treasure in Frank Zappa's Secret Subterranean Vault](#)

[December 7, 2020 Issue](#)

The Treasure in Frank Zappa's Secret Subterranean Vault

Taking a break from “Bill & Ted,” Alex Winter dug into the rock star’s archives to make a documentary that frames him as a First Amendment culture warrior in the tradition of Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor.

By [John Seabrook](#)

November 30, 2020

Alex Winter’s latest documentary began with a deceptively simple question, one that came up in a brainstorming session with his producer, Glen Zipper: Why hasn’t somebody made an authorized movie about Frank Zappa? Seeking an explanation, Winter contacted Ahmet Zappa, one of the late musician’s children. The short answer, Ahmet told him, was Gail, the mother of Ahmet and the three other Zappa kids: Moon, Dweezil, and Diva. During Frank’s life (1940-93), Gail helped manage his business affairs, including an indie label and a home recording studio that Frank called the Utility Muffin Research Kitchen. After his death, from prostate cancer, Gail closely guarded his copyrights and legacy, as well as access to a legendary vault, rumored to exist beneath the Zappa family home, in Laurel Canyon. It held music that had never been released, drawings, videos, and Frank’s Stan Brakhage-style home movies.



Frank Zappa illustration by João Fazenda

Ahmet, forty-six, joined Winter, fifty-five, on a recent Zoom call to discuss the film, called “Zappa.” A poster of Rodan, Godzilla’s flying frenemy and one of Ahmet’s middle names, was visible behind him. (It was a gift from his buddy Johnny Ramone, who “liked that I was named after a rubber monster,” Ahmet said.) He recalled that, when Winter approached him, “I said, ‘Look, we’ve gone through multiple directors who tried to get this done.’ ” Gail had shut them all down. “ ‘I’m totally happy to make the introduction, but, I’ve got to say, my mother is a vibey, spiritual, super-smart person with a point of view.’ ”

“I was scared of her before I ever walked into her house,” Winter said. But they met, they vibed, and Winter pitched. He didn’t want to make a film about Zappa the rock god, whose epic shirtless guitar solos are readily available on YouTube. He was interested in Zappa as a culture warrior in the Lenny Bruce/Richard Pryor tradition—the icon photographed naked on a toilet in London’s Royal Garden Hotel in 1967, the hero of free expression who was fêted in the Czech Republic after the Velvet Revolution. The film’s main focus, Winter told Gail, would be Zappa the avant-garde composer, whose little-known orchestral music is sometimes ranked among works by Charles Ives, Edgard Varèse, and other seminal twentieth-century artists.

“That’s how Alex got the movie,” Ahmet said. “That was the thing Gail cared about.”



"You know times are tough when a rugged voice saying 'We're all in this together' dubbed over footage of an S.U.V. snaking down a mountain road is comforting."

Gail mentioned the vault. During breaks in Winter's acting career—he plays Bill to Keanu Reeves's Ted in the "Bill & Ted" series—he's made music videos and short rock bios, which led to two documentaries, "Downloaded" and "Deep Web." In the course of interviewing rock stars, "I'd heard a lot of bullshit spun," he said, and he assumed that the Zappa vault was similarly mythic. "Gail said, 'No, there's literally a vault under the house.' They took me down there, and it was like the end of 'Citizen Kane.' Filled floor to ceiling with media from his birth all the way till, like, yesterday." He was overwhelmed, and then cowed. How to portray a man who began as the Dionysian leader of a Dada-esque band, the Mothers of Invention, and became a First Amendment advocate with a suit and tie and a haircut (at least he kept the mustache), testifying in Washington against Tipper Gore's call for warning labels on albums and arguing with John Lofton on CNN's "Crossfire"?

Before Winter could start making use of the archived material, some of it had to be preserved and digitized; the footage was deteriorating rapidly. The filmmakers launched a Kickstarter campaign, which raised \$1.2 million, a record amount for a documentary. "We said to the fans, 'We could take some of the money we raised for the doc, or we could take all of it and put it toward preserving the stuff in the vault,'" Winter explained. "And they said, 'Look, we love you, but we're here for Frank. Please preserve the media in the vault.'"

Then, in 2015, Gail died. Ahmet and Diva had a falling-out with Dweezil and Moon over the estate and the use of the Zappa name. The Laurel Canyon property was put up for sale, and Lady Gaga bought the house, the Muffin Kitchen, and the now empty vault, for \$5.25 million. Restoring the materials from the vault took two years and involved more than fifty specialists. After Winter finished the documentary, he made the latest "Bill & Ted" installment, in which the eighties slackers are the fathers of two brainy and much cooler daughters.

Six years after the fateful brainstorm, Winter's film, distributed by Magnolia Pictures, is in theatres and streaming online. According to Ahmet, Gail would have loved it. What about Bill and Ted? "I think that Zappa might be

lost on them,” Winter said. However, “he would not be lost on their daughters.” ♦

Letter from Los Angeles

- [Using the Homeless to Guard Empty Houses](#)

Using the Homeless to Guard Empty Houses

As the pandemic makes an already terrible housing crisis worse, a new version of house-sitting signals a broken real-estate market.

By [Francesca Mari](#)

November 30, 2020



Wandering around Northwest Pasadena, I pressed my face against the window of a dingy pink stucco house at 265 Robinson Road. It was April, 2019, and in two blocks I had passed thirteen bungalows, duplexes, and multifamily homes that had gone through foreclosure in the past fifteen years. Twelve of them were still unoccupied. No. 265 had been in foreclosure for a year and a half, and the two small houses on the property had long sat empty. But now, inside the rear house, there was a gallon jug of water and a bag of peanuts on a Formica kitchen counter. The walls were a mangy taupe, but African-print sheets hung over the windows. As I walked away, I heard a genteel Southern accent from behind me: “Can I help you?” A Black man with perfect posture, wearing loafers and a black T-shirt tucked into belted trousers, introduced himself as Augustus Evans.

I wasn’t the first person to wonder what Evans was doing there. A few weeks earlier, two sheriffs had knocked on the door around 11 P.M. and handcuffed him. In his car’s glove compartment, they found a letter of employment and the cell-phone number of a woman named Diane Montano, who runs Weekend Warriors, a company that provides security for vacant houses. Like many of Montano’s employees, Evans was homeless when he was hired. Now he lives in properties that are being flipped, guarding them through the renovation, staging, open-house, and inspection periods. In the past seven years, he has protected more than twenty-two homes, in thirteen neighborhoods around Los Angeles, almost all historically Black and Latino communities. A McMansion in Fontana; a four-unit apartment complex in Compton; a “baby mansion on the peak of the mountain” in East L.A., which had been left to a son who, according to the neighbors, borrowed so much against the equity of the house that he lost it to foreclosure. Before leaving, he poured liquid cement down the drains. Evans guarded the property as the plumbing system was replaced.

Empty houses are a strange sight in an area that has one of the most severe housing shortages in the United States. L.A. has the highest median home prices, relative to income, and among the lowest homeownership rates of any major city, according to the [U.C.L.A. Center for Neighborhood Knowledge](#). Renting isn’t any easier. The area has one of the lowest vacancy rates in the country, and the average rent is twenty-two hundred dollars a month. On any night, some sixty-six thousand people there sleep in cars, in shelters, or on the street, an increase of thirteen per cent since last year.

The housing shortage was caused, in part, by restrictive zoning, rampant NIMBYism, and the use of California's environmental laws to thwart urban development. In 1960, Los Angeles was zoned to house some ten million people. By 1990, decades of downzoning had reduced that number to 3.9 million, roughly the city's current population. Then, in 2008, the subprime-mortgage crisis struck, and in the years that followed thousands of foreclosed homes were sold at auction. Because they had to be purchased in cash, many of them were bought by wealthy investors, private-equity-backed real-estate funds, and countless other real-estate companies, leaving less inventory for individual buyers. In the end, [the 2008 crash](#) made [housing in California even more expensive](#).

No. 265, along with thousands of other homes in L.A., was acquired by Wedgewood, a real-estate company, founded in 1983, that specializes in flipping homes, managing everything from lockouts and financing to renovation and staging. In gentrifying neighborhoods, empty houses are sitting ducks, so companies like Wedgewood hire Weekend Warriors and other house-sitting services for cheap security. Around Robinson Road, several properties had been broken into. At No. 265, a middle-aged Black couple had recently crawled in through the front window. When Evans told them to leave, they apologized; the man was a jazz musician, and they said that they were struggling with crystal-meth dependency and that they used to sleep in this house before Evans arrived. The three went to the front porch and chatted while smoking cigarillos.

Evans, who was sixty-seven at the time, took me through the two houses on the lot. He'd laid a blue tarp over the cream-colored carpet, and, in one room, he'd set up an inflatable mattress neatly made with a floral fleece coverlet. A Haitian-flag baby blanket was wrapped around his pillow. He liked his room warm; when he woke up, he'd crank up his space heater, then brew a cup of coffee and read and write—poetry, essays, screenplays—at a plastic folding table by his bed. He was contemplating writing a memoir. "This is how I keep my sanity," he told me. He had the run of both houses, but he kept to this one room, his life contained in several milk crates on the shelves. He showed me his eighth-grade diploma and a picture of a poetry venue that he had opened in Compton in the nineties. (It closed after becoming a target of the Crips gang.) Two of his screenplays were on the shelves, along with a book, "The Thoughts of Augustus the Final Poet,"

which he had self-published in 2014: “Hey, Mr. Income / You’re my best friend. / My pockets are empty / Where have you been?” He’d saved a receipt from the Los Angeles Unified School District, which bought two hundred and eighty-five copies for its classrooms.

He spent most of his time inside, but when he wanted a change of scenery he sat in his S.U.V., a 2001 Infiniti, which he’d bought with his house-sitting savings. Evans dreamed of living in the Robincroft Castle, a seven-thousand-square-foot historic landmark across the street, which sold for \$1.39 million in 2016 and three years later was listed for \$2.49 million. And he took to caring for a colony of ants under a tree, feeding them chicken bones. The bones disappeared quickly, so he kept watch and spied a cat and a possum come by, and realized they weren’t just eating the bones but the ants and everything else.

Born to sharecroppers in the Arkansas Delta, Evans is the seventh of ten children. He picked cotton until he was eleven, when his family hitched a ride on a hay truck to Tulare, California. In school, the other children and teachers ridiculed him—for his accent, his coveralls, his lunches of fatback and collard greens. He dropped out after the eighth grade. At sixteen, he and some cousins were washing cars at a gas station when a money-green Cadillac Eldorado rolled in and a Black man stepped out. One of Evans’s cousins asked the man how he could afford such a car, and he told them that, if they came to Los Angeles, he could hook them up with a job that paid two hundred dollars a day. That afternoon, the boys took a Greyhound bus to Venice, where they began selling little balloons of heroin out of their mouths for ten dollars each. Not long afterward, Evans offered drugs to an undercover officer. He was arrested and sent to juvenile detention, where he joined the Nation of Islam. His faith estranged him from his Christian family. “The old Muslim people, they brainwashed him, I think,” his sister Ercell Murray told me. When Evans was released, he moved to Compton, the heart of L.A.’s Black activist community. In the seventies, he sold Amway products door to door and taught martial arts. He wanted to open a martial-arts academy, but no bank would give him a loan. In the fall of 1983, when Derrick Stevens, a friend from juvenile detention, asked if Evans wanted in on a bank robbery, Evans said yes. “I never thought of robbing a bank, but I did know that that’s the building with the money in it, and if you

got a lot of money you could do anything you want in America," Evans told me.

