PRICE $8.99

THE NEW YORKER

DEC. 30, 2024 & JAN. 6, 2025

The New Yorker Magazine

[Jan 06]

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  By Helen Rosner | When it comes to the Italian holiday loaf, there’s magnificence and there’s stultifying disappointment, with little in between.

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December 20, 2024

Brian Seibert
Seibert has covered dance for Goings On since 2002.

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.***

New York dance in December is all about **"The Nutcracker,"** the **Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre,** and the joy they both bring. But the Ailey company's encampment at City Center this year (through Jan. 5) is tinged with sadness, because Judith Jamison died in November.

In the nineteen-seventies, Jamison was the company's star: statuesque and superhuman, yet warm and witty. After Ailey's death, in 1989, she became the group's savior, taking over as artistic director and leading it into financial stability and unparalleled popularity. Under Jamison's direction, the Ailey dancers grew more and more godlike in technique without losing earthly looseness and soul. Joan Acocella described the quality in *The New Yorker,* in 1999: "Someone has given them to themselves, and that person has to be Jamison."

Judith Jamison in 1973.

Photograph by M. McKeown / Express / Hulton Archive / Getty

The works that Jamison brought into the company repertory, before she stepped down, in 2011, were generally not as amazing. But in 1999 she commissioned a piece from a young choreographer named Ronald K. Brown. This was “Grace,” and it was miraculous: a piece about a mother god who guides the wayward into the light, set to Duke Ellington’s “Come Sunday,” some house tracks, and Fela Kuti Afrobeat, and embodied in an extraordinarily supple blend of West African and modern dance. “Grace,” which is beautifully revived this season, remains one of very few dances, other than Ailey’s “Revelations,” that never fail to summon the spirit.

None of this season’s premières are on that level. Jamar Roberts’s “Al-Andalus Blues,” set in part to Miles Davis’s version of “Concierto de Aranjuez,” shows flashes of Roberts’s fresh musicality but is mired in a murky concept. So is Hope Boykin’s “Finding Free,” despite gospel-tinged live music by the jazz pianist Matthew Whitaker. Lar Lubovitch’s “Many Angels,” set to the Adagietto of Mahler’s Fifth, is merely pretty.

Not every season produces a masterpiece like “Grace.” But the company is full of hope. Alicia Graf Mack, one of its brightest and most beloved stars

of the two-thousands, takes over as the company’s artistic director next year.

About Town

Classical

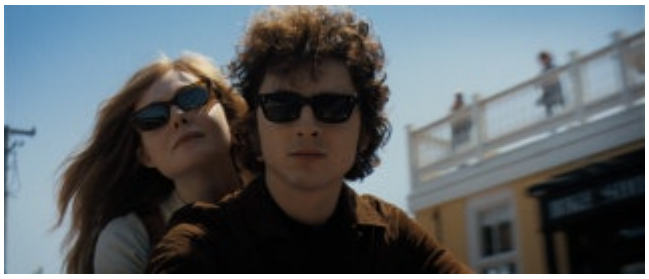
This year, at St. John the Divine’s annual **“New Year’s Eve Concert for Peace,”** one work may have the best chance to inspire a glimmer of hope: Beethoven’s megalithic Symphony No. 9. The symphony premièred two hundred years ago in Vienna, when Beethoven’s deafness, which began in his late twenties, had become severe. At the end of “Ode to Joy,” the last movement, one of the singers turned Beethoven around to face the audience, so that he could bear witness to the rousing applause that he couldn’t hear. This year, the St. John cathedral choirs and orchestra perform with the soprano Kathryn Lewek, the mezzo-soprano Raehann Bryce-Davis, the tenor Paul Appleby, and the bass William Guanbo Su. Peace feels impossible at the moment, but at least we have music like this.—*Jane Bua (Dec. 31.)*

Jam Rock

What do you do after witnessing the mind-altering, improvisational Phish concert at Madison Square Garden (Dec. 28-31)? For two nights, the answer is to go up a few blocks and further down the improv well with **John Medeski, Billy Martin, Scott Metzger, and Nels Cline.** The occasional supergroup has made a tradition of playing Phish after-parties—Medeski and Martin (the keyboardist and the drummer of the jazz-fusion band Medeski Martin & Wood), who have been linked with the jam band since 1995, channel the same psychedelic release in their own playing. Fronted by the guitarists Metzger (Joe Russo's Almost Dead) and Cline (Wilco), they ramble on into the wee hours. The show has become its own

little ritual, an intuitive, free-flowing journey that seems consciousness-expanding for everyone involved.—*Sheldon Pearce (Sony Hall; Dec. 29-30.)*

Movies



Elle Fanning and Timothée Chalamet in "A Complete Unknown."

Photograph courtesy Searchlight Pictures

If Bob Dylan didn't exist, **"A Complete Unknown"** would be an absorbing if conventional drama about a fictional folk singer with that name who, in the nineteen-sixties, shows up in New York and turns himself into a rock star at a time when the concept was novel. But, given the complex ubiquity of Dylan's music and life story, the movie's synthetic simplicity is bewildering. The director, James Mangold (who wrote the script with Jay Cocks), emphasizes the protagonist's own sense of self-invention, and offers a bland and smooth official portrait—which nonetheless remains fascinating. Timothée Chalamet stars, delivering an impressive yet emotionally muffled impersonation of Dylan; the rest of the cast—principally, Edward Norton, as Pete Seeger; Monica Barbaro, as Joan Baez; and Elle Fanning, as the pseudonymous Sylvie Russo—push vigorously against the narrow limits of their roles.—*Richard Brody (In wide release.)*

Dance

In many ways, "The Nutcracker" is about the nostalgia we feel for childhood and the rituals that come back, year after year. People return to New York City Ballet's **"George Balanchine's The Nutcracker"** because they know exactly what to expect: the tree will grow extravagantly, Marie will vanquish the Mouse King with her slipper, and the ballerina performing Dewdrop will dazzle with her windswept jumps and spins. The combination

of Tchaikovsky’s music and Balanchine’s choreography—and the presence of dozens of kids onstage—elicits an almost Pavlovian response: we feel delight, warmth, and a craving for wintry things.—*Marina Harss (David H. Koch Theatre; through Jan. 4.)*

Broadway

Chelsea Yakura-Kurtz in “Eureka Day.”

Photograph by Jeremy Daniel

Much of the humor in Jonathan Spector’s **“Eureka Day,”** directed by Anna D. Shapiro for Manhattan Theatre Club, needles a progressive school board, whose right-thinking efforts at consensus fail in the face of a mumps outbreak. Whatever your appetite for laughing at self-righteous lefties—trying to be mindful, what dweebs!—Spector’s acid pen is impressively precise: in one virtuoso scene, the board parents, including newcomer

Carina (Amber Gray) and queen bee Suzanne (Jessica Hecht), attempt a Zoom conference while a hilarious online chat, projected onto the wall behind them, drowns them out. Spector is interested in liberal bubbles, and he's perceptive about the physics that governs them. It's not his fault that the play, first performed in 2018, shows its age—some such bubbles have burst . . . or caught on fire.—*Helen Shaw (Samuel J. Friedman; through Feb. 2.)*

Movies

Halina Reijn's erotic thriller **"Babygirl"** is a nineties throwback that's utterly contemporary in the buttons it schematically pushes. Romy (Nicole Kidman), the C.E.O. of a New York robotics firm, is sexually unsatisfied in her marriage to Jacob (Antonio Banderas). Samuel (Harris Dickinson), a brash new intern who's less polished than his peers, aggressively flirts with her. Romy enters into an affair with him, in which he is dominant and she is submissive. But rumors leak out, endangering her career, and she raises the stakes with bold coverups. The portrayal of a boss who relinquishes control in bed remains facile, because Romy's character is hardly defined elsewhere, but the movie's psychology is secondary to its moral one-liner: Reijn dares viewers to judge Romy's pursuit of sexual pleasure as a lesser value than business as usual.—*R.B. (In wide release.)*

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- The power of magazines
- Continue and persist
- The perimenopause gold rush

Book Currents

Paul Schrader’s Favorite Works of Fiction

The director, whose latest film, “Oh, Canada,” opened this December, discusses four of his favorites.

December 11, 2024

Illustration by Isabel Seliger

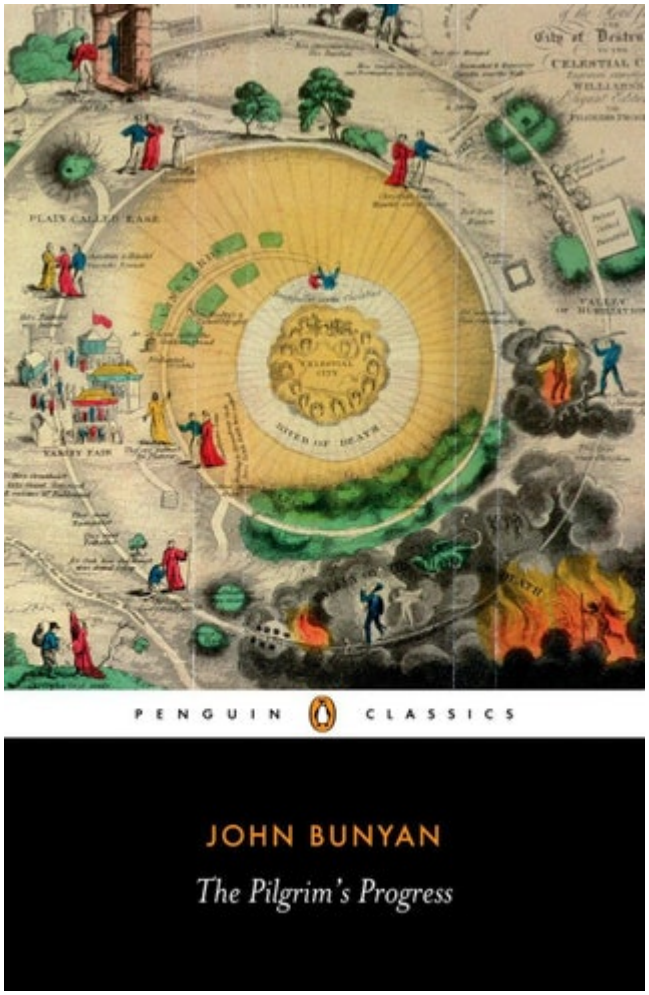
You’re reading Book Currents, a weekly column in which notable figures share what they’re reading. ***Sign up for the Goings On newsletter*** *to receive their selections, and other cultural recommendations, in your in-box.*

Paul Schrader, whose latest film, “Oh, Canada,” is based on Russell Banks’s semi-autobiographical novel “Foregone,” is no stranger to literary adaptations. In 1985, he co-wrote and directed “Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters,” a film about the Japanese writer Yukio Mishima that also features dramatizations of his fiction. In 1990, he released “The Comfort of Strangers,” based on Ian McEwan’s book of the same name. Schrader’s

serious reading habits stem from his strict Calvinist upbringing—he didn't see his first movie until he was seventeen—and from his coming of intellectual age before the dawn of prestige TV, in an era when, as he put it recently, there was "an important novel that came out at least once a month that informed people would want to read." Nowadays, Schrader tends to alternate his reading between such serious works and genre fiction—though the classics are important, too. "Every few years, you should put your toe back in the water—Dostoevsky, Austen, or Hardy—just to reënergize." A few weeks ago, he sat down with us to talk about some of his favorite novels. His remarks have been edited and condensed.

The Pilgrim's Progress

by John Bunyan



Amazon | **Bookshop**

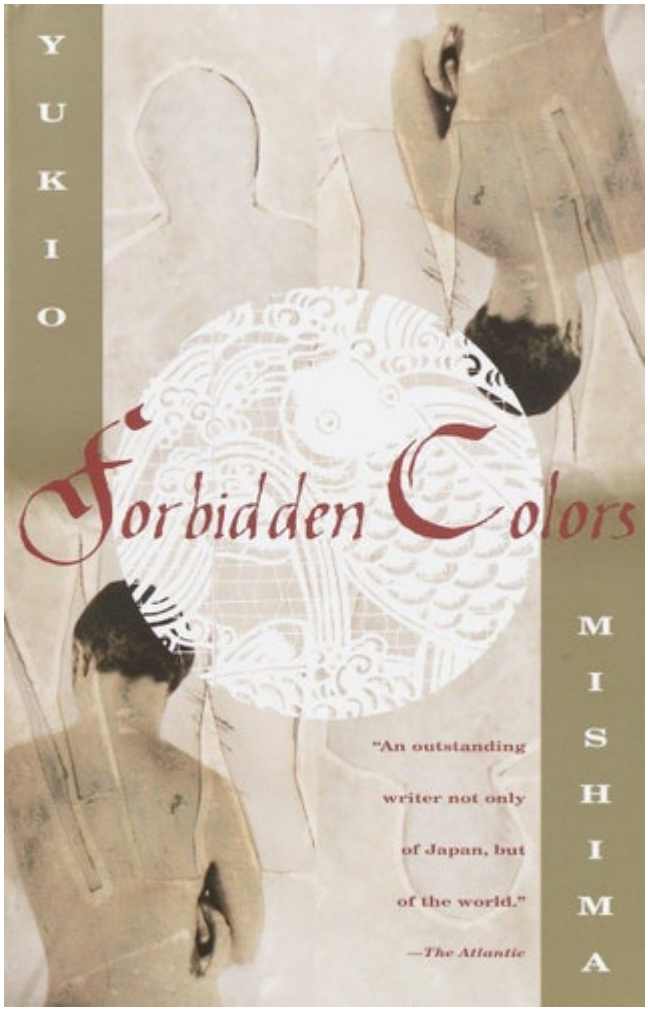
I was a big reader as a kid, because movies were forbidden by my church. We didn't go to movies, and we were very late to television. We read books. They were always books on the safe side—because I went to Christian schools—but they were real books. Like Shakespeare or "The Mayor of Casterbridge"—which is a great book whether you're ten or you're forty.

The one I remember most, the one that really brought me in, was "The Pilgrim's Progress." Because of the beautiful picture of being brave in that story. The first version I read was this wonderful, illustrated version, which I still own.

But then, you know, truth be told, the best stories are still in the Bible. I remember sitting in church just reading the Old Testament stories. The preacher was doing something else, but I would just read one story after another. They are the oldest stories—Cain and Abel, Adam and Eve. We're never going to stop telling them.

Forbidden Colors

by Yukio Mishima



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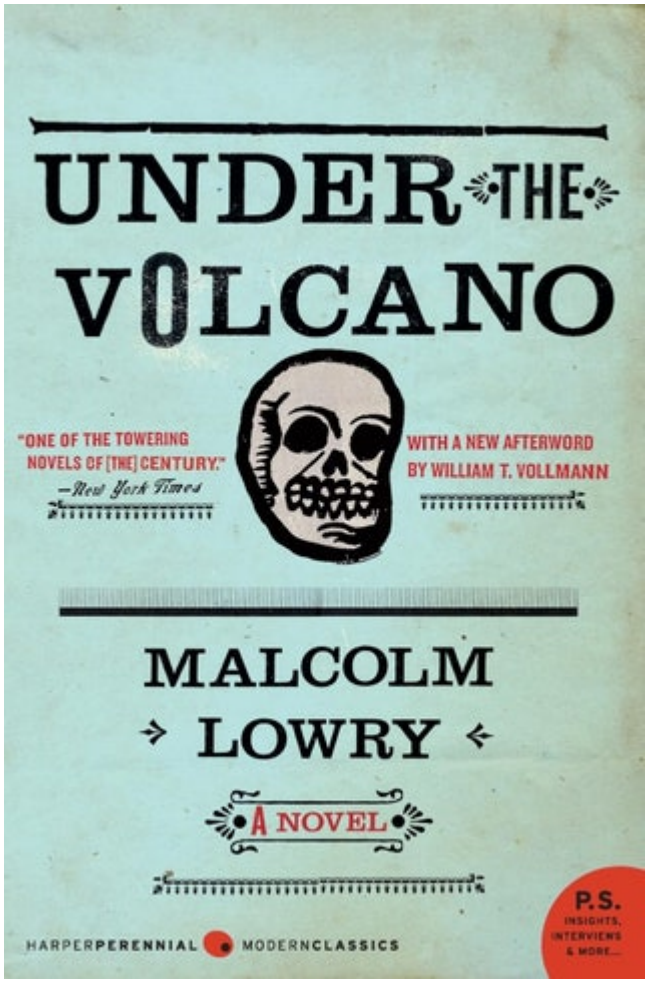
If there's one Mishima people should read, aside from the tetralogy, it's this. It's my favorite. This is the only one that, when I was making "Mishima," Madam Mishima wouldn't give me, because it's his only overtly gay book. It has a great, great plotline. [*Reading a summary from his phone*] "An aging, embittered novelist"—well, there's a good reason I would like it.

There's a Mishima quote that I always liked, which I put in my film. It was something, like, Long ago, the average life span was twenty. Heaven must have been so beautiful then. It must be so ugly now.

Under the Volcano

by Malcolm Lowry



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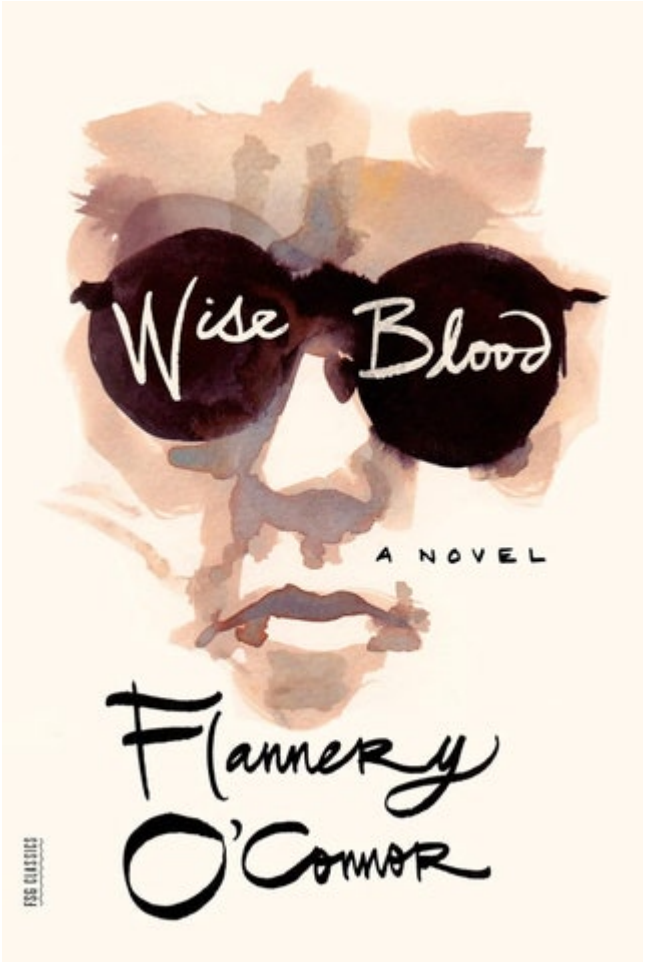
I'm a collector of modern firsts—these are books from about 1915, 1920 onward, as opposed to antiquarian books. I have a copy of "Revolutionary Road" inscribed by Richard Yates to the couple he based the characters in the book on, and a copy of another book given by Melville to his wife for her birthday. In my house in the country, I have a thousand books, but I don't have that kind of space in New York, I just have my top shelf.

The ones I like most are the ones that mean most to me. Like my inscribed "Under the Volcano." This is one of the great books. Lowry had a very tortured life—the novel is a very good biography of him, too. It's one of these sad cases where there wasn't enough distance between his life and his fiction.

Wise Blood

by Flannery O’Connor



Amazon | **Bookshop**

This is a favorite. First of all, you have Flannery’s writing. But then there’s also the main character, Hazel Motes. Hazel is tormented—in the end, he puts his eyes out with lime and ties himself up in barbed wire, and goes out preaching. I admire all of her stuff, particularly the short stories. “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” “The Artificial Nigger”—which unfortunately is no longer a politically correct title—is a terrific story.

She made an impression on me early on. You find that, in life, those authors that punch you early, punch you for a reason. And they usually hang around. You remember the first time you read “Lolita”: wow. And then you come back to it some years later, and you say, It’s even better than I remember.

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The Food Scene

Three Exceptional Panettones

When it comes to the Italian holiday loaf, there's magnificence and there's stultifying disappointment, with little in between.

By Helen Rosner

December 15, 2024

Panettone Balsamico with Sour Cherry, from Acetaia Leonardi.Photographs by Balarama Heller for The New Yorker

You're reading the Food Scene newsletter, Helen Rosner's guide to what, where, and how to eat. ***Sign up to receive it in your in-box.***

I used to believe that I didn't much like panettone, the round, fruit-studded, high-rise Italian sweet bread that's a popular holiday-season treat. I'd tried plenty of them, over the years, loaves picked up at local specialty-import shops and plated out at parties or given as gifts. Their lavishly illustrated cardboard boxes promised richness and festivity, but I found it hard to muster enthusiasm for the cakey rounds inside, which were dry and crumbly as week-old brioche. Then, a few years ago, a friend presented me with a thick, shiny box—minimal in its design, no rococo flourishes or swoopy landscapes—and promised that this panettone would change my life. It was a grand pronouncement, to be sure, but after my first bite I understood the hyperbole: this was a panettone so different from the one-note specimens I'd tried before that it might as well have been a different species of baked good entirely. Beneath the burnished, slightly sticky crust was a crumb light as breath. The piece I tore off for myself seemed to melt

a little against the ambient heat of my fingers. In my mouth, it nearly dissolved, like cotton candy. The tender bread was just barely sweet, with bits of dried fruits and nuts suspended in the matrix of doughlike dewdrops on a spider's web. Panettone, I have since learned, is a dichotomous food: there's magnificence, and then there's stultifying disappointment, with little in between.

Helen, Help Me!
E-mail your questions about dining, eating, and anything food-related, and Helen may respond in a future newsletter.

Since my panettone awakening, I've become a minor obsessive. I do not recommend making it yourself: I've learned that one of the reasons for the great gulf between worthwhile panettone and the other sort is that it is infamous among bakers as one of the most difficult recipes in the global canon. First, a complex, multistage proofing process is needed to get the heavy, yolk- and butter-enriched batter to reach an ideal degree of loft and levity. After all that rising and forming, a loaf takes on additional height while baking in the oven, lifting vertically in its paper wrapper, like a soufflé; also like a soufflé, it runs the risk of collapse once it's removed from the oven. To offset this possibility, the loaves are flipped upside down to cool, skewered through their lower circumferences on dowels and left to hang, bat-like, until the steam and heat, and their softening effects, have dissipated. (For years, the baker Olga Koutseridi has chronicled her panettone experimentation via Instagram; it's genuinely riveting content.)

One other distinction of exceptional panettone is, alas, the cost: a loaf of the really good stuff runs three or four times what you'd pay for the shiny-boxed Italian-deli variety. Seventy or eighty dollars is a lot to shell out for what is, ultimately, a loaf of fancy bread with some sugar and nuts in it, but 'tis the season for frivolous expenditures, little treats, and moments of delight. Plus, a loaf of panettone is enormous, and, true to its fruitcake adjacency, it keeps forever—crack into one around Christmastime and keep it wrapped up airtight, and you can still happily nibble on it well into January. To experience true panettone bliss, try one of these three varieties, my favorites of the many I've tasted.

Panettone Biasetto, $70

This tall, golden Adonis, from the Padua kitchens of the Belgian Italian pastry chef Luigi Biasetto, has a rich citrus-and-vanilla perfume that wafts toward you the moment you unwrap its stately maroon-and-gold packaging. Tear open the toasty exterior to reveal a marigold-bright crumb, achieved thanks to the Technicolor yolks of superb eggs, and an extra squishy texture owing to acacia honey from Tuscany. It's studded with bits of candied citrus rind, which are sweet and bitter and tart, plus raisins so plump and juicy they're halfway back to being grapes. In a flourish of cheffy fussiness, Biasetto famously recommends that his panettone be served just above room temperature, which he suggests you achieve by resting it on the radiator for a few hours (a classic *nonna* move), or near (but not in!) a heated oven. He's not wrong: that extra bit of warmth opens up the flavors and aromas, deepening the woodsiness of the vanilla and softening any lingering sharpness from the candied citrus. But, I can report from experience, it's pretty wonderful at room temperature, too. Biasetto wisely suggests you eat your panettone "two or three times a day," after each meal.

Acetaia Leonardi Panettone Balsamico with Sour Cherry, $50-$60

Not too long ago, when I dropped by the Brooklyn culinary bookstore Archestratus (one of the only places in the city you can find a Biasetto this time of year), the owner, Paige Lipari, practically forced me to give this slightly unconventional panettone from Emilia-Romagna a try. It's made by Acetaia Leonardi—which, as the name implies, is not a bakery but a balsamic-vinegar manufactory, in operation since 1871—and the yielding, buttery interior is shot through with a sultry ripple of balsamic crema. Maybe that's what makes it noticeably denser than most other high-end panettone I've tried, with a slinky, melty chewiness that almost—but not quite—verges on the texture of cake. This isn't salad-dressing vinegar; this is the sort of unctuous, viscous aged balsamic you drizzle on ice cream, fruity and dimensional. Leonardi makes two versions of panettone, one studded with raisins (more traditional) and another with preserved sour cherries. Lipari told me I'd prefer the cherry one, and she was right: the red fruit injects a note of sourness that coaxes out the sweet vinegar's sharpness, a welcome pucker of intensity.

