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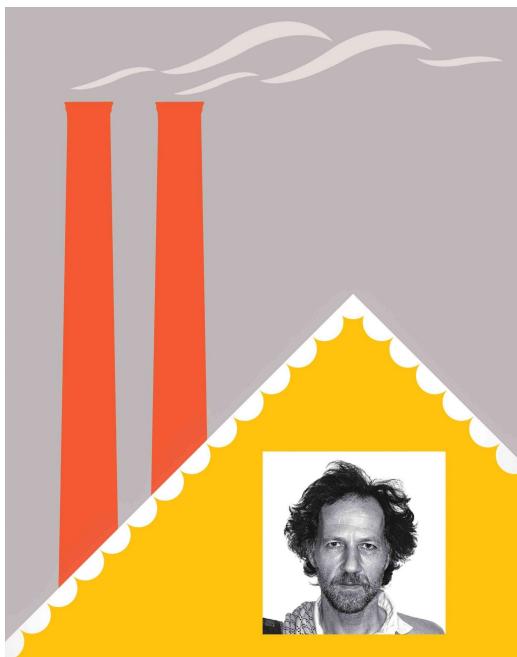
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Personal History

The Mysteries of Pittsburgh

I was searching for truth. Instead, I found a family.

By [Werner Herzog](#)



With the Franklins, I learned some of the best and deepest things about America. Photo illustration by Tamara Shopsin; Source photograph by Beat Presser

By the time I was twenty-one, I had made two short films and was dead set on making a feature. I had gone to a distinguished school in Munich, where I had few friends, and which I hated so passionately that I imagined setting it on fire. There is such a thing as academic intelligence, and I didn't have it. Intelligence is always a bundle of qualities: logical thought, articulacy, originality, memory, musicality, sensitivity, speed of association, and so on. In my case, the bundle seemed to be differently composed. I remember asking a fellow-student to write a term paper for me, which he did quite easily. In jest, he asked me what I would do for him in return, and I promised that I would make him immortal. His name was Hauke Stroszek. I gave his last name to the main character in my first film, "Signs of Life." I called another film "Stroszek."

But some of my studies I found utterly absorbing. For a class on medieval history, I wrote a paper on the *Privilegium maius*. This was a flagrant forgery, from 1358 or 1359, conceived by Rudolf IV, a scion of the Habsburgs, who wanted to define his family's territory and install them as one of the powers of Europe. He produced a set of five clumsy documents, in the guise of royal charters, with a supplement purportedly issued by Julius Caesar. Despite being clearly fraudulent, the documents were ultimately accepted by the Holy Roman Emperor, confirming the Habsburgs' claim to Austria. It was an early instance of fake news, and it inspired in me an obsession with questions of factuality, reality, and truth. In life, we are confronted by facts. Art draws on their power, as they have a normative force, but making purely factual films has never interested me. Truth, like history and memory, is not a fixed star but a search, an approximation. In my paper, I declared, even if it was illogical, that the *Privilegium* was a true account.

What seemed to me a natural approach became a method. Because I knew it would be hopeless to make a feature right away, I accepted a scholarship to go to the United States. I applied to Duquesne University, in Pittsburgh, which had cameras and a film studio. I chose Pittsburgh because I had the sentimental notion that I wouldn't be tied up with academic nonsense; I'd be in a city with real, down-to-earth people. Pittsburgh was the Steel City, and I had worked in a steel factory myself.

Around the same time, I won ten thousand marks in a competition, for the screenplay for "Signs of Life," and a free Atlantic crossing. I took passage on the Bremen, where, a few years earlier, Siegfried and Roy had worked as stewards, diverting the passengers with magic tricks. It was on board this ship that I met my first wife, Martje. After we had reached the Irish Sea, it stormed for a week, and the dining room, for six hundred passengers, was empty. Martje was on her way to begin a literature degree in Wisconsin. The heavy seas didn't bother her. When we sailed into New York, we passed the Statue of Liberty, neither of us interested in the view; we were engrossed in a game of shuffleboard on deck. Martje is the mother of my first son, Rudolph Amos Achmed. He bears the names of three very important people in my life. Rudolf was my grandfather, a classics professor who led enormous archeological digs, involving hundreds of laborers, on the island of Kos. Amos was Amos Vogel, a writer who fled the Nazis, co-founded the

New York Film Festival, and became a mentor to me. I remember him taking me aside after three years of marriage and asking if everything was all right. Of course it was all right. “Why don’t you have any children, then?” he said. I thought, Well, indeed, why not?

Achmed was the last remaining laborer who worked with my grandfather. My first time on Kos, when I was fifteen, I went to his home and introduced myself. Achmed started to cry, then threw open all the cupboards, drawers, and windows, and said, “All this is yours.” He had a fourteen-year-old granddaughter, and suggested that I might want to marry her. It wasn’t easy to get him to drop the idea, until I promised to name my firstborn son for Rudolf and him. The island, once under Ottoman rule, eventually became Greek; Achmed remained, working in the digs. I cast him in a small sequence in “Signs of Life,” which was filmed on Kos. He had lost his wife, his daughter, and even his granddaughter; all he had left was his dog, Bondchuk. The next time I saw him, he again threw open his doors and windows, but all he said was “Bondchuk *apethane*”—“Bondchuk is dead.” We sat together crying for a long time and said nothing.

Pittsburgh turned out to be a bad idea. For a start, the steel industry was almost dead, and the shuttered plants were rusting away. Second, Duquesne University was an intellectually impoverished place. I had no idea that there were differences among universities. There was the film studio, but that was set up like a TV newsroom, with a desk for the anchor flanked by three heavy electronic cameras. Old-fashioned spotlights were affixed to the ceiling, and you couldn’t take them down or move them.

Quitting school would have meant losing my visa and having to leave the United States. So I kept my registration. There was a group of young writers clustered around a magazine on campus; I published my first short story there. In my memory, it all feels blurred, events piled on top of one another. Sometimes I slept on the library floor, where the cleaners would find me at six in the morning. I slept on the sofas of various acquaintances and of my original host, a professor, forty but terrified of his mother, who forbade contact with female students and perhaps with women in general. In front of his window were dark trees and chipmunks, which had something consoling about them. Also consoling were the calls of unfamiliar birds and the play of sharp sunbeams cutting through the thin twigs. Images formed inside me.

There were occasional bizarre scenes. The mother fed her son as if he were a little kid. More precisely, she made him eat green Jell-O, and she started to think of me as someone who might also benefit from it. I ate it uncomplainingly. This motif surfaced many years later, in my film “My Son, My Son, What Have Ye Done,” where the protagonist, played by Michael Shannon, is covered in Jell-O by his mother, as if it were war paint. He ends up playing the part of Orestes in a theatre production, failing to keep performance separate from reality, and killing his mother with a stage prop, a Turkish sabre.

A freak encounter changed everything. My host lived in a place called Fox Chapel, in the hills outside Pittsburgh. The bus would take me twelve miles or so, as far as Dorseyville, and from there I would hike up the road through some woods. While walking this last stretch, I was often passed by a woman in a car, the seats full of youngsters. One day, it started raining, and the car drew up beside me. The woman wound down her window. She could give me a lift, she said. It was a two-minute drive to Fox Chapel.

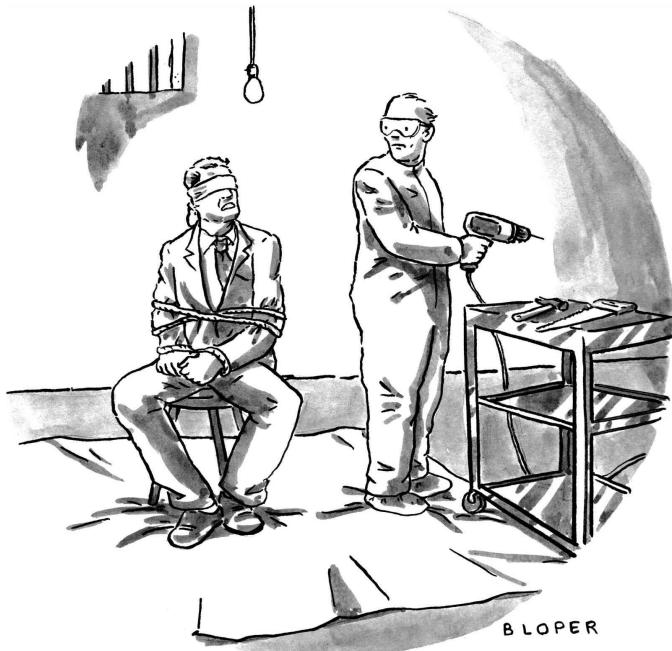
Where was I from? she asked. I was a Kraut, I said. Where was I staying? I explained my situation. Oh, the woman said, she knew the man, he was a weirdo, a wacko-weirdo. She said I’d do better staying with her; she had a spare room in her attic. Her place was just a quarter of a mile from his.

And so I found myself adopted by a family. The woman’s name was Evelyn Franklin. She had six children between seventeen and twenty-seven, and she said that a seventh would be good, seeing as her oldest daughter had just married and moved out. Her husband had died an alcoholic, which must have meant years of misery for Evelyn. She mentioned him only in passing, and always as Mr. Franklin. The youngest kids were twin girls, Jeannie and Joanie; then there was a brother, Billy, who was a failed rock musician; then two more brothers, one of whom—the only one!—was a bit boring and bougie, while the other, twenty-five, was a little slow and had a soft heart. As a child, he had fallen out of a moving car. Then there was a ninety-year-old grandmother and a cocker spaniel who went by Benjamin, as in Benjamin Franklin. I was put in the attic, where there was an old bed and junk. It had a pitched roof, and it was only in the middle that I could stand upright.

I straightaway became part of the daily madness. Evelyn commuted into the city, where she had a job as a secretary in an insurance company. The twins came back from high school in the afternoon, often with friends in tow. Long before that, though, from eight o'clock on, the grandmother would try to rouse Billy, who had usually been rocking in some bar until 3 a.m. She would pound on his locked door, trying to convert him from his sinful life, reading him Bible quotes. The dog, who had a kind of symbiotic relationship with Billy, lay forlornly outside the door. In the afternoon, Billy would emerge stark naked, stretching pleasurabley. The grandmother would flee, and Billy would smite his chest and in Old Testament tones bewail his sinful life. Benjamin Franklin would howl an accompaniment, then kick his back paws into the air. Billy, switching to an imaginary canine language, would grab the paws and start dragging Benjamin Franklin down the stairs. At each carpeted landing, he stopped to lament his sins in dog language. Down in the living room, the twins and their squealing girlfriends fled the naked youth, who then set off in pursuit of his runaway grandmother.

It was by no means unusual in this atmosphere for the twins to then pursue me, squirting me with eau de cologne from Woolworth's. One day, I spotted them plotting an ambush behind the door that led down to the garage. I crept into the top-floor bathroom, intending to jump all the way down and, coming through the garage, attack them from behind. My own preferred weapon was shaving foam. It had been snowing, and there was an inch or so of loose snow, which I thought was enough padding. I landed on a spiral concrete staircase near the garage. My ankle made a penetrating sound that I can still hear, like a wet branch snapping. The fracture was so complicated that I was encased in a plaster cast up to my hip. After a month, I was given a walking cast, which went up only to my knee.

I did get some film experience, working for a producer at WQED in Pittsburgh. His name was Matt, short for Mathias von Brauchitsch; he was related to a former commander-in-chief of the German Army, who in 1941 fell out with Hitler. I kept quiet about the fact that I didn't have a work permit. Von Brauchitsch was overseeing several documentaries for *NASA* about alternatives to rocket fuel. I had neither training nor references, but he seemed to be convinced of my capacity. That kind of pragmatic optimism is something I admire about America to this day.



"Please don't hurt me—I have a wife and kids and a secret second wife and kids that they don't know about."
Cartoon by Brendan Loper

The film I was making was about theoretical research on plasma rockets, which was happening principally in Cleveland. Put simply, superheated plasma was being tested as fuel, but the temperatures melted any sort of solid container, so the experiments used nonmaterial vessels formed from extremely powerful magnetic fields. At the time, Cleveland had one of the most powerful magnets in existence. Right next to it was an experimental atomic reactor. I remember corridors with open doors and mathematicians working in empty rooms. Once, I watched a group of young men doing nothing, just thinking. Finally, one of them got up and drew a dot on a green chalkboard, then an arrow pointing to it. Then silence.

I had bought a rusty Volkswagen, which Grandma Franklin called the Bush Wagon. (She could never get my name right, either: she would call me Wiener or Orphan.) I drove to Cleveland several times a week. In one building, there was a vacuum chamber built out of steel, so big that several technicians could go inside it. The door to the chamber was operated electrically and moved very slowly on rails. After the engineers prepared their experiment, they left the room, the door closed silently, and shrill alarms signalled that testing would begin.

One day, there was shouting from the chamber and a desperate hammering against the walls. One of the technicians had been left behind. It took

minutes for the door to open again. The man inside was deathly pale. No one knew what to do. A very young man, the only Black man among the scientists present, walked up and embraced the technician. He held on to him for a while, then the shocked man laughed, and everyone else started laughing as well. The mishap resulted in the hall's being shut down and the incident's being investigated.

Ten days later, I received a summons from the immigration authorities, demanding that I bring my passport. I knew what that meant. Because I had violated the conditions of my visa, I was about to be deported to Germany. Planning to make a break for Mexico, I quickly bought a Spanish dictionary and drove off. The parting from the Franklins was painful, but we knew that we would see one another again.

I drove almost non-stop to Texas, crossing the border at Laredo. On the bridge over the Rio Grande, something ground in my VW engine, as though the United States didn't want to let me go and Mexico wasn't quite ready to take me in. I pushed the car into Mexico to be repaired. For a few weeks, I worked at the *charreadas*, or rodeos, in Guanajuato. That came to an end after a bull pinned my bad leg to a wall.

I started importing stereos and TV sets for a few well-off rancheros I had met at the *charreadas*. Those things were much more expensive in Mexico because of the duty. I was able to import them because there was a gap in the border between Reynosa and McAllen. Day laborers crossed into McAllen in the morning and went home at night. Three lanes of the widened highway were set aside for them, and their cars were identified by stickers on the windshields. I managed to get hold of some Mexican plates and one of the stickers. My beat-up old car looked the part. Early in the morning, I was simply waved through on the special lanes; it sounds incredible now, but back in 1965 there was very little in the way of drug smuggling. In a few instances, I also brought Colt revolvers into Mexico, ornamental weapons with mother-of-pearl inlaid handles. The wealthy rancheros liked to show off with them.

When that line of business came to an end, I moved inland, to San Miguel de Allende, a beautiful little colonial town now completely spoiled. Vast numbers of confused and prosperous Americans have descended on it, all

wanting to get in touch with their creativity. I kept on moving farther south, until, near the Guatemalan border, I got sick. It was hepatitis, but I didn't know that. I had heard of attempts to form an independent Mayan state in Petén, and was obsessed with the idea that I would help. I still remember the asphalt road through the jungle, the clear streams and the big boulders where women washed clothes. The frontier was the river near Talisman. I wanted to cross into Guatemala, and a few hundred yards upstream of the border post I found a likely spot. For a flotation device, I stuffed an old inflatable soccer ball inside a shopping net, and then I swam out with my few belongings on my head. I treaded water for a while, then noticed a couple of young soldiers carrying rifles. They had stepped out of the jungle and were grinning. I waved in greeting and very slowly swam back.

Secretly, I was relieved that I hadn't managed to cross. It was becoming clear that I wasn't well. I made my way back up to Texas almost without stopping, this time minus the fake plates and sticker. What had I been doing in Mexico? I claimed to have been on a short research trip, and was allowed back in. From then on, everything is a fevered blur. I drove and drove, stopping now and then to lay my sopping head on the passenger seat for a few hours' sleep. I remember a village in Native American territory in Cherokee, North Carolina. I stopped for gas and ate a hamburger. Did I actually see dancing chickens just across the way? Everything was dancing: my plate, my parked car, the tip I'd left on the bar. Years later, I went back there to shoot "Stroszek"; the dancing chickens in that film are perhaps the craziest thing I've shown on-screen.

I made it to Pittsburgh. The Franklins delivered me to a hospital and, after a couple of weeks, came to pick me up. Two days later, I flew back to Germany.

I loved the Franklins. With them, I got to know some of the best and deepest things about America. Later on, I invited them to Munich and took them to a party in Sachrang, the remote Bavarian village where I grew up. Hugs, beer, squeals. Contact became harder as much of the family, Billy included, seemed to fall further into religion. When I played the villain in a 2012 Hollywood action movie—it was called "Jack Reacher," and the star, Tom Cruise, wanted me—the filming took place in Pittsburgh. But I couldn't find the Franklins. I drove out to Fox Chapel. Almost everything in the area had

changed; there were new buildings everywhere; it was very depressing. The Franklins' home was mostly unchanged; the lawn had the same old broad-leaved trees, but the path down to the garage was overgrown with flowering shrubs. There was no one home. I tried the neighbors, and learned that the house had changed owners several times. I knew that Evelyn Franklin had died. Two years later, I heard that Billy had died, too. He had been like a brother to me.

I remember the twins and their girlfriends going wild with excitement because a new British band was playing the Civic Arena. It was called the Rolling Stones. So far, all these groups—and pop culture as a whole—had passed me by, with the exception of Elvis, whose first film I had seen in Munich. The twins took a piece of cardboard to the concert with the name of their favorite, Brian, on it. He was the band's leader; not long afterward, he was found drowned in his pool. I still recall my astonishment at the commotion and the girls' screams. When the concert was over, many of the plastic bucket seats were steaming. It seemed that a lot of the girls had pissed themselves. When I saw that, I knew this band was going to be big.

Much later, in my film "Fitzcarraldo," Mick Jagger played the lead alongside Jason Robards, but then Robards got sick and the filming had to be suspended halfway through. Everything would have to be done over, this time with Klaus Kinski. I had Jagger on contract for only three more weeks—the Stones had a world tour coming up—and he was so peculiar, so unique, that I didn't want to recast his part, so I wrote it out of the script altogether. He was to play Wilbur, an English actor who had lost his mind and turned up in the Amazon. The origin of the character, at least in part, was the stark-naked Billy Franklin in Pittsburgh. The part of the dog, Benjamin Franklin, was taken by a timid ape called McNamara. ♦

(Translated, from the German, by Michael Hofmann)

This is drawn from "[Every Man for Himself and God Against All](#)."

By Zadie Smith

By D. T. Max

By Andre Dubus III

By Jessica Winter

[The Control of Nature](#)

Is Beekeeping Wrong?

Parasites and pesticides have brought chaos to bee colonies throughout the world. Natural beekeepers want to transform our relationship to the hive.

By [Sam Knight](#)



Bees have long been held to be prophetic—messengers to another realm. Photographs by Alice Zoo for The New Yorker

Listen to this article.

On a hot, pollen-dazed morning this summer, I stopped by the house of Gareth John, a retired agricultural ecologist, who lives on a quiet lane above a river in Oxfordshire, to take a look at his bees. In British beekeeping circles, John, who has a white beard and a sprightly, didactic manner, is well known as a “natural beekeeper,” although he acknowledged right off the bat that this was a problematic term. “It’s an oxymoron, right?” he said. John cares for perhaps half a million bees, but he does not think of himself as *keeping* anything. “I wouldn’t call myself a dog-keeper,” he said. “But I have a dog.” Natural beekeepers are the radical dissenters of apiculture. They believe that mainstream beekeeping—like most human-centered interactions with the natural world—has lost its way. There is another path, but it requires the unlearning and dismantling of almost two centuries of bee

husbandry and its related institutions. During my visit, John asked me not to disclose his exact location, because his hives fell off the radar of the National Bee Unit, a government agency that monitors honeybee health, about a decade ago, and he prefers it that way.

John grew up in the English countryside in the sixties and seventies, when beekeeping was—as he remembers it—a gentle, live-and-let-live pastime: men in veils pottering around a few hives under the apple trees, jars of honey for sale at the garden gate. “It was very, very leave-alone,” he said. “Natural.” When John returned to the craft, in the early two-thousands, he was shocked by what it had become. In 1992, an ectoparasitic mite called *Varroa destructor*, which had jumped from an Asian honeybee to the Western one sometime in the fifties, emerged in Britain and killed untold millions of bees. Thousands of hobbyist beekeepers gave up. (Varroa reached the U.S. in 1987, and wrought similar devastation.) There was an atmosphere of vigilance and doom. Bee researchers talked about the “Four P’s”—parasites, pathogens, poor nutrition, and pesticides—as if they were the horsemen of the Apocalypse. The British Beekeeping Association, which has served as the custodian of the craft since the late nineteenth century, ran courses on pest control. “Fear,” John said. “Disease. Disease. Disease.” He watched fellow-beekeepers treat their bees with miticides, to control varroa; import more prolific queens, and other non-native bees from southern Europe, to boost honey production; and feed their hives syrup to get them through the winter. “It had become this agro-industrial monster, where you were supposed to behave as if you had a high-yielding Holstein dairy cow,” he recalled.

It didn’t feel right. As a species, the Western honeybee (*Apis mellifera*) is millions of years old. (It was introduced to North America by European settlers in the sixteen-twenties.) Although people have harvested its honey and wax—sweetness and light—for thousands of years, the honeybee has not been tamed. “Wheat is domesticated. Cows are domesticated. Dogs are domesticated,” John said. “Domestication is a mutual process. You could never domesticate a robin. Bees are the same as robins. They will quite happily live in a nest box that you give them. But they’re not dependent on you. They don’t need you.”



"One day, son, all this anxiety will be yours."
Cartoon by Juan Astasio

John did not believe that beekeeping's intensive turn was helping the bees. He looked around for other skeptics and came across "The Principles of Beekeeping Backwards," a quasi-mystical tract published in *Bee Culture*, in the summer of 2001. The text was by Charles Martin Simon, a.k.a. Charlie Nothing, an artist and an experimental-rock musician who invented the dingulator, a guitar-like instrument made from car parts.

Simon, who was based outside Santa Cruz, California, was also an organic farmer and a beekeeper. He had developed his own kind of bee frame. (In the fall of 1851, the Reverend Lorenzo L. Langstroth, a Congregationalist pastor from Philadelphia, created the world's first commercially viable beehive with removable frames and, thus, modern beekeeping.) "Beekeeping Backwards" was Simon's disavowal of the craft that he'd practiced for forty years. He rejected chemicals for treating varroa; synthetic foundation frames, to make bees construct neat honeycombs; and the removal of male drones, which don't contribute to honey-making. "Our industry is directed by madmen," Simon wrote. "They have been driven mad by the fear of death and simultaneously compelled irresistibly toward it. Death of our beloved bees. Death of our beloved industry. Death of ourselves."

The better part of two centuries after Langstroth's hive went on sale, natural beekeepers liken much conventional beekeeping to industrial agriculture—

permeated by chemicals and the delusion of human control. They dwell on the differences between the lives of wild, or free-living, bees and those which are kept in apiaries. Managed bees are typically kept in a drafty box low to the ground, as opposed to a snug nest high in a hollow tree. Most beekeepers' colonies are much larger than those which occur in the wild, and rival colonies might be separated by only a few yards, rather than by half a mile. Much of the bees' honey, which is supposed to get them through the winter, is taken before they have a chance to eat it. A queen bee goes on a spree of mating flights early in her life, and then lays the fertilized eggs until her death. In apiaries, queens often have their wings clipped, to interrupt swarming (a colony's natural form of reproduction), and are routinely inspected, and replaced by newcomers, sometimes imported from the other side of the world. Propolis—a wonderful, sticky substance that bees make from tree resin and that has antibacterial qualities—is typically scraped out of hives by beekeepers because it is annoying and hard to get off their hands.

These are all dire interventions in the fabric of the colony. No wonder the bees keep dying. In a normal year, perhaps ten or fifteen per cent of bee colonies die in the winter. Last winter, America's bees suffered colony losses of close to forty per cent, with varroa, "queen issues," and starvation among the leading causes. High death rates tend to lead to more bee imports, more bee medication, more bee supplements, more bee-breeding programs, and the whole unwieldy cycle continues.

Natural beekeepers leave their bees alone. They seldom treat for disease—allowing the weaker colonies to fail—and they raise the survivors in conditions that are as close as possible to tree cavities. They fill their hives with swarms that come in on the wing, rather than those which come from dealers who trade on the Internet. They treasure the bees for their own sake —like a goldfinch that nests in the yard—and have an evangelical spirit, as if they have stumbled on a great secret. They are disdainful of conventional beekeepers. "They've completely lost sight of the creature," John told me.

Honey is a touchy subject. John said that he harvests only an absolute excess —after the bees have enough for two winters and a wet summer—and even then he won't take money for it. "It's not my honey to sell," he explained. Another natural beekeeper, who abstains from taking honey altogether, referenced "When Harry Met Sally" to explain his position: "There was this

line, ‘Sex always gets in the way of friendship.’ I think honey always gets in the way of us appreciating bees.”

Bees were long held to be prophetic—messengers from another realm. The name of Deborah, the prophetess and judge of the Old Testament, translates as “bee.” The priestesses who tended the oracle at Delphi were known as Melissae. Melissa means “bee,” too. For a quarter century, anxiety about the fate of honeybees has been a manifestation of our unease about the state of pollinators and our biomes in general. But that doesn’t mean we have been interpreting the problems correctly, or that humans are the best placed to find solutions. Natural beekeepers think of themselves as deferring to the bees for guidance. “If I go to a hive and I put my hand on the hive . . . I can actually feel their presence, and that balance and that skill and that beauty that only nature can provide,” Jonathan Powell, of Britain’s Natural Beekeeping Trust, told me. “And yet if I think of a bee flying up to the window of my house, putting their antennae on my house, I’m frankly embarrassed by the way I live, and how clumsy and how stupid I am.”

In Oxfordshire, John led the way to his apiary, which was on a small pasture at the back of his property, bounded by high hedgerows. There was a lock on the gate and a small workshop, where he makes and maintains fifteen or so hives. A honeybee colony is a female commonwealth—a biological marvel of social decision-making by a queen and her thousands of female workers. (Beekeeping, by contrast, was for a long time a patriarchy. The monks of Mt. Athos, in Greece, were allowed to keep bees because the insects were assumed to be all male.)

“Hello, sweethearts,” John said, as he revealed the glass inspection wall of a Warré hive, first developed by a French priest in the nineteen-thirties, that he had reimagined. The rest of John’s apiary was like a real-estate showcase for honeybees. There was a log hive on stilts, and woven skeps, basketlike hives that were popular among the Vikings. Conventional beehives tend to be portable, so they can be moved around farms, and easy to access, to help beekeepers inspect and manipulate their bees. John’s hives were homes, for the bees to make their own. Approaching a skep, he opened his palms, in a submissive pose modelled on wall paintings of ancient Egyptian beekeepers, and asked me to step out of the bees’ path as they flew in and out of the entrance.

John visits his apiary most days, to watch and listen to his bees. “There is communication going on,” he said. “And it’s a two-way communication, if you allow it to be.” His modifications to the Warré hive incorporated new dimensions, inspired by the golden ratio of the Fibonacci sequence.

Inside, the colony looked like a train station at rush hour. John pointed out bees fanning their wings, to keep the temperature and carbon-dioxide levels under control, and guards stationed at the entrance, apparently checking the bright-yellow beads of pollen that arrived on their fellow-bees’ knees, like bag searchers at a museum. In the forties, a German beekeeper named Johann Thür used the term *Nestduftwärmebindung*—literally, nest-scent-heat-binding—to convey the heady fug of warmth, humidity, pheromones, and other mysterious signals that is essential to a healthy bees’ nest. Natural beekeepers often speak of the hive in somewhat spiritual tones, as a single, sentient organism that has evolved in parallel to mammals like us. “This creature is not like any other creature we ever interact with,” John said. I touched the glass. The hive thrummed. The smell of honey rolled across the pasture.

On the afternoon of August 20, 2002, Thomas Seeley, a biology professor at Cornell, arrived at a clearing on the edge of the Arnot Forest, in upstate New York, with a wooden bee box that held a piece of old honeycomb filled with syrup. Seeley is the world’s leading authority on the lives of wild honeybees. He had come to the same clearing twenty-four years earlier, in August, 1978, as part of a survey of the forest, during which he found nine wild colonies, living in the trees.

Seeley was curious, and somewhat fearful, about what had happened to the forest’s bees since the arrival of *Varroa destructor*. He had lost nine of his ten research hives to the mites. In the clearing, Seeley roamed with the bee box. For ten minutes, he wondered if all the wild bees were gone. Finally, he spotted a honeybee feeding from a goldenrod flower. After she fed from the syrup in the box, Seeley took a compass reading of her path—her beeline—as she flew back into the trees. When bees find something good to eat, they inform their fellow-foragers by means of the waggle dance—a representation of direction and distance that takes its bearing from the sun—which the other bees interpret, in the darkness of the nest, mostly by touch. More bees arrived in the clearing. By the end of the afternoon, Seeley had

two solid beelines—one heading north, one heading south—indicating at least two nests in the forest.



"You're going to hear some sounds that might move your soul like it's never been moved before."
Cartoon by Daniel Kanhai

During the next twenty-seven days, Seeley found eight bee colonies in the Arnot Forest, but in a smaller area and in less time than he had in 1978—suggesting that the wild population was just as healthy as it had been before varroa. “How can this be . . . ?” he asked in *Bee Culture*, the following year. Seeley aired three possibilities: the bees in the forest had been sufficiently isolated to escape infection; they had been infected, and were about to die; or—his hope—the bees had been exposed to varroa and had developed some form of resistance.

“None of us knew at the time how strong the selection would be in the wild,” Seeley told me recently. “It turned out that the bees had the variation needed to develop the traits to resist the mites.” While beekeepers were experimenting with chemical treatments and hive designs, the bees in the forest were changing genetically. Their life styles helped them, too. “Colonies living in the wild have many things going for them,” Seeley said. The bees lived in smaller groups, relatively far apart, which made it harder for varroa to spread. They swarmed every year, which broke the reproductive cycle of the mites. (If a colony swarms, the nest is left without bee larvae, which is where varroa mites take hold.) Wild nests were hygienic

and coated in propolis. Their *Nestduftwärmebindung* was on point. Seeley shared his findings in books and papers, but they weren't what most beekeepers wanted to hear. "My phone didn't ring off the hook," he said. Seeley is gentle and plainspoken, but his conclusions were totalizing. "As I see it, most of the problems of honey bee health are rooted in the standard practices of beekeeping," he told me in an e-mail, "which are used by nearly all beekeepers."

In March, 2017, Seeley proposed what he called Darwinian Beekeeping. "Solutions to the problems of beekeeping and bee health may come most rapidly if we are as attuned to the biologist Charles R. Darwin as we are to the Reverend Lorenzo L. Langstroth," he wrote in the *American Bee Journal*. Seeley listed twenty differences between the lives of wild bees and those kept in conventional hives. He observed that the most routine beekeeping activities—taking wax, preventing swarming, even looking inside a hive—constituted profound disturbances for bees.

"I don't think anybody contests that free-living bees have a better, easier life," Seeley told me. "What is contested is whether that's realistic." Seeley acknowledged that there will always be commercial bee operations, for honey production and for crop pollination. But these constitute the minority: around ninety per cent of American beekeepers are hobbyists, with twenty-five colonies or fewer. Seeley compared intensively managed bee colonies to racehorses. "They live a short, hard life," he said. "My whole aim has been to present that there is an alternative. In the United States, beekeepers are taught only what we might call the industrial form of beekeeping. And that's where I would say, 'No . . . there is a choice here between how you want to relate to an organism whose life, in a way, you have under your control.' "

Natural beekeeping has arisen alongside a broadening sense of bee intelligence. People have always known that the creatures are remarkable. "The discovery of a sign of true intellect outside ourselves procures us something of the emotion Robinson Crusoe felt when he saw the imprint of a human foot on the sandy beach of his island," Maurice Maeterlinck, a Belgian playwright and bee scholar, wrote of bees in 1901. "We seem less solitary than we had believed."

The Mayans worshipped Ah-Muzen-Cab, the god of bees and honey. In Lithuanian, a verb meaning “to die” is reserved for humans and bees. Like us, bees practice architecture and their own, presumably less debased, form of democracy. In 1927, Karl von Frisch, an Austrian zoologist, explained the waggle dance, for which he later won the Nobel Prize. “The bee’s life is like a magic well: the more you draw from it, the more it fills with water,” he wrote. And the water has only kept rising. In 2018, researchers showed that bees understood the concept of zero—an ability previously thought to be limited to parrots, dolphins, primates, and recent humans. (Fibonacci introduced zero to Western mathematics around the year 1200.) When I spoke to Seeley, he was running an experiment on the importance of bee sleep at a research station in the Adirondacks. “It’s not just an energy-saving process,” he explained. “It really improves their cognitive abilities.” A bee’s brain is the size of a sesame seed.

In the early nineties, when Lars Chittka, a German zoologist, was a graduate student in Berlin, he was not sure that bees could feel pain. In 2008, he co-authored a paper suggesting that bumblebees could suffer from anxiety. Last year, Chittka published the book “The Mind of a Bee,” which argues that the most plausible explanation for bees’ ability to perform so many different tasks, and to learn so well, is that they possess a form of general intelligence, or bee consciousness. “Bees qualify as conscious agents with no less certainty than dogs or cats,” he wrote.

Chittka based his conclusion on work in his own lab and on hundreds of years of bee study, including that of Charles Turner, a Black American scientist, who was denied a university-based research career and instead worked as a high-school teacher in St. Louis. Starting in the eighteen-nineties, Turner observed variations in problem-solving among individual spiders, “outcome awareness” in ants, and the ability, in bees, to steer by visual landmarks—“memory pictures”—rather than by instinct. Turner posited ideas of general invertebrate intelligence which were almost entirely ignored. “He was really a century ahead,” Chittka said. Last year, the U.K. passed legislation that recognized animals as sentient beings, capable of feeling pain and joy. So far, the bill dignifies vertebrates, decapod crustaceans (crabs and lobsters), and cephalopods (squids and octopuses), but not a single conscious bee.

The more we know about bees, the more complicated beekeeping becomes. When I visited Chittka's lab, he flipped open a laptop to show me a sequence from "More Than Honey," a Swiss documentary from 2012, which included footage from the pollination of California's five-billion-dollar almond crop—an annual agro-industrial pilgrimage that involves an estimated seventy per cent of America's commercial beekeepers. On the screen, a mechanical arm scraped tumbling bees and honeycomb from the edge of a plastic hive, before loading it onto a truck. "It's disgusting," Chittka said. "But the absurd thing is that these people then complain that their bees are dying."