On a late October morning, Evans, Stevens, and two other men walked into the American Savings and Loan on Crenshaw Boulevard wearing rubber masks of Presidents Johnson, Nixon, Ford, and Reagan. The men bagged two hundred and twenty-eight thousand dollars and several exploding dye packs, in what was then the largest bank robbery in Los Angeles history. (It inspired scenes in the movie "Point Break.") Three months later, Evans was caught in Tampa, Florida, just before boarding a cruise ship to the Bahamas, where he'd hoped to hide. He spent the next seven years locked up, reading, writing, and preaching. When he got out, it was hard to find work.

In 1998, Evans rented a derelict office in South L.A., across from the Magic Johnson Theatre, to work on his poetry and various business projects, including a short-lived toilet-paper-delivery service. One day, he gave a CD of himself performing his poetry to a woman who worked in the salon downstairs; he'd noticed her singing to herself as she braided hair. "She was a vocalist out of this world," Evans told me. "I mean, she's another Aretha Franklin, Patti LaBelle, Whitney Houston quality of a singer." Soon they got married and he moved into her small apartment in South L.A., where they paid some six hundred dollars a month. They had two sons, and eventually, afraid that their children would become involved in the local gangs, they moved with Evans's mother-in-law and brother-in-law to Moreno Valley, a suburb with a fast-growing Black population. They had another son, and, over the years, they rented homes that ranged from two thousand to four thousand dollars a month.

As the world eased out of the Great Recession, in 2010, his wife told him that their differences had grown too great. Although she had a talent for singing, she'd earned her nursing degree, but he was still holding on to the hope of becoming a famous poet. "You can't just get stagnated and stuck on a dream that has not materialized," she told me. After their divorce was finalized, he put his belongings in a trash bag and walked out, beginning a life of homelessness. He got two weeks' worth of motel vouchers from General Relief, and when those ran out he headed toward Union Station, where he hoped to sleep on a bench. He was crossing Normandie and Vernon when a couple he knew from the Black-consciousness community spotted

him. They took him into their store, a Caribbean gift shop called Bles-sed Love, and told him that he could sleep there in exchange for some help at the counter. There was a windowless black-lit room in the back, with murals of Egyptian iconography on the walls and the solar system painted on the ceiling. He slept there for nearly two years, waking at dawn for morning prayers and opening the store two hours later.

One morning, a customer told Evans that he supplemented his Social Security income by house-sitting for Weekend Warriors. There were two types of gigs, he explained: 7 P.M. to 7 A.M., which paid five hundred dollars a month, and 24/7, which paid eight hundred dollars. All you needed was an I.D. Evans called Diane Montano at around 10 A.M., and at 2 P.M. a van picked him up and took him to a house in Riverside.

The rules were simple: don't leave, don't host guests, and don't talk to anyone—not contractors, property managers, real-estate agents, or prospective buyers. If you were working a 24/7, only short trips to the market or the laundromat were allowed. The premises had to be kept clean at all times, or pay would be docked. The driver supplied Evans with a mini-fridge, a small microwave, an inflatable mattress, and plastic floor coverings to protect the carpet.

The driver came by to check on Evans occasionally, always unannounced, photographing each room and sending the pictures to Montano, so that she could monitor Evans's cleanliness and track the progress of the renovations. By the time Evans was living at No. 265, he had learned the rhythms of the gig. He knew that the driver wouldn't come by at night or on Sundays. When he could, he'd steal out to Moreno Valley, an hour and twenty minutes away, to visit his sons. He kept loose change in a coffee cup in his car, and he'd give his youngest son all the coins he'd collected since his last visit. "They know Daddy has to work away from the house," he told me. "They're big boys now."



"You may be king of the jungle, Tim, but don't forget—here you're just another actuary."

Cartoon by Emily Flake

Around the end of the month, the driver would deliver a check. In seven years of working for Montano, Evans has never met her. (Montano declined to comment for this article.)

At No. 265, two construction workers junked the decades-old kitchen appliances and Formica counters, tore up the carpeting, and laid down ash-wood laminate floors. By the end of June, the exterior was painted gray with slate-gray trim, the interiors a bright white. Shaker-style cabinets and granite countertops were installed in the kitchens. Edison bulbs hung from the ceiling in black metal light fixtures. Evans's beat-up white microwave and mini-fridge looked incongruous. By October, the property was staged for showing, with wishbone chairs, reclaimed-wood tables, and woven wall hangings. In 2005, it had sold for four hundred and twenty thousand dollars; now it was listed for nine hundred and thirty thousand. A few weeks later, a termite tent went up to address bugs found during a home inspection, the final step in many L.A. real-estate transactions.

Montano told Evans to leave for a couple of days, to escape the fumes. Usually, he slept in his car (as does about a third of Los Angeles's homeless population), but a strong El Niño had brought heavy rain to California. He accepted Montano's offer to "bunk up" with another house sitter, in Compton, in South L.A., where the city's rents are rising the fastest and where Black residents are most likely to be homeless. It's also where many of the house sitters are assigned work.

Mansa Moosa-El opened the door and was surprised to find that his bunkie was Augustus Evans. "He has tremendous respect on the street," Moosa, who was born Adrian Rhone, told me. He knew that Evans had walked with Louis Farrakhan in the early eighties, and he had seen him at community events. "I'm the fantastic immortal classic," Moosa, who is forty-nine and was born in Compton, told me. "He's the one and only golden oldie." Whereas Evans dressed in trousers, blazers, and loafers, Moosa, a Black Panther, preferred a louder look: he wore a leather jacket, rose-tinted sunglasses, and African beads, and carried a staff with a black plastic snake coiled around it. Learning that Evans was house-sitting made him feel less miserable about his own situation. Moosa walked Evans through the small

three-bedroom house, pointing out the lack of sinks, cabinets, hot water, and heat. The only thing that functioned was the toilet.

Moosa's life has been shaped by L.A.'s demographic trends. As recent books like "[The Color of Law](#)," by Richard Rothstein, and "[Race for Profit](#)," by [Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor](#), explain, a number of inner-city ghettos, like Compton, were formed by government policy. During the Great Depression, the government tried to enlarge the middle class by encouraging homeownership through the creation of the thirty-year mortgage. But restrictive covenants prohibited Black people from buying houses in certain neighborhoods, and further limitations were imposed by redlining, which barred prospective buyers in areas with large numbers of people of color from receiving federally insured loans.

During the Second World War, L.A.'s Black population almost doubled, as newcomers were drawn by factory jobs. Residents of Compton, which was then nearly all white, protested new housing for the workers. A large public-housing complex that had been planned for the neighborhood was moved to Watts, a racially mixed neighborhood nearby. "By 1958, it was 95% black," Rothstein wrote in an op-ed in the *Los Angeles Times*. "Public housing policy was largely responsible for this segregation." It wasn't long before white people fled Compton, where Moosa's parents bought a house in the early seventies. By then, L.A. had the fastest-growing Black population outside the Southeast, three-quarters of it concentrated in South L.A. Moosa's father worked for the city, in the records library, and as much as a fifth of the Black population had solid manufacturing jobs. But, by the eighties, those jobs had disappeared or gone overseas. Moosa, like many Black Gen X-ers, fared worse than his parents.

The foreclosure crisis was ruinous to L.A.'s Black communities, in part because residents, after decades of being denied mortgages, had been disproportionately targeted for predatory loans and reverse mortgages. When the bubble burst, Black people were seventy-one per cent more likely than white people to lose their homes. Last year, Black homeownership reached its lowest rate since 1968, when housing discrimination was outlawed by the passage of the Fair Housing Act.

Even as renters, Black people are in a uniquely precarious situation. Jacqueline Waggoner, a president of Enterprise Community Partners, an affordable-housing nonprofit, and the chair of the Ad Hoc Committee on Black People Experiencing Homelessness, told me, “When people are severely rent burdened, they don’t really have anyone to call. Their siblings or family members—many of them are one paycheck away from being homeless themselves.” A 2016 report found that white households in L.A. have a median net worth of three hundred and fifty-five thousand dollars; the figure for Black households is four thousand dollars.

The pandemic is making a terrible housing crisis even worse. For the first time in more than a decade, rents have stopped rising, but income has fallen precipitously. It is estimated that, among renters in L.A. County—a group that is disproportionately Black and Latino—at least three hundred and sixty-five thousand households currently don’t have an adult with enough income to pay the rent.

Although only eight per cent of Los Angeles residents are Black, Black people make up forty-two per cent of the homeless population. “I come from a pretty good family,” Moosa told me. “I grew up with a two-parent household, and I still couldn’t make it work.”

Like Evans, Moosa found himself homeless after his marriage fell apart, in 2017. In 2018, half of all unhoused people in L.A. County were homeless for the first time in their lives. A compounding factor for both Evans and Moosa was a criminal record, which made it harder to get a job and to pass credit and background checks. As a radical young activist, Moosa had served time for commercial burglary, possession of an explosive device, and assault and battery. His driver’s license had also been suspended. “Can’t be no Black Panther and follow all the rules,” he joked.

For a year, Moosa slept wherever he could: on couches, on someone’s laundry-room floor, and in cars and mobile homes that friends were trying to sell. He stayed until he wore out his welcome. “You can tell you have to walk,” he said. “Rather than make it all melodramatic, you better do that.” On April 1, 2017, he had a heart attack; a year and a half later, he had a stroke. (The average life expectancy of homeless people is estimated to be

almost thirty years shorter than that of the general population.) When a doctor learned that he didn't have a home, he was referred to a shelter.

Many of the people checking into the shelter were unbathed or mentally ill; the shelter felt like "county jail on the streets," Moosa said. His younger brother, who had been house-sitting for a couple of years, shared Montano's number. Moosa took a selfie and texted it to her along with a picture of his state I.D. Soon afterward, a driver picked up Moosa and took him to an apartment complex in Buena Park, an affluent area in Orange County. "I was, like, Yeah, all right, this is it!" he said. But as an outsider in white suburbia, without a car or money, he went hungry. After several days, he texted his brother, who drove him to a Wendy's. Moosa took a sip of cold soda and his system was so shocked that his entire body began to shake.

"It'd be a lot of unpredictability and instability to it," Moosa said of house-sitting. "There's been times I feel like a turkey on Thanksgiving Eve." If a property was listed for sale, he might find out at six in the morning, when a real-estate agent, wanting to beat traffic, arrived without warning. "I'll be pumping a log, and they'll come in before it hits the water," Moosa said. "I'll exit the bathroom and the Realtor is standing there, three feet away. 'Oh, um, can we look in here?'"

The house sitters aren't told who owns the homes they're protecting, but it's apparent when the "For Sale" signs go up: Wedgewood and its subsidiary, Maxim Properties, which are based in Redondo Beach. In recent filings, the company has reported buying and selling several thousand homes in L.A. County each year, and many more up and down the West Coast and in Florida. The company uses more than a dozen different L.L.C. names, many of which sound like ski resorts, such as Catamount Properties and Breckenridge. A significant number of its Los Angeles properties—and seemingly all of those assigned a house sitter—are in communities of color.

"Many of the neighborhoods that were redlined are seeing investment pour back in for the first time since they were redlined in the nineteen-thirties," Braden Crooks, a co-founder of Designing the We, a design and social-impact studio that has staged exhibits on redlining throughout the country, told me. "But, because of this historic wealth destruction, because people lost ownership and are mostly renters . . . you don't see the speculative

investment that's pouring back into urban and redlined neighborhoods lifting everyone's boats. You see it washing them away."

Wedgewood's role in the housing crisis hasn't gone unnoticed. The week before Thanksgiving, 2019, a group of Black mothers calling themselves Moms 4 Housing occupied a Wedgewood property in West Oakland that they said had been vacant for years. They washed the walls, installed a water heater, and set up their children's bunk beds. Then they began paying the water and electric bills. Two months later, Alameda County sheriff's deputies arrived in riot gear and removed them.

Shelter-in-place orders to minimize the spread of *COVID-19* have brought new attention to vacant houses owned by investors. The Alliance for Californians for Community Empowerment, which supported Moms 4 Housing, staged an occupation of vacant homes owned by Caltrans in L.A., and throughout the summer the group organized rent strikes and protests against eviction.