Olivieri 1882 Apricot and Salted Caramel Panettone, $95

Olivieri, a bakery in the Veneto, has been in operation for a hundred and forty-two years, and in that time it has more or less perfected the art of making panettone. Its classic version, with raisins and candied citrus, has the airy tenderness of perfection—as it should, given that it costs nearly a hundred dollars. But I'm especially enamored of one of the bakery's more creative variations, which employs pieces of floral-sweet candied apricot and a gentle swirl of salted caramel. This second special ingredient lends a pointed confectionary aroma to the exterior, but inside (and on the palate) it makes more elemental contributions: a little extra sweetness, a tang of sea air. A good panettone has a sometimes relentless richness, and this bit of salt cuts through that, opening windows onto notes of honey (though there's no honey), lemon, and enrapturing, sun-drenched butter. After having this panettone, I began sprinkling a bit of salt onto any panettone I tried; all were measurably improved, though I remain committed to the lovely loaf that opened my eyes to the innovation. How brilliant of Olivieri to bake the secret right in. ♦

Helen Rosner, a staff writer, received a 2024 James Beard Award for her weekly restaurant-review column, The Food Scene.

The Talk of the Town

- **As if Times Weren’t Unsettling Enough, Saturn Is Losing Its Rings**
  By Adam Gopnik | The rain it raineth every day, as Shakespeare noted, apparently even on Saturn. The cosmos, it seems, is no comfort at this moment.
- **The Professional Health-Insurance-C.E.O. Nagger**
  By Carrie Battan | Susan Frager, known as the PsychBilling Coach, helps therapists appeal coverage denials. Her job got more difficult after the killing of UnitedHealthcare’s C.E.O., Brian Thompson.
- **Christmas Recalled, by the Feds**
  By Adam Iscoe | This year’s figurative lumps of coal include a “Star Wars” tree ornament, a knockoff Yeti tumbler, faulty training wheels, a mango-tangerine candle, and Finger-Ease Guitar String Lubricant.
- **Andy Cohen Gets His Face (and the Rest of Him) in Wax**
  By Zach Zimmerman | After a year of being measured and sculpted, the Bravo host joins Lucille Ball, Beyoncé, and the Queen in the halls of Madame Tussauds.
- **Searching for (Real?) New Jersey Drones at a Fake Alien-Landing Site**
  By Robert Sullivan | An amateur U.F.O. hunter at Grovers Mill, of “The War of the Worlds” fame, makes a shocking discovery.

Comment

As if Times Weren’t Unsettling Enough, Saturn Is Losing Its Rings

The rain it raineth every day, as Shakespeare noted, apparently even on Saturn. The cosmos, it seems, is no comfort at this moment.

By Adam Gopnik

December 22, 2024

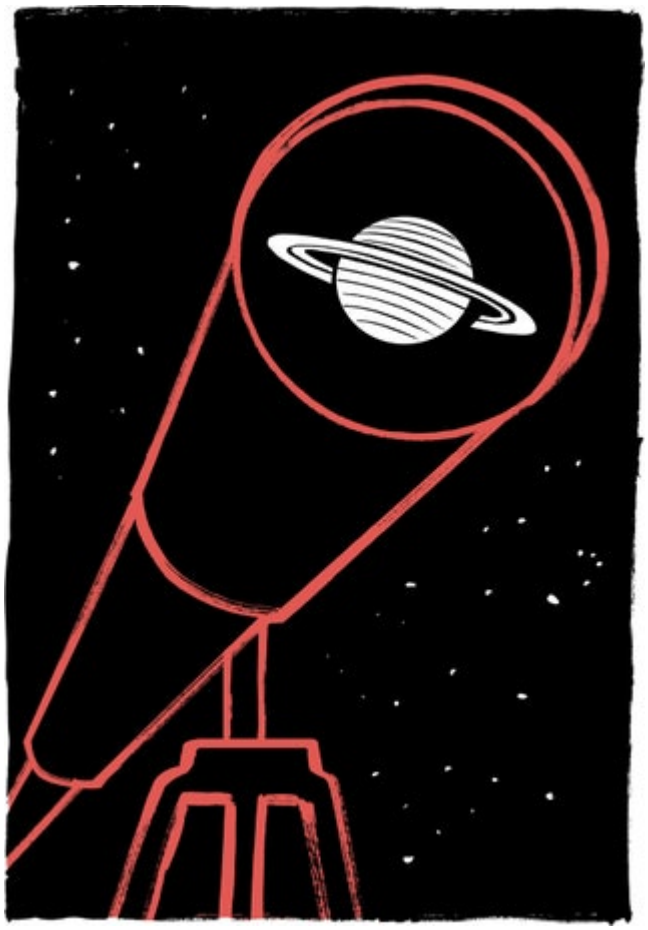


Illustration by João Fazenda

If anything seemed solid in a melting and mutable world, surely it was the great big outer planets of the solar system. There they were, Saturn and Jupiter, stately if a little foreboding, hanging around close together,

impossibly large and bright, in the Great Conjunction, as it was called, visible for the first time in decades four winters ago, in the pandemic year of 2020. You could go outside then and stare at the gassy planets on the empty streets at midnight, their presence suggesting, if not a benign purpose, then at least a superintending one—the permanence of the cosmos itself—while we chafed and fretted below.

But now news has leaked out—it has been known to astronomers for a while but only recently reached our shared, night-sky-gazers consciousness—that Saturn's beautiful rings, the one true ornamental element in the solar system, are vanishing. "Ring rain," it seems, is wasting them away in what is, for a cosmic event, a quick process. Ring rain is just what it sounds like: charged water particles leaking out of Saturn's rings and raining down onto the planet, diminishing the rings at what astronomers say is an alarming pace. "Saturn Is Losing Its Rings at Worst-Case-Scenario Rate," an article published by *nasa* read, and a science Web site bid "Goodbye to Saturn's Rings," though the farewell taps will be heard for some time, since that "worst case" turns out to be about a hundred million years—not exactly what we mean by worst-case scenarios down here on Earth, where they tend to entail four-year cycles, if that.

The causes and consequences of ring rain are fascinating, if still a bit obscure to the non-astronomer, because they involve a complicated exchange between the surprisingly fragile ring system—first spotted by Galileo himself, back in the early seventeenth century—and the planet. For all the rings' majesty and beauty, they're mostly ice mixed with rocks. At times, ring particles take on an electrical charge (from the sun's ultraviolet light, for instance). When this happens, they're more susceptible to Saturn's gravitational pull and can begin pelting into the planet's atmosphere.

If that thought isn't alarming enough, add to it that in 2025 we will be able to see what it will look like when Saturn's rings are gone. That's because in the coming year Saturn will tilt in a way that, from the point of view of earthlings, creates a startling trick of eye and angle that makes the rings invisible. We will be able to look that hundred million years ahead, at least for a while. (The rings should be back in sight in the next couple of years, or, at any rate, let's hope so.)

One of the emerging truths of the cosmos is that some of the same laws of slow contingency and evolutionary drift, of vertiginously changing vantage points oscillating with incremental processes, that govern our paltry lives also affect the large stuff out there. What we see when we look up, like what we see when we look around, is not a well-ordered clockwork ticking its way toward eternity. It is a mix of short-lived illusions, long-lived evolutions, meaningless overlays—the constellations we love, after all, are just superimposed serendipities, stars at vastly different distances seen as one—lucky accidents and unforeseen developments. Some comfort can be found in the indifference of the cosmos to our stories; some other comfort lies in the thought that the cosmos tells stories much like our own.

It may turn out, for instance, that, as the physicist Lee Smolin has theorized, our universe has evolved on a Darwinian basis. Just as humans outcompete other creatures in the struggle for existence, some kinds of universes have outcompeted other kinds in the struggle for cosmological existence. Our universe, in this view, is a kind of successful predatory cosmos—it's one that worked. After all, if we see a lion dining on a zebra, we can be sure that there were previous lions who dined on lots more zebras than other lions did to give birth to this one. So it is, it would appear, with the universe itself. Its existence is a proof of the success of this precise kind of universe in the struggle for existence with other, alternate universes.

And then let's add to this confounding catalogue the truth that looking up at the night sky for comfort seems a little more implausible right now. As everyone knows, people in the neighboring state of New Jersey, right across the Hudson, have been spotting ominous squadrons of alien drones. Or, far more likely, spotting not ominous drones but familiar assortments of normal drones and passing airplanes and helicopters—and even planets and stars—that some people have spent too much time watching Fox News to have noticed before.

It is beyond strange that New Jersey was the site of another American panic to take place under uncertain skies in a deeply divided time, filled with looming fears of approaching fascism and America First ideology. That earlier incident was a result of Orson Welles's "War of the Worlds" radio

play, in 1938, which sent New Jerseyans, and not just New Jerseyans, racing into the streets in fear of an alien visitation.

The reversal, perhaps typical of our time, is that, whereas the Welles broadcast was a program that, heard indoors, thrust people in terror out-of-doors, our drone panic involves an outdoor occurrence that people race inside to make sense of. Or, rather, not to make sense of, with YouTube videos and social media amplifying, rather than easing, the panic.

Well, the rain it raineth every day, as Shakespeare noted, apparently even on Saturn. The cosmos remains too little comfort at this moment. In our skies as in our social lives, incremental change, like ring rain, seems to work slowly, while acts of frightening absolutism seem to happen overnight. Our hopes for the power of small transformations may be misplaced, while the power of the sudden apparition—The drones are here! The rings are gone!—seems overwhelming. Yet the slow force of small change really does alter Saturn's rings, and what looks like an astonishing, radical amputation may turn out to be the trick of an angle and a passing happenstance of positioning. The coming year will be an interesting one, and not just in the night sky. ♦

Adam Gopnik, a staff writer, has been contributing to The New Yorker since 1986. His books include "The Real Work: On the Mystery of Mastery."

In These United States

The Professional Health-Insurance-C.E.O. Nagger

Susan Frager, known as the PsychBilling Coach, helps therapists appeal coverage denials. Her job got more difficult after the killing of UnitedHealthcare's C.E.O., Brian Thompson.

By Carrie Battan

December 23, 2024

Illustration by João Fazenda

When Susan Frager tells people about her work, she is accustomed to receiving confused stares. Once, a taxi-driver in Ireland asked her about her job. "I don't know if I can explain it to you, because it doesn't exist in Ireland," she told him. Her spectacularly American job is to provide

coaching to therapists and psychiatrists struggling to navigate the labyrinthine process of billing health-insurance companies. She calls herself the PsychBilling Coach. The cabbie didn't get it.

On December 4th, the day that UnitedHealthcare's C.E.O., Brian Thompson, was murdered, Frager's job—typically perceived as a confounding paperwork puzzle—was suddenly linked to a nationwide obsession that had a vise grip on social-media and news outlets. Much of her work involves writing letters and e-mails to C.E.O.s of major health-insurance providers to appeal claims that have been denied. "I did not know Brian Thompson personally, but I wrote him letters all the time," she said over Zoom the other day. "I'm surprised about the shooting, but I'm not surprised at the reaction. Therapists are kind of, like, 'Yeah, we told you so.' " She went on, "I'm just fascinated by this sick system. I have found that, if you go to the exec level, they'll just give you what you want. But it takes a lot of guts." It was 8 *A.M.* in Washington State, where Frager lives, and a string of Christmas lights was twinkling in her living room.

Frager, who is fifty-eight years old, started her career with the intention of becoming a therapist. After getting licensed, she was hired by a company that required her to schedule thirty-six patients a week. (Many therapists consider twenty to twenty-five a full slate.) She was burned out after a year, and transferred into a more administrative role, reviewing other therapists' treatment reports. She learned the ropes of health-insurance billing, and eventually she became a full-time independent biller—someone in charge of processing claims for care providers.

As a biller, Frager noticed the insurance companies' increasingly sophisticated claim-denial tactics, even after a 2008 federal law was passed requiring them to treat mental-health care as essential in their coverage protocols. Over time, customer-service representatives were replaced with online portals and overseas call centers, resulting in a crushing sense of defeat among the clinicians and patients seeking reimbursement.

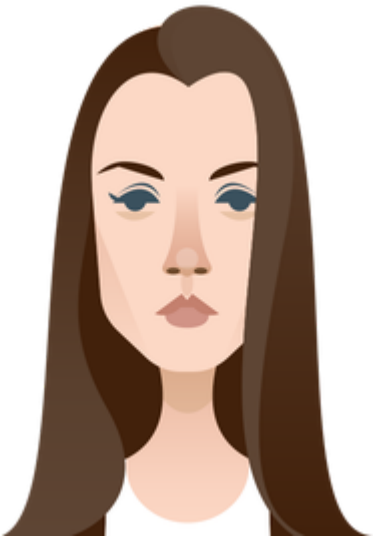
"Around ten per cent of the claims that are denied are ever appealed," Frager said. "They're making bank on the fact that people don't appeal." Filing appeals became more difficult after insurers started off-loading claim

reviews to A.I. “That’s when going to the C.E.O. is literally your only option,” Frager said. “I try to be a thorn in their side.”

In 2021, overwhelmed with clients and the red tape around the billing process, Frager revamped her business model and began coaching therapists, charging a hundred and fifty dollars an hour to help clients draft letters to C.E.O.s that hint at legal repercussions. If she suspects that a company is skirting the law, “I kind of lay out the facts, and I say, ‘Hey, you might want to consult corporate counsel. This may be a violation of blah blah blah. The penalties for this could be . . .’ And I list them.”

Though Frager chose not to pursue a new therapy license after moving to Washington, many of her consultations take on a therapeutic air. “I’ve known for quite some time that there’s been a lid on this hell that’s boiling and boiling,” she said. “I’ve been dealing with so much anger on the part of patients and clinicians, to the point where I’ve started to have some secondary trauma.” She has built up a large enough client roster to transition to her new subscription service, called the Rescue Biller, with which providers can easily access the information needed to solve dozens of types of problems.

One might assume that, with the new scrutiny on the health-insurance industry, chasing down reimbursements might become smoother. But after Thompson’s killing many insurance companies removed executive names and bios from their Web sites. “Now social media is cheering Luigi Mangione on, but it’s going to make my job a lot harder,” Frager said. “I need the names.” ♦



Carrie Battan began contributing to The New Yorker in 2015 and became a staff writer in 2018.

Wish List Dept.

Christmas Recalled, by the Feds

This year’s figurative lumps of coal include a “Star Wars” tree ornament, a knockoff Yeti tumbler, faulty training wheels, a mango-tangerine candle, and Finger-Ease Guitar String Lubricant.

By Adam Iscoe

December 23, 2024

Illustration by João Fazenda

If you don’t love this year’s loot, you’re not alone. Merchandise returns are expected to hit an all-time high—almost a trillion dollars’ worth—and many people already have a head start, per the advice of federal officials, who, in recent weeks, have recalled anxiety medications, dietary supplements, seventy-two thousand pounds of meat products—beef shanks, pork tongues—and sixty-two thousand eight hundred and seventy-two Kia EV6 vehicles

(model years 2022-24), which have been found to randomly lose drive power. A few other items that, with luck, were recalled before they made it under your tree:

— Hallmark Keepsake Christmas-tree ornaments (product code 2199QXE3341) portraying a “Star Wars” character named Cad Bane, who wears a brown hat, has a blue face, and, according to the federal government, might be covered in mold.

— Those knockoff Yeti tumblers (24 oz., with metal straw), sold by Wawa, which reportedly cause hand and mouth lacerations.

— Temu.com’s highly flammable “I ❤️ Dad” two-piece pajama sets for kids. (“Consumers should destroy the garments,” regulators advised.) Speaking of highly flammable: the lithium-ion batteries inside some Anker power banks (models A1642, A1647, and A1652) were found to overheat, explode, catch fire, and scald your hands.

Want to tidy up before the carollers arrive? Brookstone’s TurboVac Handheld Rechargeable vacuums (model BSBVAC301) have reportedly caused a few serious fires. Do you love the glow of candlelight? Trader Joe’s mango-tangerine-scented candles (*SKU*: 56879) and the lavender ones sold by Cracker Barrel (U.P.C.: 197712076826) have been found to emit “high flames” and “flames reaching excessive heights,” respectively. (Minor burns have been reported.) Colsen fire pits, which use an invisible alcohol that can suddenly and randomly be propelled onto your family and friends, have caused more serious burns. “At least six incidents have involved surgery, prolonged medical treatment, admission to burn treatment facilities, short-term disability, loss of function, physical therapy, or permanent disfigurement,” regulators said.

Remember those cool, vintage-y Smeg refrigerators which you’ve seen in design magazines? The doors on some of them (in the FAB38U line) have been falling off. That Wolf Wi-Fi-enabled, sixty-inch dual-fuel range with six burners and infrared charbroiler (cost: twenty-one thousand two hundred and eighty-five dollars) which your Friend Who Never Cooks bought this summer? Its infrared griddle might ignite all by itself. And several Brooke

wooden dining chairs (model W520-21), sold by Grand Rapids Chair Company, have recently broken.

Berkley Jensen-branded cedar hard-topped gazebos are picturesque and also, in four models, known to have their roofs dislodge during high winds. The 2017-21-edition Arctic Cat 9000 Series snowmobile features a turbocharged engine, QS3R Kashima-coated rear-track shocks, and a warning that its self-adjusting clutch can break into pieces, lacerating riders' toes. Bulldog's Magnum Biometric Pistol Vault (models BD4030B, BD4040B, and BD4055B)—"New 'User Friendly' Finger Print Reader Works Better W/ Moist, Dry, Dirty & Elderly Finger Prints"—can be easily opened by your husband, a nemesis, or, God forbid, your children.

Is Santa bringing a bike? You should know: the training wheels fell off of certain Co-op Cycles REV kids' bicycles (model years 2022-24), sold by R.E.I. Other supposedly dangerous playthings include: more than a hundred Sandford Family 6-Player Croquet Sets (the coating on the red-and-blue mallets contains toxic phthalates), Yaomiao children's silver tiaras with red rhinestones (may cause lead poisoning), a heart-shaped kids' ring set sold by Newmemo (product code X0034COQMP; warning: cadmium poisoning possible), and the bunny-ear headbands contained in OleOleToy's glow-in-the-dark toy set, because children might swallow the batteries ("The ingested batteries can cause serious injuries, internal chemical burns and death," regulators said).

Be advised: the handlebars on Droyd Fury youth A.T.V.s (model XW-A01) may lacerate your kid's head.

Did you think that some Finger-Ease Guitar String Lubricant, manufactured by Chem-Pak, Inc., would be a good stocking stuffer for your troubadour boyfriend? Guess again. The aerosol spray in one batch (model number 220B, lot code 106824) has been found to cause minor skin irritation.

If you find these products in your stocking, take caution but don't despair. The manufacturers of almost all of them will provide repairs, replacements, or refunds. ♦

Adam Iscoe, who began contributing to The New Yorker in 2021, has written about mental illness, contemporary art and film, private aviation, Afghanistan, climate change, mass incarceration, N.Y.C.

politics, cryptocurrency, boats, guns, restaurants, the U.N., and cannabis. In 2024, he received the Carey McWilliams Award.

Doppelgänger Dept.

Andy Cohen Gets His Face (and the Rest of Him) in Wax

After a year of being measured and sculpted, the Bravo host joins Lucille Ball, Beyoncé, and the Queen in the halls of Madame Tussauds.

By Zach Zimmerman

December 23, 2024

Illustration by João Fazenda

Can you make me thinner?" the reality-TV mogul Andy Cohen asked. It was a hot July day in 2023, and Cohen was in a Manhattan photo studio, awaiting a session in which employees of the Madame Tussauds wax

museum would take his measurements. He looked down at the purple T-shirt and yellow shorts he had on. “Sorry for my outfit,” he said. “Maybe I didn’t read the e-mail carefully.”

Eight technicians in black T-shirts buzzed around a table strewn with cameras; another held a small briefcase of glass eyeballs.

“Do I have to donate blood to Madame Tussaud?” Cohen asked, eying the eyeballs.

“We now own you,” Matthew Clarkson, a Tussauds marketing executive, replied. Clarkson advised a quick wardrobe change, and, once Cohen had put on a gray tank top and shorts, he was directed to sit in the blue swivel chair that had been U-Hauled over from his “Watch What Happens Live” set. After consulting a briefing sheet, Cohen sat and assumed the decreed position:

POSE: Sitting with right ankle crossed over left knee. Arms resting on the arms of the chair, holding interview cards in his RH [right hand]. Head slightly tilted to side, as per expression.

EXPRESSION: Smiling with his teeth, gaze looking out towards guests with a slight head tilt.

Once Cohen settled, the team descended like a Nascar pit crew to take his measurements: radius of cranium, distance between eyes, width of nostrils. Some used metal calipers, of the same type that the actual Marie Tussaud had employed in eighteenth-century France; others used a portable 3-D scanner, which Madame Tussaud did not.

Cohen sat perfectly still, although some celebrities have opted for more animated poses: Tony Hawk’s waxwork showed him in the air on a skateboard, which meant that, at his sitting, he had to lie on his back, legs thrust skyward, for two hours.

There’s no rigid formula for who gets a wax replica in one of the twenty-three Tussauds around the world. (Kylie Jenner has two; Margot Robbie, none.) Tussaud herself used attendance as the metric, a value system that

has endured. Last year, around ten million people visited a Madame Tussauds location. Only the very, very busy—or the dead—don't come in for a formal sitting. Jimmy Fallon and Beyoncé sat. The Queen sat nine times.

After thirty minutes, Cohen and his chair were rotated ten degrees and measured again. "The chair has a hard out," one of two publicists named Courtney said. Three hours later, the chair was hustled from the building, and Cohen followed soon afterward.

"It's funny that I'm being immortalized at my ice-cream-and-cheeseburger weight," he concluded.

Thirteen months later, in August, Cohen met his wax doppelgänger for the first time, at the Madame Tussauds on Forty-second Street. Since the measuring session, artists had begun creating the figure in London, in a four-story complex that turns out almost two hundred likenesses a year. There's a serene sculpting room for clay heads and fibreglass bodies; a steampunk-ish mold shop; cubicles for hairstyling and coloring which evoke an old-fashioned beauty salon; and a 3-D-printing room for accessories.

While Cohen was being fabricated there, his half-built companions included Timothée Chalamet, whose clay head (built three per cent larger than life-size, to allow for shrinkage) gazed from a plinth, and Selena Gomez, whose plaster head mold sat on the floor in the wax shop. A carton of sleeping bags was at the ready, not for all-nighters but to pad the finished figures when they're packed into coffin-like crates for shipping.

In Madame Tussaud's day, the wax statues actually broke news about what famous people looked like; her museum was the *People* magazine of its time. When the Revolution broke out, the mob marched wax heads through Paris on pikes. (Today's guests are less violent, though, in 2019, an upset guest did stomp on Diddy's decapitated head.)

When Cohen showed up to inspect (and approve) his wax image in New York, he found it propped between Lucille Ball and Fallon. "O.K., this is freaky," he announced, causing a museum employee to wince. ("Freaky"

and “scary” are words they don’t like to hear.) “Wow, you know what? I don’t look too bad.” He examined the Dolce & Gabbana shoes and other details. “They did a good job with the teeth,” he said. (He’d had impressions made at his dentist’s.) “They got the one dimple right.” He patted his wax head admiringly. “This is what I look like,” he said. Then he sat down next to himself, in a replica of the blue guest chair on his set.

Before the figure would go on display, it made its début on Cohen’s show, broadcast from the Bravo Clubhouse, downtown. After the taping, two Tussauds employees disassembled the wax man, first making sure that no civilians were in the room. In seconds, Cohen’s head and hands were removed. The rest of him was placed on a cart and rolled out to a loading dock.

The waxwork Cohen is hardy enough to delight would-be real housewives in perpetuity. The replica guest chair won’t last that long, owing to wear and tear from selfie-seeking visitors. As one of Cohen’s staff said, of the real chair, “We can only clean so much bronzer off of it.” ♦

Zach Zimmerman is a comedian and the author of “Is It Hot in Here (Or Am I Suffering for All Eternity for the Sins I Committed on Earth)?”

Up in the Sky

Searching for (Real?) New Jersey Drones at a Fake Alien-Landing Site

An amateur U.F.O. hunter at Grovers Mill, of “The War of the Worlds” fame, makes a shocking discovery.

By Robert Sullivan

December 23, 2024

Illustration by João Fazenda

What more can you say about the drones that are attacking—or, correction, appear to be attacking—New Jersey? You've heard all the theories: Iranian spy drones launched from a ship; drones launched by China; drones launched from locations known only to the President and the Pentagon (via the President-elect Donald Trump, who said, "Something strange is going on"). The friendlier theories have it that the drones are searching for something—e.g., a radioactive medical device that the state's Department of Environmental Protection had, in fact, reported missing, on December 5th. "I think it's probably us, listening and watching," Michael Melham, the mayor of Belleville, said. (The lost device, used for *CAT* scans, was found by FedEx.) But, if you head out into central Jersey on a cold, clear night to look for stuff, Melham's words resonate. "I never saw anything like it," the mayor said. "Dozens and dozens of drones, coming in from all different areas. We were swarmed last night."

The sky started looking unusual in November—first in central Jersey, along the Raritan River, then north, into the Highlands. Then drones were spotted in Monmouth County, where the sheriff told Fox News that he wants the legal authority to "de-drone." Drones were in the Pine Barrens, inching into Staten Island, and also in the Bronx. Local news posted videos that are either hard to discern or feature planes or helicopters landing somewhere in a state with close to five hundred places to land planes or helicopters. One North Jersey reporter likened his daily commute to the helicopter scene in "GoodFellas."

