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NOV. 30, 2020

THE NEW YORKER



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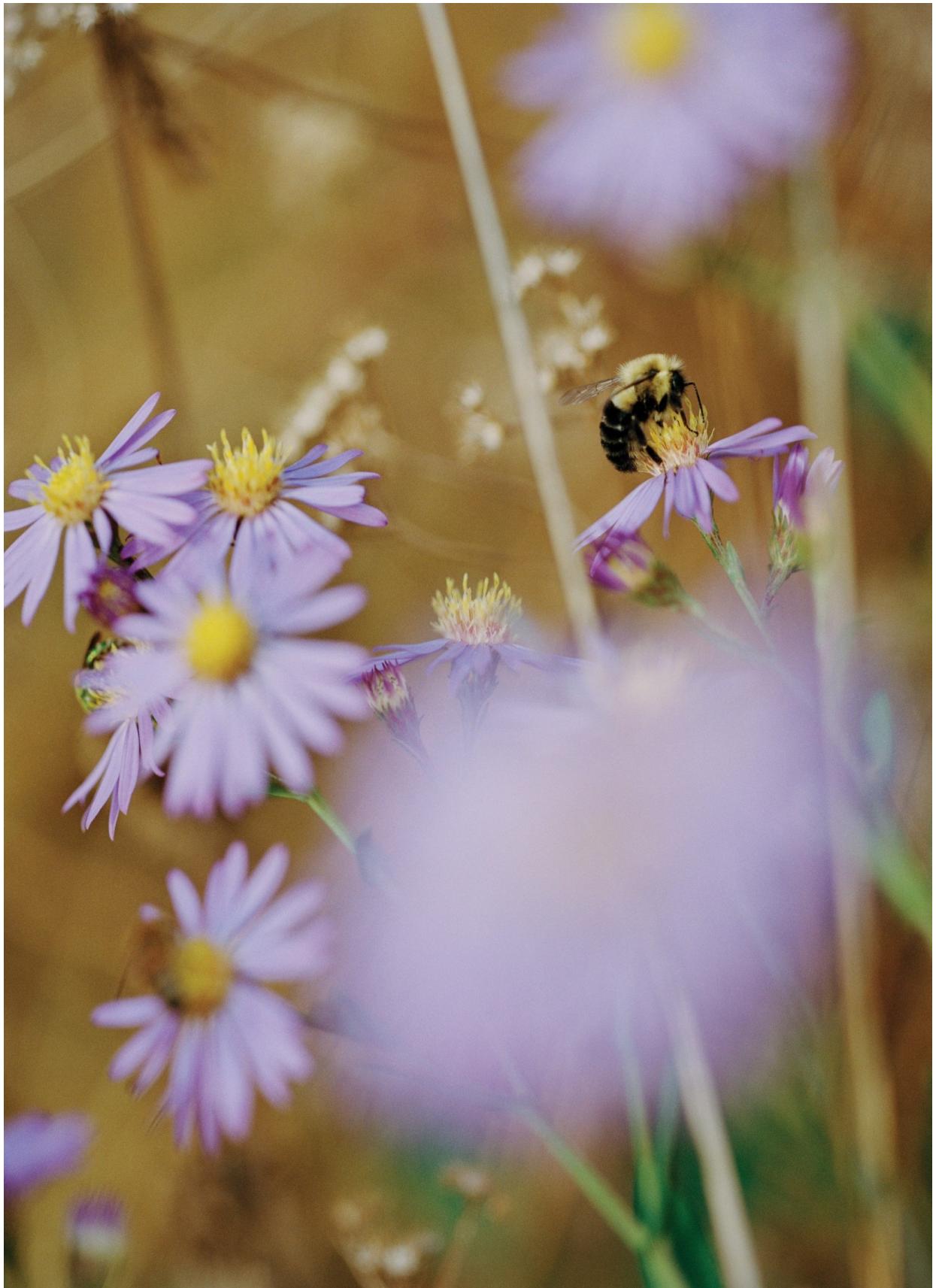
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The Urban Refuge of the New York Botanical Garden

Meadows, woodlands, wetlands, and glades, full of plants native to the region, surround a crescent-shaped pool of recycled rainwater—an outdoor space for which to give thanks.

November 20, 2020



Photograph by Ryan Frigillana for The New Yorker

Since the nineteen-thirties, the **New York Botanical Garden**, in the Bronx, has dedicated three and a half acres to its Native Plant Garden (pictured here in early November). Redesigned in 2013, it's home to some hundred thousand species of trees, ferns, shrubs, wildflowers, and grasses, all indigenous to the Northeast. Meadows, woodlands, wetlands, and glades surround a crescent-shaped pool of recycled rainwater, purified with the help of aquatic plants—an urban refuge for which to give thanks. Advance tickets are required.

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The Long Awakening of Adrienne Rich

Some called her coarse, extreme, too quick to change. In fact, she was always one step ahead.

By [Maggie Doherty](#)

November 23, 2020



It was the summer of 1958—the end of “the tranquilized *Fifties*,” in the words of Robert Lowell—and the poet Adrienne Rich was desperate. Her body was rebelling. The first signs of rheumatoid arthritis had appeared seven years earlier, when she was twenty-two. She had two young children, and while pregnant with the first she had developed a rash, later diagnosed as an allergic reaction to the pregnancy itself. And now, despite her contraception, she was pregnant again, to her dismay.

Years later, looking back on this time, Rich would characterize herself as “sleepwalking.” Most days, she was up at dawn with a child before turning to endless domestic tasks: cooking, cleaning, supervising the kids. She had little time to write and even less motivation. “When I receive a letter soliciting mss., or someone alludes to my ‘career,’ I have a strong sense of wanting to deny all responsibility for and interest in that person who writes—or who wrote,” she recorded in her journal in 1956. She was alienated from her former self—the prodigy who had delighted her domineering father and stunned teachers at her high school, the Radcliffe undergraduate who had won the prestigious Yale Younger Poets’ Prize, the Guggenheim Fellow who had infiltrated the all-male Merton College at Oxford. Suddenly, like many educated women of her generation, she was a wife and a mother, who spent her days doing “repetitious cycles of laundry” and her evenings attending “ludicrous dinner parties” in and around Boston.

As Rich wrote in an autobiographical essay in 1982, “The experience of motherhood was eventually to radicalize me.” The woman who wrote that essay bore little resemblance to the sleepwalker of the fifties. Since her near-“spiritual death,” Rich had published a dozen books of poetry; taught at Swarthmore College and Columbia University; and won—and, on occasion, refused—glamorous prizes, including the National Book Award for Poetry. She had separated from her husband in 1970, shortly after she found feminism, and was now in a long-term relationship with a woman, the Jamaican-American writer Michelle Cliff. As social movements proliferated across the country, Rich criticized beloved institutions (Harvard) and old friends (Lowell), and renounced familiar aesthetics (formal poetry). To some, she was unrecognizable; to others, she was an inspiration.

Which of these women was the real Rich? The dutiful daughter, the star undergrad, the excellent cook? Or the political poet who used every platform

she had—and she had many—to criticize violence in all its forms? This is the question that the scholar and writer Hilary Holladay poses in “[The Power of Adrienne Rich](#),” the first biography of the poet and, one hopes, not the last. “Who was she? Who was she really?” Holladay asks near the end of the book. Her question recalls a claim she makes in the preface, where she argues that Rich never felt she had a “definitive identity,” and that “the absence of a fully knowable self”—a “wound,” in Holladay’s words—spurred her on, to both self-discovery and creative success. According to Holladay, the only secure identity Rich ever found was in her art. “That is who and what she is,” Holladay concludes.

The search for the real Adrienne Rich is a tempting biographical task. But it suggests a curious conception of the self, as something prior to and apart from the social conditions that produce it. The ways one is raised and educated, the language one learns, the stories to which one has access: all these create and constrict the self. Rich knew this—“I felt myself perceived by the world simply as a pregnant woman, and it seemed easier . . . to perceive myself so,” she wrote in “[Of Woman Born](#),” her 1976 study of motherhood as an “institution”—and she knew, too, that any project of self-discovery was necessarily a project of social and political critique.

This is not to diminish Rich’s particularity, nor is it to say that she was simply “of her time.” The woman that emerges in Holladay’s biography is singular: not just brilliant but hard-minded and unsparing. She was a skilled, prolific writer, eager to experiment and brave enough to break with the poetic style that first earned her acclaim. As a political thinker, she was always one step ahead: concerned early on with the whiteness of women’s liberation, sex-positive at the height of the anti-pornography movement, anti-capitalist before that was in vogue. Watching American feminism unfold, she stood by with the next, necessary critique, often implicating herself in the process. As a result, she was sometimes disappointed with people who lacked her introspection, who couldn’t or wouldn’t keep up. She lost friends she’d wanted to keep; she was alone more often than she would have liked. If anything, the problem—and the power—of Adrienne Rich was not too little self but too much.

Born in Baltimore in May, 1929, Adrienne Cecile Rich was supposed to be a boy. Her parents had planned to name her after her father, Arnold Rich, a

Jewish pathologist from Alabama, who had earned a research-and-teaching position at Johns Hopkins University. Arnold decided early that his daughter would be a genius. He tutored her in his off-hours, while her mother, Helen, a former concert pianist, homeschooled the child and gave her music lessons. Rich learned to read and write by four. At six, she wrote her first book of poetry; the next year, she produced a fifty-page play about the Trojan War. (Classics played an integral role in the Rich household: when Adrienne was small, she sat on a volume of Plutarch's "Lives" in order to reach the piano.) Helen wrote in a notebook, "This is the child we needed and deserved."

But Rich's wasn't a happy childhood, or at least not entirely. Though she enjoyed her father's praise—Holladay identifies this as Rich's primary goal up through her young adulthood—she couldn't help but notice how unhappy her mother was, living under her husband's thumb. It was assumed that Helen would give up her concert career after she married. When she moved in with Arnold, he presented her with a modest, long-sleeved black dress, of his own design, which she was to wear every day of her wedded life. (The couple called it her uniform.) Rich intuited her mother's sadness and her father's desperate need for his daughter to succeed. She was plagued by eczema, facial tics, hay fever. She didn't play very much or have many friends. She was happier after she was enrolled in an all-girls high school in her upscale Baltimore neighborhood, and after she gave up the piano, at sixteen, in order to commit herself fully to poetry. But the prospect of Arnold's disapproval always loomed.

Rich entered Radcliffe in 1947, and described Cambridge as "heaven." She made close friends, found a serious boyfriend, took courses with F. O. Matthiessen, and became acquainted with Robert Frost. She wrote poetry daily, for an hour after breakfast. During her undergraduate career, she had poems accepted by *Harper's* and the *Virginia Quarterly Review*. Her greatest triumph came in 1951, during her senior year, when her first book of poems, "[A Change of World](#)"—the manuscript that won the Yale Prize—was published. W. H. Auden, the prize judge, wrote the foreword, in which he praised Rich for writing poems that were "neatly and modestly dressed, speak quietly but do not mumble, respect their elders but are not cowed by them, and do not tell fibs."

Paternalism aside, the description is a fair gloss on Rich's early work. The poems in "A Change of World" show a deference to the male masters: Frost, Yeats, even Auden himself. ("The most that we can do for one another / Is let our blunders and our blind mischances / Argue a certain brusque abrupt compassion" calls to mind Auden's "September 1, 1939," in which he puts it more simply: "We must love one another or die.") Some of the verse emerges from personal experience—the "you" of the emotionally complex poem "Stepping Backward" is a female college friend and, Holladay argues, an early love interest—but it is deliberately detached, rarely using feminine pronouns. In the early fifties, Rich recalled in 1984, "a notion of male experience as universal prevailed which made the feminine pronoun suspect or merely 'personal.'" Working on a poem that would be included in her second collection, "The Diamond Cutters" (1955), Rich transformed the figure of the tourist—a stand-in for herself—into a man.

At the time, Rich was intent on being two seemingly incompatible things: the ideal fifties woman, beautiful, feminine, with a successful husband and adorable children, and a world-historically important poet, the kind who would, in her father's words, "leave things behind . . . that will blaze their way into the minds of men after you're gone." Her life would be perfectly ordered, even if it required uncommon discipline. During her years at Radcliffe, she wrote that she "pitied old maids, damned sterile feminism, saw in marriage the frame for my whole conception of life," even while she was enjoying a string of dazzling achievements.

Rich began to question the importance of marriage when she broke off an engagement and won a Guggenheim to fund her studies at Oxford. But then she met Alfred Conrad. "Alf," a graduate student in economics at Harvard, was an intelligent, "virile" Jewish man with a dark past, by the standards of mid-century America. He'd married a dancer and choreographer who had suffered from mental illness and been institutionalized. Rich went abroad to study soon after their meeting, but the couple corresponded regularly. Arnold Rich did not approve. In "For Ethel Rosenberg," a long poem from the eighties about family strife, Rich writes of receiving, during her time in England, "letters of seventeen pages / finely inscribed harangues" from her father. Their relationship never healed; for the first time, Rich decided to disregard his desires and follow her own. She and Conrad were married on June 26, 1953, shortly after her return.

One could see Rich's decision to marry Conrad as her first rebellion against the patriarchy. But leaving one man for another is hardly an emancipation. Conrad respected his wife's intelligence and creative potential, and Rich recalled him as "a sensitive, affectionate man who wanted children and who . . . was willing to 'help.' " Nevertheless, "it was clearly understood that this 'help' was an act of generosity; that *his* work, *his* professional life, was the real work in the family." The couple followed his job prospects, moving first to Evanston, Illinois, where Conrad took a job at Northwestern; then returning to Cambridge when Harvard offered him a position; then, in 1966, moving to New York, where Conrad, who had not earned tenure at Harvard, took a tenured position at City University.

During these years, Rich was responsible for raising their three children, often with some household help but otherwise alone, since Conrad tended to travel for research. She struggled, and she felt ashamed for struggling. When a young, ambitious poet named Sylvia Plath visited her, she advised Plath not to have children. (After giving birth to her third child, Rich had her tubes tied. "Had yourself spayed, did you?" a nurse asked after she woke from the surgery.) Rich found she could write only late at night, after the children were in bed, often with vodka to help her wind down from the day. "The Diamond Cutters" was the only book she produced during the first nine years of her marriage. Later, she said that she regretted publishing it at all.

But out of that era's challenges came some of Rich's most potent poetry. "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law," the title poem from [her 1963 collection](#), repurposes images from domestic life to show how they might be used for—and transcended in—art. The poem begins with housework: a "nervy, glowering" woman, washing the dishes, deliberately scalds herself with the dishwater. She thinks of her mother, whose mind is now "mouldering like wedding-cake," and resolves that she will be "another way." This means escaping from oppressive masculinity, figured here as a "beak that grips," as well as overcoming the burdens of traditional femininity: "the mildewed orange-flowers, the female pills, the terrible breasts." The poem is full of cages of all kinds: a "commodious steamer-trunk," a pantry, a birdcage, a vault. The way to escape such enclosures, Rich suggests, is to be an artist: not a woman who sings the words of men but one who composes her own song.

“Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” represented both a formal and a thematic leap for Rich. The poem is longer and looser than her earlier work. She cites women writers—Emily Dickinson, Mary Wollstonecraft—and parodies the masculine tradition (Baudelaire’s famous line becomes “*ma semblable, ma soeur*”). The poem is decidedly feminine, replete with images uniquely horrifying to women readers (“She shaves her legs until they gleam / like petrified mammoth-tusk”), and several stanzas include the first person, the “I” that Rich had once been reluctant to use.

It took Rich three years to write the poem and six years to publish the collection. She was disappointed with the critical response. The book was initially ignored by the *Times*, which had warmly reviewed her first two collections, and criticized harshly in *The New York Review of Books*. Her father hated it, too: he called the poems “sordid, irritable and often nasty” and believed many were “too private and personal for public consumption.” “I knew I was stronger as a poet, I knew I was stronger in my connection with myself,” Rich recalled in 1975. And yet this stronger self was precisely what her male critics couldn’t tolerate.

A lesser poet, or a less resolute person, might have caved. Rich, undaunted, pursued her new path, not yet knowing where she would end up. In “Necessities of Life” (1966), her poetic line became shorter, her tone brisker, her images simpler, though no less striking for being so. (“The Corpse-Plant” transforms a small indoor garden into something existentially terrifying.) She used the lyric “I” consistently and wrote about her domestic life with greater intimacy and specificity. The poem “Like This Together,” dedicated to Conrad, portrays a moment of trouble in their marriage:



J.P

"Son, this precious tax loophole was passed down to me from my father, who received it from his father, and now you must guard it with your life."

Wind rocks the car.
We sit parked by the river,
silence between our teeth.
Birds scatter across islands
of broken ice. Another time
I'd have said "Canada geese,"
knowing you love them.
A year, ten years from now
I'll remember this—
this sitting like drugged birds
in a glass case—
not why, only that we
were here like this together.

The taut lines, the strong and repeated stresses, the monosyllabic words ("wind," "sit," "ice," "why") all conspire to communicate the stasis of the scene. The couple can't speak of their troubles—the ambiguous "this" that sits between them—nor can they leave them behind and fly off like southbound geese. The poem is haunting, powerful. It shows how far Rich had come.

There were several factors that pushed Rich in this new creative direction. One, surely, was the publication of Lowell's "[Life Studies](#)" (1959), which won the National Book Award and inaugurated a poetic movement that critics called "confessional." (Plath, W. D. Snodgrass, and Anne Sexton would all be associated with the movement, though Rich rejected the label.) By the mid-sixties, writing about one's marital problems or one's struggles with mental illness—formerly taboo subjects for lyric poetry—was accepted and even acclaimed. Rich had become friends with Lowell and his wife, Elizabeth Hardwick, in the late fifties, right around the time she decided to change her life. "Adrienne Rich is having a third baby . . . and is reading Simone de Beauvoir and bursting with benzedrine and emancipation," Lowell wrote to his friend Elizabeth Bishop in 1958. "We like her very much." He supported Rich privately and publicly. In a letter from 1964, he wrote to her, "You go on exploring and accumulating more resources. It

seems you more and more have worked out a style of your own.” He reviewed “Necessities of Life” positively in the *Times Book Review*.

If Lowell encouraged Rich to follow this new path, feminism helped her stay on it. She began forming ties with other “independent-minded New York women,” as Holladay refers to them, in the late sixties and early seventies. While teaching in the CUNY system, Rich met Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan, and Audre Lorde; the last would become a lifelong friend. She also began spending time with Robin Morgan, the poet, activist, and future editor of the feminist anthology “Sisterhood Is Powerful.” Morgan recalled Rich as “a well-meaning, liberal white lady” who was, at the time, “not a feminist.”

That soon changed. In 1970, just weeks after making a proclamation that she was going to do significantly less cooking, Rich wrote to the poet Hayden Carruth, a close friend, that she was leaving Conrad. They were still mired in marital trouble, and Rich was fed up with trying to get her husband to speak openly with her. (The 1971 poem “Trying to Talk with a Man” depicts a similar dilemma.) She planned to leave the children with Conrad and find her own apartment. In an earlier letter to Carruth, she’d chastised her friend for how he treated his wife, then copped to her new political orientation: “If this sounds like a Women’s Lib rap, baby, it is.”

Rich was optimistic about the separation, and told Carruth that she thought moving out was “an act *for* both of us, in the long run.” Conrad apparently felt differently. Not long after their split, he rented a car, drove up to Vermont, where the family had a vacation house, and shot himself in a meadow. Rich, distraught, wrote to Carruth that Conrad’s suicide seemed “a choice which he made in order not to have to make other, living choices”; she did not feel responsible, but at times that belief wavered. Morgan later recalled that, shortly afterward, Rich asked how Morgan could blame Ted Hughes for Plath’s suicide and not blame Rich for Conrad’s. “I think that it was one of the first times that I ever used the phrase ‘false equivalence,’ ” Morgan said. Rich was not entirely convinced.

Single again after seventeen years, Rich mourned her losses and revelled in her newfound freedom. She had a brief love affair with her psychiatrist, Lilly Engler; it was her first relationship with a woman, and it would inspire the book “Twenty-one Love Poems” (1976), which Holladay calls Rich’s

“literary coming-out as a lesbian.” (The poems lavish attention on her lover’s body: her “traveled, generous thighs,” her “strong tongue and slender fingers,” and her more intimate parts, as well.) She sparred in print with Susan Sontag, often called the Dark Lady of American Letters (and one of Engler’s former lovers), then ended up sleeping with her. She worked tirelessly on the book that became “*Of Woman Born*.” And, though she was often lonely, she wrote to a friend that she was reading feminist theory with great excitement, and looking for “a real femaleness” in life and in art.

Holladay characterizes this time as a hinge point for Rich. It was a period of intense exploration—intellectual, sexual, creative—and it produced some of Rich’s most lasting work, including the 1973 poetry collection [“Diving Into the Wreck.”](#) It was also the beginning of a long phase of personal reflection and reassessment. Thanks to the influence of feminist theory and of friends like Lorde and Morgan, Rich started to understand how her life was conditioned by social and historical forces. She was not (or not only) a precocious child and a talented writer; she was also Southern, Jewish, a person from a family with resources, the embodiment of white privilege, a woman whose heterosexuality was not natural, or chosen, but compulsory. As she later explained, in a 1984 essay, “My personal world view, which like so many young people I carried as a conviction of my own uniqueness, was not original with me, but was, rather, my untutored and half-conscious rendering of the facts of blood and bread, the social and political forces of my time and place.”

This kind of retrospective evaluation became one of Rich’s great projects. Her goal was not to reject or repudiate her past but to “re-vision” it, a term of her own coinage. She defined the concept, in a 1971 speech, as “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entertaining an old text from a new critical direction.” In Rich’s work, her life, her country, women’s history, and the poetic tradition were all endlessly subject to re-vision. In the 1974 poem “Power,” which showcased Rich’s new habit of leaving space between words in the same line, she reflected on the scientist Marie Curie, who never admitted that she “suffered from radiation sickness,” as if doing so would cancel out her scientific achievements. The poem ends with the paradox of Curie’s plight:

She died a famous woman denying
her wounds
denying
her wounds came from the same source as her power

Rich also began re-visioning her literary predecessors, women writers who had beaten the odds and succeeded in their art, though they rarely received sufficient critical attention. She wrote about Charlotte Brontë and about Elizabeth Bishop. Her 1975 essay on Emily Dickinson, “Vesuvius at Home,” is a hallmark of feminist literary criticism. In reexamining the canon, Rich operated much like the speaker in “Diving Into the Wreck”: she sifted through the detritus of the past, discarding old ideas and salvaging what she thought could be used.

This practice provided Rich with continuity, even as she changed dramatically. She didn’t shed past selves like dead skin. Instead, she treated them like fossils: things to recover, preserve, study. The title of her 1971 collection, [The Will to Change](#), nicely encapsulated Rich’s view of self-formation. Change was not an accident or a twist of fate but something you achieved, deliberately. Rich was an “unapologetically strong woman,” as Holladay describes her, precisely because she saw herself as stable but unfixed.

Throughout the biography, Holladay marvels, not always with admiration, at how swiftly and confidently Rich could complete an about-face. She went from a cowed daughter to an independent woman, a straight housewife to a lesbian, a close friend of Lowell’s to one of his fiercest critics. (In a 1973 review, Rich accused Lowell of exhibiting “aggrandized and merciless masculinity” and “bullshit eloquence.”) In Holladay’s first biography, of the minor Beat writer Herbert Huncke, she writes with palpable affection of the wayward men who made up that literary movement. Here, she chides Rich for her “lifelong habit of denouncing places she once praised,” such as Harvard, and notes that Rich occasionally turned on those who had helped her to succeed. At times, she suggests that Rich was inconsistent, or, worse, disloyal.

How else, though, might a conscious woman have navigated the intense fluctuations of Rich’s life? Rich was a radical, but she wasn’t a rebel. She fit

in during the fifties—"a typical boy-crazy coed," in Holladay's words—and she didn't become a feminist or an out lesbian until the seventies, when conditions had changed enough to make those identities, if not acceptable, at least socially legible. She was also never one of "the mad ones" whom the Beat writer Jack Kerouac praised in 1957, while Rich was tending to spit-up. She was thoughtful, considerate, cautious in word and deed. "I am truly monogamous and respectful of others' coupledness," she once wrote to Lorde, explaining why she wouldn't sleep with her. After Rich met Cliff, she stayed with her for thirty-six years, through Cliff's alcoholism, her own deteriorating arthritis, and the difficulties of an interracial relationship.

Never a mad genius, like Lowell or Ginsberg or Plath, Rich became, in the public imagination, something else: the angry feminist, eager to lay waste to people or systems she deplored. By the mid-eighties, she was much honored—a professor at Stanford, the winner of multiple awards—but not entirely adored. As early as 1973, she had gone public with her politics, persuading Lorde and Alice Walker to protest the National Book Awards "on behalf of all women." On the page, meanwhile, she had become almost documentary in her approach. The 1991 collection "[An Atlas of the Difficult World](#)" opens with an image of migrant workers picking pesticide-covered strawberries and goes on to describe domestic abuse, genocide, and lynching. The critic Helen Vendler, who had once felt a kinship with Rich, watched her evolution with dismay. "She thinks it the duty of the poet to bear witness to, and to protest against, these social evils," Vendler wrote in a review of "Atlas." Some of Rich's closest friends agreed. "I don't know what happened," Hardwick said. "She got swept too far. She deliberately made herself ugly and wrote those extreme and ridiculous poems."

But Rich had come to see politics as part of the poet's "vocation": "not how to write poetry, but wherefore." At its best, she said, the art was a "liberative language, connecting the fragments within us, connecting us to others like and unlike ourselves." For those who thought of the lyric poem as a reprieve from the humming external world, a chance to wrestle with internal contradictions, Rich's overt politics felt unlovely, even unpoetic. But poetry had always been urgent to Rich; it was this sense of urgency that had propelled her to write every day in college, and to stay up working as a young mother. If asked, she wouldn't have said she had changed her mind about a poem's purpose so much as begun to see it more clearly. The Rich

that finally emerges in Holladay's telling is like a barreling locomotive. Calling her inconsistent is like faulting the train for leaving one town and arriving in another.

Still, there's something to Holladay's criticisms. Reading Rich's work, we have a sense of what it was like to see one's life as a kind of palimpsest, to work by constant amendment and adjustment. It's at once awe-inspiring and exhausting. When the title poem from "The Diamond Cutters" was republished in "[The Collected Early Poems: 1950-1970](#)," Rich appended a footnote, stating that the poem "does not take responsibility for its own metaphor" of diamond mining—she had not then known of the miners' exploitation. (Fair enough, but it's hard not to roll your eyes.) She could also take herself extremely seriously. "I stand convicted by all my convictions," Rich wrote in "Hunger," a poem dedicated to Lorde. Willing not only to admit fault but also to accuse herself of it unprompted, Rich became a kind of closed system—hard for critics and even friends to penetrate. This is partly why Vendler recoiled from Rich's feminist work: it was the self-accusation and certainty that rankled, not necessarily the convictions themselves. "Her present myth is not offered as provisional," Vendler wrote in a review of "Of Woman Born." "Instead, the current interpretation of events . . . is offered as the definitive one." Why was Rich so sure she'd been wrong then, and why was she certain she was right now?

It's possible to see that certainty as pride, but one could also see it as a kind of hope, for a better self and a better world. "Poetry is not a resting on the given," Rich wrote in a late essay, "but a questing toward what might otherwise be." In 2008, four years before Rich's death, I went to one of her last public readings, in Cambridge. I arrived late, and from my place standing at the back of the audience I could just barely make out a short woman with close-cropped hair, dressed all in black, sitting in a high-backed chair. She looked frail, like a wounded bird, but when she spoke it was with such force that I felt the need to step back. The crowd—mostly women, of all ages—was hushed; it was as if we had come together in mourning, or in church. When the event ended, some rushed toward Rich, asking for her signature, but I felt the need to be alone. I walked home through Radcliffe Yard, travelling the same paths Rich had walked as an undergraduate, more than fifty years earlier. She had left, turned her back on the place—but she

had also returned, uncompromising. She had told the crowd that, despite rumors to the contrary, she was still alive, and still writing. ♦

William Faulkner's Demons

In his own life, the novelist failed to truly acknowledge the evils of slavery and segregation. But he did so with savage thoroughness in his fiction.

By [Casey Cep](#)

November 23, 2020



What if the North had won the Civil War? That technically factual counterfactual animated almost all of William Faulkner's writing. The Mississippi novelist was born thirty-two years after Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox, but he came of age believing in the superiority of the Confederacy: the South might have lost, but the North did not deserve to win. This Lost Cause revisionism appeared everywhere, from the textbooks that Faulkner was assigned growing up to editorials in local newspapers, praising the paternalism and the prosperity of the slavery economy, jury-rigging an alternative justification for secession, canonizing as saints and martyrs those who fought for the C.S.A., and proclaiming the virtues of antebellum society. In contrast with those delusions, Faulkner's fiction revealed the truth: the Confederacy was both a military and a moral failure.

The Civil War features in some dozen of Faulkner's novels. It is most prominent in those set in Yoknapatawpha County, an imaginary Mississippi landscape filled with battlefields and graveyards, veterans and widows, slaves and former slaves, draft dodgers and ghosts. In "Light in August," the Reverend Gail Hightower is haunted by his Confederate grandfather; in "Intruder in the Dust," the lawyer Gavin Stevens insists that all the region's teen-age boys are obsessed with the hours before Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg. In these books, no Southerner is spared the torturous influence of the war, whether he flees the region, as Quentin Compson does, in "The Sound and the Fury," or whether, like Rosa Coldfield, in "Absalom, Absalom!," she stays.

A new book by Michael Gorra, "The Saddest Words: William Faulkner's Civil War" (Liveright), traces Faulkner's literary depictions of the military conflict in the nineteenth century and his personal engagement with the racial conflict of the twentieth. The latter struggle, within the novelist himself, is the real war of Gorra's subtitle. In "The Saddest Words," Faulkner emerges as a character as tragic as any he invented: a writer who brilliantly portrayed the way that the South's refusal to accept its defeat led to cultural decay, but a Southerner whose private letters and public statements were riddled with the very racism that his books so pointedly damned.

It's too late to cancel Faulkner; he already cancelled himself. "I will protest to the last: no photographs, no recorded documents," he wrote in a letter to the critic Malcolm Cowley on February 11, 1949. "It is my ambition to be, as a private individual, abolished and voided from history, leaving it markless, no refuse save the printed books; I wish I had had enough sense to see ahead thirty years ago and, like some of the Elizabethans, not signed them."

Cowley was the editor of "The Portable Faulkner," a 1946 anthology that collected and excerpted Faulkner's short stories and novels, ordering them chronologically according to their story lines rather than by their publication dates. It was an attempt to rescue Faulkner from an unsurprising obscurity: many of his books are difficult, and many had been published during the Great Depression or the Second World War, when both the money and the appetite for such writing was scarce. To make a living, Faulkner had turned to writing screenplays, including those for "The Big Sleep" and "To Have and Have Not." Cowley made the case for Faulkner's genius, providing in the anthology a figurative as well as a literal map that showed the contours and connections of Yoknapatawpha County and its people. The volume put Faulkner's earlier novels back into print, and helped readers make sense of his modernist texts. Cowley had already published a similar anthology of Hemingway's work; it was a subsequent profile of "Papa" for *Life* that occasioned Faulkner's letter begging off any such publicity.

Faulkner expressed his desire for authorial anonymity in other venues, too. "If I had not existed, someone else would have written me, Hemingway, Dostoyevsky, all of us," he told *The Paris Review*. "Proof of that is that there are about three candidates for the authorship of Shakespeare's plays. But what is important is *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, not who wrote them, but that somebody did. The artist is of no importance. Only what he creates is important."

It's hard to say whether those sentiments grew out of Faulkner's aversion to publicity in general or were instead a response to his particular stumbles with the press, but he seemed to know how much his personal reputation might damage the reputation of his work. Faulkner had grown up using racial slurs and deployed them in correspondence; after he became well known, he continued to write and say things that were just as scandalous, if

not more so. In a letter to the editor of a newspaper in Memphis, he suggested that justice was delivered by juries and lynch mobs alike and that no innocent man of any race had ever been lynched. In an article for *Life*, he seemed to equate the N.A.A.C.P. with the white-supremacist Citizens' Council, and opposed what he called the "compulsory integration" of the South by the North. He told the New York *Herald Tribune* that he longed for the return of the "benevolent autocracy" of slavery, in which "Negroes would be better off because they'd have some one to look after them." In 1956, several years after he won the Nobel Prize and around the time the federal government began deploying him as an international ambassador for democracy and human rights, he told a journalist that if that same government used troops to enforce integration in the South he would do as his Confederate great-grandfather had done before him. "If it came to fighting," he said, "I'd fight for Mississippi against the United States even if it meant going out into the street and shooting Negroes."

The outcry was swift. W. E. B. Du Bois challenged Faulkner to a debate on the steps of the Mississippi courthouse where Emmett Till's murderers had been acquitted the year before. Faulkner declined, saying, "I do not believe there is a debatable point between us." He also issued a carefully hedged statement: the words attributed to him, he insisted, were ones "no sober man would make, nor, it seems to me, any sane man believe." (Faulkner was a notorious drunk, but elsewhere he seemed to subscribe to the in-vino-veritas model of alcohol consumption.) He also published an apologia in *Ebony* titled "If I Were a Negro," calling for moderation on racial questions and appealing for civil-rights advocates to "go slow, pause for a moment."

The remarks were not well received, and the denials convinced no one who was not already intent on defending Faulkner. James Baldwin excoriated him in the pages of *Partisan Review*, writing that Faulkner was exactly like "the bulk of relatively articulate white Southerners of good-will," in that his arguments "have no value whatever as arguments, being almost entirely and helplessly dishonest, when not, indeed, insane." Baldwin understood that there was no middle ground between segregationists and integrationists, and no reconciling the equal rights and freedoms articulated in the Constitution with the discrimination and oppression of Jim Crow. With regard to Faulkner, he asked, "Where is the evidence of the struggle he has been carrying on there on behalf of the Negro? Why, if he and his enlightened

confreres in the South have been boring from within to destroy segregation, do they react with such panic when the walls show any signs of falling?"

Gorra has no direct answer to Baldwin's question, and he acknowledges that some readers may find in these biographical facts reason enough to banish Faulkner from syllabi, if not from shelves. But Baldwin's essay is a condemnation of the writer's personal politics, not his work; it never mentions Faulkner's fiction. Gorra's argument, however, depends on close readings of everything from individual sentences to symbols and characters and themes across the author's novels, which collectively make the case that a racist person can be a radical writer. "Faulkner the man shared many of the closed society's opinions and values," Gorra writes. "But when the novelist could inhabit a character—when he slipped inside another mind and put those opinions into a different voice—he was almost always able to stand outside them, to place and to judge them."

Faulkner was unwilling in his own life to adequately acknowledge the evils of slavery and segregation, but he did so with savage thoroughness in his fiction. He was a Hieronymus Bosch of prose: his tortured imagination filled story after story with sins of every form and with characters turned grotesque by committing them. Though much historical fiction is escapist, Faulkner's is brutalizing, depicting a South debased first by degeneracy and then by the refusal to atone for it, even in the face of defeat. In 1936, the same year that Margaret Mitchell offered the world a romance between the roguish Rhett Butler and the Southern belle Scarlett O'Hara, Faulkner published a story of rape and incest and racist terror. It was the seventy-fifth anniversary of the start of the Civil War, and Americans made clear which version of events they wanted to remember: "*Absalom, Absalom!*" sold around ten thousand copies; "*Gone with the Wind*" sold more than a million and won the Pulitzer Prize.

"*Absalom, Absalom!*" was Faulkner's ninth novel, published ten years after his first. In that astonishing decade, he also wrote "*The Sound and the Fury*," "*As I Lay Dying*," and "*Light in August*." A high-school dropout, Faulkner experimented with poetry as a teen-ager, then enlisted to fight in the First World War with the Royal Air Force. It's unclear why he didn't join the U.S. Army; in any case, the Armistice arrived before he had finished training, and he was discharged. Faulkner brought home an officer's uniform

and the “u” he had added to his family’s surname to make it seem more English. Both were part of the persona he cultivated at the University of Mississippi, where fellow-students mockingly called him Count No ’Count. His family had once been prominent in the part of Mississippi where he was born—his lineage included bankers and businessmen—but Faulkner was not much of a student. He took a few literature and language classes but ended up spending more years on campus as the school’s postmaster. That didn’t last long, either: busy playing cards and golfing during business hours, he neglected to forward mail, misdelivered some letters while throwing others in the garbage, refused to prepare return receipts, and, when he could be bothered to open the office at all, often sat inside it working on his first book.

That was a collection of poetry, “The Marble Faun,” probably the most traditional and certainly the least remarkable of all the books Faulkner published—he borrowed the title from Nathaniel Hawthorne and the style from the Romantics and the Symbolists. But the prose that followed was all his own. Faulkner’s fiction does not have influences so much as analogues. He burned down houses with the gothic zeal of Edgar Allan Poe, staged moral crises as dramatically as Dostoyevsky, and fashioned fanatics who would have pleased Herman Melville. He created characters who migrated from one novel to another, and he wrote stream-of-consciousness narration that featured broken syntax and typographical experiments. A single, almost thirteen-hundred-word sentence in “Absalom, Absalom!” includes parentheses, question marks, granddaughters, spinsters, demons, dragons, chickens, coffins, Washington, Lincoln, and Faustus.

That novel has many narrative voices, but the character connecting them is Quentin Compson, who also appears in “The Sound and the Fury,” published seven years earlier. Quentin is a descendant of a Confederate general and a governor of Mississippi and the heir to an estate first acquired from a Chickasaw chief in the early nineteenth century, now crumbling in the center of town and subdivided to cover the cost of his college tuition. “The Sound and the Fury” has four sections, each devoted to a different character: Quentin, his brothers Benjy and Jason, and the Compson family’s cook, Dilsey. The novel is a passion play in which the two heirs to authority and power are deceitful and depraved and the two reviled members of society are honorable and decent. The novel begins on Holy Saturday inside the

constrained and tender consciousness of Benjy, who is profoundly mentally disabled, and it ends on Easter Sunday with Dilsey, whose sincere piety and caregiving contrast with the degeneracy of the family she serves and that of the former Confederacy, in which she is trapped. While the sections focussed on Benjy, Quentin, and Jason are told in the first person and reflect the wandering or wayward character of their minds, the final section features an omniscient narrator and includes a sermon on how society is redeemed by its least respected members. Listening in the sanctuary are the “idiot” of the Compson family, who is Christlike in his needs, and their Black servant, who is Christlike in meeting them.