Mychael Lindsey, another house sitter, didn't like how Wedgewood acquired properties from people who had lost them in distress, but he told me that he'd made his peace with it, and at least he loved how Wedgewood renovated them. "All of our signature houses have the pretty cream carpet, the gray wood floors that are really nice, that mix with the gray granite tops," he said.

There was one house-sitting assignment that rested uneasily in Lindsey's mind. A house in Compton that had been lived in by the same family for three generations was foreclosed on after the mother died. When Lindsey showed up, the family was still there. Rather than informing Weekend Warriors and calling the sheriff for a lockout, he decided to give them another week. He told his boss that the property was secure and that he could clear out the furniture himself. The family cried in relief when he told them. But, after the week was over, the construction workers arrived, and they had to leave.

I asked Moosa, as he stood smoking in the back yard, if it felt weird to work for a company that's implicated in the gentrification of his neighborhood. "Hold on," he said. "Man, wow. Does that shit feel weird?" He looked up at

the sky, considering, and then snapped his head down. “No!” he yelled. “It feel like racist white folks still controlling my existence all the time, which is still the same reason why I don’t even vote!”

But Evans saw house-sitting as a blessing. “Unfortunately, I am one of those who need shelter of any kind, and I’ve got shelter with pay through the cold, raining months, thanks to Diane,” he said. The checks were often late, but they always came eventually, and he could concentrate on his reading and writing. “I get twenty-four-hour peace,” he said. His years in prison had accustomed him to solitude—he could sit there for ten, twelve hours a day. He tried to stay out of people’s way.

In November, 265 Robinson Road went into contract, and on a rainy Thursday in early December the new owner, a Black man in his forties, knocked on the door. He toured the house and told Evans that he would be moving in the next day. “All of this?” Evans said, pointing to his colorful African sheets and inflatable mattress. “It won’t be here tomorrow! It’ll be like I was never here.”

Montano had a new assignment for Evans: replacing a house sitter whom she didn’t trust at a condo that was under contract for three hundred and thirty thousand dollars in Panorama City, a predominantly Latino suburb. Intruders had left a large black stain on the carpet in the master bedroom. Montano told Evans to protect the property while the carpet was replaced. When he arrived at the beige stucco complex, a young man and woman were rolling a blunt on the front steps. Evans toured the premises: a living room with a fireplace, a dining area with a low-hanging light fixture. Upstairs were two bedrooms, with cream-colored carpet throughout. Evans put protective plastic on the floor of the smaller room, which had a view in two directions, and inflated his mattress.

At one-thirty in the morning, Evans heard the front door opening. He rose and walked to the top of the stairs and saw a man and a woman in their thirties. “Are you squatting in here?” the man asked, agitated. “I’m security,” Evans told them.

“Well, can a woman use the bathroom?” the man asked. “No, come on, let’s go,” the woman said.



" 'A' is for 'anxiety,' 'B' is for 'boredom,' 'C' is for 'coping mechanisms' . . . "

Cartoon by Julia Suits

The next morning, workers came to replace the bedroom carpet, and Montano texted Evans to tell him that he needed to be out by 11 A.M. He could bunk back in Compton.

For the first time in what seemed like years, it was Friday and Evans was off the clock. That night, he decided to go to one of the clubs he used to visit in his youth, order a Shirley Temple, and see some live music. But, before he could choose which club to go to, he got a text from Montano: the sale of the condo had fallen through—the roof was leaking and water was streaming into one of the bathrooms—and she needed him back there immediately. He got into his car and hoped it would make it back to Panorama City.

A couple of weeks later, at 9 A.M., Evans heard the front door open. A woman in her forties entered, with a bag full of recycling. She knew the smart-lock code and assumed that Evans was the boyfriend of the woman who'd given it to her. She'd come to take a shower. "A lot of times, when Diane hires someone, they're pretty much homeless anyway, so they identify with the homeless and as a result they sympathize and break the rules," Evans told me. "I can identify with the homeless myself." Nevertheless, he told the woman that she had to leave. She walked to the complex's trash area and began digging.

Moosa was fired from house-sitting in January, after a neighbor accused him of making racist comments. He told me that he had merely introduced himself to the neighbors, as instructed by Weekend Warriors. As the coronavirus began to ravage communities of color, his ex-wife agreed to let him move in temporarily with her and their children.

An early fatality was Evans's ex-wife's brother, whom Evans had lived with in Moreno Valley. He caught the coronavirus in a convalescent home, where he was recovering from a toe amputation necessitated by his diabetes. Evans called Montano and requested his house-sitting check so that he could contribute to the costs of the funeral—which the family still hasn't been able to have. But the virus brought a measure of stability to Evans's life. He's been in the same home since January, when he was assigned to a duplex in Santa Ana. Construction stopped in March, after a truck deposited new appliances, which sat in their boxes unopened all summer. Evans didn't

mind the lockdown. “I’ve been quarantining for seven years!” he said. He began writing a new essay about the sort of relationship he sought, the type of woman he’d want to be cooped up with during a pandemic. It was inspired by a radio story on the recent rise in domestic violence.

Yet sometimes restlessness struck him. He bought two maps, one of the U.S. and one of the world, and taped them on the wall opposite his bed. He thought about getting a passport—“I always thought it was thousands of dollars, but it’s only a hundred,” he said—and looked up prices for flights to Egypt and Jamaica.

His memoir project had stalled around Christmas. He’d been trying to dictate the book into Otter, a voice-transcription app, but hadn’t had the heart to keep talking alone. I suggested that he invite his sons over to listen, but he shook his head. “So much of my history and my life I conceal, because I don’t need to have my children dreaming nightmares over their father’s story,” he told me. “My life, you know, is not an attractive life. There’s no glory in it. I’ve never been in the military. I’ve never been out of the country. The only thing that’s impressive is that in a few days—shoot, next week—I’ll be sixty-eight years old.”

He longed for a home of his own, where he could watch movies with his sons and be surrounded by the possessions that he was currently paying eighty dollars a month to keep in storage. His Social Security check was eight hundred and thirty-eight dollars a month; he couldn’t afford much. But, as a senior citizen, he thought he might qualify for affordable housing. He called three nonprofits specializing in housing for the elderly. All of them said that they had a waiting list of between five and ten years. The news gave him insomnia. In the middle of the night, he wrote:

Millionaires and billionaires and trillionaires,
You will not be moving from this earth to any other planet.
You will not be importing water to start civilization on the moon.
My name is Augustus and I am here to announce your doom.
I want you to look me in my eye and read my lips
before you trip trying to run from the angry populations and board
space ships.

One night, he asked me how to use Craigslist. We pulled it up on his phone. “What’s your dream neighborhood?” I asked.

“Oh, wow,” he said, marvelling at the idea of choosing where he wanted to live. “Culver City. Wait, no. Carson? Carson got too much pollution there. Long Beach.” There was a pause. “Damn. What neighborhood would I want to move into?

“Well, you know, I’ll just type this in, just to see,” he finally said. “C-O-M-P-T-O-N.”

He scrolled through bland bungalows on run-down blocks. “You know, they used to call that Chocolate City,” he said wistfully.

“You can’t even get a single for sixteen hundred dollars,” he said, trying to navigate the pictures. “I got to go sell me some books.” ♦

Musical Events

- [What Does It Mean to “Reimagine” an Orchestra Season?](#)

What Does It Mean to “Reimagine” an Orchestra Season?

With live performances constrained by the pandemic, musical ensembles are streaming productions for listeners curious enough to seek them out.

By [Alex Ross](#)

November 30, 2020



To many musicians' ears, the word "stream" has an ugly ring: it suggests a utility that can be turned on and off with a faucet. In recent years, concert halls and theatres have found renewed appeal as places of refuge where listeners can escape the addictive injection of data—e-mails, texts, notifications, feeds, alerts—and focus on a single event made by fellow-humans. The near-total disappearance of live performance in [the pandemic era](#) has trapped us more than ever in front of screens, where distractions stretch out to the crack of doom. Streamed events lack the psychic imprint of the real, the aura of shared experience: the moment they are done, they tend to evaporate from memory, leaving only ghosts of feeling in their wake.

Nonetheless, with no alternative in view, performing-arts institutions have decamped to virtuality. They have done so not only to maintain contact with their audiences but, even more important, to keep their artists engaged. Many American orchestras are delivering some semblance of a fall season, even if dimensions are reduced and ambitions confined. Opera houses have been mostly inactive, in light of the nearly insuperable epidemiological challenges of assembling soloists, a chorus, and an orchestra in one space. [Yuval Sharon's](#) drive-through "[Götterdämmerung](#)," which Michigan Opera Theatre presented in October in Detroit, seems all the more staggering in retrospect: in any year, it would have been a formidable accomplishment, and in the midst of a pandemic it felt close to miraculous.

When, over the summer, orchestras began making known their fall plans, the operative word was "reimagined." At least twenty orchestras, from Albany to St. Louis, announced reimagined seasons. Yet, because so many institutions were using identical language, it didn't seem that anything particularly imaginative was going on. A certain herd mentality also surfaced in the programming. Even a [welcome concentration](#) on works by African-American composers, in recognition of Black Lives Matter protests, leaned too much on a few names, with wide swaths of Black music left unexplored.

One orchestra that avoided the "reimagined" label was the Detroit Symphony, which had two distinct advantages: its programming was already livelier and more contemporary than that of most American ensembles, and for some years it has been in the habit of streaming its concerts. In August, not long after Detroit emerged from lockdown, the orchestra began

presenting outdoor chamber concerts. These were charmingly intimate, neighborly affairs, with musicians providing spoken introductions. Come fall, the ensemble moved back into Orchestra Hall, its longtime home, marshalling nearly thirty programs. Jader Bignamini, Detroit's gifted new music director, established himself as an incisive leader. As with Michigan Opera Theatre's "Götterdämmerung"—Detroit is dominating American musical life at the moment—several of the orchestra's events would have warranted attention in any season.

In early November, the violinist Jennifer Koh came to Detroit to play in the world première of [Tyshawn Sorey](#)'s "For Marcos Balter," which the composer has described as a "non-certo"—a concerto shorn of theatrical conflict and virtuoso features. Sorey, a remarkable and unclassifiable figure in contemporary American music, first established himself as an avant-garde-leaning jazz drummer and has more recently built up a compelling portfolio of works for classical ensembles. He has the cardinal virtue of being unpredictable: each new piece of his feels like a departure into fresh terrain.

[Morton Feldman](#), the master of abstract quietude, also favored titles beginning with the preposition "for," and "For Marcos Balter" opens in a very Feldman-like world, with shifting constellations of sustained tones, atmospheric dissonances, and wisps of quicker figuration (a sextuplet on the piano). That elemental texture persists through the first part of the work, and, as mysteriously gorgeous as it is, it risks becoming pastiche. But then new patterns emerge: sustained tones, block chords, murmurs of recessed melody. By the end, an increasingly charged, unstable mass of forces yields unexpected tension. The coda is magnificent and ominous: the timpani thwack out a slow-rising sequence of notes, almost like a chopped-and-screwed version of the opening piano gestures.

As it happens, the Seattle Symphony streamed another major new Sorey work a couple of weeks later: "For Roscoe Mitchell," for cello and orchestra, with Seth Parker Woods as the soloist and David Robertson conducting. It, too, takes off from the Feldman model, with tendrils of tone wafting across opaque chordal clusters. Yet its narrative arc is dramatically different from that of "For Marcos Balter." The cello fuses fragmentary motifs into long-breathed legato lines. Toward the end, violins and violas pick up those

songful patterns, as if preparing to break through into some collective epiphany; but a crisis intervenes, in the form of grisly, dissonant quadruple-forte chords. The cello descends deep into its bass register, in wounded retreat. Both of Sorey's imposing utterances come across as monuments to a tragic year.