As thousands began to report seeing drones, some the size of cars, officials were stumped. Sometimes the reports were actually drones. But mostly not, and, when some police drones filmed real drones, the real drones seemed to vanish. A big issue: drones are everywhere. There are a million registered in the U.S., deployed by the police, and now delivering Jersey Mike's subs in Holly Springs, North Carolina.

In the gap between what authorities can verify and what they can't, more drone questions take flight, especially on WKXW, a.k.a. New Jersey 101.5. "We're talking drones," Bill Spadea, the host of the morning-drive show, said recently. "Why? 'Cause that's what everybody's talking about." In between ads for toenail-fungus treatment, people call in with sightings, and

Spadea asks drone questions. “Do you buy into the fact that they lost a nuclear package?” he asked Brian Fitzherbert, a Republican defense contractor from South Jersey.

“That one’s a tough one,” Fitzherbert said.

Spadea, who is running for governor as a pro-Trump Republican, is the former host of “Chasing News,” a defunct local Fox program; he frames drone sightings in anti-government ire. “As governor, I would order a state of emergency, put the national Air Guard on alert, and mobilize our state police to start chasing these drones down,” he said. “At that point, we’ll find out whose side our federal government is really on.”

“Ever since we got married, you don’t chase me around the tree trunk, halt suddenly, then continue chasing me around like you used to.”
Cartoon by Tom Toro

Sky-watchers note: New Jersey has a history of hoaxes. The Great Morristown U.F.O. Hoax—in which two men attached red flares to helium balloons, in 2009—had people seeing things for weeks, despite the police saying they were “reasonably certain . . . that they were red flares attached to a balloon.”

The most famous hoax centered on Grovers Mill, the hamlet that a scriptwriter randomly chose as the Martian-landing site in Orson Welles’s 1938 radio adaptation of “The War of the Worlds.” If you showed up at the fake landing site last week, you could feel a little something in the air, perhaps because the Defense Department had not yet set up the finely tuned

drone-detection devices being shipped into the state, a system invented to prevent bird strikes at airports.

On the town pond, house lights reflected in the water. The geese flew overhead, honking loudly, though invisible. If you had a telescope, you would have spotted a quick orange glow, low, at the dark edge of the woods, but then would have realized that it was only a cigarette held by a distant smoker. But somehow, before packing up, you could look in the telescope and see a giant incandescent sphere with three white orbs circling it: Jupiter, brighter even than the stars. ♦

Robert Sullivan is the author of books including "Double Exposure."

Reporting & Essays

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  By Rachel Syme | TV’s preëminent office guy has never worked a “regular nine-to-five,” but his years as a struggling actor taught him what it’s like to toil anonymously.
- **How Much Does Our Language Shape Our Thinking?**
  By Manvir Singh | English continues to expand into diverse regions around the world. The question is whether humanity will be homogenized as a result.
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  By Rachel Aviv | The celebrated writer’s partner sexually abused her daughter Andrea. The abuse transformed Munro’s fiction, but she left it to Andrea to confront the true story.

Profiles

The Hollywood Slog That Led Adam Scott to “Severance”

TV’s preëminent office guy has never worked a “regular nine-to-five,” but his years as a struggling actor taught him what it’s like to toil anonymously.

By Rachel Syme

December 23, 2024

Michael Schur, who cast Scott as a geeky office guy on the sitcom “Parks and Recreation,” says, “He’s memorable in unmemorable parts.”Photograph by Elizabeth Renstrom for The New Yorker

In late 2012, Dan Erickson was a twenty-eight-year-old aspiring screenwriter in L.A., working a dull job in office management at a door-parts company. Day after day, he sat at a computer monitor cataloguing hinges and cabinet pulls. He longed to escape the drudgery, but he needed the money; he was saddled with debt, and drove a dinky scooter to save on

gas. One morning, while walking into work, Erickson had a thought: What if I could skip ahead to the end of the day, and my work would magically be done? During his lunch breaks, he began turning this idea into a pilot for a high-concept workplace thriller called “Severance.” The result was part “The Office,” part “Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind.” A sinister corporation called Lumon Industries has invented a microchip brain implant that can bisect a person’s consciousness into an “innie” and an “outie”—an office self and a home self. Lumon employees who choose to have the implant installed work on a subterranean “severed floor” of Lumon’s headquarters. The chip is activated as they ride an elevator down, erasing their knowledge of their outside lives. Their home selves, in turn, know nothing of what happens within the office’s walls. The show’s protagonist, Mark Scout, is a severed man toiling in Lumon’s Macrodata Refinement Department, sorting numbers into arbitrary groupings. Outside the office, his outie is a bereft widower who chose to sever his mind just to get some emotional relief. At work, his innie is upbeat, affable, on task—and, like his severed co-workers, effectively trapped forever at the office, by design.

From the time Erickson began writing the script, he had the actor Adam Scott in mind for the role. Erickson had admired Scott’s performance in the hit NBC sitcom “Parks and Recreation,” as Ben Wyatt, a geeky budget adviser who ultimately wins the heart of the show’s protagonist, the bubbly bureaucrat Leslie Knope (Amy Poehler). “Parks,” along with the cult comedy series “Party Down,” about a group of failed actors turned cater waiters, helped establish Scott as an endearing version of TV’s working Everyman, whose sardonic veneer belies an inner core of hopeful sweetness. This métier has been defined, in part, by Scott’s physical appearance, which straddles the line between hunky and nondescript—medium height, slightly hangdog eyes, thick chestnut hair that juts like a cockatiel’s crest. As Michael Schur, the co-creator of “Parks,” put it to me, “He’s memorable in unmemorable parts.” “Severance,” an office dystopia, needed a guy regular enough to ground viewers in the rules of its heightened sci-fi world but intriguing enough to make you suspect that he’s more than a drone.

In 2015, the head of television at Red Hour, a production company run by the actor and director Ben Stiller, received Erickson’s pilot, which also

made the BloodList, an online compendium of promising unproduced horror scripts. Stiller, who had previously directed both madcap film comedies (“Zoolander,” “Tropic Thunder”) and a dark television drama (“Escape at Dannemora”), immediately took to the concept, and he and Erickson began revising the script in 2016. With no awareness of Erickson’s casting idea, Stiller told me recently, he, too, concluded that Mark should be played by Adam Scott. Stiller and Scott had worked together briefly in 2013, when Scott had a small role as an office bully in Stiller’s “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty,” and they’d kept in touch. Stiller, who spent his own early career feeling pigeonholed as a tightly wound straight man in comedies like “Meet the Parents” and “There’s Something About Mary,” knew that Scott yearned to play more dramatically challenging characters. “There are actors like Bryan Cranston who get to go to another place when people see them in a certain role,” Stiller told me, referring to Cranston’s reputational leap from playing a sitcom dad on “Malcolm in the Middle” to a ruthless drug lord on “Breaking Bad.” “That’s what I felt with this.”

In January of 2017, Stiller called Scott and pitched him on the show. Scott read the script and loved it. “It felt too good to be true,” he told me recently. “I pretty much assumed it would disappear.” It nearly did. Stiller sold the show to Apple, which was preparing to launch a new streaming service, AppleTV+, and the same qualities that had made Erickson and Stiller want Scott—the sense that he could be anyone, that he could almost be overlooked—made him a harder sell to Apple. Executives were hesitant to cast him. Stiller refused to commit to an alternative, and a year of developmental stalemate ensued. Finally, Stiller sent Scott a late-night e-mail: Apple was open to considering him, but only if Scott agreed to tape an audition for the part he’d thought he already had. Stiller feared that Scott would consider this demeaning and walk. But Scott, who is now fifty-one, spent the first fifteen years of his career as a struggling actor, and even after the success of “Parks”—and a part on the popular HBO drama “Big Little Lies” (2017)—he’d maintained a swallow-your-pride mind-set. When Scott read Stiller’s e-mail, he was in a rental trailer in Atlanta, completing a shoot as the host of a short-lived ABC game show called “Don’t.” Scott said, “I remember sitting there thinking, Am I in any position to say ‘No, thanks’ to audition for probably the best pilot I’ve ever read?” He wrote back to Stiller “in, like, five seconds,” and after reading for the part he secured the job.

“Severance” premièred in February of 2022, to wide acclaim. Amid a glut of bloated, forgettable streaming shows, the series stood out for its amusingly stilted tone and retrofuturistic mise en scène, and for the psychological dimensions of its cryptic puzzle-box structure. In this magazine, Naomi Fry called it “sci-fi for the soul.” At a time when the pandemic was prompting people to interrogate their relationships to their workplaces, the show had a fortuitous claim to the Zeitgeist. In the *Times*, James Poniewozik wrote that it might be “the first great TV show of the Great Resignation.” (Lumon’s sleek office looked like a cross between a mid-century library and an Apple store, and there was a piquant irony in a tech giant producing a show that lampoons corporate surveillance.) The ensemble cast included veteran stars, among them John Turturro, Christopher Walken, and Patricia Arquette, as the viperous severed-floor boss. But Scott’s subtly humane performance as Mark was what Stiller calls the “beating heart” of the story. In 2022, Scott received his first Emmy nomination, for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Drama Series.

Scott is temperamentally resistant to admitting he’s had success. When I first met him, for lunch at a hipster pizza place in L.A.’s Studio City, in November, two months before the première of “Severance” Season 2, he told me that he still worries he’s “not very good” as an actor. “And that’s not in a showy way, like how ‘impostor syndrome’ has become this buzzword now and most people are using it to humblebrag,” he added. In person, as in some of his best-known roles, he speaks with a deadpan delivery that can seem self-protective, a ward against humiliation. When I asked him the secret to achieving his impressive hair volume, he answered flatly: “Propecia.” His style is haute dadcore—slim-cut khakis, waxed field jackets, pristine sneakers. Last summer, after he turned fifty, he bought an electric Porsche Taycan, then fretted that it made him look like a middle-aged cliché. (Whether he wanted to show off the car or just his nice-guy bona fides, he offered to drive me to my friend’s house after lunch.) He described the lead-up to “Severance” Season 1, when billboards featuring his face popped up all over Los Angeles, as one of the most stressful periods of his life. Every time he comes out with a new project, he told me, “my default position is to think it will either make zero noise or be embarrassing.” Weeks later, worried that complaining about being on

billboards sounded “so gross,” he added, “The thing is, I live daily with the fear of anyone thinking *I* think I’m great.”

Ben from “Parks and Recreation” is an incorrigible pop-culture nerd, whose passions include nineties indie rock and Batman movies, complicated board games and fantasy series. In one scene that has become an Internet meme, an unemployed Ben spends three weeks making a three-second Claymation music video. When his close friend, played by Rob Lowe, suggests that he might be depressed, Ben brandishes a clumsy clay figurine of his likeness and asks, “Do you think a depressed person could make *this*?”

Ben’s interests and fixational tendencies were based partly on Scott’s. For the past decade, Scott has had a side gig as the co-host, with the comedian Scott Aukerman, of a popular music podcast, on which they (“Scott and Scott”) analyze the discographies of their favorite bands, one album at a time. The seasons have aggressively goofy names—“U Talkin’ U2 to Me?,” “U Springin’ Springsteen on My Bean?,” and the forthcoming “U Talkin’ Billy Joel 2 My E-Hole?”—but, as Jesse David Fox, who covers comedy for Vulture, put it to me, the humor of the show stems from Scott’s ability to “idle in neutral.” Fox added, “He’s a dude who loves this normie music, and he is unafraid to sound really, really boring or basic about it.” On the season “R U Talkin’ R.E.M. RE: ME?,” Scott divulged that in his R.E.M.-obsessed youth he’d been an extra in the music video for the band’s song “Drive.” In the time since, he’d scrolled through the video repeatedly, frame by frame, but could never find himself. A podcast listener trawled the footage and finally spotted him, beaming upward as Michael Stipe crowd-surfs overhead.

Scott grew up, in Santa Cruz, as the third and youngest child of divorced parents. He was what he described as a “chubby kid” who was bullied for his weight at school. He lived mostly with his mom, Anne, an artist and a special-education teacher, who didn’t own a television. But when Scott was nine years old his dad, Dougald, a biology professor at a community college, gave him a portable black-and-white TV set. Scott would watch shows at night in his bedroom—“The Twilight Zone,” “Late Night with David Letterman.” (“I found something so comforting in that dry, sardonic Midwestern stance,” he recalled.) After school, he’d loiter at a local video

store, “reading the backs of the VHS boxes,” and he cultivated a budding identity as a film connoisseur. In high school, he hung a photograph of Martin Scorsese in his locker. After seeing Spike Lee’s “Do the Right Thing,” he grew a goatee and wore a Knicks hat for an entire year.

Scott lost his baby weight and made the water-polo team—which, in Santa Cruz, he told me, was more socially advantageous than playing football. During his sophomore year, a drama teacher caught him peeking into the school theatre and encouraged him to try out for a play. He was loath to jeopardize his new shot at popularity, but he agreed, and soon became single-minded about acting. He appeared in school productions of “Blue Denim” and “Guys and Dolls” and let his studies slip, to the point where he was put on academic probation. As a senior, with the kind of outsized confidence endemic among high-school thespians, he declared that he was moving to Hollywood to make it as an actor.

Scott enrolled in the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, in Pasadena, an acting school he chose, in part, because eligible applicants needed only a 2.0 G.P.A. He dreamed of becoming what he called a “serious actor, like Robert De Niro or Al Pacino.” During his second year, Scott briefly tried using the surname Quardero, a shortened version of his mother’s Sicilian maiden name, thinking that it might lend him similar actorly gravitas. “Adam Scott,” he told me, “sounds generic *and* fake.” He scribbled his new autograph several times on a piece of paper, but felt “totally embarrassed” and abandoned the moniker. (Later, after he made the mistake of telling this story to his castmates on “Party Down,” they began shouting “Quardero!” any time he’d film a scene that was even “slightly sincere.”) For a Gen X-er raised on movies that skewered phonies and wannabes, the thought of being a poser was, in the end, far more offensive to his sensibilities than being potentially bland. They say a name can be a kind of destiny, and there was no use outrunning his. “I was clearly meant to play the befuddled beta male,” he said.

While at the Academy, Scott met Paul Rudd, a recent graduate who had landed a Nintendo commercial right out of school, making him the program’s resident golden boy. (Scott, with a lingering trace of high-school jock, calls his male actor friends by their last names—Hamm, Bateman,

Lowe. “*Everyone* knew Rudd,” he said.) The two men connected over their similar ambitions. Rudd told me, “We probably shared a bit of disdain for the fact that we were ‘struggling actors,’ and the clichés that come along with that.” Rudd did not have to struggle for long: in 1995, he scored his breakout role as the brainy love interest in the blockbuster teen comedy “Clueless.” Scott’s path, as Rudd delicately put it, “was a bit of a slower burn.”

Besides a brief stint as a busboy at Johnny Rockets, Scott told me, he has never worked a day job or a “regular nine-to-five.” But his early years in Hollywood gave him vivid experience of a certain kind of demoralizing grind. After finishing drama school, he signed with a small-time manager, and his life became a conveyor belt of auditions, rejections, and parts that ranged in size from bit to slightly less bit. He appeared on an MTV series called “Dead at 21,” and as a chest-wound victim on an episode of “ER.” He appeared in the background of a Tia Carrere music video, and made his film début, as an eighteenth-century dandy, in the horror sequel “Hellraiser: Bloodline.” He appeared in single episodes of the cop shows “NYPD Blue” and “High Incident.” He had a brief romantic arc as Neve Campbell’s crush on “Party of Five,” and a four-episode stint on “Boy Meets World.” “Maybe some of my peers thought ‘Boy Meets World’ was lame, or they were, like, ‘We don’t do TV,’ ” Scott told me, adding, “I’d do fucking *whatever*.” One especially humbling experience was an audition for the Western “Wild Bill,” starring Jeff Bridges. In the waiting room, Scott found dozens of other aspirants who looked like him, except they’d dressed for the part, in cowboy hats and riding gear, whereas he’d worn a flannel shirt and cut-off cargo pants. Flustered, he flubbed his read so badly that the director invited him to go again. When Scott left the room after his second try, he passed a young Matt Damon, waiting his turn. “I was, like, Yeah, Damon’s here, I’m not getting this one,” he said.

He owned a pager just so that his manager could alert him about auditions, and spent much of his time between jobs “sitting around in the dark, smoking cigarettes, and waiting for that beeper to go off.” He added, “I didn’t go on trips. I didn’t have any hobbies. I just stuck around and waited to be called to some rinky-dink office building to read a script.” He’d often go on five auditions a day, paying for gas with quarters he dug out from the

ashtray of his beat-up Oldsmobile. His father remembers visiting Scott around this time and driving around with him between casting calls. “He had to keep getting out to change his clothes on the side of the road,” Dougald said. Scott lived for a while in a “crappy, creepy apartment” in Hollywood, right across the street from the Scientology Celebrity Center. The church was notorious for luring in young industry strivers; one of Scott’s good friends had joined. “I never went in for a stress test,” Scott joked, referring to the church’s infamous intake assessment. “I was already pretty aware of my stress level at all times.” At one point, he did visit a psychic, asking her why he had yet to land a plum role.

In 1998, Scott met his wife, Naomi, a producer, at a bar on Sunset Boulevard. Early in their relationship, she asked Scott if he had ever considered doing something besides acting. “My mom always said you should learn accounting, just in case,” she told me. “So I asked him—pretty flippantly, I now realize—what he would do if acting didn’t work out. And I remember him *blanching*. He’d never thought about it.” Scott told me that he considered giving up only once, when he narrowly missed getting a part in the HBO drama “Six Feet Under” that ultimately went to Michael C. Hall. He’d made it down to the final three. Losing the job, he recalled, “was a body blow.” A few years later, he got a call that he was up for a small role in “The Aviator,” a film by Scorsese, Scott’s idol from adolescence, as a wisecracking press agent for Leonardo DiCaprio’s Howard Hughes. To prepare, Scott grew a pencil mustache, rented a zoot suit, and studied classic screwball comedies. The morning of his audition, Naomi left a Post-it note on Scott’s mirror that read “Good luck. You deserve this!” Scott got the part, but the film did not turn out to be the big, career-launching break that he’d hoped for. Recounting Naomi’s faith in him during his protracted fallow period, Scott broke down in tears. Then he groaned and shook his head rapidly, like a dog sloughing off bathwater. “I cannot fucking believe I cried,” he said. “*Jesus Christ*.”

One morning in November, Scott was at the headquarters of Great Scott, a production company that he and Naomi co-run. It occupies a wooden bungalow on the lot of Radford Studio Center, where “Parks and Recreation” was filmed. Scott and Naomi live close by, with their two teen-age children. They launched their company, originally called Gettin’ Rad, in

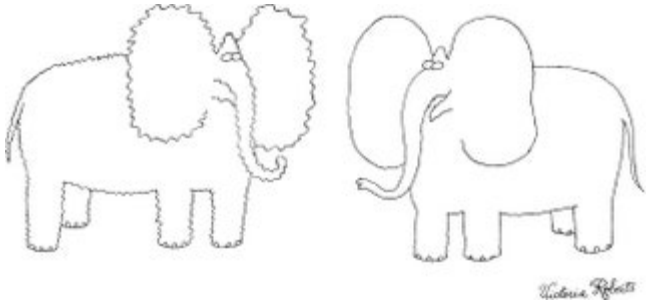
2012, with a series of classic-television spoofs for the Cartoon Network's Adult Swim block, and specialized in what Scott calls "quick and dirty" film and TV projects. They are currently producing an independent feature called "The Saviors," which stars Scott as a "coddled dum-dum" who rents his guesthouse out to a couple he begins to suspect might be terrorists. Scott met me at the door, wearing a spotless white baseball cap and Sperry Top-Siders—"like David Byrne wears in 'Stop Making Sense,' " he told me. "And, if you think that's an accident, you're insane."

Inside, in an office he shares with Naomi, two identical white desks faced each other. The room was decorated with framed photographs of Scott—on the set of "Severance," posing with his "Parks and Recreation" castmates in tuxedos, meeting Barack Obama—plus a large portrait of Barbra Streisand. "That's *all* Naomi," he said. A bookcase held a porcelain reproduction of his favorite snack, the kindergarten staple ants on a log. Scott told me that an assistant, who'd gifted him the sculpture, used to prepare it for him, but he was "mortified" when he caught her on the "Severance" set wearing surgical gloves and (in a task worthy of a Lumon employee) piping peanut butter onto celery sticks. He pointed out one of his most prized possessions: a lightsabre that was given to him by Mark Hamill as a surprise stunt on an episode of "Jimmy Kimmel Live." In a clip of the segment that went viral, Scott, visibly shaken, tells Hamill, "This really is one of *the* best moments of my life." Scott's fanboy identity can fit awkwardly with his rising stature in Hollywood. The night before he was supposed to shoot his first scene on "Severance" with Christopher Walken and John Turturro, he got so excited to see his name next to theirs on the call sheet that he stayed up until 4 *A.M.* The next morning, he overslept and arrived on set hours late. When he had the chance to meet Al Pacino, at a *Vanity Fair* Oscars party in 2022, he hid behind a potted palm tree. Pacino spotted him and approached, to say that he was a "Severance" fan.

Looking back, Scott said, he wonders if his reverence for dramatic actors made him miss the early signs of his affinity for comedy. He'd always loved the Albert Brooks film "Defending Your Life," a warmly funny fantasy about an ad executive in the afterlife. What if Brooks, rather than Pacino, had been his lodestar? Scott's acting career finally started to click when, with the help of Rudd's connections, he began migrating toward comedic

roles. Judd Apatow gave Scott a small part as a male nurse in “Knocked Up” (2007), which inspired the director Adam McKay, a friend of Apatow’s, to cast Scott in “Step Brothers” (2008), as an entitled antagonist of the titular siblings, played by Will Ferrell and John C. Reilly. At the age of thirty-four, Scott unearthed a new talent for portraying another familiar breed of dude, the smug asshole (a role he later reprised in both “The Good Place” and “Walter Mitty”).

In 2008, he got cast on “Party Down” when Rudd, who co-created the show, was too busy to star in it himself. “Party Down” had a colorful ensemble cast, including Megan Mullally and Jane Lynch, and was drolly astute about the service industry’s way of bringing the rich and famous into cringey contact with those who only aspire to be. But it got barely any attention during its initial two-season run on Starz; the series finale, which aired in the summer of 2010, received a 0.0 Nielsen rating. Over the following decade, however, the show acquired a cult following through DVDs and streaming, and a few years ago, bowing to fan demand, Scott’s company helped produce a six-episode reboot, released in 2023. Scott’s character, Henry Pollard, is a downtrodden actor who’d had a promising career until an appearance in a successful beer commercial torpedoed his credibility; he has since resigned himself to tending bar in a pink bow tie. In the show’s best running gag, strangers constantly accost him with the ad’s bro-y catchphrase: “Are we having fun yet?” Scott’s Henry is acerbic but attentive on the job—like Sam Malone from “Cheers” with a nihilistic streak—and has a flinty, self-critical edge informed by Scott’s own years of stymied ambition. He told me, “I realized that I could just pour all of my own insecurities into the character.” (Rudd, a sunny onscreen personality and a card-carrying movie star, might have been less persuasive in the role.)



“Have you gone all crinkly again or should I have my eyes checked?”
Cartoon by Victoria Roberts

Michael Schur, the “Parks” co-creator, was among the few people who actually saw “Party Down” when it first aired, and he thought Scott’s type would make a good love interest for Leslie Knope. Ben Wyatt appeared on a few episodes of the second season, and became a core character in the third. In a workplace of exaggerated oddballs, Ben served as the audience’s avatar, quietly tolerating his shambolic surroundings or glancing pleadingly at the camera like Jim in “The Office.” Poehler told me, of Scott’s fruitfully withholding presence as an actor, “He’s not an open-faced sandwich.” His chemistry with Poehler, as the base to Leslie’s kooky acid, made him a heartthrob among a certain breed of Type A viewer. BuzzFeed published lists swooning over the character, including “22 Reasons Why Ben Wyatt From ‘Parks And Rec’ Is Actually Your Soulmate.”

Scott said that his “comedy era” helped shape the way he thinks about acting over all. He recalled that, during a scene in “Party Down” in which Henry flirts with a fellow-caterer, played by Lizzy Caplan, the episode’s director, Fred Savage, told him that he was trying too hard: “He took me aside and was, like, ‘Listen, you’re the star of the show. You’re the guy that the audience is gonna go through this story with. You can just sit there and *listen* to this woman. You don’t have to do a bunch of stuff, or the audience is gonna get fried.’ ” Scott felt awakened to the comedic power of understatement. On “Severance,” many of the best scenes involve Mark’s innie—suit-clad, with a neat Beatles haircut—sitting passively at his desk, looking somehow both quizzical and nonchalant. His uncritical acceptance of Lumon’s eccentricities—the endless number sorting; the lame employee perks, including a midday “Music Dance Experience”; the fact that nobody can say what the company actually *does*—enhances their ominous absurdity. During Season 1, Mark’s innie peruses a sophomoric self-help book called “The You You Are,” and his face gradually brightens as he reads, his blunted mind blown open by dime-store enlightenment. When comedians play Everymen, their inner clowns often feel barely concealed. Jim Carrey’s suburban insurance salesman in “The Truman Show” is a milquetoast Mr. Rogers type until he discovers that his life is a televised ruse, after which Carrey lets loose flashes of Ace Ventura-ish schtick. Even Stiller’s meek male nurse in “Meet the Parents” eventually explodes like a shaken-up Sprite. By contrast, as Schur put it to me, Scott “is never over the top.” He added, of Scott’s performance as innie and outie Mark, “He had

the opportunity to go big, and play these two wildly distinct characters. But he stayed small."