Like many entomologists, he does not see honeybee health as primarily an ecological problem. "Where they are under threat, it's because of poor beekeeping practices," Chittka said. In the scientific literature, the Western honeybee is sometimes referred to as a "massively introduced managed species" (MIMS), whose population is increasing on almost every continent, often to the detriment of other wild pollinators. In 2020, researchers concluded that the thirty-three hundred wild bee species of the Mediterranean basin were being "gradually replaced" by a single species of managed *Apis mellifera*. The same year, a report from the Royal Botanic Gardens, at Kew, warned that parts of London had too many honeybee colonies, whose foraging was displacing the city's wild bee species. "Beekeeping to save bees could actually be having the opposite effect," the report found.

"I often get asked, 'So, is this true, that all the bees are dying?'" Chittka said. "And any nuanced message—'Well, it's not the honeybees. It's the other wild bees'—is often misinterpreted. 'You're saying there's not a problem?' And, actually, there is a problem. It's just a slightly different one." For a long time, the honeybee was characterized as a canary in the coal mine, an omen of catastrophe for the rest of the world's pollinators. In recent years, some scientists have begun to question this analogy and to challenge the conditions of industrial agriculture and conventional beekeeping instead. "We see the canary, we know it is unwell," Maggie Shanahan, a bee researcher who recently completed a Ph.D. at the University of Minnesota, wrote, last year, in the *Journal of Insect Science*. "But focusing solely on individual aspects of canary health actually keeps us from asking more

fundamental questions: Why are we keeping canaries in coal mines in the first place? Why are we still building coal mines at all?"

The first meeting of the British Beekeepers Association took place on May 16, 1874, at a town house on Camden Street, in North London. It was a self-consciously modern project, which aimed to replace the homemade skeps and uncontrolled swarms of the rural working classes with honesty, sobriety, and the latest beekeeping technology. Beekeeping exams began in 1882. Members took part in "bee-driving" competitions inside a large mesh tent, in which they raced to find a colony's queen. (The first winner was C. N. Abbott, the founder of the *British Bee Journal*, with fourteen minutes and thirty-five seconds.)

There have been times, during its century and a half of existence, that the B.B.K.A. has more or less merged with the British state, in the causes of pollination and honey production. In 1898, the Postmaster General allowed live bees to be sent in the mail. The National hive, Britain's version of the Langstroth, was introduced in the twenties. During the Second World War, beekeepers were allowed extra sugar rations. The B.B.K.A. now has around twenty-seven thousand members. You can become a Master Beekeeper if you pass ten of the association's exams, in such fields as biology, honeybee management, and queen rearing. B.B.K.A. members are encouraged to use their harvests to bake Majestic & Moist Honey Cake.

When I read about the B.B.K.A., the first thing it reminded me of was a bee colony. Powell, of the Natural Beekeeping Trust, compared it to a church of conventional beekeeping, complete with its own liturgy and rituals, such as the National Honey Show. "Every year, that syllabus is pounded into them," Powell said. "We have hymns and chanting in religion because the message is always the same."

The president of the B.B.K.A., Anne Rowberry, was hard to reach. (Last October, she travelled to London to give the King a jar of honey.) But I met Margaret Murdin, a former chair and president of the B.B.K.A., for a coffee in Chipping Norton, a market town in the Cotswolds. Murdin is one of around ninety holders of the National Diploma in Beekeeping, the U.K.'s highest qualification. Her day job, before she retired, was advising the government on special-needs education. "I should have been an

entomologist,” she said. Murdin said that neither she nor the B.B.K.A. had any quarrel with natural beekeepers. (The association discourages the importing of queens and supports local bee breeding.) From Murdin’s point of view, any animosity came from the other side. “How you keep your bees is entirely up to you,” she said. “If they don’t like it, they will leave.”

Murdin admired Seeley’s bee research and agreed with almost all of it. “They certainly prefer not to be interfered with,” she said. “That goes without saying. So do I.” But she drew the line at two of the basic tenets of natural beekeeping: allowing bees to swarm and not treating them for disease. Swarms, she said, bother the public. (They also usually mean a significant hit to the honey harvest that year.) “If I had cows, I wouldn’t want them jumping out of their field and annoying my neighbors,” Murdin said. “I don’t want my bees doing it, either.” At heart, Darwinian beekeeping offended her sense of responsibility as a beekeeper. “You can let the bees get on with it, if you hadn’t interfered so much in the first place,” she said. It was humans who brought in varroa and pesticides and agricultural monocultures. “You can’t say, ‘We’ve got a pandemic and we’re not going to intervene. We’re going to let everybody die of *Covid*,’” she added. If we have broken the bees, then it is our job to fix them.

Beekeepers often joke about how much they disagree with one another: “If you ask four beekeepers, you will get five opinions.” Their collective noun, they say, should be an *argument* of beekeepers. I wonder if this has to do with each being the sole authority in his apiary, of being a “strange god,” in Maeterlinck’s phrase, to the bees. When natural and conventional beekeepers do clash, it is normally online. (On beekeeping forums, natural beekeepers sometimes signify themselves as “TF,” or treatment-free.) When I visited Gareth John’s garden, Paul Honigmann, from the Oxford Natural Beekeeping Group, joined us. There were a hundred and nineteen beekeepers on his e-mail list, compared with three hundred and fifty-four members of the Oxford branch of the B.B.K.A., and many belonged to both. According to the B.B.K.A., about a third of British beekeepers did not treat their bees for varroa last year. “There’s a phenomenon in sociology where, when you’ve got a very small out-group, nobody cares,” Honigmann said. “When that immigrant population or whatever hits a certain threshold, they are perceived as a threat.”

There is rarely an occasion for beekeepers to fight in the open. (One bee conservationist told me that he left the B.B.K.A. after a physical confrontation at a meeting.) But Andrew Brough, a conventional beekeeper from Oxford, says that, in the fall of 2020, he was asked to move a dozen hives into the orchards of Waterperry Gardens, a set of ornamental gardens to the east of the city, to help with the pollination season the following spring. Unbeknownst to him, Gareth John had also been looking after bees on the property, with another natural beekeeper, for several years. Brough secures his hives with pallet strapping and metal fasteners. As the weeks went by, he began to suspect that someone was tampering with the hives. “They were progressively being opened up on a Friday,” he said.

Brough imports queens from Denmark. When he introduced a new queen to one of his hives, it disappeared. One day, Brough found John and two other natural beekeepers standing outside his hives. “They were trying to kill my queens,” he said. (John described Brough’s account as “slander” and said that he had stumbled across Brough’s hives, unaware of his presence in the orchard.) Brough says that he offered the natural beekeepers a jar of honey, to show that there were no hard feelings, but they declined. (Eventually, both Brough and John stopped working at the gardens.) Brough dismissed natural beekeeping as an image thing. “It’s new, green, rock and roll,” he said. “Beards and sandals.” He thought for a moment. “Quite a lot of ordinary beekeepers also have beards and sandals,” he conceded. Brough told me that he makes a subsistence living from selling queens and the honey that he harvests each year. “Why they want to keep honeybees, I do not know,” he said.

I wanted to find a beekeeper who was respected on all sides. Eventually, I heard about Roger Patterson, who maintains dave-cushman.net—a Web site built by a fellow-beekeeper who died in 2011—which is regarded as one of the world’s best sources of apiculture information. Patterson started keeping bees sixty summers ago. He served for eight years as a trustee of the B.B.K.A., but he is better known as the president of the Bee Improvement and Bee Breeders Association, a more radical outfit that has long opposed the importing of foreign bees. Patterson has a reputation of being somewhat ornery. He is critical of exams and isn’t scientifically trained. But his views command attention. “I would very much believe what he’s telling you,” Seeley said. “He’s a straight shooter.”

Patterson runs a teaching apiary for his local beekeeping association in a small wood in West Sussex. When I arrived, he was in a clearing, clipping queens. I waited on the path with his dogs. Patterson wore jeans that were held up with green suspenders. He pulled a pair of plastic chairs out of a shipping container and we sat down to talk by his car. He was despondent about the state of beekeeping generally, whether natural, conventional, or on commercial bee farms. “When I first started keeping bees, at least fifty per cent of our members worked on the land in some way. They were practical people. They were cowmen, or foresters or gardeners,” Patterson said. “If they had a problem, they knew enough that they could get out of it for having a bit of gumption.” Modern beekeepers preferred simple answers. “There’s a lot of narrow thinking going on,” he said.

Patterson was sympathetic to the ideas of natural beekeepers, although he suspected that many of them were misguided novices. “‘Oh, wouldn’t it be lovely?’ You know,” he said. During the pandemic, Patterson experimented with not treating his bees for varroa and lost sixteen out of nineteen hives. He was fine with that. But he needed to have bees to teach with, so he had to start treating again.

What really worried him were the bees. Something was up. “Very up,” Patterson said. Since the early nineties, he had noticed that his queens could not lead their colonies for as long as they used to. In the past, Patterson’s queens had lived for five or six years. Now they were being superseded—deposed by the colony—within a year or two. Patterson hadn’t changed his beekeeping techniques much since 1963. “It is a massive problem,” he said. Some of the queens seemed fine. Others had misshapen wings. Patterson’s theory was that something was interfering with the bees’ pheromones in the hive, their *Nestduftwärmebindung*. But he didn’t know what.

“Lots of things are changing,” he said. “People are changing. The bees are changing. The environment’s changing.” Patterson wondered whether natural beekeeping was just another human vanity that was being foisted on the bees. At the same time, he had come to doubt the health of the creatures whose lives he was managing from season to season. “I reckon that the bees in trees are healthier than bees raised in hives,” he told me. But Patterson was a beekeeper. “Throughout my beekeeping life, I have always tried to improve the bees,” he said. Patterson explained that when he said this most

people thought he meant improving the bees to make more honey. "I think you can improve bees from the point of view of bees as well," he said. Patterson was not ready to admit that this task might be beyond him, or any beekeeper. He had inspected nine colonies that morning. After I left, he was going to place new queens into the hives that he feared would not last the winter. ♦

[A Reporter at Large](#)

Elon Musk's Shadow Rule

How the U.S. government came to rely on the tech billionaire—and is now struggling to rein him in.

By [Ronan Farrow](#)



"We are living off his good graces," a Pentagon official said of Musk's role in the war in Ukraine. *"That sucks."* Photo illustration by Matt Chase; Source photographs from Getty; Shutterstock

Last October, Colin Kahl, then the Under-Secretary of Defense for Policy at the Pentagon, sat in a hotel in Paris and prepared to make a call to avert disaster in Ukraine. A staffer handed him an iPhone—in part to avoid inviting an onslaught of late-night texts and colorful emojis on Kahl's own phone. Kahl had returned to his room, with its heavy drapery and distant view of the Eiffel Tower, after a day of meetings with officials from the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. A senior defense official told me that Kahl was surprised by whom he was about to contact: “He was, like, ‘Why am I calling [Elon Musk?](#)’ ”

The reason soon became apparent. “Even though Musk is not technically a diplomat or statesman, I felt it was important to treat him as such, given the influence he had on this issue,” Kahl told me. [SpaceX](#), Musk’s space-

exploration company, had for months been providing Internet access across Ukraine, allowing the country's forces to plan attacks and to defend themselves. But, in recent days, the forces had found their connectivity severed as they entered territory contested by Russia. More alarmingly, SpaceX had recently given the Pentagon an ultimatum: if it didn't assume the cost of providing service in Ukraine, which the company calculated at some four hundred million dollars annually, it would cut off access. "We started to get a little panicked," the senior defense official, one of four who described the standoff to me, recalled. Musk "could turn it off at any given moment. And that would have real operational impact for the Ukrainians."

Musk had become involved in the war in Ukraine soon after Russia invaded, in February, 2022. Along with conventional assaults, the Kremlin was conducting cyberattacks against Ukraine's digital infrastructure. Ukrainian officials and a loose coalition of expatriates in the tech sector, brainstorming in group chats on WhatsApp and Signal, found a potential solution: SpaceX, which manufactures a line of mobile Internet terminals called Starlink. The tripod-mounted dishes, each about the size of a computer display and clad in white plastic reminiscent of the sleek design sensibility of Musk's Tesla [electric cars](#), connect with a network of satellites. The units have limited range, but in this situation that was an advantage: although a nationwide network of dishes was required, it would be difficult for Russia to completely dismantle Ukrainian connectivity. Of course, Musk could do so. Three people involved in bringing Starlink to Ukraine, all of whom spoke on the condition of anonymity because they worried that Musk, if upset, could withdraw his services, told me that they originally overlooked the significance of his personal control. "Nobody thought about it back then," one of them, a Ukrainian tech executive, told me. "It was all about 'Let's fucking go, people are dying.' "

In the ensuing months, fund-raising in Silicon Valley's Ukrainian community, contracts with the U.S. Agency for International Development and with European governments, and pro-bono contributions from SpaceX facilitated the transfer of thousands of Starlink units to Ukraine. A soldier in Ukraine's signal corps who was responsible for maintaining Starlink access on the front lines, and who asked to be identified only by his first name, Mykola, told me, "It's the essential backbone of communication on the battlefield."

Initially, Musk showed unreserved support for the Ukrainian cause, responding encouragingly as Mykhailo Fedorov, the Ukrainian minister for digital transformation, tweeted pictures of equipment in the field. But, as the war ground on, SpaceX began to balk at the cost. “We are not in a position to further donate terminals to Ukraine, or fund the existing terminals for an indefinite period of time,” SpaceX’s director of government sales told the Pentagon in a [letter](#), last September. (CNBC recently [valued](#) SpaceX at nearly a hundred and fifty billion dollars. *Forbes* estimated Musk’s personal net worth at two hundred and twenty billion dollars, making him the world’s [richest](#) man.)

Musk was also growing increasingly uneasy with the fact that his technology was being used for warfare. That month, at a conference in Aspen attended by business and political figures, Musk even appeared to express support for Vladimir Putin. “He was onstage, and he said, ‘We should be negotiating. Putin wants peace—we should be negotiating peace with Putin.’ ” Reid Hoffman, who helped start PayPal with Musk, recalled. Musk seemed, he said, to have “bought what Putin was selling, hook, line, and sinker.” A week later, Musk tweeted a proposal for his own peace plan, which called for new referendums to redraw the borders of Ukraine, and granted Russia control of Crimea, the semi-autonomous peninsula recognized by most nations, including the United States, as Ukrainian territory. In later tweets, Musk portrayed as inevitable an outcome favoring Russia and attached maps highlighting eastern Ukrainian territories, some of which, he argued, “prefer Russia.” Musk also polled his Twitter followers about the plan. Millions responded, with about sixty per cent rejecting the proposal. (Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine’s President, tweeted his own poll, asking users whether they preferred the Elon Musk who supported Ukraine or the one who now seemed to back Russia. The former won, though Zelensky’s poll had a smaller turnout: Musk has more than twenty times as many followers.)

By then, Musk’s sympathies appeared to be manifesting on the battlefield. One day, Ukrainian forces advancing into contested areas in the south found themselves suddenly unable to communicate. “We were very close to the front line,” Mykola, the signal-corps soldier, told me. “We crossed this border and the Starlink stopped working.” The consequences were immediate. “Communications became dead, units were isolated. When you’re on offense, especially for commanders, you need a constant stream of

information from battalions. Commanders had to drive to the battlefield to be in radio range, risking themselves,” Mykola said. “It was chaos.” Ukrainian expats who had raised funds for the Starlink units began receiving frantic calls. The tech executive recalls a Ukrainian military official telling him, “We need Elon now.” “How now?” he replied. “Like fucking now,” the official said. “People are dying.” Another Ukrainian involved told me that he was “awoken by a dozen calls saying they’d lost connectivity and had to retreat.” The *Financial Times* reported that outages affected units in Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Kharkiv, Donetsk, and Luhansk. American and Ukrainian officials told me they believed that SpaceX had cut the connectivity via geofencing, cordoning off areas of access.



“My followers expect higher-quality vacation content than this.”
Cartoon by Emily Flake

The senior defense official said, “We had a whole series of meetings internal to the department to try to figure out what we could do about this.” Musk’s singular role presented unfamiliar challenges, as did the government’s role as intermediary. “It wasn’t like we could hold him in breach of contract or something,” the official continued. The Pentagon would need to reach a contractual arrangement with SpaceX so that, at the very least, Musk “couldn’t wake up one morning and just decide, like, he didn’t want to do this anymore.” Kahl added, “It was kind of a way for us to lock in services

across Ukraine. It could at least prevent Musk from turning off the switch altogether.”

Typically, such a negotiation would be handled by the Pentagon’s acquisitions department. But Musk had become more than just a vendor like Boeing, Lockheed, or other defense-industry behemoths. On the phone with Musk from Paris, Kahl was deferential. According to unclassified talking points for the call, he thanked Musk for his efforts in Ukraine, acknowledged the steep costs he’d incurred, and pleaded for even a few weeks to devise a contract. “If you cut this off, it doesn’t end the war,” Kahl recalled telling Musk.

Musk wasn’t immediately convinced. “My inference was that he was getting nervous that Starlink’s involvement was increasingly seen in Russia as enabling the Ukrainian war effort, and was looking for a way to placate Russian concerns,” Kahl told me. To the dismay of Pentagon officials, Musk volunteered that he had spoken with Putin personally. Another individual told me that Musk had made the same assertion in the weeks before he tweeted his pro-Russia peace plan, and had said that his consultations with the Kremlin were regular. (Musk later denied having spoken with Putin about Ukraine.) On the phone, Musk said that he was looking at his laptop and could see “the entire war unfolding” through a map of Starlink activity. “This was, like, three minutes before he said, ‘Well, I had this great conversation with Putin,’ ” the senior defense official told me. “And we were, like, ‘Oh, dear, this is not good.’ ” Musk told Kahl that the vivid illustration of how technology he had designed for peaceful ends was being used to wage war gave him pause.

After a fifteen-minute call, Musk agreed to give the Pentagon more time. He also, after public blowback and with evident annoyance, walked back his threats to cut off service. “The hell with it,” he tweeted. “Even though Starlink is still losing money & other companies are getting billions of taxpayer \$, we’ll just keep funding Ukraine govt for free.” This June, the Department of Defense announced that it had reached a deal with SpaceX.

The meddling of oligarchs and other monied interests in the fate of nations is not new. During the First World War, J. P. Morgan lent vast sums to the Allied powers; afterward, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., poured money into the

fledgling League of Nations. The investor George Soros's Open Society Foundations underwrote civil-society reform in post-Soviet Europe, and the casino mogul Sheldon Adelson funded right-wing media in Israel, as part of his support of Benjamin Netanyahu.

But Musk's influence is more brazen and expansive. There is little precedent for a civilian's becoming the arbiter of a war between nations in such a granular way, or for the degree of dependency that the U.S. now has on Musk in a variety of fields, from the future of energy and transportation to the exploration of space. SpaceX is currently the sole means by which *NASA* transports crew from U.S. soil into space, a situation that will persist for at least another year. The government's plan to move the auto industry toward electric cars requires increasing access to charging stations along America's highways. But this rests on the actions of another Musk enterprise, [Tesla](#). The automaker has seeded so much of the country with its proprietary charging stations that the Biden Administration relaxed an early push for a universal charging standard disliked by Musk. His stations are eligible for billions of dollars in subsidies, so long as Tesla makes them compatible with the other charging standard.

In the past twenty years, against a backdrop of crumbling infrastructure and declining trust in institutions, Musk has sought out business opportunities in crucial areas where, after decades of privatization, the state has receded. The government is now reliant on him, but struggles to respond to his risk-taking, brinkmanship, and caprice. Current and former officials from *NASA*, the Department of Defense, the Department of Transportation, the Federal Aviation Administration, and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration told me that Musk's influence had become inescapable in their work, and several of them said that they now treat him like a sort of unelected official. One Pentagon spokesman said that he was keeping Musk apprised of my inquiries about his role in Ukraine and would grant an interview with an official about the matter only with Musk's permission. "We'll talk to you if Elon wants us to," he told me. In a podcast interview last year, Musk was asked whether he has more influence than the American government. He replied immediately, "In some ways." Reid Hoffman told me that Musk's attitude is "like Louis XIV: 'L'état, c'est moi.' "

Musk's power continues to grow. His [takeover](#) of Twitter, which he has rebranded "X," gives him a critical forum for political discourse ahead of the next Presidential election. He recently launched an artificial-intelligence company, a move that follows years of involvement in the technology. Musk has become a hyper-exposed pop-culture figure, and his sharp turns from altruistic to vainglorious, strategic to impulsive, have been the subject of innumerable articles and at least seven major books, including a forthcoming [biography](#) by Walter Isaacson. But the nature and the scope of his power are less widely understood.

More than thirty of Musk's current and former colleagues in various industries and a dozen individuals in his personal life spoke to me about their experiences with him. [Sam Altman](#), the C.E.O. of OpenAI, with whom Musk has both worked and sparred, told me, "Elon desperately wants the world to be saved. But only if he can be the one to save it."

The terms of the Starlink deal have not been made public. Ukrainian officials say that they have not faced further service interruptions. But Musk has continued to express ambivalence about how the technology is being used, and where it can be deployed. In February, he tweeted, "We will not enable escalation of conflict that may lead to WW3." He said, as he had told Kahl, that he was sincerely attempting to navigate the moral dilemmas of his role: "We're trying hard to do the right thing, where the 'right thing' is an extremely difficult moral question."

Musk's hesitation aligns with his pragmatic interests. A facility in Shanghai produces half of all Tesla cars, and Musk depends on the good will of officials in China, which has lent support to Russia in the conflict. Musk recently acknowledged to the *Financial Times* that Beijing [disapproves](#) of his decision to provide Internet service to Ukraine and has sought assurances that he would not deploy similar technology in China. In the same interview, he responded to questions about China's efforts to assert control over Taiwan by floating another peace plan. Taiwan, he suggested, could become a jointly controlled administrative zone, an outcome that Taiwanese leaders see as ending the country's independence. During a trip to Beijing this spring, Musk was welcomed with what Reuters summarized as "flattery and feasts." He met with senior officials, including China's foreign minister, and posed

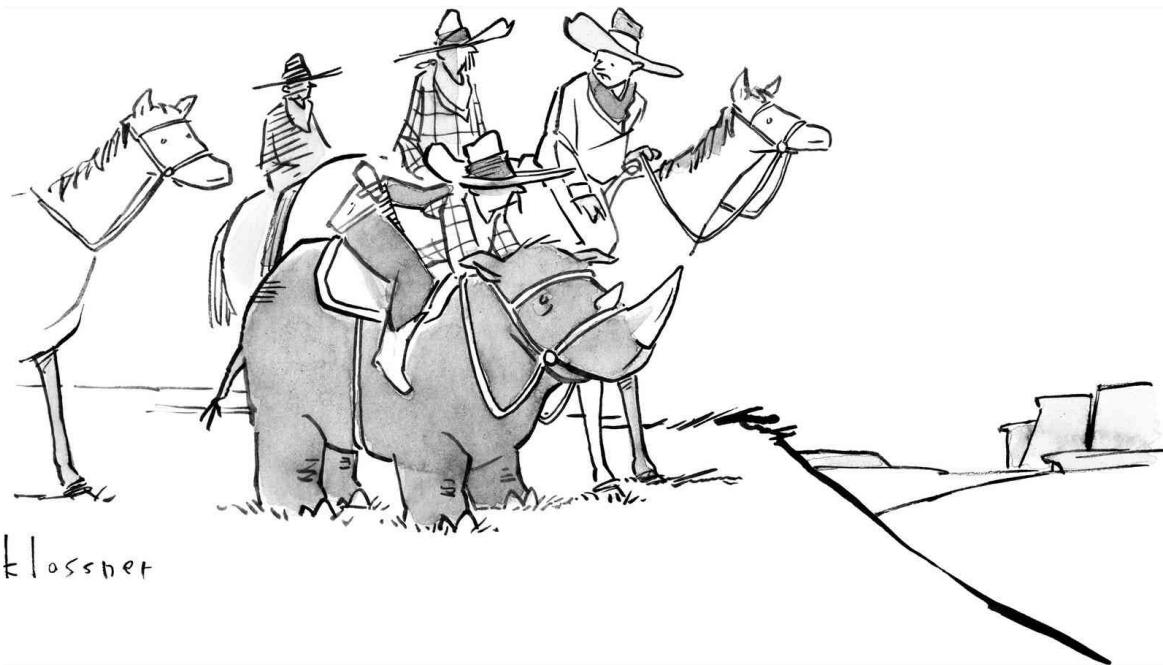
for the kinds of awkwardly smiling formal photos that are more typical of world leaders.

National-security officials I spoke with had a range of views on the government's balance of power with Musk. He maintains good relationships with some of them, including General Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Since the two men met, several years ago, when [Milley](#) was the chief of staff of the Army, they have discussed "technology applications to warfare—artificial intelligence, electric vehicles, and autonomous machines," Milley told me. "He has insight that helped shape my thoughts on the fundamental change in the character of war and the modernization of the U.S. military." During the Starlink controversy, Musk called him for advice. But other officials expressed profound misgivings. "Living in the world we live in, in which Elon runs this company and it is a private business under his control, we are living off his good graces," a Pentagon official told me. "That sucks."

One summer evening in the mid-nineteen-eighties, Musk and his friend Theo Taoushiani took Taoushiani's father's car for an illicit drive. Musk and Taoushiani were both in their mid-teens, and lived about a mile apart in a suburb of Johannesburg, South Africa. Neither had a driver's license, or permission from Taoushiani's father. But they were passionate Dungeons & Dragons fans, and a new module—a fresh scenario in the game—had just been released. Taoushiani took the wheel for the twenty-minute drive to the Sandton City mall. "Elon was my co-pilot," Taoushiani told me. "We went under the cover of darkness." At the mall, they found that they didn't have enough money. But Musk promised a salesperson that they would return the next day with the rest, and dropped the name of a well-known Greek restaurant owned by Taoushiani's family. "Elon had the gift of the gab," Taoushiani said. "He's very persuasive, and he's quite dogged in his determination." The two went home with the module.

Musk was born in 1971 in Pretoria, the country's administrative capital, and he and his younger brother, Kimbal, and his younger sister, Tosca, grew up under apartheid. Musk's mother, Maye, a Canadian model and dietitian, and his father, Errol, an engineer, divorced when he was young, and the children initially stayed with Maye. She has said that Errol was physically abusive toward her. "He would hit me when the kids were around," she wrote in her

memoir. “I remember that Tosca and Kimbal, who were two and four, respectively, would cry in the corner, and Elon, who was five, would hit him on the backs of his knees to try to stop him.” By the mid-eighties, Musk had moved in with his father—a decision that he has said was motivated by concern for his father’s loneliness, and which he came to regret. Musk, usually impassive in interviews, cried openly when he told *Rolling Stone* about the years that followed, in which, he said, his father psychologically tortured him, in ways that he declined to specify. “You have no idea about how bad,” he said. “Almost every crime you can possibly think of, he has done. Almost every evil thing you could possibly think of, he has done.” Taoushiani recalled witnessing Errol “chastise Elon a lot. Maybe belittle him.” (Errol Musk has denied allegations that he was abusive to Maye or to his children.) Musk has also said that he was violently bullied at school. Though he is now six feet one, with a broad-shouldered build, he was “much, much smaller back in school,” Taoushiani told me. “He wasn’t very social.”



“ ‘Ram them.’ That’s your suggestion for everything.”
Cartoon by John Klossner

Musk has said that he has Asperger’s syndrome, a form of what is now known as autism-spectrum disorder, which is characterized by difficulty with social interactions. As a child, he would sometimes fall into trancelike states of deep thought, during which he was so unresponsive that his mother

eventually took him to a doctor to check his hearing. Musk's quiet side persists—in my own interactions with him, I have found him to be thoughtful and measured. (Musk declined to answer questions for this story.) He can also be, as he joked during a stilted “Saturday Night Live” monologue, “pretty good at running human, in emulation mode.”

Musk escaped into science fiction and video games. “One of the reasons I got into technology, maybe *the* reason, was video games,” he said at a gaming-industry convention several years ago. In his early teens, Musk coded an eight-bit shooter game in the style of Space Invaders called Blastar, whose title screen, in a novelistic flourish, credits him as “E. R. Musk.” The premise was basic: “*MISSION: DESTROY ALIEN FREIGHTER CARRYING DEADLY HYDROGEN BOMBS AND STATUS BEAM MACHINES.*” But it won recognition from a South African trade magazine, which published the game’s hundred and sixty-seven lines of code and paid Musk a small sum.

Musk often talks about his science-fiction influences. Some have manifested in straightforward ways: he has connected his love of Isaac Asimov’s “[Foundation](#)” novels, whose characters grapple with a mathematically precise prediction of their civilization’s collapse, to his obsession with insuring human survival beyond Earth. But some of Musk’s touchstones present ironies. He has said that his hero is Douglas Adams, the writer who skewered both the hyper-rich and the progress-at-any-cost ethos that Musk has come to embody. In the “[The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy](#)” novels and radio plays, the latter of which were broadcast in South Africa during Musk’s childhood, a narcissistic playboy becomes the president of the galaxy, and Earth is demolished to make way for a space transit route. Musk is also an avowed fan of Deus Ex, a role-playing first-person-shooter video game that he has brought up when discussing his company Neuralink, which aspires to invent ability-enhancing body [modifications](#) like those featured in the game. During the pandemic, Musk seemed to embrace *Covid* denialism, and for a while he changed his Twitter profile picture to an image of the protagonist of the game, which turns on a manufactured plague designed to control the masses. But Deus Ex, like “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy,” is a fundamentally anti-capitalist text, in which the plague is the culmination of unrestrained corporate power, and the villain is the world’s richest man, a media-darling tech entrepreneur with global aspirations and political leaders under his control.

In 1999, Musk stood outside his Bay Area home to accept the delivery of a million-dollar McLaren F1 sports car. He was in his late twenties, and wearing an oversized brown blazer. “Some could interpret purchasing this car as behavior characteristic of an imperialist brat,” he told a CNN news crew. Then he beamed, saying that there were only about sixty such cars in the world. “My values may have changed,” he added, “but I’m not consciously aware of my values having changed.” Musk’s fiancée, a Canadian writer named Justine Wilson, seemed more aware. “It’s a million-dollar car. It’s decadent,” she said. “My fear is that we become spoiled brats. That we lose a sense of appreciation and perspective.” The McLaren, she observed, was “the perfect car for Silicon Valley.”

Musk had moved to Canada when he was in his late teens, and met Wilson when they both attended Queen’s University, in Ontario. He later transferred to the University of Pennsylvania, graduating with degrees in economics and physics. In 1995, the early days of the World Wide Web, he and Kimbal founded a company that came to be called Zip2, an online city directory that they sold to newspapers. Musk has often described the company’s humble origins, saying that he and his brother lived and worked in a small studio apartment, showering at a nearby Y.M.C.A. and eating at Jack in the Box. (Errol at one point gave his sons twenty-eight thousand dollars. Musk, who has a tendency to fuss over questions of credit, has stated that his father’s contribution came “much later,” in a round of funding that “would’ve happened anyway.”) At Zip2, Musk developed what he describes as his “hard-core” work style; even after he had his own apartment, he often slept on a beanbag at the office. But, in the end, the company’s investors stripped him of his leadership role and installed a more experienced chief executive. Musk believed that the startup should have been targeting not just newspapers but consumers. Investors pursued a more modest vision instead. In 1999, Zip2 was sold to Compaq for three hundred and seven million dollars, earning Musk more than twenty million dollars.

Justine and Musk married the following year. After their first child died at ten weeks, from sudden infant death syndrome, the couple dealt with the tragedy in very different ways. Justine, by her account, grieved openly; Musk later told one of his biographers, Ashlee Vance, that “[wallowing](#) in sadness does no good for anyone around you.” After pursuing I.V.F. treatment, the couple had twins, then triplets. (Musk now has at least nine

children with three different women, and has said that he is doing his part to address one of his pet issues, the risk of population collapse; demographers are skeptical about the matter.) Justine wrote in an essay for *Marie Claire* that their relationship eventually buckled under the weight of Musk's obsession with work and his [controlling tendencies](#), which began with him insisting, as they danced at their wedding, "I am the alpha in this relationship." A messy divorce ensued, leading to a legal dispute over their postnuptial financial agreement, which was settled years later. "He had grown up in the male-dominated culture of South Africa," Justine wrote. "The will to compete and dominate that made him so successful in business did not magically shut off when he came home." (Musk wrote a response to Justine's account in Business Insider, discussing the financial dispute, but he did not address Justine's characterizations of his behavior.)

After Musk left Zip2, he poured some twelve million dollars, a majority of his wealth, into another startup, an online bank called X.com. It was the first instance of his [obsession](#) with the letter "X," which has now appeared in the names of his companies, his products, and his son with the artist Grimes: X Æ A-12. The bank also marked the beginning of a long and so far unfulfilled quest—recently revived in his effort to reinvent Twitter—to create an "everything app," incorporating a payment system. In 2000, X.com merged with a competing online-payments startup, Confinity, co-founded by the entrepreneur [Peter Thiel](#). In events that have since become Silicon Valley lore, Musk and Thiel battled for control of the company. Various accounts apportion blame differently. Hoffman told me, citing the story as an example of Musk's disingenuousness, that Musk had pushed for the merger by highlighting the leadership of his company's seasoned executive, only to force out the executive and place himself in the top role. "A merger like this, you're doing a marriage," Hoffman said. "And it's, like, 'I was lying to you intensely while we were dating. Now that we're married, let me tell you about the herpes.'" People who have worked with Musk often describe him as controlling. One said, "In the areas he wants to compete in, he has a very hard time sharing the spotlight, or not being the center of attention." In the fall of 2000, another coup, executed while Musk was on a long-delayed honeymoon with Justine, overthrew Musk and installed Thiel as the company's head. Two years later, eBay acquired the company, by then called PayPal, for \$1.5 billion, making Musk, who remained the largest shareholder, fabulously wealthy.