However constricted the streaming ritual may be, it lets the curious listener range across the musical map in a way that would be impossible under ordinary circumstances. From my well-worn office chair, I was able to make a remote tour of a dozen or more American orchestras. Members of the Chicago Symphony turned in a rich-hued account of the Dvořák Sextet. Franz Welser-Möst led the Cleveland Orchestra in a pristine rendition of Alfred Schnittke's brooding Piano Concerto, with Yefim Bronfman as the soloist. The Dallas Symphony, under Fabio Luisi, organized a meaty night of Verdi excerpts, with thrillingly full-throated singing by Angela Meade, Jamie Barton, and Bryan Hymel. And a fifty-eight-player contingent from the Boston Symphony, under Ken-David Masur, gave a forceful reading of Dvořák's "New World" Symphony, thereby breaking months of melancholy silence in Symphony Hall, one of the nation's finest acoustic spaces.

I especially relished the work of the Cincinnati Symphony, which is thriving under the stylish, polyglot direction of Louis Langrée. Cincinnati's all-American season-opening concert included Jessie Montgomery's 2014 piece for strings, "Banner," which rings questioning variations on the national anthem; Samuel Barber's "Knoxville: Summer of 1915," brimming with gauzy nostalgia; and Copland's "Appalachian Spring," an emblem of New Deal idealism. Angel Blue sang piercingly in the Barber, and Christopher Pell, the Cincinnati's principal clarinetist, anchored an urgently glowing ensemble in the Copland. A month later, the violinist Augustin Hadelich tore into the glittering Second Violin Concerto of the eighteenth-century Afro-French composer Joseph Bologne, who received much attention this fall; the Detroit Symphony played his First Symphony, and the L.A. Opera revived his comic opera "The Anonymous Lover."

The most elaborate production of the fall came from the San Francisco Symphony, which had to scrap most of its plans to celebrate its new music director, [Esa-Pekka Salonen](#). Its online gala, on November 14th, encapsulated Salonen's questing spirit nevertheless, with the conductor on

hand to lead a movement from John Adams's "Shaker Loops." The major offering was the première of Nico Muhly's "Throughline," which makes a virtue of distancing and isolation. In an astounding feat of editing, the video of the performance integrates footage of players and ensembles in various locations, resulting not in an anonymous wall of Zoom boxes but in a seamless montage of closeup musical action. Muhly's dexterously racing score allows individual musicians to shine, and also serves to introduce eight of the collaborative partners that Salonen has gathered around him in his new role: the flutist Claire Chase, the guitarist-composer Bryce Dessner, the bassist-composer Esperanza Spalding, the soprano Julia Bullock, the A.I. innovator Carol Reiley, the violinist Pekka Kuusisto, the pianist-composer Nicholas Britell, and Muhly himself. The "Throughline" video even has a silent part for Salonen: he is seen walking through the woods around his home in Finland.

The [New York Philharmonic](#), the nation's oldest orchestra, has been largely absent from the streaming marketplace. Health regulations have prevented it from organizing even modest-sized recording sessions, although an exception was made for a recent online gala, which included Bernstein's "Candide" Overture and Elgar's "Nimrod." The orchestra did, however, make its presence felt in city squares and parks, in an initiative titled NY Phil Bandwagon. This was the brainchild of the countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo, who accompanied squads of players in more than eighty concerts across the five boroughs. In October, I caught an event on a pedestrian island at Broadway and Twenty-ninth Street. I'd never heard a program for countertenor and horn quartet, and may not hear one again. A few dozen spectators took in "Dripping Amber," a new piece by Jessica Mays; horn-quartet pieces by Nikolai Tcherepnin and Alfred Diewitz; and a strangely effective arrangement of "Dido's Lament."

For the most part, only those who are actively searching out streaming concerts will find them. The Bandwagon, which featured Costanzo singing from a bright-red pickup truck, caught the attention of many people who don't otherwise attend concerts. Although there was something dishearteningly marginal about the spectacle—most pedestrians paused only briefly before walking on—its very distance from the customary grandeur of classical presentations may do something to change popular perceptions of

the institution. In any case, the series restored, if just for a moment, the psychic bond that a season of isolation has broken. ♦

On Television

- [“Roadkill” Offers the Fantasy of Politics as Usual](#)

“Roadkill” Offers the Fantasy of Politics as Usual

The British political thriller, full of small-bore scandals and Victorian twists, can hardly compete with reality.

By [Alexandra Schwartz](#)

November 30, 2020



On Election Night, I was on the live-streaming Web site Twitch, helping a French friend try to make sense of the incomprehensible for an audience of his compatriots. It was two in the morning across the Atlantic, then three, then four, and still viewers stayed tuned. “This is better than a TV show,” one commented, as we puzzled through various disaster scenarios that seemed equal parts outlandish and plausible. Suspense, villainy, pettiness, infighting, gimmicks galore: the reality-TV politics of our reality-TV President have had us mercilessly hooked, from slow-rolling attempt at a coup to dripping-hair-dye debacle. Spare a sympathetic thought for television writers. How can they hope to compete with the present?

Such is the challenge faced by “Roadkill” (on PBS’s “Masterpiece”), David Hare’s new political thriller in four episodes. Watching it now is like chasing the double tequila shot of the real with a milky cup of tea. The show is set in England, which Americans continue to imagine as a land of escapist sanity, despite recent evidence to the contrary. “You have to forget about Brexit,” the Tory transport minister, Peter Laurence (Hugh Laurie), tells a caller to the radio talk show on which he regularly bloviates. “It was a national trauma, as you call it, but it’s a trauma we came through. It’s over.” That reassuring fantasy of politics as usual is one that “Roadkill,” with its small-bore scandals and Victorian twists, faithfully upholds. It’s risk-averse in a way that is itself a kind of risk—comfortingly old-fashioned, at the cost of staying one cautious step behind the present that it aims to represent.

As the show opens, Peter has just had a triumph in court. After a newspaper accused him of profiting from his government position—by consulting for an American lobbying group when he was a junior minister of health—he sued for libel and won. Much like Brett Kavanaugh’s confirmation hearing, the Laurence case seems to have come down to a question of calendars; Charmian Pepper (Sarah Greene), the journalist who wrote a story placing Peter at the lobbyists’ Washington, D.C., headquarters, was forced to recant, after Peter’s team presented an official diary scrubbed of the offending visit. “They’re always the best cases,” Peter’s young barrister (Pippa Bennett-Warner) brashly tells a colleague, as the courthouse crowd spills onto the sidewalk around her. “The ones you win when you suspect your client is guilty as hell.”

Peter's victory, and the scandal it conceals, is merely the first plot plate that Hare sets spinning. Soon his trusty, bumbling aide, Duncan Knock (Iain De Caestecker), spirits him to Shephill, a women's prison, where an inmate (Gbemisola Ikumelo) insists that she must talk to him about his daughter. The daughter who doesn't speak to him, or the other one? Peter asks. No, a third, the heretofore unknown offspring of a youth spent in drunken philandering. Peter has just enough time to take in this dubious revelation before he must rush off to 10 Downing Street, where he squirms before Dawn Ellison (Helen McCrory), the fearsome Prime Minister, who looks like a dyed tulip in her form-fitting powder-blue suit and has the air of a cat about to pounce. A Cabinet reshuffle is planned; Dawn dangles the possibility of a major promotion, and Peter, blinded by ego, steps obligingly into her trap.

"Roadkill" is a stylish show, with a handsome title sequence that calls to mind the great Saul Bass, and a traipsing score, by Harry Escott, that casts a playful, mysterious mood. We get lots of dark wood, dark suits, and dark corporate cars that glide, unimpeded, down glistening gray streets. Much of the show's appeal lies in its embrace of the familiar. The gruff, macho newspaper editor (Pip Torrens); the fragile, neglected wife (Saskia Reeves); the chafing, unsatisfied mistress (Sidse Babett Knudsen)—we know them well. But Hare, dazzled by the buffet of tropes available to him, can't keep himself from loading up his tray. It's not enough for Peter's illegitimate child to claim his attention after twenty-odd years; his bratty daughter Lily (Millie Brady), resentful and entitled, must be photographed by the tabloids snorting cocaine. Charmian Pepper, her name taken straight from Dickens's reject pile, is given an alcohol problem to underscore her instability. (One depressing rule of thumb for this sort of show is that the diligent journalist working to uncover the politician's dirty truth must be a young woman, the better to be objectified by her bosses and prove her worth as a go-getter even as she trades on her sex appeal. A second depressing rule of thumb is that she must be disposed of, preferably by means of a blunt collision—recalling the hurtling subway train that put an end to Kate Mara in "House of Cards.") We get riots in prisons, vodka glasses thrown at heads in the heat of domestic anger, and vague, faceless foreign calamities. "It's about Yemen," a conniving politico tells the Prime Minister. Isn't it always?

What kept me watching was Laurie, who floats through the action with a bemused, obliging look on his wonderful lean, lipless face. There is something gentle and appeasing about his Peter, who prides himself on his working-class background, and is susceptible to maverick pricks of conscience—he alienates his party, and seemingly all of Britain, by championing prison reform. (“The British like locking people up. It’s in our character,” the Prime Minister tells him—a line that makes an American feel a little less alone.) In the street, Peter is accosted by selfie-seekers, but at home—where Hare, a seasoned purveyor of female melodrama, unsubtly surrounds him with a pack of women who peck and nag—he is merely baffled, wondering what he’s doing neck-deep in this mess.

Political reputations are made to be won and lost. Private disgrace is harder to grapple with, now that it can be turned public with a click and a swipe. The violation of digital exposure is the subject of “I Hate Suzie” (on HBO Max), a destabilizing, off-kilter show created by Billie Piper and Lucy Prebble. Piper stars as Suzie Pickles, an actress who, like Piper herself, found teen-age stardom as a singer and is now entering the career descent of early middle age. (Action shows in which she runs from Nazi zombies are her bread and butter.) She lives in a cozy house in the English countryside with her husband, Cob (Daniel Ings), and their young son, who is deaf. After her phone is hacked, nude photos of her are splashed all over the Web, in flagrante delicto with a man whose cob is visibly not Cob’s. “There is a penis of color in the pictures,” she is informed by an indignant audience member at a sci-fi convention—an absurdist phrase, at once respectful and rude, that typifies the show’s tart tonal mix.

“I Hate Suzie” has a strange, strong flavor, a briny funk with a surprising undercurrent of sweetness, like Scandinavian licorice. At first, I was repulsed. Then dislike turned to craving. Each of the show’s eight episodes is named for a stage in coping with trauma: we start out with “Shock,” “Denial,” and “Fear,” before progressing through “Shame,” “Bargaining,” and “Guilt” to “Anger” and “Acceptance,” but the artificiality of that structure is undercut by the show’s genuine, exploratory weirdness.

Berated by the furious, wounded Cob, Suzie goes off the rails. Woozy camerawork and screeching, witchy strings take us into a mind altered by drugs, alcohol, and anxiety, but it is Piper’s raw, comical performance as a

not so smart woman on the verge that stands out. Suzie mumbles, makes excuses, and tells incompetent lies as the camera shows her aging face in merciless closeup; she is a creature of haphazard instinct and ruinous libido. One excellent early episode looks at desire from within, flashing through an array of Suzie's sexual fantasies as she and her savvy manager, Naomi (Leila Farzad), analyze them together like critics at a screening. "We'll sort it out like grownups, like in a Woody Allen film," her oblivious lover (Nathaniel Martello-White) tells her, a reminder that adulthood is itself a performance, however derivative and imitative, that Suzie, like the rest of us, must make her own. ♦

Poems

- “[Winter Song for One Who Suffers](#)”
- “[Little Spy in My Bedroom](#)”

[December 7, 2020 Issue](#)

Winter Song for One Who Suffers

By [Brenda Hillman](#)

November 30, 2020

Audio: Read by the author.