This fall, Scott took on a new podcasting gig, as the co-host, with Stiller, of a show recapping "Severance" Season 1, called, plainly, "The Severance Podcast with Ben Stiller and Adam Scott." On a recent Sunday afternoon, at the L.A. headquarters of the podcast company Pineapple Street, in Hollywood, Scott and Stiller sat across from each other in a studio, preparing to tape the first two episodes. They'd decided, the night before, to fly in Erickson, who'd been out of town visiting family, so that he and Jackie Cohn, a "Severance" producer, could serve as special guests. Whereas both Stiller and Scott are wiry and shipshape in their appearance, Erickson was stubbly and dressed in baggy jeans and Blundstones—the standard uniform of the rumpled screenwriter. By the time he and Stiller began developing "Severance," he had quit the door-parts company and was doing Postmates deliveries on his scooter. The day he and Stiller pitched the show at Apple's L.A. office, Erickson was broke enough that he took a Postmates order on his way home. He joked to me later, "I bring the working-class clout to this team. I've got street cred that these guys could only ever dream of."

When recording began, Scott, leaning into a cantilevered microphone, introduced Erickson as "the big brain behind everything."

"They're bringing Dan's brain in, in a jar, right now," Stiller added. "There'll be some sort of a technology hooked up directly to his medulla oblongata, too, and there'll be a synthesized A.I. voice."

Erickson said, with a nervous giggle, "I'm not thrilled with the voice you guys have picked for me, for my brain, my jar brain. I was told that John Turturro's voice would be representing me."

The podcast was a useful promotional push, partly because "Severance" has the dubious distinction of taking one of the longest breaks in TV history between its first and second seasons. At the end of Season 1, the innies revolted against Lumon and found a way to inhabit their outies' bodies, leading Mark to discover that his wife is not dead at all—and that she has an innie at Lumon. "We ended on a cliffhanger," Stiller told me. "We didn't

really expect it to be a *three-year* cliffhanger." Fans have grown peevishly impatient. In response to an Indiewire article, from October, in which a "Severance" producer said that Erickson already had a vision "mapped out" for a Season 3 (which has yet to be confirmed), one Reddit commenter wrote, "The twist is that the thing they're doing at Lumon is actually writing the script for the show."

The wait for Season 2 was due, in part, to external factors, such as the W.G.A. and *SAG-AFTRA* strikes of 2023, which shut down the "Severance" set mid-production. But some of the delay appears to have been self-imposed. Erickson, however big-brained, is a first-time screenwriter. Stiller, whom Scott described as the "conjurer" of "Severance," has long had a reputation in Hollywood as an obsessively exacting auteur. Under the title of executive producer, he is intricately involved in the show's script development, directs most of the episodes, and oversees editing and postproduction. For the second season, the "Severance" team did rewrites up until the cameras rolled, and then additional rewrites and reshoots during filming—even if, according to an interview Erickson gave to *Vanity Fair*, it meant scrapping locations that were "built or partially built." According to Matthew Belloni, who covers Hollywood for the media startup Puck, and has followed the "Severance" delays, the drawn-out process caused the production to run "significantly over budget." At a reported twenty million dollars or more for each episode, per Bloomberg, it is one of the most expensive series currently in production—no small feat for a show set mostly in an office. (Stiller told me that "any numbers out there are totally inaccurate.")

Scott said that he approached the role of Mark "like a student asking for more homework," and in time Stiller anointed him a valued collaborator; he's credited as an executive producer on Season 2. Stiller told me, "I've come to rely on Adam a lot because we share the same taste, and ultimately it all comes down to taste." Scott would often join Stiller and Erickson in long Zoom sessions spent debating the philosophical and practical realities of the "Severance" world: What happens to innies when they retire? Do they know what America is? (Despite audience fears about red herrings, the men are adamant that there is good reason for Season 1's roomful of mysterious goats.) To signal Lumon employees' transformation from outie

to innie, Stiller came up with the idea of an eye flutter. Scott worked on the movement for weeks, finally landing on an uncanny approach where his pupils roll into his head while his jaw goes slack.

Scott, who considers Stiller both his boss and a friend, justified the show's painstaking development process as necessary for quality control. "When something is being rewritten and reworked and re-approached and then torn down and rewritten, I think that's all part of the path for getting it to be as good as possible," he said. Erickson sounded more battle-worn. "I don't think Ben would mind me saying that a part of the reason that it took so long is Ben is a perfectionist," he told me, and added that he and Stiller sometimes "disagreed on what perfect meant." He went on to emphasize that any conflict was "always in good faith," but said, "There are times where we'll have written seven episodes, and we'll have a conversation, and Ben or somebody else will say, 'Well, I think this detail could be better,' and I'd sort of say, 'Wait a second, we'd have to go back and rewrite every other episode'—and often we did. As months are ticking by, that was a scary process to have to go through." (Later, in an e-mail to *The New Yorker*, Erickson amended his previous statements, writing, "It would be inaccurate to say that production delays had to do with Ben Stiller's super power of being a perfectionist." Stiller, for his part, told me that the creative process was not "anything outside of the norm" for a big sci-fi show.)

According to Stiller, Season 2 involved a hundred and eighty-six days of shooting. "Severance" takes place in bleak midwinter, and most of the exterior scenes were shot in the bitter cold in Canada and upstate New York. For the office scenes, the cast spent months at a time inside a windowless set, on a sound stage in the Bronx, wandering through a labyrinth of blinding-white Lumon hallways. Furthering the sense of dislocation, the crew often shifted halls around during the day, so that the actors would sometimes get lost and have to call out for help. Scott told me that he would regularly request ten or more takes per scene—"As many as they'll give me before we absolutely have to move on." But many people told me that he was also a leavening presence on set. Britt Lower, who plays Helly, Mark's co-worker and burgeoning love interest, said that there were strict standards around the tidiness of the innies' hair styles. ("Flyaway hairs drive me crazy," Stiller told me.) "Adam and I sort of rebelled against that," Lower

said. “At the very end of every day, we’d get together and mess up our hair.”

After the podcast recording, we walked down Hollywood Boulevard, past the Walk of Fame, to where Scott’s electric Porsche was valeted, and drove to the Chateau Marmont hotel to have dinner with Stiller. As the three of us sat down on the candlelit back patio, Stiller, the son of the late character actors Jerry Stiller and Anne Meara, said, “I’ve been coming to this hotel my whole life. I’m actually staying in the room my parents used to stay in.”

“See, *my* memory of this place is that I once played a bad guy here in an Aaron Spelling pilot called ‘Crosstown Traffic,’ about hot undercover cops,” Scott said, adding, “It obviously did not get picked up.”

Two of Stiller’s parents’ famous TV projects—“Rhoda,” in which Meara played the titular character’s friend Sally, and “Seinfeld,” in which Jerry Stiller played George’s dad—were filmed at Radford Studio Center, where Scott’s production office is now housed. When I’d visited Scott there, he’d told me that he liked to eat his lunch on the fake New York back lot left over from “Seinfeld.” “Ben used to come here when he was a kid,” he’d said. “And now I’m here. Crazy.” Earlier this year, following in the Stiller vein, Scott announced that he’ll be making his directorial début, with “Double Booked,” an Airbnb-set thriller in which he’ll also star. Kathryn Hahn, who played Scott’s wife in “Step Brothers,” and spent years relegated to sidekick roles before starring in and producing shows including “Mrs. Fletcher” and “Tiny Beautiful Things,” told me that when she and Scott run into each other now they exchange “an unspoken cat-that-ate-the-mouse grin.”

Stiller and Scott both ordered Bibb salads, Diet Cokes, and red meat—a burger for Scott, a steak for Stiller. At some point, conversation turned to one of the first scenes of the “Severance” pilot, in which Mark’s outie sits weeping in his Volvo in the Lumon parking lot. They’d started filming the season in November of 2020, a few months after Scott’s mother died, of A.L.S. To help Scott access his grief, Stiller, who’d recently lost his father, talked Scott through the scene over a walkie-talkie.

Scott recalled, “He said, ‘I want you to split yourself open.’ ” The heaving sobs captured in the sequence were real.

Stiller, who noted that he connected to “Severance,” in part, for its “inherent sadness,” said, “That’s when I knew the show could work.”

Even if the creators’ vision is meticulously mapped out in advance, it’s always a risk when a puzzle-box show gets extended: Can the sense of carefully calibrated suspense be sustained? Will the pieces all fit? So far, “Severance” does not seem liable to become another “Lost,” muddling its way through new plotlines as the mystery expands to fill new seasons. I’ve seen Season 2, and it retains many of the first season’s taut pleasures, partially owing to Scott’s ability to differentiate between Mark’s two states of being even as the innie and outie worlds begin to converge. Scott told me that when he was first conceptualizing the character’s divided consciousness he thought, “The innie is everything I like about myself, and the outie is everything I hate about myself—like, a guy who thinks everything is bullshit and keeps everyone at an arm’s distance.” In the new season, he worked to solidify the micro-physical distinctions that define the two Marks—his innie bright and unfettered in the shoulders, his outie shuffling and affectively sanded down. (As Lizzy Caplan put it to me, Scott has a strange ability to seem like “both the youngest and oldest middle-aged person in the world.”) He hired a vocal coach to master switching between the innie’s obliging tone and the outie’s aggrieved one. Scott’s other workplace underdogs eventually escape their complacency. In “Party Down,” Henry decides that he is going to quit catering and give acting one more shot. In “Parks and Recreation,” Ben ends the show as a congressman and a married father of three. The Mark of Season 2 has snapped out of his semi-lobotomized state. Now a man (or, technically, still two partial men) on a mission to find his wife, he is not idling in neutral; even his desk-jockey side has action scenes. Filming one such sequence, Scott suffered a concussion on set, for a take that made it into the final cut. “A hundred and eighty-six days—it’s a lot,” he told me. “I’m there all the time. And I like being there all the time. It’s all I’ve ever wanted, to be there *all the time*.” ♦

Rachel Syme is a staff writer at The New Yorker. She has covered Hollywood, style, and other cultural subjects since 2012. She is the author of "Syme's Letter Writer," about the joys of handwritten correspondence.

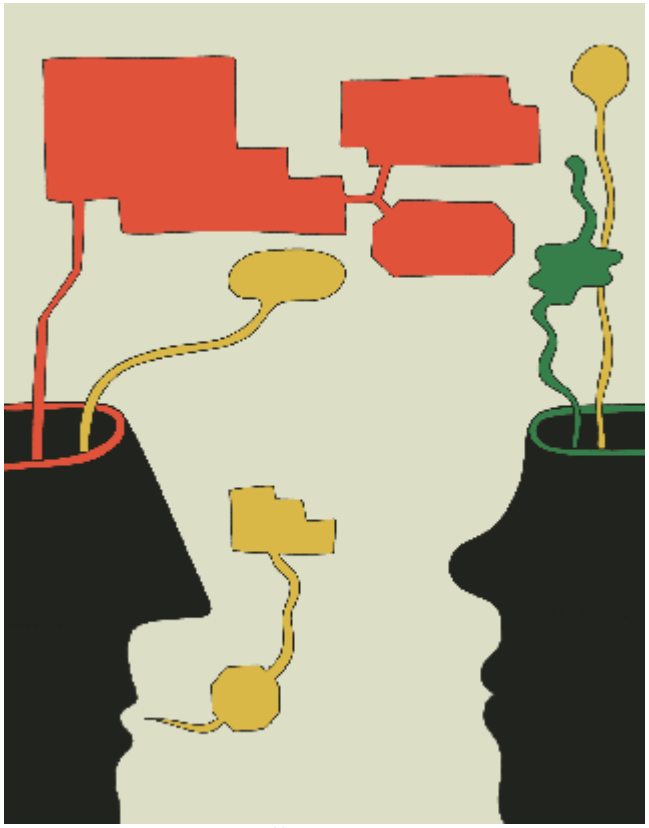
Annals of Inquiry

How Much Does Our Language Shape Our Thinking?

English continues to expand into diverse regions around the world. The question is whether humanity will be homogenized as a result.

By Manvir Singh

December 23, 2024



One multilingual scholar has compared the different languages she speaks to distinct personalities bickering for the spotlight.Illustration by Henri Campeã

In 2010, a new goddess, about two feet tall and cast in bronze, was set to appear in a village within the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. She looked nothing like the deities of Hindu mythology. In lieu of Durga's bright saris or Lakshmi's opulent jewels, she wore a wide-brimmed hat and the robes of

the Statue of Liberty. She wasn't riding a lion or a swan; she stood on a desktop computer. Instead of a sword or a spear, she held a pen in one hand and the Indian constitution—with its promise of legalized equality—in the other. Her name was Angrezi Devi, the Goddess English, and she was intended for India's Dalits, or "untouchables."

"The Goddess English can empower Dalits, giving them a chance to break free from centuries of oppression," her creator, the prominent Dalit writer Chandra Bhan Prasad, declared. He saw English as an immensely valuable resource for the Dalit. "Will English-speaking Dalits be expected to clean gutters and roads?" he asked. "Will English-speaking Dalits be content to work as menials at landlords' farms?" An atheist, he designed the goddess in order to infuse English into the Dalit identity, propelling his people from a feudal subaltern standing to the ranks of the modern and independent. "Learning English has become the greatest mass movement the world has ever seen," he wrote.

He had a point. An estimated 1.5 billion people—roughly one in every five human beings—speak English, making it the most widely used language in the history of humanity. With an official status in the U.N., *NATO*, the W.T.O., and the E.U., it reigns as the dominant "lingua franca of the world," Rosemary Salomone writes in "The Rise of English: Global Politics and the Power of Language" (Oxford). Like other colonial tongues, it spread first through "conquest, conversion, and commerce," she notes, but its spread today is powered by a fourth process, what Salomone calls "collusion." Around the globe, people pursue English and the opportunities it promises. "Korean mothers move their children to anglophone countries to learn in English," Salomone observes. "Dutch universities teach in it. *ASEAN* countries collaborate in it. Political activists tweet in it."

The expansion of English naturally evokes angst and opposition. Salomone, a law professor at St. John's University, focusses on the political and legal tensions that accompany the diffusion of English. France, for example, fought for decades against English's dominance in the European Economic Community, and then in the E.U. "If, with the arrival of the English, French no longer were the first working language in the Community," the French President Georges Pompidou warned, in 1971, "then Europe would never

be totally European.” Nearly half a century later, in 2018, President Emmanuel Macron declared English to be “too dominant in Brussels” and vowed to ramp up efforts to “teach French to European officials.”

In part, such apprehension reflects unease about the erosion of various cultural identities. Yet many researchers find another reason to worry about the spread of English: the prospect of cognitive hegemony. Languages, they argue, influence how we perceive and respond to the world. The idiosyncrasies of English—its grammar, its concepts, its connection to Western culture—can jointly produce an arbitrary construction of reality.

Speculation about these effects is widespread. Prasad, for instance, thinks there’s a kind of egalitarianism that’s inherent in English and missing from its Indian alternatives. “Hindi is full of caste biases,” he told me. “Idioms, phrases, sayings, jokes, songs belittle Dalits. How can any Dalit take pride in the so-called native tongue?” Other intellectuals, such as the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, maintain that English serves as yet another tool to entrench British and American culture. Pierre Bourdieu, the celebrated French sociologist, voiced a common concern when, in 2001, he wondered if “it is possible to accept the use of English without the risk of one’s mental structures being anglicized, without being brainwashed by linguistic patterns.” Was he right to worry?

Everyone can agree that language affects thought. If I told you that I have a pet badger and twenty-two canaries, you’d have new thoughts about my home life. The real question is whether a language itself has features that affect how its speakers think: Does conversing in Spanish for a month make objects seem more gendered? Does speaking English rather than Hindi make you less casteist, and maybe more capitalist?

Today, questions like these tend to be associated with Benjamin Lee Whorf, a fire-insurance analyst who studied linguistics at Yale in the nineteen-thirties. History has been both kind and unkind to him. On the one hand, his name has become synonymous with a theory about how language affects thought, though it predated him by at least a century. On the other hand, the version of the theory often attributed to him is so radical that few modern scholars would want the honor, anyway.

Whorf laid out his views in an essay titled “The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language.” Contrasting the way time is discussed by English speakers (as an object that can be quantified and divided) and by Hopi speakers (as a more continuous process, or so Whorf believed), he suggested that linguistic differences contributed to differences in how each group understands temporal flow. Despite the boldness of his claims, he was also cautious, proposing merely “traceable affinities” between language and behavior, nothing ironclad, and stressing that he was “the last to pretend that there is anything so definite as ‘a correlation.’ ”

Unfortunately, that nuance has usually been forgotten. Whorf has since become the mascot of linguistic determinism—the position that language is the ultimate arbiter of thought. Whorfianism, as it’s sometimes called, quickly dissolves into absurdities: if your language lacks a proper future tense, tomorrow will be inconceivable; if your language lacks certain emotion words, you will never feel them. Preverbal infants, orangutans, and all other creatures incapable of language are, by implication, powerless to perform many basic mental operations.

Whorfianism has been the target of relentless discrediting. Some of the most striking counterexamples involve individuals unable to produce or comprehend language. Take the case of Brother John, a fifty-year-old French Canadian who suffered from spells of aphasia. Even during periods when he had lost the faculty of language, he mostly got along fine, according to a 1980 study published in *Brain and Language*. He could manipulate complex tools, follow instructions he’d been given beforehand, and sometimes succeed in hiding his impairment from others. The Harvard cognitive scientist Steven Pinker has had much to say about Whorfian fallacies. He has shown how common experiences—like searching for the right word or inventing a new term for an existing intuition—invalidate the idea that language always precedes thought. Writing in “The Language Instinct” (1994), he concludes that Whorfianism is “wrong, all wrong.”

That’s a fair assessment if we’re talking about the strongest interpretation of Whorf’s arguments. Yet the picture emerging from the latest research is more complicated. Whorfianism is wrong—but it isn’t *all* wrong.

“Each of my languages comes not only with its own patterns of sound and methods for arranging words but also with its social habits and its judgments about what to forgive, what to condemn, and what to revere,” Julie Sedivy writes in “Linguaphile: A Life of Language Love” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). Born in what was then Czechoslovakia, Sedivy grew up in a “linguistic bedlam,” hopping between Austria and Italy before settling down in Montreal. She was acquainted with five languages by kindergarten and went on to study how people learn and process language. Science suffuses her book, yet, as a way of knowing, it coexists with experience; the resulting volume isn’t so much a standard pop-sci book as it is a rhapsodic meditation on loving, taming, and forgetting words. She senses that distinct cognitive styles are tied to the different languages she speaks, comparing them to personalities bickering for the spotlight. “I am a cacophony of voices, influencing each other, at times assisting each other, at times getting in each other’s way, always vying for turf,” she writes.

Testimony from polyglots like her has invited a more sophisticated take on Whorf’s ideas. What if language is less like a yoke than like a wind, nudging us in various directions? This moderate approach, which is more in line with Whorf’s original perspective, is known as “weak Whorfianism” or, paradoxically, neo-Whorfianism.

Some neo-Whorfian studies have already become classics. One led by the psychologist Jonathan Winawer and published in 2007 took advantage of the fact that, where English has the word “blue,” Russian has two basic color terms: *goluboy* (lighter blue) and *siniy* (darker blue). Russian speakers in the experiment proved faster than English speakers at distinguishing shades that corresponded to that lexical distinction.

Other such studies exploit variations in, for instance, how languages talk about temporal duration (long and short, as in English, or big and small, as in Greek) or the ordering of events (B following A, as in English, or B below A, as in Mandarin), testing whether those differences correlate with performance on experimental tasks. Many linguists remain unimpressed. In the anti-Whorfian polemic “The Language Hoax” (2014), John H. McWhorter, of Columbia University, describes this research as mostly

showing “eensy-weensy differences” of the sort that “one might find in the cosseted context of a psychological experiment.”

Caleb Everett, an anthropologist and psychologist at the University of Miami, arrives at another conclusion in “A Myriad of Tongues” (Harvard). Like Sedivy, Everett was reared in a morass of languages. The son of the missionary turned linguist Daniel Everett, he spent much of his childhood in Brazil. His parents intermittently took him to the Amazon to stay with the Pirahã, a people legendary for speaking a language devoid of words for numbers and colors, which contributed to his lifelong fascination with linguistic and cognitive diversity.

Everett’s book is about the surprising ways that languages differ and about the significance these differences may have. He starts by covering Whorf’s favorite topic: time. English speakers instinctively split time into categories of past, present, and future, but many others don’t. Karitiâna, an Amazonian language Everett studied two decades ago, has two tenses, future and non-future, while another Amazonian language, Yagua, seems to have eight, including for events that occurred between a month and a year ago, for events that are about to happen, and for events expected to happen further into the future.

More relevant for Whorfianism are the metaphors people use to organize time. For English speakers, time is understood spatially, with the past typically “behind us” and the future “ahead.” Aymara, an Andean language spoken by millions of Indigenous Bolivians and Peruvians, likewise uses space to talk about time but favors a metaphor about sight. In Aymara, *nayra*, or last year, translates literally to something like “the year I can see.” The past, visible, thus stands in front of the speaker, while the future, unseeable, looms behind. *Ancha nayra pachana*, or a long time ago, can roughly be translated as “a time way in front of me.” When researchers analyzed videos of people chatting, they noticed that the metaphors inform gesture, with fluent Aymara speakers pointing backward to talk about the future and forward to talk about the past. Spanish speakers from the same region show the opposite patterns, suggesting that language configures how speakers map time onto space.

Aymara speakers are far from unique here. Speakers of Lisu, a Tibeto-Burman language, also talk about the future as lying behind them and the past as in front of them. Everett tells us that Yupno, a language spoken in the eastern New Guinea highlands, invokes a three-dimensional analogy. Like a gravity-defying river, the future is said to flow up mountains, while the past flows downhill. As with Aymara speakers, the metaphor manifests in gesture: how Yupno speakers point depends on the orientation of the nearest mountain range. Some cognitive scientists have assumed that all humans, whatever their local quirks, reason about time using spatial metaphors, yet at least one language, Tupi-Kawahíb, evidently lacks any mapping between time and space—not left to right, back to front, or downhill to uphill. When Tupi-Kawahíb speakers were asked to organize objects to chart out the seasons of a year, researchers struggled to understand the arrangements the speakers had created. More than communication tools, languages help concretize the abstract, providing frameworks for making sense of concepts as fundamental as time.

Of the many topics Everett covers—which include space, number, and object categorization—the most fascinating is probably sensory vocabulary. Western writers have long assumed that human beings have an inherently limited capacity to describe some senses, with olfaction ranking as the most elusive. We can speak abstractly about colors (red, blue, black) and sound (high, low, loud). With smell, though, we usually give "source-based" references ("like cut grass"). But the cognitive scientist Asifa Majid, now of Oxford, and the linguist Niclas Burenhult, of Lund University, in Sweden, have shown that this needn't be the case. They discovered that the Jahai, hunter-gatherers living at the border of Malaysia and Thailand, have a rich vocabulary of abstract smell words. One Jahai term, *itpit*, refers to the "intense smell of durian, perfume, soap, *Aquillaria* wood, and bearcat," Majid and Burenhult report. Another, *cnes*, applies to "the smell of petrol, smoke, bat droppings and bat caves, some species of millipede, root of wild ginger, leaf of gingerwort, wood of mango tree." Subsequent research has found large olfactory lexicons in at least forty other languages, among them Fang, Khmer, Swahili, and Zapotec.

It makes a difference. In a study that Majid and Burenhult conducted a decade ago, Jahai and English speakers were asked to identify and name

twelve smells, including cinnamon, turpentine, gasoline, and onion. English speakers, despite their greater familiarity with the odors, faltered. They mostly gave rambling source-based answers and showed almost no agreement among themselves. One English speaker presented with cinnamon responded, “I don’t know how to say that, sweet, yeah; I have tasted that gum like Big Red or something tastes like, what do I want to say? I can’t get the word. Jesus it’s that gum smell like something like Big Red. Can I say that? Ok. Big Red. Big Red gum.” But Jahai speakers named smells with relative ease. They used abstract terms and were much more likely to converge in their responses. In a follow-up study, wine and coffee experts performed just as badly as novices when given non-wine and non-coffee smells, suggesting the Jahai’s enhanced abilities aren’t simply a result of practice in attending to aromas. Rather, the regular exercise of sorting the olfactory world with abstract labels seems to change how the Jahai understand all smells, familiar and otherwise.

The work on olfaction is a tiny part of a large research program, much of it headed by Majid, that has overturned the scientific consensus on how humans talk about the senses. At least since Aristotle, many writers have posited a sensorial hierarchy: seeing and hearing are said to be the most salient to our minds and the easiest to verbalize, followed by taste, touch, and finally smell. Contesting that thesis, Majid and her colleagues have developed a measure called codability, which captures how easily a sense is expressed. Codability is high when members of a language community converge on one or two abstract labels to describe a stimulus; ask English speakers to tell you the color of a stop sign, and you’d expect high codability. It’s low, in contrast, when people provide diverse, protracted, and ad-hoc descriptions—as when, say, you ask English speakers to describe the smell of a rutabaga.

Majid and her team measured codability for the five senses in twenty far-flung languages, including three unrelated sign languages. English, the only spoken Western European tongue in the sample, was also the only one to exhibit high codability for sight and hearing and low codability for everything else. “Rampant variation” reigned, the researchers found. English speakers floundered when talking about touch (in response to sandpaper, felt, rubber, etc.), but speakers of certain other languages—such

as Dogul Dom, in Mali, and Siwu, in Ghana—tended to agree in their descriptions. In many languages, including Lao, Farsi, Yucatec, and Cantonese, taste turned out to be the most expressible sense.