The last shall be first, and in Faulkner’s novel they already are. For all their philosophizing, Jason and Quentin and their father cannot reason their way out of evil and toward goodness. An American Hamlet, Quentin is half mad and half in love with his sister; he is so consumed by his obsession with sexual purity and racial honor that not even leaving the South for Harvard allows him to escape the fate of all the other failed members of his family. It is from one of his desolate soliloquies that Gorra takes the title of his book. Sitting in his dorm room more than a thousand miles from Mississippi, Quentin reconstructs a partial memory of something his father once told him: “every man is the arbiter of his own virtues but let no man prescribe for another mans well-being and i temporary and he was the saddest word of all there is nothing else in the world its not despair until time its not even time until it was.”

A lawyer by training and an alcoholic by nature, Quentin’s father is a source of torment to all four of his children—the three boys and their sister, Caddy. Although the family’s fortune is wasted, the father remains obsessed with the power and wealth of the earlier generations, living in the land of “was” rather than “is” or “will be,” subjecting his children to his theories of time and ethics and civilization, so preoccupied with the past that he can offer them no way to live in the present or prepare for the future. That is why, just before Quentin commits suicide, he returns to the “saddest word” speech, breaking his grandfather’s pocket watch to stop time and arriving at his own idea of tragedy: “Again. Sadder than was. Again. Saddest of all. Again.”

In “The Saddest Words,” Gorra posits that Quentin represents Faulkner’s view of tragedy as recurrence. “Again” was the saddest word for the

character and the author alike because it “suggests that what *was* has simply gone on happening, a cycle of repetition that replays itself, forever.” Both the real and the fictional Southerner were trapped in that cycle, aware that the fall of the Confederacy was right and just but unable to shed their sympathy for the antebellum South. “What *was* is never over,” Gorra writes, pointing out that the racism that ensnared Faulkner in the last century persists in this one: “There have been moments in our history, brief ones, when the meaning of the Civil War has seemed settled. This isn’t one of them, not when the illusion that this country might become a postracial society lies in tatters. *Again*. That’s precisely why Faulkner remains so valuable—that very recurrence makes him necessary.”

Plenty of Faulkner’s characters appear in multiple novels and stories, but Quentin represents the height of the writer’s talents and the depths of his identification with his doomed protagonists. Faulkner’s pessimism, notable even among the Lost Generation, seemed prescient during the civil-rights movement, and seems even more so today. His “Again . . . Again . . . Again” is the American version of Shakespeare’s tragic invocation, in “Macbeth,” of “To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow.” A novelist born a full generation after the end of the Confederacy insists that he would have no choice but to repeat the racist and secessionist violence of his ancestors; a country a hundred and fifty-five years past its Civil War is still violently divided over the flags and monuments of that conflict.

Gorra argues that the racism and the failures in moral reasoning that characterized Faulkner’s life refract brilliantly in the work: “They speak to us of a riven soul; of a battle in which the right side doesn’t always win.” Rather than separating the artist from his art, Gorra suggests that the two are entwined; Faulkner’s racism informed his devastating portrayals of it. Earlier Faulkner apologists tried to minimize aspects of his politics that they found disagreeable, whether by denying their existence, insisting that he could have been worse, or mendaciously elevating selected parts of his biography as if they excused all the rest, like the eulogy he delivered for his family’s Black maid, Caroline Barr, to whom he dedicated his book “*Go Down, Moses*.” But there is no defending Faulkner’s character, only his characters. As the writer himself knew, the best art will always exceed the artist who creates it. Transcendence isn’t just an aesthetic experience for readers; it can be one for writers, too.

Few of Faulkner's contemporaries, even those who addressed the horrors of the war or the racial segregation that followed, wrote about the intimate versions of those conflicts—the sexual exploitation of slavery, the realities of interracial love, the social and emotional entanglements of Black and white families, the lived experience of miscegenation, and the perils of passing. Faulkner's novels, meanwhile, are full of confusion over racial identity, with mixed-race characters struggling to determine their origins, or knowing them and struggling to understand how they fit into the world, and, either way, struggling to find an identity that can sustain them in a racially essentialist society. These characters include some of the most remarkable creations in American fiction: Joe Christmas, Clytemnestra Sutpen, Charles Bon, Lucas Beauchamp. Faulkner also wrote white characters who were obsessed with racial categories, like Quentin, who sits beside a Black man on an integrated streetcar in Massachusetts, thinking, “A nigger is not a person so much as a form of behavior; a sort of obverse reflection of the white people he lives among.”

While Baldwin excluded these characters from his consideration of Faulkner's politics, other Black writers have drawn inspiration from them. The novelist Toni Morrison wrote her master's thesis partly on Faulkner and his depictions of what she called “alienated” individuals, including Quentin. The scholar James A. Snead observed in his study of Faulkner, “Figures of Division,” that, in a society of polarity, where people were divided into strict categories of male or female, rich or poor, white or Black, the writer saw through such dichotomies: “Faulkner's genealogical research discovers not purity but rather merging and chaos, states against which the traditions of social classification and division vainly struggle.” What Faulkner recognized was the ubiquity of such struggles over identity and their centrality to the American experience—the way that the question “Who am I?” is always connected to the question “Who are we?”

Gorra is most captivating when he tends to these pervasive private battles, leaving military sites and other tourist destinations behind. “The Saddest Words” lags only when it turns into a travelogue of his adventures in Faulklandia: visits to Faulkner's ancestral graveyard in Ripley, Mississippi; to the grand estate he bought in Oxford and called Rowan Oak; to the Confederate statuary on Monument Avenue, in Richmond, and the present-day Emmitsburg Road, in Gettysburg. A park ranger can provide a better

tour of the troop movements at Shiloh; a literature professor can articulate what a novel does with such history. Gorra has thought for decades about Faulkner's writing, and he is a remarkably illuminating teacher—in one masterly paragraph, he explicates the first sentence of “Absalom, Absalom!,” pointing out how its adjectives become verbs and pile up like cars in a traffic jam, and how the place it describes is so stuffy and static that the only things moving within it are motes of dust. Of the novel as a whole, Gorra writes, “No one can read it quickly or even entirely with pleasure, but anyone who can hear its flowered dissonance will know that such books are why we read at all.”

Quentin Compson, Gorra points out, is a broken vessel for all this history and description; Faulkner's readers are guided by “the fractured mind of a boy who seems already half-ghost.” Faulkner knew that the tortured self was his own true subject, and his narrators are always wrecked by the knowledge they possess. In his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize, Faulkner said that it was “the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat.”

Race was the most salient manifestation of that conflict for Faulkner's characters, and for Faulkner himself. As Baldwin suggested, Faulkner had pleaded with civil-rights activists for “time in which the Southerner will come to terms with himself.” Yet Faulkner's own novels acknowledged that a century had not been enough time for that peace to be made.

After Faulkner was gone, his family continued to demonstrate how Quentin's “Again . . . Again . . . Again” was not fiction but fact. Faulkner died in the summer of 1962, at the age of sixty-four. A few months later, federal courts ordered the University of Mississippi to admit its first Black student, James Meredith. The state legislature passed a bill declaring that those charged with crimes of moral turpitude could not be admitted as students to a state university, and, the day it became law, Meredith was convicted of voter fraud, a crime he had not committed. The Kennedy Administration intervened to secure his admission, sending hundreds of federal law-enforcement officers to accompany Meredith when he enrolled.

Two people died and more than a hundred and fifty federal marshals were injured in the ensuing riots, which became known as the Battle of Oxford. As Gorra notes, that battle featured Faulkners on both sides. Six years after the novelist declared that if it came down to it he would fight for Mississippi against his nation, one of his nephews broke an arm commanding the local National Guard unit enforcing the federal integration order. That man's brother was among those who rioted. ♦

November 30, 2020 Issue

Briefly Noted

“Metazoa,” “Heinrich Heine,” “Aphasia,” and “Alexandria.”
November 23, 2020



METAZOA

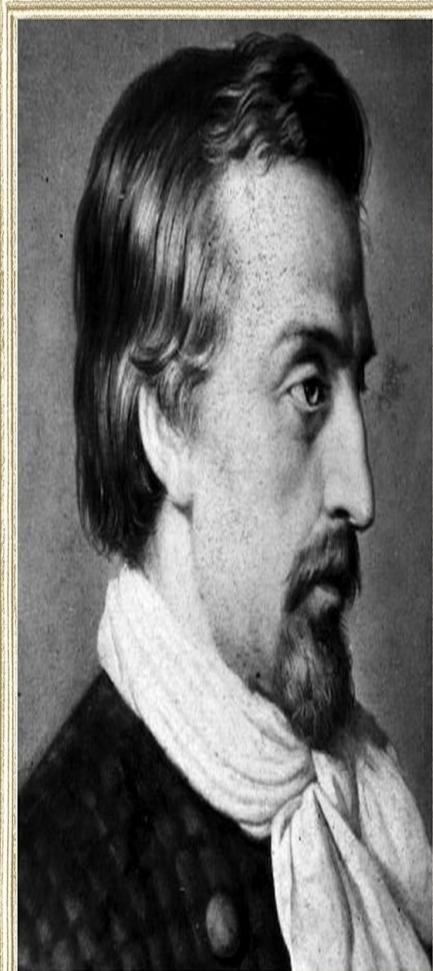
ANIMAL LIFE AND
THE BIRTH OF THE MIND

PETER GODFREY-SMITH

AUTHOR OF

OTHER MINDS

Metazoa, by Peter Godfrey-Smith (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). Philosophers have long debated the nature of consciousness. This probing study takes an evolutionary approach, examining “experience in general” not only in humans but in much of the animal kingdom. Animals, it argues, developed consciousness gradually, through such biological innovations as centralized nervous systems and the ability to distinguish one’s actions from external forces, which have given rise to “varieties of subjectivity.” The author is crisp on a subject notorious for abstraction, dissecting fuzzy philosophical metaphors and weaving in lively descriptions of the octopuses, whale sharks, and banded shrimp he observes on scuba dives off the coasts of Australia.



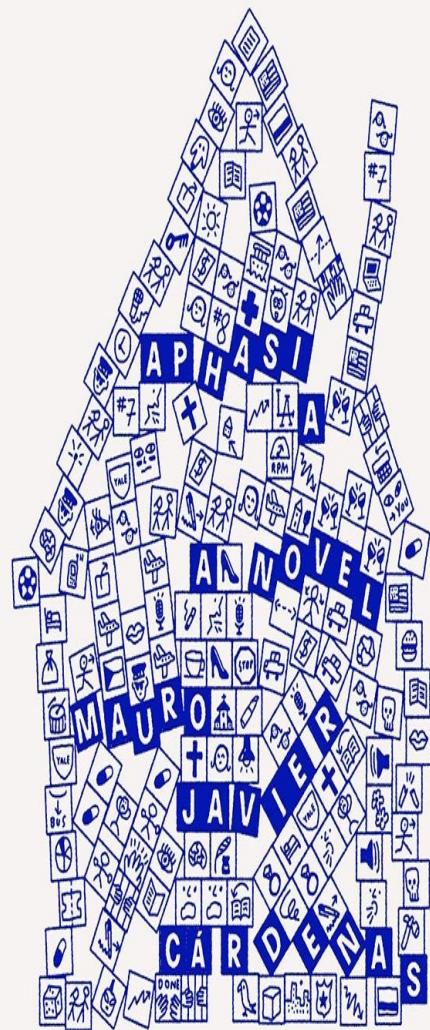
Heinrich Heine

WRITING THE REVOLUTION

GEORGE PROCHNIK

Jewish Lives

[Heinrich Heine](#), by George Prochnik (Yale). Cosmopolitanism and nationalism form the backdrop for this life of the great Jewish German poet. Born in 1797 in Düsseldorf, then under Napoleonic occupation, Heine remained a committed liberal even as Germany turned inward after the Congress of Vienna. Prochnik provides a jaunty narrative of Heine's schooldays in Bonn and Göttingen, journalistic career in Berlin, and twenty-five-year exile in Paris, detailing his literary feuds, scraps with censors, and unwavering belief in political liberty. Wondering what "Heine's revolutionary imagination had left behind that could be used as a weapon, or balm, in the hour of crisis," Prochnik singles out his irreverent voice, which became a lodestar for dissidents from Boris Pasternak to Heine's distant cousin Karl Marx.



Aphasia, by Mauro Javier Cárdenas (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). “What I don’t transcribe I will forget,” Antonio, the protagonist of this roving novel, remarks. A Colombian divorcé living in Los Angeles, he obsessively documents the stories of those he encounters. He spends nights with women he meets on a sugar-daddy Web site and makes notes of their childhood stories the mornings after. He records his mother’s childhood recollections and the ramblings of his sister, who suffers from schizophrenia, and whose experience of abuse at the hands of their father haunts them both. The result is a collage-like meditation on the ephemeral. “I have come to define happiness collectively,” Antonio reflects, “and it’s ridiculous, given that most adult relationships end anyway.”

"A furiously gifted writer."
— *The Washington Post*

ALEXANDRIA

A NOVEL PAUL KINGSNORTH
AUTHOR OF *THE WAKE*

Alexandria, by Paul Kingsnorth (Graywolf). This post-climate-apocalypse novel completes a loose trilogy set in the wild reaches of what was once England. Nine hundred years in the future, a remote tribe lives a primitive life, wary of “stalkers”—metahumans with transparent skin who have been sent by a mysterious artificial intelligence. The stalkers persuade people to forswear their bodies and allow their minds to “ascend” to Alexandria, where they will live forever. Unconventional orthography (“hunnerd,” “Skito”) and mythical style add texture to a story that examines whether the body is essential or merely the mind’s cage and whether humans are inherently destructive. When one stalker has doubts about his mission, his crisis of belief drives the book into unexpected territory.

Comment

- [Biden's Covid-19 Mission](#)

November 30, 2020 Issue

Biden's Covid-19 Mission

As Donald Trump continues to find new ways to make things worse, Joe Biden is preparing to take immediate action on an escalating crisis.

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)

November 22, 2020

The passage of time, in this pandemic, has been a hard thing to gauge. To take one example, the phase III trials of [COVID-19 vaccines](#), which scientists had warned may not be completed until the end of the year, are coming to blessedly rapid conclusions. Last Wednesday, Pfizer and BioNTech announced that their vaccine appears to be both ninety-five-percent effective and safe, even for older people—a historic victory. Moderna’s version, just a step behind Pfizer’s, appears to be effective, too, and other vaccines will follow. What propelled the trials forward, though, was the acceleration of the pandemic itself. The positive cases in the control groups, which were given placebos, piled up so quickly that it became easier to see that the vaccines were working.



Illustration by João Fazenda

Still, the most torturous interval may be the one between now and Inauguration Day. On January 20, 2021—a year to the day since the first case of *COVID-19* in the United States was confirmed—[Joe Biden](#) is due to be sworn in as President. But, until then, [Donald Trump](#) will linger in office for weeks in which, the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation projects, the average number of deaths will rise to more than two thousand a day. (On the day of Pfizer’s announcement, the number of new cases in the United States exceeded a hundred and sixty thousand.) Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year’s threaten to become national superspreader events. Biden will have to deal with a crisis that may still be escalating. As a result, his coronavirus mission must have an economic, an epidemiological, and a moral dimension.

Last week, at a virtual roundtable that Biden convened with frontline workers, Mary Turner, the president of the Minnesota Nurses Association, began to cry as she described staff shortages and how, even now, her colleagues have to “beg” for personal protective equipment. “You got me emotional,” Biden said, close to tears himself. Unlike Trump, he has no problem mustering empathy, but he must also make up for the President’s failure to develop a true national strategy for getting supplies to hospitals, building a testing and contact-tracing system, and supporting health-care workers. “We nurses know that we are facing immense death and suffering in the coming weeks,” Turner said. “And we will be there. But we need to act now, we need to act quickly.”

Biden can undertake some immediate actions, like recommitting to the World Health Organization, by executive order. For others, such as putting together a new *COVID*-relief package that will help individuals, businesses that may be forced to close, and states facing budget shortfalls, he will need Congress’s coöperation. (And control of the Senate won’t be clear until after Georgia’s runoff elections, on January 5th.) Biden has spoken of a nationwide mask mandate; even with limits on federal power, he can use tools like incentives and persuasion to try to organize one. He can also lend his authority to guidelines for targeted shutdowns and reopenings.

Trump and his crew, meanwhile, keep finding new ways to make things worse. Last week, when [Gretchen Whitmer](#), the governor of Michigan, announced a three-week “pause” on certain activities in that state, in an

attempt to halt the virus, Trump’s preferred coronavirus adviser, Scott Atlas, tweeted that Michiganders should “rise up” against the new rules. (“#FreedomMatters.”) Biden, asked about that comment, posed a pertinent question: “What the hell is the matter with these guys?”

Atlas’s remarks were particularly corrosive because Michigan, which Biden won by almost a hundred and fifty thousand votes, is one of the states whose election results Trump is baselessly contesting. Trump is also withholding transition resources and intelligence briefings, and he has kept Biden’s coronavirus task force—which the President-elect has already assembled—from fully engaging with career public-health officials and scientists in the government, many of whom Trump has sidelined and belittled. (As of last week, [Dr. Anthony Fauci](#), whom Trump has called an “idiot and a disaster,” had not yet formally met with Biden.) “We’ve been unable to get access to the kinds of things we need to know,” Biden said on Wednesday. He mentioned the Strategic National Stockpile: it’s more difficult to make a plan for distributing supplies if no one will tell you what the government has at hand.

Most important, perhaps, Biden’s team needs to be part of the planning for vaccine distribution, which will involve the military. Although many aspects of the pandemic response are managed on the state or local level, it is the federal government that has contracted to buy a hundred million doses from both Pfizer and Moderna. (Each person needs two doses.) Only a fraction of those doses will be ready by the time Biden is inaugurated—innovation is fast, but manufacturing is stubbornly slow—and the logistics of getting them to the public is complex. The Pfizer vaccine, in particular, can be stored in a commercial freezer for only five days, and otherwise must be kept at extremely low temperatures. People refusing the vaccine may become an issue in some areas of the country, but at first there will not be enough to go around—or even enough to protect health-care workers. The same is true of advanced treatments, such as the monoclonal antibody cocktail that Trump received when he contracted *COVID-19*. He spent the final weeks of his campaign telling the mostly maskless crowds at his rallies that there is a “cure” for *COVID-19*, which he would make sure they all got free of charge; if that fails to happen, it is Biden who will have to deal with the resulting anger and distrust.

Trump also suggested that he might limit vaccine access to states, such as New York, that he does not regard as friendly. When it's Biden's turn, his priorities will doubtless reflect different values; nevertheless, there will be hard choices that everyone, even in his own party, might not willingly endorse. (Which risk factors matter most? Should border guards be vaccinated before teachers?) [Atul Gawande](#), a member of Biden's Transition covid-19 Advisory Board (and a writer for this magazine), argues that distribution must demonstrate that we can prioritize those who are more likely to be exposed, such as meatpacking and public-transportation workers, over members of the professional classes who can work via Zoom. This would give Biden an opportunity to show that progressivism has immediate, practical meaning. "We've never put those people first in line," Gawande said.

Above all, the process will require transparency, decency, and the rebuilding of trust. Biden has to move fast. He will also need to urge patience. In January, the pandemic will still be demanding a great deal of us, and of him. There are long days ahead. ♦

More on the Coronavirus

- To protect American lives and [revive the economy](#), Donald Trump and Jared Kushner should listen to Anthony Fauci rather than trash him.
- We should look to students to conceive of appropriate [school-reopening plans](#). It is not too late to ask what they really want.
- A pregnant pediatrician on [what children need during the crisis](#).
- Trump is helping tycoons who have donated to his reëlection campaign [exploit the pandemic](#) to maximize profits.
- Meet the [high-finance mogul](#) in charge of our economic recovery.
- The coronavirus is likely to reshape architecture. What kinds of space are we willing to [live and work in now?](#)

Fiction

- “The Winged Thing”

The Winged Thing

By [Patricia Lockwood](#)

November 23, 2020



Audio: Patricia Lockwood reads.

Everyone at gate B6 was bathed in gold. She sat there with one foot off the edge of the earth, close to falling, until she saw the couple with matching extravagant mullets that hung down past their shoulder blades. The man took out a brush and began to fight through his mullet until it was free, and then he handed the brush to his wife and she began to fight through hers with the same consecrated look; these mullets were their acre and when God came down he would not find a rock, a stump, a weed. They shook out their hair together, as if it were all on the same head, joined hands, and rested. She sat in the gold that made them the same and felt a little less like dying.

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The cursor blinked where her mind was. She put one true word after another and put the words in the portal. All at once they were not true, not as true as she could have made them. Where was the fiction? Distance, arrangement, emphasis, proportion? Did they become untrue only when they entered someone else's life and butted up, trivial, against its bigness?

•

A twenty-three-year-old influencer sat next to her on the couch and spoke of the feeling of being a public body; his skin seemed to have no pores whatsoever. "Did you read . . . ?" they said to each other again and again. "Did you read?" They kept raising their hands excitedly to high-five, for they had discovered something even better than being soul mates: that they were exactly, and happily, and hopelessly, the same amount of online.

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[Patricia Lockwood on the extremely online.](#)

"I have a theory," she said to the crowd, and then paused, for somewhere she thought she heard someone groan. She tried to resume, but couldn't recall what she'd been about to say—something about being a woman in our time.

•

In Vienna the little cakes looked like the big buildings, or else the big buildings looked like the little cakes. She ate both, layer upon layer. Then, as she swung at the top of the Ferris wheel in the Prater, coffee sloshing in her stomach above the linden leaves, her phone buzzed and there were the words, from her far mother: “Something has gone wrong” and “How soon can you get here?”

•

The question that was the pure, liquid element of the portal—who am I failing to protect?—had found its stopped-clock answer. She fell heavily out of the broad warm *us*, out of the story that had seemed, up until the very last minute, to require her perpetual co-writing. Oh, she thought hazily, falling rain-wise like Alice, finding tucked under her arm the bag of peas she once Photoshopped into pictures of historical atrocities, Oh, have I been *wasting my time?*

•

“Tell me,” she said to her mother in the car. The last maternal text had been just a row of blue hearts and the spurting three droplets, which she no longer had the heart to explain were jizz. Her mother laid her head against the steering wheel and began to weep.

•

The strange and sideways uses to which art is put! She stood in the hospital dark beside her sister, holding her slender hand and smoothing a wave of bleached hair back from her forehead. Her sister’s husband rocked back and forth on his heels, boyish in basketball shorts and flip-flops, unable to stand still. The tech moved the ultrasound wand over the curve of stomach until a huge *womph* of heart filled the room, red-black and fuzzed at the edges, somehow functioning. They were waiting for the baby to move her diaphragm, the tech explained, in and out, in and out. This would show that her body was learning how to breathe. The tech watched and watched, pressing the wand so hard that her sister cried. On the monitor a small everything swam and bulged; it was impossible to look at the gray-and-black wash of it and not be reminded of both the History Channel and outer space.

Still, the baby would not practice her breathing, would not practice it in preparation for being born. The baby would not practice being in the world—why should she?—until she said to her sister, “I have an idea,” and took out her phone to blare the up-tempo songs of the Andrews Sisters, sturdy mules and wide lapels and high brass shining in the hospital dark, music for the boys to listen to overseas, far from home and frightened, bright lungfuls for them to gulp before they headed into battle. It had been useful. It was useful again. The baby, where she did not need to, breathed.

•

The tech could see everything—the head that was measuring ten weeks ahead of the rest of the body, the asymmetry in the arms and legs, the eyes that would not close—but she wasn’t allowed to say anything about it. She marked down measurements, her mouth like a single stitch. At the end she smiled shyly. “I like your music,” she said.

•

Astonishing that a twenty-first-century existence could be threatened by something we had been doing for a million years. Had the caveman diet given us nothing? Had the ancient grains failed to fortify us against the far more ancient enemy? Could the person in all those Facebook pictures, the blinking three dots in the text window, could the ringtone that startled her whenever her sister called simply disappear?



"Tonight, I was thinking we could run laps around the living room and then check out that Zoom standup show, but I'm open to other horrible ideas."

•

For a while all anyone could talk about, in tones of portent and doom, was what the baby might be missing. “Forgive me for thinking,” she argued in the shower, “that every baby should get to have an ass. Call me old-fashioned, but I happen to believe that a BABY! should get to have an ASS! no matter WHAT!”

•

None of the doctors, nurses, or specialists ever breathed a word about abortion. Because twenty-six weeks was already too late? Because it was Ohio, and the governor’s pen was constantly hovering over terrible new legislation? Because the hospital was Catholic, and in the lobby there was a statue of Jesus holding a farm animal? They never exactly knew. “Did you read that article . . .” her sister asked one morning, and immediately she knew which one: a woman who had to fly hundreds of miles to Las Vegas, fight, head down, through a churn of protesters, and finally lie down on the table in a paper gown behind six inches of bulletproof glass. “I keep thinking of the protesters,” her sister said. “Spit flying from their mouths. How none of them knew.”

•

“I’ll drive you,” she said, in desperation. “I’ll drive you. I’ll do anything. Just say the word.” Her sister nodding sadly, both of them seeing that possible desert whip past, the sage and sand, those lilac mountains—they had never been, of course, had only seen the movie “Showgirls”—both knowing that the journey wouldn’t be safe, both knowing that their parents would never speak to them again.

•

She remembered that long-ago trip to Norway, where one morning on her way to the market she heard a thin, high, strained sound, like a yellow thread pulled between two fingers. It was aimed through the top of the head instead of at the back of the teeth, so she knew immediately that it was religious. It

was anti-abortion singing, led by a woman in a long, cobwebby skirt, and a man in a white collar was standing next to her with a tambourine. Behind them were two ginger-haired, freckled young men with Down syndrome, embracing each other with both arms and their cheeks pressed close.

Oh, my God, she had thought back then. As soon as our pro-lifers figure out they can have a tambourine, it's over.

•

"If I were you, honey," one social worker told her sister, "I might just *go out running and see what happened.*" They blinked at her. Surely that wasn't safe? Surely they hadn't been transported back to nineteen-fifties Ireland? Surely no one would advise her, next, to drink a bottle of gin in a hot bath?

•

What she worried for was not just her sister's life but her originality. She loved "Star Wars" so much, for instance, that she had walked down the aisle to "The Imperial March." Would the impulse to walk down the aisle to "The Imperial March"—which seemed the essence of survival itself, the little tune we hummed in the dark—would that make it out of whatever was happening alive?

•

She went silent in the portal; she knew how it was. She knew that as you scrolled you averted your eyes from the ones who could not apply their lipstick within the lines, from the ones who were beginning to edge up into mania, from the ones who were Horny, from the dommes who were not remotely mean enough, from the nudeness that received only eight likes, from the toothpaste on the mirror in bathroom selfies, from the potato salads that looked terrible, from the journalists who were making mistakes in real time, from the new displays of animal weakness that told us to lengthen the distance between the pack and the stragglers. But above all you averted your eyes from the ones who were in mad grief, whose mouths were open like caves with ancient paintings inside.

•

If *all she was was funny*, and *none of this was funny*, where did that leave her?

•

“Do you understand that your daughter’s life is in danger?” she screamed quietly to her father in the car, for the baby’s head was still growing uncontrollably with no sign of slowing down, and her sister could not walk more than a few steps without starting contractions. “Do you understand that a century ago—” but stopped, because her father’s eyes were swimming. He was starting to see, and she couldn’t bear it if this was the thing that did it, and after all these years. She tried to wrench the passenger door open but it was locked; “Bad to the Bone” was playing on the radio, and it was not in her father’s nature to let her out of the car until it had ended.

•

Still, he wasn’t as dismissive as usual; he was trying to be good. “How is . . . your work . . . going . . . these days?” he asked over breakfast, and she thought of a recent event where she got legally high with some booksellers, became convinced she was dying, drank an entire pitcher of cucumber water, and then fell to the ground so slowly that she accidentally showed the entire room her snatch, all the while crying out for someone to Call an Ambulance. On reflection, she felt no shame. What was such an error but a replica, made miniature, of the sad trajectory that had brought her fame in the first place? “It’s going *really, really well*,” she told her father, crossing her indefensible forearms over her undefended chest.

•

“Everything that could have gone wrong with a baby’s brain went wrong here,” the doctors told them, and so she began to live in that brain, thinking herself along its routes, thinking what it meant that the baby would never know the news. The image of it approached total abstraction, almost became beautiful. “The neurons all migrated into isolated pods, where they will never talk to each other,” the doctors said. Ten words, maybe. Maybe she’ll know who you are. Everyone in the room gazing at the blooming gray cloud; everyone in the room seized with a secret wish to see their own, which they

believed they would recognize by the subtle shadows of things in it. Oh, look, eight years of medical school. Oh, look, an old episode of “Frasier.”

•

The neurologist stood out from the others. Her skin had the gentle green cast of a Madonna balanced on a single fish-shaped foot in a grotto, with sea light reflecting on the long upward thought of her forehead. Compositionally, she appeared to be fourteen per cent classical music, the kind you were supposed to listen to while you were studying. As she spoke, she stopped every few sentences to apologize. “Not your fault,” her sister kept saying, flicking solid silver away from her cheek, as whatever it was that had made the neurologist study the brain in the first place cracked the channel of her education and began to pour toward them as a direct current. She streamed in her fixed socket like a star. Said, “I am so sorry.”

•

If the baby lived—for the doctors did not believe she would live. If she lived, they did not believe she would live for long. If she lived for long, they did not know what her life would be—she would live in her senses. Her fingertips, her ears, her sleepiness and her wide awake, a ripple along the skin wherever she was touched. All along her edges, just where she turned to another state. Tide pools full of slow blinks and bubbles and little waving fronds. The self, but more, like a sponge. But thirsty.

•

The words “shared reality” stretched and stretched, flapped at the corners like a blue felt blanket, and failed to cover everyone’s feet at once, feet that all shrank from the same cold. Picture the blanket with its wide satin hem, for didn’t we all have the same one?

•

“Back in Ohio and heterosexual again,” she sighed. This happened every time she returned home, as soon as she saw the Quaker Steak & Lube, as soon as the first Tom Petty song came on the radio and began working at the

zipper of her jeans, as soon as her speed on the highway produced a friction approaching fire.

•

As a teen-ager, she had tried to write poetry about the beauty of her surroundings, but her surroundings were so ugly that she had quickly abandoned the project. Why were the trees here so brown, so stunted? Why did the billboards announce “*LOOSE, HOT SLOTS*”? Why did her mother collect Precious Moments? Why did the birds seem to say “*Bur-ger King, Bur-ger King,*” and why, in her most solitary moments, did she find herself humming the jingle for the local accident-and-injury lawyer, which was so catchy that it almost seemed to qualify as a disease?

•

If she had stayed, she might have gotten addicted to pills, too, she realized. Something about the way the lunch-bag-colored leaves wadded in the gutters in autumn, something about the way the snow stayed long after it was wanted, like wives. Something about her memory of the multiplication table, with its fat, devouring zero at the corner, and that chalk taste on the center of the tongue.

•

Instead, she had disappeared into the Internet. She had not realized what a close call she’d had until recently, for now, in the portal, men were coming up through the manholes to confess how near they had come to being radicalized, how they, too, had wandered the sewers of communal thought for days at a time, dry-mouthed and damp under the arms. How they were exposed to the mutagenic glowing sludge just long enough to become perfectly, perfectly funny, just long enough to grow that all-discerning third eye.

•

All along the roadside were signs reading “*KIDNEY FOR MELISSA*,” “*KIDNEY FOR RANDY*,” “*KIDNEY FOR JEANINE*,” with desperate phone

numbers written underneath in Magic Marker. “Mom, what are those signs?” she finally asked.

“I’ve never seen them before,” her mother said, squinting through her drugstore glasses. “They must be a scam.”

“A scam to do what?”



Her mother was quiet for a very long time. “To get a kidney,” she said softly, finally, staring at her daughter like she was God’s own idiot.

•

There was grant money set aside by the hospital, and Obamacare helped cover a complete exome sequencing of the baby’s DNA, which pleased her on both the highest and the pettiest possible level: her father could never say the word in *that tone* again. “Don’t expect too much—we’re looking for a single misspelling in a single word on a single page of a very long book,” the geneticist told them. She felt for a moment that he had wandered onto her turf. The animal things in her bristled.

•

The error was in a growth-control pathway, which meant that what was happening to the baby could not and would not stop. There was in her arms and legs and head and heart a kind of absolutism that was almost joy. Inside her mother she was a pinwheel of vigor, every minute announcing her readiness, every minute saying, Hey, put me in.

•

Because of this vigor and this wheeling and this insistence, she felt more fitted to life than the rest of them—she was what life was, a grand and unexpected overreach, a leap out onto land. “I thought she was stronger than other babies,” her sister said, and she was right. “I thought she was protecting me,” her sister said, and who was to say she wasn’t?

•

Dread rose in their hearts on hearing the seven worst words in the English language. *There was a new law in Ohio.* It stated that it was a felony to induce a pregnant woman before thirty-seven weeks, no matter what had gone wrong, no matter how big her baby’s head was. The law itself was only a month old: fresh as a newborn, and no one knew whose it was, and naked fear on the doctors’ faces.

•

I'll write an article! she thought wildly. I'll blow the whole thing wide open! I'll . . . I'll . . . I'll *post* about it!

•

"Men make these laws," she told her mother. "And they also don't know where a girl pees from." She had once spent an entire afternoon figuring out where she peed from, with the help of a Clinique Free Bonus hand mirror and a series of shocking contortions she could no longer achieve. It had actually been extremely difficult.

•

"Surely there must be exceptions," her father ventured, the man who had spent his entire existence crusading against the exception. His white-hairy hand travelled to his belt, the way it always did when he was afraid. He did not want to live in the world he had made, but, when it came right down to it, did any of us?

•

Another thing he said: "They'll do an abortion right up to the very last minute . . . you know, *health of the mother*," putting the last phrase in finger quotes, even as his daughter sat before him in her wheelchair. When that sentence woke her in the purple part of night, she would tug her phone off the bedside table, post the words "eat the police" in the portal, wait for it to get sixty-nine likes, then delete it. This, in its childishness, calmed the thrash of helplessness in her stomach, so muscular that it almost seemed to have its own heartbeat.

•

The baby was information printed on pink paper. The baby did not know the news. The baby kicked and pretended to breathe to the sounds of bright horns: Don't sit under the apple tree, Duke and Ella, an America she was in and was ready to join, America! The baby went mad when her mother drank a single Coca-Cola.

•

Her sister would sometimes turn a dull brick red when another woman in the waiting room, due any minute now, went outside to chain-smoke in the blooming courtyard. To cheer her sister up, she considered telling her about that post where someone claimed that telling pregnant women not to shoot up heroin was classist, or something like that. Ha ha, that post ruled! She laughed out loud just remembering it but snapped her mouth shut as soon as she heard herself. She had started laughing like a witch five years ago as a joke and now she couldn't stop.

•

"Any kids?" one of the nurses asked her. No. She hesitated so long she could feel her hair growing. A cat. Named Dr. Butthole.

•

During those weeks animals came up to her on the street and pushed their soft muzzles into her palm, and she always said the same two words, never wondering whether they were a lie or not, the words that dumb things depend on us to say—because when a dog runs to you and nudges against your hand for love and you say automatically, "I know, I know," what else are you talking about except the world?

•

At night, to take their minds off things, they watched a show called "River Monsters." It always started with the blue-eyed British host arriving in a village where the fishermen were disappearing, dragged down, thrashed to death, swallowed by the Biblical unknown. For the rest of the episode he would track sinuous ripples in the water until sometimes he hauled up something monstrous and prehistoric, with a crisp eye that breathed the moonlight like a gill, and he would call it beautiful and then let it go.

•

At night, to take their minds off things, they watched LeBron James. The soles of his feet were geniuses. The pink tips of his fingers were geniuses. In his hands, the basketball became a genius; the hoop, as it received his arc, became a genius; the air that he sliced through was the breath they were

holding, aha, aha, aha, eureka; he travelled down the court, outrunning everything they did not know; the rusted city unbent and rose to the moon; the whole world was a genius of watching that man.

•

The doctors' specialized faces were alive with interest. In front of her sister they fought over their future shares of the placenta, the cord blood, mother's blood, baby's blood. "I have never seen anything like this," the geneticist declared almost hysterically. "And I will never see anything like this again until the day I die."

Messy bench who loves drama, she thought, the words rising into her head like a warding spell, for, whatever lives we lead, they do prepare us for these moments.

•

The exome test had found the misspelling, the one missed letter in a very long book. The family sat at the conference table as the entire dictionary was fired at them through peashooters. The words the doctors said were "Proteus syndrome," the words they said were "one in a billion," the words they meant were "Elephant Man." She thought of the bare Victorian rooms with clocks ticking in the background, of the splendid dignity and dialogue and makeup of the movie—which must have understood something, but, no, did not understand this. Of the words on the poster: "*I—AM—A—MAN!*"

At the end of his life, the Wikipedia entry said, the Elephant Man laid down his head so that he could sleep like other people, and suffocated under the weight of it. But that bit of the Wikipedia entry, the end, was always the most suspect.