Perhaps the most revealing moment in the PayPal saga happened at its outset. In March, 2000, as the merger was under way, Musk was driving his new McLaren, with Thiel in the passenger seat. The two were on Sand Hill Road, an artery that cuts through Silicon Valley. Thiel asked Musk, “So what can this do?” Musk replied, “Watch this,” then floored the gas pedal, hit an embankment, and sent the car airborne and spinning before it slammed back onto the pavement, blowing out its suspension and its windows. “This isn’t insured,” Musk told Thiel. Musk’s critics have used the story to illustrate his reckless showboating, but it also underscores how often Musk has been rewarded for that behavior: he repaired the McLaren, drove it for several more years, then reportedly sold it at a profit. Musk delights in telling the story, lingering on the risk to his life. In one interview, asked whether there were parallels with his approach to building companies, Musk said, “I hope not.” Appearing to consider the idea, he added, “*Watch this.* Yeah, that could be awkward with a rocket launch.”

Of all Musk’s enterprises, SpaceX may be the one that most fundamentally reflects his appetite for risk. Staff at SpaceX’s Starship facility, in Boca Chica, Texas, spent December of 2020 preparing for the launch of a rocket known as SN8, then the newest prototype in the company’s Starship program, which it hopes will eventually transport humans to orbit, to the moon, and, in the mission Musk speaks about with the most passion, to Mars. The F.A.A. had approved an initial launch date for the rocket. But an engine issue forced SpaceX to delay by a day. By then, the weather had shifted. On the new day, the F.A.A. told SpaceX that, according to its model of the wind’s speed and direction, if the rocket exploded it could create a blast wave that risked damaging the windows of nearby houses. A series of tense meetings followed, with SpaceX presenting its own modelling to establish that the launch was safe, and the F.A.A. refusing to grant permission. Wayne Monteith, then the head of the agency’s space division, was leaving an event at the Cape Canaveral Space Force Station when he received a frustrated call from Musk. “Look, you cannot launch,” Monteith told him. “You’re not cleared to launch.” Musk acknowledged the order.

Musk was on site in Boca Chica when SpaceX launched anyway. The rocket achieved liftoff and successfully performed several maneuvers intended to rehearse those of an eventual manned Starship. But, on landing, the SN8 came in too fast, and exploded on impact. (No windows were damaged.) The

next day, Musk visited the crash site. In a picture taken that day, Musk stands next to the twisted steel of the rocket, dressed in a black T-shirt and jeans, looking determined, his arms crossed and his eyes narrowed. His tweets about the explosion were celebratory, not apologetic. “He has a long history of launching and blowing up rockets. And then he puts out videos of all the rockets that he’s blown up. And like half of America thinks it’s really cool,” the former *NASA* administrator Jim Bridenstine told me. “He has a different set of rules.”

Hans Koenigsmann, then SpaceX’s vice-president for flight reliability, started working on a customary report to the F.A.A. about the launch. Koenigsmann told me that he felt pressure to minimize focus on the launch process and Musk’s role in it. “I sensed that he wanted it taken out,” Koenigsmann said. “I disagreed, and in the end we wound up with a very different version from what was originally intended.” Eventually, Koenigsmann was told not to write a report at all, and a letter was sent to the F.A.A. instead. The agency, meanwhile, opened its own investigation. Monteith told me that he agreed with Musk that the F.A.A. had been conservative about a situation that presented little statistical risk of casualties, but he was nevertheless troubled. “We had safety folks who were very upset about it,” Monteith recalled. In a series of letters to SpaceX, Monteith accused the company of relying on data “hastily developed to meet a launch window,” launching “based on ‘impressions’ and ‘assumptions,’ ” and exhibiting “a concerning lack of operational control and process discipline that is inconsistent with a strong safety culture.” In its responses, SpaceX proposed various safety reforms, but also pushed back, complaining that the F.A.A.’s weather model was unreliable and suggesting that the agency had been resistant to discussions about improving it. (SpaceX did not respond to requests for comment.)

The following March, Steve Dickson, then the F.A.A.’s administrator, called Musk. The two men spoke for thirty minutes. Like Kahl, Dickson was deferential, thanking Musk for his role in transforming the commercial space sector and acknowledging that SpaceX was taking steps to make its launches less risky. But Dickson, an F.A.A. spokesperson said in a statement, “made it clear that the FAA expects SpaceX to develop and foster a robust safety culture that stresses adherence to FAA rules.” Dickson had navigated such conversations before, including with Boeing after two *737 max* aircraft

crashed. But this situation presented a thornier challenge. “It’s not every day that the F.A.A. administrator releases a statement about a phone call that they have with the C.E.O. or the head of an aerospace company,” an official at the agency told me. “That kind of gets into the soft pressure, public pressure that you don’t do unless you are trying to change the incentive structure.”

The F.A.A. issued no fine, though it grounded SpaceX for two months. “I didn’t see that a fine would make any difference,” Monteith told me. “He could pull that out of his pocket. However, not allowing launches, that would get the attention of a company that prides itself on being able to iterate and go fast.” Musk has continued to complain about the agency. After it postponed another launch, he tweeted, “The FAA space division has a fundamentally broken regulatory structure.” He added, “Under those rules, humanity will never get to Mars.”



Cartoon by Maggie Larson

Musk has been fixated on space since his childhood. The idea for SpaceX came about after his exile from PayPal. “I went to the *NASA* website so I could see the schedule of when we’re supposed to go” to Mars, Musk told *Wired*, in 2012. “At first I thought, jeez, maybe I’m just looking in the wrong place! Why was there no plan, no schedule? There was nothing.” In 2001, he connected with space-exploration enthusiasts, and even travelled to

Russia in an unsuccessful bid to buy missiles to use as rockets. The next year, he moved to Los Angeles, closer to California's aerospace industry, and ultimately he pulled together a team of engineers and entrepreneurs and founded SpaceX, to make his own rockets. Private rocket launches date back to the eighties, but no one had attempted anything on the scale that Musk envisioned, and it proved to be more difficult and expensive than he had anticipated. Musk has said that, by 2008, the company was nearly bankrupt, and that, after putting much of his wealth into SpaceX and Tesla, he wasn't far behind. "That was definitely the worst year of my life," he said in an [interview](#) on "60 Minutes." SpaceX's first three launches had failed, and there was no budget for another. "I had no more money left," Musk told Bridenstine, the *NASA* administrator, years later. "We managed to put together enough spare parts to do a fourth launch." Had that failed, he added, "SpaceX would have died." The launch was successful, and *NASA* soon awarded SpaceX a \$1.6-billion contract to resupply the International Space Station. In 2020, the company flew its first manned mission there—ending nearly a decade of American reliance on Russian craft for the task. SpaceX now launches more satellites than any other private company, with four thousand five hundred and nineteen in orbit as of July, occupying many of Earth's orbital routes. "Once the carrying capacity of an orbit is maxed out, you've basically blocked everyone from trying to compete in that market," Bridenstine told me.

There are [competitors](#) in the field, including Jeff Bezos's Blue Origin and Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic, but none yet rival SpaceX. The new space race has the potential to shape the global balance of power. Satellites enable the navigation of drones and missiles and generate imagery used for intelligence, and they are mostly under the control of private companies. "The U.S. government is in massive catch-up to build a more resilient space architecture," Kahl, the former Pentagon Under-Secretary, told me. "And that only works if you can leverage the explosion of commercial space." Several officials told me that they were alarmed by *NASA*'s reliance on SpaceX for essential services. "There is only one thing worse than a government monopoly. And that is a private monopoly that the government is dependent on," Bridenstine said. "I do worry that we have put all of our eggs into one basket, and it's the SpaceX basket."

Even Musk's critics concede that his tendency to push against constraints has helped catalyze SpaceX's success. A number of officials suggested to me that, despite the tensions related to the company, it has made government bureaucracies nimbler. "When SpaceX and *NASA* work together, we work closer to optimal speed," Kenneth Bowersox, *NASA*'s associate administrator for space operations, told me. Still, some figures in the aerospace world, even ones who think that Musk's rockets are basically safe, fear that concentrating so much power in private companies, with so few restraints, invites tragedy. "At some point, with new competitors emerging, progress will be thwarted when there's an accident, and people won't be confident in the capabilities commercial companies have," Bridenstine said. "I mean, we just saw this submersible going down to visit the Titanic implode. I think we have to think about the non-regulatory environment as sometimes hurting the industry more than the regulatory environment."

In early 2022, Steven Cliff, then the deputy administrator of the Department of Transportation's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, learned that potentially tens of thousands of Tesla vehicles had a feature that he found concerning. For years, Tesla has been working to create a totally self-driving car, a long-standing ambition of Musk's. Now Cliff was told that a version of Tesla's Full Self-Driving software, an experimental feature that lets the cars navigate with little intervention from a driver, permitted cars to roll through stop signs, at up to about six miles an hour. This was clearly illegal. Cliff's enforcement team contacted Tesla, and, in several meetings, a surprising conversation about safety and artificial intelligence played out. Representatives for Tesla seemed confused. Their response, as Cliff recalled, was "That's what humans do all the time. Show us the data, why it's unsafe." N.H.T.S.A. officials told Tesla that, regardless of human compliance, "you should not be able to program a computer to break the law for you." They demanded that Tesla update all the affected cars, removing the feature—a recall, in industry terms, albeit a digital one. "There was a lot of back-and-forth," Cliff told me. "Like, at midnight on the very last day, they blinked and ended up recalling the rolling-stop feature." (Tesla did not respond to requests for comment.)

Musk joined Tesla as an investor in 2004, a year after it was incorporated. (He has spent years defending the formative nature of his role and was eventually, in a legal settlement, one of several people granted permission to

use the term “co-founder.”) Musk was again entering a market bound by entrenched private interests and stringent regulation, which opened him up to more clashes with regulators. Some of the skirmishes were trivial. Tesla for a time included in its vehicles the ability to replace the humming noises that electric cars must emit—since their engines make little sound—with goat bleats, farting, or a sound of the owner’s choice. “We’re, like, ‘No, that’s not compliant with the regulations, don’t be stupid,’ ” Cliff told me. Tesla argued with regulators for more than a year, according to an N.H.T.S.A. safety report. Nine days after the rolling-stop recall, the company pulled the noises, too. On Twitter, Musk wrote, “The fun police made us do it (sigh).”

“It’s a little like Mom and Dad and children. Like, How far can I push Mom and Dad until they push back?” Cliff said. “And that’s not a recipe for a strong safety culture.”

The fart debate had low stakes; the over-all safety of the cars is a far greater matter. Tesla has repeatedly said that Autopilot, a more limited technology than Full Self-Driving, is safer than a human driver. Last year, Musk added that he would be “shocked” if Full Self-Driving didn’t become safer than human drivers by the end of the year. But he has never made public the data needed to fully corroborate those claims. In recent months, new [crash numbers](#) from the N.H.T.S.A., which were first reported by the *Washington Post*, have shown an uptick in accidents—and fatalities—involving Autopilot and Full Self-Driving. Tesla has been secretive about the specifics. A person at the N.H.T.S.A. told me that the company instructed the agency to redact specifics about whether driver-assistance software was in use during crashes. (By law, regulators must abide by such requests for confidentiality, unless they decide to contest them in court.) Pete Buttigieg, the Secretary of Transportation, recently said that there were “concerns” about the marketing of Autopilot. Cliff told me he had seen data that showed Teslas were involved in “a disproportionate number of crashes involving emergency vehicles,” though he said that the agency had not yet determined whether the technology or the human drivers was the cause. In a statement, a spokesperson for the agency said, “Multiple investigations remain open.”

Officials who have worked at *OSHA* and at an equivalent California agency told me that Musk’s influence, and his attitude about regulation, had made

their jobs difficult. The Biden Administration, which is urgently trying to reduce reliance on fossil fuels, has concluded that it needs to work with Musk, because of his dominant position in the electric-car market. And Musk's personal wealth dwarfs the entire budget of *OSHA*, which is tasked with monitoring the conditions in his workplaces. "You add on the fact that he considers himself to be a master of the universe and these rules just don't apply to people like him," Jordan Barab, a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Labor at *OSHA*, told me. "There's a lot of underreporting in industry in general. And Elon Musk kind of seems to raise that to an art form." Garrett Brown, a former field-compliance inspector at California's Division of Occupational Safety and Health, added, "We have a bad health-and-safety situation throughout the country. And it's worse in companies run by people like Elon Musk, who was ideologically opposed to the idea of government enforcement of public-health regulations."

In March, 2020, as pandemic lockdowns began, Musk e-mailed Tesla employees, telling them that he intended to violate orders and show up at work, and downplaying the significance of *COVID-19*. Soon after, he lost an initial fight to keep a factory in Alameda County—Tesla's most productive in the U.S.—open. That April, after county officials extended shelter-in-place orders, Musk was on a conference call with outside financial analysts. His rhetoric became nakedly political, to an extent that would have been uncharacteristic just a few years earlier. "I would call it forcibly imprisoning people in their homes against all of their constitutional rights," he told the analysts, speaking of the lockdowns. "What the fuck?" he added. "It's an outrage. An outrage. . . . This is fascist. This is not democratic. This is not freedom. Give people back their goddam freedom." The pandemic seems to have sparked a pronounced shift in Musk. The lockdowns represented an example of what Hoffman told me Musk considered to be a cardinal sin: "getting in the way of the mission."

The following month, Musk sent a series of vitriolic tweets, threatening to file suit against Alameda County, to move Tesla's headquarters, and to flout the rules and reopen his factory, all of which he eventually did. The county essentially rubber-stamped the reopening soon afterward—a far cry from what Musk had invited. "I will be on the line with everyone else," he had tweeted, at the height of his frustration. "If anyone is arrested, I ask that it only be me."

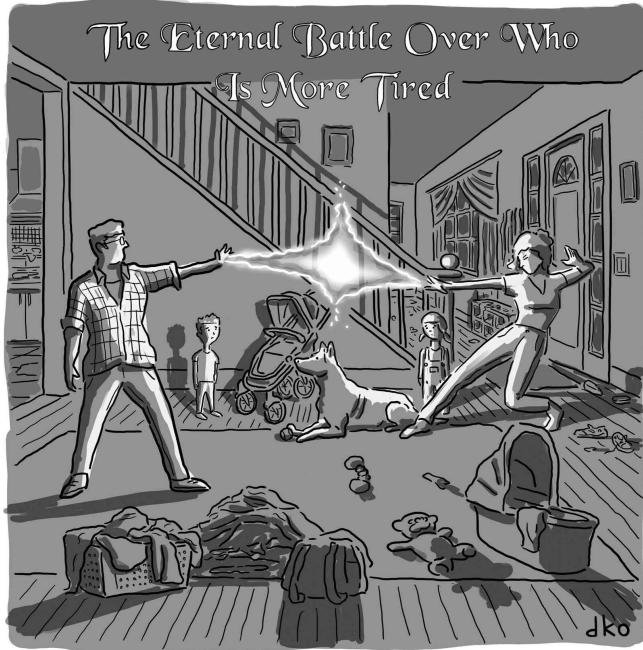
Musk has, for much of his public life, presented himself as a centrist. “I’m socially very liberal,” he told the technology reporter Kara Swisher in 2020. “And then economically right of center, maybe, or center.” He has said that he donated to Hillary Clinton, and voted for both her and Joe Biden. But, in recent years, the more radical perspective that characterized his diatribes about *Covid* has come to the fore. In March, 2022, Twitter restricted the account of the satirical Web site the Babylon Bee, after the site misgendered a government official. The next day, in texts later disclosed during the Twitter-acquisition process, Musk’s contact “TJ” (identified by Bloomberg as his ex-wife Talulah Riley) expressed frustration with the development and urged him to purchase Twitter to “fight woke-ism.” The following week, Musk polled his followers about whether Twitter respected free speech and, in a phone call to the Babylon Bee’s C.E.O., joked about buying the platform. Finally, in April, 2022, he offered forty-four billion dollars for the company. Almost immediately, he tried to back out of the deal, prompting Twitter to sue. After months of legal proceedings, Musk resumed the acquisition process, and in October he assumed control of the company.

“Given unprovoked attacks by leading Democrats against me & a very cold shoulder to Tesla & SpaceX, I intend to vote Republican in November,” he tweeted last year. By the time he bought Twitter, he was urging his followers to vote along similar lines, and appearing to back Ron DeSantis, whose candidacy he helped launch in a technically disastrous Twitter live event. Although Musk’s teen-age daughter, Vivian, has come out as trans, he has embraced anti-trans sentiment, saying that he would lobby to criminalize “irreversible” gender-affirming care for children. (Vivian recently changed her last name, saying in a legal filing, “I no longer live with or wish to be related to my biological father in any way, shape or form.”) Musk started spreading misinformation on the platform: he shared theories that the physical attack on Paul Pelosi, the husband of the former Speaker of the House, had followed a meeting with a male prostitute, and retweeted suggestions that reports accurately identifying a mass shooter as a white supremacist were a “psyop.” Some people who know Musk well still struggle to make sense of his political shift. “There was nothing political about him ever,” a close associate told me. “I’ve been around him for a long time, and had lots of deep conversations with the man, at all hours of the day —never heard a fucking word about this.”

When Musk arrived at Twitter, he immediately gutted the company's staff, reducing the number of employees by about fifty per cent. One person who kept his job was Yoel Roth, the company's head of trust and safety. Roth, who is in his mid-thirties, is gay, Jewish, and liberal. His department was responsible for determining Twitter's rules; during the Trump Administration, he became embroiled in the culture wars. After the company began rolling out a new fact-checking policy that labelled two of Trump's tweets as misinformation, Kellyanne Conway, President Trump's aide, went on "Fox & Friends" and read out Roth's full name and spelled his username, adding, "He's about to get more followers." Trump then held up a New York *Post* cover mocking Roth, and Twitter users began recirculating tweets that Roth had written criticizing conservative candidates.

But when Musk took over he resisted calls to fire Roth. "We've all made some questionable tweets, me more than most, but I want to be clear that I support Yoel," he tweeted in October, 2022. "My sense is that he has high integrity, and we are all entitled to our political beliefs." That evening, Roth messaged Musk on Signal, thanking him. Musk responded, "You have my full support," and, the next day, he followed up with a screenshot of a tweet from Roth that described Mitch McConnell as "a bag of farts." Musk added, "Haha, I totally agree."

But the cuts that Musk had instituted quickly took a toll on the company. Employees had been informed of their termination via brusque, impersonal e-mails—Musk is now being sued for hundreds of millions of dollars by employees who say that they are owed additional severance pay—and the remaining staffers were abruptly ordered to return to work in person. Twitter's business model was also in question, since Musk had alienated advertisers and invited a flood of fake accounts by reinventing the platform's verification process. On November 10th, Roth sent a brief resignation e-mail. When his departure became public, Musk texted, asking to talk. "I[t] would mean a lot if you would consider remaining at Twitter," he wrote. The two spoke that night, and Roth declined to return. Days later, he published an Op-Ed in the *Times*, questioning the future of user safety on the platform. (Twitter did not respond to requests for comment.)



Cartoon by David Ostow

Soon afterward, Musk replied to a Twitter user surfacing a 2010 tweet from Roth, in which he'd shared a link to a Salon article about a teacher's being charged with having sex with an eighteen-year-old student and asked, "Can high school students ever meaningfully consent to sex with their teachers?"

"That explains a lot," Musk tweeted in reply. Minutes later, he posted an image showing a portion of Roth's doctoral dissertation, which focussed on the gay-hookup app Grindr and its user data. In the excerpt, Roth argued that such platforms will inevitably be used by people under eighteen, so they should do more to keep those individuals safe. "Looks like Yoel is in favor of children being able to access adult internet services," Musk wrote.

The attack fit a pattern: Musk's trolling has increasingly taken on the vernacular of hard-right social media, in which grooming, pedophilia, and human trafficking are associated with liberalism. In 2018, when a Thai youth soccer team was trapped in a cave, Musk travelled to Thailand to offer a custom-made miniature submarine to rescuers. The head of the rescue operation declined, and Musk lashed out on Twitter, questioning the expertise of the rescuers. After one of them, Vernon Unsworth, referred to the offer as a "P.R. stunt," Musk called him a "pedo guy." (Unsworth sued Musk for defamation, characterizing the harassment he received from Musk's followers as "a life sentence without parole.") A judge ruled in favor

of Musk, who argued that he hadn't been accusing Unsworth of actual pedophilia, just trying to insult him.)

Musk's tweet about Roth got nearly seventeen thousand quote tweets and retweets. "The moment that it went from being a moderation conversation to being a Pizzagate conversation, the risk level changed," Roth told me. "I spent my career looking at the absolute worst things that the Internet could do to people. Certainly, worse things have happened to people. But this is probably up there." Roth and his husband were forced to flee their house, a two-bedroom in El Cerrito, California, that they'd purchased just two years earlier. "And then as we are, like, packing our stuff and leaving and getting the dog loaded into the car and whatever, like, the *Daily Mail* publishes an article that gives people more or less a map to my house," Roth said. "At that point, we're, like, 'Oh, we're leaving this house potentially for the last time.'"

This summer, Twitter's cheerful blue bird logo came down from the roof of the company's headquarters, in San Francisco, and was replaced with a strobing "X." The new entity is a marriage between two parts of Musk. There's his career-long quest to create an everything app—integrating services ranging from communication to banking and shopping, and emulating products, like WeChat, that are popular in Asia. Sitting alongside that pragmatic goal is a newer, more confusing side of Musk, embodied by his desire to take back the town square from what he sees as woke discourse. Twitter has become a private company, so it's difficult to assess its finances, but numerous prominent advertisers have departed, and Meta recently launched Threads, a competitor that shamelessly emulates the old Twitter, and broke records for downloads. Musk threatened to sue, then challenged Mark Zuckerberg, Meta's founder and C.E.O., to a cage match, pledging to live-stream it and donate the proceeds to charity. (Zuckerberg has accepted. Musk has delayed committing to a date, citing a back injury.) The illuminated sign atop X's headquarters, after complaints to the Department of Building Inspection, came down as quickly as it had gone up.

Some of Musk's associates connected his erratic behavior to efforts to self-medicate. Musk, who says he now spends much of his time in a modest house in the wetlands of South Texas, near a SpaceX facility, confessed, in an interview last year, "I feel quite lonely." He has said that his career

consists of “great highs, terrible lows and unrelenting stress.” One close colleague told me, “His life just sucks. It’s so stressful. He’s just so dedicated to these companies. He goes to sleep and wakes up answering e-mails. Ninety-nine per cent of people will never know someone that obsessed, and with that high a tolerance for sacrifice in their personal life.”

In 2018, the *Times* reported that members of the Tesla board had grown concerned about Musk’s use of the prescription sleep aid Ambien, which can cause hallucinations. The *Wall Street Journal* reported earlier this year that he uses ketamine, which has gained popularity both as a depression treatment and as a party drug, and several people familiar with his habits have confirmed this. Musk, who smoked pot on Joe Rogan’s podcast, prompting a *NASA* safety review of SpaceX, has, perhaps understandably, declined to comment on the reporting that he uses ketamine, but he has not disputed it. “Zombifying people with SSRIs for sure happens way too much,” he tweeted, referring to selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, another category of depression treatment. “From what I’ve seen with friends, ketamine taken occasionally is a better option.” Associates suggested that Musk’s use has escalated in recent years, and that the drug, alongside his isolation and his increasingly embattled relationship with the press, might contribute to his tendency to make chaotic and impulsive statements and decisions. Amit Anand, a leading ketamine researcher, told me that it can contribute to unpredictable behavior. “A little bit of ketamine has an effect similar to alcohol. It can cause disinhibition, where you do and say things you otherwise would not,” he said. “At higher doses, it has another effect, which is dissociation: you feel detached from your body and surroundings.” He added, “You can feel grandiose and like you have special powers or special talents. People do impulsive things, they could do inadvisable things at work. The impact depends on the kind of work. For a librarian, there’s less risk. If you’re a pilot, it can cause big problems.”

On July 12th, Musk announced xAI, his entry into a field that promises to alter much about life as we know it. He tweeted an image of the new company’s Web site, featuring a characteristically theatrical mission statement: the firm’s goal, he said, was “to understand the true nature of the universe.” In the image, Musk highlighted the date and explained its significance. “ $7 + 12 + 23 = 42$,” the text read. “42 is the answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything.” It was a reference

to “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy.” In the series, an immensely complex artificial intelligence is asked to answer that question and, after computing for millions of years, answers with Adams’s most famous punch line: 42. “I think the problem, to be quite honest with you, is that you’ve never actually known what the question is,” the computer says. Earth itself, and all the organisms on it, are ultimately revealed to be a still larger computer, built to clarify the question. Adams does not portray this satirical vision as positive. Musk’s announcement suggested more optimism: “Once you know the right question to ask, the answer is often the easy part.”

Musk has been involved in artificial intelligence for years. In 2015, he was one of a handful of tech leaders, including Hoffman and Thiel, who funded [OpenAI](#), then a nonprofit initiative. (It now has a for-profit subsidiary.) OpenAI had a less grandiose and more cautious mission statement than xAI’s: to “advance digital intelligence in the way that is most likely to benefit humanity.” In the first few years of OpenAI, Musk grew unhappy with the company. He said that his efforts at Tesla to incorporate A.I. created a conflict of interest, and several people involved told me that this was true. However, they also said that Musk was frustrated by his lack of control and, as Semafor reported earlier this year, that he had attempted to take over OpenAI. Musk still defends his centrality to the company’s origins, stressing his financial contributions in its fledgling days. (The exact figures are unclear: Musk has given estimates that range from fifty million to a hundred million dollars.) Throughout his involvement, Musk seemed preoccupied with control, credit, and rivalries. He made incendiary remarks about Demis Hassabis, the head of Google’s DeepMind A.I. initiative, and, later, about Microsoft’s competing effort. He thought that OpenAI wasn’t sufficiently competitive, at one point telling colleagues that it had a “0%” chance of “being relevant.” Musk left the company in 2018, renegeing on a commitment to further fund OpenAI, one of the individuals involved told me. “Basically, he goes, ‘You’re all a bunch of jackasses,’ and he leaves,” Hoffman said. The withdrawal was devastating. “It was very tough,” Altman, the head of OpenAI, said. “I had to reorient a lot of my life and time to make sure we had enough funding.” OpenAI went on to become a leader in the field, introducing [ChatGPT](#) last year. Musk has made a habit of trashing the company, wondering repeatedly, in public interviews, why he hasn’t received a return on his investment, given the company’s for-profit arm. “If this is legal, why doesn’t everyone do it?” he tweeted recently.

It is difficult to say whether Musk's interest in A.I. is driven by scientific wonder and altruism or by a desire to dominate a new and potentially powerful industry. Several entrepreneurs who have co-founded businesses with Musk suggested that the arrival of Google and Microsoft in the field had made it a new brass ring, as space and electric vehicles had been earlier. Musk has maintained that he is motivated by his fear of the technology's destructive potential. In a podcast earlier this year, Ari Emanuel, the head of the Hollywood agency W.M.E., recalled Musk joking about an A.I.-dominated future. "Ari, do you have dogs?" Musk asked him. "Well, here's what A.I. is to you. You're the dog." In March, Musk, along with dozens of tech leaders, signed an open letter calling for a six-month pause in the development of advanced A.I. technology. "Contemporary AI systems are now becoming human-competitive at general tasks, and we must ask ourselves: Should we let machines flood our information channels with propaganda and untruth?" the letter said. "Should we automate away all the jobs, including the fulfilling ones? Should we develop nonhuman minds that might eventually outnumber, outsmart, obsolete and replace us?"

Yet in the period during which Musk endorsed a pause, he was working to build xAI, recruiting from major competitors, including OpenAI, and even, according to someone with knowledge of the conversation, contacting leadership at Nvidia, the dominant maker of chips used in A.I. The month the letter was distributed, Musk completed the registrations for xAI. He has said little about how the company will differ from preexisting A.I. initiatives, but generally has framed it in terms of competition. "I will create a third option, although starting very late in the game of course," he told the *Washington Post*. "That third option hopefully does more good than harm." Through A.I. research and development already under way at Tesla, and the trove of data he now commands through Twitter (which he recently barred OpenAI from scraping in order to train its chatbots), he may have some advantage, as he applies his sensibilities and his world view to that race. Hoffman told me, "His whole approach to A.I. is: A.I. can only be saved if I deliver, if I build it." As humanity creates A.I. in its own image, Hoffman argued, the principles and priorities of the leaders in the field will matter: "We want the construction of this to be not people with Messiah complexes."

At one point in “The Hitchhiker’s Guide,” Adams introduces the architects of the Earth supercomputer. They’re powerful beings who have been living among us, disguised as mice. At first, they were motivated by simple curiosity. But seeking the question made them famous, and they began considering talk-show and lecture deals. In the end, Earth is demolished in the name of commerce, and their path to existential clarity along with it. The mice greet this with a shrug, mouth vague platitudes, and go on the talk-show circuit anyway. Musk isn’t peddling pabulum. His initiatives have real substance. But he also wants to be on the show—or, better yet, to be the show himself.

In the open letter, alongside questions about the apocalyptic potential of artificial intelligence was one that reflects on the sectors of government and industry that Musk has come to shape. “Should we risk loss of control of our civilization?” he and his fellow-entrepreneurs wrote. “Such decisions must not be delegated to unelected tech leaders.” ♦

By Benjamin Flores

By Jon Lee Anderson

By Susan B. Glasser

[Letter from Brooklyn](#)

The Invention of a Neighborhood

In the early years of Brooklyn's gentrification, a 1977 *New Yorker* piece by Jervis Anderson captured the process in a freeze-frame. Those he interviewed were my neighbors.

By [Jonathan Lethem](#)



Jervis Anderson's article delineates the part played by brownstoners such as Helen Buckler and L. J. Davis in the creation of Boerum Hill. Photo illustration by Tyler Comrie; Source photographs from (clockwise from lower left) Anne Hall Elser; © Dinanda H. Nooney, The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division, NYPL; the family of L. J. Davis

In 1977, a staff writer for *The New Yorker* named [Jervis Anderson](#) journeyed to Dean Street in Brooklyn, to the neighborhood now known as Boerum Hill, to interview the people who lived there. His article in the November 14th issue, titled "[The Making of Boerum Hill](#)," portrayed the place as a microcosm of "one of the remarkable urban developments in recent times—the brownstone-renovation movement." What drew Anderson to Boerum Hill isn't certain. It's possible he'd lived there when he first moved to the city from Jamaica, in 1958, to study at N.Y.U. In an autobiographical essay from 1966, he wrote, "In those early days, New York was to me Washington Square, the A train, and Brooklyn."

What seems to have fascinated Anderson about Boerum Hill was the tenuousness of the neighborhood's creation. "The name had been coined so recently, and by such a small number of the residents, that people who had been living in the area all their lives had never heard of Boerum Hill and hadn't the slightest idea where it was," Anderson writes. Initially, he explains, the campaign to establish the neighborhood, undertaken in order to protect dilapidated row houses from being condemned and demolished, "faltered in the face of a firm conviction that Boerum Hill existed only in the heads of the people who had thought it up."

Boerum Hill was thought up in my lifetime, by people I knew. Anderson's account of them is prescient. It reveals a white middle-class population not only dislodging a poor and diverse one but defining them out of the picture. Yet few seemed aware that they were doing anything wrong.

The blocks that became Boerum Hill were ringed, mostly, by older and more clearly defined precincts, like the traditionally posh Brooklyn Heights, the Italian-immigrant enclave Carroll Gardens, and Park Slope and Fort Greene, shaped by long-standing Irish and Black homeownership, respectively. None of these places were simple. Their fortunes rose and fell with changes typical of urban life in the postwar twentieth century—white flight, and redlining by banks that preferred "urban renewal" projects and deals with developers to the renovation of old buildings. But those had been recognized neighborhoods to begin with.

The new Boerum Hill was something less, or more. Scooped out of what was loosely known as North Gowanus, it was bounded on the north by downtown Brooklyn, a district of commerce and civic institutions, and on the south by two large housing projects, built in 1949 and 1966, and by the famously polluted industrial Gowanus Canal. In the early nineteen-sixties, when the brownstoners Anderson interviewed first moved there, the blocks of Dean Street, Pacific Street, and Bergen Street, now known for the beauty of their restoration—or for their scandalous multimillion-dollar listings—were at risk of wholesale demolition. Some buildings were vacant and crumbling; others were rooming houses filled with men, many of them retired dockworkers, or they were home to Black or Puerto Rican or Dominican families. A community of Native Americans from Canada and

upstate New York, Mohawks who'd come to build skyscrapers, had also lived in the area, and their traces were still in evidence.

The zone was more a crossroads than a neighborhood. In a process now familiar, it was transformed, not by real-estate speculation—at the start, bankers and developers wanted no part of these buildings—but by the arrival of white artists and idealistic leftists who valorized integration.

I grew up on Dean Street. Some of Jervis Anderson's subjects were parents of the children I ran with on the block; he might have passed us on his way up the stoop of a brownstone. *The New Yorker* was a common token among the aspirant middle class in the neighborhood. I learned to leaf through it backward, for the cartoons and for [Pauline Kael](#). Yet I missed Anderson's piece—perhaps that issue wasn't one that was left out on the coffee table. When I discovered it, four years ago, I felt not only that I'd tunnelled through time to 1977 but that it offered something I'd long been denied. I'd spent years trying to conjugate the divisions I detected, as a child, among the white adults in my neighborhood. They'd chosen sides, at some point, over minute differences in attitude concerning their presence in Boerum Hill, and then covered the disagreement in silence. Here they were, talking.

I'd stumbled across a companion I hadn't known to wish for—yet an elusive one. Anderson's presence is sublimated, as was typical of the style of *The New Yorker* under [William Shawn](#)'s editorship, and typical, too, of Anderson's own style: self-effacing, to an unusual degree.

There had been Black staffers at *The New Yorker* before Anderson. Charlayne Hunter-Gault, who with her classmate Hamilton Holmes broke the color line at the University of Georgia, did the same for the magazine's writing staff when she was elevated from assistant to staff writer, in 1964. Dorothy Dean, whose fabulous, tragic life is portrayed in Hilton Als's book "[The Women](#)," worked in the fact-checking department in the same period. Yet Anderson, from the time of his hiring, in 1968, until the arrival of Jamaica Kincaid, in 1976, was the lone Black staff writer at the magazine. He wrote pieces on Alex Haley and Ralph Ellison, and a four-part series about Harlem, later collected as "[This Was Harlem](#)," by Farrar, Straus & Giroux. Anderson also wrote biographies of the civil-rights leader A. Philip

Randolph and of Randolph's extroverted lieutenant Bayard Rustin, an early mentor of Anderson's.