As researchers look beyond English, close relatives (like Spanish and German), and other so-called behemoth languages (like Mandarin and Arabic), they encounter differences long thought impossible. Twenty years ago, abstract smell vocabularies seemed ridiculous. Burenhult studied the Jahai language for a decade, even writing a doctoral dissertation on its grammar, before Majid asked him to run a battery of tasks that revealed Jahai speakers' exceptional way of talking about smell. Other linguistic features once assumed to be universal—such as tenses, personal pronouns, and even, potentially, a distinction between nouns and verbs—have turned up missing when greater numbers of languages have been scrutinized. Likewise, we've enlarged our sense of the metaphors used to map concepts. English describes acoustic pitch using a verticality metaphor (high-low), but a study by experts in musical cognition found that people around the world use at least thirty-five other mappings, such as small-big, alert-sleepy, pretty-ugly, tense-relaxed, summer-winter, and—in the case of some traditional Zimbabwean instrumentalists—"crocodile" (low pitch) and "those who follow crocodiles" (high pitch).

Everett's book revels in such discoveries, which multiply the conceivable differences separating languages. In a recent review of the research literature, the language scientist Damián E. Blasi, along with Majid and others, listed the many cognitive domains that English seems to affect, including memory, theory of mind, spatial reasoning, event processing, aesthetic preferences, and sensitivity to rhythm and melody. Languages help shape the worlds we inhabit less through a few grammatical rules than through countless subtle distinctions. John McWhorter might have been right that the effect of any single linguistic feature is minor. But, as Isaac Newton realized when developing calculus, innumerable tiny effects create large-scale patterns.

Prasad's Goddess English was meant to débat on October 25, 2010. She was supposed to inhabit a temple of black granite, its walls engraved with scientific formulas and the names of great English writers. But the big day

never came. The district government blocked the temple's construction. Prasad recalls a local official hinting that the decision came from Kumari Mayawati, then the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh. Mayawati, who is herself Dalit and who had statues made in her honor while in office, enjoys an almost mythical status in the Dalit community. An Indian journalist reported rumors that Mayawati had blocked the temple because she wanted only "one Dalit goddess in the state." After she left office, in 2012, Prasad hoped construction on the temple might resume. It didn't. Five years later, Uttar Pradesh elected Yogi Adityanath, a monk and a Hindu nationalist from the Bharatiya Janata Party, as its new chief minister, and the prospect of a shrine to English may have dimmed further.

The Bharatiya Janata Party, or B.J.P., has ruled India since Narendra Modi took power, in 2014. The third of a tea seller's six children, Modi is a departure from the pedigreed, English-speaking bureaucrats who governed India for most of its post-independence history. He rejects the secular, hyper-diverse vision of the country set forth by Gandhi and Nehru, and has been intent on reshaping India into an explicitly Hindu nation. Language has been central to that project. English is depicted as a symbol of the country's imperialist past and disconnected élites, while Hindi, the Sanskrit-derived "language of the masses," has been recast as an avatar of common identity—despite the fact that only about forty per cent of Indians speak Hindi or one of its many dialects.

Although Prasad disagrees with the ideologues of the B.J.P. about the proper place for English in India, they all agree that English is powerful. Putting aside the economic opportunities it unlocks, they see the language as a psychosocial force—one that is rooted in its foreign origins and that, rather like Hinduism's divine triumvirate, can create, sustain, or destroy social orders. Bourdieu's suggestion that the spread of English represents a form of cognitive hegemony is one that Prasad and the B.J.P. accept, whether as a blessing or as a curse.

Yet we can attend to the recent research into cultural psycholinguistics without ascribing so much authority to English. The language is far less unitary than we often suppose. The version of English that the B.J.P. seeks to weaken differs considerably from whatever the British first imposed

some two centuries ago. It's a language enamored with the progressive tense (as in "I am going to school every day"), whose pronunciation is transfigured by retroflex consonants (say "dog" but curl your tongue back until it resembles a fishhook) and unaspirated voiceless plosives (say "kick" without expelling air), and in which "Kindly do the needful and prepone our meeting to tomorrow itself, na?" is a typical request. Honorifics like "ji," "sir," and "sahib" are mobilized to accommodate local nuances of deference. After centuries spent fermenting in the subcontinent, English has turned Indian.

Such local reworking is ubiquitous. In Singapore, English bred with Malay, Tamil, Hokkien, and other Asian languages to produce that *lah*-filled tongue known as Singlish, a creole that nonlocal English speakers struggle to follow. Seven years ago, the BBC began offering news online in West African Pidgin English, which is spoken by more than a hundred million people and influenced so strongly by local African tongues that some linguists consider it tonal. There are countless examples like these, in which English scaffolding has adapted to the demands and the cultural heritage of its speakers, from Jamaican patois to Tok Pisin, of New Guinea. For that matter, few tongues exemplify the ever-evolving nature of language better than so-called Standard English, which, after millennia of conquest, conversion, and commerce, has acquired a vocabulary that is roughly seventy per cent non-Germanic and a simplified grammar that facilitates its spread among adults.

Bourdieu was right that linguistic patterns affect us. Yet, going by the best ethnographic and social-science research, his fear of brainwashing was overblown. If ways of speaking can alter ways of thinking, ways of thinking can alter ways of speaking as well. The dynamic interaction between the two is part of the ongoing story of how we try to make the world intelligible to us—and to make ourselves intelligible to one another. Talk about the human conversation. ♦

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A Reporter at Large

Alice Munro’s Passive Voice

The celebrated writer’s partner sexually abused her daughter Andrea. The abuse transformed Munro’s fiction, but she left it to Andrea to confront the true story.

By Rachel Aviv

December 23, 2024

Andrea was nine when the abuse began. She later wrote that Alice “loves and protects the most destructive person of my life.”Photograph by Andrea Modica for The New Yorker

“I am a writer or used to be a writer,” Alice Munro wrote in 2014, in one of the last stories she tried to compose. A year earlier, she had won the Nobel Prize in Literature. But she had Alzheimer’s and had been in decline for several years. Her partner of four decades, Gerald (Gerry) Fremlin, had recently died, and she was living near her daughter Jenny, in Port Hope,

east of Toronto. “I’m a writer, as I said, and I suppose that sticks for a while even though you don’t ~~due~~ ~~do~~ due it anymore,” she wrote, in shaky longhand. “I am going to write what happened yesterday, though at first I did not mean to, didn’t think of it, as I don’t anymore.”

The day before, Alice had been waiting outside a bank while Jenny, the second of her three daughters, took care of business inside. “My daughter does all that sort of thing now,” Alice wrote. “I’m sort of frightened by it.” A man she knew vaguely from high school, in Wingham, a rural town in Ontario, came out of the bank and recognized her. Alice asked after his two sisters, who turned out to be dead. “Me the only bugger left on the planet,” the man said, nodding. His words seemed to release something in Alice, and she tried to build a story around the conversation. But after several beginnings she doubted herself: “Why, I don’t know—I mean why write. Even my pen seems unwilling.” She crumpled up the pages. Later, Jenny picked them out of the trash.

Jenny always made sure that her mother had pens and spiral-bound notebooks beside her chair, but eventually Alice became too impaired to use them. As she lost her abilities, Jenny noticed a change. “Something happened where she was full of love and understanding, and people felt better after being with her,” she told me. In the Munro family, the word “earnest” had been used as an insult. Once, in a letter, Alice thanked Jenny for her “loving kindness,” and then, as if embarrassed, drew an arrow pointing toward the phrase and added the words “blah blah blah.” In her illness, though, Alice seemed to access her emotions more freely, a shift that Jenny attributed, in part, to the fact that she wasn’t writing. “She wasn’t putting every difficulty in her life through that machine that turned things into gold,” Jenny said.

For years, Jenny had been trying to talk with her mother about something that had been put through the machine repeatedly: the sexual abuse of Alice’s youngest daughter, Andrea, by Gerry, and Alice’s refusal to see the harm that it had done. “She loves and protects the most destructive person of my life,” Andrea had written years earlier.

Alice used to shut down when Jenny brought up the subject, but after she got Alzheimer’s, Jenny said, “she didn’t feel invested in that person, Gerry,

at all, or in the person she'd been with him. She started to lose that great terror over the truth."

Jenny and her mother had lucid conversations about Andrea's abuse, which Jenny sometimes recorded, but Alice would forget what had happened a few minutes later. In one conversation, in 2019, Alice exhaled loudly and said under her breath, "How awful." She looked up at Jenny and said, "It was beastly of me not to get rid of him."

"Did you sort of blame yourself and hate yourself and think Andrea would never love you again, too?" Jenny asked, hoping for more self-reflection.

"No, I don't think it was that," Alice said. "I don't know why I didn't." She sat in a cushioned chair, wearing a zip-up sweater, a fleece blanket spread over her lap. Then she said in a louder voice, as if finally discovering something solid, "Well, he told me he'd kill himself, of course." Gerry had said that he couldn't live without her. "He was in a desperate situation."

"And it's an empty threat, isn't it?" Jenny said. "What if Andrea had killed herself?"

"Yes, exactly," Alice said, nodding.

"A lot of victims of child abuse do," Jenny said.

Alice held her hand to her forehead. She seemed to be losing track of the emotional center of the conversation. "Does she think about it still?" she asked.

"This?" Jenny said. "It's not something you get over."

"Oh, God. Oh, God," Alice said, in a high, pained voice, bowing her head and holding it in her hand.

Jenny asked Andrea if she could share the recording with her, but Andrea wasn't interested. "Every time I found a morsel of remorse, I would tell Andrea," Jenny said. "But it was just so little, so late." Andrea felt as if her mother had found a disease that was almost too convenient, a permanent

forgetting. She told me, “I was kind of mad at her, like, Oh, yeah. You found your way out.”

One of the first times that Andrea met Gerry, she dressed up as a waitress, created a menu, and served him and Alice at the dinner table. She was eight years old. “I was really trying to make a fabulous impression,” she told me. She felt she had succeeded. “I loved him. He took a lot of interest in me, and I thought that was a great thing. He loved to talk and I loved to listen.”

Alice, who was living in London, Ontario, had recently left her husband, Jim Munro, the father of her daughters. She had known Gerry in college, at the University of Western Ontario, though she hadn’t seen him for twenty years. Tall and handsome, he had been part of a group of bohemian students who were alluring because “they were dangerous, got drunk and so on,” Alice said. When she wrote her first story for the college literary magazine, she handed it to him, hoping that he was the editor. “Then we would fall into conversation, and he would fall in love with me, and everything would go on from there,” she said she imagined. Instead, he told her the name of the actual editor. He considered her “an apple-cheeked country girl” and was not attracted to her.

“It said, ‘I’d love to pick your leader’s brain if you think they might be interested, but seriously no worries if not.’ ”
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

Gerry had never married. He had edited “The National Atlas of Canada,” and worked as a government geographer before taking early retirement, in

1974. That year, he heard Alice interviewed on CBC radio. She had an easy, humble, softly seductive way of talking. The daughter of a fox farmer, she had grown up poor, in a home where displays of self-regard were punished with beatings, and she spoke candidly about why, in her first three books of short stories, she kept returning to autobiographical material. “Every time, I seem to go a stage closer to what is really very hard to bear—a sort of unbearable truth,” she said.

Gerry called her and asked her to lunch. They each had three Martinis. By the end of the meal, they were discussing living together. “I’m very happy in a floating kind of way, all identity more or less down the drain,” Alice wrote a friend.

Andrea had been living with her mother, but in the summer of 1975 she went to Victoria, British Columbia, to visit her father. Jenny, who was eighteen, and her older sister, Sheila, who was twenty-one, were already living on their own. Alice moved in with Gerry, who lived in Clinton, a town with a population of around three thousand, twenty miles from Wingham, where she had grown up. He was caring for his sick mother in the house where he had been born. “It was very much the time of women’s liberation,” Sheila told me. “I didn’t really question my mother’s decision, because there was this sense of sexual adventure and being free of a twenty-year marriage.”

Alice, who was forty-four, had never learned to drive, so she was dependent on Gerry if she wanted to go anywhere. She often worked on stories in a corner of the dining room or on the staircase. In a letter, Gerry wrote, “Alice and I know that I didn’t deeply love her when we first started living together. She was, however, the only person I ever met that I thought I could live with.”

By fall, it had been decided that Andrea would stay in Victoria and go to school there, coming back to Ontario during the summers. Jim Munro was living with a textile artist, Carole Sabiston, who had a ten-year-old son, Andrew, and he and Andrea had quickly become close. In a story called “The Children Stay,” Alice described the pain of leaving one’s children for a man: “You won’t get free of it, but you won’t die of it. You won’t feel it every minute, but you won’t spend many days without it. And you’ll learn

some tricks to dull it or banish it, trying not to end up destroying what you incurred this pain to get."

Alice and Gerry were rarely alone, because Gerry's mother was always "tottering about, needing large quantities of Cream of Wheat + *six* books a week," Alice wrote in a letter. She took on the task of fetching English historical novels from the library. Reflecting on her return to the community where she'd grown up, she told *Publishers Weekly*, "I never, never, never, never, never, never thought I would end up there." In a letter, she wrote, "The fidelity + permanence I really want, I just am a little scared of how I can stand up to a much stronger personality."

Andrea was a buoyant, adventurous child whose favorite movie was "The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams," about a frontier woodsman who survives in the mountains with wild animals as his companions. During the summers in Clinton, Andrea spent many days at a hog barn down the road. She walked there barefoot on gravel roads, hoping to build calluses in case she was ever lost for days in the woods.

Gerry, who had flown more than thirty bombing missions in the Royal Canadian Air Force during the Second World War, celebrated her physical adeptness and told her that she could be part of his "bombing crew," which would include only the most stalwart people. Alice could never make the cut. She cried too much. Gerry laughed at her weaknesses, such as her swim stroke, which he considered too fluttery. He got angry at her for minor infractions, like not properly flushing the toilet or having spinach stuck in her teeth.

Alice sometimes complained to Andrea that Gerry hated her. She also said that Gerry liked Andrea better than her. "Something would rise up in me," Andrea told me, "and I'd be, like, 'This isn't right—why am I your confidante?' And she'd be, like, 'This is what friends do,' and I would think, Oh, we're friends. I'm so honored."

When Alice and Gerry fought, Andrea took care to appear sensible and insightful. "Poor Andrea was dropped down into the middle of it all," Gerry wrote in a letter. "We had a dependence on her to help us out of our rows." Andrea felt that she understood Gerry's sense of humor, and she tried to lift

the mood by being a kind of “performing monkey.” She recited dirty lyrics that Gerry had taught her, or added sexual innuendos to innocuous sentences. He dared her to perform stunts like putting on her mother’s clothes and her wig, the same color and texture as her real hair, which she worried was thinning. One time, he encouraged her to chase her mother with a mummified mouse that he had found in the basement.

Jenny found Gerry intelligent and amusing but also a blowhard and a bully. He had many opinions about monarchy, religion, empire-building. “He thought of himself as quite the big deal intellectually and was writing an indecipherable book about geography, sort of like Casaubon in ‘Middlemarch,’ ” Jenny told me. “You’d always have to be quiet, because he was working on it at the table. I think it was called ‘Ways of Seeing.’ ”

Jenny said that Gerry would get into arguments with her mother’s friends: “He would goad them, and make it impossible for her to see these friends for months. I think he was trying to isolate her, really.” Alice, in an interview, said of Gerry, “He protects me from social life in a way,” because “he’s not exactly intimidating but he’s more outspoken than I.”

Many of the women in Alice’s stories have a kind of fantasy of total surrender, as if some final truth or recognition might be grasped in the depths of submission. Alice recognized that passivity was not “something the modern woman is supposed to be content with,” she told the CBC in 1979. But it could also be an asset. “I will let situations develop way past the point where I should stop them, just to see what will happen, to see what people will say, to see what people will do,” she said. “It’s probably the overriding passion of my life—just to see what will happen.”

“Is that because you don’t want to hurt them?” the interviewer asked.

“Oh, no,” Alice responded quickly. “That’s the surface part, that’s the social behavior: that one doesn’t make anyone uncomfortable. But it’s also that . . .” She smiled subtly. “Everything fascinates me,” she continued, nodding. “What happens between people. So this is the intelligent passivity, I suppose.”

“You, dear Alice Munro, like few others, have come close to solving the greatest mystery of them all: the human heart and its caprices,” the secretary of the Swedish Academy said, as he presented the Nobel Prize in Literature. “She is interested in the silent and the silenced, the passive, those who choose not to choose,” he went on. “Of key importance are all the things her characters could not or did not wish to understand there and then, but that, only long afterward, stand revealed.” The novelist Mona Simpson said that after the prize was announced every female fiction writer she knew called her, some in tears. “We had won something, too,” Simpson said in a speech, “because of the generosity, the frank respect for the smallest and largest aspects of the female experience that she bequeathed to us in all her stories.”

Alice often spoke of how she had a real life, which was hidden, and another life, in which she was “pretending to be what people wanted me to be.” She also talked about moving through the world as “two women.” One was using the other’s life as material. As a young girl, she had recognized that her desires were so at odds with her surroundings—reading books was seen as a dangerous addiction—that exposure would bring her ridicule. Even when she was in her thirties, her brother, who had become a chemist, told her, “I’ve learned to accept my limitations, and I believe that’s what you should do. None of your writing is any good.” As a young mother, she lied rather than tell her friends that she was writing. She couldn’t write at all if another adult was in the house. “I just, I suppose, lived a very deceptive life,” she said. “But it didn’t bother me.” The outward-facing woman was self-effacing and gracious and vivacious, a compassionate listener. But the exertion of being in public—the “constant ‘work’ of that self-*presentation*,” Alice wrote her agent—caused her to feel so dysregulated that she felt she needed to stop going on book tours. “I’m not *just* being finicky, I think I’m making a true judgement of what’s dangerous for me,” she wrote.

In fourteen books of short stories, more than fifty of which were published in *The New Yorker*, Alice created a new form for expressing the way that the past, incompletely assimilated, creates the conditions of life in the present. Her stories flash forward and backward by decades, one layer of experience placed at a surprising angle to another. Sometimes there is an insight that feels like a breakthrough, but after enough years pass in a

character's life we realize that the insight was not so important. It can feel as if, for the first time, we are grasping the full span of a human life. Emotional patterns replicate; revelations surface and then recede; injuries are experienced only belatedly. Her mode of writing feels almost traumatized. Denial is built into the structure of the story. She captures what it feels like to live next to pain and shame without ever looking directly at it.

Throughout her work, episodes from her own life are repeatedly put to use, as if she were mapping out the arc of a memory at different stages, as it becomes more or less bearable. She first wrote about her mother in 1959, shortly after her death, which became what she called "my central material." Alice, the eldest of three children, was in her early teens when her mother was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. She felt humiliated by her mother's symptoms—her unintelligible voice, her drooling—and also by her pleas for attention. After going to college, on a scholarship, Alice rarely returned home. In moments of despair, her mother would say, "Soon I'll see Alice," like a prayer. "Dearest dear," her mother wrote her, shortly before dying. "I am just so full of love and good wishes that my letter will I fear it will burst at the corner. Please write soon (just for me) everything. I find my love and it is centred on my children."

Alice hadn't seen her mother in two and a half years, and she didn't go home for her funeral. "The problem, the only problem, is my mother," she wrote, in a story that drew on these memories. In another story, she described taking "all emotion away from our dealings with her, as you might take away meat from a prisoner to weaken him, till he died."

After Alice moved in with Gerry, her stories became more structurally complex, the point of view less stable. Her characters accumulate self-knowledge but can't keep it in focus. "I got to a stage of backing off from the things I couldn't really know," one says.

In a draft of "Labor Day Dinner," from 1981, fragments of which are preserved in her archives, at the University of Calgary, Alice tried eight versions of the same sentiment in a row: "There is no time; nowhere to work; no room; no light; no table. No clear moments"; "She can't work now that life has got such a grip on her"; "Or is it that her authority has waned,

her independent sight has clouded, her powers are wilting”; “Her authority is not what it used to be, in the exercise of even her most private powers”; “*That’s what she can’t afford to discover*.”

Cartoon by Mort Gerberg

“Labor Day Dinner” is about Roberta, a middle-aged woman whose two daughters are visiting her and her new boyfriend for the summer. The older daughter is dismayed by the way that the boyfriend, George—an “occasionally brutal, consistently entertaining character”—seems to sap her mother of self-respect. “If this is love I want no part of it,” the daughter writes in her journal. “He wants to enslave her and us all and she walks a tightrope trying to keep him from getting mad.”

Jenny, who was twenty-four when “Labor Day Dinner” was published, realized that her mother had read her private writing. “She changed a few things, but that story was true,” Jenny told me. “I had these exercise books I filled with drawings and writing—and I was coping, you know. And I actually thought my version was better, because I said ‘walk on eggshells,’ and she said ‘walk a tightrope,’ but it was very much the substance.”

In the story, George tells Roberta that her armpits are flabby, so she puts on a shirt with sleeves. He is “disgusted by her aging body” and seems to feel a certain “satisfaction of airing disgust.” Roberta weeps so much that she wears dark glasses to hide her eyes. “Surely it is hatred,” she thinks, that “George is steadily manufacturing and wordlessly pouring out at her, and surely it is a deadly gas.”

Although Roberta's older daughter can't stand George, the younger one —"an acrobat, a parodist, an optimist, a disturber"—seems to have a special connection with him. "I know how to be jokey," she says. "I understand him." Roberta shivers at this remark: "It seems to her that she has instructed them, by example, that he is to be accommodated, his silences respected, his joking responded to. What if he should turn, within this safety, and deal them a memorable blow? If it happened, it would be she who would have betrayed them."

In the summer of 1976, Alice left Clinton to be with her father, who was dying. Alice and Gerry's bedroom had two beds, and Andrea, who was nine, asked if she could sleep in one of them. "Well, don't tell your mother," Gerry said. He undressed and got into the other bed. "As I lay reading," he later wrote in a letter, "I started to think that Andrea was interested in me sexually, and in consequence got an erection. I pushed the covers back and let the erection show and fondled it. I felt sure she was watching, but didn't look to see." Then he "became faintly disgusted" with himself, so he turned off the light and went to sleep.

Early the next morning, "I again thought that Andrea must be interested in me sexually, and I got into bed with her," he wrote. "I *know* there are Lolitas, and I know that I can respond to a Lolita, if I'm not careful, as a Humbert Humbert." He put his erect penis in Andrea's hand and rubbed her vagina with his hand. Andrea pretended to be asleep. "He put me on top of him and rubbed my body up and down on himself," she later wrote. Gerry again felt disgusted with himself, he wrote, so he went downstairs. When he came back, Andrea had moved into her own room. "I asked her if she was alright—normally she would be up by this time," he wrote. "She said she had a headache and would get up later."

When her mother returned to Clinton, Andrea never considered telling her what had happened. Andrea said, "I didn't feel safe enough in that house to even wonder, Should I or shouldn't I?" For the rest of the summer, Andrea said, when they were alone in Gerry's truck he would take his penis out of his shorts and leave it exposed. "Andrea and I had a guilty secret," Gerry wrote in a letter. "But we were the very best of friends it seemed to me."

A few weeks after Andrea returned to Victoria for the school year, she was sitting in the den, watching TV with her stepbrother, Andrew, and she mentioned that Gerry had got into bed with her. “She said it in a kind of jokey way,” Andrew told me. “I remember saying, ‘Wait, what? You’ve got to tell my mom.’ ” He walked upstairs with her, to find his mother, Carole, who had married Jim that year. “I took her aside and I said, ‘Is there something you want to tell me?’ ” Carole recalled. “She was whimpering—she had got her tiny little girl’s voice on.” As Andrea told the story, she tried to figure out what was important. “Carole wanted to know if he’d penetrated me. And when it turned out that no, he hadn’t, I wondered, Is that bad? Is that good?” At the end, she began sobbing and said, “He touched me in places that I didn’t want him to touch me.”

Soon afterward, Andrea remembers, Sheila, who was twenty-three, asked her what had happened. She told Sheila about other moments, too, that had made her uncomfortable, like when Gerry asked her to sit on his lap after she’d taken a bath. “And when I finished, Sheila said, ‘O.K., so that’s the entirety?’ I said, ‘Yes.’ ” When Sheila brought up a moment that Andrea hadn’t mentioned to her, “I felt like, Oh, what if she thinks she’s caught me in a lie?” Andrea said.

Carole also told the story to Andrea’s father, Jim, the owner of Munro’s Books, an independent bookstore in Victoria that he and Alice had started together. After their divorce, Jim had turned it into a prominent institution. Alice’s increasing fame gave the store extra cachet. His home office was full of pictures of him shaking hands with famous visitors, like the Canadian Prime Minister and the Queen of Jordan. “His total focus was always The Bookstore,” Carole wrote me. Jim was stern and not inclined toward physical affection; one of his favorite sayings was “Everyone’s entitled to my opinion.”

Carole wanted to tell Alice, but Jim forbade it, explaining that they couldn’t be certain the story was true. Jenny was in Montreal when Andrea first told the story; Jim eventually shared a vague version with her, which Jenny described as “You know little girls, how they flirt and jump around.” Jenny immediately went to call her mother, but Jim took the phone from her hand, saying, “Don’t you tell your mother! This would kill her!”