•

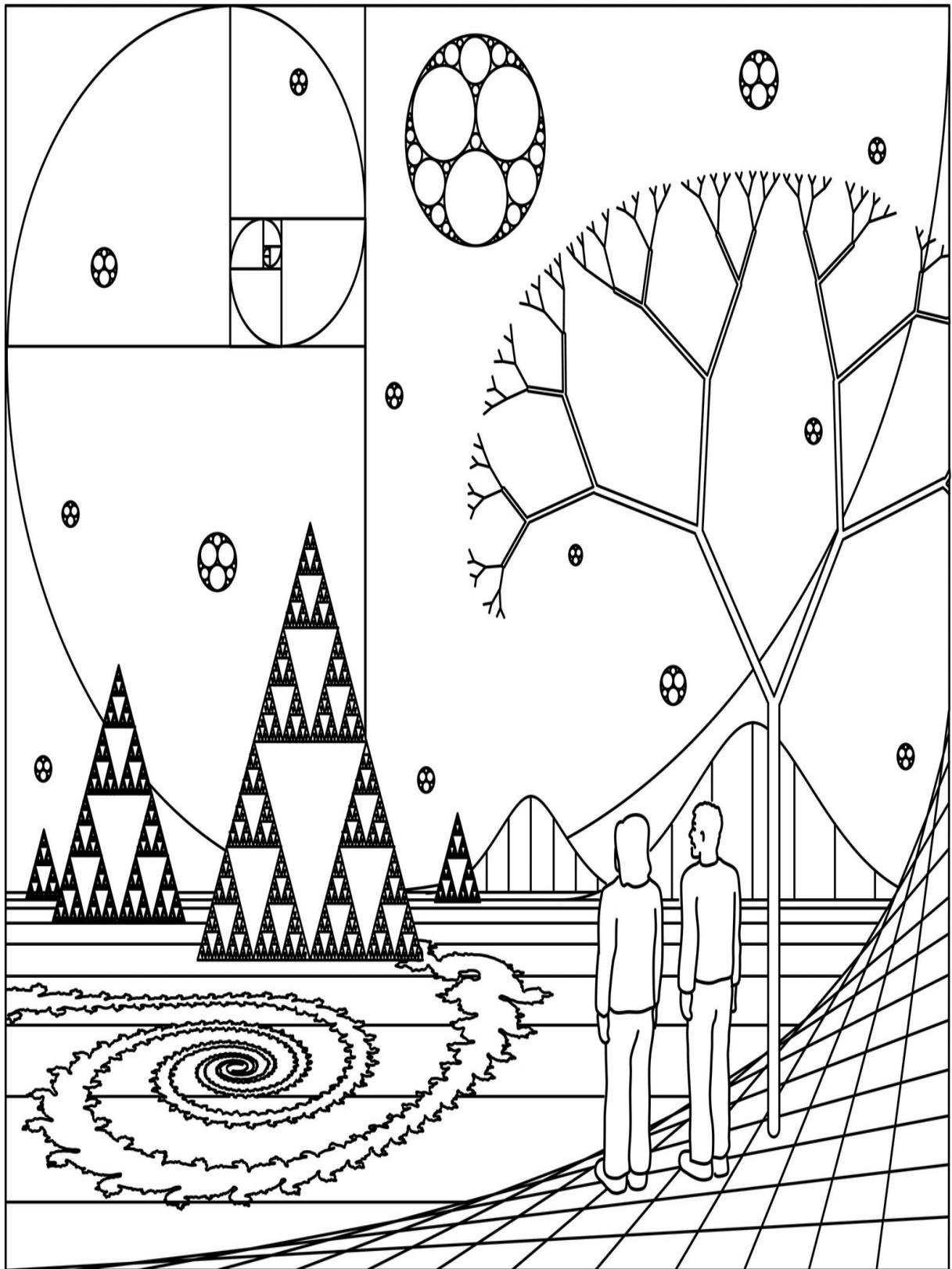
Oh, she dared the geneticist to try to tell her who Proteus was. She dared him to hold out his thick, miracle-roughened, eminent hands and mime the changeable water slipping through them, there and then not there. If he did, she would slap the table with all her might and say, "Who do you think you're talking to? I was a *mythology girl*."

•

The baby was the first and only case that had ever been diagnosed in utero. The excitement in the room was as palpable as an apple, for the tree of knowledge had suddenly produced an orange. “Still,” the doctors urged them finally, “don’t go home and look this up.” That was the difference between the old generation and the new, though. She would rather die than not look something up. She would actually rather die.

•

People went to pinewood shacks at the edge of town, she told the baby, as she played brass music to her sister’s stomach. People went to night clubs and slouched together between palms, and slid silver flasks out of their back pockets. It was a terrible age, she told the baby. The best players were black and it was Jim Crow. The best players were Jewish and it was the Second World War. But the horns played past some eternal curfew; the horns lasted as long as anyone wanted to dance. The horns seemed to say, I am here, I am here.



ADT

"I'm finding these drugs a bit mathy."

•

An art therapist showed up at the house, sat at the kitchen table, and began unpacking her pens and pastels and watercolors with the pretty irrelevance of a girl poking a daisy into the barrel of a gun. “Art?” she wanted to cry out. “You think art can help with this, you fucking hippie?”

•

Her sister clinging tight to her at midnight, her belly molten hot like the center of the earth, the breath pouring out of her like the atmosphere of Venus, planet of love, and saying, “Maybe . . . she will help us . . . find out about things.”

•

Her sister spoke of them often, the Numbers; she spoke of how often things go right, how human replication was a machine for things mostly going right. When considering the vast waterfall of data in the baby’s exome sequencing, for instance, it was impossible not to think that there was some power of gravity, a magnet, that the drops of mercury mostly flew together, the flock cohered into a single wing. The Numbers, mostly, did not get sick, stayed well.

•

She could try to pray. She could put on a white nightgown, kneel down, and fold her hands—though she doubted that her cries would be heard, considering how recently she had written in the portal that *jesus was a thot and a hoe*.

•

“I cannot see the good in this,” her mother whispered in the small sheltered airspace of the car, where they had taken to having controlled mutual outbursts as soon as they left the house. Her shoulders rounded once more over the steering wheel, the same shape as her grandmother’s hump. Last

night they had watched a slideshow and eaten popcorn, and, amid the warm, glowing agates of 1976, she had seen her teen-age mother walking toward the camera in a bathing suit, with the same flat stomach her sister had had, before.

•

This is what happened: they knew someone. They knew someone at the hospital, and so the tall stack of her sister's paperwork rose to the top like cream. When the ethics committee finally signed off on a thirty-five-week delivery, the female doctor, in a silk head scarf and a rose-gold Michael Kors watch, the doctor who might now be barred from the country, the doctor who was not allowed at any point to mention termination, the doctor who must have felt a ping in her lower belly the moment we lost the Supreme Court, the doctor actually wept.

•

She thought of women in grape-dark business suits with their hair pulled back testifying in front of Senate committees. The faces of the senators were always comfortably closed against them, like doors on a federal holiday. Because the worst-case scenarios had happened to them, the women must have done something to deserve it.

They knew nothing about this period when we were inside the great bicep just before it flexed, when we were not yet the people it had happened to.

•

Dark stock photo of an elderly ob-gyn crouched between a pregnant woman's legs, eating a large and luxurious sandwich.

•

All along the walls of the hospital were memorial tiles, which must have been cheap enough that even poorer families could afford them. Excusing herself from the waiting room, she would sneak out to the corridors and obsessively photograph the tiles, many of which included terrible drawings. Ronald McDonald giving a thumbs-up—to what? She shivered. A

frightening, large toad named Big Billy. A picture of a baby in a full feather headdress, dead in the year 1971, when that sort of thing was still fine.

•

How far did a word have to travel from its source in order to become unrecognizable? Spellings of the word “baby” that the portal had lately cycled through: babey, babby, bhabie. Middle English had seen similar transformations: babe, babee, babi. Yet in every variation the meaning shone through, as durable as a soul, wrapped in swaddling clothes.

•

Raw almonds in the waiting room, and then a cry in the operating theatre, and the photographers from “Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep” crowded all at once around her sister and brother-in-law to take stunning black-and-white photographs of the baby before she passed away. But she didn’t, and she didn’t, and then she unfurled like a wet spring thing and was alive.

“I believe she will come out and I believe she will cry,” the grotto-green neurologist had told them, alone of all the doctors.

•

All the worries about *what a mind was* fell away as soon as the baby was placed in her arms. A mind was merely something trying to make it in the world. The baby, like a soft pink machete, swung and chopped her way through the living leaves. A path was a path was a path was a path. A path was a person and a path was a mind, walk, chop, walk, chop.

•

How she wished she had never read that article about octopus intelligence, because now each time she sliced into a charred tentacle among blameless new potatoes she thought, I am eating a mind, I am eating a mind, I am eating a fine grasp of the subject at hand.

•

When the baby was put to the breast for the first time, she hovered behind her sister's shoulder to document it, with her phone sealed inside a disinfected ziplock so that all the photographs she took appeared to take place in Heaven. Her sister's neck from the side had the smooth poured texture of a birdbath, rising and rising. The winged thing, pink blink, blurred cardinal, lit on her surface and drank.

•

She herself was named godmother, a word she could never hear without seeing a wand turning things into other things. A tap on the forehead—always on the forehead!—and then the bursting of mousy outlines into static, wide white, the wide sky.

•

"So good," the nurses crooned, when they saw the baby in her scratchy white baptismal gown, with a broad chuckle in her eyes at their earnest human ceremony. She flooded with triumph as the priest poured water from his chipped seashell, because here at last was a child whom religion could not frighten, here was a child who could not be made to dread the afterlife.

•

She found herself so excited by the baby that she could hardly stand it. The baby was doing so well. She was *stupendous*. In every reaching cell of her she was a genius, just like the man with the basketball whose body always knew what to do. Her eyes travelled and travelled though she could not see—would not be able to see, it was immediately clear, because there were drops of wild dragon-scale fluorescence where her irises ought to be. So? So what? That every person on earth might be observed in this way, given a party whenever she waved and raised her little arms, breathed just like the rest of us. Turned to hear a voice she knew. The news. The news.

•

It was a marvel how cleanly and completely this lifted her out of the stream of regular life. She was a gleaming, a sterilized instrument, flashing out at the precise moment of emergency. She chugged hot hospital coffee and then

went “ah-h-h-h-h,” like George Clooney on “ER,” like she was off to go slice out the tumor that had lately been pressing on the world’s optic nerve. She wanted to stop people on the street and say, “Do you know about this? You should know about this. No one is talking about this!”

•

O.K., she was a gleaming instrument until the moment she shut her bedroom door at night, at which point she exploded into a white mist of tears and strange gasping sounds that were a million years before or after language. For she had spent the past two years letting things sink in, and now . . . guess what, bitch! Further absorption was no longer possible! All day she drank in information, but no one was telling them the main thing. No one was telling them how long they would have her, how long the open cloud of her would last.

•



"Stop saying everything is 'unprecedented.' "

There was a channel that played the baby in fuzzy black-and-white, looking like she was about to steal a pack of cigarettes from a convenience store. They tuned in to it at night, all of them in their separate beds, and this was what she used to think the angels did—watch the channel that played her. If so much as a sock slipped off the baby, they could call, and God would move into frame from nowhere and put the sock back on.

•

Her blue-and-vanilla guest room looked out on the street, and in the corner was a handle of potato vodka and every book she had ever given her sister for Christmas, back to the time they were teen-agers. After she'd finished bursting into a mist, after she'd anxiously checked the channel that played the baby, she would slosh an inch of warm vodka into a water glass and begin reading, sliding lower and lower in the bed until the sentences undressed and slept, until it no longer frightened her that there was so much not set down in books.

•

"I guess I'll go home when the handle of vodka runs out," she told herself, like the opposite of Cinderella, though still slipping into the glass that fit her perfectly.

•

One of the books was a sex diary, which exerted the particular frontier charm of Internet writing before 9/11. This sex diarist wore pigtails and had eyes like blue sequins and lacked inhibition entirely. She made New Hampshire sound like a place you wanted to go: an endless orifice amid black ice, buzzing like an "*OPEN 24 HOURS*" sign. Cups of coffee in the morning, adrenaline-fuelled e-mails in the afternoon, solitary preparations for threesomes at night.

This seemed the writer's whole existence but was in fact only one room of it. In another was her son, Wolf, who had been born with a microdeletion in one of his chromosomes. In one of those unforgivable intimacies that the

modern age allowed us, she had looked them up every few years, to find out —to find out what? Wolf was still alive, and the last time she checked he had become a Christian, painted marvellous self-portraits, and constantly monitored the weather. “It always makes me feel safe because . . . if I don’t listen to it, how will I know what’s going to happen?” he said.

•

A dream where she herself was pregnant, and was seized with panic when she realized that she had been drinking and smoking the whole time—a cigarette was unfolding like a paper crane between her fingertips, and ice cubes shook geologically in her glass. A flat red light came through her window then and illuminated her stomach so that she was see-through: and in a cushion of ocean inside her was the baby, with the larger head and the long froggy limbs facing upward, and the rose-of-the-world mouth asked her, nearly laughing, Why are you doing this to us?

•

That magnifying liquid at nighttime saved her, but at dawn, like a jailer, she had to haul her own body out of the bed by the scruff of the neck, yelling, “Morning, sunshine!” For in order for life to continue she had to get to the hospital as soon as possible, her right hand curled permanently around the close-to-burning cup of coffee, rushing through red lights side by side with her mother, hearing that cover of Toto’s “Africa” on the radio, trying not to join in but then breaking down and howling, “I BLESS THE RAINS!”

•

“She only knows what it is to be herself,” they kept repeating to one another. The rest was about them and what they thought a brain and a body ought to be able to do. When the neurologist, in that first-ever meeting, had said gently that maybe the baby would one day be able to count to three, she had almost turned the table over on her, because who needed to count to three? Look where counting to three had got us. I’m *warning* you.

•

The heart grew. Where it hit the limit of the individual, it hurt. It tried to follow the pathways as far as they would go. It tried not to know.

•

Once, when she was reading out loud to the baby, she came to a chapter where a little girl died, and went up to Heaven, and “received all the news of the world from the birds.” It was not in her nature to skip, so she kept going in a tinier and tinier voice, until the sound grew so small that even the birds could not carry it, but the baby never noticed a thing.

•

What did a story mean to the baby? It meant a soft voice, reassurance that everything outside her still went on, still would go on. That the blood of continuity still pumped, that the day ran in its riverbed. Her blue eyes rolled when the voice of the story came, and sometimes she shook with what must have been excitement, trying in her tininess to be as large as what pressed in on her. In the dome of her head, the mercury of all things was trying to tremble together.

•

The great gift of the baby knowing their voices, contentless except for love —how she turned so wildly to where the pouring and continuous element was, strained her limbs toward the human sunshine, would fight her way through anything to get there.

•

Different, yes, different. But we were going to be different, the future had asked it of us, we had already begun to change. And there was almost no human being so unlike other human beings that it did not know what a kiss was.

•

The baby kicked her legs past other legs, punched her fists past other fists, windmilled her arms, climbed the air like a staircase. Plucked idly at the pale

hair on the back of her head. It was the baby whose movements were designed for a new and unimagined landscape, the baby who was showing us how to blast off and leave—how we would fly, touch down, pick flowers in other places.

But please, not yet, we liked it here. ♦

By [David Wallace](#)

Georgia Postcard

- [In Georgia, the Dullest Spectator Sport in the World](#)

[November 30, 2020 Issue](#)

In Georgia, the Dullest Spectator Sport in the World

The election audit was a sprawling affair, a television-unfriendly November Madness, confirming that Joe Biden was the first Democrat to take the state since Bill Clinton.

By [Charles Bethea](#)

November 23, 2020

Recount, audit, formality, scam: opinions varied as Georgia took another look at the five million ballots its citizens cast in the Presidential election. Joe Biden had won by around thirteen thousand votes—the first Democrat to take the state since Bill Clinton. But Georgia Republicans had their doubts, and, in some cases, their delusions. “Notice anything fishy?” Marjorie Taylor Greene, congresswoman-elect and QAnon fan, tweeted, on November 10th, alongside a chart comparing the number of Georgia absentee ballots cast this year (a lot) with that of past election years (not very many). “Wait ’til you hear about the pandemic,” a commenter deadpanned.



The counting, which began on a Friday, was a sprawling affair, a television-unfriendly November Madness occurring simultaneously across Georgia's hundred and fifty-nine counties, from a probate court in Peach County to a former Sam's Club in DeKalb. The main action was in Atlanta, in Fulton County, where about a tenth of the state's votes were cast. By Saturday morning, a hundred and fifty tables at the Georgia World Congress Center—the Peach State's Roland-Garros of recounting—were staffed with masked-up counters. Observers hung around on the sidelines, speaking in mid-match whispers. "She's fast," one said, pointing to a woman at Table 113, who was tallying, stacking, and re-tallying with unusual speed. "Fast isn't the goal," someone else said.

"We finished one container," Norma, a middle-aged white woman, announced, pausing for a snack. "About nine hundred ballots!" (It had taken ninety minutes.) A Black woman named Aya described "separating ballots into the different candidates, writing down how many of each, and putting them back in the box." She added, "So far, so good. Any questions I did have, they come and answer it really quick."

An umpire boomed over a loudspeaker: "As you count them and put them in stacks of ten, please be reminded that you must count them again." A video looped on a large screen above the action: two children sorting ballots into piles. "Basic instructions," Larry Korn, a bored-looking local lawyer, said as he watched. "'One, two, three . . .' I don't feel like I can actually skip a number." He offered some inside baseball as he waited for his at-bat. "They need their base stirred up," he said, referring to the state's Republican senators, Kelly Loeffler and David Perdue, who are competing in runoffs that will determine control of the U.S. Senate. "Claiming there's voting fraud when there's no evidence of any of it." When did Korn expect these two to accept the outcome of the Presidential election? "January 6th"—the day after their Senate runoffs—"would be my guess," he said.

There was a live feed of the action online. Hecklers chimed in from afar. "Their recount is a scam, means nothing," one, named Donald Trump, tweeted. "Must see fraudulent signatures which is prohibited by stupidly signed & unconstitutional consent decree." One of the counters, Kermit Ashford, an art teacher with dreadlocks, whose mask was pulled below his chin, was amused. "There's no proof a mask prevents anything," he said. He

had two books in his lap; one was “Critical Impact,” a romance novel. “Our job is to be fair, to not have any biases,” he went on. This was easy for him: he hadn’t voted. “They’re all actors to me,” he said, of the candidates. “This is a puppet show.” He figured he’d be there for nine hours: “I think we’ll be getting some hazard pay.”

Over in the nosebleed section sat Marilyn Marks, an election-integrity activist wearing a colorful scarf, who’d come down from North Carolina. She was tweeting on her laptop. “This is a Frankenstein illicit audit,” she told an observer. “A big, muddled mess.” She offered her monocular, which she used to get a closer look at the action.

A man sat down next to Marks, looking overheated. “We human beings have three main problems,” he said. “We are slow, dishonest, and error-prone.” His name was Harri Hursti, and he was an international-hacking-and-security expert. Marks was paying him to help her observe, and to capture “problems with the process” with his long-lens camera, to be used in an ongoing lawsuit about the accuracy of state voting machines. “I saw unattended ballots,” Hursti said. “They were blank. Non-malicious—but just wrong.” He compared the U.S. to Estonia and Indonesia, where he has also observed elections. “One of the worst on earth,” he said. Marks pointed to a man hunched over a computer. She was concerned about digital security; he was inputting official table tallies. “He’s using the Wi-Fi,” Hursti noted. “Not smart.”

By midafternoon, the fervor had faded. A man from Table 107 went to the rest room and never returned. Elsewhere in Georgia, voting-related lawsuits were tossed up and swatted down, like a weak layup. ♦

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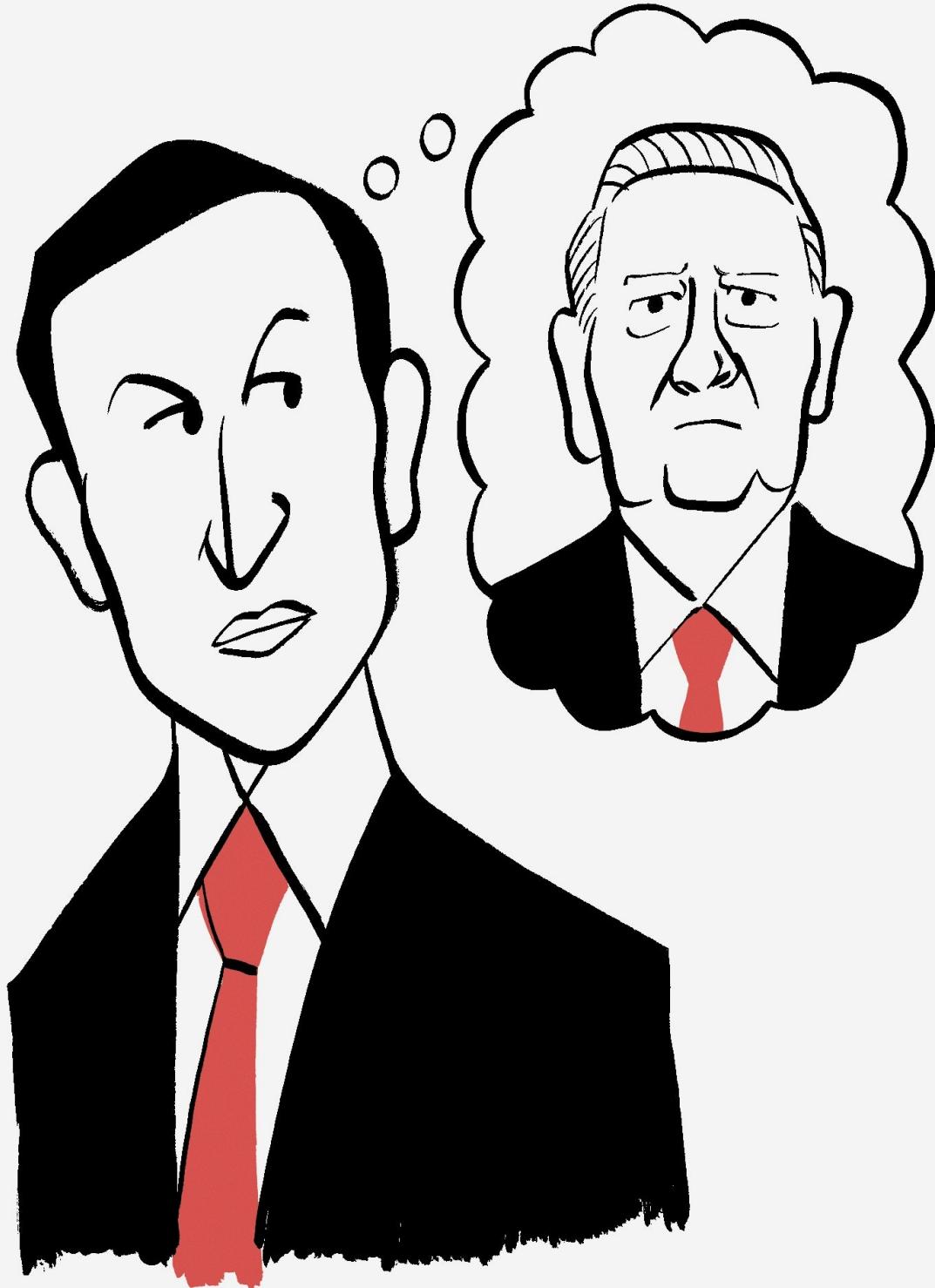
The Motley Crew Leading Trump's Election Challenges

Jared Kushner wanted a “James Baker-like” figure, but he ended up with a ragtag bunch of lawyers led by a raving Rudolph Giuliani, who made his first appearance in federal court in this century.

By [Lizzie Widdicombe](#)

November 21, 2020

When it began to look like Joe Biden was winning the Presidential election, Donald Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner, picked up the phone. He feverishly called around, looking for a “James Baker-like” figure to oversee the campaign’s legal challenges to the election results. Baker, a former Secretary of State, led George W. Bush’s recount effort in Florida, in 2000, managing a dream team of lawyers that included the Supreme Court litigator Ted Olson and three future Supreme Court Justices. Kushner hoped to assemble a similar A-team for his father-in-law, who, on entering office, had vowed to surround himself with only “the best” people.



Jared Kushner and James Baker Illustration by João Fazenda

On November 7th, Trump tweeted that his squad would be unveiled at a press conference “at Four Seasons, Philadelphia. 11:00 A.M.” Minutes later, he deleted the post and wrote another, clarifying that the venue was a small business called Four Seasons Total Landscaping. The blooper proved prescient: the legal eagles drafted to help the President had as much relation to James Baker as Four Seasons Total Landscaping has to the luxury hotel. At the press conference, there were many familiar faces: not white-shoe veterans of Bush v. Gore but, rather, ghosts of impeachments past. Trump’s personal lawyer, Rudolph Giuliani, was there. So was Pam Bondi, the former Florida attorney general (and registered foreign agent for Qatar), and a smattering of angry poll watchers, one of whom turned out to be a convicted sex offender.

The campaign announced that the legal effort would be headed up by the conservative activist David Bossie (not to be confused with David Boies), who is neither a lawyer nor a college graduate. (He is an author of “Let Trump Be Trump,” a memoir co-written with Corey Lewandowski, another member of the new legal team.) Within days, Bossie tested positive for *COVID-19* and went into quarantine. Then Lewandowski tested positive. Two down. The campaign turned to Giuliani, who agreed to serve as its new general for the reported asking price of twenty thousand dollars a day.

It wasn’t the most auspicious start, but, as the campaign initiated a flurry of lawsuits in swing states, it kept up a modicum of respectability. Lawyers from Jones Day, a prominent international law firm, were contesting an extended ballot deadline in Pennsylvania, where Trump’s lead was shrinking by the day. The largest firm in Arizona, Snell & Wilmer, was representing the R.N.C. in a case that it had brought alongside the Trump campaign. Soon enough, both firms backed out or backtracked. Jones Day issued a statement claiming that the firm “is not representing President Trump, his campaign, or any affiliated party in any litigation alleging voter fraud.” James Bopp, the lawyer known as the architect of the Citizens United case, dropped the election lawsuits he’d filed in four states on behalf of his conservative group, True the Vote, without explanation.

This left Trump with a motley crew of helpers. Scanning the dockets that the campaign has filed around the country, one sees a lot of local lone-ranger types. There’s the St. Louis-based Mark Hearne (nickname: Thor), who filed

one of the Trump lawsuits in the wrong court. Kory Langhofer, in Arizona, was once fined for filing a frivolous medical-marijuana-related lawsuit against the town of Snowflake. In Georgia, the campaign retained Lin Wood, a former medical-malpractice lawyer whose clients have included Richard Jewell and Kyle Rittenhouse. (His former colleagues are suing him, claiming that he left them abusive messages, in which he referred to himself as “Almighty Lin” and said that he was taking orders from God.)

Two weeks ago, in Pennsylvania, lawyers from Porter Wright Morris & Arthur filed a suit seeking to stop the certification of the state’s vote count. Then they withdrew. Next up was a local divorce lawyer named Linda A. Kerns, working with two Texas attorneys. Days later, all three quit. They handed the reins to a new lead lawyer: Marc Scaringi, a Pennsylvania radio host, who was once featured in a *GQ* article titled “A Field Guide to Bad Conservative Hair.” (Perhaps the campaign missed that Scaringi had discussed Trump’s lawsuits on his show, predicting, “At the end of the day, the litigation will not work. It will not reverse this election.”) Then, hours before the hearing, Giuliani announced that he would step in personally. It would be his first time appearing in a federal court in this century.

The hearing took place last week, in Williamsport. “May it please the court,” Giuliani said, thanking the judge for “allowing me to be admitted *pro hac vice*.” He described a “nationwide voter fraud” scheme, insisting that the case “is exactly Bush v. Gore!” He alleged that treatment of Republican poll watchers “got nasty” in Philadelphia. “This doesn’t happen in an honest place,” he said.

The Trump team has brought in still more lawyers, including Jenna Ellis, who in 2016 called her new client an “idiot” and a “criminal dirtbag.” At a press conference on Thursday, she referred to the new group of lawyers as “an élite, strike-force team.” Giuliani, dark rivulets of hair dye dripping down his cheeks, like Dirk Bogarde in the final scene of “Death in Venice,” made dozens more unfounded and unhinged-sounding fraud claims. He even reënacted a scene from the Joe Pesci vehicle “My Cousin Vinny” before the networks cut away. But the effort—to overturn an election that the candidate lost by nearly six million votes—seems foolhardy. The election-law expert Edward Foley said, “I don’t think even James Baker could be successful with what they have to work with.” ♦

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Letter from Silicon Valley

- [How Venture Capitalists Are Deforming Capitalism](#)

How Venture Capitalists Are Deforming Capitalism

Even the worst-run startup can beat competitors if investors prop it up. The V.C. firm Benchmark helped enable WeWork to make one wild mistake after another—hoping that its gamble would pay off before disaster struck.

By [Charles Duhigg](#)

November 23, 2020



In 2008, Jeremy Neuner and Ryan Coonerty, two city-hall employees in Santa Cruz, California, decided to open a co-working space. They leased a cavernous building a few steps from a surf shop and a sex-toy boutique, and equipped it with desks, power strips, fast Wi-Fi, and a deluxe coffee-maker. Neuner and Coonerty named their company NextSpace Coworking.

Neuner, who had attended Harvard's Kennedy School after serving in the Navy, was looking to be part of a movement. "We really believed that this would be a totally new way of working," he told me. NextSpace provided a refuge for local freelancers desperate for office camaraderie, and within six months the company was turning a small profit. Soon, NextSpace opened locations in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Jose. Neuner and Coonerty also started looking for venture capital. They had raised some money from family and friends, but, as Neuner put it to me, "V.C. funding is the stamp of approval." He noted, "In every startup story, the V.C.s supercharge everything. They're the fairy godmothers of success."

In 2012, Neuner went to a co-working-industry conference, in Austin, Texas, to appear on a panel and try to meet investors. One of the conference's other speakers was Adam Neumann, a six-foot-five Israeli with flowing black hair, who wore designer jeans and a dark blazer—fancy dress amid the crowd's T-shirts. Neumann told the audience that he ran a company in New York, named [WeWork](#), that was "the world's first physical social network." His self-assuredness was mesmerizing. "We're planning to be all over the country very, very soon," he said. Although WeWork was just two years old, and Neumann was only thirty-two, the company already controlled more than three hundred thousand square feet of office space; he declared that WeWork would soon have ten thousand clients. "Our company is about *we* and about *collaboration*," Neumann proclaimed. "Together, we can build a community that can change the world."

When Jeremy Neuner began having meetings with venture capitalists, he said, "their first question was 'How do you compete with WeWork? Why should we invest with you instead of them?'" WeWork was reportedly losing millions of dollars each month, but it was expanding to new locations at a feverish pace. Neumann's promises to V.C.s were so wildly optimistic, bordering on ridiculous, that Neuner was convinced WeWork had to be a scam. "They were saying they would become the biggest office-space

provider in the world,” Neuner recalled. “What do I say to compete with that? Do I tell V.C.s, ‘You know, WeWork must be lying, so you should accept my smaller returns instead’? No one wanted to hear that. All the V.C.s couldn’t wait to drink the Kool-Aid.”

A real-estate agent informed Neuner that WeWork had opened a location in San Francisco, just a few blocks from NextSpace, and was charging cheaper rates. As NextSpace grew, eventually opening a fifth California location, WeWork opened competing offices alongside each one of its facilities, never more than a few blocks away. Invariably, WeWork charged tenants slightly less.

Neuner began hearing similar stories from other co-working entrepreneurs: WeWork came to town, opened near an existing co-working office, and undercut the competitor on price. Sometimes WeWork promised tenants a moving bonus if they terminated an existing lease; in other instances, the company obtained client directories from competitors’ Web sites and offered everyone on the lists three months of free rent. Jerome Chang, the owner of Blankspaces, in Los Angeles, told me, “My average rate was five hundred and fifty dollars per desk per month, and I was just scraping by. Then WeWork arrived, and I had to drop it to four hundred and fifty, and then three hundred and fifty. It eviscerated my business.” Rebecca Brian Pan, who founded a co-working company named Covo, said, “*No one* could make money at these prices. But they kept lowering them so that they were cheaper than everyone else. It was like they had a bottomless bank account that made it impossible for anyone else to survive.”

Neuner began slashing NextSpace’s prices and adding amenities—free beer; lunchtime classes on accounting, coding, and chakra cleansing—but none of it mattered. WeWork’s prices were too low. By the end of 2014, WeWork had raised more than half a billion dollars from venture capitalists. Although it was now losing six million dollars a month, it was growing faster than ever before, with plans for sixty locations in more than a dozen cities.

Meanwhile, one of [Silicon Valley](#)’s most prominent investors, Bruce Dunlevie, of the venture-capital firm Benchmark, had joined WeWork’s board of directors. Benchmark, founded in 1995 in Menlo Park, had funded such Silicon Valley startups as eBay, [Twitter](#), and Instagram. Dunlevie

admitted to a partner that he wasn't certain how WeWork would ever become profitable, but he was taken with Neumann. Dunlevie said to the partner, "Let's give him some money, and he'll figure it out." Around this time, Benchmark made its first investment in WeWork—seventeen million dollars.

Venture capitalists began telling Jeremy Neuner that making piddly investments in his company wasn't worth their time; moreover, if they funded NextSpace, they might be excluded from buying into WeWork someday. To Neuner, this seemed nuts. He was building a solid business, but the V.C.s wanted fantasy. "All we needed was five million dollars a year in revenues, and we would have made money for everyone," he told me. "That's enough to earn a living and buy a house and put your kids through school. But no one wanted something that just made a healthy living. They all wanted to find the next [Zuckerberg](#)." Neuner was frustrated, but he wasn't surprised. He knew that American history was filled with entrepreneurs like P. T. Barnum, Walt Disney, and Charles Ponzi, self-promoters whose audaciousness created new industries and vast riches—and who, occasionally, ended up in jail. What Neuner hadn't realized was that some venture capitalists had become co-conspirators with such hype artists, handing them millions of dollars and encouraging their worst tendencies, in the hope that one lucky wager would more than offset many bad bets.

In six years, Neuner opened nine NextSpace locations, as far east as Chicago. "But I was so burnt out by everyone saying I was a failure just because I didn't want to dominate the globe," he said. In 2014, Neuner resigned, and NextSpace began closing its sites. "It was heartbreaking," he said. "V.C.s seem like these quiet, boring guys who are good at math, encourage you to dream big, and have private planes. You know who else is quiet, good at math, and has private planes? Drug cartels."

As NextSpace's offices shut down or were sold off, WeWork opened forty new locations and announced that it had raised hundreds of millions of dollars more. It became one of the biggest property lessors in New York, London, and Washington, D.C. One fall day in 2017, as Neuner was browsing in a bookstore near NextSpace's original location, in Santa Cruz, he passed a magazine rack and saw that *Forbes* had put Adam Neumann on its cover. The [accompanying article](#) described how Neumann had met with

Masayoshi Son, one of Japan's wealthiest men and the head of the enormous investment firm SoftBank. Son had been so impressed by a twelve-minute tour of WeWork's headquarters that he had scribbled out a spur-of-the-moment contract to invest \$4.4 billion in the company. That backing, Neumann had explained to the *Forbes* reporter, was based not on financial estimates but, rather, "on our energy and spirituality."



"Yes, kids, this is where hand sanitizer comes from."

Victoria Roberts

The article also detailed how, a few months after Son made that commitment, Neumann travelled to Tokyo to toast the deal with him. As they celebrated, Son asked Neumann a philosophical question: “In a fight, who wins—the smart guy or the crazy guy?”

“Crazy guy,” Neumann replied.

“You are correct,” Son said. “But you,” he added, with a hint of concern, “are not crazy *enough*.”

From the start, venture capitalists have presented their profession as an elevated calling. They weren’t mere speculators—they were midwives to innovation. The first V.C. firms were designed to make money by identifying and supporting the most brilliant startup ideas, providing the funds and the strategic advice that daring entrepreneurs needed in order to prosper. For decades, such boasts were merited. Genentech, which helped invent synthetic insulin, in the nineteen-seventies, succeeded in large part because of the stewardship of the venture capitalist Tom Perkins, whose company, Kleiner Perkins, made an initial hundred-thousand-dollar investment. Perkins demanded a seat on Genentech’s board of directors, and then began spending one afternoon a week in the startup’s offices, scrutinizing spending reports and browbeating inexperienced executives. In subsequent years, Kleiner Perkins nurtured such tech startups as Amazon, Google, Sun Microsystems, and Compaq. When Perkins died, in 2016, at the age of eighty-four, an obituary in the *Financial Times* [remembered him](#) as “part of a new movement in finance that saw investors roll up their sleeves and play an active role in management.”

The V.C. industry has grown exponentially since Perkins’s heyday, but it has also become increasingly avaricious and cynical. It is now dominated by a few dozen firms, which, collectively, control hundreds of billions of dollars. Most professional V.C.s fit a narrow mold: according to surveys, just under half of them attended either Harvard or Stanford, and eighty per cent are male. Although V.C.s depict themselves as perpetually on the hunt for radical business ideas, they often seem to be hyping the same Silicon Valley trends—and their managerial oversight has dwindled, making their investments look more like trading-floor bets. Steve Blank, an entrepreneur

who currently teaches at Stanford’s engineering school, said, “I’ve watched the industry become a money-hungry mob. V.C.s today aren’t interested in the public good. They’re not interested in anything except optimizing their own profits and chasing the herd, and so they waste billions of dollars that could have gone to innovation that actually helps people.”

This clubby, self-serving approach has made many V.C.s rich. In January, 2020, the National Venture Capital Association hailed a “record decade” of “hyper growth” in which its members had given nearly eight hundred billion dollars to startups, “fueling the economy of tomorrow.” [The pandemic](#) has slowed things down, but not much. According to a report by PitchBook, a company that provides data on the industry, five of the top twenty venture-capital firms are currently making more deals than they did last year.

In recent decades, the gambles taken by V.C.s have grown dramatically larger. A million-dollar investment in a thriving young company might yield ten million dollars in profits. A fifty-million-dollar investment in the same startup could deliver half a billion dollars. “Honestly, it stopped making sense to look at investments that were smaller than thirty or forty million,” a prominent venture capitalist told me. “It’s the same amount of due diligence, the same amount of time going to board meetings, the same amount of work, regardless of how much you invest.”

Critics of the venture-capital industry have observed that, lately, it has given one dubious startup after another gigantic infusions of money. The blood-testing company [Theranos](#) received seven hundred million dollars from a number of investors, including [Rupert Murdoch](#) and [Betsy DeVos](#), before it was revealed as a fraud; in 2018, its founders were indicted. Juicero, which sold a Wi-Fi-enabled juice press for seven hundred dollars, raised more than a hundred million dollars from such sources as Google’s investment arm, but shut down after only four years. (Consumers posted videos demonstrating that they could press juice just as efficiently with their own hands.) Two years ago, when Wag!, an Uber-like service for dog walking, went looking for seventy-five million dollars in venture capital, its founders—among them, a pair of brothers in their twenties, with little business experience—discovered that investors were interested, as long as Wag! agreed to accept three hundred million dollars. The startup planned to use those funds to expand internationally, but it was too poorly run to flourish. It began

shedding its employees after, among other things, the New York City Council accused the firm of losing dogs.