The stars stand up
behind the day. A known dove balances
on its claw
at the window. A cosmic incident
of darkness has begun

& a mild excess of beauty
will be offered to the dead,
which they will eat. On a hill

the wise man serves the people,
your thought splits
in half when he speaks of the old
revolts, the return
of apocalypse, motive & advancement.

A soul can crouch
a long time while the heart
expands to reach its edges.
What is missing past the glitter
of the harvest?

Friend, you chose
to live. How? You did. So many
choices, not just two, encrypted
behind the mystery of the sun,

then the hurt was set aside,
indeterminate chaos
called in by love.

[December 7, 2020 Issue](#)

Little Spy in My Bedroom

By [Yusef Komunyakaa](#)

November 30, 2020

Audio: Read by the author.

What's that ticking sound
under the red velvet sofa,
breathing a little click-song
stolen from South Africa,
perched on a windowsill
or lost in a coffin drawer
singing a half-pint of good
luck, aping such big emotion?
Whatever it is, it materialized
up here on the second floor,
as if from my head—the silent
timekeeper's rasping alarm.
I pace around the room, careful
not to trip on the tiger rug,
to search out the mechanical
night song of a small being.
What good can it bring now
in our highly evolved world
of climate change & hunting
death stars to give the names
of hermit kings & outlaws.
Love, have I always listened
with my whole damn body,
18k. tick of a pocket watch?
I rise, gazing into an inlaid box
of hex signs & cheap rings.
Now I hardly hear the faint
noise, yet know it is here.
I cover my eyes with my left

hand to hear the machine
pulse of a careless heart, &
in a patch of early-morning
sunlight I see a black cricket.
Someone kicks off her shoe
before I can think to say, No,
one of us must show mercy.

Portfolio

- [The Race to Make Vials for Coronavirus Vaccines](#)

The Race to Make Vials for Coronavirus Vaccines

A Corning factory in upstate New York is running around the clock to help meet the urgent demand.

Photography by [Christopher Payne](#)

November 30, 2020



An old story about glass goes something like this: A glassmaker, presenting his wares to the Roman emperor Tiberius, handed over a bowl for inspection. After studying it, Tiberius returned the bowl to the man, who promptly hurled it to the ground. Rather than smash to pieces, the glass merely dented; it had been fashioned from a substance that the ancients called *vitrum flexile*. Amazed, Tiberius asked if anyone else knew how to make it. When the artisan said no, the emperor—fearing that such an invention would devalue treasures filled with gold and silver—had him executed.

The story was, as the historian Pliny wrote, “more widely spread than well authenticated.” But it captures an aspiration nearly as old as glass itself: to create resilience in the fragile substance that results when hot silica fuses with other minerals. That aspiration now carries special importance. After many months in which the *COVID-19* pandemic has brought misery to much of the world, new vaccines will soon be ready for distribution. Getting them to people who need them will require more than a billion vials to be manufactured, filled, and shipped, at top speed and in some cases under extreme stress. (Pfizer’s vaccine must be kept colder than ninety degrees below zero.) Under any circumstances, putting medicine into glass is a tricky business. Standard medical vials—made of borosilicate—often break as they’re filled, and just one damaged vial can ruin a batch of doses and stop a production line.

These photographs, taken by Christopher Payne at two Corning facilities in upstate New York, tell the story of an alternative to borosilicate, called Valor Glass, and its use in the effort to deliver *COVID-19* vaccines. The development of Valor Glass began in 2011, when Corning’s researchers were working to reinvent medical vials, which had not changed substantially for a century. Using platinum-lined ceramic crucibles, heated to more than a thousand degrees, they spent hundreds of hours combining silica with new ingredients. As Robert Schaut, one of the project’s leaders, said, “The periodic table is our toolbox.” They found that, by adding alumina and removing boron, they could make the glass far more resistant to degradation, and therefore less likely to leach contaminants into the contents. Other innovations came later, and the vials went on the market in 2017. This June, the federal government granted Corning more than two hundred million dollars to produce them for *COVID* vaccines.

Corning's manufacturing process, which Payne documents with an architect's sensitivity to form, begins with cylindrical machines called converters. They cut and shape tubes of Valor Glass into vials, which are then submerged in a molten-salt bath. Potassium atoms in the hot mixture swap with smaller sodium atoms embedded in the surface of the glass, creating tension and therefore toughness. (Corning first developed this process for Gorilla Glass, which is used in iPhones and other electronic devices; a vial fortified in this way can withstand as much as a thousand pounds of force.) Afterward, the glass is rinsed, and the exterior is given a polymer coating, so that bottles don't grind against one another on a filling line, generating glass dust that can ruin doses. All this work is being conducted under conditions of severe urgency. Corning's facility is running around the clock. "Glass is used to protect our most valuable liquids," Schaut said. "It has an aura of protection."

By the end of the year, the machines in these images will have produced enough vials to deliver more than a hundred million doses of *COVID-19* vaccines, but Corning's production is merely one part of a larger effort. SiO₂ Materials Science, a company in Alabama, is manufacturing another alternative to borosilicate vials. The makers of the standard product have been ramping up operations, too. The demand calls for everything. As the chief executive of AstraZeneca, one of the companies racing to produce a vaccine, warned, early in the pandemic, "There's not enough vials in the world."

—Raffi Khatchadourian

Shouts & Murmurs

- [Raised by Wolves](#)

[December 7, 2020 Issue](#)

Raised by Wolves

By [Simon Rich](#)

November 30, 2020

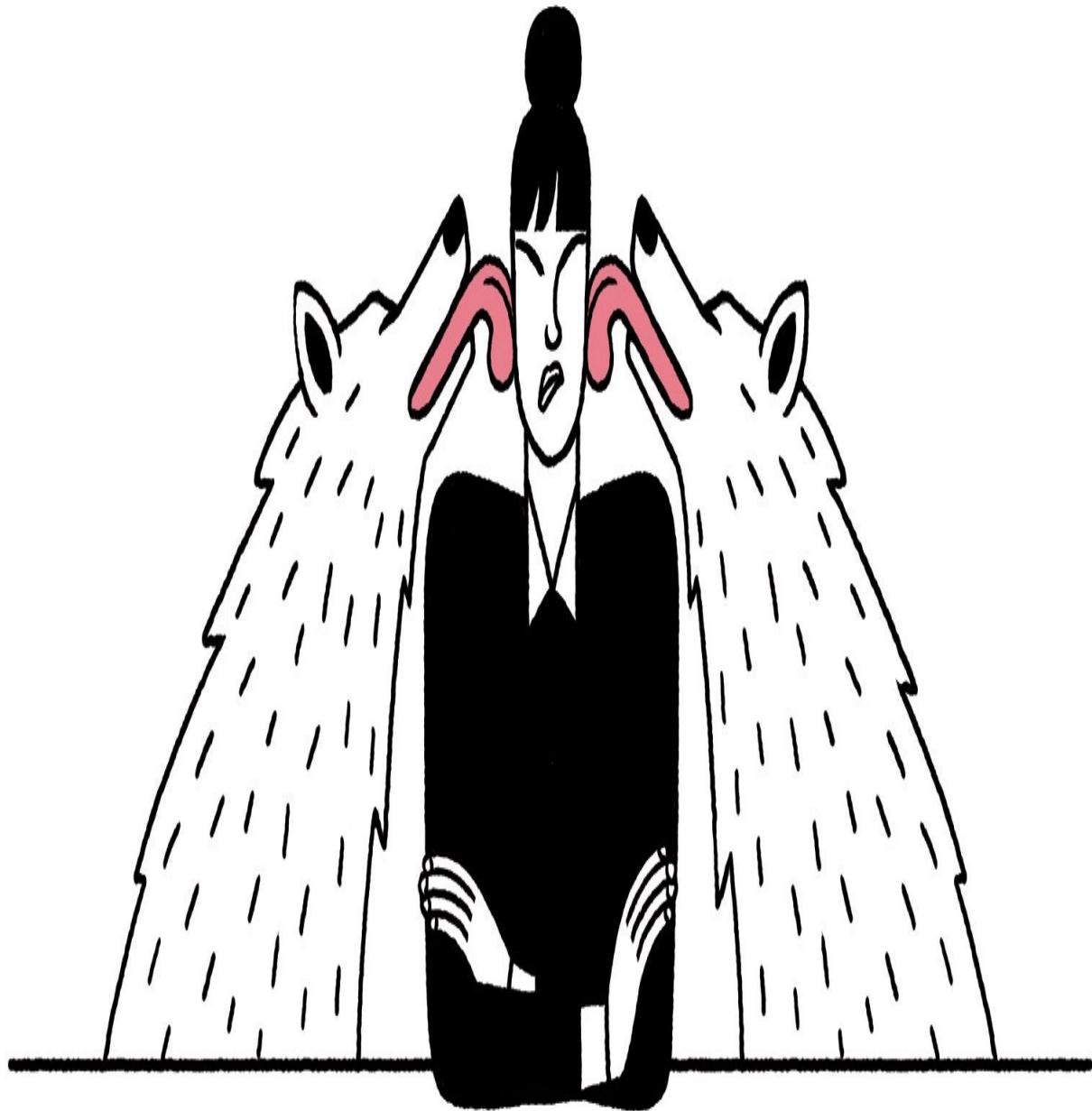


Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

In 2003, a group of hunters discovered a young woman in Siberia who had apparently been raised by wolves. Scientists were unable to explain the child's origins, but an examination indicated that she was approximately eighteen years old and in surprisingly good health. Researchers named her "Lauren" and worked to assimilate her into human society. With effort, Lauren caught up to her peers, both socially and intellectually. By the age of thirty-five, she had married an actuary named Gabe and given birth to a daughter. Lauren never interacted with the wolves that raised her, except when they came over for Thanksgiving.

Lauren was considering whether or not to take a Klonopin when her husband shuffled in, straining under the weight of a dead elk. "You didn't have to get that," she said.

"It's the least I can do," Gabe said, in a chipper Boy Scout voice. "It's so cool of them to come all the way out here!"

He dumped the carcass on the coffee table, shattering several bowls of nuts and olives. Lauren sighed.

"What's wrong?" Gabe asked.

"I just don't understand why we always have to accommodate their needs."

Gabe shot her a look. "Because they're your parents. And our guests."

Lauren popped the Klonopin and washed it down with Pinot Grigio.

"Look, I get it," Gabe said. "Parents are hard. Mine drive me crazy, too. I mean, my dad, with those puns?"

"I think my parents are worse," Lauren said. "I mean, growing up with them was a full-on nightmare."

"Maybe it's worse in your memory?"

"It was documented by scientists," she said, frustration creeping into her voice. "There have been books about it, and an award-winning documentary."

Gabe rubbed her shoulders in a way that managed to somehow make her feel even more tense. “I know your folks aren’t perfect,” he said. “But they came all the way from Siberia. They’ve been running and swimming for months, and they’ll be gone in half an hour. The least we can do is be civil, right?”

“I guess,” she said.

“Great!” he said, sealing the agreement with a condescending forehead kiss. “Besides, it might be fun. I mean, your dad’s stories are pretty epic.”

Lauren smiled tightly as Gabe set out the napkins and the tarps. She’d told him all about her screwed-up childhood. The barking, the growling, the total lack of structure and support. Her parents had never been abusive, but it had still been a dysfunctional home. Her therapist had confirmed it.

“They did not see you,” she’d said. “And you were not heard.”

Still, though Gabe was aware of her parents’ transgressions, he’d never actually witnessed any. They had mellowed considerably with age. Her father had stopped howling at the moon following his stroke, and, after a few false starts, her mother had finally quit drinking. Lauren knew that she should be grateful for their progress, but somehow it galled her. By rehabilitating themselves, they had robbed her of an audience for her suffering. It was one more deprivation, the latest in a chain stretching all the way back to her childhood.