Unlike Rustin, and unlike his hero [James Baldwin](#), Anderson was soft-spoken. Few staffers who recalled him to me failed to mention his reserve. "He was a solitary guy," Ian Frazier said. Of their conversations in the hall, Frazier told me, "Mostly these were about Shawn not running our pieces." Jamaica Kincaid, who worked alongside Frazier—known as Sandy—as a writer for the Talk of the Town, shared a story about how Anderson had once given her a kiss as he passed her in the hallway. "I immediately ran to Sandy's office," she said. "I told him what had just happened and we laughed ourselves silly because Jervis was so mild-mannered, not seemingly vulnerable to such passionate outbursts. The kiss was most welcomed by me because he was attractive and brilliant." Anderson was a democratic socialist, according to the staff writer Hendrik Hertzberg. The two men bonded in the magazine's offices over politics, and Hertzberg suggested to me that Anderson's deeper commitments may have been outside *The New Yorker*: "The Irving Howe crowd, the whole *Dissent* masthead, those were Jervis's real friends."



"And then God said, and I hope I'm getting the accent right . . ."
Cartoon by Pia Guerra and Ian Boothby

Nowadays, the term "gentrification" has become as familiar, and as blandly elastic, as "Kafkaesque" or "fascism." The word doesn't appear in

Anderson's article. (It doesn't seem to have appeared in *The New Yorker* until November, 1982, in a piece about shopping uptown: those who consider Columbus Avenue a "style ghetto," readers are told, will be pleased to find that "gentrification has brought a host of often admirable and attractive new boutiques.") The word already existed, though, coined in 1964 by the German-born British sociologist Ruth Glass.

As it happens, the term "Boerum Hill" was coined that same year. At the time, it named an audacious promise, or a bluff. The name was created by an author of nonfiction named Helen Buckler, who had moved to Dean Street in 1962. It was popularized by, among others, another author, a novelist and journalist named L. J. Davis. Anderson interviewed them both. In both cases, I knew their houses from the inside.

Like "Boerum Hill" and "gentrification," I was born in 1964. In that year, my parents lived in an illegal loft on West Broadway, where my father had a painting studio. We came to Dean Street in 1968.

My father was led there by a fellow-painter, Patricia Stegman. She and her husband, Robert Snyder, had purchased a building on the same block as Helen Buckler, and a second on Pacific Street, to serve as her studio. Bob and Pat Snyder, as they were known locally, were, according to Anderson, "the first middle-class home buyers to follow Miss Buckler." The Snyders showed my parents a house, and, when my parents borrowed a down payment of three thousand dollars from my grandmother in Queens, Bob Snyder acted as the broker.

Snyder had taken up a real-estate license not out of any desire for a career but in the cause of keeping crumbling houses from being demolished; Realtors had turned their backs on these buildings. Hundred-year-old marble mantelpieces weren't then a consensus taste. Among people who could afford to choose, many preferred modern buildings, often in the suburbs. It was Buckler who had suggested to the couple that they begin showing the houses. As the conjurer of the neighborhood's existence, Buckler was the Wizard of Oz. The Snyders were Dorothy and her companions—the Wizard's emissaries.

The house I grew up in was across from the Snyders, and five doors down from Helen Buckler. With the exception of a handful of children on the block—my friends Karl Rusnak and Lynn and Aaron Nottage, and the Snyders’ son, Adam—these adults were the first people I knew outside my home. One Saturday morning when I was ten, old enough to walk alone as far as the post office on Atlantic Avenue, I was sent to Helen Buckler’s parlor to take up my first employment, as her gofer. In that capacity, I walked Miss Buckler’s many handwritten letters to the post office, emptied her garbage cans, and changed her cat’s litter. She must have been eighty by then.

Before Brooklyn, Buckler had lived in Manhattan, and worked as a secretary and editorial writer at *The Nation*, and as an advertising copywriter at J. Walter Thompson. In her parlor, I’d sneak looks at the papers on her roll-top writing desk, trying to understand a world of Wasp provenance and taste that was to me utterly mysterious. As a child, I collected postcards. She gave me a set of old deckle-edged black-and-white postcards of a riverside hamlet in Hampshire, England, called Buckler’s Hard, to which, I understood, she traced her family origins. She seemed vaguely famous to me, as a revered elder of the Brooklyn Friends Meeting; Quaker families from all over Brooklyn took turns, Sunday mornings, driving her to the Meeting House on Schermerhorn Street.

Buckler, known to her friends and correspondents as Bobbie, was tiny, opinionated, and odd. She was nearly blind. In the sixties, she’d suffered both a hip infection and a bad fall, which was recounted to me by my mother: slipping in her bathroom, Helen had grabbed at a towel rack, which had snapped in two and pierced her ribs as she fell. The result, after a long recovery, was a spinal deformation that required her to walk with a cane; I’m ashamed of the horror this inspired in me. I didn’t want to keep visiting Miss Buckler’s well-appointed parlor, let alone the dank basement level, where the cat box was kept. I wanted to be out on the street, running amok.

“Miss Buckler’s friends were shocked to hear that she had bought a house in North Gowanus,” Jervis Anderson wrote. “To them, living in such an area was unthinkable. Nor was her confidence strengthened when some of the older residents told her that except for the rooming-house speculators she was the first ‘outside person’ in years to buy a house in the community. She

herself could not help noticing how shabby the area was, that there were ‘gaps in some of the blocks, like teeth missing in a face,’ that ‘there were a lot of noisy people’ on the streets, who ‘were always fighting.’ But she reminded herself that those conditions could be found in many other sections of New York.” Anderson focusses on Buckler’s zeal for architectural detail—above all, for fireplaces. “I was lucky to find all the original etched-glass doors intact,” she told him. “I found the round over-mantle mirror gathering dust in the cellar.” She went on, “Since fireplaces are my passion, the chimney was the first thing I did. And now I have four good working fireplaces.”

Buckler set about the formation of a neighborhood association. “She called a meeting in her parlor,” Anderson wrote, “attended by seven or eight representatives of the old home-owning families.” In Buckler’s search, aided by the Long Island Historical Society, for an appropriate name, she almost settled on Sycamore Hill, but was perhaps unsatisfied by something so vague. “Looking over the names of the old farmers,” Anderson continued, “Miss Buckler found herself drawn to the name Boerum, which was already the name of a street in the neighborhood. The most famous member of that family was Simon Boerum, who, historians say, would have been one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence if he had not died in 1775.”

Anderson’s appetite for historical research suffuses his article. This likely helped him gain the trust of the brownstoners, whose eagerness for tracing lineages, between their restoration of the houses and the early history of the area, bordered on the fanatic. In 1964, it was unlikely that Helen Buckler or her enablers at the Historical Society would have troubled to notice that Boerum was the name of a slaveholding family. In 1977, Anderson quotes Franklin Burdge, Simon Boerum’s biographer: “Brooklyn at that time was a pleasant agricultural town of about 700 white and 200 black inhabitants, the latter almost all slaves.” Characteristically, Anderson leaves the implication for his reader to unpack.

Anderson reports that an early response to Buckler’s effort was a story in the Brooklyn section of the *World-Telegram & Sun* on March 26, 1964, titled “Rescue Operation on ‘Boerum Hill.’” As the newspaper explains, Buckler, “who likes old brownstones with a fireplace in every room, is spearheading

a campaign to win public acceptance of a new name, ‘Boerum Hill’ for a run-down section of downtown Brooklyn.”

The *World-Telegram & Sun* story includes a map. It represents the propositional neighborhood as a solid black rectangle plopped into Brooklyn’s established terrain, with boundaries that would startle anyone who knows the current definition of Boerum Hill. Buckler, in carving out an island of safety from the objectionable terrain on either side, laid claim to only six city blocks: the boundaries ran along Bergen and Pacific Streets, and between Smith and Nevins. Atlantic Avenue, with its mess of storefronts—then mostly empty—was too enmeshed, perhaps, in the difficulties of “downtown Brooklyn.” These confines required the sacrifice of State Street, north of Atlantic, despite its several blocks of splendid, rescue-ready brownstones.

Even stranger, in avoidance of Wyckoff Gardens, the housing projects facing Wyckoff Street, not all of Bergen Street had been included in Boerum Hill’s first perimeter. Were this map to have been taken literally, the owners on Bergen’s south face, looking across the street, would have been met with a new neighborhood that had left them behind. The same weirdness would have pertained on Pacific Street. Buckler’s earliest draft of Boerum Hill was, essentially, a box around three blocks of Dean Street.

A “block association” defines a material fact. If you live on the block, you may choose to ignore its activities, yet you still live there. A “neighborhood association” describes an assertion in free space—civic space, historical space, racial space. The Boerum Hill Association believed that the houses on certain blocks held a meaning and a value that had become endangered by neglect—neglect by city and bank officials, but also by many of the people who occupied them.

Two years later, when the new name found its way into the *Times*, an updated map expanded the boundaries. Now Boerum Hill touched Schermerhorn Street to the north and Wyckoff to the south. In the 1966 story—“Brooklyn Renewal Is an Uphill Fight”—the bankers refusing to grant mortgages are given a chance to defend themselves. One, Frederick L. Kriete, an assistant vice-president of the Williamsburgh Savings Bank, called Boerum Hill an “odd case.” He puzzled over the brownstoners.

“Generally, they’re cultivated, artistic people, with an appreciation for antiques and art—they’re a class all to themselves. I admire and appreciate their taste, but you wonder if the bank should get involved.”

Half a century later, the word “renewal” is widely understood as a euphemism for an intrinsically racist program of neighborhood demolition, favorable only to the financiers of freeways, shopping malls, and stadiums. The *Times* article quotes Bob Snyder, who recounts his difficulties with the banks. “They said we needed a sunken bathtub to get a loan,” Snyder said, “but we have a really wild Victorian bathtub.”

He added, “These are pretexts—they’re shielding the real reason, which is that the area is integrated.”

In 1967, a pamphlet appeared, limited to two hundred and forty copies, bearing the title “A History of Boerum Hill.” In seven pages of deliberately antique-looking Goudy Mediaeval font, it retails a saga beginning with the clearing of land north of Gowanus Cove by the Marechkawieck people, and “a minor land rush into the area” by Dutch tradesmen and farmers, including “Jacob Stoffelsen, the Dutch West India Company’s overseer of Negros.” Starting with colonial lore, the pamphlet centers Boerum Hill in the settling and development of Brooklyn, as if the name had always existed. It makes hasty work of the immediate past: “Although the neighborhood became steadily poorer in the years between the Second World War and 1962, in a strange way it was an architectural blessing.” It explains, “Boerum Hill was spared because of its poverty: simply, nobody could afford to ruin the fronts of their buildings. Following years of careful preservation, economic deterioration had the paradoxical effect of presenting to us, in the purest possible form, a perfectly preserved, mid-nineteenth-century neighborhood —a bit nibbled on the edges perhaps.”



"Never trust anyone who trusts their backup camera implicitly."
Cartoon by William Haefeli

L. J. Davis, the pamphlet's author, bought a brownstone on Dean Street in 1965. A native of Idaho, Davis moved his young family to Brooklyn after completing a Stegner Fellowship at Stanford, in a cohort that included the novelist Stephen Dixon and the poet Robert Pinsky. Davis wrote four novels—published between 1968 and 1974—comedies portraying confused young men drowning in the squalor and diversity of the city. He is as much a master of what is now called “cringe” as Larry David or Nathan Fielder. “Like a comic actor with the crucial willingness to make himself look ridiculous, Davis sacrifices our good opinion for the sake of the art,” Evan Hughes, the author of “[Literary Brooklyn](#),” writes. “He makes you think hard about whether this L. J. Davis guy is a bigot, and that means thinking hard about what bigotry is.”

Of these novels, “[A Meaningful Life](#)” is the fiercest. (I wrote the introduction for a 2009 reissue by New York Review Books Classics.) Hughes describes it as “the most lacerating portrait of the folly and shame that gentrification brings with it everywhere it goes.” Davis’s subject is the brownstoners: “They are the most house-proud people you could ever hope to meet. To start with, most of them were doing their own renovation, so they became obsessed.”

Davis wrote from within what he ironized. A house-proud renovator himself, and a working journalist, Davis was not only Boerum Hill's needling existentialist but its early popularizer, one with a stake in the outcome, since he'd sunk his family's future—its financial and emotional well-being—into the precarious situation. When, in 1969, *New York* magazine's cover trumpeted "Brooklyn: The Sane Alternative," Pete Hamill's title essay made an overture to the borough's revival; in the same issue, in a piece on brownstones, Davis advertised Boerum Hill houses to space-hungry Manhattanites—still available but going fast.

Davis bragged to Anderson about how he'd researched the first occupant of his house: "His name was Malachi Murray, and he was a stonemason. Murray lost the house in the financial crash of 1873." Davis's knack for history must have gratified the other brownstoners, whose zeal for marble mantelpieces and gas-fitted street lamps needed justification. The neighborhood's entrancing past cried out from under the layers of lead paint; the effort of individuals to beautify their homes gained an ethical dimension when viewed as a collective mission of curation. The word "Victorian" was everywhere, knitting the area's white future to its white past. The populations that had defined the postwar decades could be seen as a kind of placeholder, until the eleventh-hour rescue. Brownstoners even posed in their houses dressed in Victorian costumes, such as Park Slope's Joy and Paul Wilkes, on the cover of their 1973 book, "You Don't Have to Be Rich to Own a Brownstone." Davis's limited-edition 1967 pamphlet was reprinted in 1973 by Renaissance Properties—other brokers had by then stepped in, relieving Bob Snyder's burden as a vigilante real-estate agent. If Helen Buckler was the first "author" of Boerum Hill, L. J. Davis was the second.

The scene had other novelist witnesses. Paula Fox moved to Dean Street in the late sixties, and got to know Davis. In an admiring 2009 review in *The New York Review of Books*, she compared him to Céline. Fox's second novel, "[Desperate Characters](#)," depicts their shared block in terms similar to Davis's, as crime-ridden and garbage-strewn. When her book was filmed, partly in a brownstone on Pacific Street, in 1970, with Shirley MacLaine in the lead, Davis played a policeman investigating a break-in. The novel is celebrated, justly, for allegorizing urban fear as an existential condition: the risk of a break-in stands for an inchoate crisis in the life of a married couple who coexist in parallel silence. Yet readers on Dean Street at the time would

have understood the risk literally. It was a commonplace, then, that every house would suffer regular break-ins until the ironwork defending the parlor windows and the basement entrance had been sufficiently strengthened, and the inviting fire escapes had been stripped away. And much early brownstoner energy was expended trying to rouse policemen to the task of pushing open-air prostitution and drug dealing beyond Helen Buckler's boundary.

Rosellen Brown wasn't a renovator, only a renter. She left Dean Street after three years, for New Hampshire, but her 1974 story collection, "[Street Games](#)," depicts a cross-section of her block's white, Hispanic, and Black inhabitants with precision and sympathy. In "Why I Quit the Gowanus Liberation Front," Brown anatomizes the improbable blend of self-absolving idealisms that make the brownstoners, from this distance, so slippery to define. The scene is a neighborhood meeting, held in what Brown confirmed to me was a fictionalization of L. J. Davis's parlor. "So I went to this meeting," Brown writes. "It was in the house of a writer, a cat who gets his kicks out of having six working fireplaces." She continues, "We had decided to have a multiethnic Street Fair complete with police barricades at both ends of the block to close it off even to the rest of George Street, thus indicating true inner-block solidarity (as opposed to intra-block, which comes later). We would find a cause to use the money for at our second meeting, when we could fight about how many people could relate to flower boxes, how many to gas lamps."

L. J. Davis's elder son, Jeremy, was one of my best friends during my high-school years. I spent many days and nights in their home. Their family included L.J.'s wife, a younger son, and two adopted daughters, who were Black.

I was fascinated with L.J., for his working writer's office, for his collection of books and LPs so different from that of my parents, for his weird anecdotes and clench-jawed speaking style, full of invisible punctuation marks and eyebrow-arched pauses to allow implications to sink in. L.J. would, if we pleaded, cook us eggs Benedict, a dish I'd never heard of before. He took me to a matinée of "Sweeney Todd," with Len Cariou—the first time I'd entered a Broadway auditorium. The only theatre I'd seen at that point had been enacted by giant puppets at antiwar protests.

By the time I was a visitor to L.J.'s home, the brownstoners had split into enemy camps. One was made up of the hippies and commune dwellers (my parents were both) who opposed what was then called displacement and vilified speculators. Despite that special irony which torments the community-minded who move into poor neighborhoods—our presence made the area whiter, and therefore, from the city's point of view, more worthy of investment and policing—my parents' camp regarded those, including L.J., who acquired buildings in addition to their own homes as culpable.

In the opposing camp were the brownstoners who opened their parlors to one another in yearly house tours. Proud of what they'd accomplished, they regarded the decrease in street crime and the increase in trees and property values as obvious goods, and the hippies as political dreamers. I suspect that my mother, an outspoken radical, came into direct conflict with L.J. She died before I befriended him.

It's worth noting that local preservationists, in the sixties and early seventies, fought and won underdog battles against the forces of predatory urban renewal. Their defense of the houses equated, in the beginning, to protection for anyone living in the area, white or otherwise. "Boerum Hill Building Gets Temporary Lease on Life," reads a headline in the April 20, 1967, edition of the *Times*: "A group of young property owners pushing baby carriages and carrying signs succeeded yesterday in temporarily preventing the city from razing a town house." The story centers on the Snyders: "'He's a veteran picket. He helped save 434 State Street,' said Mrs. Robert T. Snyder, pointing to her 13-month-old son Adam." It goes on, "The structure, between Hoyt and Smith Streets, in a historic but deteriorated section of the borough, was to be torn down by helmeted wreckers sent by the Department of Real Estate. The building has been empty for two years and the Department of Buildings said it was a fire hazard and a gathering place for undesirables."

A year earlier, the *Times* had written, "In a sense the battle of Boerum Hill epitomizes in miniature the nationwide tug-of-war between two principal schools of urban-renewal thought. Ranged on one side are those like the Brooklyn bankers, who envision renewal in the broad terms of clearance and complete rebuilding, even if it means sacrificing some sound old buildings.

And on the other side are those, like Jane Jacobs, the author and caustic critic of many city planners, who see vitality even in slums.”

Jacobs, the author of “[The Death and Life of Great American Cities](#),” is a name usually linked with that of her nemesis, New York City’s unelected, power-mad city planner [Robert Moses](#). Though by this time he’d been impugned as a bully, and his power had waned, the Moses-inspired Cross-Brooklyn Expressway attracted passionate opposition by Brooklyn civic groups as late as 1969. The David and Goliath struggle felt immediate, not theoretical.

The moral calculus lent righteousness to the brownstoners’ preservationist stance. Yet a tone had crept in, that of an élitist cult. The brownstoners seemed oblivious to the intimations lurking in materials such as an announcement in the “Community Forum” column of *The Phoenix*, Boerum Hill’s new local paper, advertising an insurance company’s offering. “The Brownstone Package Policy was not designed to offer coverage to everybody with a bit of cracked brown sandstone on any old city house,” the policy’s originator explained. “We’re not really insuring houses, we’re insuring homeowners of brownstones. . . . We will not consider slumlords or other ‘high-risk’ people.”

I’ve tried to picture Jervis Anderson sitting patiently in the brownstoners’ parlors, recording their declarations. “This thing about renovating an old house sounds very esoteric,” Patricia Snyder told him. “But it often goes together with a commitment to living in an area that is mixed in every way.” She continued, “We have much more diversity than Cobble Hill or Brooklyn Heights. Everybody shouldn’t be the same.” L. J. Davis struck a similar note: “I myself don’t need to live around people who all look like me. If I wanted to do that, I would not have come to New York City. I would have stayed in Boise, Idaho, where everybody looks just like me.”

It had seemed unlikely at first, in the teeth of the banks’ opposition and the indifference of the city officials: the brownstoners’ triumph. Yet here it was. In bringing the cultural gravitas of *The New Yorker* into the scene, Anderson had become a third “author” of Boerum Hill—the one who could ratify both Helen Buckler’s dream and L. J. Davis’s historical sleuthing. His article ends with the words “Boerum Hill is not a rumor anymore. It exists.” Declaring

the brownstoners' victory, Anderson also highlighted the contradictions that gnawed at the liberal renovators' good intentions. His article predicts the heel turn the renovators were at that moment taking, from underdogs to overdogs, from "defenders" to "displacers."

I visited William Harris, the founder of Renaissance Properties, who moved to the neighborhood in 1970, and asked him to describe the impact of Anderson's reporting at the time. "The article was supposed to be a two-part piece, you know," Harris told me. "And they said he stretched it out so that he could have all the free dinners that came along with the reporting."

I was disconcerted by the tartness of the gossip. A newcomer by the standards of Buckler or Davis, Harris made up for lost time by opening Renaissance Properties in 1973 and, with a partner, snapping up eleven buildings on Atlantic Avenue in one swoop, for three thousand dollars apiece. When I mentioned the homes lived in by children I'd known growing up, or the once vacant storefront now housing Rucola, a fashionable restaurant, Harris routinely interjected, "I brokered that house."



"How long before it kicks in?"
Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein

Buckler died in 1988, Davis in 2011. Harris remains a keeper of the flame. In his eighties, he still displays a fervor for the zone's deep provenances. Thrilled by the recent rediscovery of a Revolutionary-era stone-lined well

beneath the pavement near his house—possibly a remnant of the Continental Army’s Fort Box, captured by Redcoats during the Battle of Brooklyn—Harris helped contrive a plaque commemorating the well on the exterior wall of a dry cleaner.

As to Anderson’s article, Harris shrugged. “I wasn’t a subscriber,” he said. “I didn’t draw a tremendous amount from it.” He was struck, however, by how little attention Anderson gave to the Kahnawake and Akwesasne tribal people still living in the neighborhood then: “The Indians were here all over the place, and they’re only mentioned fleetingly, in about a line and a half.” The union hall frequented by Mohawk ironworkers was above the post office where I took Helen Buckler’s letters. At one point, their numbers were large enough that a Presbyterian church on Pacific Street gave services in their language. Hank’s Saloon, a late, lamented hipster bar, was during my childhood a Mohawk dive called the Doray Tavern.

Yet the emphasis on the Native Americans seems a substitution. The neighborhood’s Mohawk residents, made famous in a 1949 *New Yorker* piece by [Joseph Mitchell](#), were scant by the late seventies. I recall widows in basement apartments. The local families whose children filled the public schools I attended, and the kids I played with on the street, weren’t Native American—they were Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Black. The urgency in the commemoration of various histories—architectural Victorianism, nineteenth-century middle-class urbanites, Washington’s soldiers, Mohawk ironworkers—corresponds precisely to the need to leave others unmentioned.

Mary Jane Melish, another Dean Street neighbor, was once a famous Communist. She and her husband, the Reverend William Howard Melish, were prominent in the American Party’s outreach to the Soviet Union. In the nineteen-fifties, a McCarthyist purge cost Melish his post at Brooklyn Heights’ Church of the Holy Trinity (now known as St. Ann & the Holy Trinity). In 1963, the Reverend Melish travelled to Ghana to deliver the memorial address at W. E. B. Du Bois’s funeral; several years earlier, when the American Friends Service Committee arranged for a teen-age Angela Davis to move from Birmingham, Alabama, to New York City to attend high school, she was placed in the Melishes’ home. “From the first moment I had heard about them, and the sacrifices they had made for the progressive

movement, I had a great respect for both of them,” Davis writes in her [autobiography](#). “Their suffering had simply made them stronger and more determined.”

Mary Jane Melish directed a youth center on the corner of Atlantic and Bond, part of the nineteenth-century settlement-house system that still survives across the five boroughs. Leonard Bernstein and Jerome Robbins stopped by, while working on “West Side Story,” to meet the street gangs that coexisted inside. I spent a lot of time at the center myself, since my father taught a woodworking class there. I barely recall Howard Melish, but the cherubic, bright-eyed Mary Jane was a regular presence in my mother’s circle, revered by our leftist friends for reasons I couldn’t have grasped at the time.

Jervis Anderson would have known of the Melishes’ radicalism, but he underplays it in his piece, even as he lets Mary Jane write his conclusion for him. She told Anderson, “The attitude of some of the renovators toward the poorer people—those who live in the run-down apartments or over storefronts—is very negative. The renovators are resented by these people, who feel that the community belongs to them as much as it belongs to the newcomers. They don’t like being looked down upon, they don’t like being excluded, and they don’t like being pushed out.” She goes on, “I believe that houses are things to be used. They are not museums. And it seems to me that to a lot of the renovators houses come first and people come later.”

Mary Jane Melish is gone, as is Robert Snyder, but Patricia Stegman, the painter who married and later divorced Snyder, and who directed her son’s stroller into the path of a wrecking crew, still lives on Dean Street. Her brownstone, the one with the “wild Victorian bathtub,” holds a special aura. The house, which had been in the possession of only one family, was bequeathed to the Salvation Army, which kept it sealed until the Snyders opted to buy it, in 1963. This represented a kind of immaculate conception. “Every doorknob is original,” Stegman told me this year. Not only had the property been conveyed intact, with details like front and back shutters, an ironwork patio, and a back-yard cistern, but it had required no eviction to take occupancy.

At ninety-three, Stegman no longer paints. The last exhibition listed on her Web site is the Gowanus Open Studios in 2016; it must be strange, for the first-generation brownstoners, to consider the voguishness of the place-name Gowanus, which the Boerum Hill Association was once so eager to distance itself from. I sat with Stegman and her son, Adam, in the same time-stopped parlor where, in 1970, she consented to pose, in Victorian dress, for a feature in the *Times Magazine*. Like Anderson, I brought a tape recorder, though interviewing her felt odd. Once, while babysitting me, Stegman had had to rush me to the emergency room with a spiking fever.

I handed her a copy of the 1977 article.

“They described me as tall, attractive, and mild-tempered. They don’t know me.”

“Two out of three ain’t bad,” Adam said.

Stegman remains angry at the bankers who redlined the neighborhood: “We went to millions of banks. They all said, ‘We’ve given a lot of mortgages in that neighborhood and we’re not going to give any more, because the neighborhood is no good now.’” As she paged through my tattered copy of the magazine, Anderson’s words rekindled wonder in Stegman, at the distance Dean Street has travelled, from rooming houses, demolition, and garbage-piled streets. The Snyders were central to the story: Bob’s real-estate license, the protests, the coverage they drew from the *Times* and elsewhere. “I feel I am responsible for making Brooklyn, not just Boerum Hill, a chic place to live,” she said. It seemed only a slight exaggeration.

The ethical line that Pat Stegman and Bob Snyder drew was firm: “People offered us many houses to buy. I would be rich if I had bought them. One man owned a whole flock of rooming houses. He offered them to me very cheaply. I said, ‘I don’t want to be a landlord of rooming houses.’ We would have had to evict or manage them.”

She added, “We had a chance to buy a house in Carroll Gardens. But I found the people there were bigoted. They said, ‘Oh, we’d be so thrilled to show to you and your husband, because we’d never sell to a Black person.’ Well, I

had friends who were Black, and so I said, ‘They wouldn’t be comfortable coming here to visit me, right?’ ”

In 1993, I was shelving books at Moe’s, in Berkeley, where I worked as a clerk—at the time, Dean Street was far from my thoughts—when a blue-jacketed hardcover came into my hands: “Daniel Hale Williams: Negro Surgeon.” The author’s name was Helen Buckler. It took me an instant to recognize her in the photo on the back, above a citation from the National Council of Negro Women. “The surprises in the story were many,” Buckler wrote in the introduction. “It turned out to bear little resemblance to the usual Negro story. There are no slave cabins, no cotton fields, no city slums, no lynchings—only the slow crucifixion of the spirit.”

In March, I explored Helen Buckler’s papers, which are stored at the Wisconsin Historical Society. Among get-well cards and newspaper clippings on the founding of Boerum Hill are drafts of articles on racial equality, with titles like “Little Known Facts About Negroes” and “The Race Question: A Woman’s Problem.” In the latter, in which Buckler tackles the spectre of miscegenation panic head on, she writes, “Willingly or not, woman was made the crux of the matter. Whatever the economic and political forces surging and battling underneath the surface, the banner unfurled to lead the crusaders always carried the slogan: Defend White Womanhood!” Beneath dated language, her thinking is lucid.

The founders of Boerum Hill all avowed a desire to live in an integrated neighborhood. Many had participated in the cause of civil rights—even William Harris, who bought and sold so many houses. In his twenties, in Virginia, when Prince Edward County shut down its public schools to avoid forced integration, he’d volunteered as a teacher in a makeshift integrated school. How had these crusaders—against the “little boxes” of suburbia, against eminent domain, against blandly uniform lives—ended up on the wrong side of Mary Jane Melish’s formula of “houses come first and people come later”? Had some intoxicant in the solvent they’d used to strip paint from the old moldings led them astray? Or was there an original sin in Buckler’s drawing of a boundary around Boerum Hill in the first place?

By the time of Jervis Anderson’s piece, L. J. Davis had stopped writing boosterish articles. Brownstone advocacy was redundant. The craze was

official. Davis's fiction had never sold much—the manuscript of a fifth novel went into a drawer—and he refashioned himself as an investigative reporter, specializing in financial scandal. A 1979 *Harper's* cover story, “The Money Vanishes,” dissected the Carter Administration official Bert Lance; Davis's 1982 book, “[Bad Money](#),” exposed the credit crisis.

L.J. was by then also done opening his parlor, either to the house tours or to meetings of the Gowanus Liberation Front. He'd become a curmudgeon, our local Mencken or Vonnegut. In his columns in *The Phoenix*, alongside sunny coverage of the annual Atlantic Antic street fair and the openings of new restaurants, L.J. fulminated about Erica Jong, H. P. Lovecraft, and the degeneration of written English. “Descartes was a lucky dog,” one column begins, explaining that “he did not live on a bus stop” and “was therefore spared the small agonies of citizenship at its rawest: drunken softball teams celebrating on his stoop at two in the morning, beer cans in his shrubbery.” Another starts, “I sometimes wonder if I'm a safe person for me to know.” Elsewhere, he refers to himself as “the Darth Vader of Dean Street.”

L.J.’s neighbors would have detected, in this arch tone, that he felt cornered by leftist voices. A 1980 column, written in tribute to Helen Buckler, resorts to bitter sarcasm. “It looks so easy,” he writes. “You take a declining neighborhood, move into it, fix up the premises, and encourage other, like-minded souls to do the same. Hey presto, a rejuvenated neighborhood or a gentrified one, take your pick.” The piece spirals into a rant: “Nor was it, as certain ageing hippies would have us believe, an act of dark and sinister cunning.” He continues, “There was still no neighborhood here, just a lot of desperate poor people crammed into structures built to contain a tenth of their number—and at night, the sound of children being beaten unmercifully. This was the earthly paradise we are now called upon to admire by people who, in those days, wouldn't have lived here on a bet.” Then it turns horrible: “It is hard to see what could have been done, short of some sort of concentration camp.” Elsewhere, L.J. makes shrouded reference to “the Indian reservation.” He means the Gowanus Houses projects, the setting, fifteen years later, of Spike Lee’s “Clockers.”



"When you said giant ants were attacking the city, I wish you'd mentioned that it was by ant standards."
Cartoon by Joe Dator

Had L.J.—to use the phrase he would have chosen himself—“gone mad”? For me, he is an emblem of the complex intellect who, feeling a critique of his privilege, jumps calamitously the wrong way.

L. J. Davis wrecked his journalistic credibility with a single pratfall. In 1994, *The New Republic* sent him on assignment to Little Rock, Arkansas, to sleuth around the financial paper trail known as Whitewater. L.J. mistook an alcoholic blackout episode in his hotel room for a possible assault. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that pages had been torn from his research notebook. L.J. later said that they had only ripped—and the hotel bartender observed that he’d had perhaps six Martinis before ascending to his room—but it was too late. The Republican conspiracy machine relished the suggestion that a journalist researching the Clintons had been attacked, and read the incident into the *Congressional Record*; L.J. was ahead of his time yet again. Still, he wrote two books afterward: one on cable-television moguls, and a passion project on the history of electrification. In his final years, he was a garrulous daytime drinker. His neighbors would sometimes cross the street to avoid being subject to his monologues. I did this myself.

Jervis Anderson died in 1999 or 2000, sometime between Christmas and New Year’s Day. His body was found early in January, when neighbors noticed mail piling up. He’d retired from *The New Yorker* the year before,

after thirty years, publishing little in the magazine toward the end. Known once for his formality and dignity, he'd become a figure of isolation, and there were rumors of solitary drinking. Unlike Joseph Mitchell, he didn't gain a legend for his reluctance. He showed up until he didn't, and then he died at home.

I've spent the past four years wishing I could speak with Anderson, wishing I could cajole him into telling me what he thought about the white people on Dean Street. More recently, I've sought out those who knew him, hoping they'd make him more legible. Hendrik Hertzberg's *Talk of the Town* [obituary](#) describes Anderson as a "product of British colonialism and West Indian anticolonialism, leavened by Harlem and the Upper West Side." I spoke with Anne Nelson, who became good friends with Anderson during her time in *The New Yorker's* typing pool, before a career as an author and playwright. "Jervis didn't express the anger of 'I'm living with the descendants of my slaveowners,'" she told me. "He didn't share that attitude. He was analyzing, he was reporting. His writing was about advancing African American civil rights, but doing so systematically." Discussing his first years as a writer in New York, she said, "This could have put him in conflict with people who might assume he would be an ally. Here is Jervis, the stately Jamaican wearing a suit—out of step, and out of time." In his 1966 autobiographical essay, which was published in the *Teachers College Record*, Anderson himself develops this image: "We had been colonials for a long time and had grown to be as chauvinistic about English taste and English tradition as the English themselves. The involuntary reverence that most West Indians feel for the English sensibility and the English way of life must—even now that the Empire has been liquidated—stand as one of the sweeter and more deadly triumphs of imperialism." The tone, both wistful and remorseless, is that of a writer who allows the reader—and history—to be the judge. Perhaps it also accounts for Anderson's capacity to occupy the role of *The New Yorker's* sole Black staff writer for so long. His instantiation of a psychic position somewhere between the dominant culture and the point of view of the oppressed was his tool and his method, until—I'm speculating—this method collapsed on him.

At some stage, it occurred to me that I might be searching in the wrong place, or asking of Anderson something he shouldn't have to deliver. If what

I craved was to hear from a Black person who'd spent time in L. J. Davis's house, I needed only to search out one of L.J.'s daughters.