Increasingly, the venture-capital industry has become fixated on creating “unicorns”: startups whose valuations exceed a billion dollars. Some of these companies become lasting successes, but many of them—such as Uber, the data-mining giant Palantir, and the scandal-plagued software firm Zenefits—never seemed to have a realistic plan for turning a profit. A [2018 paper](#) co-written by Martin Kenney, a professor at the University of California, Davis, argued that, thanks to the prodigious bets made by today’s V.C.s, “money-losing firms can continue operating and undercutting incumbents for far longer than previously.” In the traditional capitalist model, the most efficient and capable company succeeds; in the new model, the company with the most funding wins. Such firms are often “destroying economic value”—that is, undermining sound rivals—and creating “disruption without social benefit.”

Many venture capitalists say that they have no choice but to flood startups with cash. In order for a Silicon Valley startup to become a true unicorn, it typically must wipe out its competitors and emerge as the dominant brand. Jeff Housenbold, a managing partner at SoftBank, told me, “Once Uber is founded, within a year you suddenly have three hundred copycats. The only way to protect your company is to get big fast by investing hundreds of millions.” What’s more, V.C.s say, the big venture firms are all looking at the same deals, and trying to persuade the same coveted entrepreneurs to accept their investment dollars. To win, V.C.s must give entrepreneurs what they demand.

Particularly in Silicon Valley, founders often want venture capitalists who promise not to interfere or to ask too many questions. V.C.s have started boasting that they are “founder-friendly” and uninterested in, say, spending an afternoon a week at a company’s offices or second-guessing a young C.E.O. Josh Lerner, a professor at Harvard Business School, told me, “Proclaiming founder loyalty is kind of expected now.” One of the bigger V.C. firms, the Founders Fund, which has more than six billion dollars under management, [declares on its Web site](#) that it “has never removed a single founder” and that, when it finds entrepreneurs with “audacious vision,” “a near-messianic attitude,” and “wild-eyed passion,” it essentially seeks to

give them veto-proof authority over the board of directors, so that an entrepreneur need never worry about being reined in, let alone fired.

Whereas venture capitalists like Tom Perkins once prided themselves on installing good governance and closely monitoring companies, V.C.s today are more likely to encourage entrepreneurs' undisciplined eccentricities. Masayoshi Son, the SoftBank venture capitalist who promised WeWork \$4.4 billion after less than twenty minutes, embodies this approach. In 2016, he began raising a hundred-billion-dollar Vision Fund, the largest pool of money ever devoted to venture-capital investment. "Masa decided to deliberately inject cocaine into the bloodstream of these young companies," a former SoftBank senior executive said. "You approach an entrepreneur and say, 'Hey, either take a billion dollars from me *right now*, or I'll give it to your competitor and you'll go out of business.'" This strategy might sound reckless, but it has paid off handsomely for Son. In the mid-nineties, he gave billions of dollars to hundreds of tech firms, including twenty million dollars to a small Chinese online marketplace named Alibaba. When the first Internet bubble burst, in 2001, Son lost almost seventy billion dollars, but Alibaba had enough of a war chest to outlast its competitors, and today it's valued at more than seven hundred billion dollars. SoftBank's stake in the firm is more than a hundred billion dollars—far exceeding all of Son's other losses. "Venture capital has become a lottery," the former SoftBank executive told me. "Masa is not a particularly deep thinker, but he has one strength: he's devoted to buying more lottery tickets than anyone else."

As NextSpace dissolved and WeWork expanded, a perverse dynamic emerged: the more that rumors spread about WeWork's predatory tactics and odd culture, the more that Adam Neumann was courted by venture capitalists. Investors whispered that WeWork's top employees were told to attend weekly sessions with a guru; tales circulated of office tequila parties and recreational drug use among the staff. Sex at the WeWork headquarters was so commonplace, one employee told me, that every day for a week she found a different used condom in a stairwell. Neumann smoked marijuana at the office; someone who worked closely with him told me that, on her first day, Neumann "lights up a joint and starts blowing it in my face, almost like a test." Neumann also spent lavishly on perks for himself, such as a Maybach car and a chauffeur, and a cold-plunge pool and an infrared sauna in his office.

Despite the unprofessional atmosphere at WeWork, its valuation was doubling every year. “Everyone wanted in,” a venture capitalist told me. “If you could deliver a piece of WeWork to your partners, they’d never fire you.” Neumann lay at the heart of the company’s allure. He had moved to New York in 2001, intent, he later said, on “hitting on every girl in the city.” Not long afterward, he started a company that sold women’s shoes with collapsible heels. When that venture failed, he founded Krawlers, a company that made baby clothes with kneepads. Its tagline: “Just because they don’t tell you, doesn’t mean they don’t hurt.”

After that startup also sputtered, Neumann and a partner, Miguel McKelvey, rented an office in Brooklyn, divided it into small spaces, and established themselves as co-working entrepreneurs. When potential funders came to visit, Neumann instructed employees to pretend to be his tenants, socializing enthusiastically in the hallways. “He was crazy, but exactly the *right* kind of crazy to make you believe he could pull this off,” another venture capitalist said. “He was the most charismatic pitchman I ever saw.”

By 2014, Neumann was fielding so many inquiries from V.C.s that he issued an ultimatum: henceforth, he would work only with investors willing to give him a majority of voting control over the company’s board. Bruce Dunlevie, the investor at Benchmark who sat on WeWork’s board, had become a mentor to Neumann, and he thought that this unfettered authority was a bad idea. He took it upon himself to get Neumann to abandon his demand. Dunlevie is widely considered to be one of Silicon Valley’s intellectuals. Most V.C.s are technocrats in Tesla fleeces obsessed with obscure nutritional supplements; Dunlevie donates to museums, has a history degree from Cambridge, and is known for quoting nineteenth-century English writers. He once helped save an independent bookstore after Amazon had pushed it to the edge of extinction. He described himself to me as being in the “persuasion business,” and as someone who succeeds by nudging headstrong founders to make better choices. (To underscore the point, he keeps a textbook of pediatric psychiatry on his desk.) At a board meeting, Dunlevie urged WeWork’s other directors to deny Neumann’s demand for complete control by quoting Lord Acton: “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

Neumann, who attended the meeting, said that he didn't care about Lord Acton. Nobody else on the WeWork board supported Dunlevie's effort. At that moment, Dunlevie could have resigned from WeWork's board of directors, or gone public with his objections. He had taken such stands in the past. In the late nineties, Dunlevie and Benchmark planned on partnering with Toys R Us to create what everyone anticipated would be one of the largest online retailers. Dunlevie had recently helped propel eBay to enormous success, earning Benchmark five billion dollars in profits. Toys R Us asked for guidance in entering the e-commerce sphere, and promised to give Benchmark a free hand to do what was necessary. "Bruce was a total rock star," a Toys R Us executive from that period told me. "He had this incredible vision and *moral* authority. He knew exactly what we needed to do, and was there, every step of the way, pushing to make it happen." It quickly became clear, however, that numerous middle managers at Toys R Us felt threatened by the e-commerce plans and were undermining the effort. Dunlevie, who is six feet four and played quarterback in high school in Texas, called the company's chief executive. "This is bullshit!" he told him. "None of what you represented is true!" As Randall E. Stross reported in a 2000 book about Benchmark, "[eBoys](#)," Dunlevie soon met with his Benchmark partners about Toys R Us and told them that his "every inclination is just to say, 'Let's get the fuck out of here.'" The only thing holding him back, he said, was a sense of obligation to Toys R Us's president. "He's not a bad guy," Dunlevie told his partners. "This poor son of a bitch needs us."

Over the next month, Dunlevie cajoled executives, and pleaded with new hires to stick around. "He did everything possible," the former Toys R Us executive said. "He fought and fought." But the internal resistance was too great, so Dunlevie cancelled the planned partnership with Toys R Us, forfeiting a guaranteed hundred-million-dollar payout. The toy retailer, he announced, had not been up front about its internal deficiencies. "Bruce stood on principle," the former executive said. "He refused to be part of something that was so dysfunctional."

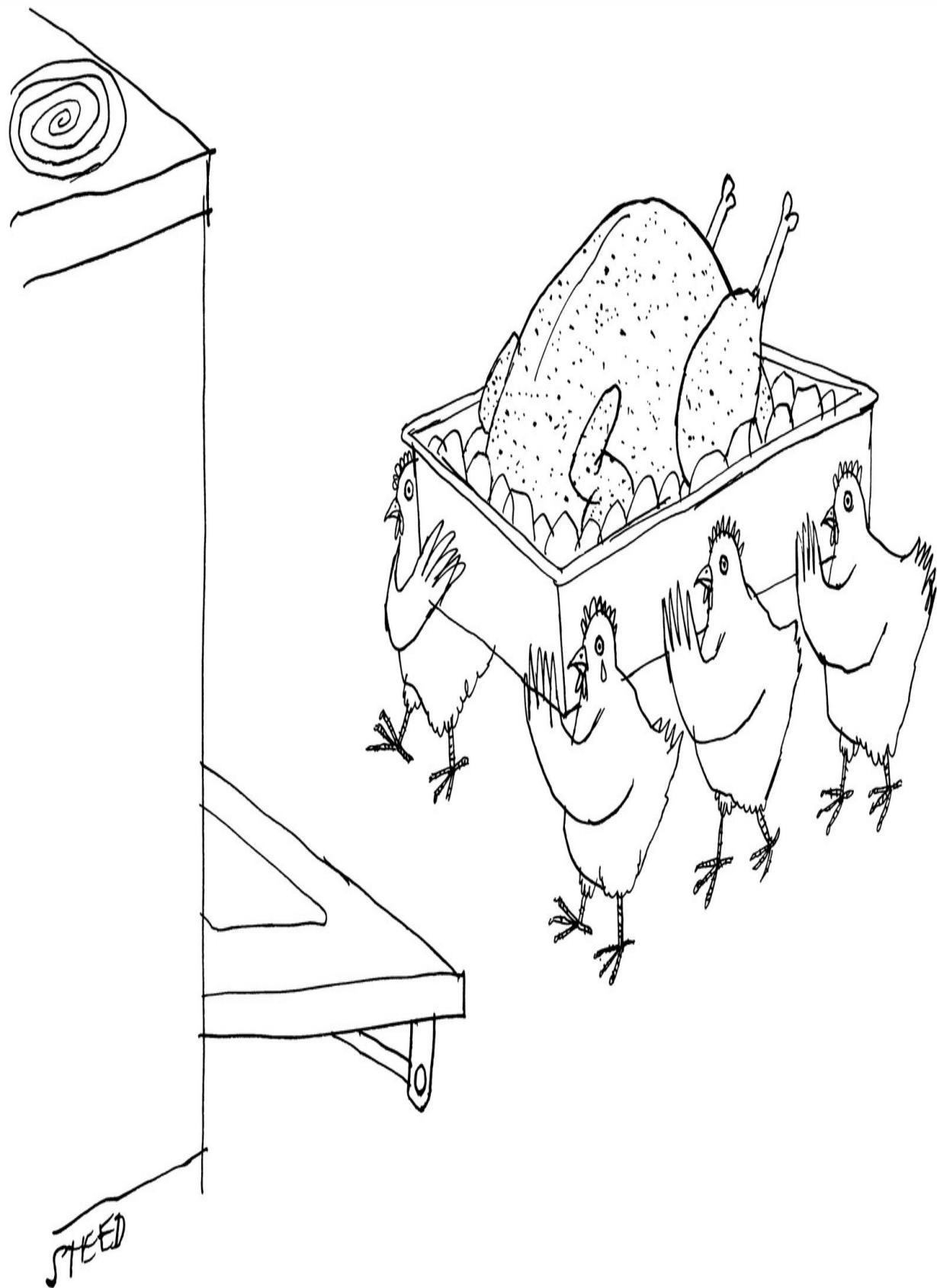
Dunlevie took a different approach with WeWork. When Neumann demanded total control, Dunlevie objected, but he did not threaten to resign. Doing so, one of Dunlevie's colleagues at Benchmark told me, "would have been the stupidest fucking idea on earth." Benchmark had "invested when

WeWork was worth, like, eighty million dollars, and now it's worth fifteen billion, and we should walk away? Or, even worse, complain?" The colleague continued, "You could stand on principle and resign from the board, or vote no and marginalize yourself, but that's not going to change anything. That's not the world we fucking live in." In a phone interview, Dunlevie told me, "We get paid to deal with these wild and crazy entrepreneurs," and "we're expected to remain in the ring and keep swinging, even when we're getting our ass kicked." In the end, Dunlevie banded with other investors and agreed to give Neumann the voting control he wanted. They also approved additional investments of hundreds of millions of dollars.

WeWork had a number of internal problems that should have concerned Dunlevie and the other board members. In the spring of 2018, the board learned that a senior vice-president had prepared a lawsuit accusing a colleague of giving her a date-rape drug. She also alleged that executives often referred to female co-workers with such epithets as "bitch," "slut," and "whore." (The senior vice-president received a settlement, and the suit was not filed; Dunlevie told me that he has no recollection of the complaint.) There were reports, too, of top executives using cocaine at events, dating subordinates, and sending texts like "I think I should sleep with a WeWork employee." Some board members knew that Neumann used drugs, that he had once punched his personal trainer during a workout session in his office, and that—as the journalist Reeves Wiedeman details in his new book, "[Billion Dollar Loser](#)"—a raucous party in Neumann's office had ended with a glass wall shattered by a tequila bottle.

The board had also allowed Neumann, a passionate surfer, to take thirteen million dollars in WeWork funds and invest them in a company that made artificial-wave pools, even though surfing had nothing to do with WeWork's business. Neumann spent millions more to finance an idea from Laird Hamilton, a professional surfer, to manufacture "performance mushrooms." The board knew that WeWork had spent sixty million dollars on a corporate jet, which Neumann and his family took to various surf spots. It had stood by as WeWork's name was changed to the We Company; not long afterward, the company paid Neumann \$5.9 million in stock, because he had trademarked the word "We." (The payment was later returned.) The board had approved stock sales and loans to Neumann worth seven hundred

million dollars, not to mention loans worth millions more to other executives and to a board member. When Neumann's wife, Rebekah, abruptly declared that the company should go meat-free, board members remained silent. The sudden prohibition, which occurred while Rebekah and Adam were travelling in Israel, caused internal chaos at WeWork, as employees began debating whether they could order cold-cut sandwiches anymore or needed to throw out tenants' leather furniture. (Neumann, who ate lamb for dinner after the command went out, eventually moderated the vegetarian decree.)



Cartoon by Edward Steed

A former high-ranking WeWork executive told me that, by 2018, “our job had basically become to make sure Adam didn’t do anything really stupid or really illegal—the board knew Adam was the key to raising money, and, as long as their valuations kept going up, they weren’t going to risk upsetting him.” The company continued to grow rapidly; it would soon be opening a new location nearly every day, and adding hundreds of new employees each month, many of whom were paid partly in stock—making those workers, in effect, a new venture-capital class for the firm.

However, as reports of WeWork’s oddities began appearing in the media, board members who once had been willing to publicly defend Neumann started declining interview requests. In early 2019, when the *Wall Street Journal* was poised to [report](#) that Neumann had been personally buying buildings and then leasing them to WeWork—a form of self-dealing that would have been grounds for censure at almost any other firm—company executives pleaded with board members to defend Neumann in the press. All of them refused. “They were embarrassed,” a WeWork executive recalled. “They were a Vichy board, and there was obviously this tension between, like, upholding good corporate governance and frankly just saying, ‘I don’t give a fuck, because my investment is getting better every day, and so it doesn’t really matter what Adam does as long as I can get my money out at some point.’ ”

Although Neumann had been given voting control, the board of directors still had numerous ways to curb his behavior. It could have established committees to review his actions, or tried to veto his outlandish acquisitions, or, at a minimum, formally declared its concerns and requested frequent updates. Board members could have stepped in when Neumann kept borrowing money against his WeWork stock. Instead, they approved nearly every proposal that Neumann formally submitted to the board. Another former high-ranking WeWork executive, who regularly participated in board meetings, told me, “If you review the minutes of our board meetings, you would see that never has there been a board vote that wasn’t unanimous. There was never a budget plan, or a growth plan, that wasn’t approved unanimously. If board members had concerns, they never once officially said them.” (Dunlevie told me that directors expressed disagreement with Neumann behind closed doors, and sometimes privately urged him to change course.)

By early 2019, Neumann had started missing board meetings. The other directors didn't chide him for his truancy. "You don't want to get a reputation as being founder-unfriendly," a professional investor told me. "That's the kiss of death." Many of the venture capitalists believed that they could afford to stay quiet for the time being, because the plan was for WeWork to go public; once an I.P.O. happened, shareholders and regulators from the Securities and Exchange Commission would surely exert discipline on Neumann. The board members, meanwhile, could sell their shares, pocket hundreds of millions of dollars, and be done with the company altogether.

By the summer of 2019, WeWork had five hundred and twenty-eight locations, in twenty-nine countries. The company had raised \$12.8 billion but was losing two hundred and nineteen thousand dollars an hour. The normal process of planning an I.P.O. begins by hiring investment bankers, consultants, pension-fund liaisons, and the like to, in the parlance of Wall Street, "put lipstick on the pig"—make the company look as promising as possible. Wall Street's major banks had been wooing Neumann for years, in the hope of overseeing the I.P.O. (One banker told me that WeWork's I.P.O. was likely worth at least fifty million dollars in fees.) JPMorgan Chase, as part of its charm offensive, had loaned Neumann more than ninety-five million dollars, some of it to help finance the purchase of five mansions.

Traditionally, a board of directors is deeply involved in the I.P.O. process. But at WeWork the board declined to participate much. "There was a general sense that the bankers ought to be in charge, that they'd bring some discipline to the process," one person close to the board said. "But, it turned out, all the bankers saw was a big payday, and so they told Adam whatever he wanted to hear."

Representatives of Morgan Stanley had informed Neumann that they believed WeWork could go public at a valuation of a hundred and four billion dollars, making it worth more than American Express. Bankers from Goldman Sachs were more modest in their valuation—ninety-six billion—but in their presentation to Neumann they compared him to Mother Theresa, Steve Jobs, and Lin-Manuel Miranda, and lauded the "WeWork Effect" for allowing people to "live a true life," combat loneliness, and avoid deathbed regrets.

At the core of an I.P.O. is an S-1—a document, approved by a board of directors, that lays out a company’s financial details to the S.E.C. and to the public. Throughout the spring and summer of 2019, Neumann, in between surfing sessions and a multi-week birthday party in the Maldives, collaborated with WeWork executives and investment bankers to write up the S-1. Soon, Neumann began adding clauses. “Adam controls a majority of the Company’s voting power,” the S-1 said. It further specified that, after the I.P.O., Neumann would be given unambiguous authority to fire or overrule any director or employee, and he’d receive additional stock worth as much as \$1.8 billion. Neumann also inserted a provision that, “in the event that Adam is permanently disabled or deceased,” his wife would approve his successor as chief executive. (At one point, Rebekah Neumann demanded that the S-1 contain a provision committing WeWork to saving the world’s mammals and oceans, but agreed to withdraw her request after executives placated her by spending thousands of dollars to adorn the document with nature photographs.) Most S-1s are dry recitations of financial details. Neumann adopted a more poetic tone. “Adam is a unique leader who has proven he can simultaneously wear the hats of visionary, operator and innovator, while thriving as a community and culture creator,” the document read. “Our mission is to elevate the world’s consciousness.”

As summer ended in 2019, the S-1 was approved by the company’s board of directors and by the underwriting committees at JPMorgan Chase, Goldman Sachs, Bank of America, Citigroup, and Barclays. “We had the biggest leaders in finance telling us this was the most amazing S-1 they had ever seen,” Miguel McKelvey, the WeWork co-founder, told me. The S-1 was blessed by hundreds of lawyers, accountants, consultants, communications professionals, and other people advising WeWork, all of whom stood to earn millions of dollars when the I.P.O. went through. Bruce Dunlevie signed off, too.

Many WeWork executives suspected that the S-1 might cause problems when it became public, but they didn’t say anything, because “there was this massive pot of gold just over the horizon,” one former executive told me. “Basically, we chose willful ignorance and greed over admitting this was obviously batshit crazy.

“And you know what? If it *had* worked, and we *had* gotten rich, then everyone in tech and Wall Street would be saying that Adam was a genius right now, and that WeWork is an example of how American capitalism is supposed to work.”

When venture capitalists join a company’s board of directors, they take on a legal duty to protect all shareholders equally, and they must pledge not to prioritize their own gains over the profits of anyone else. This obligation is critical, because directors have ultimate authority over a company’s actions, and they essentially serve as stewards for everyone who hasn’t been invited into the boardroom. Directors are compelled by law to speak up if they see something that might damage the smallest shareholders, even if staying silent might be financially advantageous to them.

Proving that a director has violated this legal obligation is complicated, but among publicly traded corporations the standard is vigorously enforced. Indeed, whenever anything bad happens at a publicly traded firm—a data breach, a chemical spill, a #MeToo complaint—dozens of lawyers tend to file lawsuits on behalf of minority shareholders, claiming that the board of directors knew, or should have known, about the issue and ought to have intervened. (Often, these lawsuits work out better for the lawyers, who collect multimillion-dollar fees, than for the jilted shareholders.)

Among privately held companies—where boards of directors typically consist of the company’s founder, venture capitalists, and some of the founder’s friends—such lawsuits are much less common. “It’s a clubby industry,” Steve Kraus, of Bessemer Venture Partners, said. “You need other V.C.s to like you, because they refer you into deals. If you get a reputation as a complainer, it can really hurt your business.”

As the venture-capital industry has become specialized and concentrated—last year, the ten largest firms raised sixteen billion dollars, nearly a third of all new V.C. fund-raising—it has become even more cliquish. Today, most major V.C. deals are “syndicated,” or divvied up, among the big firms. This cartel-like atmosphere has encouraged V.C.s to remain silent when confronted with unethical behavior. Kraus, who has been critical of the industry’s myopia, told me, “If you’re on a board that empowered some wacky founder, or you didn’t pay attention to governance—or something

happened that, in retrospect, sort of skirted the law, like at [Uber](#)—you’re fine, as long as you post decent returns.” He added, “You’re remembered for your winners, not your losers. In ten years, no one is going to remember all the bad stuff at WeWork. All they’ll remember is who made money.”

Politicians have generally been reluctant to criticize the venture-capital industry, in part because it has successfully portrayed itself as crucial to innovation. Martin Kenney, the professor at the University of California, Davis, said, “[Obama](#) loved Silicon Valley and V.C.s, and [Trump](#) craved their approval.” He went on, “Regulators have been totally defanged from doing real investigations of venture-capital firms. I think people are finally waking up to the damage the tech industry and V.C.s can do, but it’s slow going.” Senator [Elizabeth Warren](#) has proposed reforms that would make it easier for shareholders to sue directors who fail to report unethical behavior. Other Democrats have proposed laws that would force venture capitalists to pay higher taxes. President-elect [Joe Biden](#) supports greater protections for stockholding employees. While campaigning in Pennsylvania, he promised, “I’ll be laser-focussed on working families, the middle-class families I came from here in Scranton, not the wealthy investor class—they don’t need me.”

Even as many Silicon Valley founders, from Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg to Uber’s Travis Kalanick, have become public villains, the venture capitalists who have funded and enabled them have escaped scrutiny. Steve Blank, the Stanford professor, said, “The first time you see a venture capitalist prosecuted for failing to uphold their duty as a board member, you’re going to see Silicon Valley transform overnight. All it takes is one V.C. doing a perp walk and everyone gets the message—you’re responsible, you have a legal duty, and if you do things that are bad for society you’ll be called to account.”

Such a reckoning might be a ways off yet. There have been thousands of articles written about WeWork, but none of the company’s board members have spoken openly about their experiences with the firm. They have not explained why they never tried to restrict or censure Neumann, nor have they offered many criticisms of their colleagues. All the company’s board members during Neumann’s tenure were contacted for this story. None agreed to speak except Dunlevie (who consented to an interview only after receiving fact-checking inquiries).

On a range of other topics, venture capitalists are not shy. They pontificate on Twitter, dispense wisdom via podcasts, publish books about “the hard thing about hard things,” and otherwise foist their insights on the world. Yet there have been few public accountings by V.C.s of how Uber, or Theranos, or any number of other tech companies went awry. Instances of venture capitalists calling out one another are rare. One of Dunlevie’s partners at Benchmark, Bill Gurley, served on the board of Uber for six years. Eventually, after the *Times* and other publications spent months reporting serious ethical lapses at the company, Benchmark initiated a lawsuit with the aim of ridding the board of Kalanick, the company’s founder and former chief executive. Kalanick ultimately left the board after the lawsuit was dropped—but since then some members of Benchmark have become regretful that the dispute was so public. “All we got was a shitload of flak from within the industry for doing it,” one of Gurley’s colleagues told me. “Lesson learned. That’s what you get for trying to do what’s quote-unquote ‘the right thing.’ ”

WeWork’s S-1 was formally released to the public on August 14, 2019. It opened with a dedication “to the energy of We” and closed, three hundred and fifty pages later, with photographs of a tropical forest that Adam and Rebekah Neumann had promised to protect. There was a memorable centerfold: a photograph of Neumann with his arms outstretched like Jesus, amid a blizzard of confetti. “Adam and Rebekah felt like they had finally shared their vision,” a former executive told me. “The S-1 was their masterpiece.”

Stock analysts, journalists, and investors were not impressed. A widely read summary by a Harvard Business School professor, Nori Gerardo Lietz, noted that the document exposed WeWork’s “byzantine corporate structure, the continuing projected losses, the plethora of conflicts, the complete absence of any substantive corporate governance, and the uncommon ‘New Age’ parlance.” At the same time, she wrote, the S-1 failed to provide many conventional financial details. Gerardo Lietz later told me she felt that the S-1 was “misleading, and probably fraudulent.” Other observers argued that the S-1 laid bare a basic truth: WeWork’s dominant position in the co-working industry wasn’t a result of operational prowess or a superior product. Instead, WeWork had beaten its rivals because it had access to a near-limitless supply of funds, much of which it had squandered on

expensive furniture, flamboyant perks, and promotions luring customers with below-market rents.



"We were having a discussion, and I wasn't even angry, then he said, 'Take it easy, Janine.' Next thing I knew, he's begging me to take his hand out of the panini press."

The only opinions that truly mattered, however, were those of decision-makers at such investment houses as Goldman Sachs and BlackRock, which typically order huge blocks of stock before an I.P.O. Neumann had set up dozens of meetings with these potentates. Under normal circumstances, such meetings unfold with a C.E.O. speaking for about ten minutes and then taking investors' questions. At Neumann's meetings, he spoke and spoke and spoke. "No one else could get a word in," one attendee recalled. Afterward, Neumann often called participants—without lawyers or compliance officials on the line—and lobbied them further. "That's risking S.E.C. violations," the attendee said. Jamie Dimon, of JPMorgan Chase, called Neumann and warned him to stop. "These are personal friends of mine," Neumann told Dimon. "Why shouldn't I call my friends and tell them what I think?"

Investors began admitting to WeWork's bankers that the S-1 did not inspire confidence. WeWork amended the document's language, promising to reduce Neumann's control and lower the price investors would pay. The moves didn't allay concerns. Two days before WeWork was set to officially launch its "roadshow"—the public kickoff of the I.P.O. process—Neumann went to the company's headquarters to film a short video. He spent six hours flubbing lines and arguing over the script, and around midnight started serving tequila shots. A group of bankers, working in one of WeWork's conference rooms, telephoned their bosses—who were already concerned about WeWork, because they'd heard that a forthcoming [Wall Street Journal article](#) would reveal that Neumann had smoked marijuana on a private jet during a flight to Israel, and had hidden more of the drug in a cereal box, for the return trip. The article also said that Neumann had told people he planned to become the Prime Minister of Israel, or possibly the "president of the world," as well as the first trillionaire. "This whole company was built around Adam," a high-ranking WeWork executive told me. "And now we have a situation where people are saying, 'This guy seems crazy,' and the bankers are saying he's stoned."

The board called an emergency meeting and decided to delay the I.P.O. Even then, no one was willing to confront Neumann. Almost a week went by, with daily newspaper headlines detailing the tumult inside WeWork, but each time Neumann contacted a board member he was assured of the member's

support. Finally, about a dozen bankers and WeWork executives reached a breaking point. (“It was like babysitting a pyromaniac,” one executive told me.) They contacted WeWork’s board and demanded that it acknowledge that Neumann had become a liability. The I.P.O. would have to be cancelled: the company could not go public as long as Neumann remained chief executive. He had become an obstacle to everyone’s ability to cash out.

Once the venture capitalists realized that their profits were at risk, they acted. Dimon called Neumann and, according to someone who observed the conversation, said, “The best thing for the company is if you step down. If you do, we’ll make sure to take care of you.” Not long afterward, at a dinner with Neumann, Dunlevie delivered an even starker message. With the I.P.O. in doubt, Dunlevie warned, all of Neumann’s loans that were backed by his WeWork stock could be called in, ruining him. Dunlevie told Neumann that he had killed the company, and that, if he didn’t step down, he would go bankrupt. Dunlevie also told Neumann that he was toxic, and threatened to break his arm if he didn’t resign.

A few days later, on September 24th, Neumann stepped down as chief executive. His e-mail account was closed, his key cards deactivated. Two senior WeWork executives were named interim C.E.O.s; within days, they had fired dozens of Neumann’s confidants. Soon, more than twenty-four hundred additional employees—from mid-level accountants to minimum-wage workers—were laid off. “The board let Adam get away with terrorizing employees and wasting billions, and didn’t really care,” a former WeWork executive said. “But, once he threatened their personal payouts, they cut his throat.”

At this point, the board could have assumed strong oversight of the company and started the hard work of rebuilding. Instead, the directors cut a deal with Masayoshi Son, of SoftBank. The directors agreed to essentially give WeWork to Son, if he promised to loan the company money and spend three billion dollars to buy out Neumann, the V.C.s, and other investors. Benchmark would pocket roughly three hundred million dollars. Neumann would get about seven hundred and twenty-five million. The proposal passed unanimously. A person close to Dunlevie and Benchmark told me that, all things considered, the firm’s investment turned out O.K.: “I don’t know if ‘happy’ is the right word, because obviously I think there was a lot of hope

that it could be worth a lot more. But it's been a fine investment on a cash-on-cash basis."

WeWork's employees, along with many other minority investors, were not fine. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, for more than ninety per cent of the company's current and former employees the deal effectively made worthless any stock or stock options that they held. "The employees got screwed," a top WeWork executive told me. Other investors who had bought into WeWork at the height of its valuation—including mutual-fund companies that invest on behalf of retirement plans—lost hundreds of millions of dollars.

Neumann believes that he, too, is a victim. After his ouster, he told someone, "What's really painful is, I made so many good decisions." The venture capitalists, he complained, had made out well: "Everyone, at this point, has made, what, twenty, thirty, forty times their money?" He conceded that thousands of WeWork employees had lost their jobs, that billions of dollars had been spent recklessly, and that there were landlords and tenants across the world who had no idea if their leases would be honored. But he also deserved sympathy. "I feel hurt," Neumann said.

When the coronavirus spread across the globe, WeWork's business model—shoulder-to-shoulder desks, shared conference rooms, office-wide happy hours—became untenable. Although nearly all of WeWork's locations remain open, many resemble ghost towns. Since the beginning of the year, the company has laid off thousands more employees.

Nevertheless, the pandemic has created opportunities for some of WeWork's venture capitalists. In April, Masayoshi Son and SoftBank indicated that they would continue controlling WeWork but, on second thought, would not be paying three billion dollars to Neumann, Dunlevie, and other investors and stakeholders. In response, a special committee of the WeWork board, guided by Dunlevie, prepared a lawsuit against SoftBank, and Neumann filed a suit of his own. Dunlevie's committee released a statement accusing SoftBank of being "completely unethical." (A SoftBank spokesperson said, "SoftBank denies all of the Special Committee's allegations. SoftBank has honored its agreement.") The litigation is expected to last for years. Neumann and many of the V.C.s have already collected hundreds of millions

of dollars, by off-loading stock to other investors. Benchmark alone has received a return of more than a thousand per cent on its investment. But Benchmark is committed to fighting for more.

WeWork has said that it expects to achieve profitability by 2021, and analysts think that it's possible the firm may become a long-term financial success. (The company, which is now led by Sandeep Mathrani, a veteran real-estate executive, declined to comment for this article.) In many ways, however, the company remains an organizational mess: among other things, one faction of the board of directors is, in essence, suing another faction. If WeWork succeeds, it will likely depend on the same factors that propelled its prior growth: the firm still has a giant reservoir of V.C. funding, which has allowed it to continue undercutting its rivals on price. It is almost guaranteed to be the largest co-working company when America eventually reopens, if for no other reason than that all other co-working firms have less of a cushion.

The drama at WeWork, venture capitalists say, has given the co-working industry an unsavory tinge. Steve Kraus noted, “When Theranos blew up, it destroyed the blood-testing-startup scene. Any company in that space trying to raise money for a good idea—it’s basically impossible.” WeWork’s implosion was different—the company was undone by incompetence rather than by fraud—but the debacle has similarly scared investors away from other co-working entrepreneurs. The messiness has even spread to other industries. In early March, the trucking startup Nikola was forced to sell itself to a competitor because, it said, the WeWork debacle had turned off potential investors. “There are probably a dozen or two really awesome entrepreneurs, and every one of them said the capital just became incredibly difficult after WeWork,” the company’s president told a freight-industry publication. “WeWork really ruined a lot of things.”

For decades, venture capitalists have succeeded in defining themselves as judicious meritocrats who direct money to those who will use it best. But examples like WeWork make it harder to believe that V.C.s help balance greedy impulses with enlightened innovation. Rather, V.C.s seem to embody the cynical shape of modern capitalism, which too often rewards crafty middlemen and bombastic charlatans rather than hardworking employees and creative businesspeople. Jeremy Neuner, the NextSpace co-founder,

said, “You can’t blame Adam Neumann for being Adam Neumann. It was clear to everyone he was selling something too good to be true. He never pretended to be sensible, or down to earth, or anything besides a crazy optimist. But you *can* blame the venture capitalists.” Neuner went on, “When you get involved in the startup world, you meet all these amazing entrepreneurs with fantastic ideas, and, over time, you watch them get pushed by V.C.s to take too much money, and make bad choices, and grow as fast as possible. And then they blow up. And, eventually, you start to realize: no matter what happens, the V.C.s still end up rich.” ♦

On Television

- The Sensuality and Brutality of Steve McQueen's "Small Axe"

The Sensuality and Brutality of Steve McQueen's "Small Axe"

In his new film series, the director wants to vanquish any idea that British racism is somehow more repressed and less violent than the American kind.

By [Doreen St. Félix](#)

November 23, 2020



One way to measure a filmmaker's commitment to his subject is to look at the not so minor details, such as costumes, wigs, and food. If the paraphernalia of a people doesn't feel forged but, rather, appears to have been lifted unmolested from observation or memory, or both, then the effect is immersion—the melding of reality with the world of the screen. Black folks haven't often felt that rush. Looking to support the film industry, over the past century we have excused everything from minstrelsy to bad drag. So when a story comes along that wants not to extract from you but to support you, you take notice. In "Small Axe," a collection of five films by Steve McQueen about the British West Indian experience, three of which are reviewed in this column, a kind of revolutionary attention is paid to the physical world of the characters. Across the interrelated films, recurring sequences—head-wrapped women fussing over a bubbling vat of sunshine-yellow curry goat; men haggling over cards in true patois—evince the sincerity of the project's creator, who is publicly claiming his place in a community, and who wants every aspect in the political tableau to be just so.

McQueen, who is of Trinidadian and Grenadan descent, was born in West London in 1969. His parents were members of the Windrush generation—the inaugural group of West Indians to settle in Britain in the mid-century. McQueen's films have grappled with the struggles of other nations: the 1981 Irish hunger strike, in "Hunger," and the story of a free African-American man who, in 1841, was kidnapped and sold into bondage, in "12 Years a Slave." It took McQueen a while to address home. Why? In a recent interview with the *Times*, he explained, "Sometimes, you've got to have a certain maturity, and I wouldn't have had that ten, fifteen years ago." Maturity, here, could mean the spirit of vulnerability and plain-spokenness that we feel in the anthology, which is McQueen's small-screen début. (In 2014, I worked as a Haitian-Creole-language consultant on his unaired pilot for a scrapped HBO show, "Codes of Conduct.") The films are neither condescending nor shy about being educations. The title comes from a proverb, popularized by a Bob Marley song, in which it is sung with portent in the throat: "If you are the big tree, we are the small axe, ready to cut you down."

The collection opens with "Mangrove," a feature-length film based on the Mangrove Nine, Black Londoners who, in 1971, following a protest, were put on trial for incitement to riot and affray. The trial was the government's

first, albeit reluctant, admission of racism in the British police force. When the film premiered in the U.K., in mid-November, many young Black British people expressed anger that they had not encountered the history in school. That “Small Axe” airs on the BBC, then, is a kind of populist restitution. (In the U.S., the series is available on Amazon Prime.)

Some of the Mangrove Nine were British Black Panthers. Frank Crichlow, the owner of the Mangrove Restaurant, a Trinidadian spot in Notting Hill, was not. He is the emotional center of McQueen’s film. (Shaun Parkes expertly shoulders the role.) Crichlow seems largely uninterested in politics, but everywhere politics is happening to him. Before Notting Hill was gentrified, it was the hub of the West Indian diaspora in London. The opening shot, of Crichlow strolling through the streets, places him amid construction sites, a sign of the upheaval to come. When he reaches a lime-green restaurant with a “Black Ownership” placard in the window, the viewer understands that she is about to enter a protected place. Crichlow and his cook, Aunt Betty, joke around. He sends a boy, Kendrick, to the market to buy flowers for the restaurant. Kendrick worries that he will look effete. What if someone sees him? Crichlow replies, “Say *yuh* in love, go!”