Two piercing howls sounded outside. “I think that might be them,” Gabe said. “Do you want to let them in?”

“You can do it,” she said.

Lauren refilled her wineglass while Gabe opened the window so that her parents could jump into the living room.

“Sorry we’re late!” her mother said. “You know your daddy—he didn’t want to ask for directions!”

“Good thing I had my better half!” he said.

Lauren cringed as her parents nuzzled. When she was a kid, her father had cheated on her mother constantly, with her friends and neighbors and, once, with a log that had a hole in it. And now everyone was supposed to pretend like their marriage was perfect?

“So, how’s everything?” her father asked. “How’s work?”

“It’s fine,” Lauren said.

There was a two-second pause, and Gabe rushed to fill it. “Work’s better than fine,” he said, smacking Lauren’s arm with an annoying amount of force. “Honey, tell them your news!”

“It’s nothing,” she said.

“It’s not nothing,” Gabe protested. He turned to her parents and gestured at her like a game-show host: “You are looking at Verizon’s newest regional marketing-communications manager!”

Lauren’s parents tackled her and licked her face. “We’re so proud of you!”

“So what does this mean?” her father asked. “You get to hunt bigger animals?”

“I’m not a hunter,” she said. “I work for Verizon. In telecommunications.”

“Ah, gotcha,” he said, lowering his eyes. “I’m sorry I got it wrong.”

“You’re not wrong,” Gabe told him, reassuringly. “She got a raise, which is sort of like the human equivalent of hunting bigger animals. Right, honey?”

“I mean, I guess,” Lauren said.

“I’m not surprised,” her mother said. “We always used to say, ‘There goes Lauren, our little genius!’ ”

“Huh,” Lauren said.

Gabe shot her a warning look.

“What?” her mother asked.

“I just don’t remember you ever saying that,” she said. “My memory, in fact, is that you never named me.”

Her parents hung their heads.

“Would anybody like to eat this dead elk’s ass?” Gabe asked.

“I’m not hungry,” her father said.

“O.K., I’m sorry,” Lauren said, rolling her eyes. “I should have remembered the family rule: never say anything about anything uncomfortable, ever.”

Lauren’s father put his tail between his legs. “Maybe coming here was a mistake,” he murmured. “Maybe we should just leap out the window.”

Lauren shrugged. “Wouldn’t be the first time you left.”

“Sweetheart,” he said. “We went over this in therapy. The reason I left the family had nothing to do with you. It was a period in my life when I was confused. I thought that log with a hole in it was your mother. I literally thought the moss on it was her fur. It was a crazy time for me. I had rabies.”

“I’m supposed to feel sorry for you now?” Lauren asked. Despite the wine and Klonopin, her hands were shaking.

“We’re not asking for sympathy,” her mother said. “And, if there’s something you need to say to us, we’re here to listen. Right, darling?”

“Yes,” her father said. “We are prepared to honor your emotions.”

Lauren clenched her fists; she hated it when they used therapy jargon.

“Let’s start with my leaving,” her father said. “Why did it upset you so much?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Lauren said, sarcastically. “Maybe because it happened on my fucking birthday?” Her parents eyed each other subtly. “Let me

guess,” Lauren said. “You don’t remember.”

“Honestly, no,” her father said.

“So you’re saying that I made it up?”

“I’m not saying that!” he said, raising a paw. “It totally could have happened the way you remember it. I’m just saying that my memory is different.”

“O.K., fine,” she said. “What’s your memory of the day you left?”

“O.K., well—and, again, this could be inaccurate. We’re talking about a long time ago, and my brain is the size of a pine cone, and I have no understanding of time or numbers. But my memory of that day is: I was walking in the woods. And then the big, yellow god that lives in the sky shined hot. And then there was a smell, like, ‘O.K. time to go.’ So I ran into the wet place that is cold. And, again, that might not be a perfectly accurate description of what happened. But that’s what I remember about that day.”

“That’s what I remember, too,” said her mother.

“There’s no point doing this,” Lauren said. “It just leads to frustration.”

“We’re frustrated, too!” her father said. He sighed. “I’m sorry for growling. I was flooded.”

“That’s all right,” Lauren muttered.

“Thank you,” he said. “My point is, I know we weren’t great parents. We were young, and we were wolves, and we didn’t always know what we were doing. But every time we see you all we do is apologize, over and over, and it’s not easy. In order to do it, we both had to learn to talk English, and it hurts our throats and sounds insane. Just hearing my voice right now, coming out of my snout—it’s incredibly unnatural and disturbing. So if you want us to keep saying sorry in these weird, choking animal voices, we will. Because we *are* sorry. But, at a certain point, the ball is in your court.”

The room fell silent, allowing them to hear a distant squeak.

“Sounds like someone’s up!” Gabe said, grateful for an excuse to flee. He returned holding their three-year-old daughter, Haley. She was gripping a small orange ball—the source of the squeaking. Her eyes were bleary from sleep, but when she saw her grandparents she let out a squeal and buried her face in their fur.

Lauren was surprised that Haley remembered who they were. She’d barely spent any time with them. There was last Thanksgiving, and that Memorial Day when they’d flown her to Siberia because Gabe’s sister was getting married and there were no kids at the wedding, and it was just the easiest child-care option. Lauren had expected Haley to be homesick on the tundra, but she’d enjoyed herself. It didn’t hurt that her grandparents had given her unlimited screen time. They claimed it was because they didn’t understand what screens were and had no way of differentiating between an iPad and any other reflective surface, like a puddle or an eye. Lauren suspected that they were lying, but she was charmed. In their coddling of Haley, she sensed a desire to make up for the past, a subconscious awareness that there were wrongs that needed righting.

Haley tossed her ball across the room, and her grandparents obediently fetched it. It was surreal to Lauren to see her folks so docile, but to her daughter it made perfect sense. She didn’t see her grandparents as vicious wolves. To her, they were just Papa and Gam Gam.

Someday she’d have to tell Haley the truth about her childhood and the trauma she’d endured.

Or maybe she wouldn’t. Maybe she’d tell a different narrative, one that focussed on the things that they’d got right. How they’d fed her, sheltered her, and defended her from hawks. For all their dysfunction, she’d ended up doing O.K. In some ways, her parents’ flaws had even contributed to her success. (She knew that her essay about them, for example, had been a major factor in her getting into Brown.)

Haley was about to throw the ball again when she walked over to her mother. “Now Mommy throw,” she said, pressing the soggy ball into Lauren’s hand.

Lauren turned it over in her palm. It was hard to tell if the drool was her parents' or her daughter's. Haley had some new teeth coming in. Lauren had recently taken her to the dentist, and the X-ray of her child's jaw had shocked her. There wasn't anything out of the ordinary, but it was disturbing to see all those adult teeth embedded in her skull, a lifetime of canines and molars waiting to erupt. It would be years before the teeth broke through her gums, with braces and retainers along the way. Why couldn't humans come out fully formed, with everything they needed? Why did it have to take so long and hurt so much to finish growing up?

She gazed at her parents, who were crouching low on the carpet in a show of deference. In wolf years, they were four hundred years old. She wondered what they had been like when they were young. They'd been raised by wolves, too, of course. They'd never spoken about their parents, and it occurred to Lauren only now that she had never asked. She held up the ball, and her parents stared at it with tired yellow eyes. Their panting was labored, but their pupils tracked the ball as she tentatively traced it through the air. She could hear them faintly whimpering, plaintive as pups begging for scraps.

"Throw, Mommy," Haley pleaded.

Lauren lifted the ball high, feeling its heavy, sticky weight. Then she took a deep breath and let it go. ♦

Social Contract Dept.

- [The Brooklyn School Suing the C.D.C.](#)

December 7, 2020 Issue

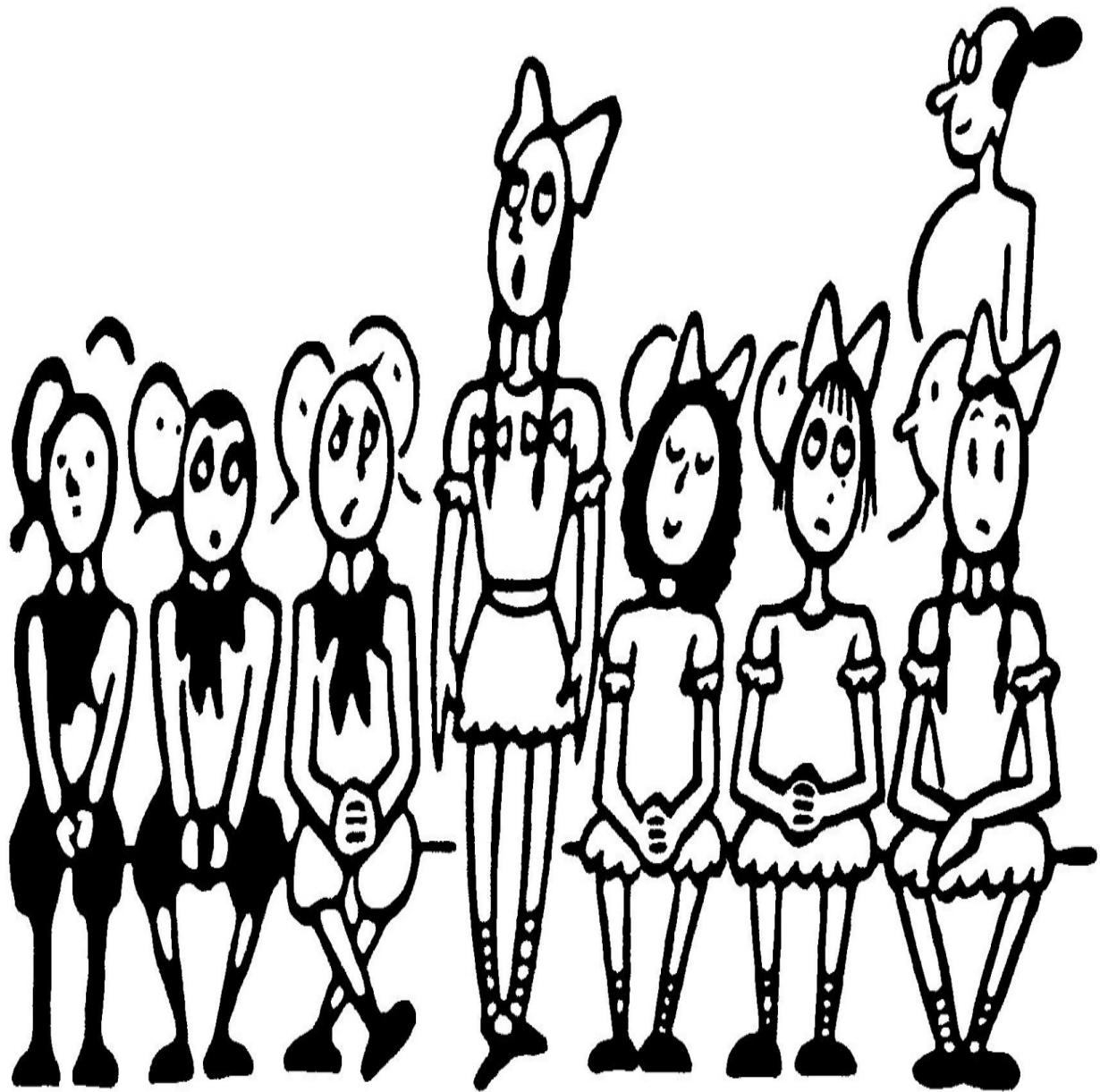
The Brooklyn School Suing the C.D.C.

Coney Island Prep’s lawsuit alleges that the government’s incompetence in dealing with COVID is not just destructive—leaving people dead and making it hard for many others to do their jobs—but also illegal.