For months, no one mentioned the abuse. “It was a horrible gap,” Carole told me. “We were all afraid to bring it up. We didn’t want to remind her of what happened.” When the school year was almost over, Carole told Andrea that she didn’t have to return to Clinton for the summer. “She started crying and said, ‘I have to go back,’ ” Carole said. “This went on for a very, very long time, and she got more and more distressed, until she ended up like a rag, she was so limp.” Andrea felt that if she didn’t go to Clinton as planned her mother would guess her and Gerry’s “secret.” She didn’t think that Alice could survive the revelation. “That my mother was terribly fragile was something I had always believed,” she said.

Jim decided to send Andrea back to Clinton for the summer, but he asked Sheila to go, too, to make sure that Andrea and Gerry were never alone. Sheila agreed, and left her job, managing a second branch of Munro’s Books. That summer, Alice rented a cottage in a lakeside town about ten miles away. “I think Gerry must have known something was up, because he stayed away most of the time,” Sheila told me.

In a memoir, “Lives of Mothers & Daughters,” published in 2001, Sheila wrote that few things were more compelling than a conversation with her mother. “I’d see her coming up the street in her leather pants, maybe some tight turtleneck, something dramatic, no grey showing in her hair because she used a product called Happiness (‘I really have found happiness,’ she used to joke), and I’d be in a state of breathless anticipation,” she wrote. “There was always a sense of excitement; it was as if we were trying to get to some perspective, some stance, where we could see everything as it truly was.”

Sheila didn’t understand why her mother was doing housework for Gerry and his mom. Alice had recently had a hysterectomy, and she spent much of the summer lying on her bed in the dark. Yet she was still going to Gerry’s house and performing such chores as lifting his mother out of the bath. “I said, ‘Why are you cleaning up Gerry’s mess?’ ” Sheila recalled. “She got really angry with me, and said I was trying to ruin her relationship, ruin her happiness. That’s when I nearly told her about Gerry.” But she held back. “She was the great Alice Munro,” Sheila said. “We all just had this feeling that she had to be protected.”

After the summer, Sheila wrote a letter to her father saying that he didn't need to worry about Andrea and Gerry. She said that Andrea had told her "it would never happen again." Somehow, at the time, Sheila felt that Andrea had the power to offer this assurance.

In an interview with *The Paris Review* in 1994, Alice said that she sometimes had the impulse to call her daughters and ask, "Are you sure you're all right? I didn't mean to be such a . . ." When Sheila was about two, "I would bat her away with one hand and type with the other," Alice said. "I've told her that. This was bad because it made her the adversary to what was most important to me."

Alice had another baby girl less than two years after Sheila was born, but the child died when she was a day old. Not long afterward, Alice got pregnant with Jenny. Jenny remembers how, on excursions they took together when she was young, Alice's lips would be moving, as she worked through the lines of a story. "Her writing was more real than our lives and, I think, our existence," Jenny said. "But there was also unconditional love. I know there was for me, and I think for all of us."

In her memoir, Sheila describes the disorientation of reading a short story called "Miles City, Montana," based on a trip that the family had taken when she and Jenny were young. She was amazed that her mother had captured her personality in a few sentences: "*How could she know I was like that*, 'too eager to be what we in fact depended on her to be?' " But Sheila sensed that, though Alice had been carefully observing her childhood, it was not for Sheila's benefit.

Alice and Jim Munro had met in college—she dropped out around the time she married him, because her scholarship covered only two years—and there was tension over their class difference. "I had no breeding," she said. His parents, who were genteel and middle-class, often asked her when she'd get a haircut. Alice felt ashamed of her background and critical of Jim's. He bought them a house with a chandelier and chintz furniture, and the place seemed to reinforce the irreconcilability of their world views. "It doesn't matter whether you live in a new beautiful house or a few little rooms, that doesn't change anything, not you or what we feel towards you," Alice's younger sister wrote in a letter, trying to reassure her. When Andrea was

born—“Not enough jelly on the diaphragm,” Alice joked—Jim bought an even larger home, a mock-Tudor house in Victoria with an ivy-covered gazebo in the yard. It had twelve rooms, five fireplaces, twelve-foot ceilings, two staircases, and a maid’s quarters. “Something happened right then,” Alice said. “Everything just pulled apart.” In a letter to a friend, she wrote that she had stayed in the marriage for Sheila and Jenny’s sake. “But I can’t do it for hers,” she wrote, referring to Andrea. “There’s not enough time left.”

In 1973, after separating from Jim, Alice was one of six artists featured in *Maclean’s* as models for women in Canada. They “refuse to play background to anybody’s life,” the article said. They are “willing to grow up, to leave cuteness and compliance behind.” But Alice spoke frankly about “this emotional dependency I feel in myself.” She said, “I’m really afraid of getting to a stage where one still has sexual feelings but is no longer considered a possible sex object. That to me is the ultimate horror.” She believed that the “springs of creativity and sex are all together.”

Newly single and teaching writing, she fell into a series of damaging relationships. One man “hurts + delights me more than anybody ever has, I think, sometimes both in the same day,” she wrote in a letter. Then she fell in love with the writer John Metcalf, who was thirty-five. Metcalf eventually broke things off, his friend later told her, because she was too old. She was forty-three. Around that time, a colleague took her home from a party and raped her. “Not legally rape because I didn’t scream and wake his kids,” she wrote Metcalf. “I just thought, oh hurry up then, get it over with.” She said the whole subject was “boring, really. It doesn’t really matter.” But the day after the rape she felt so numb that she couldn’t meet her class; instead, she wandered around the city aimlessly. “I have that real powerless humiliated anger you have when you’re a kid,” she wrote. A few weeks later, the colleague apologized, saying that he’d been drunk. “Never mind, I said, it’ll make a good story,” she wrote. “A *funny* story, I said. Should give him a few worried nights.”

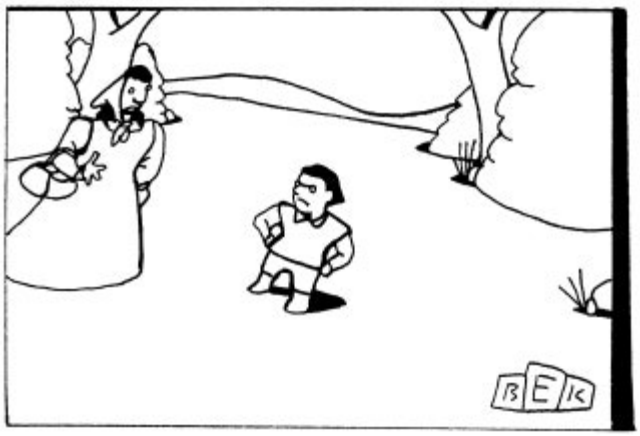
Jenny said that her mother didn’t like anyone to touch her hair, and she startled if someone approached her from behind. Jenny connected this to her mother’s early childhood, when she was routinely taken to a doctor who

administered enemas. Alice's mother, a former teacher with a violent dislike of sex, seemed so afraid of the workings of the human body that she could not let Alice's trips to the bathroom be dictated by physical urges.

Alice fashioned herself in opposition to her mother. "I hated the image of the mother who disapproved of everything, who had a different set of values," she told Sheila, in an interview for the memoir. "It was the refusal to sink into this role which made me self-centred instead of thinking about what you could have used."

Gerry, the son of a police officer, also took pride in flouting the norms of his parents' generation. One year, he and Alice sent out a Christmas card with a photograph of him standing in the snow, naked except for boots, his bare butt toward the camera. "I don't take responsibility for these cards you get every year," Alice wrote her agent, Virginia Barber. "I am only a bewildered accomplice."

Andrea said that it was not uncommon for her and her mother to be sitting in the kitchen and hear Gerry in the bathroom near them. He seemed to be masturbating in the shower. "My mom had a totally blank expression, like a void," Andrea said. "I thought I must be imagining it, that I was prone to thinking that innocent sounds were actually dangerous."



"I'm sorry—I ate the magic beans because I needed a little protein."
Cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan

Gerry felt it was important that their home be a place where "no subjects, questions, or language were barred," he wrote in a letter. "We had a sort of a pedagogical theory to the effect that Andrea was a person, not a child." In

front of Alice, Gerry would tell Andrea that in the past, before the culture became prude, it had been “natural” for adults to want to have sex with children. He talked about “Lolita,” and about a scene in William Faulkner’s “The Sound and the Fury” where a girl named Caddy climbs a tree as her brothers watch “the muddy bottom of her drawers,” an episode that foreshadows her sexual precocity. He pretended to speak casually, Andrea said, but she noticed a defiant thrill on his face.

Three of Alice’s early stories have scenes involving girls who feel that they have willed an older man to grope them. It is hard to tell that what is happening in these scenes is sexual abuse—though it is—because the writing is so respectful of the complexities of early experiences of lust. One girl longs to be someone’s object (“pounded, pleasured, reduced”), and is willing to “risk almost anything, just to see what will happen. *To see what will happen*.”

In “Lives of Girls and Women,” the narrator, Del, is also “fanatically curious.” She routinely tries to position herself so that it is easy for an older man, a friend of the family, to grab her breasts and butt. She will not be one of those women who is “damageable,” she decides. By the time she begins dating someone closer to her own age, she has honed her capacity for dissociation. After her boyfriend nearly kills her, she is “amazed to think that the person suffering was me, for it was not me at all; I was watching.”

When Andrea was about eleven, Alice went to see a therapist. She told Jenny that she was troubled by an interaction she’d witnessed between Gerry and Andrea in the back yard. “She said that Gerry was using a hose, like he was pissing, and Andrea was laughing, and she would grab the hose and do it, too,” Jenny said. “And it just seemed off. It seemed wrong.”

In “Soon,” published more than twenty years later, a woman named Juliet dreams that, when she looks out her window, she sees her father and a girl playing with a hose. She can see that her father “held the hose low, in front of his body, and that it was only the nozzle of it that he turned back and forth. The dream was suffused with a sticky horror. Not the kind of horror that jostles its shapes outside your skin, but the kind that curls through the narrowest passages of your blood.”

Jenny said her mother told her that the therapist, a younger man, chided her for having unrealistic expectations for Gerry, who she had always known was not the “fatherly type.” The therapist told her that she was jealous of Andrea.

A few years later, Alice published a story called “Dulse,” in which a middle-aged woman, suffering over her relationship with a man named Duncan, goes to a therapist. The woman understands that “the sacrifices she made with Duncan—in living arrangements, in the matter of friends, as well as in the rhythm of sex and the tone of conversations—were violations, committed not seriously but flagrantly.”

“When are you happy?” the therapist asks her.

“When he’s pleased with me,” the woman responds. “When he’s joking and enjoying himself.” But it’s more a feeling of triumph than of happiness, she adds, because “he can always pull the rug out.”

“So, why are you with somebody who can always pull the rug out?”

“I want to be humiliated?” she offers. “What good will it do me to know that?”

Another story from this time, “Bardon Bus,” offers a vision of romance as a kind of wild, whipped-up condition not dissimilar to psychosis, a “cherished helplessness.” On the back side of a typed draft, Alice wrote, in longhand, “What is your reaction to this story? I think it is a morally wrong or morally irresponsible story.” Below, she listed four problems with it, including the narrator’s attitude toward the man she desires. “She treats him like a mystery so she won’t have to judge him,” she wrote.

Andrea decided that she would tell her mother about Gerry’s abuse as soon as Alice left him for good, something Alice tried to do nearly every summer. During one of these escapes, they visited Alice’s sister, and Andrea confided that she had a “friend with a secret.” She was hoping that her mother would ask for details, but she seemed incurious. Andrea didn’t feel comfortable saying more.

As usual, they ended up returning to the house in Clinton. “Part of her pattern was to see Gerry for what he was,” Andrea wrote me. “She would sincerely want to get away, but then the drama of leaving would trip the intimacy wire, flinging her back to him with even greater force.”

The dynamic seemed to have been established early in Alice’s life. Once, when Jenny and Alice were sitting together in the den of the house in Clinton, the conversation turned to the fact that Alice’s father had regularly beaten her, at the request of her mother. Jenny commented on how humiliating that must have been, but Alice dismissed the sentiment, saying, “Oh, that’s just what parents did in those days,” Jenny recalled. “I said, ‘Why are you defending the old man?’ And then Gerry walked into the room, and the conversation stopped. So, yeah.”

Alice rendered this abuse in extraordinary detail in an autobiographical story, “Royal Beatings,” published in 1977, the year after her father died. In the story, a girl named Rose is beaten semi-regularly, the punishment unfolding as a kind of ritualized performance with distinct stages. When Rose behaves with too much ego or boldness, her stepmother summons Rose’s father, who is initially reluctant but then gets into the spirit of things. His eyes fill with “hatred and pleasure” as he chases her around the kitchen, whipping her with a leather belt, throwing her against the wall, and boxing her ears. Eventually, Rose, who has been incoherently crying for forgiveness, escapes to her bedroom and lies in bed, in pain, passing to the next stage of the ritual. She decides that she will run away, or kill herself. She “floats in her pure superior state as if kindly drugged.” She feels a sense of freedom and sudden strength.

Then her stepmother comes upstairs with a tray of special food. Rose refuses to acknowledge the treats, because she wants to honor the depth of her violation. It is her chance to maintain the upper hand. But she is tempted by the smell. She will eat just one treat, she tells herself—but then she finishes them all, surrendering her moral advantage.

In a letter to Metcalf from the early seventies, Alice described how her relationships with men often culminated in the sense of lightness that Rose feels immediately after her beatings. “God knows, I can’t figure this pattern out,” she wrote. “I don’t know I’m doing it, of course—I pick men who will

reject me, or reject my total offer, and I suffer to the brink of self-destruction, and then I come out with a funny little cool feeling of relief."

In the early eighties, Alice and Gerry began socializing with Nellie Webb, a friend of Gerry's from college. Nellie, who was separated from her husband, lived alone in a house not far from Clinton. Before she and her husband split up, Gerry had routinely slept over at their house. "There were always gifts when he came," their daughter, Jane, told me. "I was really, really fond of him." On one occasion, he sent Jane a record that had only two songs. "I gotta see Jane," the musician sings on one. "I gotta find that world of Jane and me / like it used to be."

In 1969, when Jane was nine years old, she walked into the room where Gerry was sleeping to ask him what he wanted for breakfast. He pulled back the blankets and showed her his erect penis. "I've never forgotten the look on his face," she said. "It was just, like, Well, are you interested? What do you think of this?" She ran into the kitchen. Gerry followed her there and apologized for "flashing my cock." Jane was shocked by the word, she said, but he seemed not to realize and pressed on, telling her, "I showed you mine, maybe you'd like to show me yours."

Jane asked to be excused, and went upstairs to tell her mom. Gerry waited downstairs. "You would think he'd be, like, Oh, no, the jig's up," she said. But he seemed to feel confident that she would keep his behavior a secret.

When Nellie came downstairs, though, she kicked him out of the house. "My mother and I ended up having a pretty volatile relationship," Jane told me. "And I think that was one of the most important things she did for me as a parent. I was believed instantly."

Gerry was never invited to their house again, and Jane assumed that her parents had ended the friendship. But later each parent resumed socializing with him. "On the one hand, they recognized that he was a predator they had to protect their daughter from," Jane said. "And on the other hand it was, like, Yeah, but you know he's a lot of fun at a party."

Jane's brother, Tom, younger than her by a decade, said that one day, in the mid-eighties, he came home from school and his mom and Alice were

sitting together in the dining room. On learning of this meeting, Andrea told me that there must have been “special circumstances,” because her mom didn’t go places alone, since she couldn’t drive. Tom didn’t listen to their conversation, but he feels confident that his mother, who died in 2018, would have told Alice about what Gerry had done to Jane. “My mother was very strong-willed, a sort of no-nonsense person—she prided herself on that sort of thing,” he told me. “I can’t see that she would keep quiet about this.”

Not long after Nellie met with Alice, Gerry called her from a pay phone. He told her that they could no longer have any contact. His explanation was that Alice was jealous of their relationship, but Andrea and Jenny suspect that this was not the real reason.

Several years later, when Andrea was twenty-five, Alice told her that she’d just read a story by Linda Svendsen, a Canadian writer, about a girl who is sexually abused by her father but afraid to tell her mother. The girl becomes increasingly isolated, and kills herself by jumping off a bridge.

“And for those of you who will be making connections—well, good for you.”
Cartoon by Drew Dernavich

Alice contributed a promotional blurb for the back cover of Svendsen’s new collection of stories, “Marine Life.” “The last story left me shaking,” she wrote, referring to the one about sexual abuse. She made the same remark to Andrea, adding that, after finishing it, she couldn’t look at Gerry. Andrea, who had also read Svendsen’s story, said, “I was used to overriding the

obvious, pretending things weren't what they were." But she felt that "something shifted in that conversation. She knew. I knew she knew."

"Dear mom," Andrea wrote, soon afterward. "Please find a spot alone before you read this." Her letter began gently, with a description of a recent conversation about Alice's feelings of mistrust. "I wasn't able to tell you that I have those same feelings, especially concerning you," Andrea wrote. "The closer you come to me, the harder it is for me to keep my distance. The more painful it becomes to hide myself from you when I don't want to hide."

She went on, "When you told me about that story in 'Marine Life,' I wanted to cry and hold you and thank you and TELL YOU." She summarized what Gerry had done to her, and wrote that, after getting into her bed when she was nine, he had treated her like a sexual object until she went through puberty. Not long afterward, she became bulimic. But when she saw a psychiatrist she didn't say anything about Gerry. "I thought she would use it as a pat explanation for everything wrong with me," she wrote. Gerry used to speak of sexual abuse as a "feminist concept," an excuse for women to be bitter. She thought that if she dwelled on the abuse people would laugh at her or pity her.

She had also worried that Alice would blame her. "I guess I thought you saw me as a seductress," she wrote. "Dad and Carole's reaction told me that ultimately I was responsible for what did and did not happen to me." Then, for a long time, she assumed that the window for disclosure had passed. "But it is not too late," she wrote. "It is very wrong that it happened (you were wronged too) and it was wrong that no one told you. I hope you will understand (probably not immediately) that I have had to wait this long to feel trusting enough and to feel worthy enough to be able to tell you."

Andrea dropped the letter in a mailbox in Victoria and then went to her father's house and said, "I've just told her about Gerry." Jim remarked, "Good for you. You're the only one who could have done it."

Andrea had suffered from migraines for sixteen years, since the summer that Gerry began abusing her. That night, she had the worst one of her life.

“I thought, This is the last migraine I’ll ever have, because we’re getting it out,” she said.

Within hours of reading the letter, Alice left her house in Clinton and headed to the airport alone. She flew to Comox, a coastal town three hours from Victoria, where she and Gerry had recently purchased a second home.

Alice had put the letter on the table before she left, and Gerry typed it up, numbered each paragraph “for reference purposes,” and wrote his own “commentary,” which he sent to Jim and Carole two days later. In a passage titled “The Psychology of It All,” he argued that Andrea could not have been damaged by the abuse, claiming that, even when she told her family, “1. People don’t seem to think what happened is so serious, and 2. They tend to say ‘It was partly your own fault, Lolita.’ ”

In a passage titled “Observations on Myself,” he acknowledged that his sexuality was “not in accordance with the canons of public respectability.” But, he wrote, “I do not feel irretrievably degenerate for having been sexually aroused by a nymphette.” The only transgression for which he felt guilt was being unfaithful to Alice: “I would feel just as dishonorable and disgusted with myself if the infidelity had been with an adult.”

In another letter, sent two days later, he told Jim and Carole, “If my life is to be ruined, I am going to make it cost a lot.” He threatened to make Andrea’s letter public, along with a series of “eloquent” photographs—“one taken in Australia with Andrea posing as a Lolita-like character in a crib, one of Andrea in my underwear shorts.” He seemed so committed to the idea that Andrea had seduced him that he must have imagined these materials would vindicate him. But he also raised the possibility of suicide. Alice was already worried about his state of mind, and soon after arriving in Comox she had asked the police in Clinton to check on him.

Andrea, who had not seen the letters, joined her mother in Comox. “She was clearly in an aggrieved state,” Andrea said. “She felt she had been kept in the dark and laughed at by the entire family.” But Alice also told Andrea that as soon as she read the first line of her letter she knew what it would say. She revealed that, when Andrea was eleven, the parents of a fourteen-year-old girl had told her that Gerry had been sexually inappropriate with

their daughter. The girl may have been Jane, in which case the ages were wrong, or another child.

Alice also said that she'd always wondered if Gerry had raped and murdered a twelve-year-old girl named Lynne Harper, who was found dead in a woodlot in Clinton, in 1959. At the time, the suggestion struck Andrea as a kind of "grab for air in the room." (Years later, Andrea began considering the idea more seriously, and she and Jenny spent a long time researching the case, which is unsolved. Andrea reported the suspicion to the police, and was interviewed, but never heard anything more. In a statement, the police said that the investigation is ongoing. Records from the case, along with conversations with people who knew Gerry or Harper at the time, suggest that his involvement was unlikely.)

Andrea found herself cast in a role that was familiar from childhood. When Alice was suffering in the middle of the night, "I was there for her, to hold her," Andrea said. "There was maybe some anger at me for having an 'affair' with her husband, but, more than that, I really just felt that I wasn't there. I was invisible."

Alice told Andrea that blaming a mother for her husband's abuse was a symptom of the culture's misogyny, an idea that Andrea accepted. Several times, Andrea assured her mother that she would never be so "selfish" as to make her mother choose her over Gerry. "This idea of a child making demands on a parent, insisting on being that important in her life—it was drilled into me that this was something you would only do to a woman," Andrea said. "You would never ask a father for that."

Jennifer Rudolph Walsh, a literary agent who handled Alice's ancillary rights at the time, told me, "Alice was broken open, and we all tried to hold her hand through the experience. She talked about it constantly." Walsh said that she hadn't known which daughter had been abused, but she'd had the impression that the daughter had been "fifteen at the time, not nine. I don't know if Alice was lying, or swallowing the truth in small bits."

Ann Close, Alice's editor at Knopf, told me, "I think I mostly thought of it as a tragedy, honestly, that my writer and friend was struck by." For many of Alice's friends and colleagues, her experience as a betrayed lover seems

to have been the top concern. Close, who worked at Knopf for fifty-three years, said, “What do you do if you love somebody whom you learn something terrible about? You’ve already had more than fifteen years of something good.”

Five days after Alice left Gerry, he wrote a letter to Jenny saying that he’d had a phone call with Alice. He warned that, in this emotional state, Alice could not keep producing fiction: “I think there is an assumption that now that the truth has made her free Alice will pick up her notebook and happily resume writing.” But she was so distressed that she couldn’t even do her own shopping. “Basket case or not, Alice is one of the greatest artists of this age,” he wrote.

He already seemed calmer and more hopeful. “We still love each other very much,” he told Jenny. On the phone, he said, Alice had reassured him, “We must not die apart.”

A month later, Alice wrote her agent, Virginia Barber, to say that she and Gerry were together in Comox. “We’ve got a good therapist and progress (as they call it) is being made,” she told Barber. “Gerry is doing really well when you consider what a reversal + loss this had to be. Andrea’s okay, but doesn’t want to be in touch with me now G. is here.” She adopted a chipper tone, comparing the relationship to a mended teapot. “See how Ms. M clings to the comfy domestic images,” she wrote, adding, “I feel very weirdly free in a way. For so long I’ve felt oddly apologetic or strange with people, + now I feel I know what the trouble was.”

She could always find the perfect unexpected word to illustrate an emotional experience, but here she chose the most generic one: it was just “trouble.”

Barber (who died in 2016) continued socializing with Alice and Gerry, even helping Gerry as he searched for an agent for his geography book. But Walsh, who had begun her career as Barber’s assistant and still worked at the same firm, said that she would never interact with Gerry again. He had always picked up the phone when she called Alice’s house, and they would talk about contracts, and even editorial matters. Now she refused. Once, Alice got angry about this, and they argued. In a letter that Walsh believes

was about this dispute, Alice apologized to Barber, who had been supportive of Walsh, for being “quite out of touch with anything you might feel, and considering what a good friend you have been and the way you have helped me, all outside of our business relationship, that is shocking. I am shocked by this revelation of myself.”

The writer Margaret Atwood, who had been friends with Alice since the late sixties, told me that she didn’t know about Andrea’s abuse, though she was aware that Alice had unexpectedly ended up in Comox. At the time, Atwood said, few men would put up with a middle-aged woman who was an accomplished writer. But Andrea’s revelation would have changed the power dynamics in the relationship. “After Alice found out,” Atwood wrote me, “she had the moral upper hand.” She now had an “ace-in-the-hole ‘You-have-been-a-bad-person’ card.” She added, “I’m not saying it’s a good thing—I’m just saying it’s a fact. For somebody of her generation who had been brought up to believe that women were lesser and that their opinions and feelings and desires did not count, it would be quite something.”

In a letter from the early seventies, Alice described surviving a period where she “absolutely lived by will—having to wind myself up to speak, smile, move, caring for *nothing*.” Then one day she went to a coffee shop. “I was looking at those thick glass dishes they put ice-cream in—and this is the hard part to explain without seeming silly—I started to see those dishes with the most peculiar clarity and *respect*.” The counter looked different, too. “I don’t know if you just have to wait for this ‘seeing’ or if it can be managed by effort or faith,” she wrote. “But it is for me the final saving thing.”

In interviews, Alice tried to define this unique sort of “seeing,” describing it as a capacity to detect a kind of secret intensity lurking beneath the surfaces of everyday objects. “I can’t really claim that it is linked to any kind of a religious feeling about the world, and yet that might come closest to describing it,” she said. She characterized it as a fight against the knowledge that large swaths of the world, and of ourselves, are lost forever, every day. “Writing is a way of convincing yourself perhaps that you’re doing something about this,” she said. “I can’t stand to let go without some effort at this.”