Meanwhile, a political movement is beginning: a scene shows campaigners huddled at the feet of C. L. R. James, the Trinidadian theorist. Crichlow’s restaurant becomes a haven for young activists and intellectuals, who are literally inventing the British-Caribbean identity. The police see the Mangrove as the cradle of an encroachment—a dreaded reverse-colonization, in which the white British way is under threat. Officers begin raiding the place. (Crichlow tries to explain, “We only serve spicy cuisine here!”) A police assault turns Kendrick, the boy who had been bashful about flowers, the color of a bruised tulip. In one lingering shot, the camera is almost level with the kitchen floor, as it traces the chaos of brutality—a colander, knocked off its base, rocking without purchase. A raid on the home of two activists is more pointed: officers knock books off the shelves, smash the printer. McQueen wants to vanquish any idea that British racism is somehow more repressed and less violent than the American kind; he spotlights the myth of the country’s politesse in order to do some smashing of his own.

In its second hour, the film becomes a legal drama, as Crichlow and eight others go to trial after being arrested at the protest. The courtroom is a stage, and the judge has planned for the play to be a prim farce. (“Take that ridiculous hat off,” he barks at a defendant, but whose head is the one covered by a ridiculous wig?) Two defendants, Darcus Howe and Altheia Jones-LeCointe (Malachi Kirby and Letitia Wright), wrest control of the proceedings by representing, in more than the technical sense, themselves. The Mangrove Nine beat the rioting charges, but McQueen is careful not to write the conclusion as a win. As the rulings are read, the camera focusses on Crichlow, who had wanted to avoid a trial. It is not only relief that causes the tears to flow and the muscles of his face to twitch.

“Red, White and Blue” is the melancholic complement to “Mangrove.” It is also based on a true story, that of Leroy Logan (John Boyega), a British-Jamaican who, in the eighties, left his research-science job to join the Metropolitan Police. The film opens with Leroy as a boy, in his school uniform, carting a musical instrument and waiting to be picked up after class. He is approached by the police, who claim that he fits “the description” of a robber. His father, Ken (Steve Toussaint), pulls up, outraged. On the way home, he warns Leroy not to be a roughneck, to never bring the police to his yard. We think that we are watching the beginning of a familiar tragedy, in which the light of a boy’s life is doused before it can begin to thrive.

That both is and isn’t what happens. It is Ken who is later beaten by the police. The assault intensifies Leroy’s desire to be part of the force—to fix the institution’s relationship with the Black community from the inside. There is a roteness to the depiction of Leroy’s initiation; the swing of a locker door, to reveal the message “dirty nigger,” in graffiti, is merely affecting. He should have expected this treatment from his colleagues. The film is best when it explores why he did not.

In their scenes together, Toussaint and Boyega are often metres away, representing the distance between the immigrant and the subsequent generation. Their relationship speaks to the paradoxes of West Indian child rearing. Ken drilled down on the importance of exceptionalism; is it a surprise that his son is fixated on taming Blackness? “You wanted us more British than the British!” Leroy yells at his father.

The soundtrack vitalizes “Small Axe.” Reggae classics do not overlay these dramas but, rather, melt into them. McQueen’s cast are dancers, too. The film “Lovers Rock,” named for the romantic subgenre of reggae that flourished in seventies-era London, borrows from music-video aesthetics, raising them to the divine. In the piece, which is set during a fictionalized houseparty, the camera loiters on pairs of lovers discovering each other’s waists while they dance, lost in the rapture of a slow wine. Young men take out their frustration with the state on the baseboards, stomping and curling and flailing to “Kunta Kinte” by the Revolutionaries. The film is an anomaly: a plotless fresco, tracking a party into the morning. But it moved me more than anything else in the collection. You can’t help but experience a somatic response to the surfeit of beauty and omen and ecstasy in McQueen’s living painting.

The film’s climax is timed to the high-note climax of Janet Kay’s track “Silly Games.” Mind you, there *is* danger in the story—racist and sexual threats abound. But McQueen doesn’t pathologize or dwell on these bursts of ugliness; he lets them pass over us like waves, as they might in life. For much of “Small Axe,” the viewer is a student, processing the post-colonial horrors that were wreaked on Black Londoners. “Lovers Rock,” though, gives viewers an opportunity to feel abandon. This is the Caribbean way of doing things. The revolutions were set to drums. ♦

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The Art of Building the Impossible

The carpenter behind some of New York's most elaborate—and expensive—homes.

By [Burkhard Bilger](#)

November 23, 2020



Mark Ellison stood on the raw plywood floor, staring up into the gutted nineteenth-century town house. Above him, joists, beams, and electrical conduits crisscrossed in the half-light like a demented spider's web. He still wasn't sure how to build this thing. According to the architect's plans, this room was to be the master bath—a cocoon of curving plaster shimmering with pinprick lights. But the ceiling made no sense. One half of it was a barrel vault, like the inside of a Roman basilica; the other half was a groin vault, like the nave of a cathedral. On paper, the rounded curves of one vault flowed smoothly into the elliptical curves of the other. But getting them to do so in three dimensions was a nightmare. "I showed the drawings to the bass player in my band," Ellison said. "He's a physicist, so I asked him, 'Could you do the calculus for this?' He said, 'No.' "

Straight lines are easy, curves are hard. Most houses are just collections of boxes, Ellison says. We stack them side by side or on top of one another, like toddlers playing with blocks. Add a triangular roof and it's done. When buildings were still made by hand, the process would yield the occasional curve—igloos, mud huts, wigwams, yurts—and master builders earned their keep with arches and domes. But flat shapes are cheaper to mass-produce, and every sawmill and factory spits them out in uniform sizes: bricks, boards, drywall, tile. It's the tyranny of the orthogonal, Ellison says.

"I can't do the calculus on this, either," he added, shrugging. "But I can build it." Ellison is a carpenter—the best carpenter in New York, by some accounts, though that hardly covers it. Depending on the job, Ellison is also a welder, a sculptor, a contractor, a cabinetmaker, an inventor, and an industrial designer. He's a carpenter the way Filippo Brunelleschi, the architect of the great dome of the Florence Cathedral, was an engineer. He's a man who gets hired to build impossible things.

A floor below us, workers were shouldering sheets of plywood up a set of temporary stairs, sidestepping the half-finished tilework in the entryway. Ducts and wires were going in here on the third floor, snaking under joists and along floorboards, while sections of a staircase were hoisted through a window on the fourth. A team of metalworkers was welding them into place, sending foot-long sparks into the air. On the fifth floor, under the soaring ceiling of a skylit studio, some exposed steel beams were getting a coat of paint, while carpenters built a bulkhead on the roof and stoneworkers

scuttled by on scaffolds outside, restoring the brick-and-brownstone façade. It was the ordinary chaos of a construction site. What seemed haphazard was in fact an intricate choreography of skilled workers and parts, scheduled months in advance and now brought together in a preordained sequence. What looked like butchery was reconstructive surgery, the building's bones and organs and circulatory system splayed open like a patient on an operating table. It's always a mess before the drywall goes up, Ellison said. In a couple of months, I wouldn't recognize it.

He walked out into the middle of the hall and stood there like a boulder in rapids, directing the flow without moving. Ellison is fifty-eight and has been working as a carpenter for almost forty years. He is a big man with heavy, sloped shoulders. He has thick wrists and meaty paws, a bald head and fleshy lips that protrude over a ragged beard. There is a bone-deep competence about him that reads as solidity: he seems built of denser stuff than other people. With his gruff voice and wide-set, watchful eyes, he can seem like a character out of Tolkien or Wagner: the clever Nibelung, fabricator of treasures. He loves machines and fire and precious metals. He loves wood and brass and stone. He bought a cement mixer and was obsessed with it for two years—couldn't stop using it. What draws him to a project, he says, is the potential for magic, the unexpected thing. The glimmer of gems that veins the mundane.



"Do you want the check all for one or one for all?"

Cartoon by Brendan Loper

“Nobody ever hires me to do a conventional building,” he said. “Billionaires don’t want the same old thing. They want better than the last. They want something that no one has done before, that’s specific to their apartment, and that might even be ill-advised.” Sometimes this gives rise to wonders; more often it doesn’t. Ellison has worked on homes for David Bowie, Woody Allen, Robin Williams, and dozens of others he’s not allowed to name. His least expensive projects cost around five million dollars, but others can swell to fifty million or more. “If they want Downton Abbey, I can give them Downton Abbey,” he said. “If they want a Roman bath, I’ll build that. I’ve done some hideous places—I mean, disturbingly hideous. But I don’t have a pony in the race. If they want Studio 54, I’ll build that. But it’ll be the best Studio 54 they’ve ever seen—and it’ll have some extra Studio 56 thrown in.”

High-end New York real estate exists in its own microcosm, reliant on strange, nonlinear math. It’s as divorced from ordinary constraints as the needle towers that have risen to contain it. Even in the depths of the financial crisis, in 2008, the ultra-rich kept on building. They bought properties at cut-rate prices and turned them into luxury rentals. Or let them stand empty, assuming the market would recover. Or acquired them from China or Saudi Arabia, sight unseen, thinking the city was still a safe place to park a few million. Or just ignored the economy altogether, believing it could do them no harm. In the early months of the pandemic, there was much talk of wealthy New Yorkers fleeing the city. The market was down over all, but by fall the luxury market was rebounding: one firm sold twenty homes for more than four million dollars in the last week of September alone. “Nothing about what we do is sensible,” Ellison said. “No one does what we do to an apartment for value or resale. No one needs it. They just want it.”

New York may be the hardest place in the world to do construction. There’s too little room to build anything and too much money with which to build it, and the combined pressure, like an architectural geyser, sends glass towers, Gothic skyscrapers, Egyptian temples, and Bauhaus slabs rocketing into the air. If anything, their interiors are even more exotic—strange crystals formed when the pressure is turned inward. Ride a private elevator up a Park Avenue residence and the doors could open onto a French Country parlor or an

English hunting lodge, a minimalist loft or a Byzantine library, its ceiling crowded with saints and martyrs. No logic leads from one space to the next. No zoning law or building tradition connects the rajah's palace on twelve to the Shinto shrine on twenty-four. Their owners just like the way they look.

"I couldn't be employed in most cities in America," Ellison told me. "This job doesn't exist there. It's too idiosyncratic." New York has its share of cookie-cutter apartments and high-rises, but even those may be lodged in landmark buildings or wedged into odd-shaped lots, set wobbling on sandbox foundations or perched on stilts a quarter mile high. After four centuries of building and razing, almost every block is a crazy quilt of structures and styles, and every era has its problems. Colonial houses are handsome but frail. Their wood wasn't kiln-dried, so any original boards will be warped, rotten, or split. Town houses from the eighteen-hundreds are good for their shells and not much else. Their walls may be one brick thick, the mortar washed out by rain. Prewar buildings can be nearly bombproof, but their cast-iron sewers are full of corrosion, their brass plumbing brittle and cracked. "If you build in Kansas, you don't have to give a shit about any of this," Ellison says.

A mid-century building may be the most reliable, but watch out for those built after 1970. Construction was a free-for-all in the eighties. The crews and work sites were often run by the Mafia. "If you wanted to pass your job inspection, a guy would call from a pay phone and you'd walk down with an envelope of two hundred and fifty dollars," Ellison recalls. New buildings can be just as bad. In the luxury apartment house in Gramercy Park where Karl Lagerfeld owned a unit, the façade leaked so badly that some of the floors rippled like potato chips. But the very worst, in Ellison's experience, was Trump Tower. In an apartment he renovated there, the windows howled and had no weather stripping, and the electrical circuits seemed patched together with extension-cord wire. The floors were so out of level, he told me, you could drop a marble and watch it roll.

Learning the flaws and foibles of every era is a lifetime's work. There's no doctoral degree in high-end construction. No Cordon Bleu for carpenters. It's the closest thing in America to a medieval guild, with a long and haphazard apprenticeship. It takes fifteen years to become a good carpenter, Ellison estimates, and another fifteen to do the style of project he does. "Most

people just aren't up for it. It's too weird and hard," he says. Even demolition can be a refined skill in New York. In most cities, a crew can just whale away with crowbars and sledgehammers and toss the debris into dumpsters. But in buildings filled with wealthy, finicky owners, the crews have to work with surgical stealth. Any dirt or noise could prompt a call to City Hall, and a single busted water pipe could ruin a Degas. So the walls have to be carefully dismantled, the pieces packed into rolling containers or fifty-five-gallon drums, sprayed down to settle the dust, and sealed in plastic. Just gutting an apartment can cost a third of a million dollars.

A lot of co-ops and luxury condominiums insist on "summer rules." They allow construction only between Memorial Day and Labor Day, when owners are off in Tuscany or the Hamptons. This ratchets up the already enormous logistical challenges. There's no driveway, back yard, or empty lot to leave materials. The sidewalk is narrow, the stairwell dim and cramped, the elevator a tight squeeze for three people. It's like building a ship in a bottle. When the truck arrives with a load of drywall, it gets stuck behind a moving van. Soon traffic is backed up, horns blaring, and the police are handing out tickets. Then the neighbor files a complaint and the site gets shut down. Even if the permits are in order, the building codes are a labyrinth of shifting passages. Two buildings explode in East Harlem, begetting stricter gas inspections. A parapet crumbles at Columbia and kills a student, triggering new façade standards. A small boy falls from the fifty-third floor and henceforth windows in all apartments with children may open no more than four and a half inches. "There's an old saying that building code is written in blood," Ellison told me. "It's also written in annoying letters." When Cindy Crawford threw one too many parties a few years ago, new noise covenants were born.

And all this time, as crews navigate the city's pop-up obstacles and the end of summer hurries near, the owners are revising their plans, piling on complexities. Last year, Ellison completed a three-year, forty-two-million-dollar renovation of a penthouse on Seventy-second Street. The apartment had six floors and twenty thousand square feet. Before he was done, he had to design and build more than fifty custom furnishings and mechanical devices for it—from a retractable television above an outdoor fireplace to an origami-like childproof gate. A commercial firm might have taken years to develop and test each piece. Ellison had a few weeks. "We don't have time

to prototype,” he says. “These people are desperate to get into the place. So I get one chance. We build the prototype and then they live in it.”

Ellison and his partner, Adam Marelli, were sitting at a makeshift plywood table at the town house, going over the day’s schedule. Ellison usually works as an independent contractor, hired to build specific parts of a project. But he and Marelli have lately teamed up to manage entire renovations. Ellison was in charge of this building’s structures and finishes—the walls, stairs, cabinets, tiles, and woodwork—while Marelli oversaw its inner workings: the plumbing, electricity, sprinklers, and ventilation. Marelli, who is forty, trained as a fine artist at N.Y.U. He divides his time among painting, construction, photography, and surfing the breaks in Lavallette, New Jersey. With his longish brown curls and slender-hipped downtown style, he can seem an odd match for Ellison and his crew—a whippet among pit bulls. But he shares Ellison’s obsession with craft. As they worked, their talk pinged amiably between blueprints and elevations, the Napoleonic Code and the stepwells of Rajasthan, with side discussions of Japanese temples and Greek vernacular architecture. “It’s all about ellipses and irrational numbers,” Ellison said. “It’s the language of music and art. It’s like life: nothing ever works out on its own.”



Ellison in his workshop in Newburgh, where the tools are simple and multipurpose. What he loves about carpentry is how it gives free rein to the body's physical intelligence. Photograph by Dean Kaufman for *The New Yorker*

This was their first week back at the site in three months. The last time I saw Ellison, in late February, when he was wrestling with the bathroom ceiling, he hoped to finish the job by summer. Then everything crashed to a halt. When the pandemic began, New York had forty thousand active construction sites—almost twice the number of restaurants in the city. At first, the sites were kept open as essential businesses. On some projects with confirmed *COVID* cases, the crews had no choice but to come to work and ride packed elevators up twenty floors or more. It was only in late March, after protests by workers, that close to ninety per cent of the job sites were finally shut down. Even indoors, you could sense the absence, like the sudden lack of traffic noise. The sound of buildings going up is the city's ostinato—its thrumming, hammering heartbeat. Now it was dead silent.

Ellison spent the spring alone in his studio in Newburgh, an hour up the Hudson. He made parts for the town house and kept tabs on his subcontractors. All told, thirty-three companies were slated to work on the project, from roofers and tilers to ironmongers and concrete fabricators. He had no idea how many would return from quarantine. Renovation jobs tend to lag two years behind the economy. The owner gets a Christmas bonus, hires an architect and a contractor, then waits around for drawings to be done, permits to be issued, and crews to shake free. By the time construction starts, it's usually too late to stop. But now office buildings were emptying out across Manhattan and co-op boards were banning all new construction for the foreseeable future. “They don’t want a bunch of grubby, *Covid*-carrying workers walking around,” Ellison said.

When the city resumed construction, on June 8th, it set strict limits and protocols, backed by five-thousand-dollar fines. Workers had to take their temperatures and answer health questionnaires, wear masks and keep their distance—the state limited sites to one worker for every two hundred and fifty square feet. A site like this one, with seven thousand square feet, could have no more than twenty-eight people on the premises. Today, there were seventeen. Some of the crew were still reluctant to leave quarantine. “The cabinetmakers, custom metalworkers, and finish carpenters fall into that camp,” Ellison said. “They’re a little better off, own their businesses, have workshops in Connecticut.” The prissier trades, he called them, jokingly.

Marelli laughed: “Those with college degrees from art schools tend to be made of softer tissues.” Others had left town weeks ago. “The steel guy went back to Ecuador,” Ellison said. “He says he’s coming back in two weeks, but he’s in Guayaquil and he brought his wife with him.”

Like many crews in the city, Ellison and Marelli’s were filled with first-generation immigrants: Russian plumbers, Hungarian floorers, Guyanese electricians, Bangladeshi stone carvers. The nationalities and the trades tended to go together. When Ellison first moved to New York, in the seventies, the carpenters all seemed to be Irish. Then they went home in the boom years of the Celtic Tiger and were replaced by waves of Serbs, Albanians, Guatemalans, Hondurans, Colombians, and Ecuadoreans. You could track the world’s conflicts and collapses by the men on New York scaffolds. Some came with advanced degrees of no use to them here. Others were fleeing death squads, drug cartels, or previous disease outbreaks: cholera, Ebola, meningitis, yellow fever. “If you’re looking for a place to work when shit goes wrong, New York isn’t a terrible place to land,” Marelli said. “You’re not on bamboo scaffolding, you won’t get beat up or cheated by a criminal state, and a Hispanic guy can fold right into a Nepalese crew. If you can follow masonry marks, you can work all day.”

This spring was a frightening exception. But construction is a dangerous business in any season. Despite *OSHA* mandates and safety inspections, a thousand workers die on the job every year in the United States—more than in any other industry. They die of electrocution and exploding gas, toxic fumes and ruptured steam pipes; they get pinned by forklifts, caught in machinery, and buried in debris; they tumble from rooftops, I-beams, ladders, and cranes. Most of Ellison’s accidents have happened while biking to sites. (The first broke a wrist and two ribs; the second, a hip; the third, his jaw and two teeth.) But he has a thick scar on his left hand where he nearly sawed his hand off, and he’s seen three arms lopped off at job sites. Even Marelli, who mostly sticks to management, almost lost an eye a few years ago. He was standing near a crew that was cutting some steel studs with a chop saw when three splinters shot out and pierced his right eyeball. That was on Friday. On Saturday, he had an ophthalmologist extract the splinters and clean out the rust. By Monday, he was back at work.

One afternoon in late July, I met Ellison and Marelli on the Upper East Side, on a leafy side street around the corner from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. We were visiting an apartment that Ellison had worked on seventeen years earlier. A ten-room triplex in a town house built in 1901, it was owned by an entrepreneur and Broadway producer named James Fantaci and his wife, Anna. (They sold it in 2015 for nearly twenty million dollars.) Seen from the street, the building had a starchy, Beaux-Arts elegance, with limestone pediments and wrought-iron grillwork. But, once we were inside, its renovated lines began to soften into Art Nouveau, the walls and woodwork bending and folding around us. It was like stepping into a water lily. The door to the great room was shaped like a curling leaf, framing a swirling oval staircase behind it. Ellison had helped build both, and made sure that they matched each other curve for curve. The mantelpieces were made of solid cherry, based on models sculpted by the architect, Angela Dirks. The dining room had a glass catwalk, with nickel-plated railings and tulip-blossom finials that Ellison carved. Even the wine cellar had a vaulted pearwood ceiling. “It’s the nearest I ever got to everything being gorgeous,” Ellison said.

A century ago in Paris, building a residence like this took extraordinary skill. Today, it’s much harder. It’s not just that those craft traditions are almost gone, and with them many of the most beautiful materials—Spanish mahogany, Carpathian elm, pure white Thassos marble. It’s that the rooms themselves have been reinvented. What were once decorated boxes are now complex machines. The plaster is just a thin scrim hiding a welter of gas, electric, fibre-optic, and cable lines, smoke detectors, motion sensors, stereo systems, and security cameras, Wi-Fi routers, climate-control systems, and the transformers and housings for automated lights and sprinklers. The result is a house so complicated that it may need a full-time staff to maintain it. “I don’t think I’ve ever built a home for a client who was qualified to live there,” Ellison told me.

Home building has become the domain of the obsessive-compulsive. An apartment like this one could entail more choices than the space shuttle—from the shape and patina of each hinge and handle to the location of every window alarm. Some clients get decision fatigue. They just can’t bring themselves to decide on another remote sensor. Others insist on customizing everything. The granite slabs long ubiquitous on kitchen counters have

spread, like a geological mold, to cabinets and appliances. To carry the weight of the rock and keep the doors from tearing off, Ellison has to redesign all the hardware. In one apartment, on Twentieth Street, the front door was so heavy that the only hinges that could hold it were meant for a jail cell.

As we walked through the apartment, Ellison kept popping open hidden compartments—access panels, breaker boxes, secret drawers, and medicine cabinets—each one cleverly fitted into the plaster or woodwork. One of the hardest parts of this job, he said, was finding space. Where to shoehorn all that complexity? A suburban house is full of convenient voids. If an air handler won't fit in the ceiling, stuff it in the attic or the basement. But New York apartments aren't so forgiving. "Attic? What the fuck's an attic?" Marelli said. "People in this city are fighting over half an inch." Between the plaster and the studs in these walls lay hundreds of miles of wire and pipe, wound as tight as a circuit board. The tolerances weren't that different from those in the yachting industry.



*In the Sky House, a steel girder serves both as a support and as a climbing pole.*Photograph by Dean Kaufman for *The New Yorker*

“It’s like solving a giant puzzle,” Angela Dirks said. “Just figuring out how to design all the ductwork without driving down the ceiling or taking out crazy chunks of it—it’s torture.” Dirks, who is fifty-two, trained at Columbia and Princeton and specializes in residential interiors. In twenty-five years as an architect, she said, she’d had only four projects of this scale that allowed such attention to detail. At one point, a client even tracked her down to a cruise ship off the coast of Alaska. The towel rods in the bathrooms were being installed that day, she said. Could Dirks approve the locations?

Most owners can’t wait for an architect to untangle every kink in the ductwork. They have two mortgages to carry until the renovation is done. Ellison’s projects rarely cost less than fifteen hundred dollars a square foot these days, and sometimes twice that much. New kitchens start at a hundred and fifty thousand; master baths can run even more. And the prices tend to go up the longer the project lasts. “I’ve never seen a set of plans that were buildable as presented,” Marelli told me. “They either weren’t complete, defied physics, or had ambitions that the drawings didn’t explain how to achieve.” And so a familiar cycle begins. Owners set a budget but ask for more than they can afford. Architects overpromise and contractors underbid, knowing the plans are somewhat notional. Construction starts and a blizzard of change orders ensues. A project scheduled to take a year and cost a thousand dollars per square foot balloons to twice the length and price, and everyone blames everyone else. If it’s off by only a third, they call it a success.

“It’s just a crackpot system,” Ellison told me. “The whole game is set up so that everyone’s motivations are at cross purposes. It’s habit and bad habit.” For most of his career, he kept clear of the big decisions. He was just a hired gun, working for an hourly wage. But some projects are too complex for piecemeal work. They’re more like car engines than like houses: they have to be designed from the inside out, layer by layer, each component fitted exactly to the next. When the final coat of plaster is laid, the warren of ducts and wires beneath it has to sit perfectly flat, plumb to within a sixteenth of an inch over ten feet. Yet every trade works to different tolerances: steelworkers aim to be accurate within half an inch, carpenters a quarter of an inch, Sheetrockers an eighth of an inch, and stoneworkers a sixteenth. It’s Ellison’s job to get them all on the same page.

Dirks remembers walking in on him one day after he'd been brought on to coördinate the project. The apartment had been stripped to the studs and he'd spent a week alone in the gutted space. He'd taken measurements, laid center lines, and visualized every fixture, outlet, and piece of panelling. He'd done hundreds of drawings by hand on graph paper, isolating problem spots and explaining how to fix them. There were minute cross-sections of doorframes and railings, of the structural steel around the stairs, of vents hidden behind crown moldings and motorized shades tucked into window pockets, all gathered into an enormous black ring binder. "This is why everyone wants Mark or a clone of Mark," Dirks told me. "This is the document that says, 'I know not only what happens here but in every space, in every discipline.' "

The effect of all that planning was more felt than seen. In the kitchen and the bathrooms, for instance, the walls and floors were both unremarkable and somehow perfect. It was only after you stared at them for a while that you noticed the reason: every tile in every row was complete; there were no awkward joints or truncated borders. Ellison had built the room with these exact final dimensions in mind. Not a single tile had to be cut. "I have this memory of Mark sitting there when I came in," Dirks said. "I asked what he was doing, and he looked up at me and said, 'I think I'm done.' It was just an empty shell, but it was all in Mark's brain."

Ellison's own home sits across from an abandoned chemical factory in downtown Newburgh. Built in 1849 as a school for boys, it's a plain brick box set square to the curb with a worn wooden portico out front. Downstairs is Ellison's workshop, where the boys used to learn metalwork and wood joinery. Upstairs is his apartment, a lofty, barnlike space filled with guitars, amplifiers, a Hammond organ, and other band equipment. The walls are hung with art his mother lent him—mostly Hudson River vistas and some watercolors she painted of scenes from samurai life, including one of a warrior decapitating his foe. For many years, the building was claimed by squatters and stray dogs. It was renovated in 2016, not long before Ellison moved in, but the neighborhood is still fairly rough. There have been four murders within two blocks in the past two years.

Ellison has had nicer places: a town house in Brooklyn; a six-bedroom Victorian that he restored on Staten Island; a farmhouse on the Hudson. But divorce has landed him here, on the blue-collar side of the river, across the

bridge from his ex-wife in upscale Beacon, and the change seems to suit him. He's learning to Lindy Hop, plays in a honky-tonk band, and consorts with artists and builders too offbeat or impecunious to live in New York. Last January, an old firehouse came up for sale a few blocks from Ellison's place. At six hundred thousand dollars, it found no takers, then the price dropped to five hundred thousand, and he bit. With a little renovation, he thinks, it might be a good place to retire. "I love Newburgh," he told me, when I visited him there. "It's full of weirdos. It hasn't arrived—it's becoming."

One morning after breakfast, we stopped in at a hardware store to buy a blade for his table saw. Ellison likes to keep his tools simple and multipurpose. His workshop has a steampunk quality—almost but not quite identical to one from the nineteen-forties—and his social life has a similar hybrid vigor. "After all these years, I speak, like, seventeen different languages," he told me. "I speak millworker. I speak glass dude. I speak stone guy. I speak engineer. The beauty of this thing is that you start by digging holes in the dirt and finish by taking six-thousand-grit sandpaper and polishing up the last bit of brass. To me, everything is cool."

As a boy growing up in Pittsburgh in the mid-sixties, he got an immersion course in code-switching. This was in the Steel City days, when the factories were filled with Greeks, Italians, Scots, Irish, Germans, Eastern Europeans, and Southern Blacks who'd come north in the Great Migration. They worked together at open hearths and blast furnaces, then headed to their own watering holes on Friday night. It was a dingy, bare-knuckle town, where so many fish floated belly-up in the Monongahela that Ellison thought that was just what fish did. "The smell of coal smoke and steam and oil—that's the smell of my childhood," he told me. "You could drive down to the river at night and there were just miles of steel mills that never stopped running, and they would glow and shoot sparks and smoke into the air. These giant monsters that were eating everyone alive, they just didn't know it."



"Tread lightly, Mother. This is a very formative time for me."

W. M. Pial

His family's house was halfway up the city's terraced flanks, on the red line between Black neighborhoods and white, uphill and down. His father was a sociologist and a former chaplain—he'd studied at Union Theological Seminary when Reinhold Niebuhr was there. His mother was in medical school, training to be a pediatric neurologist while raising four small children. Mark was the second youngest. In the mornings, he went to an experimental school run by the University of Pittsburgh, with modular classrooms and hippie teachers. In the afternoons, he joined packs of kids on banana-seat bikes, popping wheelies and jumping curbs, careering through empty lots and scrubby woods like clouds of stinging flies. Every once in a while, he'd get mugged or thrown into a hedge. Still, it was paradise.

When we got back to his apartment from the hardware store, he played me a song he'd written after a recent trip to the old neighborhood. It was his first time there in nearly fifty years. Ellison's singing voice is a raw, lumbering thing, but his words can be disarmingly tender. "Takes eighteen years to grow a man / Another few to make him sound," he sang. "A hundred years to grow a city / Just one day to tear it down / Last time I left Pittsburgh / They'd built a city where that city used to be / Other folks might find their way back / But not me."

When he was ten, his mother took a residency in Albany and that was it for Pittsburgh. Ellison spent the next four years at local schools "basically designed so that dullards might excel." Then he experienced a different sort of misery in high school, at Phillips Academy, in Andover, Massachusetts. Socially, it was a training ground for the American gentry: John F. Kennedy, Jr., was there at the time. Intellectually, it was rigorous but hidebound. Ellison had always been a hands-on thinker. He could spend hours deducing the effects of the earth's magnetism on the flight patterns of birds, but pure formula rarely sank in. "It was abundantly evident that I didn't belong," he says.

He did learn how to talk to rich people—a useful skill. And, despite time off as a dishwasher at a Howard Johnson's, a tree planter in Georgia, a zoo worker in Arizona, and an apprentice carpenter in Boston, he managed to make it to senior year. Still, he fell one credit short of graduating. When Columbia accepted him anyway, he dropped out after six weeks, realizing

that it was more of the same. He found a cheap apartment in Harlem, put up mimeographed signs offering to build lofts and bookcases, and found part-time jobs to fill the gaps. While his classmates became lawyers, brokers, and hedge-fund traders—his future clients—he unloaded trucks, learned the banjo, worked in a bindery, scooped ice cream, and slowly wound his way around to mastering a trade. Straight lines are easy, curves are hard.

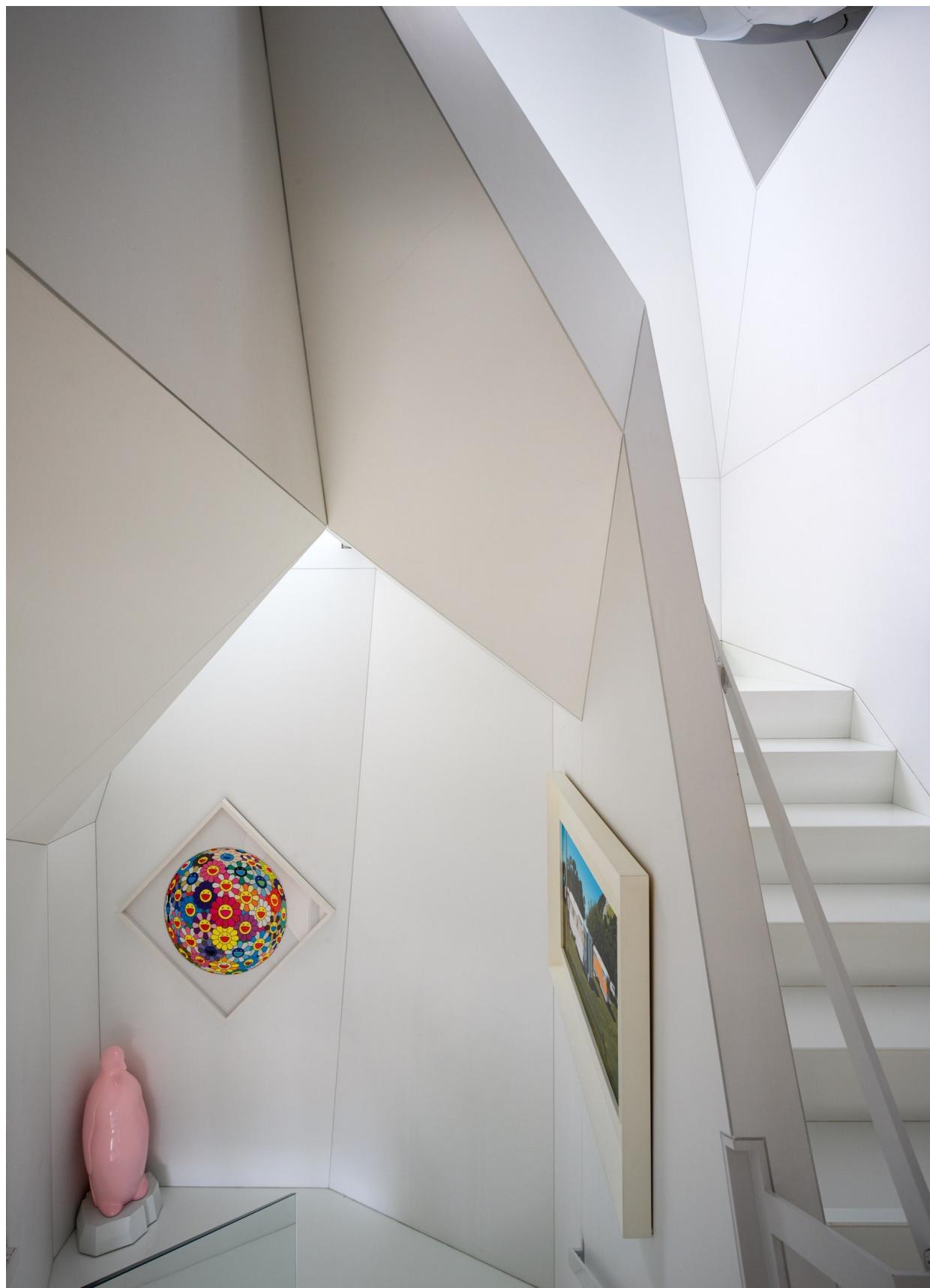
Ellison has been at this job for so long by now that its tricks are second nature to him. They can make his competence seem like eccentricity, even recklessness. I saw a good example of this one day in Newburgh, when he was building the staircase for the town house. Staircases are Ellison's signature projects. They're the most complicated structures in most homes—they have to both stand on their own and move through space—and even small errors can accumulate disastrously. If each step is just a thirty-second of an inch too low, the stairs may wind up three inches short of the uppermost landing. "A staircase that's wrong is recognizably wrong," Marelli says.

Yet stairs are also designed to call attention to themselves. At mansions like the Breakers, the Vanderbilts' summer home in Newport, built in 1895, the staircase was like a curtain rising. When guests arrived, it drew their eyes up from the entrance hall toward the glamorous hostess posed in her gown at the railing. The steps were built deliberately low—with a six-inch rise rather than the customary seven and a half—the better to let her glide weightlessly down to join the party.

The architect Santiago Calatrava once called a staircase that Ellison built for him a masterpiece. This one wasn't quite up to that standard—Ellison was convinced from the start that it had to be redesigned. The drawings called for each flight to be made of a single sheet of perforated steel, bent to form the steps. But the steel was less than an eighth of an inch thick, nearly half of it holes. If a few people went up the staircase at once, Ellison calculated, it would flex like a saw blade. Worse, the steel would develop stress fractures and serrated edges along the perforations. "It basically becomes a human cheese grater," he said. That was the best-case scenario. If the next owner decided to have a grand piano carried to the top floor, the whole structure might collapse.

“People pay me a lot of money to make the obvious clear,” Ellison said. But the alternative was less than straightforward. Quarter-inch steel would be strong enough, but the metal still tore when he bent it. So Ellison went a step further. He blasted the steel with a blowtorch until it glowed a dull orange, then let it cool slowly. This technique, known as annealing, realigned the atoms and relaxed their bonds, making the metal more ductile. When he bent the steel again, there was no tearing.

The stringers posed a different sort of problem. These were the boards that ran alongside the steps. In the drawings, they were made of poplar and twisted like seamless ribbons from floor to floor. But how to cut flat boards into curves? A router and a jig could do the job but would take forever. A computer-controlled shaper would work, but a new one cost three thousand dollars. Ellison decided to use a table saw, but there was a catch: a table saw doesn’t cut curves. Its flat, spinning blade is designed to slice straight across a board. It can be tilted left or right to make angled cuts, but that’s about it.



The Sky House's staircase is built of white nanoglass—an opaque and extremely hard synthetic stone—and twists up through the apartment in precisely organized shards. Photograph by Dean Kaufman for The New Yorker

“This is one of those ‘Don’t try this at home, kids!’ things,” he said. He was standing by the table saw, showing his neighbor and sometime apprentice, Caine Budelman, how to do the job. Budelman is forty-one: an English major turned metalworker with a blond man bun and a loose, athletic bearing. He left a foundry job in nearby Rock Tavern after burning a hole in his foot with a glob of molten aluminum and figured carpentry for a safer skill. Ellison wasn’t so sure. His own father lost six fingers to an electric saw —three on two occasions. “A lot of people would have taken the first time as a lesson,” he said.

The trick to cutting curves with a table saw, Ellison explained, is to use the saw the wrong way. He grabbed a poplar board from a stack on his bench. Instead of placing it in front of the saw’s teeth, as most carpenters would, he laid it alongside them. Then, as the baffled Budelman looked on, he set the circular blade spinning and calmly pushed the board into its side. A few seconds later, the board had a smooth, half-moon shape carved into it.

“That is so cool,” Budelman said.

“It’s fun, right?”

“I’ve never used a saw like that.”

“You’re not supposed to. It seems psychotic. But it makes a beautiful curve.”