By [Zach Helfand](#)

November 30, 2020

Many Americans seem to have abandoned hope of a functioning government. The country is cresting its third *Covid-19* peak; it hasn’t flattened any curves so much as stacked them into one ascending, surrealist staircase. The lame-duck President ditched the G-20’s pandemic-preparedness summit for a round of golf. Congress is hopeless. Elections are deemed fraudulent. Perhaps only one great national tradition remains viable: Americans can always sue.



A few weeks ago, Coney Island Prep, a charter school in Brooklyn, filed a lawsuit against Alex Azar, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, and Robert Redfield, the director of the Centers for Disease Control, for their handling of the pandemic. The school and a few co-plaintiffs allege that the government's incompetence is not just destructive—leaving people dead and making it hard for many others to do their jobs—but also illegal. “People are dying, and it’s our kids’ parents, our kids’ grandparents,” Leslie-Bernard Joseph, the C.E.O. of Coney Island Prep, said recently. Most of the school’s thousand students are Black or Latino. Many are poor. When the pandemic hit, the school decided not to expect much help, and formed its own safety net. It distributed about eight hundred laptops and tablets, a hundred and twenty-five thousand meals, and more than a hundred thousand dollars to parents, to cover rent and other expenses. It’s also paying for fifty families’ Internet.

“That should be the government’s job, but that’s actually not what I need help with right now,” Joseph said. He wanted readily available tests, and reliable information, so that the school doesn’t have to keep ripping up its plans. In October, four days before the school was to open, the governor declared the neighborhood a “hot spot.” The school was shut down. “It’s been like trying to swim against the current of the Pacific Ocean,” Joseph said. “We knew we were drowning, and we were just going to try to keep swimming as long as we could.”

At issue in the lawsuit is the Pandemic and All-Hazards Preparedness and Advancing Innovation Act, which President Trump signed into law last year. The act sets requirements for the executive branch, including running a federal testing-and-tracing program, releasing timely information about outbreaks, and soliciting input from the public. If the school prevails, it will not win monetary damages, but the United States District Court would compel the government to do its job.

Does a school’s taking on the C.D.C. represent democracy in action? The other day, a handful of Coney Island Prep history students convened on Zoom to discuss. A girl named Karema, who wore a sage-colored hijab, spoke up. “Coming from someone who is taking A.P. U.S. history this year and just came out of global history, you learn a lot about the Renaissance and all these ideas of the social contract,” she said. “And what happens when

the government isn't doing their job? Revolution happens! Someone goes and starts beheading the entire royal family. The French Revolution all over again."

Heads nodded. A girl named Ana, who had a blue streak in her hair, pointed out that the government wasn't representing the will of the people. Civilians weren't doing so great, either. "So Halloween happens," she said. "We all know those who were posting on Snapchat, 'Hey, I was going to a party!' And now the holidays are coming up, and a lot of people have been saying, 'You're not going to stop me from seeing my grandma!' Well, guess what? Grandma's not gonna be there if you're gonna go see her!" An assistant principal jumped in with a question about American exceptionalism. A boy named Collins said, "When you talk about power in America and American exceptionalism, I think of the police." His classmates agreed. The power structure, Ana added, was represented by the maskless officers she passed every day.

The conversation turned. Students considered protest versus social distancing. They discussed the Enlightenment. The faithful execution of laws was weighed. These were not theoretical ideas. The longer the virus raged, the more the students suffered. Ana's father had lost his construction job because of the pandemic. A girl named Jahdiel said that the virus had marooned her with cousins in New Jersey. In the spring, a student's father died of *COVID*. When a mother of four students died, the family fell behind on rent.

One student, Margarita, chimed in periodically; behind her, young kids were playing. "This is a very small apartment, and there's eleven people living here with six children, and everybody has to be in school," she said. "I'm responsible for my brother and my sister. And it's difficult for me to pay attention to my classes. Sometimes I get really emotional—it's just so overwhelming." Her dad worked long hours. She cooked him dinner when he returned late at night. "I wish the government would be doing something. Like, I just wish they would be more focussed on helping people." ♦

Tables for Two

- [In Greenpoint, Edy's Grocer Offers Lebanese Food with a Nod to the Polish Past](#)

[December 7, 2020 Issue](#)

In Greenpoint, Edy's Grocer Offers Lebanese Food with a Nod to the Polish Past

When the pandemic hit, the chef Edouard Massih took over his friend and neighbor's Polish deli, turning it into a bright and cheerful shop and café serving both Lebanese and Polish packaged goods, plus meze, sandwiches, and ready-to-heat dishes.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

November 27, 2020



During the first few years of his career, the chef Edouard (Edy) Massih, who started a Brooklyn-based catering company when he was twenty-two, got into the habit of lying about his age. If anyone asked, he was thirty. “New York has a really bad problem with ageism,” he told me the other day. “Nobody takes you seriously if you’re in your early twenties. You’re just another millennial who doesn’t know what they’re doing.”



Meze, clockwise from left: baba ghanoush; hummus; stuffed grape leaves; marinated feta. Photograph by Heami Lee for The New Yorker

Plenty of clients who hired him to pull off lavish events, including weddings and bat mitzvahs, were none the wiser, and none the worse for it; their glowing recommendations were how he built a booming business and became a darling of the fashion world, completely by word of mouth. But the person who gave him perhaps his biggest boost knew exactly how old he was. Maria Puk opened Maria's Deli, in Greenpoint, in 1978, when she was just twenty-four, fourteen years after she'd immigrated to New York from Poland. Massih, who was born in Lebanon and immigrated to the U.S. when he was ten, has lived in Greenpoint since 2014; he became a regular of the deli, and then close friends with Puk, whom he thinks of as his honorary grandmother. The pair had spoken casually about Massih someday taking over the business. When the pandemic hit and Puk decided to move to Pennsylvania, it became a reality much sooner than either had imagined. In July, just a few months before Massih turned twenty-six, Maria's Deli became Edy's Grocer, an invitingly bright and cheerful shop and café.



Rotating dessert options include lemon-rosewater polenta cakes. Photograph by Heami Lee for The New Yorker

Students of Sahadi's, a hundred-and-twenty-year-old Middle Eastern market with locations in Brooklyn Heights and Industry City, will recognize many of the packaged goods; Massih uses the store, which is owned by a Lebanese family, as a supplier. Floor-to-ceiling shelves, painted pale pink, are lined with Lebanese olive oil (sourced from near where Massih was born, and where his grandfather presses small amounts of his own), rose water, pomegranate molasses, grains and lentils galore, Master-brand potato chips, and sesame-studded breadsticks.



*In July, at the age of twenty-five, Edouard (Edy) Massih took over the shop from Maria Puk, a Polish immigrant who opened it, as Maria's Deli, in 1978, when she was twenty-four.*Photograph by Heami Lee for The New Yorker

But Edy's is much more than a Sahadi's satellite. Massih carries domestically made products from companies started by other young immigrants, including tahini and halvah from Seed + Mill and Sound sparkling rose-cardamom tea. A rotating monthly menu offers house-made Lebanese soups such as *adas bil hamoud*, a lemony lentil, and made-to-order dishes such as a *man'oushe*, or Lebanese breakfast flatbread, topped with tomato, cucumber, olives, and za'atar; a chicken-shawarma wrap; and a grilled cheese featuring thyme-and-chili-flecked feta and a layer of fig jam.

The meze stacked in the glass refrigerators are all Massih's own, a tantalizing array including stuffed grape leaves, marinated olives, garlicky labneh, and spicy tomato jam. For dinner one recent night, I collected them all, plus pita (from Damascus Bread & Pastry Shop, next to Sahadi's on Atlantic Avenue), a container of winter-squash *fatteh*—a mix of roasted butternut, delicata, and acorn, tossed with chickpeas and tahini—and ready-to-heat *riz a jej*, which Massih describes as Lebanese dirty rice, flecked with fine-ground beef, plump shreds of chicken, melty bits of onion, and pomegranate seeds.



Edy's winter-squash fatteh, featuring butternut, acorn, and delicata, tossed with chickpeas and tahini. Photograph by Heami Lee for The New Yorker

For good measure, I swept the “Polish Classics” section of the menu, too. Massih is bold in looking ahead—the world needs a Middle Eastern equivalent to Massimo Bottura and David Chang, he told me—but uninterested in erasing the past. He pays tribute to his predecessor with pancakes of shredded potato or zucchini, plus a preposterously puffy fried-apple variety, each served with a plastic ramekin of sour cream seasoned with harissa or cinnamon. Among the jars of pickled Lebanese wild cucumbers (thinner and reedier than the domesticated kind) and grilled-eggplant pulp, you’ll find Polish sauerkraut, grainy mustard, strawberry syrup, and cherry confiture, preserves both literal and figurative. (*Meze and ready-to-heat dishes \$3.50-\$20.*) ♦

The Current Cinema

- [Economic Ruthlessness on the Open Road in “Nomadland”](#)

[December 7, 2020 Issue](#)

Economic Ruthlessness on the Open Road in “Nomadland”

In an almost-true story of older Americans living in their vans, Frances McDormand plays a woman who is both free spirit and labor-market refugee.

By [Anthony Lane](#)

November 27, 2020



One of the things we learn from the films of Chloé Zhao is this: bad luck is the stuff that happens before a story begins. As “[The Rider](#)” (2018) gets under way, the hero—a young fellow named Brady—already has an angry gash in his head, having tumbled from his horse at a rodeo and taken a hoof to the skull. And now, at the start of “Nomadland,” which Zhao wrote and directed, we meet Fern ([Frances McDormand](#)), who no longer has a husband, a regular job, or a home. Well, she *does* have a home, but it’s a white van that she has adapted, with lots of storage space, to be her only dwelling. She calls it Vanguard.

Another takeaway from Zhao’s work: no land is more fertile than the border zone between documentary and fiction. Brady, for instance, is played by a real-life rider, also named Brady, from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, in South Dakota, and his wound is no invention. His sister, Lilly, who has Asperger’s, plays a version of herself. In the same vein, most of the folks in “Nomadland” are, as it were, true to themselves—genuine wanderers, recounting their experience as birds of passage, and radiating a singular blend of stringency and warmth. Thus, Linda, a smiling and capable figure with silver hair, is played by Linda May; Swankie, who has seven or eight months to live, and who hangs a skull and crossbones on the side of her van, is played by Swankie; and so on.

“Nomadland,” which won the main prize at this year’s Venice Film Festival, is based on the 2017 [book of the same name](#), by Jessica Bruder. That is nonfiction, through and through: a deep delve, patiently researched, into the rising number of Americans for whom a stable existence is unaffordable. They may have been scathed by personal hardship, or spit out by the [financial collapse of 2008](#). Most of them are of riper years, weathered by a steady-humored stoicism, and they’ve shrugged off the burden of property ownership in favor of what’s known as wheel estate. According to the jargon, you can be a vandweller or, more specifically, a workamper, which means that you travel around in your R.V. in search of temporary jobs, some of which come with a place to park, plus access to power and water. It was Bruder who came across Linda, Swankie, and other nomads, and reported in detail on the pattern of their endurance; now they have migrated into Zhao’s movie and brought their weatherings with them. But what’s so dramatic about it? Why is it not a documentary?

In a word, because of Fern. She is a fictional creation, and she's played by a bona-fide film star, albeit one with a hilariously low dose of airs and graces. (If McDormand receives an Oscar nomination for her pains, as she should, expect her to show up in Crocs.) One of the first actions that she is required to perform onscreen is to pee outside, in the middle of nowhere, on a freezing day. Later, an upset stomach forces her to excrete noisily into a bucket. At the other extreme, she gets to float naked in a creek, gazing up at the sky, with arms flung wide: a tranquil sight, though it doesn't look especially healing or transcendent. It looks cold.