When I spoke with Tina, the younger of the two, it was the first time in forty-odd years. We compared notes on the experience of growing up in a time and place where a vision was being propagated of integration as a mission accomplished. The lives of the children playing on Dean Street were supposed to be a victory lap. Tina called it "a bubble"—a thing destined to burst, a dream deferred.

"When I stepped out of that bubble, I saw things," she said, explaining what happened when she started attending school in Manhattan. "It was scary. Things went haywire when I started meeting people from other neighborhoods. People realized I wasn't a part of them, I wasn't from their world. I'd get picked on. I started realizing I would have to act more Black. Like, what does that mean? Why can't I do this right?"

I was a little surprised that the reckoning had waited until Tina left the neighborhood. I pointed out that the housing projects were just two blocks away.

Tina said simply, "I wasn't allowed to go over there."

She continued, "I love my dad. He was a strong man, who stood up for all of us. And who laughed." Then she clarified his prohibition against her walking in the direction of the projects: "Dad was classist. If you had a different economic standard, he was, like, 'You're a Davis, and you don't go over there.' With me and my sister, it was: 'You need to find a different class of people.' "

Tina didn't need to explain further. There was a time when I'd had friends in the Wyckoff Gardens towers—grade-school kids, Black and Chinese and Puerto Rican and Dominican—whose birthday parties I attended, or whom I unself-consciously followed home. Then, as if a memo went out sometime in the mid-seventies, most of the children from Dean Street stopped going to the projects to play, if we ever had. We tried to stay in the bubble, to make integration work on our blocks alone. It couldn't, of course.

The white people who arrived in that part of Brooklyn in the sixties and seventies saw divisions among themselves. In one home lived speculators willing to manage tenants—and to evict them. In another, Maoists lived communally and worked to overthrow the state. Elsewhere, everything in between: artists, eccentrics, families. The long lens of time blurs these distinctions, making us see the brownstoners instead as collectively deluded about their culpability. This remains the case even as historians of civic life have been slowly picking apart the notion that what we call “gentrification” is simple or predictable in its effects. (Some, like Bo McMillan, a researcher for the Redress Movement, suggest that the term has itself gradually become an obscuring fiction.) Jervis Anderson’s gift was to portray the brownstoners as I recall them: people trying, and largely failing, to grasp their place in history in real time. You and I may be doing the same now.

Not everyone who moved onto those blocks ran a youth center, like Mary Jane Melish, or taught carpentry there, like my father (who also gave art lessons at the Brooklyn House of Detention). Some merely wished to live in a place that was diverse and yet neither crime-ridden nor scheduled for demolition. They might ask now: was that wish a crime? I’ve come to see this quandary as historically specific. What if theirs was a generation who believed that their desire for a just society had been addressed by the civil-rights movement—in which many had played some part—more fully than was the case? For those trying to inhabit Helen Buckler’s dream, the two enormous housing projects were a truth hidden in plain sight. Boerum Hill, that invention, was a gated community bounded only by a concept. The concept didn’t stop anyone walking down the street, except when it did.

The projects sat a mere five hundred feet from Tina’s childhood home, as from mine. Yet the situation within them was, at best, not our concern. At worst, it was a daily emergency we were prohibited from giving a name. What happened there happened elsewhere. For, according to Miss Buckler’s boundary, it *was* elsewhere. The boundary was a recipe for cognitive dissonance, for a preëmptive turning aside, in favor of more solvable matters, like how to restore a ceiling’s crumbling plaster scrollwork. It wasn’t only Tina Davis, or L. J. Davis, who couldn’t square the circle, couldn’t do the moral or emotional math. Helen Buckler didn’t intend to drive us all mad, in drawing an invisible line down Bergen Street, but she did so nonetheless. ♦

By Jervis Anderson

By D. T. Max

By Zadie Smith

By Jessica Winter

The Critics

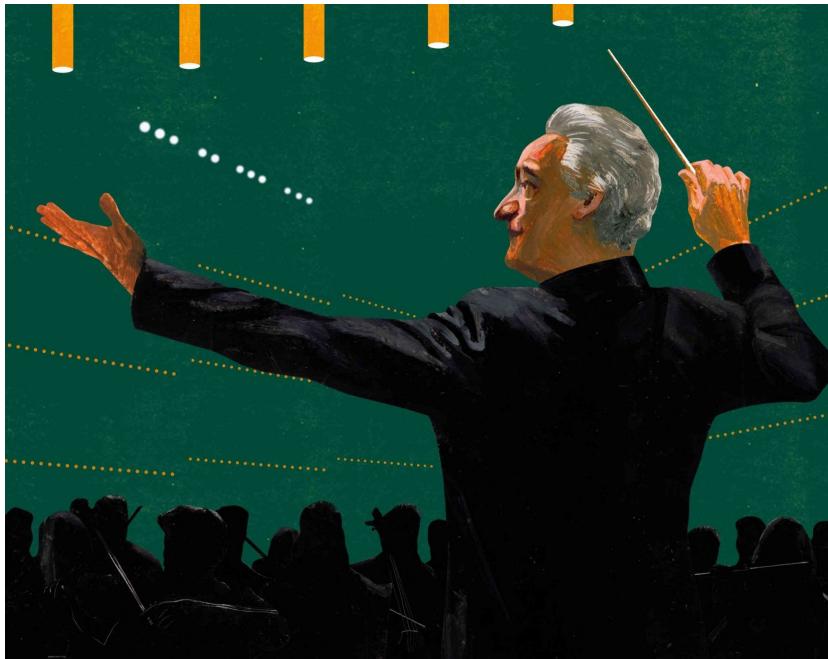
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Musical Events

Requiem for Mostly Mozart

Does the end of the beloved summer festival signal a rising disdain for classical music at Lincoln Center?

By [Alex Ross](#)



Louis Langrée conducted Mozart's final three symphonies and, in comments to the audience, pointedly analyzed them in terms of "musical democracy" and harmonious multiplicity. Illustration by Diego Mallø

Musical summers in New York may never have been as rich as they were in the first two decades of the current century, when the Mostly Mozart Festival, under the leadership of Jane Moss, and the Lincoln Center Festival, under Nigel Redden, vied with each other in the conjuring of lavishly varied seasons. In and around the Lincoln Center complex you encountered not only the usual array of Mozart symphonies and concertos, which had been attracting steady crowds since 1966, but also Baroque music-and-dance spectacles by Mark Morris; orchestral cycles of Bruckner and Varèse; Wagner's sixteen-hour "Ring"; Chen Shi-Zheng's nineteen-hour "Peony Pavilion"; Bernd Alois Zimmermann's apocalyptic antiwar opera, "Die Soldaten"; Davóne Tines and Michael Schachter's apocalyptic anti-racist revue, "The Black Clown"; and avant-garde evenings of Pauline Oliveros

and Kaija Saariaho, not to mention Persian ritual theatre, Georgian polyphony, Noh dramas, and Thai rock.

Those days are gone. The Lincoln Center Festival shut down in 2017; Mostly Mozart finished expiring this month. Lincoln Center's programming division, which is distinct from the Metropolitan Opera, the New York Philharmonic, New York City Ballet, and other resident organizations, is concentrating its energies on a series called "Summer for the City." A press release describes the range of offerings: a celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of hip-hop; the Criminal Queerness Festival; a series called "Cultivating Access Ecologies"; Korean Arts Week; "social sculpture interventions"; "participatory movement and mindfulness sessions"; Big Umbrella Day, geared toward neurodiverse audiences; standup comedy; games spaces; silent discos, with revellers wearing headphones; and "the world's first LGBTQIA+ mariachi group." The farewell season of the Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra, which once played for seven weeks or more a year, consisted of thirteen concerts in the course of three weeks.

The thinking behind this change in direction is clear enough. Lincoln Center, with its aloof modernist façades, projected a domineering cultural image from the outset. The fact that its construction required the razing of San Juan Hill—a largely Puerto Rican, Afro-Caribbean, and African American neighborhood—gave an indication of the kind of audience that was preferred. The institution had never reckoned with its history in any significant way, and the team that has assumed control in the past several years—led by Henry Timms, Lincoln Center's president and chief executive, and Shanta Thake, its chief artistic officer—has resolved to bring in new voices and genres. Thake said to the *Times*, "What have we left out? What stories aren't we telling that feel like they're demanding to be told in this moment?"

Those are necessary questions, yet the answers have so far been confusing. The pop programming defies the natural capabilities of its primary buildings, which include an opera house, an orchestra hall, a chamber-music hall, and a ballet theatre. Unless all these buildings are torn down and replaced by a stadium, Lincoln Center will always be best suited to events of the sit-down-and-listen variety. Furthermore, with Carnegie Hall on its annual pause after June, David Geffen Hall is the city's only first-rate venue

for orchestral music in the summer. It's especially bizarre that Lincoln Center has put together so few classical events this past year, following Geffen's reopening after an extensive renovation. The audience is out there: the final two Mostly Mozart concerts were packed.

Although the traditional performing arts have abiding issues with élitism and exclusivity, a swerve toward pop hardly compensates for the profound societal inequalities that are embedded in our celebrity-driven culture. Symptomatic attitudes can be found in a 2018 book titled "New Power," which Timms wrote with Jeremy Heimans. The authors reject top-down leadership and embrace a model that they call "open, participatory, and peer-driven." Facebook and Twitter are among the lead cases. Anyone who has paid attention to the decimation of the public sphere in recent years will be aware that power tends to stay in the hands of a few, no matter what hazy rhetoric accompanies each changing of the guard.

At Lincoln Center, New Power also takes the form of sonic force: according to an app on my phone, the sound level at an outdoor dance contest approached a hundred and ten decibels. I saw elderly people wincing as they made their way, sometimes with walkers or canes, into Geffen. Lincoln Center now radiates disdain for those who wish simply to listen to music they love in a comfortable hall. I can only hope that classical programming doesn't continue its downward spiral next summer, when the Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra will return under a new name. It's worth noting that the festival provides employment for dozens of musicians whose financial situation is considerably more precarious than that of Timms, who, according to a tax filing, received a salary of \$1,469,816 in the fiscal year 2022.

Inside the hall, huge ovations greeted Louis Langrée, who served as Mostly Mozart's impeccably stylish music director from 2002 onward. This perennially underrated Alsatian-born conductor is completing an extended period of American residency; his decade-long tenure with the Cincinnati Symphony ends next season. Those who attended Mostly Mozart during its doldrum years, in the nineteen-nineties, can attest to the wonders that Langrée worked with the ensemble: the quality of playing surged, the sense of engagement deepened. All those virtues were evident in his farewell program, which brought together Mozart's final three symphonies. The great

G-Minor Symphony had a fine-spun intensity, with flickers of rage hidden in its accents. The coda of the “Jupiter” built headlong momentum, even as each line remained thrillingly clear.

In the other program of his final week, Langrée hopped across five centuries of musical history: Lully’s “Bourgeois Gentilhomme,” the Overture from Mozart’s “Abduction from the Seraglio,” Tchaikovsky’s Violin Concerto (with refined solos by Randall Goosby), Kodály’s “Dances of Galánta,” and Valerie Coleman’s “Fanfare for Uncommon Times.” References along the way to Duke Ellington, Ottoman military bands, and Hungarian dance music reminded me of Langrée’s range; back in 2004, he juxtaposed Mozart’s Requiem with a performance by the Indian-Iranian trio Ghazal, which consisted of the sitarist Shujaat Husain Khan, the *kamancheh* player Kayhan Kalhor, and the tabla player Sandeep Das. In fact, the former team of Langrée, Moss, and Redden, far from remaining cloistered, embraced an exceptionally wide spectrum of non-Western traditions.

Langrée addressed the crowd at both concerts, with feisty enthusiasm. According to long-abiding codes of classical-music decorum, performers who are exiting an organization maintain a façade of agreeability, whether or not their departure was consensual. Langrée did not exactly adhere to the practice. In the most debonair way imaginable, he threw shade at the powers that be. He explained that he was discussing the pieces at length because “Lincoln Center decided to stop printing programs.” He alluded to the fears of orchestra members who saw “‘Mozart’ erased from their title.” And he pointedly analyzed Mozart’s symphonies in terms of “musical democracy” and harmonious multiplicity. He singled out a passage in the Andante of Symphony No. 39, in which a quintet of winds takes turns playing a simple pattern of four eighth-note pulses followed by a winding sixteenth-note pattern. The magic of the passage depends on five musicians listening to one another and establishing a collective flow.

Before the “Jupiter,” Langrée got to the point: “I know that now Lincoln Center wants to present much less classical music, because it’s maybe élitist, or what. But—it’s good to present hip-hop, it’s good to present R. & B., it’s good to present any type of music, any type of music, *including* classical music. Because—why did these pieces go through the filter of time?” After praising the orchestra, the audience, and Reynold Levy, a former president

of Lincoln Center, Langrée launched into the “Jupiter,” which resoundingly answered the question he had raised.

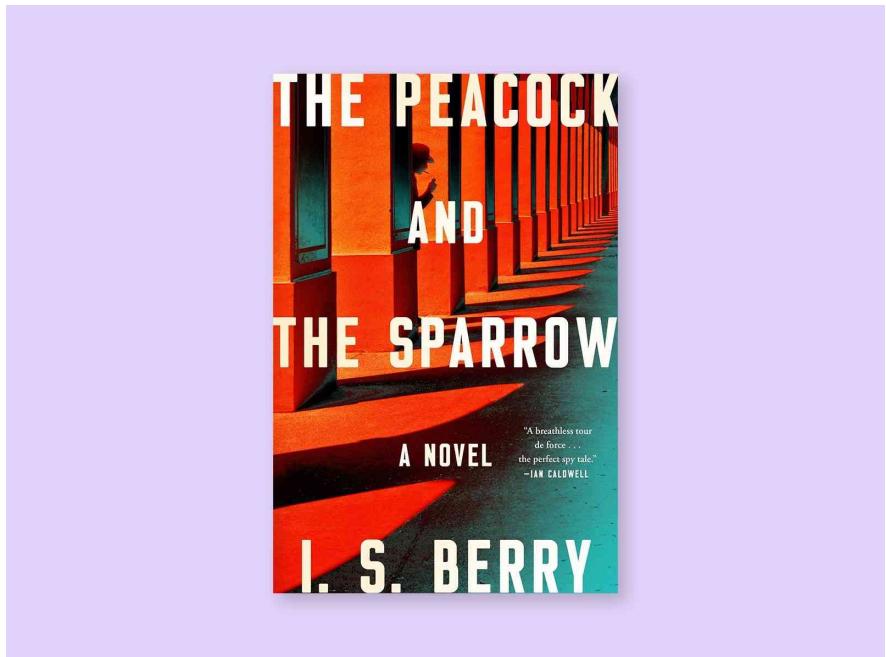
Lincoln Center’s new leadership has implemented one excellent idea: a pay-what-you-wish plan for select summertime events, including classical concerts. The suggested ticket price is thirty-five dollars, but you can pay as little as five—practically as low as the three-dollar price that Mostly Mozart set for its first season, fifty-seven years ago. There’s a strong argument for getting back to the casual spirit of the festival’s early years, when one slogan was “Mostly Mozart, barely Bach, never neckties.” Economic conditions no longer permit the sort of grandiose international programming that prevailed in the two-thousands; what’s needed is homegrown vitality. Encouraging in this respect is the appointment of the gifted young conductor Jonathon Heyward as Langrée’s successor; a South Carolina native, he is a serious musician with a broad repertory.

For the most part, though, Timms and Thake seem fundamentally out of step with Lincoln Center and its public, both extant and potential. When people make the trip to Broadway and Sixty-fifth, they surely aren’t looking for an awkward transplantation of cultures that exist in more authentic form elsewhere in the city. They more likely want an encounter with something radically other—a world distant in time or space. The moniker Mostly Mozart worked for so long because it symbolized a longing for uncanny voyages. The festival’s time may have passed, but the longing remains. Langrée touched on that primary mission when he said, in his elegantly blunt way, that artists have a responsibility to “make our planet more beautiful.” His voice trembling slightly, he added, “I think Mozart did that for us.” ♦

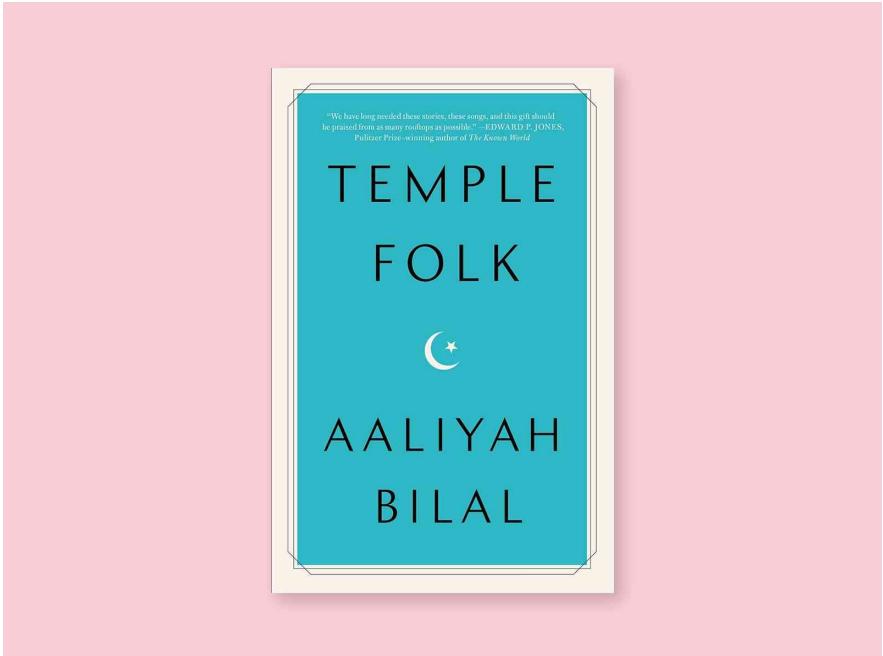
By Alex Ross

By Alex Ross

By Colin Marshall



[**The Peacock and the Sparrow**](#), by I. S. Berry (Atria). This crackling début thriller is narrated by a C.I.A. spy, a self-described “aging threadbare bureaucrat” stationed in Bahrain in the wake of the Arab Spring. The novel begins with a series of bombings targeting Westerners. These are blamed on the Bahraini opposition, but the station chief suggests that the spy’s informant, who has become a friend, was involved. No one is beyond the spy’s cascading suspicions, not even a Bahraini mosaicist with whom he is romantically entangled, and whom he approaches with a caution usually reserved for his work: navigating an affair is “not so different, after all, from the delicate give-and-take dance with an informant, an unending alternation between obeisance and control.”

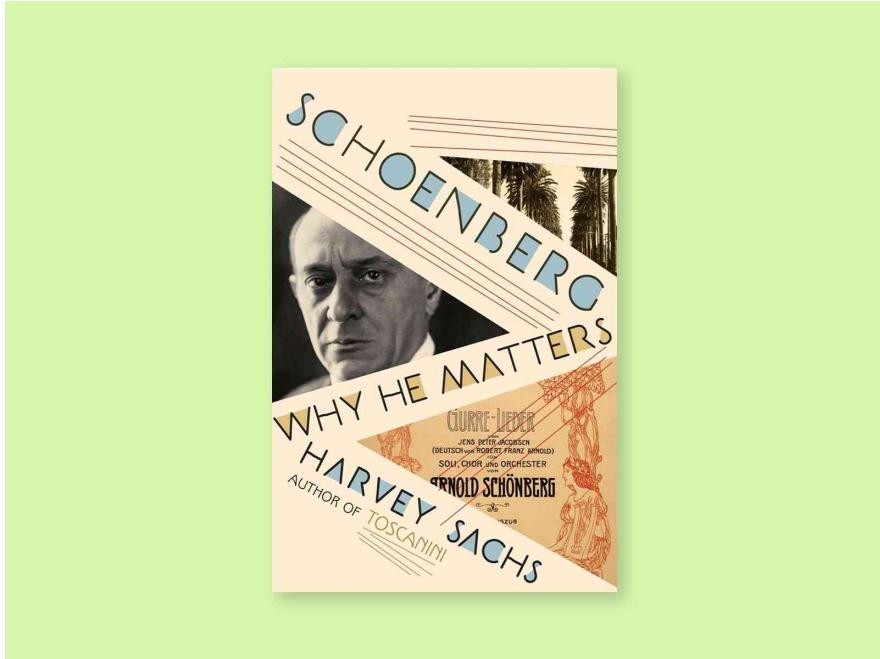


[Temple Folk](#), by *Aaliyah Bilal* (*Simon & Schuster*). These nine short stories follow Black American Muslims who drift toward and away from their faith, judge one another for immodesty, wrestle with upended family lore, and reflect with ambivalence on the impact the Nation of Islam has had on their lives. A woman visiting Egypt questions whether to continue wearing the hijab, another enters into a puzzling and intense online romance with a devout Albanian, and another is haunted by visions of her dead father as she prepares his eulogy. Built largely around vignettes, Bilal's stories depict characters who serve as sensitive guides to matters of apostasy, racial prejudice, and gender roles.

[The Best Books of 2023](#)

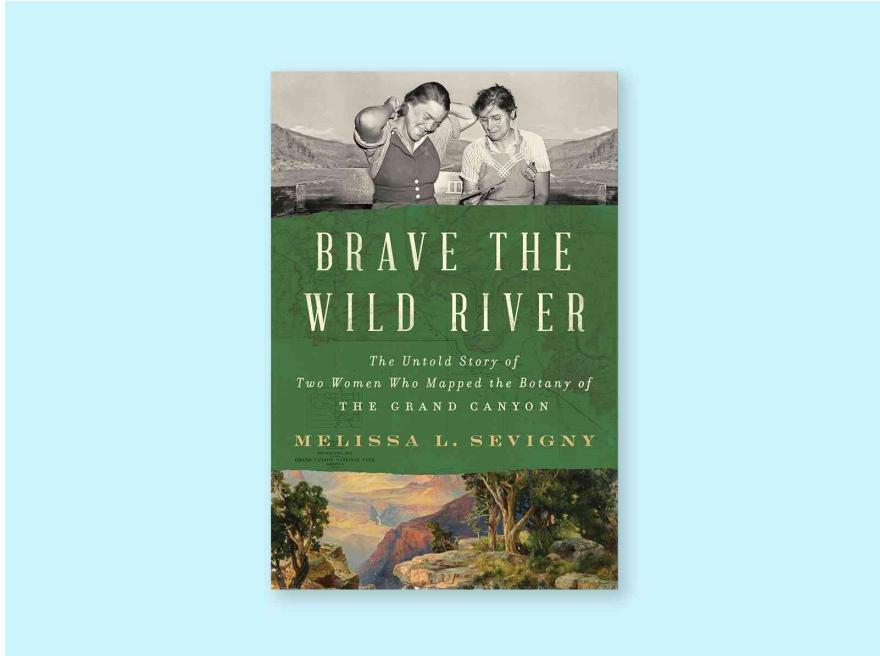


Read our reviews of the year's notable new fiction and nonfiction.



Schoenberg, by Harvey Sachs (Liveright). In this study of Arnold Schoenberg, the Austrian-born composer who immigrated to the U.S. in 1933, Sachs blends fleet-footed biography with an accessible analysis of Schoenberg's works. Best known for his development of twelve-tone

serialism, Schoenberg believed that he would single-handedly restore Germany's musical dominance over France, Italy, and Russia; the cold reception that his compositions faced left him imagining himself as a "lonely, misunderstood prophet." Sachs's interpretations of these works can be emotionally convincing, and, according to him, Schoenberg's music is, as Mark Twain is reputed to have said about Wagner's, "better than it sounds," in part because appreciation often requires repeated listening.



Brave the Wild River, by *Melissa L. Sevigny* (Norton). In 1938, two female botanists set out to document the plant life of the Grand Canyon. Elzada Clover and Lois Jotter, undeterred by warnings that the trip would be "a mighty poor place for women," joined with a river guide and a handful of other boatmen to travel the treacherous Green and Colorado Rivers. Sevigny chronicles the team's forty-three-day journey, interspersing it with accounts of the adventurers who preceded them, descriptions of plants and wildlife, and the history of Western intervention in an ecosystem long stewarded by Native nations, including the Navajo and the Hualapai. The book also makes the case that Clover and Jotter's study, conducted shortly after the construction of the Hoover Dam, provides a crucial benchmark in assessing human impact on the environment.

By Naomi Fry

By Susan B. Glasser

By Sauleha Kamal

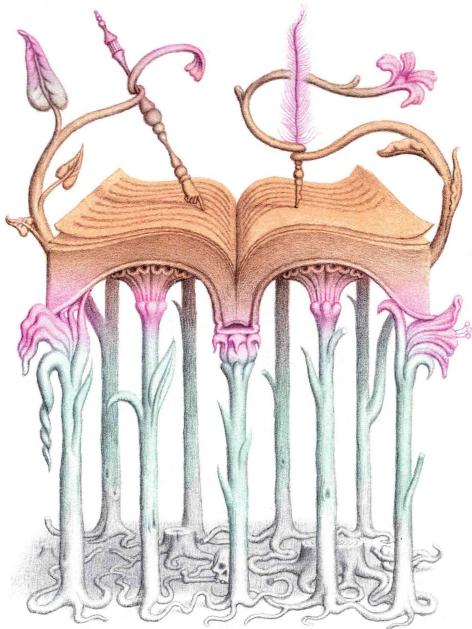
By Patrick Berry

Books

How the Authors of the Bible Spun Triumph from Defeat

History may be written by the victors, but the world's most influential text comes from antiquity's biggest losers.

By [Adam Gopnik](#)



In "Why the Bible Began," the scholar Jacob L. Wright traces the narrative rivalries and divisions that formed the Hebrew Scriptures. Illustration by Daniele Castellano

The Moshiach came to Madison Avenue this summer. All over a not particularly Jewish neighborhood, posters of the bearded, Rembrandtesque Rebbe Schneerson appeared, mucilaged to every light post and bearing the caption "Long Live the Lubavitcher Rebbe King Messiah forever!" This was, or ought to have been, trebly astonishing. First, the rebbe being urged to a longer life died in 1994, and the new insistence that he was nonetheless the Moshiach skirted, as his followers tend to do, the question of whether he might remain somehow alive. Second, the very concept of a messiah recapitulates a specific national hope of a small and oft-defeated nation several thousand years ago, and spoke originally to the local Judaean dream of a warrior who would lead his people to victory over the Persians, the

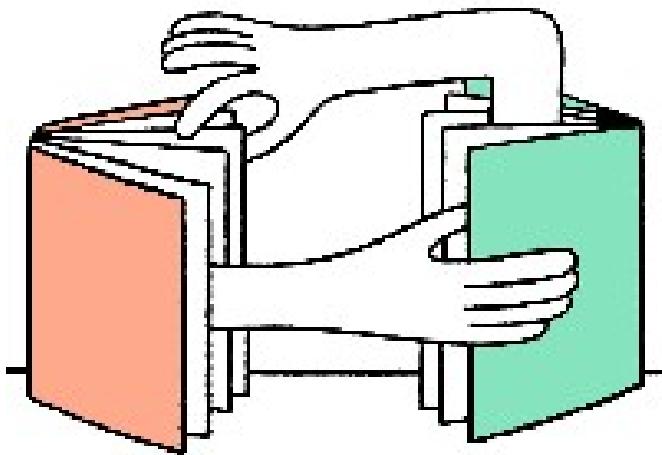
Greeks, and, latterly, the Roman colonizers. And, third, the disputes surrounding the rebbe from Crown Heights are strikingly similar to those which surrounded the rebbe Yeshua, or Jesus, when *his* followers first pressed *his* claim: was this messianic pretension a horrific blasphemy or a final fulfillment? Yet there it was, another Jewish messiah, on a poster, in 2023.

The messianism on our street corners is a reminder of Judaism's peculiarly long-lived legacy. Who can now tell Jupiter Dolichenus from Jupiter Optimus Maximus, two cult divinities once venerated at magnificent temples in Rome? But we all know what a messiah is, and some people wonder if the Brooklyn rabbi might be he. The pagans who dominated the world lost their gods when they lost their empires and saw them swept into myth by the monotheistic religions spawned from the Jewish one. And the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, is, perhaps, unique on the planet inasmuch as it is, as the scholar Jacob L. Wright suggests in his new book, "[Why the Bible Began](#)" (Cambridge), so entirely a losers' tale. The Jews were the great sufferers of the ancient world—persecuted, exiled, catastrophically defeated—and yet the tale of their special selection, and of the demiurge who, from an unbeliever's point of view, reneged on every promise and failed them at every turn, is the most admired, influential, and permanent of all written texts. Wright's purpose is to explain, in a new way, how and why this happened.

The easiest explanation is that it happened this way because that's the way God wanted it to happen. But this does not lessen the need to say *how* it happened. Or, as Edward Gibbon wrote, in one of the most perfect of sentences, explaining his ambition to provide a rational account for the rise of Christianity, "As truth and reason seldom find so favourable a reception in the world, and as the wisdom of Providence frequently condescends to use the passions of the human heart, and the general circumstances of mankind, as instruments to execute its purpose, we may still be permitted, though with becoming submission, to ask, not indeed what were the first, but what were the secondary causes?"

[The Best Books We Read This Week](#)

Read our reviews of notable new fiction and nonfiction, updated every Wednesday.



The “secondary cause” for the Bible’s triumph, in Wright’s view, can be put simply: losers rule. More people remember the record-losing ’62 Mets than the pennant-winning ’62 Yankees. Division and defeat, Wright explains, made the Bible memorable. Successive expulsions and exiles forced the Jewish poets and prophets, like Red Sox fans of yore, to imagine defeat as a virtue, dispossession as a gift, failure today as a promise of victory tomorrow. Defeat usually compelled other ancient peoples, as it does us, to invent rationalizations for what happened. (Yes, we failed to pacify Afghanistan, but nobody could have done so.) In the face of regular defeat, however, the Jewish scribes had to ask whether defeat wasn’t God’s will in the first place, and so opened mankind unto a new contemplative possibility: that spiritual success and failure were not to be judged on worldly terms. Nice guys, or, anyway, pious guys, finish last and should be proud of their position.

The Hebrew Bible was mostly composed—composed, recomposed, and redacted, by many hands at many times in many places—during the millennium before the Common Era, and the defeats endured by the Jews, having settled, probably peaceably, in the Egyptian-dominated land they

called Canaan, are still astonishing to itemize. The most significant of these took place in the middle centuries of that millennium. First, the Assyrians, around 720 B.C.E., conquered the northern Kingdom of Israel and deported and enslaved its people. Then, around 600 B.C.E., the Babylonians—led by the impressively named Nebuchadnezzar—laid siege to Jerusalem and ended the southern Kingdom of Judah and perhaps its temple as well, resulting in another massive forced migration. So began the “Babylonian captivity,” which lasted, by legend, until the Babylonians, in turn, were conquered by the Persian King Cyrus, who issued an edict, in 569 B.C.E., allowing the Jews to go back to Jerusalem. After that came the Seleucid Greeks, who ran things briefly, only to be kicked aside by the Romans, who were running everything in those days. It was in putting down the First Jewish Revolt, in 70 C.E., that the Romans laid waste to Jerusalem, destroyed its temple, and saw its people once again scattered, this time for good.

All these historical details are controversial: the mass expulsion of the Jews to Babylon may have involved only a select number of the élite; the edict of Cyrus may have been, as Wright suspects, a retrospective invention giving a particular name to a more general Persian practice of religious toleration. Even the First Temple, the so-called Temple of Solomon, may have been nothing more than a tabernacle tent, turned by retrospective memory into a marvel of cedar and gold and twisted columns. Yet a legacy of losses seems hard to deny.

The divisions that Wright speaks of are less familiar, and—this is perhaps the chief originality of his book—just as decisive. The southern Kingdom of Judah and the northern Kingdom of Israel, which we might have imagined as agreeable sister kingdoms, were, in the centuries around 900-700 B.C.E., warring adversaries, though a single deity, one of many names, was shared between them. The oldest deity, El—“Israel” is usually interpreted to mean “One who struggles with God”—got replaced over time by the unnameable deity Yahweh, who originally had a female companion, and then by a more metaphysical maker, Elohim. Wright stresses the extent of the disruption that occurred when Israel was subjugated by the Assyrians while Judah maintained self-rule for more than a century afterward. (A blink in Biblical time, perhaps, but it’s an interval like the one that separates us from the Civil War.) It was during this period, he argues persuasively, that a fundamental break happened, leaving a contrapuntal discord in the Bible between the

southern “Palace History” and the “People’s History” of the dispossessed northern scribes. The Palace History conjured up Saul and David and Solomon and the rest, still comfortably situated within a “statist,” dynastic Levantine court; the People’s History, by contrast, was aggressively indifferent to monarchs, real or imagined, and concentrated instead on popular figures, Moses and Miriam, the patriarchs and the prophets. The Jewish tradition of celebrating non-dynastic figures of moral or charismatic force—a practice mostly unknown, it would seem, in the rest of the ancient world—begins in the intersection of dispossessed Israelites and complacent Judaeans.

The northern and the southern narratives were, Wright says, constantly being entangled and reëntangled by the Biblical writers, as a kind of competition in interpolation. So, for instance, Aaron the priest is interpolated latterly as Moses’ brother in order to align the priestly court-bound southern caste with the charismatic northern one. Again and again, what seems like uniform storytelling is revealed to be an assemblage of fragments, born from defeat and midwifed by division.

This process is perhaps not as strange as Wright seems to think, and not even unknown within the nearer confines of American history. The defeated Southerners of our Civil War [also made a popular myth-history](#) out of very different material from that of their Northern brethren. The Southern scribes, too, favored non-dynastic folk heroes, such as Davy Crockett, and fictional romantic figures, such as Rhett Butler, over the Presidential luminaries whose names bedeck Northern cities. The compass directions are reversed, north to south, but one is very much a people’s narrative, the other a palace narrative. Indeed, the Western, that peculiarly American contribution to the world’s store of epic and saga, often depends on the tale of a defeated Confederate at large to enforce virtue, someone whose heroic individualism is counterpoised with the superficial discipline of the federal troops. The beloved figure of the outlaw, still haloed by [Bob Dylan](#) and others, with Jesse James (a onetime Confederate guerrilla) at its center, is that of a Southern soldier who won’t give up after defeat, so that he crosses into a subversive and (in Wright’s terms) an anti-statist role. A people’s history is not always an admirable one.