Ellison was in a groove now, passing the board through the saw again and again, eyes locking focus and moving on, as the blade spun inches from his hands. While he worked, he kept up a steady patter of anecdotes, asides, and explanations to Budelman. What Ellison loves most about carpentry, he’d told me, is how it gives rein to the body’s physical intelligence. As a kid watching the Pirates at Three Rivers Stadium, he used to marvel at how Roberto Clemente knew just where a fly ball would go. He seemed to calculate its exact arc and acceleration the second it left the bat. It wasn’t so much muscle memory as embodied analysis. “Your body just knows how to do it,” he said. “It understands weight and leverage and space in a way that your brain would take forever to figure out.” It was the same sense that told Ellison where to set a chisel or if another millimetre of wood had to come

off. “I know this carpenter named Steve Allen,” he said. “He turned to me one day and he said, ‘I don’t get it. When I do this work, I have to concentrate, and you’re just talking your fool head off all day long.’ The secret is, I don’t think. I figure something out and then I’m done thinking. I don’t bother with my brain anymore.”

This was a silly way to build a staircase, he admitted, and he planned never to do it again. “I don’t want to be known as the perforated-stair guy.” Still, if done well, it would have that element of magic which he loved. The stringers and the steps would be painted white, with no visible seams or screws. The handrail would be oiled oak. As the sun passed over the skylight above the stairs, it would send needles of light streaming through the holes in the steps. The staircase would seem to dematerialize in space. “This is not a house you should drop acid in,” Ellison said. “Everyone is laying bets on whether the owner’s dog will walk on it. Because dogs are smarter than people.”



Designed to draw attention to itself, a staircase, like this one in the Upper East Side town house, is often the most complicated structure in a home. Photograph by Dean Kaufman for The New Yorker

If Ellison could work on just one more project before he retires, it would probably be the penthouse we visited in October. It's one of the last great unclaimed spaces in New York and also one of the first: the top of the Woolworth Building. When it opened, in 1913, the Woolworth was the tallest skyscraper in the world. It may still be the most beautiful. Designed by the architect Cass Gilbert, it's draped in glazed white terra-cotta, embellished with neo-Gothic arches and tracery, and rises nearly eight hundred feet above lower Manhattan. The space we visited took up the top five floors, from the terrace above the building's last setback to the observatory in the spire. The developer, Alchemy Properties, had taken to calling it the Pinnacle.

Ellison first heard about it last year from David Hotson, an architect with whom he's often collaborated. Hotson had been hired to draw up some plans and 3-D models for the Pinnacle after another design, by Thierry Despont, failed to attract buyers. To Hotson, the problem was obvious. Despont had envisaged a kind of town house in the sky, with parquet floors, chandeliers, and a wood-panelled library. The rooms were beautiful but stodgy—they could have been in any building, not this giddy, hundred-foot-tall tip of a skyscraper. So Hotson blew them up. In his drawings, every floor opens out into the next, spiralling up through a series of ever more spectacular staircases. "It should elicit gasps at every ascent to every floor," Hotson told me. "And when you get back down to Broadway you won't even understand what you just saw."

Hotson, who is sixty-one, is as lean and angular as the spaces he designs, and he tends to come clad in the same monochromes: white hair, gray shirt, gray pants, black shoes. When he joined Ellison and me at the Pinnacle, he still seemed in awe of its possibilities—like a chamber-music conductor given the baton of the New York Philharmonic. An elevator took us to a private lobby on the fiftieth floor, then a staircase led up into the great room. In most modern buildings, the elevator-and-staircase core would have extended all the way to the top, taking up most of the floor. But this room was completely open. The ceiling was two stories high; the windows gave vaulting views across the city on every side. You could see the Palisades and the Throgs Neck Bridge to the north, Sandy Hook and the shores of Galilee,

New Jersey, to the south. It was just a raw white space with some steel girders stretched across it, but it was still astonishing.

Down below us to the east, we could see the green tiled roof of Hotson and Ellison's previous project. Known as the Sky House, it was a four-story penthouse on top of a Romanesque high-rise built for a religious publisher in 1895. A gigantic angel stood watch at each corner. By 2007, when the space was sold for six and a half million dollars—a record for the financial district at the time—it had stood empty for decades. There was almost no plumbing or electricity, just a few leftover sets from scenes shot there for Spike Lee's "Inside Man" and Charlie Kaufman's "Synecdoche, New York." The apartment that Hotson designed was both a playpen for adults and a dizzyingly high-minded piece of sculpture—the perfect warmup for the Pinnacle. In 2015, *Interior Design* named it the Best Apartment of the Decade.

The Sky House is anything but a collection of boxes. It's full of splintered, refracted spaces, as if you were walking inside a diamond. "David, in his annoying Yale way, was singing the death of rectangles," Ellison told me. Yet the apartment feels less cerebral than exuberant, full of little jokes and surprises. The white floors give way to glass panels here and there, suspending you in the air. The steel girder that holds up the living-room ceiling is also a climbing pole, with a harness so guests can rappel down. The walls in the master bedroom and bath have tunnels hidden behind them, so the owners' cats can crawl around and pop their heads through small openings. And all four floors are connected by a huge tubular slide, made of polished German stainless steel. At the top, cashmere blankets are provided to insure a fast, frictionless ride.

Hotson sometimes worries that the slide is too flashy—it gets most of the attention. But he loves the staircase that Ellison built. Unlike the slide, which bullies through the apartment like a giant intestine, the staircase seems to crystallize the spaces it's in. Built of white nanoglass—an opaque and extremely hard synthetic stone—it twists up through the building in precisely organized shards, offering sudden glimpses through the rooms unfolding around it. When Hotson finished his plans, he wasn't sure they could be built to the standard he imagined. Then Ellison arrived. "There was just a sense that this guy's got it," Hotson told me. "In fact, he's got it better

than you do. He can see these three-dimensional processes better than an architect can.” There is a picture of Ellison when the staircase was being built, working out its geometry on the wall with a Sharpie. The owner called it one of his “‘Beautiful Mind’ moments.”

The Pinnacle would require many more such moments. “It would be an endless, epic challenge from start to finish,” Ellison told me. The apartment has a private elevator, but it goes up only two floors. Most of the circulation, in Hotson’s design, is through seven sets of stairs. That may be a sticking point for some buyers, as is the asking price: seventy-nine million dollars for the raw space alone. “People who buy apartments like this are usually clubby,” Kenneth Horn, the president of Alchemy Properties, told me. “They want to live in a building with similar folks who have similar money.” The Pinnacle needs more of an iconoclast, he said—someone who could appreciate both its seigneurial grandeur and the challenges of “cylindrical living,” as he put it. “It’s like a castle on top of the world. They just need some guidance in how to live in it.”

When the Woolworth Building was constructed, Cass Gilbert didn’t intend for people to live this high. He was more concerned with fireproofing the steel to prevent another Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. The top floors had hardly any windows when they were built—Alchemy had them cut for the new apartment—and no tenants. They were filled with giant fans to pump fresh air into the offices below. But, in the modern city, the scramble for wealth and status never hits a ceiling. Seventy-nine million dollars is a lot of money to most people: the average American household would need more than a thousand years to earn it. But to the right client it’s one good quarter on the stock market. “We have some very interesting people circling,” Stan Ponte, a sales adviser from Sotheby’s, which is handling the property for Alchemy, told me. “We’ve had the top brokers in the world in here.”

Ellison knows better than to question the finances. Like the court architects of the Renaissance, he owes his living to unreasonable wealth. Years ago, he told me, he helped build the drawing room for a mansion in Palm Beach. The room was thirty-five feet long, with carved Corinthian pilasters, and the owner wanted it built entirely of English brown oak. This was like asking for a coat of dodo feathers. English brown oak comes from oaks that have been infected by the beefsteak fungus, *Fistulina hepatica*, which turns their

heartwood brown. It grows mostly in British forests and is extremely hard to source, in any significant quantity, in the United States. “They found one stash in the basement of the Boston Public Library,” Ellison recalls. “They’d been hoarding it for years.”

Late one night, Ellison was standing on a scaffold installing some crown molding when the owner walked in wearing a bathrobe and smoking a cigar. He stopped in front of one of the pilasters, which had been French-polished to a dusky glow, and shook his head. “God, that’s gorgeous!” he said. “Remind me what’s so special about that wood?” When Ellison told him, the owner just smiled and walked away. “It was as if he’d shot the last white tiger,” Ellison said.

He shook his head. He’d spent his life building other people’s dream homes, but he had yet to work on one that he’d like to own. “There is nothing about this style of living that I want,” he said. He’d much rather have his firehouse. He was thinking of putting a workshop downstairs, he said, where the horse-drawn fire trucks used to park, with a recording studio behind it. He’d blow out the back wall on the second floor and build a huge greenhouse and deck, so that he could sit with his guitars and tend to his roses. He might even put in a fireman’s pole. “I mean, who doesn’t want to live in a firehouse?” he said. “It’s every seven-year-old boy’s dream.”

We walked up the last flights of the Pinnacle, past the empty spaces where the art gallery and the private library might go. When we reached the top and stepped out into the open air, we were standing on the observatory: a vertiginous little balcony that hugged the bottom of the spire. The late-fall sun was low in the sky, flooding the streets with a softening light. Soon the city would flicker on around us, the street lamps and billboards and bridges strung like Christmas trees, the cruise ships and tankers and small craft glimmering in the harbor, and the great curve of the earth glowing beyond them. The view was almost enough to make you forget the cost. “You have this sense of possessing the whole summit of New York,” Hotson had said downstairs. “It’s like you’re living in the chandelier on top of the city.” ♦

Personal History

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Preparing to Spin the Wheel of Fortune

You may win a lot of cash and tons of prizes, but please don't do anything stupid, like quit your day job.

By [David Gilbert](#)

November 23, 2020



I am here to spin. It's 3:30 p.m. on a Friday in late January, in Los Angeles—specifically, Culver City. I am in a freezing-cold studio on the Sony lot. I like saying "on the Sony lot." I'm on the Sony lot, in a studio, and it's freezing cold. But I am thankful for this temperature. My skin rests atop a roiling sea of sweat. I am often a boat adrift on this sea. A friend once saw my wedding photos and asked if I had been flung into a pool—you know, one of those weddings. Nope, just plain old sweat. My friend went silent. I am no longer married. I have three children: boy and girl and girl, eighteen and seventeen and twelve. My parents were married for more than fifty years. My father died five years ago. Toward the end, he became panicked by every chill and practically lived with a pulse oximeter on his index finger. My marriage fell apart a few months after his death. It was sad and painful, Pat, and thank goodness things are much better now. But I'm talking to myself, because Pat Sajak has yet to stroll into this freezing-cold studio on the Sony lot in Culver City. I stand before the wheel while Pat is in his dressing room, putting on his Thursday suit.

I am Thursday. Or one of three people who constitute Thursday, March 26, 2020.

To my right is Mark, from Brentwood.

To my left is Cyndi, from Baltimore.

I am David, from New York.

We are loosening our spinning arms while two contestant handlers prep us, their eyes strobing between frantic and calm. It seems that an airplane door has slid open and the next twenty minutes are ten thousand feet below. They tell us to just have fun. They tell us to clap without clapping, because actual clapping might mess up the audio. They tell us to smile and stand straight and speak loudly and clearly and remember the used-letter board and on Free Play call a vowel and buy vowels when you can, and, oh, just have fun, that's the important thing, Mark, David, Cyndi, have fun and be yourself. I nod and fiddle with my nametag. Then I nod again and practice clapping without clapping. The theme of the week is Gone Fishin', so the set has been decorated as an Adirondack-style lodge by way of the Country Bear Jamboree. Rough-hewn logs and fieldstone have been fashioned from high-

density urethane foam. There are canoes and a tackle box and over the mantel an image of a salmon. My fly-fisherman father would've liked this place. In the rafters, a studio audience hangs like the seventh circle of spectator hell: those doomed to witness game shows. The contestant handlers are almost mystically upbeat, as if earlier they had chopped up a rainbow and snorted its brightly colored lines. Wind seems to blow through their hair as they warm up our voices by having us shout random letters. *T! N! R! S!* They remind us to reach for the wheel a few spokes to the right and grip near the top with our thumbs raised. They've obviously seen accidents. Perhaps disasters. Contestants thrown onto the wheel, impaled, crucified, crushed. This multicolored grindstone weighs more than a ton. All jewelry has been removed from our spinning hands. I imagine myself slipping forward and becoming a dopey version of the Vitruvian Man, going around and around. Just remember to buy vowels. And to clap without clapping.

The makeup person comes over for the last touch-up. She's wearing a parka and fingerless gloves. She dabs a brush into mysterious powder and gessoes me new again. I love this woman. Earlier, in the hair-and-makeup room, she punched up my always tired eyes. I seem to be getting my father's eyes. Like those cups that hold soft-boiled eggs. And she clipped a few rogue hairs from my eyebrows. I am fifty-two years old. I flew in yesterday. Many of the other male contestants joked about sitting in the hair-and-makeup chair. They asked for mascara or blush with a theatrical swish. Or if they were bald they requested curls. I always try to avoid my own gaze in the mirror. I am no good at looking at myself. I see every fault. Every bump and blemish and rash. I keep my eyes lowered as if I were passing a potential mugger.

"All set," the makeup person says.

"Thank you," I say, hoping my thank-you is imbued with extra meaning.

"Good luck," she says.

She says good luck to us all.

The contestant handlers give us water pulled from a contestant water-bottle caddy.

“O.K., guys, we’re going soon.”

We sip. We nod. We sip again.

The floor is being buffed to its final black onyx shine.

The stage manager and his production cohorts bustle along the sidelines.

Cues are called, cameras focussed and primed for the opening shot with the overhead sweep of Pat Sajak and Vanna White entering the studio like the king and queen of TV prom, Vanna heading for the puzzle board, Pat for the wheel, where his Thursday awaits.

“Remember, just be yourself,” the contestant handlers say before stepping away.

We nod. We smile. We are ready.

Merv Griffin, from San Mateo, invented the “Wheel.”



"Listen, Trixie, if we play this right and stick to the plan, we might get free room and board for the rest of our lives."

Merv Griffin, night-club singer and recorder of “I’ve Got a Lovely Bunch of Coconuts.”

Merv Griffin, host of “Play Your Hunch.”

Merv Griffin, star of the syndicated “Merv Griffin Show,” which aired on WNEW Channel 5 New York. This was the Merv I knew. Merv and Mike Douglas and Dinah Shore and sometimes Joe Franklin and always “The Brady Bunch” and “The Partridge Family” and “I Dream of Jeannie” and “The Odd Couple” and “The Munsters” and “Sanford and Son” and “Get Smart” and “Green Acres” and “My Three Sons” and “The Honeymooners” and “All in the Family” and “The Hollywood Squares” and “The Gong Show” and “The Price Is Right” and “The \$20,000 Pyramid” and “Match Game”—man oh man, “Match Game”—and whatever else was available for a kid freed from school and eating cinnamon toast in his parents’ bedroom. Sitting four feet from that nineteen-inch Zenith color television. Manipulating the Jerrold remote with its twelve hard-click buttons and toggle switch that travelled between three planes of existence: standard (2-13), extra (14-25), and extra weird (26-37). I might’ve been talentless at the piano but I was Rick Wakeman on that motherfucking Jerrold, alternating between “Hogan’s Heroes” and “The Flintstones” without missing a canned beat. Those were happy days, made happier only on Saturday mornings, when I parked myself in the living room, with its twenty-five-inch Zenith—oh, the glory of those additional six inches—and participated in a network ménage à trois of children’s programming: ABC with “The Scooby-Doo/Dynomutt Hour” and “The Krofft Supershow” and “Super Friends” and CBS with “The Sylvester and Tweety Show” and “The Bugs Bunny/Road Runner Hour” and “Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids” and NBC with “The Pink Panther Show” and “Speed Buggy” and “Land of the Lost.” *Click, click, click-click-click.* Television was *the* essential part of my upbringing, and my generation might have been the last to share this cathode-ray DNA with our parents and grandparents. We could all talk Lucy.

Merv Griffin always struck me as Johnny Carson lite. His show taped from the Celebrity Theatre, in the heart of Hollywood, and Merv himself had the demeanor of a gold bracelet hanging loosely from a wrist. His guests oozed a sincere shallowness I found intriguing. Zsa Zsa. Marty Allen. Charo. Rip

Taylor. Natural performers, all of them. And sometimes my beloved Steve Martin showed up. It was my first taste of this specific kind of cheese. Little did I know Merv was also an innovator.

In 1963, he and his wife came up with “Jeopardy!”

He even wrote the thirty-second ditty for Final Jeopardy. It’s called “Think!” and it earned him additional millions in music royalties.

Smart Merv.

Then, in 1975, he duplicated this success by marrying the game hangman with Vegas-style roulette and, voilà, “Wheel of Fortune” was born. Chuck Woolery, later of “Love Connection” fame, was the original host, and his co-host, the model Susan Stafford, was the letter turner. The initial show involved a fair amount of shopping, but in the eighties the format settled into its present-day incarnation, with Pat Sajak and Vanna White. All of this made Merv Griffin a very rich man. In 1986, he sold his empire to the Coca-Cola Company, and soon he started buying casinos and hotels, and even had disastrous dealings with our current President. Merv died in 2007, a billionaire. His epitaph reads, *I will not be right back after this message*. God bless the man, now a pile of bones and a collection of YouTube videos I’ve recently watched, along with the entire series run of “Ark II” and “Monster Squad.”

My youngest is the reason I’m on the show. Late spring, 2018. She and her older sister and I are sitting on the couch eating our takeout dinner in front of the “Jeopardy!”/“Wheel of Fortune” block. In concept, I prefer family meals at the table, but in reality the glow of the television during dinner can feel as vital, if unnecessary, as a warm piece of bread. I grew up watching the nightly news, local and national, with my pork chops and applesauce. My family was an NBC family, meaning we went from Sue Simmons to Chuck Scarborough to John Chancellor. My father would come home from work and prop himself behind the newspaper. I knew I was being too loud if I heard the *Times* ruffle. Or if he asked me to turn up the television while I was monologuing about my fifth-grade day.

“Can we change?” my youngest asks during Double Jeopardy.

“Let’s not,” I say, since I’ve always been decent with general knowledge, though I’m more Trivial Pursuit than Encyclopædia Britannica. And maybe I want my daughters to be impressed with their dad. I remember doing the same with my father, answering the questions—or, more accurately, questioning the answers—hoping he might notice what a clever son he had.

“Please change,” my youngest says.

“Not yet.”

My father adored television. He watched a lot of sports, and as a boy I would always forget which team we were rooting for. The white team? No, no, the blue team. In retirement, he took in a lot of financial news, CNBC nipping in the background like a Jack Russell terrier. He also enjoyed shows like “Deadliest Catch” and “Swamp People” and “Duck Dynasty,” where seemingly real men did seemingly real-man things. My father had no idea how to change a tire, but he could take down a marathon of “Ice Road Truckers.” As an adult, whenever I visited him, the most I expected was a temporary muting of the volume. I hardly took this as an offense; rather, I plopped myself down on the nearest chair. I think he chose being aloof over being shy, perhaps for the sake of corporate self-preservation. And maybe parenthood baffled him as well. He operated nearer the surface. But he had a sweet and sentimental underbelly, which could be glimpsed when he was scratched the right way.

The closest moment I ever had with him was on the day he was buried and I was tasked with identifying his body in the coffin. This happened at the Frank E. Campbell funeral home, in Manhattan, on the corner of Madison and Eighty-first Street, a grand brownstone that resembles a consulate for the dead. The funeral director led me into the empty chapel: the coffin was on a bier near a door, where, on the other side, the hearse was parked and waiting. The two of us walked to the coffin. The lid was already raised. I noticed the familiar dark-blue blazer. My father’s uniform even in death. And then came the hair. How strange it was to see it combed in a slightly different fashion. Then I saw the trace of stitching that zigzagged across his lips. That was disturbing. And almost a cliché. The same with the waxy Madame Tussauds complexion. In that coffin, my father looked cored of meaning, hollow and shrunken, but this was him, and I put my hand on his empty chest and told

him I loved him. He never seemed more vulnerable. More human. As if reborn to me. Oh, Dad, I remember thinking, I'm sorry.

If I could tell you I would let you know.

Who is W. H. Auden?

But now “Jeopardy!” is finishing and “Wheel of Fortune” is beginning, and both my daughters enjoy trying to solve the puzzles, so we tuck into Pat and Vanna. “Wheel of Fortune” puzzles come in a variety of categories. There’s Food & Drink, Person, Thing, Before & After, What Are You Doing?, On The Map, Phrase, Crossword, etc. Before & After might be *BALD EAGLE SCOUT*. What Are You Doing? *WATCHING THE SUNSET*. Crosswords have multiple interconnected answers revolving around a clue, as in “Seeing Red”: *LOBSTER*, *ROSE*, *BLUSHING*. “Jeopardy!” this ain’t. The game starts with two tossups, worth a thousand dollars and two thousand dollars. No spinning is involved. Letters are randomly revealed until a contestant rings in with the correct answer. Tossups also appear toward the end of the game, in the form of the Triple Toss-Up, three puzzles done in rapid succession and worth two thousand dollars apiece. If you can dominate the tossups, you can bank nine thousand dollars without ever spinning. No luck is involved; it’s just a matter of wits. Occasionally, I can get on a roll, and I must’ve got on one of these rolls, with the five tossups and the four regular puzzles, because during the bonus round, where the winner of the regular round could win a car or cash, my youngest turns to me and says, “You should go on ‘Wheel of Fortune.’ You’re really good at it.”

“Trust me, I’m not.”

But she, ever enthusiastic, is convinced of my genius, and she goes and grabs my laptop and within minutes has found the online application for becoming a contestant. I humor her because I know they will never pick me.

The e-mail told me to be honest with myself—uh-oh—and consider the following questions before deciding to attend the “Wheel of Fortune” audition: Do I think I can solve puzzles in front of a national audience? Um, I doubt it. Am I able to stay focussed and control my nerves under pressure? Historical evidence suggests otherwise. Can I call letters with a clear and

confident voice? Define confident. Do I have good presence and vitality and energy? Hmm, I think so, as I recheck the address in the e-mail, having already walked a block in the wrong direction after exiting the subway. But here I am, outside the Ink 48 hotel, on the far West Side of midtown Manhattan. The e-mail informs me that there will be a coffee stand in the lobby for guests staying at the hotel. Please do not drink this coffee! *This is not for us.* There will be a water station in our audition room. I wish I had brought coffee. But I like the line “This is not for us.” That could be the title of something.

On the fifth floor, in the Helvetica Room, I’m greeted by Jackie, a contestant handler. I instantly like her. She reminds me of Suzi Quatro playing Leather Tuscadero. I try to do the thing where I signal my acknowledgment of the absurdity of participating in this embodiment of American kitsch, but Jackie cuts through my muddled irony with her positive you-betcha energy, and I take a seat near the back.

Soon, Jackie and two of her colleagues get things rolling. “Is everyone excited?!” they shout, and we shout back in the affirmative, and we clap and smile, because we know clapping and smiling are an integral part of the audition, so we clap and smile ourselves into possible game-show existence. Look at us sparkle. Some whoop. Then others whoop. I myself refrain from whooping. Instead, I nod as I clap and smile, hoping my nodding indicates an amused detachment. Then I whoop.

We are put through our “Wheel of Fortune” paces. A puzzle is projected onto a monitor and one of the contestant handlers reads a random name from a clipboard and the random name stands up and a travel-sized wheel is spun and the wheel stops and the random name calls a letter, ideally in a clear and confident voice—*T! N! R! S!*—and either the letter is revealed or there’s a buzz and we’re on to the next random name. It’s all very quick and professional. These contestant handlers run a well-oiled contestant-culling machine.

“Running on empty,” the man sitting next to me whispers.

“I hear you,” I say.

“No, no, the puzzle. It’s *RUNNING ON EMPTY*.” (To maintain the sanctity of the audition process, this answer and the answer below have been fabricated.)

I realize he’s right. He’s solved with only the “N”s revealed. This man must be a “Wheel of Fortune” savant. And this happens over and over again, the “Wheel” savant figuring out the answer early on and whispering it to me. But, when my name is finally the random name, the puzzle is brand new and I get no whispers from my Rain Man, so I squint and call “T” and there’s a buzz and I sit back down. Soon enough my neighbor is summoned. He calls a few letters before solving: *BEAUTIFUL ISLAND SUNSET*. Correct. We clap and smile. They throw him a “Wheel of Fortune” T-shirt. The only thing I go home with is a small No. 2 pencil that says I tried out for “Wheel of Fortune.”

Two weeks later, there’s a letter in my mailbox, the “Wheel of Fortune” insignia emblazoned on the upper right corner. *CONGRATULATIONS!* I am standing in the lobby of my apartment building. I shake my head, *NO* and *WAY* playing in stereo. It’s like being accepted to cartoon Stanford. I look around for someone to tell, but nobody’s there. I grab my phone. My youngest is at pony camp. My oldest is on a camping trip. My middle is with her mom. I text her and wait for the dot-dot-dot of *Are you serious?*, the dot-dot-dot of *OMG*, but no dot-dot-dots appear, so I call and leave a message and then head upstairs to read the rest of the letter. I’m told the show tapes only four days a month, five or six episodes a day, with the actual taping schedule not formed until two weeks in advance, which will be as much notice as I will get. I am responsible for all my expenses. Most important, and printed in bold, there is an appeal to keep things in perspective. “Being a contestant on Wheel of Fortune is a wonderful opportunity!” the letter continues. “But it shouldn’t take precedence over other important areas of your life.” They want me to make sure I’m financially sound before I decide to head to Los Angeles. And if I’m not feeling physically sound, no problem, they’ll have me appear at a later date. “Your health is more important than spinning the wheel!” There’s a tender seen-it-all quality to the prose, as if the “Wheel of Fortune” people can hear your shouts of joy, and they’re shouting right along with you, because this is exciting, but they’re also reminding you that this is just a blip on the radar of life, and maybe you’ll win a lot of cash and tons of prizes, and maybe you won’t, but guaranteed you’ll have some

fun. That said, please please please don't do anything stupid to be here, like quit your day job. The "Wheel" will accommodate.

My phone rings. It is mid-January, 2020. Over New Year's, a massage therapist told me that this year is going to be my year, and I believe her, which is unlike me, believing in this kind of optimism, but fuck it, I believe her, so I answer the Culver City area code.

"David, it's Jackie from—"

I agree immediately. They have asked me twice before, and for various reasons I've had to say no, but this third offer, well, that's the formulaic charm. I soon receive a FedEx with important information about my future "Wheel of Fortune" appearance: the release forms, the travel details, the hotel recommendations, the schedule, the request for notification about any possible felonies in my past, etc. The wardrobe section is by far the most interesting part: men get a brief paragraph—dress "business casual" and *NO JEANS! NO TENNIS SHOES!*—while women are bombarded with multiple paragraphs concerning the positives of two-piece outfits, and solid colors, and blazers, and well-fitted, padded bras, and the negatives of tight tops, and loose tops, and clingy tops, and striped tops, and black or bright red or white tops, and any sort of bold pattern, and silk blouses, and low-cut blouses, and necklaces, and pins, and bracelets.

I choose a pair of dark-blue pants, a medium-blue shirt, and a suit jacket.

Of course, I envision the ridiculous outfits I could wear, as well as the ridiculous things I could do, like trying to solve the puzzle right from the start —*I HAVE A POOP IN MY PANTS*—real sophisticated stuff, stuff my father hated at the dinner table. I claim iconoclasm, but the truth is more desperate. The closer my appointment with the "Wheel" gets the more fraught my appearance seems. How should I act? What are the proper levels of self-consciousness, micro and meta? I laugh again at the absurd prospect of being a contestant—I've been laughing a lot, short bemused snorts, like unexpected sneezes. And then I have a moment of dread. What if I fuck up royally? What if, instead of *JAMAICAN COFFEE BEANS*, I guess *JAMAICAN COFFEE BEARS*? Because I could so easily do that.

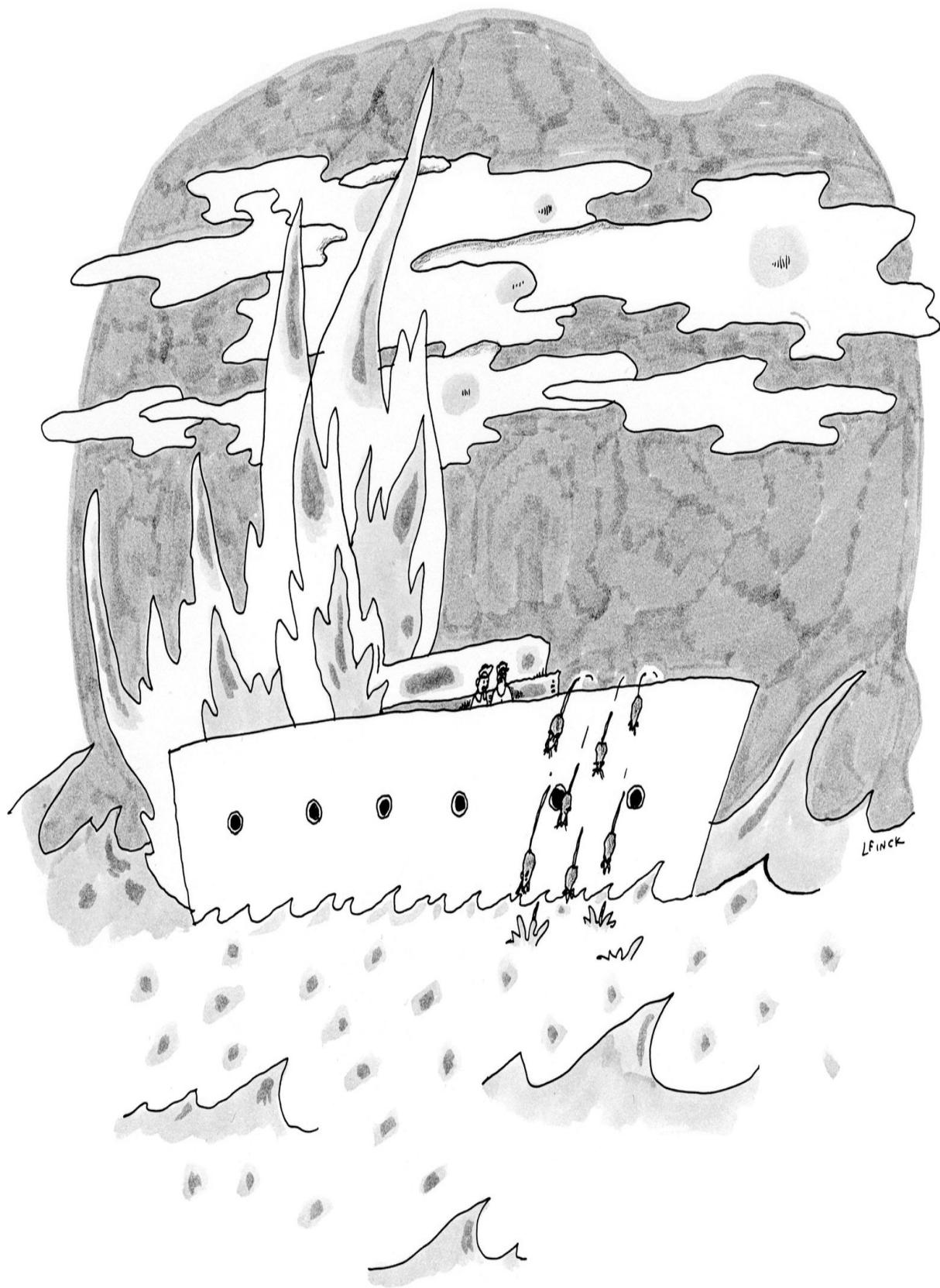
This is a very bad idea.

I am sitting in the contestant waiting room, at the “Wheel of Fortune” studio, on the Sony lot, in Culver City. The room is more like a locker room, with rows of lockers and a modest spread of breakfast items and weak coffee. We might as well be factory workers on break. Our cell phones have been locked inside these lockers. We can have no reading materials, either. We must simply exist, as ourselves, full of impounded energy, twenty of us, including alternates, representing five days in March and one day in April. We size one another up. I take note of those who have followed the dress code and those who have not. Two of us will be our competition. I try to slip on a journalistic mask, but I’m too self-deprecating and too eager to please. I am a monkey grinding himself.

I remember dancing once, like really spinning-around-and-flopping-all-over-the-place dancing, in the living room of my boyhood apartment. I have no idea why I was dancing; maybe the TV was playing a song I liked, maybe I just wanted my share of attention. I must have been ten, though my memories often reduce down to ten. I’m flailing around, as loose as Steve Martin, and my father lowers his newspaper and stares at me and says, “What are you, some kind of fag?” I know that my father is teasing, as he’s prone to do, though “fag” is more familiar during school recess, circa 1977, than after dinner on Seventy-third and Lex. I hardly recall my reaction, but I know that I stop dancing and retreat to my bedroom, which is wallpapered with posters of the rock band Kiss, as well as hundreds of photographs of the band meticulously clipped from *Rolling Stone* and *Circus* and *Creem*. Maybe I slip on headphones. Maybe I listen to “Flaming Youth.”

This is a big mistake, I think, picking over a Danish.

This isn’t funny.



"We had rats?"

Wuss. Wimp. Pussy. Candy-ass.

I am hardly a man.

There are gasps in the contestant room. “Hello, everyone.” It’s Vanna White. She’s in a robe. “This is the real me,” Vanna tells us, “before the magic of makeup and wardrobe.” And yet she glows. Vanna has repeated the same dress only once, out of more than seven thousand. She wishes us luck and leaves. It’s all very quick. No autographs, just kind words. People might joke about Vanna White having the world’s cushiest job, earning millions for “turning” letters four days a month, but “Wheel of Fortune” would not be the same without her. Because Vanna is pure goodness. She just is. She humanizes the blank coldness of the puzzle board with her confident gait and soft touch and radiating warmth. She is sexless sex appeal, her smile a slice of apple pie. Vanna responds to our call when we are right, and when we are wrong she frowns with sympathy. She might clap for us without clapping, but we hear her loud and clear. Pat is O.K., though Pat has the startled appearance of the class clown who has found himself the butt of the joke. Vanna is the show’s beating heart.

After Vanna, we have an hour-long thrill-a-thon with the legal department, and then we are brought into the freezing-cold studio for an introduction to the wheel and the mechanics of the game, and we record our “howdy” for our particular affiliates, which is beyond embarrassing (“Watch me play ‘Wheel of Fortune’ on WABC!”), and return to the contestant room and are given our contestant groupings (hello, Cyndi, from Baltimore; hello, Mark, from Brentwood) and draw numbered golf balls to determine what day we will be (we are Thursday) and then draw again to determine our placement on the wheel platform (I’m the center position), after which we head back into the subzero studio (I now understand the padded-bra suggestion) and speed through a pretend game with a pretend Pat Sajak, who resembles my high-school English teacher, but this Mr. Rushton seems more the literary-actor type, and as we spin and practice, and spin and practice, the studio audience begins to file in, plus the guests of the contestants—oh, and what about my youngest, who started this ridiculousness? Well, she has a school trip this weekend, and, though she isn’t going on the school trip, she’s sort of made plans to, like, hang with all her other friends who aren’t going on the

school trip, so, yeah, Dad, do you mind if I, like, stay put? Um, O.K. And my middle has a party she wants to go to. Fine, fine. And my oldest is away at school and has no desire to come to L.A. and watch his father play “Wheel of Fortune.” Yeah, yeah, I get it.

The space inside a television is bigger than expected, the distances free of edits, the vantages seen through eyes rather than cameras. “Ladies and gentlemen, here are the stars of our show, Pat Sajak and Vanna White.” There I am, between Mark, from Brentwood, a precision runner, and Cyndi, from Baltimore, who during the introductions will show Pat her self-professed skill on the mouth trumpet, her puckered lips going toot-toot-toot. But the mouth trumpet has been cut from the broadcast. Now it’s just Cyndi, who lives with her beautiful wife, Kailie, and their dog, GG. And I am David, from New York. I imagine my children, laughing at their goofball dad. The space inside a television is familiar yet alien, like one of those dreams of being in your house but the house isn’t your house. It is uncanny. That’s the word. I’d like to solve, Pat: *UNCANNY SENSATION*. It is a doll-house version of “Wheel of Fortune,” and we have been shrunk. We are Mike Teavee in the chocolate factory. *Look at me, I’m on TV!* I notice my head, my nose, my smile. And my voice, horrible. But my skin looks decent —thank you, makeup person, wherever you are. I see my father. In the head. In the nose. In the smile. I imagine my father watching me from his chair in the living room. His small-bore son. Unserious. I have decided, in this moment, to try to be myself. I will honor the game and play earnestly. Whatever viewing party I had planned before the pandemic is now happening via text message. My children are with their mother. I will win a thousand-dollar gift card to Cabela’s by solving *AMAZING CLOUD FORMATIONS*. My middle texts, “Congrats dude.” My oldest texts, “What’s the Hulu password?” Today is Thursday, Episode 139 of Season 37 of Our Lord, “Wheel of Fortune.” But most Americans have discovered a new day of the week, previously unknown, which has steamrolled all the other days into an endless, featureless horizon. The clock has started. Less than twenty minutes will be spent inside this television. Vanna is wearing a sapphire-blue princess-cut shift-style dress. Pat has on a silver-gray suit and a silver-blue tartan tie. I am clapping, and then I remember and clap without clapping. With all the flashing lights and sounds and colors, I feel as though I’ve dropped within an A.D.H.D. diagnosis. When I was twelve, I saw Kiss in concert at Madison Square Garden. This was peak Kiss. My father took me.