Perhaps there was never a question of whether Alice would write about Andrea's abuse. She seemed helpless in the face of such vivid details. Less than a year after taking Gerry back, she wrote Barber to inform her of the "fate of the latest story, because it's usually hard to talk frankly on the phone." She had been working on the story for two months, and "it was about The Subject, though thoroughly disguised and all pretty effectively constructed." She went on, "I could do all the parts but the central thing, and when I approached that—and I tried from various angles—I got sick (I mean really—throwing up) and felt very bleak. This has happened three or four times and I realized finally I might sort of break apart. So I burned it (not to be tempted to go on)."

But she didn't abandon the idea altogether. Two months later, she had finished a draft of "Vandals," a story about sexual abuse that reads like a version, more sophisticated and subtle, of the story in "Marine Life" that had left her shaking. It seems to build off an anecdote that Andrea had shared in her letter. She had recalled how, during the summer when she was ten, they had planned to go to a swimming hole, and Alice asked Gerry not to do his "antics." He would pretend to slip off a bridge into the water, and he encouraged Andrea to do the same. Alice and Gerry started fighting over her use of the word "antics," and Alice refused to go swimming. Andrea, who had tried all summer not to be alone with Gerry, felt that it was too late to back out. At the swimming hole, Gerry told Andrea that they hadn't seen much of each other lately. She knew exactly what he meant and said, "No!" She walked away quickly, sweating and panicking.

In "Vandals," the revelation of abuse emerges in a swimming scene that hinges on the antics of a middle-aged man named Ladner. He has decided to share his life with a woman called Bea, not because he's in love but because "he had realized that she was a person he could live with"—a line that borrows from a letter that Gerry wrote about Alice. In the summers, a girl named Liza and her younger brother, who live across the road, come over to Ladner's property to play nearly every day, treating Bea as a kind of substitute mother. One day, they are all swimming, and Ladner begins mocking Bea's stroke, "patting the water with fluttery hands." Liza has come to expect this sort of behavior from Ladner: "In the secret life she had with him, what was terrible was always funny, badness was mixed up with

silliness.” Bea, too, knows that her reality has been warped by his sense of humor: “*I am slit top to bottom with jokes.*”

“Her writing was more real than our lives,” Jenny said of her mother, Alice (above).Photograph by George Duncan

In an early draft that Alice sent to Barber, the abuse was submerged. “Ann says she likes Vandals but isn’t sure it’s clear enough,” Alice wrote, referring to Ann Close, her editor at Knopf. “She’s put the question to an innocent reader.”

A month later, Alice sent a draft with a new page on which she tried, she wrote, “giving the whole show away.” The added page makes use of another detail from Andrea’s letter. She had referred to a game called “show me” that Gerry had proposed they play. “The plan was to pull over to the side of the road and pull down our pants,” Andrea had written to her mother. In the new page of “Vandals,” Liza recalls the “scenes of serious instruction” where Ladner taught her and her brother about different rocks, trees, and mushrooms, and also played games like “P.D.P.” “Pull down pants!” Liza’s brother says, when he sees the abbreviation carved into a tree. These lessons occurred on a part of Ladner’s property shaded by cedar

trees, and Liza thinks there may still be a “bruise on the ground, a tickling of shame in the grass.” No one in the story ever names the abuse, but Alice, in a sentence that she later cut, described how all the animals on the property knew what was happening: “The red fox in particular . . . its glass-eyed gaze so blithe and frenzied makes Liza think of Ladner’s, during those times that are blacked-out and burning, in her mind.”

“Vandals” begins years after the abuse, when Liza, now in her twenties, has been asked to check on Bea’s empty house. Instead, without explanation, she trashes it. She scoops books off the shelves and throws them on the floor. “*The Wages of Sin Is Death*, ” she writes in Magic Marker on the kitchen wall. The story is structured as a kind of investigation into whether Bea knew what Ladner was doing to the children, or if she had “made a bargain not to remember.” She could “spread safety, if she wanted to. Surely she could.” But Bea is in Ladner’s thrall, for reasons she understands may be “regressive and bad form.” Much of the tension in the story gathers around the mystery of Bea’s unbreakable devotion to this man. “Some women, women like herself, might be always on the lookout for an insanity that could contain them,” Bea thinks. “For what was living with a man if it wasn’t living inside his insanity?”

In an interview after the story was published, Alice said that Bea had to find “a really good insanity—I mean, just an ordinary one won’t work for her. She has got to find a man who is extremely forceful, self-sufficient, and who lives in the world, on his own terms, and if she wants to be with him she will have to live on those terms.”

“Vandals” is the last story in “Open Secrets,” a book dedicated to nine women, including Barber and Close: “This book is for ever-faithful friends in time of trouble.” (“In time of trouble” was cut from the published version.) Many of Alice’s earlier stories had followed a single narrative path, but the stories in this book are symphonic, with multiple narrative frames. One would like to think that a writer who turns her daughter’s abuse into art will be aesthetically punished, but Alice’s stories became increasingly accomplished. She seemed to be feeling her way into a new kind of form that expressed how a mind can be almost completely closed to the truth, except for a few small pockets of knowing.

The psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott described how the process of dissociation leads to a “queer kind of truth”: people can’t incorporate the traumatic events of their lives into the present, because on some level they weren’t there when they happened. They “go on looking for the past detail which is *not yet experienced*.” Alice’s fiction about her mother—that “everlastingly wounded phantom,” as one story puts it—had seemed to create a kind of three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view of something that perhaps she wasn’t there to fully feel. The stories in “Open Secrets” go further: different perspectives take turns, and it can take many pages to determine which one will offer a view, even if partial, of the main events of a story. Mona Simpson, reflecting on the way that Alice’s style changed throughout the nineties, wrote in *The Atlantic* that Alice seemed to have “left old forms behind, or to have broken them open.” She had become like “the Beethoven of the late quartets, everywhere and nowhere in the work.”

The Munro daughters all have variations on the same face. They speak in a way that seems effortlessly precise, often lyrical, with a subtly joyful energy. It’s easy to imagine them as having been the prettiest girls at summer camp, artistic and elusive. But both Sheila and Jenny felt that, of the three sisters, Andrea was the star, and the one most like their mother. “She lit up a room,” Jenny said. “She was very sparkly and vibrant and adored by my parents. I know she doesn’t feel that. But I’ll just say that, because that’s my truth.”

Andrea sometimes worried that the shiniest parts of her personality were actually coping mechanisms. She felt that she had spent years moving through the world “as if I was giving a hundred dollars to each person I connected with, in the hopes that on the day I needed to borrow ten dollars, I could.” After getting an e-mail from her, I did sometimes feel that I had been given the emotional equivalent of cash: she was tender, warm, funny, frank, often exuberant. We exchanged long e-mails before meeting in person, and there was something almost scientific about the rigor with which she approached her memories, taking care never to overstate a feeling. Andrea said that Jenny used to call her “the little detective.” “It was funny,” Andrea told me. “But it also wasn’t funny, because the ability to recall horrible things with clarity and levelheadedness was another way to not have to feel how utterly painful it was.”

Andrea had always worked hard to fit into her parents' worlds. After college, she worked at Munro's Books, which had moved to a new location, with marble floors, stained glass, and twenty-four-foot coffered ceilings. *National Geographic* later named it the third-best bookstore in the world. Then she worked as an assistant for Alice. In an article in the Calgary *Herald*, she described how she occasionally edited Alice's stories. "It's a real vote of confidence from my mother," she said, "that she'd have me go into her stories (to have me say) 'you know, I think you should get rid of that line.' "

After sending the letter disclosing her abuse, Andrea, whose migraines had not stopped, began volunteering at a transition house for women fleeing domestic violence. "I just felt this undercurrent of trying to create different ways of being," she told me. She began reading parenting books, though she had no immediate plans to have children. She loved the idea that people could be so thoughtful about understanding and validating a child's experience. She bought a book called "Healing the Shame that Binds You" from Munro's Books, even though the store workers, whom she knew well, laughed at her choice. Andrea said, "My mother was really hostile to all the language of self-help, but it saved my life to see that something that looks so convoluted and inescapable, such as codependence, can be named, and to know that others experience it, too."

Jenny noticed that "Andrea was shifting," she said. "She became what we would call in our family 'earnest.' " Jenny thought that Andrea was finding her own way and thriving. "I couldn't hold it in my mind that you could reveal something like that, which would absolutely ruin a person, and yet there was Andrea, healthy and glowing," she said. Andrea recognized that her affect was confusing. "I could see how, if you wanted that for me, it would look like I'd moved past it," she told me. By keeping her feelings to herself, she thought she was "contributing to the greatest good for the greatest number."

Jenny had become a visual artist, and Sheila a writer and the mother of two boys. For years, Sheila had been writing vignettes about her own life. "But I could never find any framework into which they would fit," she wrote. In 1997, Alice proposed that Sheila write her biography. Sheila didn't think a

straight biography would work, but she realized that her vignettes could be restructured as a memoir about the experience of growing up as a daughter of Alice Munro. Sheila had always credited her mother with an almost holy clarity of thought. Taking in her accomplishments, Sheila wrote, was like the “psychological equivalent of looking out over the Grand Canyon.”

She thought she knew more about her mother than almost any daughter could know, and yet much of her understanding came from the writing. “I tell myself I am wrong to see fiction in this way, that fiction, even autobiographical fiction, is not the same as autobiography, but I can’t change it,” she wrote in the memoir. “So unassailable is the truth of her fiction that sometimes I even feel as though I’m living inside an Alice Munro story. It’s as if her view of the world must be the way the world really is, because it feels so convincing, so true, that you trust her every word.”

The book does not mention Andrea’s abuse. Sheila said that she felt it was Andrea’s story to tell. Before the memoir was published, Sheila was talking with her editor, Douglas Gibson, who was Alice’s Canadian editor and publisher, and surprised herself by telling him about Andrea and Gerry. “I just wanted to not be keeping it a secret, I guess,” she said. “I wanted it to be acknowledged. I don’t know. I was very emotional. I was pretty much whispering. I just wanted him to know.”

Gibson, who is eighty-one, said that he doesn’t remember the conversation. “I have nothing further to add,” he wrote me. When the book came out, Andrea, who had recently married, saw it as another “symptom of everyone carrying on, including me,” she said. “Everything was back to normal.”

Andrea’s stepmother, Carole, had saved Gerry’s letters about the abuse for almost a decade, but, after Sheila’s book was published, she was ready for someone else to store them. “It was like they were toxic waste,” Jenny said. Sheila agreed to deliver them to her mother, but Andrea decided to read them before they were handed off.

By this time, Andrea was pregnant with twins. She was overwhelmed by the detail and also by the justifications that Gerry had written. “I felt like my parents might as well have been given a video of me being raped and done

nothing," she said. She and Sheila began cutting up the letters, as a kind of exorcism, and called Jenny to let her know. Jenny told them to stop. She sensed that one day they'd want the record of Gerry confessing. "It's one of the few things I'm proud of in this," Jenny told me. She eventually taped the pages back together.

Andrea tried to talk with her father about his response to the abuse, but he seemed confused that she was still upset, and repeated the cliché that time heals all wounds. Not long afterward, he held an event at Munro's Books for "The Way the Crow Flies," a novel that dramatizes the death of Lynne Harper, the girl Alice imagined Gerry might have raped and killed. Andrea wrote me, "On that night, I was in agony with one of the worst migraines of my life, knowing my father partied and schmoozed, and the tragic story—mine, Lynne Harper's—was just entertainment in his world."

After reading the letters, Andrea was downcast and withdrawn in her mother's presence. "Now what?" Alice asked. Andrea started to talk about how she'd blamed herself for the abuse for years, and it was now apparent that her parents had, too. She remembers her mother looking at her with an expression of cold annoyance. "I know we can't go on what I *thought* she was thinking by the look on her face over 20 years ago," Andrea wrote me. But the expression, more than anything Alice said, made Andrea feel that her mother didn't think her emotions were real.

Alice has been celebrated as a feminist writer, but when asked if she was a feminist she was inclined to deflect, describing herself as a believer in the importance of telling the truth about women's experiences. Her stories do not tend to portray respect or love between women. The solace of female intimacy is too exposing. "I'm intellectually a great supporter of the women's movement, and, yet, the thing of responding to men is something else," she said, in a 1975 interview. "Something else is going on."

There's a sense in which her remarkable capacity to describe a woman's experience is born less from affinity than from observation. Womanhood is the material rather than the identity. The mother in "Miles City, Montana" feels hopeful only when she has detached herself from her family and can observe on her own terms: "It was being a watcher that did it. A watcher, not a keeper." Sheila wrote that she always connected those words with her

mother. It's as if Alice were writing not as a woman but as this other kind of being—a "watcher."

Before she had her twins, Andrea asked Gerry for reassurance that he no longer had sexual compulsions. "For the last 25 years which is nearly a third of my life, I have not been compulsive," he wrote Andrea. He accused her of holding onto a "demon theory" ("agreeable to some forms of feminism") because it allowed her to claim power within their family dynamic. Without his demonization, he wrote, Alice would have the highest rank, and "I would be in the Prince Philip position." Instead, he was demoted to the "lowest conceivable rank, and Alice is diminished by her strong alliance with me."

When the twins were born, a boy and a girl, Andrea told Alice not to bring Gerry to her house. Alice bristled, saying that this would be too inconvenient, given her inability to drive. "Mom made a terrible error there," Jenny said. It seemed to her that her mother couldn't allow the abuse to take the proper proportions in their lives. "I think she thought, There's something about Andrea. She doesn't like me. We're not suited."

Andrea, who had become a yoga instructor, felt that her mother was so far from understanding her perspective that there was "no sincere way forward." Once, when Andrea had spoken about healing from the abuse and mentioned the idea of "self-love," she said, her mother "reacted as if I had said something really combative, asking, 'What is *that*?' "

Andrea stopped speaking to everyone in her family except Jenny. "On some level, you knew that in returning to Gerry you risked losing me, and you were willing to take that risk," she wrote her mother, explaining her decision. She reflected on Alice's comment, years earlier, that it was misogynistic to expect her to leave Gerry. "My anger over your decision has not been from a hatred of women, or higher expectations of women than men, but from a sense that you and I—as human beings—deserve better," Andrea wrote.

Jenny was so disgusted by Gerry's letters that she sent copies to her mother, to force her to confront them, and stopped speaking with her, too. "I will miss you terribly but I understand completely," Alice wrote Jenny. "I had

not read the whole letter before, since it was not sent to me—only read a bit of it."

After two years, Jenny worried that her mother would die while they were still estranged, and she began seeing her again. Jenny struggled to "get a picture of it—it's always slipping away from me," she said. She found her mother to be "an empathetic presence, really. She had this special understanding. She made you feel heard. She was just very good at pinpointing what was important in life and helping you find your own way and your own gifts."

When Jenny tried to talk with her mother about the conflict, Alice would often immediately start weeping. "I remember her saying to me once, 'Gerry lets me cry about it,' " Jenny said. It was as if she had decided that she could never be redeemed. "This was it," Jenny added. "She would rather get on with her life, where she's writing and he's doing everything else."

"Then I realized all I wanted was the shining armor. I didn't need the knight."
Cartoon by Liana Finck

When Andrea's twins were seven, Alice wrote a letter to Daniel Menaker, one of her former editors at *The New Yorker*, describing an environment of family harmony with Andrea's children, even though she hadn't seen them since they were infants. "The other day they were sitting around en famille," she wrote him. "The boy, Felix, said, 'This is just the perfect way for things to be, I can't think of anything better.' 'Neither can I,' said his father. 'Me neither,' said my daughter, their mother. All looked toward . . .

the other twin," Charlie, who said she'd rather be with Paul McCartney. Andrea said that Jenny must have shared this story with her mother, who wrote herself into the scene, as if their relationship were still intact.

In her fiction, Alice wrote more honestly about the anguish of the estrangement. In a trilogy of stories, "Chance," "Soon," and "Silence," published in 2004, about two years after Andrea cut off contact, she chronicled the life of a woman named Juliet, a famous TV interviewer known for her "marvellous insights," the way she gets "right to the heart of things." But Juliet feels that she has failed at the most important relationships in her life. She abandoned her mother when she was dying, and, in the second half of her life, she is abandoned by her only child, Penelope. After a day out, the first thing Juliet does when she returns home is look for the flashing light on her answering machine: "She tried various silly tricks, to do with how many steps she took to the phone, how she picked it up, how she breathed. *Let it be her.*"

Juliet never tries to find Penelope, a delightful child who had "scarcely ever given her cause for complaint," or to investigate why Penelope has made this choice. Instead, she tries to normalize her rejection as part of the tragedy of being a mother. "You know, we always have the idea that there is this reason or that reason and we keep trying to find out reasons," she thinks. "But I think the reason may be something not so easily dug out. Something like purity in her nature. Yes. Some fineness and strictness and purity, some rock-hard honesty in her."

Years earlier, in a recorded conversation over lunch and wine, Alice had told the literary critic Magdalene Redekop about an autobiographical story she wanted to write, called "Soon." It eventually became the second story in the trilogy. She explained that she hadn't responded to her mother when she said, "Soon I'll see Alice," because she felt manipulated. "I think the family is always the enemy of the self," she said. "You have this feeling that if you're going to live any kind of honorable life in yourself, you resist the family coercion." As an adult, Alice had achieved what the child in "Royal Beatings" never could: she'd refused her mother's affection, resisting the temptations, withdrawing her attention for good. She told Redekop, "I

dream now an awful lot about either abandoning old people or abandoning children."

In conversations with journalists in the two-thousands, Alice emphasized her adoration for Gerry, who sometimes picked her up at the end of interviews. "Munro's tall geographer husband arrives," a reporter from the *Globe and Mail* wrote. "They flirt; she actually bats her eyes at him."

"Was it love at second sight?" a television interviewer asked Alice, referring to her reunion with Gerry after her first marriage.

"These things happen," Alice said, gleaming.

"People will be so pleased to know," the interviewer responded.

In a *Times Magazine* profile of Alice, published in the fall of 2004, the writer Daphne Merkin observed that Alice invoked Gerry "frequently and affectionately as 'my husband' rather than by his name, like a proud Midwestern banker's wife whose one great claim to glory is that she has married well."

After Andrea read the profile, she found it difficult to get out of bed. Merkin wrote that Alice "is close today with her three daughters." Andrea hadn't seen her in two years. "I had long felt inconsequential to my mother, but now she was erasing me," Andrea later wrote.

Shortly afterward, Andrea called the Ontario Provincial Police and reported her abuse. "It took me twenty-nine years to make a statement to the police, to begin to believe I have rights as others have rights," she wrote in her victim-impact statement. "I still struggle with the feeling that I am weak, that there is something about me that invites degradation, and that this will be visited on my children. I have been afraid to experience the sensual side of parenting, careful to touch my children in a way that cannot be misconstrued, and sometimes feel a lack of spontaneity because of my fears." She also wrote, "There is a connection I am missing by not fully trusting my husband with my body."

The detective assigned to the case interviewed Andrea and reviewed the letters from Gerry that she had almost destroyed. Then, after interviewing others in the family, he went to Alice and Gerry's house, in Clinton, and tried to interview Alice, but, he told me, "it was going nowhere. She was just disparaging her daughter."

Gerry, who was eighty, eventually went to the police station and acknowledged the crime in one handwritten sentence that was missing a pronoun: "Between 01 July 1976 and 31 August 1976 at Town of Clinton did indecently assault Andrea Munro a female person."

In March, 2005, at a brief hearing in Goderich, about twelve miles from Clinton, he pleaded guilty to indecent assault. "Is there anything you wish to say today, Mr. Fremlin?" the judge asked.

"No, Your Honor," Gerry said.

Andrea told the prosecutor that she was not seeking jail time. She had received therapy at a treatment center for sexual trauma, and she asked that Gerry make a donation to the program. "I would feel glad for this small repair," she wrote in the victim statement. He donated ten thousand dollars. He was sentenced to two years' probation, during which time he could not be alone with anyone younger than sixteen.

Journalists were routinely at the courthouse in Goderich, and Andrea assumed that the case would become public. Jenny said that, before the hearing, her mother made arrangements to leave Gerry. She planned to stay at the house of Jane Urquhart, an old friend and a prominent writer, who lived in Stratford, Ontario. "The strategy of the trial was designed to protect Alice by exclusion of the press," Gerry wrote in a letter to his lawyer. The approach—a quick guilty plea, a hearing before a judge rather than a jury—was successful: there was no media coverage. Alice abruptly cancelled the plan to move to Urquhart's house. When Andrea later learned of the arrangements, she guessed that her mother had wanted to be seen doing the right thing, and then, when it became clear that the story wouldn't come out, realized that there was no need to do anything.

A few months later, Alice and Gerry were featured in an article in their college alumni magazine. “In a small house on a quiet street in Clinton, Ontario, Alice Munro sits at her kitchen table, doubled over with laughter at the antics of her husband,” the article begins. “On the other side of the room, Gerry Fremlin (BA ’50) is swinging a rather large sword and wondering aloud” about the meaning of the phrase, “Out, damn’d spot!” in Macbeth. As Gerry recited the dialogue, the reporter observed that Alice “almost begs him to stop.”

Eight months after Gerry’s conviction, Alice, who had just been named one of the hundred most influential people in the world by *Time*, finished a draft of the story “Dimension.” It reads as a kind of sequel to the inquiry explored in “Vandals,” into how loving a man requires “living inside his insanity.” The heroine, a young woman named Doree, takes three buses to get to the jail where her husband is imprisoned for killing their three children. When they met, she felt she had been “put on earth for no reason other than to be with him and try to understand him.” Now, in an imaginary conversation with her therapist, she tries to defend her desire to keep visiting him. She won’t necessarily “forgive,” she allows. “But think. Aren’t I just as cut off by what happened as he is?” It’s because of his madness that she will never see her children again, yet she is comforted by his presence, because the children still exist in him, too. He’s the only other person who loved them.

After reading the story, Jennifer Rudolph Walsh, who had become Alice’s agent after Barber retired, around 2002, in addition to the literary executor of her will, asked Alice, “Have we arrived at the basement yet?” Alice said no and joked that there was, in fact, a “sub-basement.” Walsh, soon after taking over, had told Sonny Mehta, the editor of Knopf, about the conflict in the family. “It’s not like I made an appointment to tell people things, but when it came up I repeated the story,” she told me. “It changed my understanding of the ‘fiction’ she was writing, and I felt that the other caretakers and shepherds of her work needed to know what I knew. This was information that belonged to the world and needed to be part of the full scope of her legacy.”

Walsh told Deborah Treisman, who has been the fiction editor of *The New Yorker* since 2003, that there was a rift in the family, and that Alice had written a few autobiographical stories that she didn't want published until after her death. "I didn't hear the full story, and my assumption was that Fremlin had recently been inappropriate with one of Alice's adult daughters," Treisman told me. "I imagined he'd been drunk at a party or something and made a pass. I didn't suspect that there was a child who had been molested and not defended."

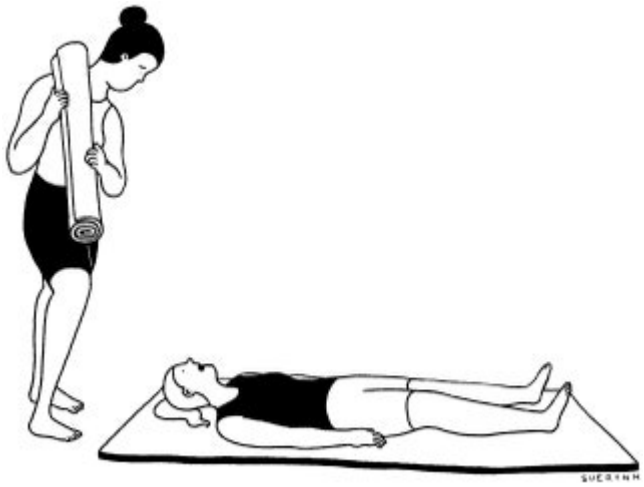
Walsh assumed that the autobiographical stories were about Andrea and Gerry. "That was the big elephant in the room," she said. "The only thing that made sense was that she was going after Gerry."

But neither Walsh nor Treisman ever saw the stories. Ann Close said that she had never heard of them. Jenny and Sheila hadn't, either. Jenny's first reaction, when I told her about their possible existence, was, "Gerry could have destroyed them. He could have easily destroyed them."

In the summer of 2005, Robert Thacker, a professor of Canadian studies and English at St. Lawrence University, in New York, was finishing a biography called "Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives." The book, which is more than six hundred pages long, follows the "parallel tracks of Alice Munro's life, Alice Munro's texts." Thacker presented Alice's return to Ontario as the turning point in her development as an artist, but he attributed this transformation largely to her rediscovery of the community where she grew up, the setting of many of her stories. He characterized her relationship, in broad strokes, as companionable and sporty. For her stories, Alice often availed herself of Gerry's knowledge, in particular of geography and woodcutting.

Shortly before the book was finalized, Andrea and Jenny e-mailed Thacker about Gerry's conviction. He had picked up on some friction in the family but hadn't known what it was about. "I will certainly scrutinize the text to ensure that I am not, as you say, 'spreading the lie,' " he wrote Andrea. "I do not think I have done so in what I have already written, but I assure you that I'll look at it again to make doubly sure."

“I meant pull the book entirely,” Andrea wrote in response. “I didn’t mean cross out adjectives that flatter Mr. Fremlin.” She told him, “It is mind-boggling to me that you don’t see the information Jenny and I have given you as key to your work.” She wrote, “Sexual abuse doesn’t happen in a vacuum, there is a context. My mother played a very large part in creating a terrifying world in which degradation—hers and mine—was guaranteed.”