Wright is both an analyst of Biblical texts and an apologist for them. His analysis is often brilliant and persuasive, leading us to see ideological fractures in texts that we thought we knew. And though much of the textual history will be familiar to scholars who have gone deep into the weeds, or the bulrushes, Wright does a terrific job of bringing it forward for his readers. He explains, for instance, that the great opening pages of Genesis are an interpolation of the Babylonian period, and a conscious, studio-notes-style rewrite of a violent Babylonian creation myth in which a female spirit is slain by a male one, and only then the world begun. Against this, the Jewish writers post the more placid, word-centered creation tale of Elohim; in a culture where words are all that is left as weapons, it's words that make the universe.

“North and South never managed to overcome their rivalry,” Wright tells us, identifying traces of it everywhere in the text. Genesis, he stresses, exists on several sedimentary levels. One level focusses on the doings of the Creator; another gives us a more familial version of the creation story. This story, rooted not in Elohim and his acts but in Abraham and his progeny, emphasizes continuity, and the idea that the Israelites had always lived in the promised land. The Mosaic account, in Exodus, is a sharply different and imperial alternative. “Whereas the patriarchs make peace with the inhabitants of Canaan,” Wright observes, “the Exodus-Conquest Account presents the newly liberated nation taking the country by force.” In his view, the tension between the “ecumenical and conciliatory” political model and the “particularist and militarist” model defines the character of the whole. At the other end of the Bible, Wright, having so neatly delineated the wars between the north, which was centered on Samaria, and the south, which was centered on Jerusalem, makes our encounter with the southern fable of the Good Samaritan suddenly hair-raising. Revisiting Jesus’ tale about a traveller, beset by robbers, who was left untouched by a Levite (i.e., his own southern people) but rescued by a kind Samaritan (i.e., a northerner), we realize that the parable contains within it a thousand years of contentious Jewish history. One people, divided in two, should again be one people.

As an apologist, Wright suggests, less persuasively, that the Jewish stories have a special virtue for having been forged in the smithy of suffering. “One cannot help but wonder: if neighboring peoples had not only admitted defeat but also made it central to a new collective identity, as the biblical scribes

did, would they too have produced corpora of literature that continued to be transmitted for generations?" he asks. Yet the Judaean cause isn't necessarily vindicated by the scale of the suffering, or by the lyricism of its lamentations, since the essential lesson conveyed isn't the lesson one would wish for—the thought that nobody should conquer other people or throw them into slavery and exile—so much as the thought that it was bad luck it happened to us. The Lamentations can be universalized, but they are limited, in the first instance, to us and ours.

And is the poetic potency of defeat so purely a Jewish discovery? Homer, certainly, found greater pathos in the Trojans' downfall than glory in the Greeks' victory, and made the humane family man Hector at least as attractive as the triumphant Achilles; and we ourselves volubly commemorate losses, from the Alamo to 9/11. "Here's to the losers, bless 'em all!" Sinatra sang, and, often enough, we call down God's blessing on the losers, since they so clearly do not have man's.

Yet Wright's meditations on the inspirational power of Jewish loss lead one, as does that Madison Avenue poster, to a larger contemplation of the "successor" faith. How much losing is there, really, in Christianity? At first glance, the Christian story appears to reverse the polarities and make a tale of universal triumph out of the old Jewish stories of particular defeat. But is this really so? Debates still rage over whether the Jewish figure of the "suffering servant" presaged the Christian example. Whatever scholars conclude, though, the force of the Christian example surely lies in the extremity of the deity's abasement, tortured to death in the most humiliatingly imaginable way and left to be buried as a criminal. The Christian fable potently compresses the Jewish stories of suffering into a single story, unfolding over a single year. Indeed, doesn't the emotional appeal of Christianity rest on its very Jewish ritualization of extreme suffering and humiliating defeat as a prelude to divine favor? Consider the number of images of Crucifixion (Jesus dying) in Italian churches as opposed to those of the ascension (Christ rising). Christian art centers on a moment of anguish and defeat, and this is in essence a Jewish idea.

A more cheering moral can be found in Wright's meditations. Wright, like so many scholars these days, cannot resist projecting pluralist, post-Enlightenment values onto societies that made no pretense of possessing

them. He cites enthusiastically, for instance, the scholar Catherine Keller's reading of Genesis, which argues that in the priestly version of Genesis the word "Tehom," usually translated as the inanimate form "the deep," actually represents a female deity who joins Elohim in creation, and whose "enduring presence holds recreative potential," such that "Elohim draws on this potential rather than mastering and dominating it, as in traditional paternal theologies."

As always, we should be skeptical about claims that fit the taste and temper of our time. We badly want benevolent female deities to tame obnoxious male ones, but this doesn't mean that any earlier reader understood it, or any earlier writer intended it, in quite this way. Wright's inclination to think that even the patriarchs might not be truly patriarchal can occasionally contort his prose and his perspective. (In the book's introduction, he does admit, disarmingly, that he doesn't entirely *like* the Bible, mandating as it does the execution of disobedient children.) Certainly, a culture that treats menstruating women as unclean cannot easily be made into a feminist one.

For all that, the interpolation of our Progressive narrative within the existing Palace and People's narratives seems, after Wright's arguments, newly graced by tradition. Given the Bible's pliability, its kludgy fusing of one story into another, surely our ways of telling it are as legitimate as any other. The story may seem frozen, as Rebbe Schneerson seems frozen in his Polish eighteenth-century garb, but, still, it moves. All religions are a set of practices before they are a set of articulated beliefs, and perhaps the key ritual practice of the Jews was prose-writing. Sacred books are far from commonplace in ancient religions. ([The Homeric epic](#), that Greek equivalent, is a war-and-adventure story with the gods attendant; and the rules of how to please them, or the impossibility of ever doing so, are inferred from the story, not announced within it. The Ten Commandments of paganism are winked by Zeus to his favorites.)

A nation is its narration. By first exploding its internal differences and then annealing them in imaginative fictions at best loosely based in history—exactly as was done in this country for so long—a coherently incoherent tale gets told. To say that the Judaeans and the Israelites and their spiritual descendants are the people of the book makes sense only if we think of books as books truly are: that is, badly reviewed, sporadically revived,

occasionally rediscovered, and, if any good at all, perpetually misread. The cracks and crevices, not to mention the palimpsests and overlays, in the Bible as it really is make for an ever more modern text. We like broken books, and this is one. ♦

By Susan B. Glasser

By Patrick Berry

By Sauleha Kamal

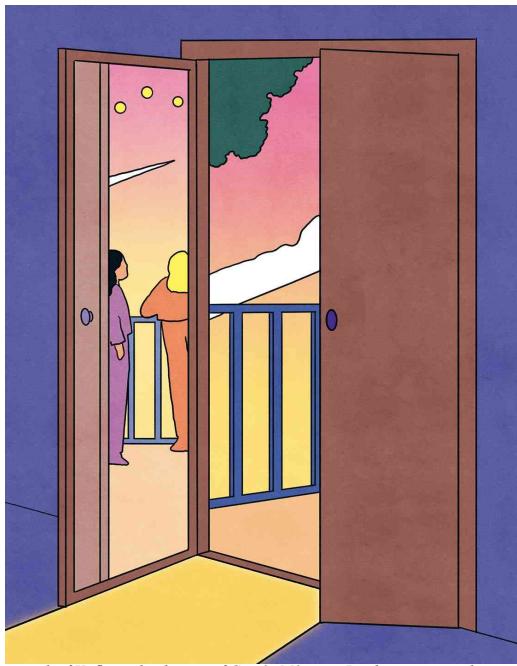
By Naomi Fry

Books

A Modern Fable About Time, Narrative, and Real Estate

In Hilary Leichter's "Terrace Story," a woman has a secret superpower: she can expand cramped apartments with her mind.

By [Clare Sestanovich](#)



With a touch of Kafka and a dusting of García Márquez, Leichter captures the insurmountable distance between people, even in the most intimate spheres. Illustration by Maria Medem

Has there ever been a better time to write a novel that's all about space? Always a literal unit of power (see: private property), it now seems to be our preferred figurative metric, too: the most annoying guest at your dinner party takes up too much of it, the most diplomatic participant at your staff meeting is careful to make more of it, and everyone has an opinion about whether it matters if it's *safe*. In this contested landscape, Hilary Leichter's second novel, "[Terrace Story](#)" (Ecco), has a suitably small footprint—at under two hundred pages, it won't strain a [Marie Kondo](#)-ed shelf—but turns out to be a capacious container for our space-related concerns.

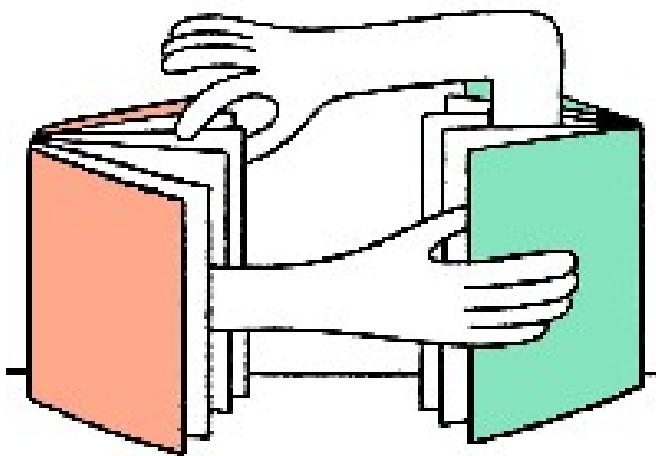
There's real estate, of course: you'll meet Annie and Edward, cash-strapped new parents, in a shoebox city apartment. There's the metaphoric geography

of intimacy, too: you'll meet George and Lydia in a marriage full of "blind alleys and impasses." And then there's the Muskin frontier: you'll find Rosie in outer space—a futuristic suburb orbiting Earth—because the planet is having some capacity issues.

As for how all these people and places fit together, part of the pleasure of reading "Terrace Story" is figuring out how its peculiar architecture works. The novel is divided into four sections: characters in the first reappear in the third; scenes are retold from a fresh point of view; striking turns of phrase pop up again and again. But the key to it all is Stephanie (single, thirtyish, in sales), and her secret superpower: she can make the world bigger with her mind. She raises ceilings, expands cupboards, adds more room to the local playground, and creates new terrain in a national park. Visiting Annie and Edward's cramped apartment, she's a kind of fairy godmother, conjuring the titular terrace on the other side of a closet door.

The Best Books We Read This Week

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There's both something old-fashioned about these flicks of the magic-realist wand—a touch of [Kafka](#), a dusting of García Márquez, even a spoonful of

Mary Poppins—and something distinctly of our moment. Consider such recent Zeitgeist successes as Sheila Heti’s “[Pure Colour](#),” in which an art student lives inside a leaf (with a ghost), or Ottessa Moshfegh’s “[My Year of Rest and Relaxation](#),” in which a boring blonde goes to sleep, Rip Van Winkle style, for many months. These authors are most compelling when they use their surreal spells to transfigure domestic, feminized spaces, exploring where women get to be, and whom they get to become. Moshfegh’s protagonist burrows into her apartment; Heti’s finally finds “her right dimensions” in a tree.

Leichter, too, centers her fable on the off-kilter power dynamics of home life. Annie and Edward, eager for the bonus square footage that materializes only when Stephanie’s around, are constantly inviting her over for “drinks and snacks, and boards of cheese.” But, in the new family’s little bubble, a single woman with an all too spacious schedule will always be an interloper, no matter how many invitations she gets. She sits and snacks, waiting for the bubble to burst.

Above all, Leichter is interested in the bewitched space of narrative itself. The fable, with tidy generic conventions but stretchy moral lessons, performs a kind of magic on the novel, giving a slim work legend-like scope. Stephanie can enlarge her world and also, fatefully, divide it—tearing characters apart and leaving their stories in pieces. Leichter might have tried to reassemble these fragments; instead, she encourages us to peer into the space between them—between lovers or friends, between one narrative and the next, between our universe and all the parallel ones.

Readers of Leichter’s first novel, “[Temporary](#)” (2020), will not be surprised to find themselves in enchanted apartments, or even in the multiverse. Her début, a fantastical sendup of the gig economy, features pirates and career criminals, a witch and a ghost, several precocious and parentless children, and a lot of puns. By comparison, “Terrace Story” has a subtler, sadder touch; marriage and family life take center stage. This may sound disappointing, as if your once wild friend had settled down, had a kid, and started serving hors d’œuvres. But convention turns out to be a perilously slippery slope, where the friction between fantasy and reality generates heat.

The scene at Annie's baby shower would be low-hanging fruit for any satirist. At one point, all the guests write down a piece of advice for the expectant mom:

Annie picked a folded card.

"Always make room for yourself!" she read.

"It's so important," one of the women said, her face full of emotion in the presence of her own words. Some silent nodding and hands on hearts.

For Annie, these spatial metaphors are something to laugh at; "I hate baby shit," she says. But, even as Leichter skewers earnestness, she shows us the tenderness in poking fun. For Stephanie, who attends the shower, then ends up seeking refuge in the bathroom, the blurry line between the literal and the figurative in Annie's humor (they're not talking about real baby shit) has serious stakes. Making room has always been a truly physical proposition in Stephanie's life: it means shaking the very foundation of her house.

How empowering is Stephanie's superpower? One section of "Terrace Story" is devoted to her biography, in which we learn that, since childhood, she has been "conscious of how she could warp a room to fit her desire." Having high-school sex in a boy's car, she adds a few extra inches to the back seat for comfort: "'I can take more of you,' she said, with the shrug of someone older." This sounds nice and anti-patriarchal, but as Stephanie's life expands everyone else seems to get farther away. Her parents are distant, frosty presences; the boy with the car is seen flirting with another girl from math class. Stephanie's experience exposes the simplistic liberatory logic that making space means making progress. Instead of longing for a room of her own, she's been creating "deep caverns for someone to fill."

That sense of isolation is where the drama of Leichter's book unfolds. It isn't a spoiler to reveal the worst thing that Stephanie does with her magic, because it happens almost right away. One day, after she's opened the door to the terrace, she closes it, leaving Annie on one side, Edward and the baby on the other. Husband and wife now exist in different "time steps," separate universes with no point of contact.

Annie tries desperately to find her way back to the terrace. “Proximity, she thought, will get the job done”:

She could hear their voices beyond the closet wall, or so she believed. Their family song, pealing like bells just beyond reach. And of course, she could hear them more clearly when the closet was completely closed, so she tucked her knees to her chest and pulled the door shut.

But the magic space never reappears; all Annie has now is a closet stocked with extra diapers she no longer needs. Baby shit, indeed. She’s learned the lesson that Stephanie has known from the start: even the best approximation of “proximity” can’t contain the infinite, insurmountable distance between people. No matter how close the harmony of a shared life seems to be (literalized as that “family song”), you still might find yourself all alone in the smallest room in the house.

When the spell wears off, when the magic is gone, there’s a lot of realism left. In Moshfegh’s “My Year of Rest and Relaxation,” [the absurdist saga](#) of a wholly empty life satirizes all those other lives—sleep-deprived, micromanaged—that we pass off as full. In Heti’s “Pure Colour,” [the narrative incoherence of both grief and love](#) ends up casting doubt on the oldest author of all, God himself. In “Terrace Story,” the simple structure of the fable strains, revealing how complicated the supposedly happy story of female agency has become. If so many stories lack a reliable shape, should we worry that we’ll never be able to tell it straight?

Leichter lets holes open up all over her novel, swallowing up key details: words that characters can’t quite find, memories they can’t quite place. Just before her life is split in two, Annie observes, “There was something crucial here, but the crucial information darted away, refracting and escaping in the pleasant morning light.” If only, perhaps, the brain were a little bigger. But this spatial metaphor, as with the many others Leichter scatters through the book like bread crumbs, is another false promise: Stephanie “tried to expand her mind but that never seemed to work. How to even begin.”

So when, in the scrap pile of advice at Annie’s baby shower, one piece of paper comes up blank, we shouldn’t be taken aback to discover that it belongs to Stephanie. What could, or should, she have written? Such blank

spaces confront nearly all of Leichter's characters; at pivotal turns, their sense of narrative logic founders. That sounds like bad news. You might wonder what can be done with books in which the “crucial information” is never fully captured, the widening gaps never truly filled.

A great deal, as it turns out. Leichter's novel is named for the embellished “terrace stories” that Annie and Edward find themselves telling Stephanie out on the roof deck, made-up memories that recast their past in a more exciting light. Annie thinks that Stephanie believes these “little fibs,” but she, like us, is in on the game. And maybe, as Stephanie believes, it's better that way: “Knowing that certain parts were fiction, this is what filled her body with an unexpected warmth. It was love, to recognize the inventions and inconsistencies that make a person whole.”

Is she right? In a novel with this many mysterious holes, what does a “whole” even look like? Leichter doesn't moralize about her craft, but her book ventures a compelling case for it: for all of us who lack superpowers, storytelling may be the surest way to grasp the elastic dimensions of life. ♦

By Naomi Fry

By Susan B. Glasser

By Sauleha Kamal

By [Anthony Lane](#)

All credit to “[Barbie](#)” and “[Oppenheimer](#),” an odd couple if ever I saw one, for saving the summer box office, but the feast of moviegoing cannot last forever. Famine awaits. Look at the lineup that looms ahead: more “[Trolls](#),” more “PAW Patrol,” yet more “[Hunger Games](#),” a third shot of “The Equalizer” and of “My Big Fat Greek Wedding,” and a fourth dose of “The Expendables,” who are evidently not. Already in cinemas is “Meg 2: The Trench,” a shark-infested swamp of joylessness. Much of it takes place on the ocean floor, in a confounding murk; the one bright patch is the opening scene, which is set sixty-five million years ago, around the time of Henry Kissinger’s tenth birthday.

Now we have Neill Blomkamp’s “[Gran Turismo](#). ” The title refers to the video game, familiar to the bleary eyes of PlayStation devotees, which allows the user to relish all the thrills—and, in painless form, the spills—of high-speed driving without the shame of environmental pollution or the torment of bickering about a parking spot. The movie’s hero is Jann Mardenborough (Archie Madekwe), a shy youth from Cardiff, the capital of Wales, who pledges himself, with priestly zeal, to the practice of [Gran Turismo](#). When the chance arrives to test his talents in an actual car, on a tangible racetrack, with rivals hurtling around him, he doesn’t hesitate. One moment he’s sitting in his bedroom in Cardiff; the next he’s on a private jet to Vienna. Talk about social mobility.

The cast of the film is an unusually mixed salad of talents, including David Harbour, Djimon Hounsou, Geri Halliwell-Horner, and Orlando Bloom—or, as their fans might prefer to think of them, a Hellboy, a gladiator, a [Spice Girl](#), and an elf. Hounsou and Halliwell-Horner play Jann’s parents, who, not surprisingly, are dismayed by the ludicrous ambition of their son. Bloom, with a drop of oily smugness, plays a marketing whiz who convinces the executives at Nissan, in Tokyo, that by recruiting a gamer to drive their cars, in competition, they will appeal to “an untapped demographic of buyers.”

Notice the nakedness of the plea. Not since “[Wayne’s World](#)” (1992), in which Mike Myers found the courage to declare, “I will not bow to any sponsor,” while deftly raising the lid of a Pizza Hut box toward the camera, has a film been so flagrantly unembarrassed by its commercial obligations. Salesmanship is both the subject and the purpose of “[Gran Turismo](#). ” (It

makes “[Air](#)” look bashful.) Were there a prize for the least subtle pitch on display, I’d be tempted to nominate the sight of a Nissan with the PlayStation logo plastered over it, but the winner would have to be a gift that Jann bestows upon his mentor, Jack Salter (Harbour), for services rendered: a shiny new Walkman, held just long enough in Jack’s grasp for us to drink in the word “Sony.” This is not a question of a movie selling its soul. The soul is in the selling.

Harbour is an actor of such genial grit that he, alone among the performers, manages to abrade the smooth absurdities of “Gran Turismo.” His character is hired to turn Jann and a bunch of other hopefuls into racing drivers, and he gives it to them straight. “I’m going to prove that you *don’t* have what it takes,” Jack tells them. The cranky coach is a Hollywood standby—think of Robert Duvall fine-tuning Tom Cruise in “Days of Thunder” (1990)—and it goes without saying that Jack is a “flamed-out has-been,” but Harbour does what he can to rein in the runaway triumphalism of the plot, and I liked the unexcitable shrug with which he reports an inferno on the track. “Cars explode all the time,” he says. “This is normal.”

Blomkamp, who made “District 9” (2009) and “Elysium” (2013), is at his best when everything goes nuts. There are a couple of crashes in “Gran Turismo” that rock you back in your seat; one involves a vehicle cresting a hill at the Nürburgring, in Germany, flipping on its stern, and *sailing* off the course. The perennial hitch with race-car flicks is how to drive home the roaring craziness of the contest without leaving the audience simply deafened and disoriented, and Blomkamp solves the problem by giving us literal pointers—little lines that indicate Jann’s car as he whips along, plus numbers to inform us where he stands in the running. More helpful still is the marketing guy’s last-minute clarification of the twenty-four-hour race at Le Mans. “Just to go over it again: it’s a twenty-four-hour race,” he says. Thanks.

The strange thing about “Gran Turismo” is that, by and large, it happens to be a true story. There is a Jann Mardenborough, and he is indeed a PlayStation supremo who became a driver. Over and over, we are invited to goggle at such amazingness. “This is not a game. This is a race,” Jann is told, and his father exhorts him to stick to “the realm of reality.” The overarching irony of the tale is that, true though it may be, it never feels

quite real; the more that Jann exceeds what is foretold of him, the farther he accelerates into a mere simulation of a plausible narrative. I think Blomkamp is onto something with this movie, at the extremes of fantasy fulfillment, and I half expected him to pull away at the end to reveal that the whole saga, winner's podium and all, had been engineered by A.I., down to the last virtual nut and bolt. Where we go from here I hate to imagine. Maybe gamers everywhere, following Jann's lead, will now demand entry to the mortal world. Get ready for films about Mario Kart addicts who leave their consoles, grow mustaches, and train to become small Italianate plumbers. The play's the thing.

After the hustling pace of "Gran Turismo," the stillness of "Fremont," a new film from Babak Jalali, feels not so much restful as haunted. There are long stretches during which the characters—notably the heroine, Donya (Anaita Wali Zada)—hold steady in front of the camera, saying next to nothing. That's how Donya gets to see a shrink without an appointment: just by staring the receptionist into submission. Later, when she looks *us* in the eye, it's hard not to feel scrutinized, as if we were being asked to account for our actions.

Donya needs a psychiatrist because she wants sleeping pills, and she can't sleep because the thought of her old existence—which we don't see, and which we hear about only piecemeal—is pressing against her current one. She lives in Fremont, California, and has a job, in San Francisco, at a business that makes fortune cookies. (By way of a promotion, she graduates from wrapping them to writing the mottoes tucked inside. "They shouldn't be too original," her boss commands.) But she used to live in Afghanistan, where she was an interpreter, employed by U.S. forces to translate for Afghan troops. Those duties earned her a visa and a chance to evacuate after the [Taliban](#) returned to power. If you watched last year's alarming HBO documentary "Escape from Kabul," you will have some conception of the chaos from which she, or her real-life counterparts, fled. Her calmness, these days, is that of someone who walked through the storm.

It would be heartening to report that Donya is embraced by the immigrant community of her compatriots, but, as the movie suggests, so benign an ideal doesn't always work out. One of Donya's neighbors refuses to speak to her, presumably because of her deeds in Afghanistan; another does little but

stand on a balcony and smoke. Could it be that reaching out to others, as we are so often enjoined to do, is beyond the capacity of the stunned? My favorite figure is a waiter who stands idle in the lowly joint where Donya—the only customer, apparently—tends to dine. Gazing at a soap opera on the restaurant TV, he remarks, “I can’t tell if this series is interesting, or if my own life is uninteresting.” Rarely has the fatal attraction of television been so concisely defined.

To treat “Fremont” as some kind of geopolitical case history, though, would be misleading. It’s more of a study in solitude. Donya, rehearsing for a blind date, sets a table and makes conversation to the empty air, like Miss Lonelyhearts in “Rear Window” (1954). Also, a mood of desolation emanates even from those who are not condemned to exile. Donya’s shrink, for instance, is a hapless fellow named Dr. Anthony (Gregg Turkington), who is obsessed with Jack London’s “[White Fang](#)” and seems pitifully pleased to have someone to talk to; it’s really not his fault if he bears an unfortunate resemblance to the brute in “Fargo” (1996) who fed one of his victims into a wood chipper. Then, we have the mechanic, played with a halting gentleness by Jeremy Allen White, whom Donya encounters at a garage. “I usually eat my lunch here,” he tells her, “and for dinner I’ll eat here, too.”

The movie, photographed by Laura Valladao, is in black-and-white; add the deadpan dialogue and you may be reminded of, say, early [Jim Jarmusch](#). But there’s not a smack of hipness here, and Jalali is not on a quest for cool. Rather, the story is suffused with an uncommon blend of radiance and resignation, nowhere more rapturously than in the final shot. Donya stands beneath a tree, in a luminous haze of sunlight, beside the busted shell of a car with no wheels and an abandoned armchair. In America, her newfound land, even the things are alone. ♦

By Susan B. Glasser

By Patrick Berry

By Sauleha Kamal

By Naomi Fry

The Talk of the Town

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The Burning of Maui

The governor called the fires Hawaii's "largest natural disaster" ever. They would more accurately be labelled an "unnatural disaster."

By [Elizabeth Kolbert](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

The 'alalā, or Hawaiian crow, is a remarkably clever bird. 'Alalā fashion tools out of sticks, which they use, a bit like skewers, to get at hard-to-reach food. The birds were once abundant, but by the late nineteen-nineties their population had dropped so low that they were facing extinction. Since 2003, all the world's remaining 'alalā have been confined to aviaries. In a last-ditch effort to preserve the species, the San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance has been breeding the crows in captivity. The alliance keeps about a third of the birds—some forty 'alalā—at a facility outside the town of Volcano, on the Big Island, and the rest outside the town of Makawao, on Maui. Earlier this month, the Maui population was very nearly wiped out. On the morning of August 8th, flames came within a few hundred feet of the birds' home and would probably have engulfed it were it not for an enterprising alliance employee, one of her neighbors, and a garden hose.

According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, “many factors” contributed to the ‘alalā’s decline, including habitat destruction, invasive species, and the effects of agriculture on the landscape. Owing to these developments, Hawaii’s native fauna in general is in crisis; the state has earned an unfortunate title as “the extinction capital of the world.” Of the nearly hundred and fifty bird species that used to be found in Hawaii and nowhere else, two-thirds are gone. Among the islands’ distinctive native snails, the losses have been even more catastrophic.

Last week, as the death toll from the fires in West Maui continued to mount—late on Friday, the number stood at a hundred and eleven—it became clear that the same “factors” that have decimated Hawaii’s wildlife also contributed to the deadliness of the blazes. Roughly a thousand people have been reported as still missing, and some two thousand homes have been destroyed or damaged. The worst-hit locality, the town of Lahaina, which lies in ruins, was built on what was once a wetland. Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, much of the vegetation surrounding the town was cleared to make way for sugar plantations. Then, when these went out of business, in the late twentieth century, the formerly cultivated acres were taken over by introduced grasses. In contrast to Hawaii’s native plants, the imported grasses have evolved to reseed after fires and, in dry times, they become highly flammable.

“The lands around Lahaina were all sugarcane from the eighteen-sixties to the late nineteen-nineties,” Clay Trauernicht, a specialist in fire ecology at the University of Hawaii at Mānoa, told the *Guardian*. “Nothing’s been done since then—hence the problem with invasive grasses and fire risk.”

Also contributing to the devastation was climate change. Since the nineteen-fifties, average temperatures in Hawaii have risen by about two degrees, and there has been a sharp uptick in warming in just the past decade. This has made the state more fire-prone and, at the same time, it has fostered the spread of the sorts of plants that provide wildfires with fuel. Hotter summers help invasive shrubs and grasses “outgrow our native tree species,” the state’s official Climate Change Portal notes.

As Hawaii has warmed, it has also dried out. According, again, to the Climate Change Portal, “rainfall and streamflow have declined significantly

over the past 30 years.” In the weeks leading up to the fires in West Maui, parts of the region were classified as suffering from “severe drought.” Meanwhile, climate change is shifting storm tracks in the Pacific farther north. Hurricane Dora, which made history as the longest-lasting Category 4 hurricane on record in the Pacific, passed to the south of Maui and helped produce the gusts that spread the Lahaina fire at a speed that’s been estimated to be a mile per minute.

After visiting the wreckage of Lahaina, Hawaii’s governor, Josh Green, called the Maui fires the “largest natural disaster Hawaii has ever experienced.” In fact, the fires would more accurately be labelled an “unnatural disaster.” As David Beilman, a professor of geography and environment at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, recently pointed out, for most of Hawaii’s history fire simply wasn’t part of the islands’ ecology. “This Maui situation is an Anthropocene phenomenon,” he told *USA Today*.

A great many more unnatural disasters lie ahead. Last month was, by a large margin, the hottest July on record, and 2023 seems likely to become the warmest year on record. Two days after Lahaina burst into flames, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration issued a revised forecast for the current Atlantic hurricane season, which runs through the end of November. The agency had been predicting a “near-normal” season, with between five and nine hurricanes. But, because of record sea-surface temperatures this summer—last month a buoy in Manatee Bay, south of Miami, registered 101.1 degrees, a reading that, as the *Washington Post* put it, is “more typical of a hot tub than ocean water”—NOAA is now projecting that the season will be “above normal,” with up to eleven hurricanes. Rising sea levels and the loss of coastal wetlands mean that any hurricanes that make landfall will be that much more destructive.

A few days after NOAA revised its forecast, officials ordered the evacuation of Yellowknife, the capital of Canada’s Northwest Territories. A wildfire burning about ten miles away would, they feared, grow to consume the city. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation called the evacuation order “extraordinary.” This summer has been Canada’s worst wildfire season on record, and, at times, the smoke has spread all the way to Europe. There are currently something like a thousand active fires in the country.

Two days after the Yellowknife evacuation was ordered, another Pacific hurricane—Hilary—intensified into a Category 4 storm. Hilary was being drawn north by a “heat dome” of high pressure over the central Plains, which was expected to bring record temperatures to parts of the Midwest. The storm’s unusual track put some twenty-six million people in four states—California, Utah, Nevada, and Arizona—under flash-flood watches.

How well humanity will fare on the new planet it is busy creating is an open question. *Homo sapiens* is a remarkably clever species. So, too, was the ‘alalā. ♦

By Carolyn Kormann

By Jack Truesdale

By Joshua Kosman

By Françoise Mouly

[D.C. Postcard](#)

Insurrectionabilia at the Smithsonian

In 2026, we will celebrate the nation's semiquincentennial, and also the fifth anniversary of the January 6th uprising. Curators diligently preserved detritus from the Capitol attack, including photos of a wooden gallows.

By [Bruce Handy](#).

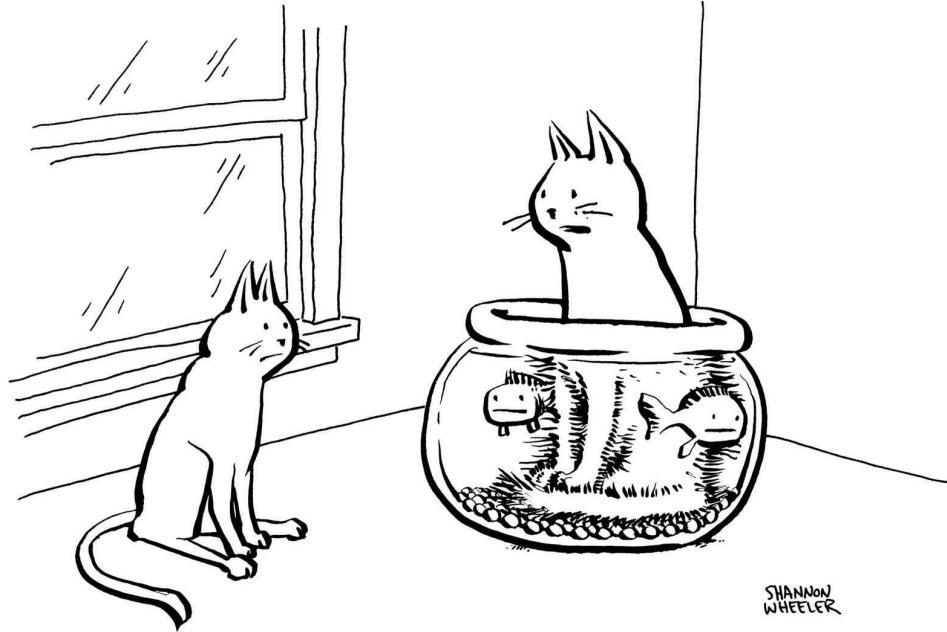


Illustration by João Fazenda

"Historians do love anniversaries," Anthea Hartig, the director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, observed the other day, in her mid-century-modern office. She gestured behind her at a velocipede hanging on her wall which was ridden by Buster Keaton a hundred years ago in the film "Our Hospitality." But she was looking ahead to 2026, which will offer what she called "a collision of anniversaries": the two-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence (the United States semiquincentennial, as it is officially known), the twenty-fifth anniversary of 9/11, and the fifth anniversary of the January 6th insurrection at the United States Capitol, just down the National Mall from the museum.

That first one is obviously a biggie for the museum. “As we careen toward the semiquincentennial,” she continued, pronouncing the last word flawlessly, “we’re thinking very deeply about the ways in which we use history to strengthen democracy.” January 6th would seem to fall within that bailiwick, but, as court dockets up and down the Eastern Seaboard demonstrate, the insurrection and its surrounding intrigues remain very much part of America’s present tense.