He wore a blazer, like the blazer he was buried in, Brooks Brothers, dark blue. A lot of the people around us sported makeup. The Demon. The Starchild. The Catman. The Spaceman, who was always my favorite. My father must've been baffled and possibly disturbed by this scene. And here was his son, enraptured. Halfway through, he asked what was happening up there onstage, and I, wide-eyed and deranged, shouted that Gene Simmons was spitting up blood. This was the apotheosis. God knows what my father made of me. But taking me to the Kiss concert became his story, a story he told with great pleasure. And I didn't expect him to show up here. In his chair with the remote. Watching me as Pat approaches and we pick up our ringers for the first tossup of the game. Maybe because I've been thinking about death. Maybe because I know how petrified my father would be if he were alive in this moment of the coronavirus, eighty-six years old, his lungs already ravaged by years of smoking. *Stay away. Stay away.* Even more than usual. *Stay away.* I place my hand on his chest. The space inside a television is nothing but a space to be filled, and I try to fill my father's emptiness with love, seeing him as a person, which is ironic, since he's just a husk, and yet I see him. The worst has happened. *Time will say nothing but I told you so.* And I want my father to feel my love regardless, my love for him, my recognition of us. We were both helpless to help. And all I want is for my children to see me, even as I have a hard time seeing myself. I swear during "Rock and Roll All Nite" my father swayed his shoulders a bit. Confetti fell from the ceiling, fell all over us. It was the final encore. And here we are, at the end, which is the beginning, my father dead and my relationship with him just starting. I try pouring myself into him before the lid is closed forever. The opening tossup is revealed with a chime, the category What Are You Doing?

□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □

I watch as the letters reveal themselves like ticks on a metronome.

□ □ □ T □ □ G M □ □ □ □ □

Cyndi will win twelve thousand five hundred dollars. Mark will win nine thousand dollars, which includes a trip to London.

□ □ I T □ □ G M □ □ □ O K

And, though I'm no good with tossups, I know this one. A hundred per cent I know this one. I can't quite believe it. Practically made for me. Maybe this game will go my way. Maybe I'm destined to win big. Maybe the gods are telling me something. This could be my year, after all.

I ring in.

Pat says, "David," with Pat-like anticipation.

"*WRITING MY BOOK*," I answer in a clear and confident voice.

"Nope," Pat says.

I will come in third, otherwise known as last. Three thousand one hundred and fifty dollars, plus the Cabela's.

A few more letters are revealed.

Cyndi rings in.

"*BAITING MY HOOK*."

"Yeah," Pat says. "There you go."

I see myself nod and smile. It's a good smile, I decide. A natural smile. ♦

Poems

- “[Betye Saar’s ‘Mystic Chart for an Unemployed Sorceress’](#)”
- “[Gravitational](#)”
- “[November](#)”

[November 30, 2020 Issue](#)

Betye Saar's "mystic Chart for an Unemployed Sorceress"

By [Patricia Spears Jones](#)

November 23, 2020

Audio: Read by the author.

My runes are in ruins, little laughter here for my sarcasm
What to do, this chart confuses, conflates moon, which phase
And honey, local or from some exotic shore and what of money
My savings stuffed beneath deflating mattress. Each cold

Day warns me that my résumé is unworthy. Who will hire me
Now that my spells are so easily broken, my warnings useless

It is a wonder that I worked as long as I could. Incantations
Memorized and recipes for spells written in an ink too pale
For visibility—each item sourced, the medicine worked and then

It did not. Was it the well of stories drying up? The fish scales
Stinking the kitchen table. The cat wandering away, while
Spiders spread their cosmic maps unreadable to all but
The other spiders. They cheer me. Again, I read the signs.

Oh, how the signs obscure true knowledge and I am blazed
In this dark room, hungry, cold and searching—who is this thief
And why has she cast this curse. What must I do to bring
Runes from my parched throat, medicine back to my pockets.

[November 30, 2020 Issue](#)

Gravitational

By [Alfred Corn](#)

November 23, 2020

Audio: Read by the author.

A downdraft early in life I never pondered:
Horses threw riders, divers bounced and plunged,
I stumbled and hit the ground but at that age
Not tall, didn't fall far, so no bones fractured.

At what point did it start to feel uncanny,
The way a scarf or jacket carelessly tossed
On a chair or satin counterpane would half
The time begin to creep and slide, consenting

To a force I couldn't—though in operation
Could—see? And even coats hooked on a hanger
Might later accept the earthward invitation,
Coaxed loose and sucked toward the globe's fierce center.

Deepening experience drove home
What the ninth month demands of gravid women:
To *endure*, and not complain of stressed backs,
The drudgery of living in italics.

Terra's a magnet, and we its iron filings,
Arrayed in patterns preordained. Much like
The sun, which grips our blue-white planet tight,
Whirling it like a bola, whirling its siblings—

The solar kingpin himself caught in the drift
Of a galaxy spinning at breakneck speed
And yet so gravely slow, the rush can't be
Perceived. Meanwhile, all bodies past age fifty

Dread getting up from a squat, the mere one g
As ruthless as a wrestler counteracting
The thrust of tight-clenched quadriceps. And even
When you let the reins go slack to have a nap,

Relentless suction functions, focussed on each bone,
Your scaffolding half aware dispassionate hydraulics
Will one day pull it six feet underground, a breech
Birth, to be cradled where that horsepower meant to haul it.

November 30, 2020 Issue

November

By [Charles Simic](#)

November 23, 2020

The crosses all men and women
Must carry through life
Even more visible
On this dark and rainy night.

Portfolio

- [Faces of a Fast-Food Nation](#)

Faces of a Fast-Food Nation

During the pandemic, low-wage workers must manage risk and rudeness.

Photography by [Richard Renaldi](#)

November 23, 2020



Since 2009, the federal minimum wage has been stuck at \$7.25 an hour, an amount that bears only the sketchiest relationship to the cost of living in many parts of the country. Twenty-nine states have set their own, higher minimum wage, somewhere between \$8.65 and \$13.50. On November 3rd, Florida voters approved raising the state's baseline to fifteen dollars an hour. (This rate is the goal, and the namesake, of the grassroots movement [the Fight for Fifteen](#); seven other states are phasing in such an increase, and Washington, D.C., has mandated one already.) Fast-food workers—for whom the federal minimum wage is often both floor and ceiling—are among the Americans who have been deemed essential in the pandemic. Especially in places where indoor dining is not permitted, drive-throughs have been providing quick sustenance to everyone from doctors and nurses to Zooming workers weary of cooking. But, for most fast-food employees, wages haven't budged since [COVID-19](#) made going to work a daily risk. Alana Ganoe, a twenty-six-year-old who works at a Bojangles in Winchester, Virginia, says that, in order to earn enough to care for herself and her two young children, she has to clock at least fifty hours a week—many of them at night, because her kindergartner is in school remotely. "I'm not asking for, like, twenty dollars an hour, because I do get a decent paycheck, and my boyfriend is a tremendous help," she says. "But, if I were to work less, I wouldn't have the money for the rent, the lights, food."

Fast-food work is stressful: chronic understaffing, hot grease, time clocks monitoring your breaks, enough unkind customers to sour a whole night. "When they see you in the uniform, it's like they forget you're a human being," Cherta Cogle, who made \$8.50 an hour at an A. & W./Long John Silver's in Charles Town, West Virginia, says. (She recently left for [Walmart](#), where she is filling carts for online orders.) "They forget you have feelings. That's been sitting on my chest for so long, wanting to say that. It's just sad. People are rude to them when they're working, so they want to be the rude customer when it's their day off." Cogle says that the pandemic ratcheted up her anxiety: "Sometimes customers have spit spray. I'm trying not to get sick. I always wore my mask, but a lot of people wouldn't wear them, or they'd have them below their chin."

In 2019, the New York-based photographer Richard Renaldi started taking pictures of fast-food workers around the country. He was drawn to the project, he says, because these are "people that millions of Americans see

every day—but, at the same time, they’re invisible, because a lot of low-wage labor isn’t appreciated and is taken for granted.” Renaldi uses an old-fashioned, large-format view camera, the kind with accordion-pleated bellows. The approach is time-consuming: it takes him about forty-five minutes of setup to get two to four images. “I love the way that, with the view camera, you stop and you see the subject—you see each other,” he says. “It just slows everything down.” The painstaking process conjures a different effect than what Renaldi calls the “grab-and-go of a lot of photojournalism,” or the casual ubiquity of cell-phone photography. Renaldi’s black-and-white images are formal, exalted, like nineteenth-century studio portraiture. His subjects hold our gaze; they compel us to see the human being in the uniform.

—*Margaret Talbot*

More on the Coronavirus

- To protect American lives and [revive the economy](#), Donald Trump and Jared Kushner should listen to Anthony Fauci rather than trash him.
- We should look to students to conceive of appropriate [school-reopening plans](#). It is not too late to ask what they really want.
- A pregnant pediatrician on [what children need during the crisis](#).
- Trump is helping tycoons who have donated to his reëlection campaign [exploit the pandemic](#) to maximize profits.
- Meet the [high-finance mogul](#) in charge of our economic recovery.
- The coronavirus is likely to reshape architecture. What kinds of space are we willing to [live and work in now?](#)

Shouts & Murmurs

- [Dark Sitcom Reboots: Beyond “Bel-Air”](#)

[November 30, 2020 Issue](#)

Rebooted

By [Jay Martel](#)

November 23, 2020

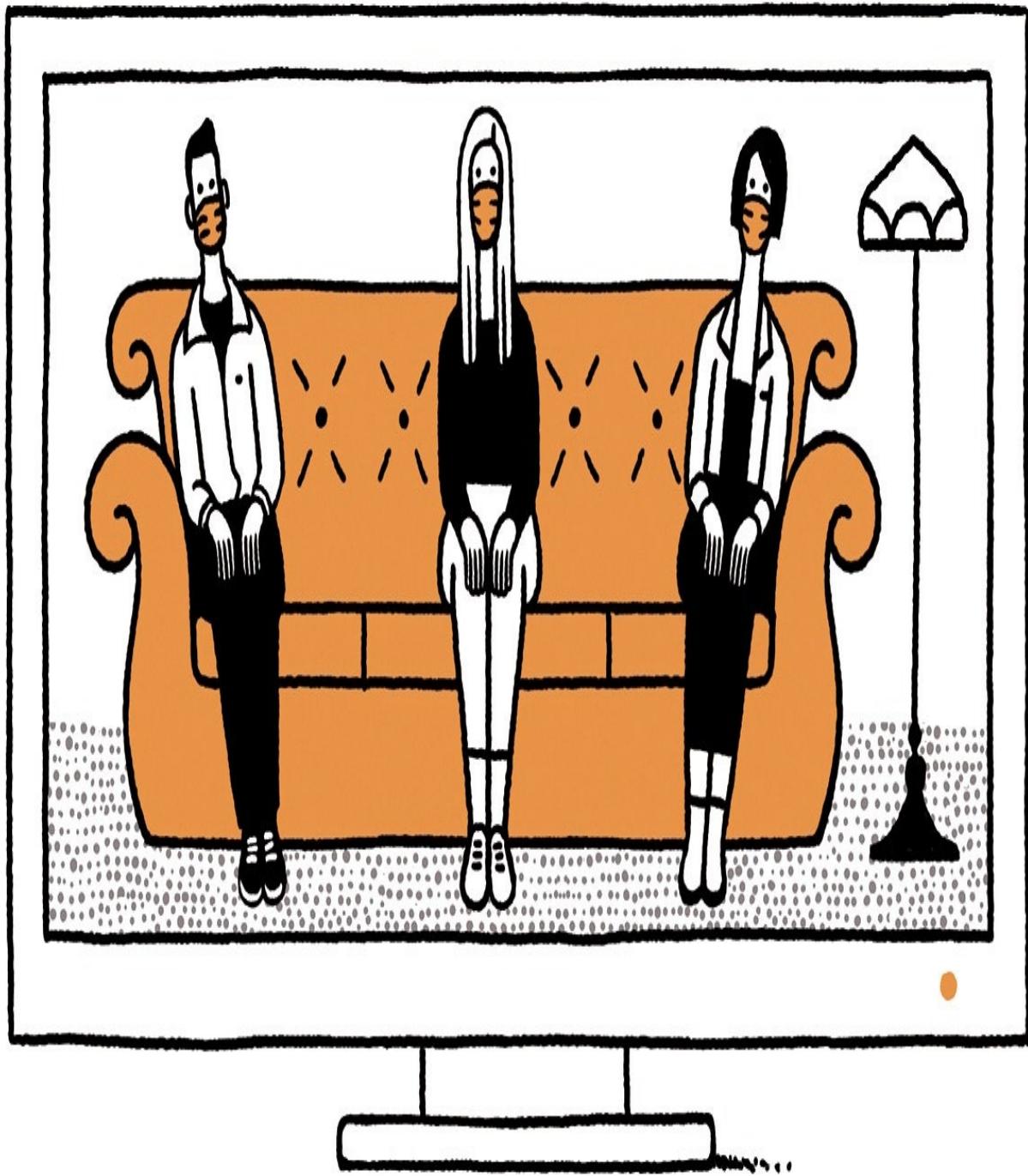


Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

“Bel-Air” is a serialized one-hour dramatic analogue of the 90’s sitcom “The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air” that leans into the original premise: Will’s complicated journey from the streets of West Philadelphia to the gated mansions of Bel-Air.

—Press release from Peacock.

“Lucille” To stay in the United States, Ricardo, a hardworking Latinx immigrant, is forced to marry Lucille, a volatile, racist redhead. Although they live together in a small New York apartment, they sleep in separate beds and lead separate lives. Lucille frequently conspires with her fellow-Karen, a neighbor named Ethel, to thwart Ricardo’s efforts to help other immigrants band together and build a better world.

“Howser” This medical drama is set in a hospital of the future, when the number of adult doctors has been so depleted by pandemics and the broken health-care system that child doctors must fill the void. The hospital’s jaded but seasoned chief physician? Sixteen-year-old Doogie Howser, M.D. “I’m too old for this job,” he growls, as he struggles to save the lives of a pregnant woman and her unborn doctor.

“The Junction” The breakdown of America’s transportation infrastructure is seen through the eyes of three sisters working dead-end, minimum-wage jobs in Hooterville, a depressed rural town. The women and their mother toil long hours at the Shady Rest, a nursing home next to the defunct train station, where the lack of basic facilities necessitates bathing in an old water tank. Though they try to keep their spirits up with listless games of horseshoes, the women are ruthlessly exploited by their fearsome but sluggish patriarch, Uncle Joe.

“How I Never Met Your Mother” Ted Mosby is a single architect looking for a soul mate. Unfortunately, he’s doing this during a global pandemic—an era of Zoom calls, social distancing, terrible dating apps, and drug-resistant herpes. But this doesn’t stop him from trying to find love, with consistently heartbreakingly results—all told in flashbacks, as he sits in an empty living room talking to himself.

“Captain Miller” In the face of Black Lives Matter protests, Captain Barnett Miller of the N.Y.P.D. is given the assignment of turning around the precinct with the highest number of excessive-force claims. Can he reform a deeply ingrained culture and the loose cannons that fuel it—like Detective Wojo, who never met a situation he couldn’t escalate?

“Two and a Half Men” The *COVID* pandemic has wreaked havoc on the life of Alan Harper: his wife succumbed to the virus, and his grown son, Jake, had both legs amputated. To help him care for Jake, Alan reconnects with his estranged brother, Charlie, who wrestles with opioid addiction and a string of angry creditors.

“Huxtable” The sinister ob-gyn at the center of this drama tries to keep a dark secret from his loving family.

“Island” A tale of survival set against the ravages of global warming. Seven day-trippers stranded on an uncharted desert isle combat hurricanes, rising tides, radioactive vegetables, and freak storms. One, known only as the Professor, insists that the disasters are the result of human-induced climate change and urges the group to find higher ground, while anti-science billionaire Thurston Howell III claims that climate events are random, and builds a beachfront mansion out of bamboo. The survivors must choose sides while steering clear of the Captain, a large, rage-filled white man who takes out his guilt over the desperate situation by hitting others with his hat.

“The Nun” A novice assigned to a convent in San Juan becomes aware of a clandestine pedophile ring involving priests. She also learns how to fly.

“Friends?” The haunting title song sums up the mood of this dark drama: *So no one told you life was gonna be this way*. Whom can you trust when anyone in your pod could be carrying a deadly virus? Follow six poorly socialized friends in New York City as they learn that, when you’re this young and good-looking, vows of isolation are difficult to maintain, and breaking them can be lethal.

“I Dream of Jinn-i” When Major Anthony Nelson returns from the war in Iraq, he discovers that the souvenir incense burner he picked up in Baghdad contains Jinn-i, a supernatural being who manifests as a young Islamic woman. Anthony, who is an evangelical Christian, is torn between his feelings for Jinn-i and the need to hide her from his nosy, xenophobic neighbors—especially Reverend Bellows, who moonlights as an *ICE* agent and is convinced that Anthony is harboring a demonic spirit.

“The Really Bad Place” In this thriller, Eleanor, Chidi, Jason, and Tahani wake up from comas in what they think is Hell. What isn’t revealed until the end of Season 1 (spoiler alert) is that they haven’t actually died—they’ve just woken up in 2020. ♦

Six Feet Under Dept.

- [Green-Wood Cemetery's New Artist-in-Residence](#)

[November 30, 2020 Issue](#)

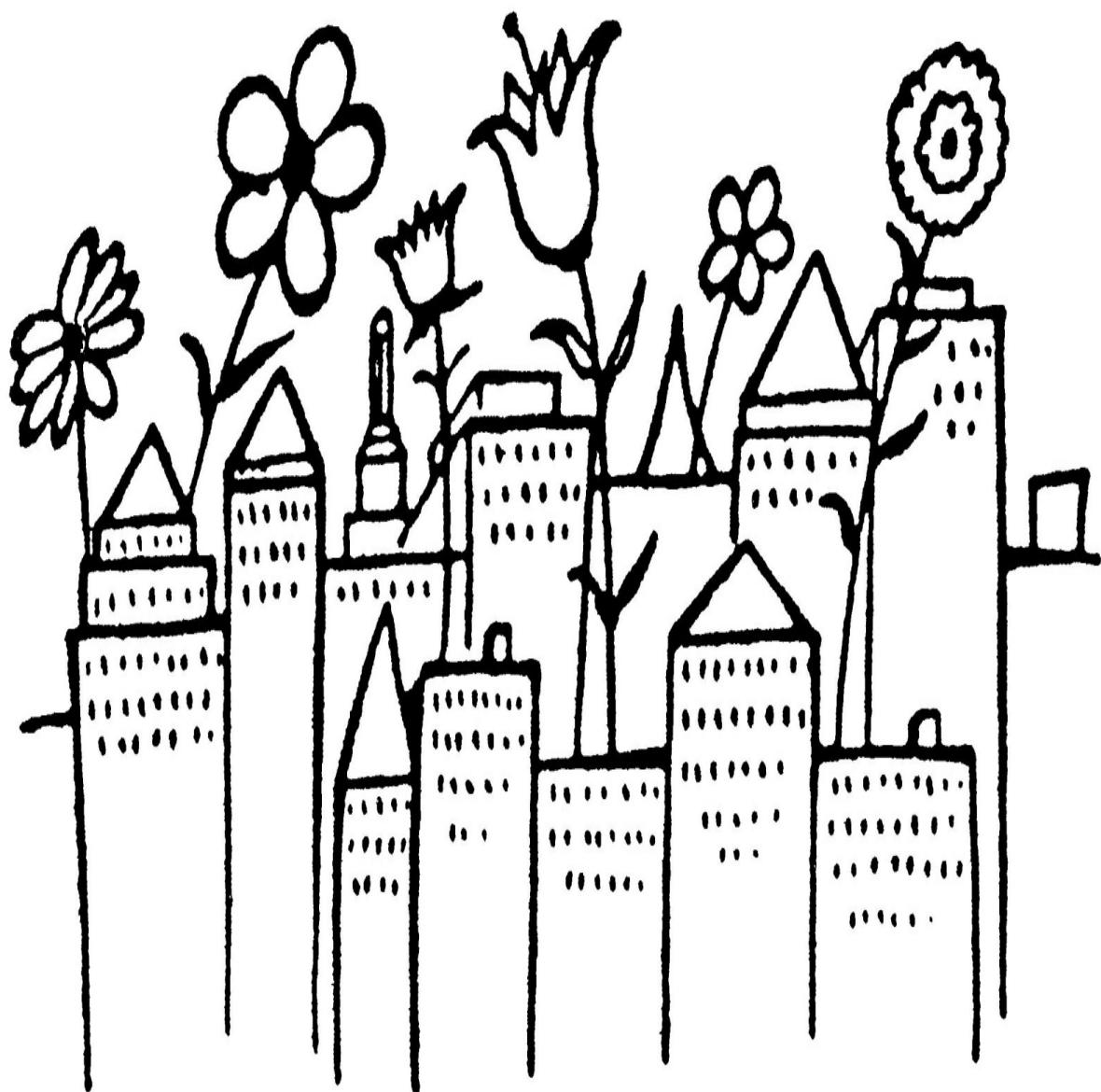
Green-Wood Cemetery's New Artist-in-Residence

With half a million of New York's dead six feet under her studio, Heidi Lau, a ceramic artist, plans to work with Chinese funeral homes for a project inspired by her grandparents' burial rites.

By [Michael Schulman](#)

November 23, 2020

Among the residents of Green-Wood Cemetery, in Brooklyn, are the actor Frank Morgan (1890-1949), who played the title role in "The Wizard of Oz"; Emma Stebbins (1815-82), the sculptor of the Bethesda Fountain angel; and Walter Hunt (1796-1859), who invented the safety pin. This winter, they'll get a new, temporary neighbor. In July, the cemetery called for submissions for its inaugural artist-in-residence program: the recipient would get an honorarium, nine months of on-site studio space, and the chance to create a project "inspired by beautiful natural landscape, stunning monuments, and compelling history." The cemetery expected a few hundred applications; it received nearly a thousand. "Some artists leaned too much on the creepy," Harry Weil, Green-Wood's director of public programs and special projects, said. "We try to avoid that."



The winner was Heidi Lau, a thirty-three-year-old ceramic artist who lives in Chinatown. “A lot of my work has to do with the afterlife,” she said recently, during a walk around her new digs. Lau has short, punky hair and wore a surgical mask and a thrift-store jacket with straitjacket-style buckles. She was born in California but grew up in Macao, and her work includes a clay-chain-mail version of a Han-dynasty jade burial robe. For her residency, she plans to work with local Chinese funeral homes to re-create the elaborate Taoist rites she remembers from when her grandparents died, which include burning joss paper representing money for the afterlife and moving a photograph of the deceased across a miniature bridge. When her appointment was announced on Green-Wood’s Instagram account, she said, she got a spate of new followers, mostly “tattoo goth people.”

Weil met her at the entrance, and a swanky black van pulled up. “We call it the Beyoncé car,” Weil said. Their first stop was the Fort Hamilton Gatehouse, on the south side of the property. It was built in the eighteen-seventies as a rest stop for visitors. “It’s meant to look like a Victorian parlor,” Weil explained, as he led Lau into a wainscotted room that would serve as her private studio. “Wow!” she said, snapping pictures. She had been renting an industrial space in Ridgewood, Queens, and this was way better. Upstairs was a dark attic with a brick chimney in the center. (“There must be a fireplace, but we can’t find one,” Weil said. *Creepy.*) Lau was elated. “I’m going to, like, roll around on the floor when I move in,” she said.



"If we're lucky, Aunt Jane will seat us at the children's table—out of the line of fire."

They took the Beyoncé car to the Yard, a building containing a woodshop, a horticulture center, and a restoration studio, crammed with mausoleum chunks and an angel that had fallen over during a storm. Weil showed Lau a musty welding shop, where she would store her kiln. “The two people who did the metalwork both retired, so the shop has been kind of vacant,” he said. Back in the van, they drove past the final resting place of John Matthews (1808-70), known as the Soda Fountain King. “He perfected making soda,” Weil said.

“Thank you!” Lau shouted out the window. She asked if there were “term limits” on the burial sites. Weil said that families own their plots indefinitely. In Macao, Lau said, most burial plots are rented for seven years: “After that, they take out your bones, grind them up, and put them into an urn. So almost nobody gets a plot forever.” She said that she has always been interested in “the other side.” When she was a child, her grandmother would bring her to a Taoist temple, point to a statue of the gatekeeper of Hell, and tell her, “Say hi to your great-grandfather.” (As a girl, her grandmother had been seriously ill, and her family had performed a ritual to make her the gatekeeper’s goddaughter, for protection.) In 2016, Lau’s mother died, of leukemia, and was buried in Macao. “Having seen her relatives go through the Cultural Revolution, she really wanted to have a ‘good death,’ because so many of her relatives didn’t,” she said. “Their bodies were never found. She always had this idea, ‘I want to be in the ground.’ ”

Not everyone would want to work alone in a cemetery, but Lau said that the place gave her a “strange sense of peace.” She went on, “Sometimes I think, How do I want to be buried? As a diasporic person, what is my final place? Is it Macao or here? Or I can get cremated and have my ashes be in two different places, like my life is?” ♦

Tables for Two

- [Hatch Chilies and Southwestern Hygge at Ursula](#)

[November 30, 2020 Issue](#)

Hatch Chilies and Southwestern Hygge at Ursula

At his Crown Heights café, the Albuquerque transplant Eric See infuses everything from breakfast burritos to pillow-y fry breads with the spirit of New Mexico, and with plenty of its chilies, hand-delivered by his mother.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

November 20, 2020



On a trip to New Mexico, some years ago, I got off the plane in Albuquerque, took my first look at the high desert, and declared, wide-eyed and with an uncharacteristic lack of cynicism, “This place is magical.” In the parking lot of Frontier Restaurant, a beloved cafeteria where I did as the locals do and smeared honey on warm flour tortillas, I realized how far from an original thought it was: the official state nickname, immortalized on license plates, is Land of Enchantment. (The unofficial version is Land of Entrapment; once people arrive, they tend not to leave.)



New Mexican sopaipillas, a type of deep-fried pastry dough, are sliced in half and used to sandwich refried beans with carne adovada, ground beef, or vegan Spanish rice, then showered in lettuce, tomato, Cheddar cheese or vegan queso, and red-chili sauce. Photograph by Cole Wilson for The New Yorker

In September, Eric See, an Albuquerque native and pastry chef who's lived on the East Coast for ten years, imported a bit of that ineffable spirit to New York when he opened Ursula, a Crown Heights café named for his New Mexican grandmother and inspired by his home state in ways both obvious and subtle. The question of what New Yorkers will do to find solace in what seems likely to be a grim and isolating winter has been resounding in the past few weeks. As I stood in line for a made-to-order breakfast burrito and a warm spiced drink one recent wet, chilly morning, I felt my mood rising—*hygge* by way of the Southwest.



New Mexico-inspired pastries include, clockwise from left: a vegan lemon-saffron poppy loaf; an apple-cider doughnut; a rosewater concha; a red chili-passion fruit doughnut; and a Mexican wedding cookie. Photograph by Cole Wilson for The New Yorker

That the breakfast burritos are the lowest-hanging fruit—available only until noon, they tend to sell out on weekends—does not mean that they’re overrated. Though I can’t in good conscience recommend drinking alcohol to excess, I can tell you that the concert of scrambled egg, bacon, shredded hash browns, Cheddar cheese, and green Hatch chili, wrapped tightly in a flour tortilla and lightly griddled, is so obviously a cure for a hangover that it inspired in me a perverse desire to be nursing one.

When possible, See gets his Hatch chilies, a category that encompasses several flavorful, mild-to-hot types grown, and often roasted, by farms in New Mexico’s Hatch Valley, from the source. In September, his mother bought seventy-five pounds of fresh green ones near Albuquerque, peeled and chopped them, sealed them in plastic bags, as is the custom in New Mexico—“If it didn’t come in a Ziploc bag, then I don’t trust it,” See told me, only half joking—and froze them, before hand-delivering them to New York. When circumstances prevent this transport system, he plans to use a mix of a dehydrated stash and a jarred variety from Zia Hatch Chile Company, a Brooklyn-based brand started by a transplant from Santa Fe.



Breakfast burritos are available only until noon. The beverage menu includes espresso drinks and oat-milk tea lattes that showcase combinations such as rose petal, palo santo, cinnamon, and hibiscus. Photograph by Cole Wilson for The New Yorker

Chilies are crucial to the menu, showing up in the passion-fruit glaze on a pillow-y doughnut, in *sopaipillas*—a traditional New Mexican fry bread that gets sliced in half to sandwich refried pinto beans and *carne adovada* (New Mexico-style braised pork), ground beef, or vegan Spanish rice—and in the aioli on the smoked-turkey B.L.T., See's twist on a beloved specialty known as the Albuquerque turkey. (Chilies can also be ordered as stand-alone sides.) But they're far from his only reference to the region. Scones are made with blue corn, an essential ingredient in the cuisine of the state's Native American tribes. The idea for a lavender-brined-chicken-and-feta sandwich came out of See's affection for two New Mexican farms: a now closed goat dairy called the Old Windmill and Los Poblanos, which grows lavender in Albuquerque.



The poblano relleno is overflowing with green chili, quinoa, riced cauliflower, posole, and roasted Koginut squash. Photograph by Cole Wilson for The New Yorker

In general, the state's climate is good for shrubby herbs and other woody plants; "holistic herbalism," See explained, holds a place of pride in the culture. When liver damage stopped See from drinking alcohol, he turned toward tea as a remedy, getting deep into making his own blends, which he sells at a Brooklyn bazaar called Oddities Flea Market. At Ursula, he uses them in oat-milk lattes, combining palo santo with rose petals, cinnamon, and hibiscus, or rooibos with toasted rice, cinnamon, and vanilla bean, in homage to the Mexican drink *horchata*. Equal parts comforting and enchanting, they're one idea for fending off the January blues. (Dishes \$9-\$14.) ♦

The Art World

- [The Metropolitan Museum at a Hundred and Fifty](#)

The Metropolitan Museum at a Hundred and Fifty

The museum is our Home Depot of the soul. It has just about whatever you want, and it has a lot of it.

By [Peter Schjeldahl](#)

November 23, 2020



“Here time becomes space.” A famously enigmatic line from Richard Wagner’s “Parsifal” toyed with my mind during a recent visit, my first since last winter, to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It chimed with my experience as I prowled the prodigious institution, which has been celebrating, in a pandemically muted manner, its hundred-and-fiftieth birthday as the world’s chief encyclopedic art museum. “Making the Met,” a huge show, roughly tracks the sequence of the museum’s acquisitions and policies since its founding, in 1870. A hundred and fifty is a lot of years, though a mere flicker compared with the five millennia’s worth of objects from the permanent collections that are sampled in the show.

If you’re so inclined, there’s much to think about when considering the successive mind-sets of patrician New York, from Eurocentric Victorian tastes to universalist ideals—an evolution that has rarely been rapid. Art that the Met deemed “primitive” was initially consigned to the American Museum of Natural History, across Central Park. This gaffe was remedied in the nineteen-seventies with spectacular gifts of African and Polynesian items that Nelson Rockefeller had amassed for his own Museum of Primitive Art. Photography, scorned for decades, arrived with a bang in the twenties and thirties, thanks to the indefatigable lobbying of Alfred Stieglitz. Three exquisite crepuscular prints of the Flatiron Building, by Edward Steichen, from 1904, heralded that breakthrough. But derelictions persist from the starchy conservatism that long retarded the museum’s engagement with twentieth-century art, when it lazily let the Museum of Modern Art get the best stuff while the getting was good. Complaints about chronic cluelessness at the Met were once common in the art world, unmitigated by such maladroit stabs at contemporaneity as “New York Painting and Sculpture,” a show in 1969 by the putatively hip curator Henry Geldzahler, which mistook abstract painting as the wave of the future and included just one woman, Helen Frankenthaler, and no Black artists. And the less that’s remembered the better of a patronizing debacle from the same year, “Harlem on My Mind,” which again excluded artists of color. The Met is endeavoring to counter its legacy of benightedness on this score, but, like the turning of a battleship, the process is gradual.

On the other hand, and meanwhile, c’mon. The Met is our Home Depot of the soul. It has just about whatever you want, and it has a lot of it, very largely the harvest of past donations, en masse, of the collections of major

benefactors—a New York tradition that, per a bequest in 1969, entitled the banker Robert Lehman to require the construction of a whole new wing, devoted to his gifts. (That was annoying, but the art was worth it.) It needs to be said that recent scholarship has cast shade on the robber-baron and colonialist provenance of many Met treasures—a problem shared by other formerly piratical museums worldwide. But it's hard to gainsay, to start with, the tremendous value of the museum's foundational commitment to ancient Egyptian (hello, Temple of Dendur, 1978), Greek, and Roman treasures, from the Mediterranean cradles of Western tradition, even as it has extended its aegis to Asian, African, and other cultures, most recently with a wondrous refurbishment of the Islamic galleries, completed in 2011.



A Noh costume, with cherry blossoms and fretwork, from the first half of the eighteenth century. Art work courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art

If there's ever a hitch to enjoying the Met, it's satiety: so much, so all at once. But that keeps us coming back—and the inability to do so for months during the *COVID* lockdown felt like a spell of localized brain damage. To return now exhilarated me—those marble halls, the noble stairs, the niche concentrations of thises and thats. Time becomes space, indeed, in stilled torrents of forms and epochs that engulf you, wherever you chance to stand. “Making the Met” magnifies the utter variousness of the place. If the effect is disorderly—with a time line cutting across departmental divisions and educational chronologies—so are we these days. I’m for rolling with it.

The show starts with a chapel-like room emphasizing the museum’s present collecting goals—a political statement, unavoidably. There’s a van Gogh painting, a Rodin sculpture, a sixteenth-century Nepalese mask, a wooden power figure from the Kongo Kingdom, a Greek marble stele, a Surrealist sculpture by Isamu Noguchi, and a Richard Avedon photograph of Marilyn Monroe. Do the juxtapositions disorient? Good. You’re primed for a panoply of incongruities with a cumulatively odd effect on aesthetic perception. Anachronism reigns. An early masterpiece by Édouard Manet, “Young Lady in 1866,” predates in the acquisition annals a set of carved stone fragments of an Aramaic palace in what is now Syria (circa the tenth or ninth century B.C.). I think I never looked at those before; they’re terrific.

Profiting greatly are items of craft and decoration—keenly selected ceramics, jewelry, armor, furniture, and whatnot—granted solo appearances away from their normally crowded shelves and vitrines. Some startle. A framed swatch of wallpaper, from 1922, by the tragically short-lived Wiener Werkstätte designer Dagobert Peche, ambushed me into rapture: bright leafy and floral accents scattered across a ground of depth-shaded vertical bands of ambrosial color. (I’ve been a Peche nut since a retrospective of his work at the Neue Galerie in 2002.) The design seemed to essentialize a human will to beauty as a matter of workaday routine: ordinary ecstasy. Come to think of it, almost everything on display in “Making the Met” crowned a good day for someone, craftsman or artist, who was charged with some specific purpose, generating for the viewer a parade of privileged encounters that bestir bygone forms to present-tense eloquence.

The show’s strangest effect, for me, was a relative deflation of major art, as a consequence of having been made to compete with a melee of minor but

pestering charms. Paintings by Manet, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Chardin, and many another master, popping up unpredictably, felt almost apologetic for diverting toward profundity a general flow of enthusiasm for any and all instances of sufficiently motivated creativity. Those painters are gods to me, and I'll want their works returned to suitably dignified hangings. But it's valuable, as an antidote to excessive piety, to register the raw fact of physical existence that they share with innumerable other made things, each with something or other to say for itself and about the human appetite for betterment, whatever the occasion. The show induces a kind of therapeutic delirium. Aesthetic response rejoices as readily in the eye-catching as in the sublime. The vacation from serious judgment seemed to me serious in itself, a reminder that nothing possesses inherent qualities except by attribution, necessarily ratified in personal experience. (Beauty really is in the eye, among other faculties, of the beholder; that's where it can do the most good.) Putting revered works to hard tests, as "Making the Met" does, disrupts and may thereby reground their wonted hold on us.



"Street Story Quilt," by Faith Ringgold, from 1985. Art work courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art © Faith Ringgold

Roaming the museum apart from the show, I found the levelling effect hard to shake, tamping down my giddiness at being back in the great building and dispersing my promiscuous surrender to the show's seductive bibelots. Regular stops for me, like "Bather (from a fountain group)," a fantastically poignant young figure in white marble from 1782 by Jean-Antoine Houdon, felt off duty, as if backstage awaiting a cue. I evaded disappointment by skipping the Renaissance, Mannerist, and Baroque demiurges—Bellini, Tintoretto, Velázquez—who normally rivet me. The reason was a mildly estranging reminder of how artificial the assumptions and protocols of museums tend to be. Like any learned behavior, museumgoing can slip the mind. I had a flash memory of being a bored kid, thrust into a mysterious jumble of things that grownups insisted I like. (I liked some, but sullenly.) That mood befits, I've decided, a thaw of sensibility after a period of benumbing house arrest. I keep noting that the objects are the same, but we who view them are different now: not resuming, rebeginning. Loving art always involves catching up to ourselves. I count on my Met touchstones to be more sociable, and myself to be less self-conscious, when next we meet.

There's looking at art, and then there's thinking about it, which can sprawl without limits across our apprehension of the ways of the world. The Met's anniversary show affords stimulus for a great deal of both, rather bravely inviting skeptical scrutiny of the institution's record of cardinal decisions. Every choice made during the museum's century and a half—what to display, and how, and why—settled an in-house argument that can percolate anew, when confined to aesthetics, or that may run afoul of latter-day cultural and political realities. Most institutions tend to be clumsy beasts in this respect, on the back foot of critical and social changes that may either confirm or trash the wisdom that they presume to embody. I think of a section in the show that celebrates Met personnel who, as "monuments men," rescued Nazi-looted art works during the late stages of the Second World War—a point of pride that touches on discomfiting issues, some not yet resolved, of the works' proper ownership and disposition. (Rounding the stuff up was the easy part.) Most gravely, as an open wound, there's the fact that, until the last two rooms, the show features hardly a Western work that isn't by a white man. The behemoth museum details—and embarrasses—the moral character of what has been mirrored to us as the sum of a comprehensive civilization: a heritage to be lived with and, by the way, lived down.

It's nice to see a painting by Romare Bearden, a consummate artist who was long burdened with token status in the art world. More satisfying still, there's "Street Story Quilt" (1985), an array of three large sewn panels by Faith Ringgold. Formally commanding, the multicolored suite captures in sprightly imagery and describes in demotic words a host of Black citizens—real lives, really led—in windows of tenements along a city street that's past due for intersecting with Fifth Avenue. ♦

The Pictures

- [Don't Typecast Lesley Manville](#)

[November 30, 2020 Issue](#)

Don't Typecast Lesley Manville

The British actor, known for her work in Mike Leigh's films, discusses nailing a North Dakota accent, playing Margaret Thatcher, and becoming Princess Margaret for "The Crown."