I tried to imagine another actress in the role, but soon gave up. Only someone as rooted and as resilient as McDormand, perhaps, can play so rootless a character. Fern used to live and to labor in Empire, Nevada, an old-school company town, owned by United States Gypsum. As we're told at the outset of the film, 2011 marked the end of Empire; the plant was shut, and the town effectively died. Fern was married to a guy named Bo, but he, too, passed away. They had no children, and now it's just her and Vanguard. At a sporting-goods store, she runs into a family she knows. "Are you still doing the van thing?" the mother asks, as if nobody could keep up such a life for long. "My mom says that you're homeless, is that true?" her daughter says. Fern, unfazed, replies, "I'm just houseless. Not the same thing, right?"

Motion pictures, from their earliest days, have leaned toward people on the move. The medium is not made for staying still. It seems natural that [Chaplin](#), left alone in the final shot of "The Circus" (1928), on a patch of waste ground marked by a circle where the big top stood, should not linger long, in reflective mood, but turn and amble away. As the iris closes around him, we don't inquire where he might go next; what counts is the manner of his going. The same applies to Jack Nicholson, as Bobby Dupea, at the bitter end of "Five Easy Pieces" (1970), abandoning his girlfriend at the gas pumps, beside the Red Rooster Café, and hitching a ride on a logging truck —no wallet, no plans, not even a jacket, although, as the trucker says, where they're headed will be colder than hell.

Fans of that film will recall that Bobby, whom we first see on a California oil rig, is a former classical pianist. It's an odd conceit, yet we buy it, because of Nicholson. Something similar occurs in "Nomadland," when Fern, in conversation with a shy young drifter, suddenly declaims a Shakespeare

sonnet. The scene is both unlikely and sublime, and it compels us to reassess Fern's motives. She was once a substitute teacher; is that not a portable skill? Couldn't she search for a school that needs a new teacher, drive there, and begin again? Or—here's the rub—has she gradually grown allergic to social norms and addicted to the open road? "All I wanted was to go somewhere; all I wanted was a change, I warn't particular." So says [Huckleberry Finn](#), in the opening chapter of his adventures, and it's as if his craving has filtered down to Fern.

No wonder the film is so tense. Fern is never attacked or robbed, thank heaven, yet the smell of possible danger hangs around. Notice how she stares ahead as she eats, like a guard on watch. In everyday dealings, her courtesy is a kind of armor, and, when she's offered the chance to settle, in a safe haven, she rebuffs it. One day, after her van has broken down, she visits her sister, Dolly (Melissa Smith), who lives on a pleasant suburban street—an alien planet, compared with the badlands and the wilderness where Fern prefers to roam. "You left home as soon as you could," Dolly says to her, remembering their childhood, and Fern, having borrowed cash, is soon gone again.

Then, there is Dave, a workamper, with too many miles on the clock. He's played by David Strathairn, whom I initially failed to spot, not just because of his stiff white beard but also because of the diffidence with which he ducks in and out of the frame. Zhao is the foe of the meet-cute. Early on, Fern walks away from a whimpering dog and, contrary to the laws of cinematic gratification, does *not* go back to claim it; with Dave, who is in equal need of companionship, she proves no easier to sway. Now and then, their orbits intersect—in the kitchen at Wall Drug, say, in South Dakota, where he flips burgers and she scrapes grease off the grill. Like many nomads, Dave has fouled up his life. (How, exactly, we can't be sure; but so expressive is Strathairn that we're sure enough.) Not without trepidation, he is returning to his family for the birth of his grandson. Fern is invited to stop by, and so, at Thanksgiving, she rolls up, to the friendliest of welcomes. "You can stay," Dave says. "Thanks, I need to do laundry," she replies, though that isn't what he had in mind. The bed in the guest room is so soft that Fern has no option but to go and sleep in her van. She leaves before anyone else is awake.

Somewhere, inside this lovely and desperate movie, there's the ghost of a Western. Though people still gather around a campfire, their talk is of cancer and P.T.S.D. Instead of cowboys driving cattle to high pastures, Fern and her kindred spirits converge, in certain months, on an Amazon warehouse—still obeying the rhythm of the seasons, I guess, as they bubble-wrap junk and box it in time for Christmas. Bruder's book called attention to the economic ruthlessness of the Amazon setup, and the effect of the toil on older employees; Zhao is more focussed on Fern, as she greets her fellow-drones at lunch, and slices banana onto her peanut-butter sandwich.

“Nomadland” is not primarily a protest. Rather, it maintains a fierce sadness, like the look in its heroine’s eyes, alive to all that’s dying in the West. That is why Zhao so often films at daylight’s decease, catching enormous skies of violet and rose, and why her fable speaks to us, in 2020, as John Ford’s “The Grapes of Wrath” did to audiences eighty years ago. Fern’s needs and rights are as basic as those of the Joad family, yet there was a breadth and an uplift to their yearning that has since dwindled to a speck. “Fellow ain’t got a soul of his own, just a little piece of a big soul,” Tom Joad said. “The one big soul that belongs to everybody.” Some hope. Fern has her own soul, and it’s hers alone, packed away tight in the van, together with her toothbrush and her chicken-noodle soup. On she goes. ♦

The Firm

- [Tobias Menzies of “The Crown” Crashed on Helena Bonham Carter’s Couch Before Lockdown](#)

[December 7, 2020 Issue](#)

Tobias Menzies of “The Crown” Crashed on Helena Bonham Carter’s Couch Before Lockdown

Prior to playing Prince Philip, the British actor took on Wallace Shawn’s “The Fever,” Brutus, and a cursed bridegroom in “Game of Thrones.”

By [Sarah Larson](#)

November 30, 2020

Like Prince Philip, the actor Tobias Menzies, who plays him in Seasons 3 and 4 of “The Crown,” occupies prewar lodgings in London. He shares his home not with Queen Elizabeth II but with a black cat named Bernie, who came to him as a stray. “My cat’s shouting at me,” he said on a recent Zoom from his kitchen, as Bernie piped up in the background. “I might have forgotten to feed him.” Menzies, forty-six, wore eyeglasses and an oxford shirt, an open cabinet behind him exposing cookbooks and a toaster. (“A backstage view,” he said, laughing.) When lockdown began, he had just moved back into his flat, after renovations had required him to couch-surf. “One of the places where I stayed was with Helena, which was delightful,” he said. “I was sort of an outer satellite of the Bonham Carter family.”



Tobias Menzies Illustration by João Fazenda

On “The Crown,” he and Helena Bonham Carter, as Princess Margaret, are both outer satellites of the Queen. The role of Margaret has given Bonham Carter a chance to romp (“There was a young lady from Dallas!” she says, trading limericks with L.B.J. at a White House dinner), and the role of Philip has given Menzies a chance to invest a stolid figure with layers of intrigue. “What’s continually being unwrapped with Philip is this contradictory tension—quite a lot of emotion for the desire for things to be incredibly straightforward and unemotional,” he said. “Even in interviews where he’s really giving very little away, there’s a hot emotionality that seems to pour off him, despite his best attempts.” In the new season, which dives headlong into the eighties, Diana (Emma Corrin) comes on the scene, as does Margaret Thatcher (Gillian Anderson). “That’s the last thing this country needs,” Philip tells the Queen (Olivia Colman), as they watch the news. “Two women running the shop.” The Queen disagrees.

Menzies is tall, lean, and understatedly handsome, with grooved cheeks and a brow that creases with concern. Whether he’s playing Brutus, on “Rome”; the academic Frank Randall or his ancestor Black Jack Randall, whipping fiend, on “Outlander”; or the nobleman Edmure Tully, on “Game of Thrones,” whose wedding ends in mass murder, Menzies conveys the sense that there’s much going on beneath the surface. All actors, he said, “come with a set of things that come for free, that you bring to every part, where the unconscious aspects of you bump into the work.” His might be “a certain kind of . . .” He trailed off, thinking. “Reticence.”

Early in the fourth season, Philip seals his son’s fate during a weekend at Balmoral, in Scotland, when Diana visits and flatters Philip on a stag-hunting excursion. (“Good shot, sir!”) Season 3 showcases Philip’s interior life, especially in a midlife-crisis episode, in which he becomes fixated on the moon landing. (“Extraordinary. What men. What courage.”) The camera lingers on his face as it cycles through quiet shades of disbelief, wonder, and amusement, his eyes brimming with tears.

Menzies was born in London, to a drama-teacher mother and a BBC radio-producer father. Growing up, “we never paid a huge amount of attention to the Royal Family,” he said. His parents separated when he was six, and he and his mother and brother moved to Kent, where he attended a Waldorf school. “In my teens, in the early nineties, my mum was taking me to see

theatre, the best stuff that was going on in London,” he said. “There was this explosion of visual theatre, dance theatre, movement theatre.” (He explored that realm himself, and hoped to attend mime school, but couldn’t afford it; he went to drama school instead.) As a teen, he saw Wallace Shawn’s “mad, amazing” one-man play “The Fever,” at the Edinburgh Festival. “This character goes through a fever of self-recrimination, class guilt,” he said. “It always stayed with me.” In 2015, Menzies performed it himself, under the direction of Robert Icke, for a small audience, in a room at the May Fair hotel. “I remember feeling pretty sick to my stomach every night before I did it,” he said. But Shawn himself came—“a great privilege”—and “seemed very delighted by what we’d done.”

Lockdown has given him time to reflect—not a Philip-style midlife crisis but a sharpening of focus. He’d like to do some “highly authored film work,” he said—“working with, you know, the Paul Thomas Andersons and the Joanna Hoggs, these filmmakers who I admire so much.” His next project is a second season of Aisling Bea’s Channel 4 dramedy, “This Way Up,” in which he plays her potential love interest, a moody widower with a young son. In the first season, “I’m not a great dad, and I’m pretty distant,” Menzies said, smiling. Another onion to be peeled, perhaps? “So many onions,” he said, laughing. “My eyes are watering.” ♦

The title of an earlier version of this story misstated when Tobias Menzies stayed at Helena Bonham Carter’s house.

Table of Contents

[New Yorker Magazine](#)

[A Critic at Large](#)

[What Henry Adams Understood About History's Breaking Points](#)

[A Reporter at Large](#)

[When One Parent Leaves a Hasidic Community, What Happens to the Kids?](#)

[Books](#)

[Why New York's Mob Mythology Endures](#)

[Briefly Noted Book Reviews](#)

[Brave New World Dept.](#)

[What if You Could Outsource Your To-Do List?](#)

[Classical Music](#)

[A Prisoners' Chorus in "Breathing Free"](#)

[Comic Strip](#)

[A Cheery Story](#)

[Comment](#)

[The Cost of Trump's Assault on the Press and the Truth](#)

[Dept. of Values](#)

[COVID Goes to College](#)

[Fiction](#)

["Dietrologia"](#)

[Legacies](#)

[The Treasure in Frank Zappa's Secret Subterranean Vault](#)

[Letter from Los Angeles](#)

[Using the Homeless to Guard Empty Houses](#)

[Musical Events](#)

[What Does It Mean to "Reimagine" an Orchestra Season?](#)

[On Television](#)

["Roadkill" Offers the Fantasy of Politics as Usual](#)

[Poems](#)

["Winter Song for One Who Suffers"](#)

["Little Spy in My Bedroom"](#)

[Portfolio](#)

- [The Race to Make Vials for Coronavirus Vaccines](#)
- [Shouts & Murmurs](#)
- [Raised by Wolves](#)
- [Social Contract Dept.](#)
- [The Brooklyn School Suing the C.D.C.](#)
- [Tables for Two](#)
- [In Greenpoint, Edy's Grocer Offers Lebanese Food with a Nod to the Polish Past](#)
- [The Current Cinema](#)
- [Economic Ruthlessness on the Open Road in “Nomadland”](#)
- [The Firm](#)
- [Tobias Menzies of “The Crown” Crashed on Helena Bonham Carter’s Couch Before Lockdown](#)