In the wake of 9/11, the museum and other like-minded institutions intensified their efforts in what is known as rapid-response collecting. The idea, in essence: grab stuff before it’s gone and let posterity sweat the appraisals. The museum has already amassed a significant collection of insurrectionabilia. In a large storage room housing items related to the Presidency and Presidential politics—the drawers conceal such treasures as George Washington’s baptismal blanket, Warren Harding’s slippers, and a petrified slice of Franklin Roosevelt’s fifty-second-birthday cake—a curator named Claire Jerry displayed an array of posters and other detritus collected from the Mall on the morning of January 7, 2021. A stolen traffic sign that someone had painted over with the slogan “Stop the Steal 2020” and the image of a grinning skull with Donald Trump’s hair, smoking a cigarette, had an undeniable flair, even if its iconography was hard to parse. More poignant was a strip of blue fabric with the word “*PENCE*” in white letters that had seemingly been torn—in anger? sorrow?—from a “*TRUMP PENCE*” flag. A white poster board was stencilled with what Jerry dryly referred to as “an interesting historical reference”: “*Time to Cross the Rubicon.*”



"Dignity aside, it's really quite refreshing."
Cartoon by Shannon Wheeler

Frank A. Blazich, Jr., a curator whose area of expertise is modern military history, was the volunteer who preserved all of this. Given the pandemic and the holidays, he was one of the few staffers in town on January 6th, and, as an Air Force veteran, he felt comfortable dealing with a potentially volatile situation. He arrived on the Mall before 7 A.M. the next day (a citywide curfew had been imposed from 6 P.M. to 6 A.M.), and raced ahead of cleaning crews, scavenging lawns, bushes, and garbage cans for three hours, until he had filled his Toyota S.U.V. One artifact couldn't fit—the wooden gallows that protesters had erected in front of the Capitol, which by morning had been knocked on its side. But he did photograph the graffiti that protesters had scribbled on it, messages such as "*POWER TO THE PEOPLE!*" and "*WHERE ARE YOU THOMAS JEFFERSON?!*," along with —easy to parse—an S.S. symbol.

The collection has continued to grow along more deliberately curated lines. Among the highlights: a protective vest and boots worn by a Capitol Police officer while under assault and, on the opposite end of the duty spectrum, the white dress gloves the same officer likely wore two weeks later for President Biden's Inauguration. The photography department has brought in startling work by the photojournalist Louie Palu, who shot inside the Capitol using old-school two-and-a-quarter-inch film; his black-and-white prints are

simultaneously beautiful and terrifying—and a visual link to a longer history of American political violence. Another photojournalist, Madeleine Kelly, donated the protective vest she was wearing when she was kidney-punched by a female protester who shouted, “That bitch is photographing us!” When Kelly returned home, she found a slit in the vest; she’d been the victim of an attempted stabbing.

For the record, no one at the museum seems much interested in acquiring the fury Viking-style headpiece famously worn by Jacob Chansley, the so-called QAnon Shaman (not that he’s offering it). Hartig said that her preference is to acquire less “well-documented” artifacts. “Nothing against that particular human,” she added politely. She pointed out that the museum’s efforts are complicated by the fact that many of the day’s actors, like Chansley, either have been convicted of crimes or have pending legal cases. To that end, the F.B.I. has come calling, since one person’s museum piece might be another person’s evidence. Hartig wasn’t at liberty to say precisely what agents were interested in; whether the items in question will be available to display when the semiquincentennial rolls around is anyone’s guess. ♦

By Isaac Chotiner

By Susan B. Glasser

By John Cassidy

By John Cassidy

Edible Content

Someone's in the Kitchen with Ted Sarandos

With actors and writers on strike, Netflix decided to squeeze new content out of its cooking shows by opening a restaurant in L.A.

By [Sheila Yasmin Marikar](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

With writers and actors on strike this summer, Netflix decided to diversify. The streaming giant opened a restaurant, Netflix Bites, a few blocks west of its Hollywood headquarters. On the menu: dishes featured in Netflix food shows. The daily special: the presence of the chefs who created the dishes. Well, some of them.

“Dominique Crenn isn’t here, because she’s opening a new restaurant, in Paris,” a Netflix publicist said, frowning, of the “Chef’s Table” star. “Which I didn’t know about.”

“We noodled with the idea of a restaurant for a while,” Greg Lombardo, Netflix’s head of experiences, said at the opening. He wore a navy sport

coat, gray jeans, and sneakers, and he clutched a sweating iced coffee that he'd brought with him. ("I didn't want to bother the kitchen," he said. "They have bigger fish to fry.")

Lombardo explained that Netflix executives, having adapted the drive-in movie for the pandemic age ("Stranger Things: The Experience") and the Regency-era ball for cosplay enthusiasts ("The Queen's Ball: A Bridgerton Experience"), pondered the question "'What do people really want?' I think what you want is a chance to literally taste that amazing dish that you've watched this incredible chef prepare," he said.

He went on, "Look, we're hopeful that the strike is resolved. We want it to end fairly for everybody. This is a way for us to connect with members where they are, in between content windows, when there's not new content for them to enjoy. This is a great way to remind them that they love that content."

At Netflix Bites, content was distributed in a sun-splashed courtyard. Cocktails with such ingredients as Hellfire bitters and "salt air" made the rounds. "There's a fun jello shot at the bottom of that," a server said as a guest lifted an amber-colored drink from a tray.

"It's a lot of moving pieces," Ann Kleinhenz, an events director who had six weeks to staff and set up the restaurant, said. "Eight different chefs, four different drink masters. Normally, you only have one. You get a lot of feedback."

How did Netflix compare with her past clients? "Well, I worked with Prince for over ten years," she said. "But Prince wasn't difficult, he was just very much in the moment."

You could say the same of Netflix. "We've been a little blessed by the writer's strike, because the entertainment business isn't working," Curtis Stone, an Iron Legend on "Iron Chef," said. He wore a black apron embroidered with "*NETFLIX BITES*" and stood near a pizza oven decorated with red tiles that spelled out the company's name. "Out of a normal restaurant in L.A., fifty per cent of your staff are actors waiting for their next

gig,” he said. “We’re not getting the leads from, you know, blockbusters, but it’s a big industry, and it’s transient work.”

The smell of charred oak and fermented dough wafted over. “Should we go check it out?” Stone said. A few steps away, Ann Kim (she was featured on “Chef’s Table: Pizza”) presided over a prep counter, running a pizza cutter across a pie of kimchi and cubed pork. Flames soared behind her.

Was the red Netflix logo on the oven slightly askew? “The hotter the oven gets, the more it starts to melt,” she said. “We just slap it back up.”

Around the corner, a twenty-five-pound hog was splayed across a charcoal smoker driven in from Alabama. “You don’t see or hear a lot of people doing whole-hog barbecue,” Rodney Scott (“Chef’s Table: BBQ”) said. “It’s kind of a dying art.”

More content circulated: serrano-pepper-topped *hamachi* from Ming Tsai (“Iron Chef”); a frosty slurry of dark rum and xanthan gum. “That looks like a dessert,” Laryl Garcia, a communications executive for Stone, said, then she noticed a hubbub nearby. “There’s a congregation around the pizza.” A man with a swoop of salt-and-pepper hair had sidled up to the pizza oven. “Oh, it’s Ted”—Sarandos, Netflix’s C.E.O. She craned her neck. “Oh, it’s Ted making the pizza.”

Onlookers leaned in as Sarandos slid a shovel-size wooden spatula into the oven and pulled out a blistered pie of Sungold tomatoes. “Don’t drop it,” Kim said. The C.E.O. set it down on a stainless-steel tray, to applause.

“Really beautiful, nice job,” Kim said.

“Good coaching,” Sarandos replied.

“Now we get to eat Ted’s pizza,” Tsai said.

Sarandos moved on to the splayed hog; the entourage followed. “Everyone walked away,” Garcia said, reaching for a slice of the Sungold. “Get in here.”

Kim sliced another kimchi pie. “He’s a pizza geek,” she said of Sarandos. “He said he has a wood-fired oven at his house,” equipped with a warming rack, which is unusual for someone not in the business. “He knows what he’s doing,” she added. ♦

By Inkoo Kang

By Richard Brody

In the Water

Tits Out Under the Verrazzano

Leslie Hamilton, an accountant, battled sea lice and rusting garbage barges as she became the first person on record to swim a lap around Staten Island since 1979.

By [Daniel Shrier](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

A swimmer freestyle through a shipping lane is a bit like a snail crossing the freeway. The situation is just as glamorous, and there tend to be few spectators. But when Leslie Hamilton, a thirty-one-year-old accountant, swam a record-breaking clockwise lap around Staten Island last month, the biggest challenge wasn't dodging garbage barges or intractable tankers with staunch, Soviet names like Salacgriva and Yasa Madura. It was lice. And she was saved by her bikini.

"Fifteen minutes in, I was, like, 'Oh, fuck,'" Hamilton said, floating in the greenish water under the Goethals Bridge at the end of her fourteen-and-a-half-hour swim. "My skin was crawling the whole time."

Sea lice often come from the pin-prick-size larvae of *Linuche unguiculata*, the thimble jellyfish. They catch on bathing suits and, wherever the fabric touches a swimmer's body, release tiny stinging cells onto the skin. These "bites" are slightly painful and very itchy. As Hamilton swam, she could feel lice under her fingernails and beneath the bridge of her goggles. When she pulled herself out of the water, she had hundreds of welts on her stomach. The day after the swim, to ease the itching, she loaded up on antihistamines and soaked in a tub of vinegar. "I smell like a salad," she said over the phone.

Hamilton's route around the borough—she is the first woman known to do it—had been in the works for eight years. She is as battle-hardened as swimmers come. She once swam into a shark in South Carolina and was back training the next day. She swam for eight days down the Hudson, from Catskill to New York Harbor, getting dangerously light-headed in the water after gashing her leg open under the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge.

For the first hour of the Staten Island lap, beset by the lice, she kept thinking, "I am going to D.N.F."—short for "did not finish"—"they're stinging me everywhere." Instead, she traded her one-piece for a bikini bottom and swam bare-chested through the night, to keep the larvae off her skin. At sunup she put a top on and resumed swimming.

Two kayakers kept her company. Just past 10 A.M., after ten hours in the water, she stopped off of Tottenville for a regular half-hourly snack of carbohydrate powder, Advil, and Super Sour Scandinavian Swimmers candies. She looked up at Terry O'Malley, one of her kayak-borne escorts. "The water's still seventy-eight degrees?" she asked.

"Yeah," O'Malley said. "But a lot more people have peed in it round here."

Hamilton and her flotilla were entering the swim's most polluted stretch: ten miles up Arthur Kill, past trash compactors, the site of what was once the world's biggest landfill, and a graveyard for submerged, rusting boats. The entry in the trip's logbook for that section: "Smells terrible."

Paula Croxson, a neuroscientist from Bolton, England, observed Hamilton's swim and put notes in the log from one of two small support motorboats, as

an official rule-keeper. “She’s braver than me,” Croxson said, laughing. “I wouldn’t swim in this.” Croxson swam a lap around Manhattan last year and has a blue-ringed octopus tattooed across her shoulder to commemorate it. But she found the Staten Island water particularly noxious. When her boat’s pilot, Thomas Crystall, switched on his propeller, the black water turned a putrid green.

“There *are* fish here,” Croxson said, hopefully, to Crystall, mentioning that they’d noticed men fishing.

“We saw a bunch of fish jump out of the water earlier,” he agreed.

“That could be a bad sign,” Croxson said. “Maybe they’re trying to leave.”

Even in cleaner water, marathon sea swimming might just be the gnarliest sport around. Between the dark thoughts in the water during hours of training and the Vaseline in dark places, many (her co-workers and fiancé included) will never quite understand the reasons Hamilton chose this hobby, or this swim.

For one, she’s made history: Hamilton is the first person on record to swim around Staten Island since 1979, when a local social worker did it (taking five hours longer than Hamilton did). She also loves New York’s water, preferring it to the skyline. Next month, she will be married on the banks of the Hudson, up in Poughkeepsie.

But really, she explained, she is drawn by what she calls “the emotional acceleration.” “Coming off such an uncomfortable situation, there was a sense of just being free,” she said, when she finished. “I think you have to go through a lot of crap before you’re rewarded with that feeling of zen.” Being uncomfortable makes everyday comforts exceptional. When she was writhing in the water at four in the morning, the prey of invisible lice, she kept it together by backstroking under the Verrazzano and screaming, “Tits out for Staten Island!” ♦

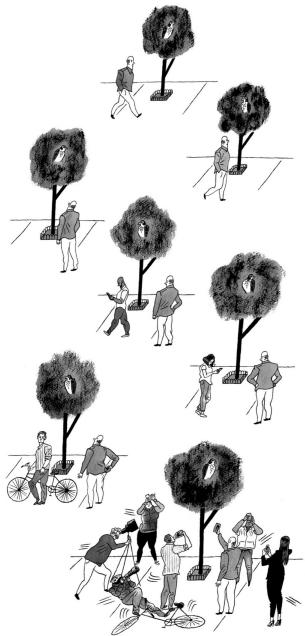
By Jessica Winter

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Shouts & Murmurs

- [The Wisdom of Rudolph Giuliani](#)

By [John Kenney](#).

“Matt Damon is a—Matt Damon is a f*g. Matt Damon is also 5'2. Eyes are blue. Coochie-coochie-coochie-coo.”

“I'd never think about a girl being smart. If you told me a girl was smart, I would often think she's not attractive.”

“They want to go through that freaking Passover all the time. . . . Get over the Passover. It was like 3,000 years ago. Okay, the Red Sea parted. Big deal. Not the first time that happened.”

—*Rudolph Giuliani in audio recordings.*

Lima beans. Lima beans don't even make sense. No one has ever actually eaten a lima bean. That's a true story.

You know who else is gay? Clint Eastwood. No one knows. Clint Eastwood. But it's like a manly gay, if you know what I mean. I know this because I kissed him once. On the cheek. By mistake. It was lovely, though. We went camping.

I've seen the Red Sea part twice in one day. I was on a nude beach with Maury Povich, who's Jewish, by the way. In fact, there are a lot of Jews in Israel. We stood there naked, neither one of us gay, and we watched the Red Sea part. Later, I would realize that I was actually in Brighton Beach, alone, and not in Israel. Although I was nude, except for a large saffron-colored hat.

You look at someone like Myrna Loy. Very attractive. And you think, Dumb, right? No. Turns out she was very bright—780 on the verbal SATs. And marvellous in the “Thin Man” films.

I met Ben Affleck. You know how tall he is? He's four feet two inches. Honest to God. He might be gay. Although short people aren't usually gay. His wife is very beautiful. Also smart. Which is surprising. They're both Jewish. Obsessed with the High Holidays. Simchat Torah this, Simchat Torah that. Wouldn't shut up about Simchat Torah.

Show me a smart, attractive Jewish woman who isn't gay and I'll show you a photo of myself nude on a camping trip with Telly Savalas. Which I have in my wallet. He was a dwarf.

The thing with Passover. Dumb. Blood all over the house. *Oh, don't kill my son.* No one's going to kill anyone. I know Pharaoh. I know him. He's a very nice guy. Six handicap. Can't say the word "pants" without laughing. Antisemitic but not in a bad way. He was friends with David O. Selznick. That's how I met Cary Grant. Cary is the first man I ever made love to.

I'm on a boat with a group of Israeli homosexuals. Not one of them is more than three feet tall. We're in the Red Sea. Boom. Just like that, it parts. We're sitting on sand. Water on either side of us. I say to one of the Jewish homosexuals, "Did the Red Sea just part?" He says, "Happens all the time." He then asked me to put sunblock on his back. Which I did. He was a very beautiful man named Ze'ev. We still keep in touch.

You see all this bullshit about the "Barbie" movie. First of all, it's not that good. I've seen it twice. Barbie's not real, so that's just stupid. What do you expect? The person who directed it was Greta Garbo. Or something. Attractive? Yes. Bright? No. And Ken? If Ken isn't gay . . . I mean, I had a Ken doll. Which I hid. Ken has no genitalia! Believe me, I checked. You know who else has no genitalia? Who's the one who buys all the things? Deadface. Wait. PoolMan. No. Ryan Reynolds. No genitals. Sad, really. But also freeing.

If there is a remake of "The Sound of Music," I will play Captain von Trapp, and Maria will be played by Timothée Chalamet, who is so small as to be almost invisible. Also, no Jew, he. We would each do our own singing. I sing. I would also play the nun who sings "Climb Every Mountain." I would, of course, be disguised, wearing the classic nun's uniform of coif, wimple, and veil, which I could bring to set, as I own one. I would also want the von Trapp children to be played by mice. We would subtitle their squeaks. Also, since Maria will be played by a man, "she" won't be dumb. She will be a he, Timothée, and he will grow his hair long, and we will almost kiss after "Edelweiss."

If I were gay, I would want to be tiny, like Matt Damon. Who recently converted to Judaism. ♦

By Adam Gopnik

By Leslie Jamison

By Aparna Nancherla

By Isaac Chotiner

Fiction

- “[The Autopsy,](#)” by [Lyudmila Ulitskaya](#)

[Fiction](#)

The Autopsy

By [Lyudmila Ulitskaya](#)



Photograph by Tereza Zelenková for The New Yorker

Kogan loved his atrocious work, especially those of his dead who left at the proper time—old, weary of life, bald, having lost lush growth in armpits and crotches, their well-worn feet knobbly and calloused, their breasts and scrotums sagging. Slowly pulling on his chain-mail gloves, he looked over a petrified body, an unread book, and formed a first superficial impression, evaluating the body according to a gauge known to him alone—whether the dead man had died at his allotted time or had failed to live to the limit set him by nature. Those who lived well beyond that limit he called “the forgotten,” and he was a little worried about himself joining their number. He did not like to dissect children and young women, preferring his reliable and lawful contingent.

Shortly before their divorce, Kogan’s first wife, a gynecologist, said to him a phrase he never forgot: Only a pathological type can choose the profession of pathoanatomist. . . . Women’s foolishness. A pathoanatomist, in Kogan’s mind, was a priest of pure corporeality, the last caretaker of the temple

abandoned by the soul. By contrast, his second wife, Ninochka, was a librarian and did not even know the word “autopsy.” And that was wonderful.

A careful autopsy usually took two hours. And during that time he was able to read the history of a life, as doctors read the history of an illness. Beyond the body of a feeble or slightly obese child splayed on a zinc table, his intelligent eye saw all the measles and scarlet fevers, the puberty crisis, the healed broken bones, the small traumas. . . .

In most cases he confirmed the diagnosis of what led to death, but occasionally the open book of the dead body presented unexpected subjects: here was a fifty-year-old man who died of a heart attack but had an undiagnosed last-stage tumor of the digestive tract. Or a famous actor killed in a car accident with blood vessels in such a state that the car accident delivered him from an impending, inevitable stroke. Or a woman suicide with undiagnosed leukemia . . . as if several illnesses competed in a still living body, and it was not always the strongest one that came out victorious.

Kogan was one of the oldest pathoanatomists and long retired, but from time to time he was invited to deal with particularly complicated autopsies and cases needing forensic expertise. This time they called him on Friday, but he had already gone to his summer place and did not want to go back. It was his former student, now the chief physician of a big Moscow hospital, a whole medical town, who asked him to come in on Monday, because the case was especially disturbing, and it would be good if it was Kogan who examined it first, before the investigators arrived.

On the table lay a young man, lean, impeccably built, with yellowish marble skin, a knife wound in the chest, multiple bruises on the facial part of the head, abrasions on the forehead, and broken feet. . . .

The morgue attendant, the old nurse Ivan Trofimovich, came up and lisped something unintelligible. Kogan had become hard of hearing lately and indistinct muttering to the side annoyed him. He grunted, the attendant nodded and turned the body so that part of the dead man’s back could be seen: on both sides of the spine, from the third to fifth ribs, parallel to the dorsal part of the shoulder blades, yawned two strange incisions, which

seemed to have been made after death. The attendant again mumbled something indistinct, and Kogan, touching the strange incision, barked:

“Speak louder, Ivan Trofimovich, I don’t hear well. Has anyone touched the body?”

“No, they brought him like this on Friday. . . . I’m surprised myself.”

“All right, we’ll sort it out,” Kogan grunted, looked into the medical report, and shook his head. The patient had been brought to the hospital by an ambulance on Friday at 10:45 P.M. and had died an hour later. The cause of death was most likely the knife wound. . . .

Kogan looked at the laid-out instruments. A complete set: a scalpel, a saw, dissecting knives, a craniotome, a raspator . . . He began, as usual, with the skull.

Two hours later Kogan signed the report on the autopsy. Death had occurred as a result of the knife wound and the subsequent bleeding. The beating and the slight traumas to the head, as well as the crushed feet, could not be the cause of death.

He came home depressed and completely exhausted, having firmly taken a decision—this was the last autopsy of his life. . . . But the two symmetrical cuts on the dead man’s back would not leave his thoughts. His knowledge of human anatomy was perfect, yet it was the first time in sixty years of practice that he had met with anything like those two pockets within these cuts, those elastic bags of unknown purpose.

He was a medical professional with a broad horizon and rational frame of mind, without any metaphysical deviations, but this dead man’s anatomy directed his thoughts toward fantastic novels fashionable in the last century about extraterrestrials, alien visitors, or else toward textbooks in mythology for schoolchildren. . . . He was confused and perplexed.

It was the second day that Marya Akimovna had been sitting on a bench in the garden by the hospital. First she sat by the information window, and, when it closed, she went outside and sat down on the garden bench.

Her son, Vsevolod, Volechka, had gone out on Friday evening for a concert and had not come back. On Saturday morning his friend Misha, a pianist with whom Volya often performed, called and asked whether Vsevolod was home.

“I’m worried, Misha. He didn’t come home, and he didn’t warn me.”

“I’ll come right now,” Misha replied.

An hour after the phone conversation, Misha, his nose disfigured and with a bruise over half his face, arrived at Marya Akimovna’s on Delegatskaya Street.

“Yesterday, after the concert, we walked out. Some guys, also musicians, drove up on three motorcycles, very tough guys. . . . They disliked us intensely. From long ago. First they grabbed Volya, tore the case out of his hands. He reached for the guy, but another one drove his motorcycle over his feet, and he fell down. At that point somebody hit me in the eye, and I fell down, too. I didn’t see what happened next. Passersby must have called an ambulance. Where Nadya and Dasha were I don’t know. I called them in the morning—no one took the phone. . . . We should call now . . . now. . . .”

And Misha began to call around, trying to find out which hospital Volya had been taken to yesterday. Then Marya Akimovna called the churchwarden to tell her that she would not be able to come to the evening prayers, because her son was in the hospital, and that it would be good to invite Kirillovna or Zina to clean up in the evening. The warden was a stern woman, but she was nice, though condescending, to Marya Akimovna, and, having known her from long ago, called her Masha. Everybody except her son and his musician friends was condescending to Marya Akimovna, but she did not even notice.

They arrived at the hospital on Leninsky Prospekt between eleven and twelve. At the reception they were told that Volya had been transferred to the surgery section and that they had to go to the information window. At the information window a young woman with a bun and a bow looked into some papers and said, “Deceased.” At first Marya Akimovna did not understand and asked how she could see her son. . . .

“You can’t. He’s in the morgue. You’ll be able to see him only after the autopsy,” the woman in the window said. “You’ll get his documents in the surgery section.”

Misha, who understood what had happened before Marya Akimovna did, seated her on the bench and burst into tears. Marya Akimovna sat next to him, looked straight ahead, and said nothing.

Her life collapsed, ended, and she realized that she had always known, anticipated, that this was how it would be. The picture of her whole life unfolded before her, from the very beginning. How her mama had died, how she had lived with her father, a stern and silent priest in the village of Novoselovo, how she had gone to school and been the last in her class. Then the village school was closed, and the children were sent to Ples, five miles away, and she could not go so far, because she was very small, weak, often sick, so she stayed home, and her father did not make her go. She stayed home, stoked the stove, cooked soup and kasha, and when she grew up her father’s relative Uncle Osip came from Moscow. The two men talked for a long time—about her, she thought. And in the morning her father said that now she would live in the city, at Uncle Osip’s. Her father left for the North, to Pskov, and became a monk there. Masha had seen him only once since, when Volechka was born. At the time Uncle Osip, whom she had married on paper, because he was old and there was no other way that she could inherit his room, took her and Volechka to the monastery to see her father. Her father did not say a word to them, did not ask anything, but he baptized her little son under the name of Vsevolod, according to the church calendar.

The family returned to Moscow, to Delegatskaya Street, where they lived in their own room in a big communal flat. Masha and Volya were now registered in it. Soon Uncle Osip died. Masha took a job as a cleaning woman at the nursery school. She and Volechka stayed there for three years, and then he was sent to kindergarten. And again she was lucky: there was a vacancy for a cleaning woman, she was accepted, and so it went smoothly later on. All her life she was together with her son, at school and at the Conservatory.

Volechka was an angel, not a child. He did not keep company with hooligans but mostly with girls, both in kindergarten and at school. At the age of ten he

made himself a reed pipe. He kept blowing into it, and tender sounds poured out. At school he was a poor student. He never finished his studies. Masha was not angry with him; she herself had not been so good at studies. She could read and write, but she had no use for the one or the other. Whenever she had free time, she knit scarves and jackets. Also sweaters for Volya.

Everything went well: they had their room; her salary, though small, came every month. Volya studied at the Conservatory; they accepted him although he had not studied at a music school. But the professors liked him; they said he had musical talent. Masha was taken as a cleaning woman there, too. She did her work very well—quietly, inconspicuously, cleanliness surrounded her somehow of itself. But Volya did not finish the Conservatory. He could not pass the social subjects—history of the Party, scientific atheism, all sorts of political economy—and he accumulated so many “gaps” that they expelled him. He was immediately called up for the Army, being of draft age. But he did not pass the medical examination—the commission found that he had tuberculosis. Marya Akimovna began to worry. The boy had always been in good health; what had happened? But a priest she knew said, Get him treated, pray, and trust in God. Doctors prescribed pills, he took them, got better. And he went to work in a woodworking shop. He liked it there. The workmen were all handicapped; they carved toys, spoons, bowls. Vsevolod learned to carve well. And he went on playing the flute. He played from scores, and sometimes his own music without a score. Masha loved it when he would stand in his corner, take the flute, and the flute would play now Haydn, now Mozart, now some very simple music Volya had composed himself, only three or four notes, but they were so modulated that it made you now weep, now smile. . . .

It was then that Misha, his former classmate at the Conservatory, who by then had already finished the piano class, came to Vsevolod, and they began to play together; later other musicians joined them, Nadya the violinist and Dasha the cellist. They organized a quartet, began to perform. And Volechka became their head. He composed his own music. His flute kept weeping and smiling, and without him it was not as good. Still, he did not abandon his woodworking, because music did not provide them with any income. There were only unnecessary expenses. They tried recording their music in a studio, but the recording did not sound very good. You could not hear the flute; the other instruments swamped its singing tone, and all the magic

disappeared. Yet people came to their concerts. Not so many of them, but those who came kept coming. And brought others like themselves, who found a particular joy in the old-fashioned sounds of the flute trills. This music was as if childlike and transparent.

Masha was the same as ever, only she had aged and become Marya Akimovna, and she now did cleaning not at school, and not at the Conservatory, but at the church on Tverskaya Street. They offered her a job at the candle stand, but she did not want to deal with money, she was not so good at counting, was afraid to make a mistake, or—worse still—she could easily be cheated. And she got along very well with a rag and a bucket.

She knew, she had always known, that her boy was extraordinary, there was not a pennyworth of evil in him, everybody loved him. It was as if he did not see evil, and for a time evil did not look at him. But the girls did look at him, and many of them liked him. They would circle around him for a bit. There were not so many free men in our city, always more women. He never offended any of them, never promised anything, nor did he offer any male attention, and they withdrew from him one after another. . . . Obviously each of them would have liked Vsevolod to marry her. But Marya Akimovna never talked with him about it. . . . It was too bad, of course. Dasha was a nice girl, and Nadya, too. . . .

So Marya Akimovna sat on the bench by the information window, without a single tear, and next to her Misha sat and wept. She was going over her past life and saw clearly that Volya had gone just as he had come, in a miraculous way. She did not know who had made her pregnant, where Volya came from, and did not know where he had gone now. One thing alone was horrible—why was he killed? Who did it? Who had a grudge against him?

Obviously Misha was thinking about the same thing, because he embraced her—she was small, and Misha tall, a head taller—and said, “It’s Volya’s music, it’s all because of the music. They couldn’t stand it, it simply burned them. It’s fiery, his music. Heavenly. . .”

“Yes, yes,” Marya Akimovna nodded. She agreed that the music was heavenly. She tried to recall it, but could not. The music had gone along with him.

The pain was so enormous, astounding—greater than one could imagine. It was all located in the forehead, and he hung on it like a towel on a nail. The pain came to a point. It had a cone shape and was concentrated precisely in this point. There was nothing left in the whole world besides the pain. Then suddenly a tiny shining dot appeared; it seemed to move, spinning slightly and drawing him to itself. The walls of the black cone grew still more black, and it became apparent that they were moving, as if this bright dot made them turn, pulling them into itself. He sensed the pull of this movement. The dot expanded, a sharp ray of light burst from it, and he headed toward it. The pain was with him, but it was also spinning and had ceased to be so tormenting. In this expanding dot the note “la” emerged, and he adjusted himself to it and moved in the direction of the light. The corridor of the darkness spun, pressing him, but also expanded slightly, as if becoming larger, and his movement toward the bright dot was becoming ever more perceptible. He was being pulled there against his will, but his will was also directed there.

“Like a toilsome return home” flashed in his mind. The pressure of the black walls was weakening. He was already almost out into the ever-expanding light. But the pain returned, no longer as a cone piercing his forehead but now in his back—sharp and as if double. And then a powerful force pushed him out of the black tube, the pain in the back flared and went out. With a last effort he spread the big moist wings that had sprouted from his back.

His legs performed light movements as if he were swimming lazily, his arms were spread freely, the lifting power of the wings carried him upward, and he felt that all the dimensions had changed, the habitual grid system had collapsed, and the sound “la” expanded unimaginably, as if absorbing all the nuances of sound as well as all those that did not belong to the auditory span of a human ear. . . . He was higher than the pain, it remained under his feet.

“They think they killed me. But that’s impossible. It’s impossible to kill anybody. Poor wicked children. . . .” And now he saw with his side vision the tips of his new wings, semitransparent and iridescent. They did not have their own color; they reflected the radiance that spread around him, shimmering with pink and green, and it was as easy to work them as to drink or to sing—just a little effort, like walking or swimming. And he swam, enjoying the movement, the gentle wind, and the tingling light.

“But I didn’t fulfill my task. Could I have fulfilled it? I’m not the first one to fail. How many were they, the immaculately born ones? One spoke and wasn’t heard, another wrote and no one understood what he wrote, there was one who sang, and he, too, wasn’t heard. And I played the flute. . . . Where’s my flute? That wretched fellow in the black leather jacket, did he take it? What a pity.” But the flute—he suddenly realized—was there! Tucked into a wide belt that tightly girded his body. He pulled it out. A blockflute, wooden, warm, with seven holes in the front and a thumb hole in the back. He put it to his lips, blew. And it sang in the best of voices.

He was flying in an unfamiliar world, which was becoming familiar moment by moment, like a decal, gleaming under the layer of swelling cheap paper. No, this world is not unfamiliar. We’ve been here, been here. . . . He gave himself entirely to the movement, and to the melody, and to the elusive thought. This unuttered thought called him somewhere. And he floated to where it was sending him. There was no “in the beginning” and “then”—everything was happening simultaneously, and in all its fullness. Ah, time is no more, he realized.

For many years now Kogan had not slept in the bedroom with his wife but had made his bed in the study on a narrow couch. That evening he read for a long time, then wrote a letter to his son, who had lost his mind over some Kabbalistic books. The son lived in Bnei Brak, a little town near Tel Aviv, and old Kogan kept trying to have at least a semblance of contact with him. Then he wrote a letter to his daughter, a professor at an American university. She taught contemporary psychology. From time to time she sent him references to her work, and he read her articles with disgust and with the same feeling of protest his son’s reflections evoked in him. . . . He recalled today’s autopsy. Those mysterious cuts along the shoulder blades were inexplicable; their inexplicability was irritating, it flew in the face of his strict and exact knowledge.

He looked at his watch—it was already past two. He went to the bathroom, took out his dentures, put them in a glass of water, rinsed his mouth, urinated with some difficulty. Lay down and quickly fell asleep. But he soon woke up. Before him stood a hazily bright figure, unrecognizable yet familiar. Kogan stirred toward it, rose a little on his bed. Right, right, this was today’s dead man. No words were pronounced. Only the soft sound, as if from

behind the wall, of poor, bright music. A flute. The visitor was inviting Kogan to follow him. And Kogan did. There was not the slightest trace of mysticism in what was happening. A convincing reality. . .

In the morning his wife twice called him to come and have breakfast. He did not come. She went into his study. The dead Kogan lay under a plaid blanket, smiling. ♦

(Translated, from the Russian, by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky.)

This is drawn from “[The Body of the Soul: Stories.](#)”

By Sunita Puri

By Charles Bethea

By Joshua Yaffa

Puzzles & Games Dept.

- [The Crossword: Monday, August 21, 2023](#)

By [Natan Last](#)

By Andrea Carla Michaels and Jack Lechner

By Patrick Berry

By Joshua Kosman

Poems

- “[The Nature of Memory](#)”
- “[What's Poetry Like?](#)”

By [Major Jackson](#)

Read by the author.

Once again I am trying to fall into the light,
twice-broken and knife-scarred, recalling my children
on Long Beach Island, loose sand in Anastasia's dreads,
Langston holding a red plastic shovel
in one hand and the swordlike tail
of a horseshoe crab in another,
shorebirds winging above their heads.

If there is another world,
a poet struggles to describe ocean mist
dissipating over a young father,
distant and lonely, watching
his children's laughter run into the sea
then explode at the edge of the world.

What is my life but a constant entering
into a dizzying churn of days
ping-ponging like numbered balls
in a glass air machine?
Then, as now, like all of us, I was brought here
through a clumsy series of human foibles
and thus am conditioned to read
the undersides of storms edging up a coast.

Someday they too will push down far enough
and learn to unfold the minutes and hours into
one long continuous wave. For now,
I hope they love themselves loud as that day,
light-drunk, kicking up sand.

This is drawn from “[Razzle Dazzle: New and Selected Poems 2002-2022](#).”

By Arthur Sze

By Bianca Stone

By Jackson Arn

By Charles McGrath

By [Bianca Stone](#)

Read by the author.

Poets play the winter tarantella,
making love in the midnight hours
on a white iron bed like a dog skeleton
distinguishing the essential and unessential
moment, shared between ordinary lunatics
and screaming over a bird in an apple tree
until an elegy has to be written
to resuscitate the relation—those who look
toward the depleted wildlife of neighborhoods
with tragic relish, to see somehow ourselves
disappearing about ourselves.