By [Sarah Larson](#)

November 23, 2020

The British actor Lesley Manville, O.B.E., is best known for her wide-ranging, expressive work in Mike Leigh's films—she has appeared in eight of them, including "Secrets & Lies" and "Another Year"—and for her Oscar-nominated performance in Paul Thomas Anderson's "Phantom Thread," as Cyril, the serenely iron-fisted sister of Daniel Day-Lewis's dressmaker character. ("Don't pick a fight with me—you certainly won't come out alive," she tells him, mildly, sipping her tea. "I'll go right through you and it'll be you who ends up on the floor.") On a recent, rare day off, Manville, sixty-four, cheerfully Zooming from an apartment in Budapest, wore a striped shirt and dangly geometric earrings, her hair in a relaxed updo. "It's a national holiday here," she said. After "Phantom Thread," Manville declined offers for several Cyril-like roles. "I don't want to get up every morning and do the same performance," she said. "I want to get up and think, I'm going to be Blanche Weboy today. And now I'm going to be sweet Mrs. Harris."



Lesley Manville Illustration by João Fazenda

In her current project, “Mrs. Harris Goes to Paris,” Manville is Mrs. Harris, and Budapest is Paris. “It’s like a musical without music,” she said. “A bit of, Is she going to fall in love with him? Is he going to fall in love with her? Is she going to get the dress? Isn’t she? It’s just delightful.” Thomas Bezucha’s “Let Him Go,” released this month, is less of an escapist confection. Kevin Costner and Diane Lane play ranchers in mid-twentieth-century Montana who travel to North Dakota to confront the menacing Weboy clan, who have the couple’s toddler grandson. Blanche is the Weboys’ chain-smoking, platinum-blond matriarch. Her jocular first line—“I hope you like pork chops!”—inspires trembling.

“I’ve played Americans onstage in England,” Manville said. (“Long Day’s Journey Into Night,” “Six Degrees of Separation.”) “But I haven’t played an American in an American film.” She’d also never attempted a North Dakota accent. “The director said, ‘Don’t worry too much about the North Dakota.’ Well, that is like a red rag to a bull to me. If she’s from North Dakota, I’m going to do North Dakota! Years ago, I played Margaret Thatcher in a little drama documentary. They said, ‘Don’t worry about doing the voice.’ I thought, It’s all right if she sounds like she’s from the Gorbals in Glasgow? Of course I’ve got to do Thatcher.” She worked with a dialect coach for Blanche. “He said, ‘The thing about North Dakota is that it’s very musical: “I hope you like *pork chops!*”’” Manville waved her finger up and down, as if tracing notes on a scale. “Bop-bop! It should have this kind of song to it.”

Manville sang before she acted. She grew up in Brighton, on the southern coast of England. “My parents were rather glamorous—quite a sexy couple,” she said. Her mother was a former ballet dancer. “My dad was a Jack-of-all-trades: a bookmaker, a taxi-driver, a plumber. I idolized him. He was very charismatic, a bit of a crooner. We used to sing duets. My sister Diana and I had good classical singing voices, and we’d go entertain people at little cabaret clubs,” she continued. “People might be playing bingo. We’d put on our little catsuits and sing a few songs and get paid a pound.” At fifteen, she went to London, to study singing, then dance, then acting: “I did anything and everything. I did pantomime, I did TV, I did children’s-show presenting, I did a musical. Then”—at the Royal Shakespeare Company—“I met Mike Leigh, and the rest is history.”

In March, Manville was starring in Tony Kushner's adaptation of Dürrenmatt's "The Visit," at the National Theatre, when *COVID* hit. "I live on my own in London," she said. "I couldn't see my son"—Alfie Oldman, thirty-two—"for twenty weeks." In lockdown, she kept busy. She filmed a monologue for Nicholas Hytner's production of Alan Bennett's "Talking Heads." "I narrated that HBO series 'Love Life'—ten episodes, from my walk-in wardrobe," she said. "I did two audiobooks, from the same said walk-in wardrobe. But I did slow down. I still had time to clean my cupboards." Now, in Budapest, "Sunday is a lovely free day"; she reads books about Princess Margaret, whom she will play in Seasons 5 and 6 of "The Crown," succeeding Helena Bonham Carter. "I'm so excited," Manville said. She hadn't yet seen Season 4. "I'm in Budapest to December, so I'm quite happy to start binge-watching," she said. ♦

U.S. Journal

- [The Heavy Toll of the Black Belt's Wastewater Crisis](#)

The Heavy Toll of the Black Belt's Wastewater Crisis

Many rural households in America don't have access to safe sewage systems. In Alabama, entrenched poverty and unusual geology have created a public-health disaster.

By [Alexis Okeowo](#)

November 23, 2020



When Pamela Rush was a young woman, in the late nineties, she moved into a trailer on an orange-dirt road in Collirene, Alabama. Rush's home sat on half an acre of land, surrounded by lush woods, and her sister Almedia lived in another trailer on the same plot. The family had bought Rush's trailer, a pale-blue single-wide, a few years earlier. She moved in to take care of her aging mother, and ended up staying for decades.

At forty-eight, Rush had full cheeks and a shy way of carrying herself. She looked everyone in the eye, but often had to be reminded to speak up. "Everybody in the neighborhood knows her," her niece Veronica said. Rush's family was one of the largest in the area, and she got together nearly every weekend with her six sisters and their children—eating, drinking, playing cards, catching up.

But Rush hesitated to invite visitors inside her trailer. It was falling apart. The walls were porous, and in hot weather the energy bill came to more than three hundred dollars a month. To save money, and to keep out rodents, she stuffed rags into holes and set traps outside the door; she kept a running tally of the opossums she caught. Trailer homes often begin losing value as soon as buyers take them off the lot. Because Rush's mortgage had exceptionally high interest, she had paid for hers twice over already: a hundred and fourteen thousand dollars, with some fifteen thousand still to go. Her total income—including disability payments and some support from the father of her children—was less than a thousand dollars a month.

Rush's home is in a part of Alabama known as the Black Belt, named for its rich, dark topsoil, which in the years before the Civil War made cotton the state's main source of wealth. Now the farming that was once done by enslaved people and sharecroppers is mostly done by seasonal workers and machines. Jobs are scarce. Lowndes County, which includes Collirene, is one of the poorest counties in one of America's poorest states.

The dirt in the region, ideal for planting cotton, isn't good for much else. It sits in a thin layer atop impermeable clay-laden soil, which, in the early days of agriculture there, frustrated farmers trying to dig wells. Now the problem is more often with sewage. The state of Alabama mandates that anyone who is not on a municipal sewer line—which includes eighty per cent of Black Belt residents—invest in a private waste-management system. But

conventional septic tanks, which store sewage until it can be filtered by the earth and consumed by microbes, are often defeated by the dense soil. For these conditions, the state recommends a “mound” system, which uses piled-up dirt to filter waste. Yet, in a region with a high water table and intense rains exacerbated by climate change, the mounds frequently erode and the tanks fail, sending sewage back through toilets, sinks, and bathtubs. In Lowndes County, at least forty per cent of households have an inadequate septic system or none at all.

In Alabama, not having a functioning septic system is a criminal misdemeanor. Residents can be fined as much as five hundred dollars per citation, evicted, and even arrested. Rush’s sister Viola was once arrested for a sewage violation. But installing a new system can cost as much as twenty thousand dollars, which is more than the average person in Lowndes County makes in a year. Instead, Rush, like her neighbors, used a pipe to empty waste into the grass outside—a practice, called straight-piping, that is not uncommon in much of rural America. (At least one in five homes in the U.S. is not on a municipal sewer line.) Floods carry sewage across people’s lawns and into their living areas, bringing with it the risk of viruses, bacteria, and parasites that thrive in feces. Studies have found *E. coli* and fecal coliform throughout the Black Belt, in wells and in public waters. A United Nations rapporteur on extreme poverty, visiting in 2017, said that the sewage problem was unlike anything else he had encountered in the developed world. “This is not a sight that one normally sees,” he said.

Rush’s situation got so bad that, in 2017, her sister Barbara sent a Facebook message to an environmental activist named Catherine Coleman Flowers. For two decades, Flowers has helped people struggling with sewage problems in Alabama. (She was recently named a MacArthur Fellow.) A petite woman of sixty-two, with a gentle drawl and a no-nonsense demeanor, Flowers is a reassuring presence; she grew up in Lowndes County and is distantly related to Rush, as she is to many people in the area. Still, she was shocked when she saw the trailer. “She showed me how they were living, and I cried,” Flowers told me.



"What's it like having a famous father?"

When I started visiting Flowers to report on her work, the following year, she took me to see Rush, who greeted us warmly and led us inside. The trailer was dim and claustrophobic, though Rush took care to keep it clean. Sheer pink-and-blue curtains swayed in front of a window. Rush's nine-year-old daughter, Bianca, had a bedroom at one end of the trailer, but she spent most nights on the living-room couch, because the power was out in her room and she needed a *CPAP* machine to breathe while she slept. (Rush had diabetes and, like her daughter, difficulty breathing at times.) Rush's son, Jeremiah, also lived there; he had a learning disability and, at sixteen, was still in middle school. The foul moisture in Rush's yard seemed to penetrate the trailer, and mold bloomed on Bianca's bedroom walls.

When Flowers first met Rush, she gave her the same talk that she gives everyone: "I can't promise you anything, but what I will do is bring people who have the means to see the problem, and hopefully one of them will be moved enough to help you." She began inviting influential visitors. The [Reverend William J. Barber II](#), of the Poor People's Campaign, came to see the place. So did Jane Fonda. Bernie Sanders made a campaign video that showed him embracing Rush and telling her that he would not forget about her.

In the summer of 2018, Flowers met Rush at the speck of an airport in Montgomery, about fifty minutes from Collirene, to see her off to Washington. Rush was due to appear in a congressional hearing on poverty, testifying before Sanders, Elijah Cummings, Elizabeth Warren, and Cory Booker. It would be her first time on a plane, but she didn't mind; she had Bianca and Almedia with her.

The next day, she sat before the senators, wearing a patterned blouse and a necklace with a cross on it. "Hi, my name is Pamela Rush, and I'm from Lowndes County, Alabama," she began. "I live in a mobile home with my two kids." She started to cry, and put her hand up to shield her face. As she explained her situation, Warren nodded sympathetically. Booker appeared stricken. "I got raw sewage, and I don't have no money," she said, looking at the politicians as if they needed help understanding something simple. "I'm poor. I couldn't buy my children stuff for what they need."

Catherine Coleman Flowers grew up surrounded by activism. Montgomery is where Rosa Parks refused to surrender her bus seat in 1955. A decade later, Martin Luther King, Jr., led marchers to Montgomery from Selma, fifty-four miles away along Highway 80, to push Congress to pass the Voting Rights Act. The civil-rights leader [John Lewis](#) was born one county over, near Troy, where his parents were sharecroppers.

Flowers's mother, Mattie, worked as a teacher's aide and drove a school bus; her father, J.C., was a stock handler at an Air Force base in Montgomery, until he was injured on the job. Both were deeply involved in the local civil-rights movement. They opened their home to activists such as Stokely Carmichael, who helped start a Black political party called the Lowndes County Freedom Organization. J.C. was known throughout the county as fearless: he carried guns where white men could see them and helped guard a camp of Black families left homeless after their white landlords evicted them for voting. Mattie advocated for women who endured forced sterilizations at a hospital in Tuskegee; she, too, had been subjected to an involuntary tubal ligation, after the birth of her fifth child.

The county was known during the civil-rights era as Bloody Lowndes, for the campaign of murders, attacks, and evictions that whites inflicted on their Black neighbors. Today, some ten thousand people live in Lowndes, and about seven thousand are Black. Many are descendants of enslaved people who worked the plantations of the Black Belt, and owning the land where their ancestors were used as forced labor is a source of pride. But white landowners hold most of the area's prime real estate. "The best land in Lowndes County has always been owned by white folks, from slavery through the present," Hasan Kwame Jeffries, an associate professor of history at Ohio State University and the author of "Bloody Lowndes," a book on power and race in the region, told me. "The wealth is tied to the land, and that land never transferred hands."

Flowers attended Alabama State University, a historically Black school in Montgomery, where she helped fight to prevent a merger with two traditionally white state universities. She left school for a time and took an internship at the Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change, in Atlanta, then finished her undergraduate degree at Cameron University and earned a master's at the University of Nebraska. Afterward,

she taught public school in Washington, D.C., and in North Carolina; she took her classes on field trips to Selma, and filed discrimination complaints on behalf of students. In the nineties, she was briefly the director of Selma's National Voting Rights Museum and Institute, and taught at a Detroit magnet school. But, in 2000, with her father in poor health, Flowers decided to move back home.

A distant cousin of Flowers's was leading the Lowndes County Commission, and he helped bring her in as an adviser on economic development. To her surprise, one of the most pressing issues was sewage. Sometimes the problems were apparent from residents' stinking yards. Other times, they surfaced in legal processes. A pastor was arrested because his church lacked a working septic tank. A husband and wife were threatened with arrest because their sewage leaked onto the road. Flowers met a family of six who had been forced from their home because the health department deemed their septic tank substandard; they had moved into tents at a campground.

In 2004, Flowers founded the Alabama Center for Rural Enterprise (ACRE), a nonprofit focussed on poverty, and started finding people to teach her the basics of soil chemistry and septic-tank design. With a grant from the Environmental Protection Agency, she launched a county-wide survey, going door-to-door and asking residents if they were having trouble with waste management. One woman had a stain running around the walls from sewage that had flooded her house; another had been forced to take out a loan to remove her carpet. "When I was growing up, we had raw sewage running back into our house, but we thought it was just a plumbing problem," Flowers told me. "It was only after we did the house-to-house survey that we realized these were not isolated situations. One reason it's been hidden for so long is because this is not something people just talk about. Who sits around and says, 'Oh, the sewage ran back into my house today'?"

In 2008, Flowers also began working with the Equal Justice Initiative, a Montgomery-based organization led by the attorney and activist [Bryan Stevenson](#). In Lowndes County, she intervened on behalf of residents who found themselves in court for sewage violations; she helped pay for septic-tank upgrades; and she persuaded donors to cover hotel rooms and storage spaces for people displaced from their homes. In Washington and in Montgomery, she advocated for more effective policies and greater

awareness of the problem. “This is not what I thought I would be working on when I came back to Alabama,” she recalled, laughing. “But I knew there was not going to be any meaningful economic development if people did not have a certain quality of life in their homes. And wastewater is so basic. You can’t really attract any kind of businesses into a community if you don’t have adequate wastewater treatment.” It seemed clear to Flowers that the county was waiting for residents to fix the problem themselves. “They’re doing crisis management and hoping it will go away,” she said.

In Hayneville, the seat of Lowndes County, nearly every important building sits along Tuskeena Street. There’s the telephone company and the town hall (which shares a building with the fire department), the middle school, an auto-parts shop, a Dollar General, and the Southview Worship Center, all surrounded by sprawling parking lots. Most residents commute to work in other counties, where there are more opportunities. The ones with jobs closer to home—for local Hyundai suppliers, at the school, or in the shops—enjoy the easy trip between work and the grocery store and church.

Hayneville, once centered on cotton production, is struggling to find a new identity. One part of town—the white part—still evokes a genteel way of life. Down Tuskeena Street from the Greek Revival courthouse is a row of handsome homes with springy, neon-green lawns. But turn off onto a dead-end road called Pine Street and there is another row of homes, occupied by Black families who live next to a municipal sewage lagoon.



When Catherine Coleman Flowers began working to help people who had sewage in their homes, she found that the issue persists in part because no one wants to talk about it. "Who sits around and says, 'Oh, the sewage ran back into my house today?'" she said. Photograph by Devin Lunsford for The New Yorker

From above, the lagoon looks like a pair of sickly green pools, the size of several football fields, surrounded by foliage. The system was designed so that sewage from Hayneville and from truck stops on a nearby highway flows into the lagoon, where algae and bacteria break it down. But, during rainy weather, a shimmering dark lake backs into the lawns of the brick houses on Pine Street. Even on dry days, puddles of wastewater form along the roadside, drawing swarms of mosquitoes.

"I first learned about the lagoon when we were doing the house-to-house surveys," Flowers said. "We went to visit Miss Charlie Mae." Charlie Mae Holcombe's house, a tidy one-level, stood just yards from the lagoon. When it rained, sewage lapped onto her property. At times, waste gathered in her bathtub, or came out of faucets in a black gush. "She was probably the only person on her street that was really complaining loudly," Flowers said. "So I was very happy to meet her."

When we visited, Holcombe welcomed us kindly, her graying hair in braided pigtails. She and her husband were sick of smelling raw sewage, she told us. Their house, like their neighbors', was connected to a community septic tank that emptied into the lagoon, and she paid the town a waste-management fee. But the tank regularly malfunctioned, adding to the flooding from the lagoon. When sewage collected on their lawns, the Holcombes and their neighbors called the city, which sent workers to pump it out. (Local authorities declined to confirm facts for this article.) Holcombe had been calling the city about the lagoon for nearly three decades; she had recently taken out a loan to replace her flooring for a second time.

To some officials, sewage problems are as much a matter of personal responsibility as of public health. In 2018, Sherry Bradley, of the Alabama Department of Public Health, suggested to a reporter that people who were being flooded by the lagoon should have known better than to buy houses on Pine Street. "Well, they moved there," she said. Bradley leads the department's Bureau of Environmental Services, which regulates home-wastewater management throughout the state. She told the reporter, "If you've got sewage on the ground, it's your fault that you're dumping sewage on the ground." Bradley, who is Black, added, "I was raised poor, but we

were proud. We were clean.” (She maintains that she was quoted out of context.)

Flowers argues that the sanitation disaster is a product of long-standing inequities. “A reason this problem has perpetuated for so long was because they blamed it on poor ignorant Black people who don’t know how to flush a toilet or take care of a septic system,” she said. Wealthier residents have an easier solution: they pay someone to fix their septic system. Health departments in the Black Belt issue permits for septic work in predominantly white counties at more than three times the rate as in predominantly Black counties. “There have been intentional structures put in place, undergirded by racism, to keep the county poor,” Flowers said. “Not having access to decent housing creates a lot of other kinds of injustices. It creates health-care disparities. It leads to not having a decent wage.”

To Flowers, the neglect of the sanitation problem in Lowndes County is as obvious an environmental injustice as the contamination of drinking water in Flint, Michigan. “It’s these places where dirty industries want to go,” she says. According to a report by the N.A.A.C.P. and the Clean Air Task Force, Black people are seventy-five per cent more likely than the average American to live near industrial plants and service facilities, including those that handle hazardous waste. In 2005, Lowndes County residents fought off an effort by Waste Management, one of the country’s largest trash-collection firms, to build a landfill along the route of King’s march. Soon afterward, another company proposed building a landfill on the banks of the Alabama River.

For decades, the state and county governments’ disinterest in the problem transferred the burden of care to activists and local leaders. Steven L. Reed, the mayor of Montgomery, told me, “There’s a numbness to suffering and pain in communities of color. Because of the lack of diversity at the state level—we’ve not had one Black governor—that awareness is often missing.”

Flowers had brought researchers and politicians to Holcombe’s house for years, but nothing changed. “My front yard look like the whole Alabama River,” Holcombe told Flowers and me. “When you hear that gurgling sound in the toilet, you know not to use it. It will back up.” When the bathroom was unusable, she and her husband sometimes had to stay with their

daughter, in Montgomery. She worried that the exposure to sewage was affecting their health. An alarming number of her friends had asthma, allergies, and heart disease. “Everyone’s got an asthma inhaler,” she said. “All of us are sick.”

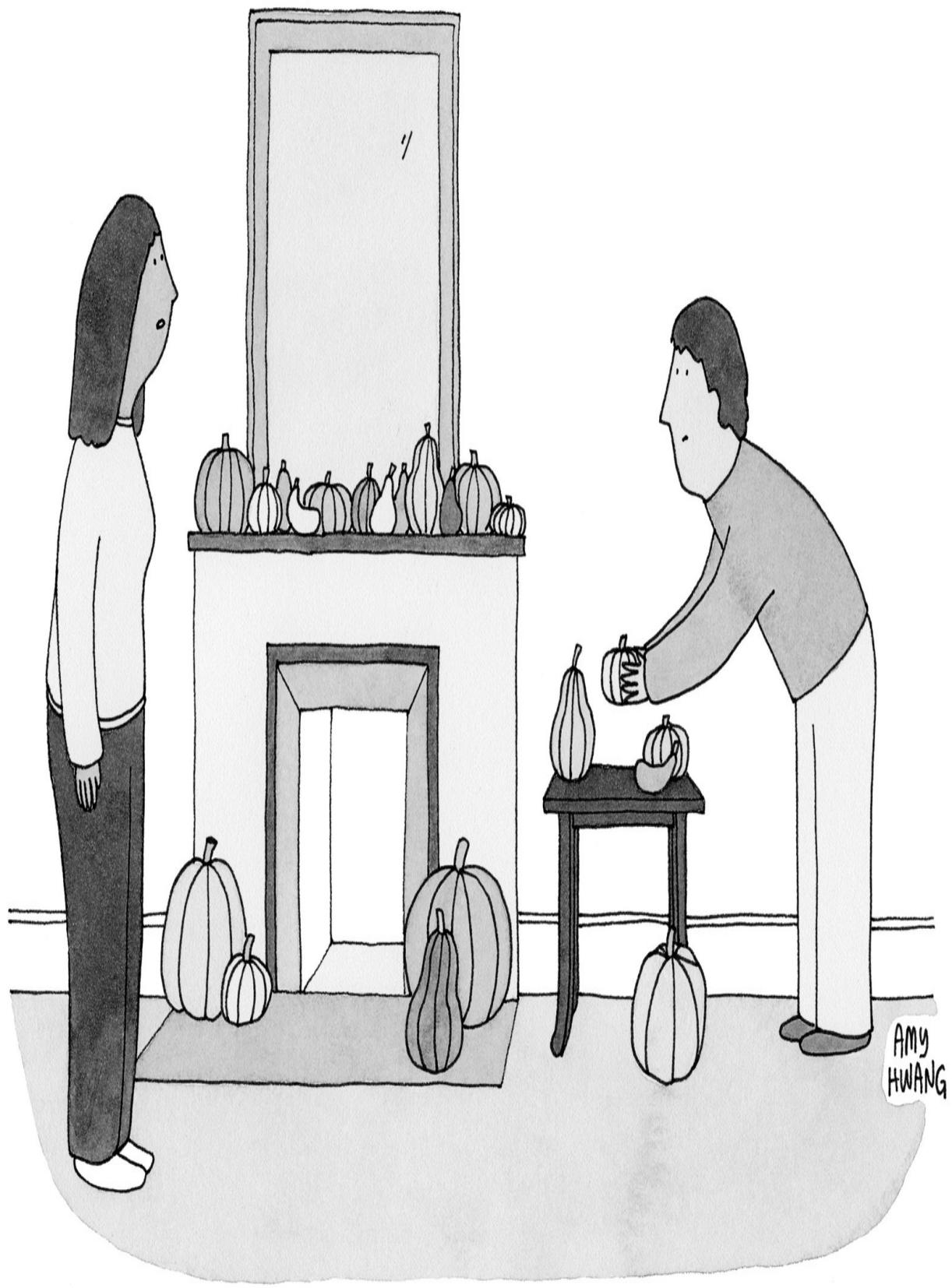
Soon after Flowers met Holcombe, she got in touch with Peter J. Hotez, the dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine, at Baylor College of Medicine. As Flowers described the situation in the Black Belt, he began to suspect that residents had intestinal worms. “Most of the world’s global health threats are in the G-20 nations, paradoxically,” Hotez, who develops vaccines for neglected tropical diseases, told me. In places that think of themselves as rich, it’s easy to ignore problems of poverty, he explained. “It’s the poor living among the wealthy that now account for most of the world’s leprosy, tuberculosis, dengue—and the list goes on.”

Hotez sent Rojelio Mejia, an infectious-disease specialist who has worked in Latin America and East Africa, to start collecting soil and waste samples in Lowndes County. “I never thought that we had this degree of parasites in America,” Mejia said. In the years around the Second World War, hookworm was documented all over Alabama, but it was thought to have been eradicated by the nineteen-eighties. Hookworm enters the body through the skin, often through the hands or the soles of bare feet, and makes its way to the small intestine, where it feeds on blood. It can persist for several years, causing anemia, weight loss, fatigue, and impaired mental function, particularly in young people. Other worms found in the region’s soil can damage the lungs and may encourage asthma. “When children get infected multiple times with parasites, they suffer long term,” Mejia said. “They have decreased growth rates and decreased cognitive abilities.”

In the fall of 2017, the Baylor researchers announced that they had tested a group of Lowndes residents who lived with poor sanitation and discovered hookworm in more than a third of them, including Holcombe’s husband and son. Yet there was no meaningful intervention by the state or the federal government. “I was able to help mobilize hundreds of millions of dollars over the years from U.S.A.I.D. to address neglected tropical diseases in Africa and in poor areas of Asia,” Hotez said. “But when you talk about neglected infections of the poor in America the lights go out.”

At the Hayneville Family Health Center, a bright clinic across from the Dollar General on Tuskeena Street, George G. Thomas had seen his last patients of the morning and was getting ready for lunch when I arrived to talk with him. For most of the past thirty years, Thomas has been the only practicing doctor in Lowndes County—which, like six other counties in Alabama, doesn’t have a hospital. He and a nurse practitioner serve a population of nearly ten thousand. In the evenings, he works at another center, in Montgomery.

At least a tenth of Alabama residents are uninsured. Like many states in the Deep South, Alabama has refused to expand Medicaid under the [Affordable Care Act](#), which would allow more than two hundred thousand Alabamians to gain health insurance. When Governor Kay Ivey was asked whether she would consider expanding Medicaid to help her constituents during the pandemic, she replied that it would be “irresponsible” to do so without considering the effect on the state budget—even though federal funds would cover most of the cost.



"We need to talk."

Thomas's clinic focusses on primary-care services; patients who require more sophisticated tests or procedures are referred to doctors in Montgomery or in Birmingham, a two-hour drive away. The county pays nineteen thousand dollars a month for an ambulance to take residents to emergency rooms in cities. But, when it is in use, patients have to make their own arrangements or stay home.

Thomas is soft-spoken, with a head of gray hair. As we talked, a blue surgical mask kept slipping down his nose. He is from North Carolina, but, during medical school at Howard University, he agreed to work for several years in a community health center in the Black Belt, in exchange for reduced tuition. (The government program that sponsored him, the National Health Service Corps, has since suffered deep cuts to its funding.) Many of his patients contend with high blood pressure and diabetes. "There is a genetic factor there," Thomas said. "But what aggravates it is the poverty, the inability to get healthy food, the inability to get to the doctor when you need to. Sometimes, it seems like the medicine is easy—it's just the social problems."

Flowers had told me about meeting people who took medications every other day, to delay the expense of a refill. Thomas said that his prescriptions sometimes weren't filled at all—and that patients who didn't have the money to keep up appointments often just disappeared. "If your rent's due, even if your high blood pressure could be doing damage to your kidneys and to your eyes, right now you have to survive," he went on. "The emergency of life takes precedence over the slow erosion of chronic disease."

In September, 2018, Earthjustice, a nonprofit that specializes in environmental law, filed a federal Civil Rights Act complaint against the Alabama Department of Public Health and the Lowndes County Health Department. The complaint alleges that the agencies' failure to improve wastewater treatment has had a "disproportionate and adverse effect" on the Black community. Anna Sewell, a staff attorney with Earthjustice, told me, "It's the long-standing ignoring of the problem that led us to file the complaint. The primarily Black residents of Lowndes County continue to suffer the effects of the health departments' failure." Sewell first visited Lowndes with the U.N. special rapporteur. "I remember being struck by

seeing children’s toys near raw sewage on the ground,” she said. “It was just appalling.” Two years later, federal authorities were still conducting an initial review—an “unconscionable delay,” Sewell said.

When the Baylor researchers released their findings, Alabama’s department of health posted a notice online, denying that hookworm was present in Lowndes County. “The health department said, They don’t know what they’re talking about,” Rojelio Mejia, the researcher, told me.

Alabama’s state health officer, Scott Harris, noted that the Baylor study was based on just sixty-seven people, and that the researchers had used a newer, more sensitive test, which Harris said could produce false positives. So far, he added, state reviews had not shown that children in Lowndes County suffered gastrointestinal ailments at a significantly higher rate than those in the rest of the state. He acknowledged that the county, like others in the Black Belt, has “a long history of problems with water.” (In the nineteen-twenties, the state health department created a waste-management division specifically to address widespread hookworm infections.) But, he went on, “the issue is not hookworm as much as it is continuing poverty that just hasn’t been addressed for generations. There are very clear examples of structural racism that have made it difficult to make progress, and our state is not invested in a consistent, sustained way in trying to fix those problems.”

The University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Medicine recently began researching parasites in the Black Belt. Claudette Poole, a specialist in pediatric infectious disease who is the study’s principal investigator, credited Flowers with helping to provide funding: in 2018, after Baylor released its study, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention awarded Poole \$1.2 million to investigate soil-transmitted parasites in children in Alabama.

Poole told me, “Our data gathering on hookworm specifically is too early to say anything definitive.” But, she added, “poor sanitation is a proxy for poverty, and poverty itself is linked to a whole host of poor health outcomes.” At the very least, the presence of raw sewage would contribute to infections from pathogens linked to vomiting, diarrhea, and potentially fatal sepsis. “Ultimately, the issue is about sanitation,” Poole said. “Whether the hookworm is there or not doesn’t change that.” So far, the researchers have tested two hundred and eighty-three children, of whom twenty per cent

said their homes use straight-piping. Only twelve per cent live in homes connected to municipal sewers. “The sanitation is really dire,” Poole said.

There has been some progress. [Senator Doug Jones](#) and Representative Terri Sewell, both of Alabama, have sponsored grants to assist residents in connecting to the sewer grid or installing septic tanks. Jones told me that Flowers had given him a tour soon after he took office. “I was just stunned,” he said. “The abject poverty in these areas is really something you can’t get your arms around unless you see it.” He began working with Sewell, Booker, and others to “at least get some federal monies down there to help.”

The Lowndes County government has been slow to make improvements, though. Jacquelyn Thomas, the county administrator, told me that a sewer line was being installed in the town of White Hall. The work, funded in part by the United States Department of Agriculture, has taken more than five years and has cost more than a million dollars—for a line that will serve seventy residents, in a town of roughly a thousand. For a county with a low tax base, Thomas suggested, installing sewers that reached more households would be prohibitively expensive.

Recently, the state health department stepped in to address the problem in Lowndes—an unusual move for a regulatory agency. It launched a pilot program, funded by a \$2.3-million matching grant from the U.S.D.A., that is intended to provide septic systems for a hundred homes. Sherry Bradley, who is administering the program, told me that residents will pay an affordable monthly fee for systems that are better engineered for the local soil.

Flowers, too, thinks that places like Lowndes County need a different solution. “Alabama needs to deal with the fact that the technology doesn’t work,” she said. She plans to use some of the money from her MacArthur award—six hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars, over five years—to investigate alternatives. She is helping lead a Columbia University initiative to develop sewage-treatment methods that don’t rely on a public line. Her co-director, an environmental engineer named Kartik Chandran, told me that he is working on household treatment systems that can be monitored and repaired remotely, and others that encourage feces to break down more easily. “With any utility infrastructure—communications, water, sewer—we

talk about trillions of dollars in spending, but all of that is devoted to people who are on the networks,” Chandran said. “What happens to the twenty per cent of this country’s population who are not on a network? It’s like they don’t exist.”

The problem is not just in Alabama, Flowers points out. In some parts of rural Alaska, where installing a single septic system can cost more than a hundred thousand dollars, people rely on outhouses and “honey buckets”—pails lined with garbage bags. In Centreville, Illinois, where the city has done little to repair worn-out sewage infrastructure, untreated waste accumulates on neighborhood streets. In Florida’s Miami-Dade County, according to a recent study, rising sea levels may threaten two-thirds of residential septic systems by 2040. As Flowers became involved in the sanitation crisis beyond Alabama, *ACRE* evolved into the Center for Rural Enterprise and Environmental Justice, which works to influence policy in neglected communities. “If it weren’t for the people in Lowndes County, we would not be talking about this as a national issue,” she said. “But we need to find a solution that’s going to benefit everybody.”



A United Nations rapporteur on extreme poverty, visiting the Black Belt in 2017, said that the sanitation problem was unlike anything else he had encountered in the developed world: "This is not a sight that one normally sees." Photograph by Devin Lunsford for The New Yorker

Last fall, Flowers called Pamela Rush, to say that their prayers had been answered. Flowers's organization had secured a donation from Kat Taylor, the wife of the billionaire former Democratic Presidential candidate Tom Steyer. The money would allow them to buy Rush and her kids a new trailer—an energy-efficient double-wide with a working septic tank. "Thank you, Jesus!" Rush shouted. The women cried together.

During the past several years, Flowers told me, she and her staff have helped a dozen families move into safer homes. But finding a spokesperson for the issue was tricky. Most people with sewage problems were understandably wary of letting strangers and cameras into their homes. Rush, however, spoke willingly to the media and to politicians. She began consulting for Flowers's center, sharing her story and conducting surveys in the community.

Rush's car was unreliable, so Flowers's colleague Stephanie N. Wallace sometimes drove her and her daughter to doctors' appointments in Birmingham. On the way, Rush talked about how her activism had changed her life. "As she began to speak about her living conditions, she began to evolve into a totally different person," Wallace recalled. "She'd be, like, 'There're a lot of folks who told me I shouldn't talk about what I'm going through. But I did it to help my kids.' " During a recent ride, Rush told Wallace how excited she was about her new home, and how grateful she felt to get donations from people who didn't even know her. She asked if they could stop by the mobile-home lot. Wallace said to wait; she and Flowers wanted it to be a surprise.

One weekend in June, Rush came down with what felt like a sinus infection. She developed a cough, lost her appetite, and had trouble seeing. On Sunday, her niece Veronica dropped off baked chicken and collard greens at her doorstep. On Tuesday, she took Rush to a clinic in Selma, thinking that maybe her blood-sugar level was too high. It was—but she also had pneumonia. When Rush tested positive for [COVID-19](#), too, she was sent on to the University of Alabama hospital in Birmingham.

During the summer, the people of Lowndes County began to realize how widely the coronavirus had spread around them. Flowers lost two cousins, a father and his daughter. At a Montgomery City Council meeting in June, William Saliski, a pulmonologist at Jackson Hospital, said that the wards were full of *COVID* patients. Half of them were on ventilators, he said—a group that was as much as ninety per cent Black. Another doctor described bodies being carried out every half hour. But, as the council deliberated over a citywide mask-wearing rule, the meeting turned contentious. A local man named William Boyd told the members that he had lost six relatives to *COVID*. “The question on the table is whether Black lives matter,” he said. Still, the council voted down the policy; it approved a similar rule only after Montgomery’s mayor, Steven Reed, issued an executive order mandating masks in public. Governor Ivey was also reluctant: she instituted a mask rule in mid-July, after three months in which the rate of new cases in the state increased nearly six hundred per cent.

In Alabama, as in the country at large, Black people are about [twice as likely](#) as their white neighbors to die from *COVID-19*. Lowndes County has the state’s highest per-capita death rate. Though there is no link between hookworm and *COVID*, the same people are being afflicted by both. “What I saw in Lowndes County, with the sanitation being such a poor system, it really makes sense why that area is so hard hit with *COVID*,” Mejia said. “Even though it’s rural, and it’s not high-density like it is in the city, you have extreme poverty and multiple generations living in the same trailer. So, when you have crowding, the virus can spread.” Residents’ underlying health conditions—diabetes (often unchecked because sufferers can’t see a doctor regularly), high blood pressure, and breathing problems—make them more vulnerable to the virus. “These things don’t increase your risk of getting it,” Mejia said. “But they definitely increase your chance of a bad outcome.”

At the clinic in Hayneville, Dr. Thomas told me that one of his patients had lost both his mother and his grandmother. As Thomas saw it, the only way to control the virus was to address the poverty that had allowed it to spread. Even patients who had tested positive resisted staying at home if they felt able to get to their jobs. “Day to day, people decide they have to work, or they do what they have to do to survive,” Thomas said. Most businesses required employees who had caught the virus to show negative results before

returning to work, but some people told me that their employers would settle for a doctor's note affirming their lack of symptoms. "It seems like Lowndes County isn't a priority," Thomas went on. "If it was a priority, then these things shouldn't happen."

Two of Rush's sisters also came down with *COVID*. Barbara contracted the virus at her factory job and recovered; Almedia got it and was sent to a hospital in Selma. Rush tried to stay optimistic. From her bed, she sent a message to Veronica, asking for eyeliner; Veronica laughed and said that she had no business looking for a boyfriend in the hospital. Her family told her not to be afraid, and she promised that she wasn't. Over the next week, though, her organs began to shut down, and she was put on a ventilator, which left her unable to communicate. On the day before the Fourth of July, Almedia was feeling well enough to go home. That afternoon, Pamela Rush died.

A few weeks later, as a heat wave settled over the Deep South, scores of relatives and loved ones gathered for a graveside service at a church just past the town of White Hall. Two small tents provided relief from the sun; men in face masks carried the coffin. Rush's son, in a crisp white shirt and a red tie, wept inconsolably, and others fanned themselves as they wiped away tears. Her family remembered Rush as the quiet girl in high school, who loved to dance and cook and listen to the blues, and who was generous. "If she could help anybody, she would," Veronica recalled. About a week before Rush got sick, she had whipped up turkey wings and potatoes for Veronica; they sat outside in the yard, the way they always did. "She was so excited about that house," Veronica said. "She was telling me, 'When I get that new house, you can come and spend the night.' "

The tragedies that ran alongside the pleasures in Rush's life—the trailer, the sewage, her children's health problems, and, eventually, *COVID*—came one after another, making a poor woman's life devastatingly expensive. "Every time a door opened, another door was in its place," Flowers said. "But she opened her private world to the public to expose what poverty really looks like. Now they have a face—they've seen it. It's not something you can get out of your mind." ♦

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