Once, in New York City, years ago,
the Internet technician finally arrived.
His teen-age apprentice stood in my living room
over a Tranströmer book. He said it looked
kind of cool, and he wanted to know
what it was. “Poetry,” I said.
“What’s poetry like?” he asked. And
the treacherous inadequacy with which one
finds oneself explaining in a few loose
deficient words something with lungs
and no face, the immortal freak
of language you haunt and hunt
which is the original state of language
you’re trying to get back to from within—
poetry, whose rare geniuses come
as bittersweet suicidal explosions
on the tongue, randomly felt during
long, tedious meals; award-winning and
already forgotten. All the emoting of the
unanalyzable fragments. All the surrender
and detonations of precision
and reckless insight

and reference to hidden wisdom and Coke cans—
conversations across time, and slips
into truth, and obscurity of thought altogether
blissful, the form itself at its best strings of dreams
in the waking life,
overlaid like unobserved clothing:
the words that sing
stillness, the silence craved
by perpetual auctioneers—that which is not
the tale of event but itself *an* event—

“You know what? Just take the book,” I said finally,
pushing it into his hands—

“THANKS!” he said, and took it away, grinning a little.

But later, with snow in my head and a thunder
in my right eyelid . . . I was worried, as I was
so dangerously then, about dark, yet-unspoken things
—it frightened me: that shiny black and white book
wafting around New York City in the back
of a Time Warner Cable van, waiting to be opened,
waiting to torment him, thinking of it changing his life.

By D. T. Max

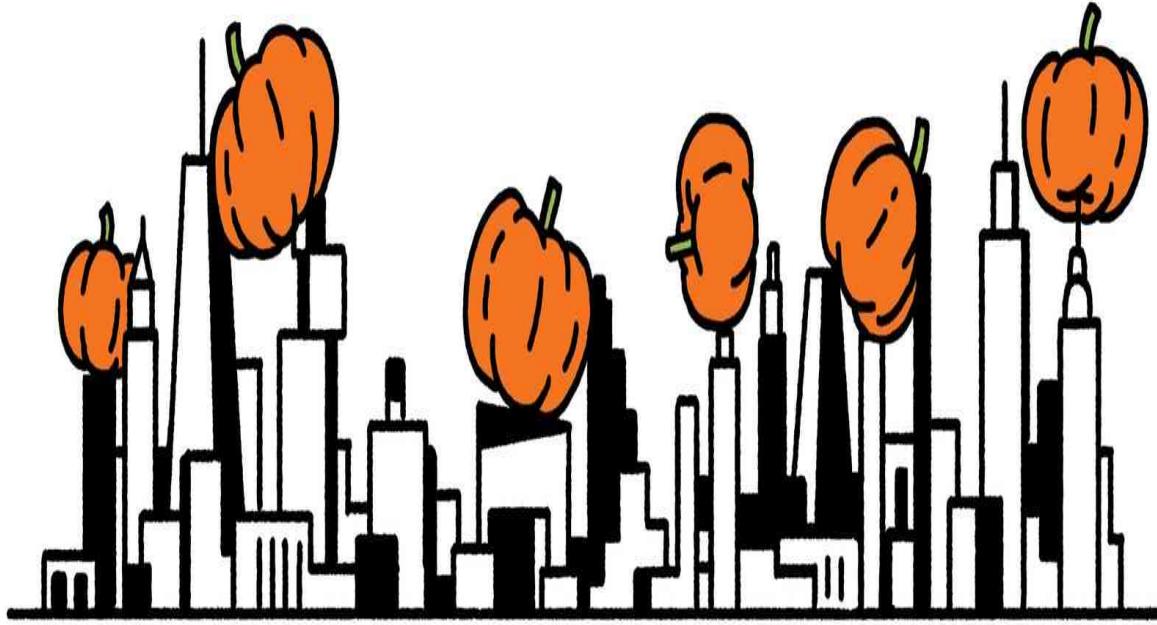
By Joshua Rothman

By Leslie Jamison

By Zadie Smith

Goings On

- [Fall Culture Preview: What to See This Season](#)



[Shauna Lyon](#)

Goings On editor

You're reading the Goings On newsletter, a guide to what we're watching, listening to, and doing this week. [Sign up to receive it in your in-box.](#)

For the first time since 2019, the fall culture calendar, especially for live events, is in full swing. The actors' and writers' strikes—with no end yet in sight—will likely continue to have ripple effects on the season's television and movie slates, but there is still plenty to see, hear, and do in New York City and beyond. Here, in our fall culture previews, our critics round up the most exciting events on the horizon. At the theatre, I'm looking forward to plays by the vital contemporary playwrights Branden Jacobs-Jenkins and Annie Baker, as well as Rachel Bloom's *COVID*-era musical, "Death, Let Me Do My Show," and Josh Gad and Andrew Rannells's "Gutenberg! The Musical!"—their first Broadway reunion since their smash pairing in "The Book of Mormon," twelve years ago. The city's music venues are stacked with shows from Janelle Monae, boygenius, the Wu-Tang Clan, Nas, and Stevie Nicks, to name but a few. Lincoln Center hosts three Metropolitan Opera House premières, as well as the return of full seasons for both New York City Ballet and American Ballet Theatre; blockbuster museum exhibitions of Manet and Degas (at the Met) and Ed Ruscha (at MOMA) will

hold their own alongside showcases of the relatively lesser-known painters Barkley L. Hendricks (at the Frick) and Henry Taylor (at the Whitney). And the stars are blazing at the movies: DiCaprio, Chalamet, and Cumberbatch lead, respectively, Martin Scorsese's "Killers of the Flower Moon," a "Dune" sequel, and Wes Anderson's adaptation of Roald Dahl's "The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar." We'll see you there.

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Television



Illustration by Jam Dong

Strikes, Game Shows, Novel Adaptations

This fall television season is—to put it mildly—a weird one. The *SAG-AFTRA* and *W.G.A.* strikes have stretched on through the summer, turning Hollywood into a tense battleground for the very future of the television industry. The questions are both practical (how can the broken residuals system be fixed in the age of streaming?) and existential (how can writers and actors insure that A.I. doesn't put them out of work and degrade the quality of entertainment for generations to come?). The studios and streamers and the *W.G.A.* are finally meeting about a new contract, but, as

of now, there will be no fresh late-night shows, no new “S.N.L.” and few scripted network débuts. The prime-time network schedule is thick with singing competitions, cooking battles, and game shows that sound like punch lines from “30 Rock”—if I told you that Fox has a new game show called **“Snake Oil,”** in which contestants pitch fake products to David Spade while he wears an old-timey boater hat, would you believe me? Well, it’s coming, on Sept. 27.

Although the streamers did manage to bank some shows before work stoppages went into effect, many have opted to push their premières until later in the fall, when (they hope) the strike will be over and star talent will be allowed to promote their work. The actress and writer Brit Marling and her showrunning partner, Zal Batmanglij, the creators of the delectably weird (and gone too soon) Netflix drama **“The OA,”** were supposed to début their new FX show, **“A Murder at the End of the World,”** on Hulu on Aug. 29, but the release date has been moved to Nov. 14. This makes sense—the show, which stars Emma Corrin as a Lisbeth Salander-esque computer hacker who must solve a murder case while holed up at the remote compound of a tech billionaire (Clive Owen), is the kind of twisty mystery with big names attached which has the potential to be a major hit if given the right push.

Still, several shows are proceeding as planned, including three notable offerings based on best-selling novels. On Sept. 13, Hulu débuts **“The Other Black Girl,”** adapted from Zakiya Dalila Harris’s thriller about a Black woman who befriends the one other Black woman working at her publishing house only to discover that something truly sinister is happening at the office. On Oct. 13, Apple TV+ airs **“Lessons in Chemistry”** (based on the book by Bonnie Garmus), which stars Brie Larson as an ambitious nineteen-fifties television personality who uses her cooking show to teach housewives about science. On Nov. 2, Netflix débuts **“All the Light We Cannot See”** (adapted from the book by Anthony Doerr), which follows a blind teen-ager and her father as they flee Occupied Paris during the Second World War. Also in November, Amazon Prime airs the much anticipated **“Mr. & Mrs. Smith”** remake, starring Donald Glover and Maya Erskine as a pair of married assassins.

There will also be, of course, a flood of home-makeover shows and international imports, villa-based dating competitions and sports documentaries—the compelling Netflix series “**Untold**” is back with new installments about the Florida Gators and Jake Paul’s boxing career—to fill the scant television cupboards this season, but if you find yourself flipping around aimlessly you won’t be alone. The vibes, as they say, are off.—
Rachel Syme

The Theatre

Barn-Burner Sondheim, Irish Drama, Antic Musicals

Sharpen your pencils and grab your backpacks: autumn in New York is back-to-theatre season. With the city as your campus, there’s a certain scholastic crispness to this fall’s programming. For example, the barn-burner revival of Stephen Sondheim’s “**Merrily We Roll Along**,” from 1981, transfers to the Hudson Theatre on Sept. 19—with Jonathan Groff, Lindsay Mendez, and Daniel Radcliffe—in the same month that Sondheim’s Luis Buñuel-inspired, last-ever musical, “**Here We Are**,” gets a blockbuster, all-star cast (Amber Gray! David Hyde Pierce!) for its posthumous première at the Shed (starting previews on Sept. 28). If you see them both, you’re basically taking an informal seminar in Sondheimian aesthetics.

There’s enough this season, too, for a (self-administered) degree in Irish drama. You could start by studying Seán O’Casey, the socialist giant: Druid Theatre’s “**DruidO’Casey**” (N.Y.U. Skirball; Oct. 4-14) brings his entire Dublin Trilogy from the nineteen-twenties—“The Plough and the Stars,” “The Shadow of a Gunman,” and “Juno and the Paycock”—in the season’s most exciting international visit. Follow that up at our own Irish Repertory Theatre, which stages Brian Friel’s masterpiece “**Translations**” (Oct. 20) as part of its encyclopedic Friel Project, and finish with a class in contemporary Irish bardic storytelling: **Mikel Murfi’s** trilogy of solo plays, at the Irish Arts Center (Oct. 24).

The city also seems to be conducting a survey course in important contemporary American playwrights: the Pulitzer Prize winner Annie Baker’s “**Infinite Life**” (Atlantic Theatre Company; opening on Sept. 12) is

one of the season's most anticipated premières, and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, a two-time Pulitzer Prize finalist, comes, finally, to Broadway, with his barbed family thriller "**Appropriate**" (Hayes; Nov. 28). Other names on that fantasy curriculum include Jocelyn Bioh, whose comedy "**Jaja's African Hair Braiding**" is at the Samuel J. Friedman (Sept. 12); David Adjmi, whose rock-band drama, "**Stereophonic**," débuts at Playwrights Horizons (Oct. 6); Qui Nguyen, offering his autofictional "**Poor Yella Rednecks**" at New York City Center (Oct. 10); and Hansol Jung, who re-genders and re-queers Restoration comedy in "**Merry Me**," at New York Theatre Workshop (Oct. 11).

The majority of the new Broadway offerings are humorous or musical approaches to profound subjects: Ossie Davis's comedy "**Purlie Victorious**" (Music Box; Sept. 7), from 1961, revolves around a preacher outwitting a racist Southerner; Barry Manilow and Bruce Sussman's musical "**Harmony**" (Ethel Barrymore; Oct. 18) remembers a forgotten German sextet torn apart by the Second World War; the new musical "**How to Dance in Ohio**" (Belasco; Nov. 15) is based on Alexandra Shiva's documentary about autistic young adults getting ready for their first spring formal; and Theresa Rebeck's "**I Need That**" (American Airlines Theatre; Oct. 13) wrings jokes out of hoarding and eviction. There will be much for the class to discuss.

But any schoolroom needs goofballs in the back throwing chalk—which leads us to the antic Rachel Bloom's one-woman *COVID* musical, "**Death, Let Me Do My Show**" (Lucille Lortel; Sept. 6). The season's other class clowns are "**Gutenberg! The Musical!**" (James Earl Jones; Sept. 15), in which the buddy act of Josh Gad and Andrew Rannells play musical-comedy writers trying to impress potential backers, and "**Spamalot**" (St. James; Oct. 31), the nutty Eric Idle musical from 2005, taking another swing at Broadway. Speaking frankly, though, Theatre for a New Audience's production of Samuel Beckett's "**Waiting for Godot**" (Nov. 4) just might be the zaniest of all. I once saw its stars, Michael Shannon and Paul Sparks, crack each other up onstage so hard that they had to hide under a blanket. If you think a little existential dread will make them behave, I've got a tree and a moon to sell you.—*Helen Shaw*

Contemporary Music

Afro-Pop, R. & B. Greats, Hip-Hop Diversity

As a summer full of mellow outdoor concerts comes to a close, the fall makes way for multiplicity. It's a seasonal slate defined by its sprawl, with several exciting and eclectic one-off events and young stars rising to newfound status at the arena level.

Pop music comes in all stripes, and from across nations. Afro-pop continues its Stateside expansion with **Ayra Starr** (Webster Hall; Sept. 2) and **Asake** (Barclays Center; Sept. 8). The slick K-pop girl groups **aespa** and **LOONA** hit Barclays (Sept. 5) and the Theatre at Madison Square Garden (Sept. 15), respectively. At MetLife, the Colombian singer **Karol G** experiments with Latin trap and reggaetón (Sept. 7-8). Dynamic artists tinker in three shows at Terminal 5: **Róisín Murphy** embraces the minimal techno of **DJ Koze** (Sept. 27), **Jessie Ware** reinvigorates disco and funk (Oct. 20-21), and **Tinashe** and **Shygirl** test out glitchy, club-aligned bops (Nov. 1).

Some R. & B. greats make New York stops on tours supporting their latest albums: **Janelle Monáe** luxuriates in “The Age of Pleasure” at Radio City Music Hall (Sept. 26); **SZA** christens the long-awaited, chart-conquering “SOS” at Barclays (Oct. 6-7); and the charismatic piano man **John Legend** tells stories and performs songs from “Legend” at the Beacon Theatre (Nov. 7-8).

As hip-hop celebrates its fiftieth anniversary, a string of shows commemorate the genre's diversity. In a performance at Barclays, the droner **Gunna** runs through the solemn post-*RICO* songs of “a Gift & a Curse” (Sept. 9). Backed by a live band, the polymath **Denzel Curry** reveals jazzy renditions from his album “Melt My Eyez See Your Future” at the Blue Note (Sept. 12-13). The jazz-rap pioneer **Ishmael Butler** and his group **Shabazz Palaces** continue their explorations into cosmic rap at Bowery Ballroom (Oct. 3). In a few dates at Terminal 5, the punchy duo **Run the Jewels** (Sept. 13-16) and the casual English bard **Little Simz** (Oct. 13) each display their dynamic lyricism.

A co-billed show of local hip-hop titans—the **Wu-Tang Clan** and **Nas** at Barclays Center, on Sept. 27—kicks off a series of performances featuring twentieth-century stars basking in their longevity. **Slowdive**, trailblazers of nineties shoegaze, celebrate a new album with a pair of gigs at Webster Hall (Sept. 27-28), and the pop-rock icon **Stevie Nicks**, an integral member of Fleetwood Mac, brings the full force of her singular voice to M.S.G. on Oct. 1.

The very next day, at the same venue, members of a new generation of talented indie-rock singer-songwriters—Julien Baker, Phoebe Bridgers, and Lucy Dacus—perform together in the supergroup **boygenius**. The folk musician **Julie Byrne** moves hopefully through loss during her Bowery Ballroom set (Sept. 21) with enchanting music that honors her late collaborator Eric Littmann. At Radio City Music Hall, the singer and guitarist Michelle Zauner works toward joy as **Japanese Breakfast** (Oct. 5). The reunited pop-punk band **Paramore** samples the skipping music of its latest album, “This Is Why,” at Webster Hall (Oct. 6), and, at Music Hall of Williamsburg, the folk-adjacent soloists **Miya Folick** (Oct. 5) and **S. G. Goodman** (Nov. 3) sing delightful songs in which traumatized characters turn their lives inside out.

For something a bit more left of center, look to instrumentalists in disparate fields. Electronic music is well represented by artists of opposing spheres: the fast-rising producer and d.j. **Fred Again**, who plays Forest Hills Stadium (Oct. 12-14), and the minimalist noise veteran **Tim Hecker**, at Pioneer Works (Nov. 10). Meanwhile, two harpists at different ends of the string spectrum—the experimental **Mary Lattimore** (Union Pool; Nov. 3) and the jazz revivalist **Brandee Younger** (Kupferberg Center for the Arts; Nov. 11)—bring vibrant new life to the form.—[Sheldon Pearce](#)

Classical Music

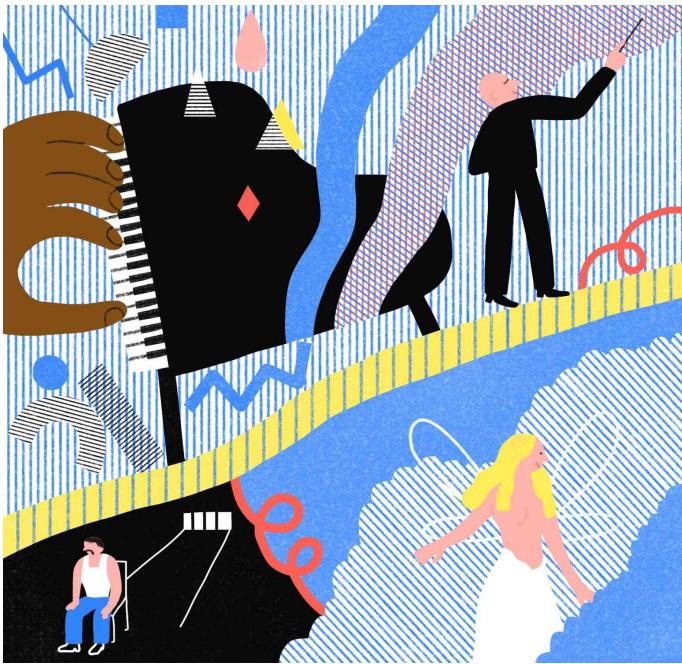


Illustration by Jam Dong

Met Premières, Jaap van Zweden’s Finale

The Metropolitan Opera triples down on contemporary music and its ability to tell modern-day stories with three company premières—Jake Heggie’s “**Dead Man Walking**” (Sept. 26-Oct. 21), Anthony Davis’s “**X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X**” (Nov. 3-Dec. 2), and Daniel Catán’s “**Florencia en el Amazonas**” (Nov. 16-Dec. 14).

Les Arts Florissants sticks to sumptuous realizations of Baroque gems with Purcell’s frolicsome semi-opera “**The Fairy Queen**,” at Alice Tully Hall (Nov. 2). Kate Soper’s new chamber opera, “**The Hunt**,” at Miller Theatre (Oct. 12 and Oct. 14), also deals with forest enchantments: three virgin maids live-stream their experience of being used as bait for a unicorn hunt. At Park Avenue Armory, **Jonas Kaufmann** conjoins his theatrical flair and his love of lieder in “**Doppelganger**,” a staging of Schubert’s cycle “**Schwanengesang**” (Sept. 22-28).

For **Jaap van Zweden’s** final season at the helm of the New York Philharmonic, the conductor surrounds himself with such luminaries as **Yo-Yo Ma**, in Dvořák’s Cello Concerto (Sept. 27); the violinist **Joshua Bell**, in “**The Elements**,” a piece crowdsourced from five major composers (Sept. 29-Oct. 1); and the minimalist legend **Steve Reich**, whose “**Jacob’s Ladder**” has its world première (Oct. 5-7).

The redoubtable **Riccardo Muti** opens Carnegie Hall's season with the **Chicago Symphony Orchestra** and **Leonidas Kavakos** in Tchaikovsky's lovely Violin Concerto (Oct. 4). Also at Carnegie, **Isata Kanneh-Mason** (Oct. 17), **Alexandre Kantorow** (Oct. 22), and **Lea Michele** (Oct. 30) make solo débuts, and the **Kronos Quartet** celebrates its fiftieth anniversary (Nov. 3). Just shy of its own half-century mark, the **Emerson String Quartet** bids farewell to the stage, at Alice Tully Hall (Oct. 21-22), with Schubert's final chamber work, the Quintet in C Major—an exquisite valediction.—*[Oussama Zahr](#)*

Dance

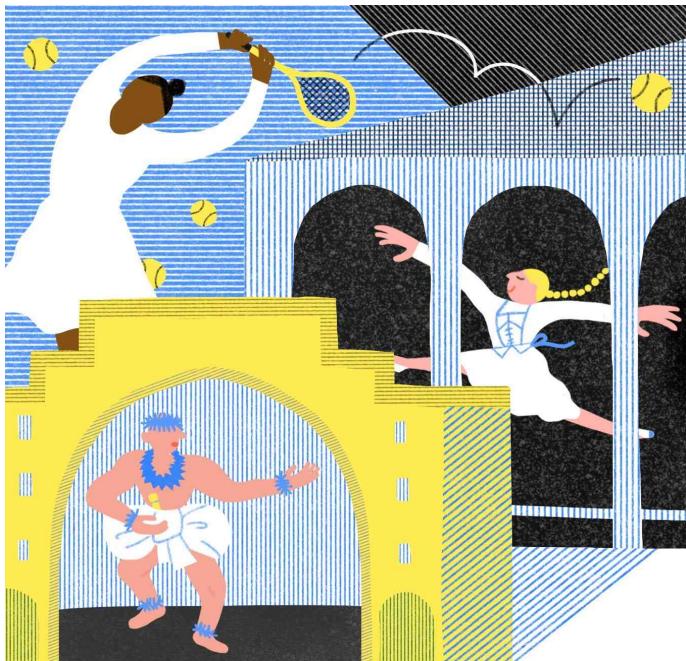


Illustration by Jam Dong

All-Male Hula, a Tennis Ballet

Outdoor dance is nice, but there's nothing like being in a theatre, with its dramatic lighting and proscenium. At New York City Center's popular and populist **Fall for Dance Festival** (Sept. 27-Oct. 8), twenty dollars buys an evening that might include the all-male hula troupe Kaleoolakaikahikinaokalā evoking Hawaii's traditions through song, drumming, and movement (Oct. 3-4), or the ecstatic dancing of Brazil's Grupo Corpo (Oct. 7-8).

New York's two resident ballet companies take turns at Lincoln Center's David H. Koch Theatre. First comes **New York City Ballet's** seventy-fifth-anniversary season (Sept. 19-Oct. 15), devoted to the works of its founding choreographer, George Balanchine. The lineup includes a program (on Oct. 11) that replicates the company's opening night, in 1948: the spare "Concerto Barocco"; "Orpheus," Balanchine's poetic take on the Greek myth; and the joyful "Symphony in C."

American Ballet Theatre's first New York season planned entirely by its incoming director, Susan Jaffe (Oct. 18-29), includes several one-act ballets, from Harald Lander's "Études," a celebration of ballet technique, to Alonzo King's tensile "Single Eye." Most resonantly, A.B.T. brings back Alexei Ratmansky's "On the Dnipro," about a Ukrainian soldier returning to his village after the First World War.

Christopher Williams reimagines Nijinsky's lost 1913 ballet, "**Jeux**" (Baryshnikov Arts Center; Oct. 12-15), an exploration of the ambiguities of sexual attraction through the prism of a tennis match. And Van Cleef & Arpels brings a new festival, **Dance Reflections**, to the city (Oct. 19-Dec. 14). Among other offerings, Lyon Opera Ballet performs Lucinda Childs's minimalist classic "Dance" (New York City Center; Oct. 19-21), and the Polish French dance artist Ola Maciejewska presents her tribute to the illusionism of Loïe Fuller (French Institute Alliance Française; Nov. 2-3).—
[Marina Harss](#)

Art



Illustration by Jam Dong

Manet and Degas, Ruth Asawa, Ed Ruscha

“Barkley L. Hendricks: Portraits at the Frick” (opening on Sept. 21) marks a homecoming of sorts for Hendricks, who died in 2017, at the age of seventy-two. The exhibition places fourteen of his paintings, made between the late nineteen-sixties and the early eighties, under the same roof as the Old Masters to which Hendricks, their dedicated student, returned throughout his life. Like all the greatest portraitists, Hendricks rendered glimmers of his subjects’ interior lives via the particularities of their personal style, the poses they strike, and the precise wattage of their skin’s radiance, remaining steadfastly devoted to, in his words, “the beauty and variety of complexion colors that we call Black.”

A fateful first meeting of Édouard Manet (1832-83) and Edgar Degas (1834-1917) at the Louvre, in the early eighteen-sixties, led to a two-decade conversation—at times friendly, at other times charged by a less than collegial frisson—as each pursued his own audacious, masterly hand. **“Manet/Degas,”** at the Met (Sept. 24), brings together a hundred and sixty paintings and works on paper by these disparate titans, whose art became part of the radical terra firma in which modernism took root. Especially delectable among the exhibition’s many delights: Degas’s portrait of Manet and his wife, which rankled Manet so much that he sliced its canvas, and Manet’s succès de scandale *“Olympia,”* here in her American début.

The Whitney exhibition “**Ruth Asawa Through Line**” (Sept. 16) honors the artist’s daily drawing practice, highlighting the contemplations on paper of shape, light, and shadow—many made public here for the first time—which informed her airy and voluptuous wire sculptures. Also at the Whitney is “**Henry Taylor: B Side**” (Oct. 4), the first survey of the artist’s career over the past thirty-plus years, during which he has become best known for paintings that level our attention across celebrities, politicians, family, and friends alongside the incarcerated, the institutionalized, and the terrorized. “Support the Black Panthers” reads a banner hanging over one disquieting installation, comprising dozens of mannequins gathered around a podium and dressed in black leather jackets—all headless, yet somehow still self-possessed.

Indeterminacy, ephemerality, fluidity—these were some of the guiding principles of the Fluxus movement, which held that every moment of life had the potential to become, or to deliver, a work of art. Japan Society’s “**Out of Bounds: Japanese Women Artists in Fluxus**” (Oct. 13) showcases four of its under-sung genre-benders—Shigeko Kubota, Yoko Ono, Takako Saito, and Mieko Shiomi—who prove that what slips through the system often sticks to the spirit with greater force. The exhibition spotlights some of their pathbreaking performances, such as Ono’s “Cut Piece,” from 1964, for which audience members were invited to disrobe the artist one scissor snip at a time, and Kubota’s “Vagina Painting,” from 1965, which upended (so to speak) Abstract Expressionism’s long-crowing machismo.

Oklahoma City-raised and Los Angeles-chilled, Ed Ruscha belongs to a generation of men for whom the Wild West gave way to a liberated libido, driven to consume anything and everything in sight, casting the artist as both America’s keenest critic and its No. 1 fan. Sixty-five years of his prodigious output is presented in “**Ed Ruscha / Now Then,**” at *MOMA* (Sept. 10-Jan. 13), a sprawling exhibition conceived to seal his reputation as one of our cannier image-makers and a master of many media. Arcing from his initial revelations sparked by Pop’s sonorous vernacular—behold “OOF,” “SPAM,” and “HONK” writ large—to a more recent painting of a shredded American flag, still waving in the cataclysmic winds of change, his is an epic tale that continues to unfold.—[Jennifer Krasinski](#)

Movies

Real-Life Drama, New Fantasies

Though studios' fall schedules have been shifting because of the actors' union's ongoing strike, which bars members from making promotional appearances, the release calendar is nonetheless crowded. Dramas based on real-life stories are among the season's most prominent offerings, including "**Killers of the Flower Moon**" (opening on Oct. 6), directed by Martin Scorsese and based on a book by David Grann, of *The New Yorker*. The film is centered on the discovery of oil by members of the Osage Nation, in Oklahoma, and the murder of Osage people, in the nineteen-twenties, by white Oklahomans who sought to control the resulting wealth. Leonardo DiCaprio, Robert De Niro, Lily Gladstone, and Tantoo Cardinal star. "**Priscilla**" (Oct. 27), directed by Sofia Coppola, is a bio-pic about Priscilla Presley, based on her autobiography and starring Cailee Spaeny in the title role and Jacob Elordi as Elvis. "**Cassandro**" (Sept. 15) is a biographical drama about Saúl Armendáriz, who was one of Mexico's first openly gay wrestlers (he was the subject of the 2018 documentary "*Cassandro, the Exotico!*"); Gael García Bernal stars, and Roger Ross Williams directed. The social-media-fuelled buying frenzy for GameStop stock, in January, 2021, which resulted in a Wall Street crisis, is fictionalized in "**Dumb Money**" (Sept. 15), directed by Craig Gillespie and starring Paul Dano, Shailene Woodley, America Ferrera, and Seth Rogen.

Fantasy, a cinematic staple, is on display in many varieties. Wes Anderson's latest film, "**The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar**" (Netflix; Oct. 13), is a thirty-seven-minute adaptation of a story by Roald Dahl, starring Benedict Cumberbatch as a man whose life is changed when he acquires supernatural powers of vision and clairvoyance; Ralph Fiennes plays Dahl. In Gareth Edwards's thriller "**The Creator**" (Sept. 29), a former Special Forces operative (John David Washington) must track and catch a mysterious inventor whose weaponized version of A.I. can destroy the world. Timothée Chalamet returns to play the hero Paul Atreides, who's on a quest for vengeance in "**Dune: Part Two**" (Nov. 3), directed by Denis Villeneuve; Zendaya, Rebecca Ferguson, and Josh Brolin co-star.

The season's family stories are headed by "**My Big Fat Greek Wedding 3**" (Sept. 8), involving a reunion in Greece; Nia Vardalos directed, wrote the script, and stars; John Corbett, Lainie Kazan, and Andrea Martin are among the co-stars. Justine Triet's courtroom thriller, "**Anatomy of a Fall**" (Oct. 13), which won the Golden Palm at this year's Cannes Film Festival, stars Sandra Hüller as a German writer in France who is accused of murdering her husband (Samuel Theis) and seeks to establish her innocence at trial. "**The Persian Version**" (Oct. 13), directed by Maryam Keshavarz, is the tale of an Iranian American filmmaker named Leila (Layla Mohammadi), whose conflicts with her mother (Niousha Noor) are elucidated by flashbacks to the family's earlier life in Iran, going back to the nineteen-sixties; Bella Warda plays Leila's grandmother.

Among the fall movies that give artistic lives and intellectual callings a workout is "**American Fiction**" (Nov. 3), the writer and director Cord Jefferson's adaptation of Percival Everett's novel "Erasure," starring Jeffrey Wright as a professor of English who's at odds with prevailing literary culture and provokes a scandal by writing a satirical novel; Tracee Ellis Ross, Erika Alexander, and Leslie Uggams co-star. Alexander Payne's "**The Holdovers**" (Nov. 10) is set in 1970, at a New England boarding school where a fussy and pompous teacher (Paul Giamatti) stays behind over Christmas break to supervise students who are unable to go home. In the Bronx-based drama "**Story Ave.**" (Oct. 6), the first feature directed by Aristotle Torres, an aspiring graffiti artist (Asante Blackk) and an M.T.A. worker (Luis Guzmán) form a crucial bond.—*[Richard Brody](#)*

By The New Yorker

By The New Yorker

By Zadie Smith

By Emily Nussbaum

Mail

- [Letters from our Readers](#)

A Tragedy in Idabel

I read with keen interest Paige Williams's article on the McCurtain *Gazette*'s conflict with the county sheriff's department ("Breaking News," July 31st). My stepfather was mortally injured in a home invasion in Idabel, Oklahoma, the county seat, in 2004. My mother was tied up and assaulted in the same attack. I will never forget cleaning up the blood, nor will I ever forget my family's horrible subsequent experience with local law enforcement. It launched an investigation, but failed to solve the crime. It also never treated my mother as a victim, and, weeks after the attack, it intimidated her in a way that scared my family and me into silence.

For years, I lived with a strange guilt for having stayed quiet, knowing that the perpetrators could harm others. I did not want to bring more trouble to my mom after her happiness had already been taken from her. Now that my mother has passed, I have decided to speak up.

I always felt great sadness for the citizens of McCurtain County, and deep anger at local law enforcement—more, even, than at the perpetrators—which wielded its power and authority in order to bully and silence rather than to protect. I'm also grateful for the McCurtain *Gazette*, which, as Williams's piece shows, has long been devoted to the local community. I still have copies of several articles in the *Gazette* which reported on the burglary and my stepfather's death.

*Jean Gajary
Philadelphia, Pa.*

Process-Oriented

Adam Gopnik's review of books about our food system, including Chris van Tulleken's "Ultra-Processed People," makes convincing arguments about the arbitrariness of the distinctions we draw between so-called processed and unprocessed foods (Books, July 31st). But I wish Gopnik had noted, in his discussion of ultra-processed foods—which contain, as he puts it, "substances that you would never find at home"—that industrial agriculture and mass-produced food are relatively recent phenomena.

Industrial agriculture, which expanded during the past century, relies on much heavier fertilizer and pesticide use than its alternatives. Monoculture, the practice of cultivating a single crop over a large area, has also become much more common during the past hundred years—in part owing to rising demand for ingredients, like palm oil, that are used in making ultra-processed foods. Intensive, mechanized farming of this sort has helped to lessen world hunger, of course, but it also leads to soil degradation, and, anyway, it is often enlisted only to grow ingredients that create unending revenue streams for multinational corporations.

*Tony Robinson
Adjunct Professor, Environmental Sustainability
Southern Methodist University
Dallas, Texas*

Hearing Voices

Jennifer Wilson, in her insightful article about Michael R. Katz's new translation of "The Brothers Karamazov," describes the novel as "cacophonous" and having a "spoken quality" (Books, July 31st). Her review reminded me of the work of the Soviet critic Mikhail Bakhtin. In his "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics," Bakhtin theorized the "polyphony" of Dostoyevsky's novels and the author's "gift for hearing and understanding all voices immediately and simultaneously." He also emphasized that Dostoyevsky's near-death experience, hardship in Siberia, and years of compulsory military service did not embitter him but, as Bakhtin put it, "helped him to understand more deeply the extensive and well-developed contradictions which coexisted among people." A valuable lesson for our time.

*Ben Gambuzza
Brooklyn, N.Y.*

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Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to themail@newyorker.com. Letters may be edited for

length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. We regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter.

By Inkoo Kang

By Deborah Treisman

By Jon Lee Anderson

By Martha McPhee

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