“I let go of all my tension and lost my will to get up.”
Cartoon by Suerynn Lee

The book was published with what Thacker described as “minor deletions” in the descriptions of Gerry. Thacker continued researching Alice’s work, first for a revised edition of the biography and later for a new book called “Alice Munro’s Late Style.” Almost three years after the first edition of the biography came out, Alice and Thacker met for lunch, and it became clear to Thacker that there was something Alice wanted to discuss.

“Well, I hear you have some information from my children,” Alice told him. They ate at Bailey’s Fine Dining, a restaurant in Goderich where Alice had a regular table in the back. Thacker recorded the conversation. “I have to ask you what they want you to do,” she said.

Thacker said that her daughters had told him about the abuse, but that he didn’t plan to write about it: “I guess if it’s what they said, and it’s in a public record, I suppose somebody . . .”

“It is in the public record,” Alice said. “And it’s quite true, and it’s a terrible fact of my life.”

Thacker asked if she was still out of touch with Andrea. “Oh, yes, I always will be,” Alice responded. “She’s going to do exactly what she feels will help her. And I think she has. I thought maybe, as the years went by, it would become less necessary for her to make people suffer. Maybe not.”

She asked Thacker to tell her if, at any point, he got an inkling that the story would become public. She imagined that people might put menacing signs on her lawn. “If I had left Gerry and made a huge public condemnation right at the time, I would be in the clear,” she told Thacker. “Gerry would probably be dead.” She went on, “I think he’s living in a fairly brave way. He’s trying to live with a certain amount of rational cheerfulness, mainly for my sake. So we are both doing our best. To Andrea, and to a certain extent to Jenny, too, this looks like cowardice.” She lowered her voice, imitating her daughters: “What’s the matter—why can’t you let it be known that you’re married to a pedophile?” Then she answered their question. “People would not know anything else about me,” she said. “That would become what people would know. I worked for a long time to be who I am.”

In 2010, Carole invited Sandra Martin, an obituary writer for the *Globe and Mail*, one of Canada’s most widely read newspapers, to a dinner party. She and Jim still lived in the twelve-room house in Victoria. After the meal, the women at the party were sitting separately from their husbands, and Carole referred to Gerry’s abuse of Andrea. “I’m listening to this, and I’m stunned and horrified,” Martin told me. Carole did not feel that the information was a secret. Friends of hers in Victoria knew, and she believed that many people in the Toronto publishing world did, too.

Martin said that for Canadians Alice was “like the Queen, in a way.” She became more luminous and beautiful as she aged. She had curly silver hair, a high forehead, and remarkably unlined skin. In a Canadian quarterly about the book trade, a novelist reviewing her 2009 collection, “Too Much Happiness,” wrote that, though the literary world was full of jealous feuding, “I have never heard anyone say anything unkind about Alice Munro, personally or professionally.” Her devoted readers seemed to blithely accept that her stories, with their grisly leitmotifs, were the product of a saintly lady who was making it all up, out of empathy.

With the help of a colleague, Martin pulled records about Gerry's case from the courthouse in Goderich. But she was informed that the paper would not be pursuing the story. "It was simply shut down," she recalled. "And what I felt was something from my own life—which is what happens, right? I also was sexually abused as a prepubescent. I didn't tell my mother for the longest time. When I finally did, what she said was, 'Don't tell your father.' " Martin dropped the subject. "I felt ashamed that I had actually dared to ask," she said.

Later, when a different editor asked Martin to prepare an obituary for Alice, years before her death, she said no, because she didn't want to be put in a position where she had to omit things that she knew to be true. Instead, she prepared an essay about Alice's work, drawing attention to several stories about maternal neglect.

Andrea had the impression that everyone knew about her abuse and, on some basic level, just didn't care. She started looking for friends who were not readers. She told me that, for a long time, when she read stories by her mother that dealt with aspects of what had happened, she thought, "O.K., she's trying to talk about it, trying to figure it out. It's just going to take some time." A story from 1998, "Rich as Stink," describes a kind of warped love triangle among a girl named Karin, her mother, and her mother's boyfriend. Karin visits them in the summers, and her mother is often hysterical with grief and shame, because she feels that her boyfriend despises her. Hoping to disrupt the mood with entertainment, Karin prepares to surprise them by wearing an old wedding dress and entering the room singing "Here Comes the Bride." But her veil drifts through the flames of some candles, and the dress burns. She ends up in the hospital, permanently scarred. Andrea interpreted the ending as a potential sign of progress, with its "catastrophic image of innocence destroyed."

But as time passed Andrea felt increasingly enraged by the fatalistic attitude of her mother's characters, "the cold calculations, the bleak survival mode." When her twins turned nine, the age she had been when she was abused, the failures of her own family felt even more acute. Jenny said, "We'd both trash the parents and go over how faulty they were, and then I'd go back to seeing them." Andrea cut off contact with Jenny, too.

Gerry and Alice's relationship seemed to get better as they aged. They would spend the morning working, Alice on her stories and Gerry on a memoir about the Second World War. Sheila said that Alice would get up first, and, as she was having coffee, "Gerry would come out and do this thing where he took her hand and kissed it in a kind of formal way. It was sort of mocking but sort of not. That was his style." Sheila felt uncomfortable when she and Gerry were alone together. A few times, he told her, "It's terrible, what I did to your family."

Jenny tried to help Gerry draft apology letters to Andrea. "I would tell him what he had to do, and his letters were never quite right," she said. "The last one may have been the best, but then he ruined it by saying, 'You had a big crush on me.' "

Gerry's conviction restricted his ability to travel internationally, and, in 2010, he applied, unsuccessfully, for a travel waiver to the United States. "I have great admiration for Americans and will regret to my dying day the piece of stupidity that brought me to this situation," he wrote. On a manila envelope where he kept records related to his application for the waiver, and also to a pardon that he'd applied for, he had jotted down relevant addresses and numbers, along with the phrase "Innocent & Flatulent."

Gerry seemed mystified that Alice's sorrow over Andrea endured. Jenny said, "He would say things to me like, 'Oh, motherhood is such a strong and powerful emotion!'—like he was a scientist. 'Wow, motherhood, what a thing.' " He seemed to have an almost mechanistic view of human behavior. In one letter, he defined "family dynamic" as "the system by which rank and prestige is assigned by family members." Jenny said, "It was like he didn't know about love. But, ironically, maybe he found it by doing the worst thing and being forgiven, you know?"

Like everyone in Alice's family, Gerry seemed to accept that parts of his life would be converted to fiction, perhaps in his case as a special kind of penance. "Gerry doesn't read my work," Alice had told an interviewer who visited her house in 1998.

"Yes, I do," Gerry had said. "But we don't discuss it."

Gerry and Alice bought burial plots for themselves in a cemetery just outside Clinton. Jenny said she could imagine them sitting down together for a glass of wine and fatal drugs. In a story called “Dolly,” published in 2012, when she was eighty, Alice described an elderly couple planning their joint suicide. Before resolving the details, though, the woman becomes inflamed by an old source of jealousy and leaves her partner. “No lies, after all, were as strong as the lies we tell ourselves, and then unfortunately have to keep telling to make the whole puke stay down in our stomachs,” she writes him. In the morning, when she wakes up alone in a motel, the fight feels stale, her arguments repetitive and rambling, and she drives back home.

Alice had been suffering from memory problems for several years, and by 2011 she was struggling to manage. Previously, Gerry had spent time decorating their yard with fanciful folk sculptures, including a bathtub painted to look like both a cow and a fighter plane, and also trying to preserve old buildings in town, but now his purpose narrowed. “He did everything for her,” Jenny said. “It reminded me of when he was waiting on his old mother.”

Gerry was diagnosed with cancer, but he continued in this mode, hiding how ill he’d become. Two weeks before he died, he spread out aerial photographs of evacuees from the Second World War and spoke of his remorse over dropping bombs. He didn’t mention regrets closer to home, Jenny noticed. He died in the spring of 2013, leaving behind the memoir of his war years, which he’d wanted published posthumously, and several long poems in rhyming comic verse.

Jenny said that within a day Alice had thrown away bags full of his belongings. Left behind was a book that he had been reading, “Mistakes Were Made (but Not by *Me*),” by social psychologists, about the cognitive biases that people use to rationalize their own harmful behavior. But it seemed to Jenny that the book’s message hadn’t reached him. The passages he’d underlined were about episodes in which children made false accusations of sexual abuse.

Jenny hoped that Gerry’s death would bring Andrea back to the family, but Andrea found that the idea of forgiveness felt increasingly “moot.” When

her husband told her that Gerry had died, she said, “I remember being so surprised, because I didn’t think he could do something so vulnerable.”

“I know you’re rolling your eyes every time I ask for something.”
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

Half a year later, Alice won the Nobel Prize in Literature, becoming the first Canadian to do so. A biography for the prize read “Alice Munro is married with two daughters from her first marriage.” In an article about the award in the *Globe and Mail*, Jim, who still ran Munro’s Books, praised his ex-wife for being a “feminist before feminism was invented.”

Alice was unable to go to Sweden—she had to be continually reminded what prize she had won—so Jenny received the award from the King of Sweden in her stead.

Andrea said that when she saw the pictures of Jenny, who looked gorgeous in a navy-blue gown, her blond hair in an updo, she thought, “They really are happier that I’m not in the family. Now they can just live in this one reality.” Alice’s face was put on a Canadian postage stamp.

Jenny lives on a corner lot in Port Hope, in a modest white cottage with Victorian trim which outwardly resembles her mother’s house in Clinton. She has a generous, fairylike presence and seems almost helplessly focussed on what is good. When she told me she had been diagnosed with a rare cancer, she relayed the news with such equanimity that I mistakenly assumed the second half of her story would be about how the diagnosis had been an error.

She hired a rotation of caretakers for her mother and filled in whenever there was an empty shift. But she was increasingly distraught about Andrea's silence. "I really felt I was almost losing my mind," she said. "It felt really sickening that I had gone along with this idea of Gerry as an acceptable part of our family." She used to jokingly call him her "faux pa."

She began reading about sexual abuse, and wept when she read a paper by the psychiatrist Roland Summit called "The Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome," which seemed to map out Andrea's childhood and adolescence. The paper describes how the abused child, to survive within her family, must "structure her reality to protect the parent," remaking herself to maximize love and acceptance. "The child is given the power to destroy the family and the responsibility to keep it together," Summit writes. Years later, when the child is ready to talk about how helpless she was made to feel, her family is dismissive of what she has been through, believing that she appeared too happy to have been harmed by the experience.

Jenny Googled "adult survivors of child sexual abuse and their families," and discovered a support center in Toronto called the Gatehouse. She told Sheila and Andrew, their stepbrother, about it, and they decided to go there together, for a healing circle where they shared their grief over the estrangement. "We were not even sure we deserved help," Jenny said.

Andrew didn't realize until he was at the Gatehouse that nothing had been done after Andrea shared her story with his mom. "I went into that room with my eleven-year-old boy's version of events," he told me. After he had heard Andrea sobbing, he never brought up the subject again, because he thought it would hurt her.

Maria Barcelos, the organization's executive director, said, "All three of them were in that place of saying, 'We know we were part of this silence and we don't want to be part of it anymore. We want our sister in our lives.' "

Gatehouse staff encouraged them to write letters to Andrea. "The salient message was 'Don't write with a goal in mind,' " Andrew said. " 'Don't write expecting a result. Just communicate how you feel about her.' "

Andrea, who was living in Calgary, read the letters, but she didn't respond. She didn't want to feel pressured to "get in a room filled with family members and start offering compassion and forgiveness."

Not long afterward, the Gatehouse hosted an annual conference, attended by more than a hundred and fifty people. Jenny was a keynote speaker. "I need to be here," she said, standing at the podium, her voice trembling. Sheila and Andrew sat in the front row. With a projector, Jenny showed a sketch she had drawn of Andrea the summer Andrea was ten. She was sitting on a quilted bed, her legs crossed, her blond hair falling nearly to her waist. She looked sorrowful. "I didn't protect this beautiful child," Jenny said. Jenny imagined that the story would be front-page news the next day, but nothing happened.

Jenny told her mother about the Gatehouse and said that many other families had experiences like theirs. "The whole society doesn't want to talk about it," she said.

"Of course," Alice said. "But I had actually forgotten about it, can you imagine?"

"Well, you're forgetting a lot of things now."

"That's true," Alice said.

Jenny spoke about how much it would mean to Andrea to know that she cared, and Alice began crying. Within twenty seconds she recovered, as if the memory, along with the emotion linked to it, had just been lost.

In 2016, when Andrea was forty-nine, her husband suddenly left her. "I felt ready to turn to where I had felt love," she said. "I felt a genuine willingness and, actually, desperation." Andrea flew to Toronto. At the airport, "I saw her at the top of the escalator, and she fell into my arms," Jenny said. They drove directly to the Gatehouse together.

Andrea also agreed to see her father for the first time in years. When she began expressing anger, Jim, who had heart congestion and was very frail, put his hand on her shoulder and said, "I need to hear this." Andrea felt that

he was listening with love. She thought, This is the kindest dad I've ever had. Later, during a period of better health, "his old personality started to come back," she said. Once, she asked him if he ever thought, when she was with her mother and Gerry in Clinton, "What is happening to Andrea right now?" He answered, "No."

Jenny daydreamed about Andrea moving to Port Hope, a town that reminded Andrea of Victoria "without the ghosts." They discussed the elements of an ideal house: a fireplace, a porch, oak trees, walls made of stone. In the summer of 2016, a house in Port Hope with almost everything on their list came on the market. Jenny helped Andrea buy it, and several months later Andrea moved there, with the twins, Charlie and Felix, eventually joining her. By that point, Alice was "completely gone," Andrea said. "She didn't know me." Charlie said that one time they were in the upstairs dining area of a coffee shop in Port Hope, and, as they walked downstairs, they saw Alice and her caretaker ordering coffee. They waited upstairs until she left the shop.

After Charlie went away to college, Andrea came over to Jenny's house every other night. They often lay on the bed, with Jenny's husband, watching movies. "It's kind of like I'm passing on this incredible love that I feel I got from my mom," Jenny told me. "I'm probably deluding myself, but I think Mom would have loved to embrace Andrea and have her back. And I'm trying to transmit that."

Alice's last book, "Dear Life," published in 2012, ends with another reflection on her abandonment of her mother. In this final rendering, her guilt has eased. If she had stayed home to care for her mother, as she felt a good daughter should, she could never have become the writer she was. "We say of some things that they can't be forgiven, or that we will never forgive ourselves," she wrote in the final lines. "But we do—we do it all the time."

It's hard not to read these words, the last she ever published in a book, as an expression of the choices she made with Andrea, too. Trauma tends to lead to a kind of unknowing repetition, and, in the second half of her life, Alice reënacted the dynamic with her mother, in new form: she had to trade reality for fiction, her daughter for art.

And yet the reader of an Alice Munro story never knows which epiphany to trust. One revelation is overlaid on another; the story continues past the point at which another author might end it. In the spring of 2024, a few weeks before Alice died, she and Jenny were sitting in the sun, outside the nursing home where Alice had been living for the past three years. Jenny said that Alice told her, “I didn’t want that pediful.” She spit the words out, with significant effort. “I said, ‘Do you mean pedophile?’ She said, ‘Yes.’ I said, ‘Do you mean you should have stood with Andrea?’ She said, ‘Yes.’ ”

A week after Alice died, the Gatehouse republished on its Web site an essay by Andrea about the experience of reuniting with her siblings after decades of silence. When the essay had first been posted, in 2020, Barcelos had asked Andrea to take out her mother’s name, largely because of concerns over the legal implications. But the new version referred to “my mother, Alice Munro.”

Andrew, an actor and a writer, sent the essay to many of his friends, and eventually to his colleagues, too, and Andrea sent it to three organizations for people who have experienced sexual abuse. She thought that the story would become public, but it didn’t. As publications were printing glowing remembrances of her mother, Andrea sent the essay to four journalists who had written about her mother or about sexual trauma. Her ex-husband sent it to two news outlets on the west coast of Canada. The response was “a big zero,” Andrea said.

Cartoon by Seth Fleishman

In early June, the Toronto *Star* published a column by a writer named Heather Mallick, who said she was crushed to realize that “political idols, once-adored writers, they’re just people, not heroes.” Andrea thought that Mallick might be subtly referencing her mother, so she e-mailed Mallick, too. But Mallick had not been aware of Andrea’s essay. She informed a top editor, and the story was proposed to Deborah Dundas, the books editor. “Lives of Girls and Women” had been a foundational book for Dundas when she was a teen-ager. “The idea of becoming a writer and having control over your own story—it meant everything to me,” she told me. She explained to her editor that she did not want to take down an idol or jeopardize her relationships in publishing. But the next day she changed her mind.

Less than three weeks later, Dundas and a colleague, Betsy Powell, a courts reporter, published a detailed article about Gerry’s abuse and how it was kept silent. The *Star* also published a longer version of Andrea’s Gatehouse essay, and also essays by Andrew and Jenny recounting how they had processed what happened to their sister. “We all, in our way, asked that Andrea live a lie,” Jenny wrote. Within a day, the news was reported around the world. The largest chain of bookstores in Canada announced that, though it would still carry Alice Munro books, it would remove posters of her face from their stores. Jim Munro had died, but the new owners of Munro’s Books issued a statement saying that all future proceeds from the sale of Alice’s books would go to organizations supporting survivors of sexual abuse. Soon, other public figures in Canada, including a journalist and a novelist, said that they’d been inspired by Andrea to share similar stories of being silenced after abuse.

The first time I met Jenny, she told me, “In general, I just see this as a giant tragedy in my family that has a kind of wonderful result—as good as it can get. I know my parents would have wanted this.”

“Even if this hurts her reputation, your mom would still ultimately want this to be happening now?” I asked.

“Yes, I think she would,” Jenny said. “She would want this truth for Andrea. She was a master of fiction, and Andrea is a master of truth. And I think, in a way, Mom would have admired that.”

When I asked Andrea if she agreed with Jenny's assessment, she started laughing and said, "No!"

We were sitting at a picnic table at Horse Discovery, an eighty-five-acre horse farm where Andrea leads yoga and mindfulness classes. She said that Jenny's impression had been altered by a decade spent taking care of that "sweet Alzheimer's lady—who wasn't our mother."

Andrea had known that person, too. She sometimes came over to her mother's home to help. "It was an act of love for Jenny," she said, not for her mother. At first, she took Alice for weekly drives. When that felt too intimate, she began doing housework, like scrubbing her floors.

Sometimes Andrea explained who she was, but Alice "would forget two minutes later, and it was easier that way," she said. "I didn't want to have a moment where we connected again. I wouldn't have believed it, anyway."

In a story from 2008, called "Deep-Holes," Alice imagined the way that dementia could bring a mother and her estranged child back together. When the son in the story makes it clear that he does not want to see his mother again, she takes solace in the thought that "age could become her ally, turning her into somebody she didn't know yet. She has seen that look of old people, now and then—clear-sighted but content, on islands of their own making."

Once, when Andrea came over to help, Alice told a story about how her father had beaten her after she gave names to the baby foxes on their farm. She wasn't supposed to get attached to the animals. "My mother always told me she had no interest in animals," Andrea said. "But I believe that happened, and I thought, Oh, the nurturing was beaten out of her."

"Did you feel like there was some part of her that knew that she was communicating this?" I asked.

"When you say it, it seems pretty obvious," she said. "But, no, I didn't realize that she might be emotionally available to herself."

I mentioned that Alice must have known how much Andrea loved animals.

“I’m willing to entertain the idea that there was some kind of knowing in there,” Andrea said. During another visit, Alice, moving in and out of coherence, had asked Andrea if it was O.K. to live on her own now and go back to college. “I had a lot of compassion for that, too, because she didn’t get to finish university,” Andrea said. Instead, she had dropped out and got married. She had no money and couldn’t write without the support of a man. Andrea said, “There was the kind of sweetness of consulting with me, like she wanted a do-over.”

When Andrea’s children were young, she took care to educate them about how to prevent sexual abuse, using her own story as an example. Not long ago, Andrea was taken aback when Charlie wrote an essay called “The Young and Pretty Condition,” for a college class, in which she described how some of her mother’s attempts to protect her innocence (like refusing to dress her in a bikini as a child, or having frank discussions about infantilizing beauty standards) gave her the impression that all old men were secretly menacing. “I think the cycle is not necessarily breakable in one fell swoop,” Andrea told me. “There are things that get pushed to the next generation, things that I didn’t intend. But the difference is that she can say these things.”

Charlie was never particularly curious about her grandmother. The family conflict didn’t feel relevant to her life. “When I was growing up, I was thinking about my problems,” she told me, almost apologetically. She speaks to her mother on the phone every day: “She’s just this beautiful, asexual creature who doesn’t need to be attractive to anybody. She’s goddess-y in her nature. She’s just glowing and energetic, and she has this joy for life that I think I have as well.”

The conversation with Charlie made me feel that Andrea was soaring through life, and in an e-mail to Andrea I admitted that I felt myself slipping into the place her siblings had spent so many years: “Look how amazing Andrea is—she’s thriving!”

“Thriving Andrea,” she responded. “What a load.” The goddess-y life of celibacy was possible because “it is easy to ignore something you are not aware of missing.” She sometimes enters a state in which all her interactions are tinged with a sense of guilt and horror that she has

demanded too much from other people. “Most of all, I’m afraid of being a burden,” she wrote me.

Recently, I met her in her home, in Port Hope, which was as idyllic as it had been described: the brick-and-stone house was on a hill, surrounded by black-walnut trees, with a granite-columned staircase leading up to it. We sat beside the fire, next to a large painting by Jenny of a gnarled tree. Jenny had just told Andrea about her mother’s letter to John Metcalf, from the early seventies, in which she had described being raped. “The hardest part of that story for me was that my mother didn’t go to the class that she was supposed to be at that day,” Andrea said. “She couldn’t. She had to wander around the city. I felt like I did that a lot—rather than show up for myself. And the next thought is the rage that she got to live her life very productively. And I feel like I continue to walk aimlessly around that city.”

She felt that she had lost several years of her life, mostly in her twenties, when she wanted to be establishing a career. She had been derailed by almost weekly migraines. It wasn’t until she had read Gerry’s letter that described her headache on the morning he first abused her that she connected the onset of the condition to what he’d done. Now she understood migraines as a “way to experience the intensity of my pain without inflicting it on anyone.” Since she published her essay on the Gatehouse Web site last spring, her migraines have become less frequent and less shattering.

After Alice died, Sheila and Jenny wanted to hold a small service for the burial of her ashes. Toward the end of her life, Alice had told Jenny, “I do not want to be buried next to that man.” They had chosen a new cemetery, in Wingham. But Andrea became upset when she “pictured my sisters standing over my mother’s grave in a town that revered St. Alice, with no one the wiser,” she wrote me.

Now that the secret has been told, Jenny and Sheila will eventually have a service. “I think we’ll just have to say, ‘We have this basic need to bury our mother,’ ” Sheila told me. Andrea doesn’t plan to attend, but she understands that her sisters need to find their own ways to grieve. The public response to her abuse has made Andrea realize that there was no “grand conspiracy of silence,” as she’d always imagined. She described it

as “more like a sideways dreamlike slide into unnameable darkness—an airless, mute place.” ♦

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Shouts & Murmurs

- **To the Detective Investigating My Murder**
  By Patricia Marx | I’m not dead, but a lot of people can’t stand me. What I mean is, they want to knock me off. My days are numbered.

Shouts & Murmurs

To the Detective Investigating My Murder

By Patricia Marx

December 23, 2024

Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

Dear Detective,

I’m not dead, but a lot of people can’t stand me. What I mean is that breathing is not an activity they want me to keep doing. What I mean is, they want to knock me off. My days are numbered.

Before long, you’ll be standing in front of my lifeless body (ignore gray roots; would’ve colored hair if I’d known I’d be autopsied the next day). And you’ll ask, “Who would want to kill Iris Lipoff?”

As someone who goes way back with the victim, trust me when I say, “Who wouldn’t?”

“That’s like using a hula hoop to strain soup,” you’ll say. “Can’t you narrow it down?”

Start with these persons of interest. I'm not saying they're guilty, just that it would be delightful if they were punished. Don't fall for the "I was in Bora-Bora for a destination colonoscopy" alibi. If quantum physics has taught us anything, it's that you can simultaneously use the lavatory in Bora-Bora and eliminate me in New York. Also, don't fall for "Iris who?" Does anyone really *know* anyone?

Obviously, the old lady I sat next to at "La Bohème" has it in for me. But let me ask you, isn't it opera-going law that, if the person next to you bends down to the floor to retrieve her cane, she forfeits the right to her half of the armrest? Anyway, give her the third degree, if she's still alive. Then there's the guy in the quiet car on the 10:33 *A.M.* New Jersey Transit train to Mahwah last Thursday. Looks like an Alan or possibly an Allen but not an Allan. He was blabbing on his cell phone—and kept blabbing *even after I explicitly told him with my eyes to lower his blabbing!* I just remembered another clue: he was wearing a beige beanie but left it on the train.

Listen, I get it that the last thing you need is some buttinsky telling you how to do your job, but I'm not just any old buttinsky. Forgive me, therefore, for pointing out forensic evidence that you might have missed. For instance, does it appear that I was forced to swallow molten gold—as was the fate, according to hearsay, of Emperor Valerian, in the third century? If so, arrest the members of my defunct book club. The group fell apart last week after seventeen years, defeated by the "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire." Yes, the selection was my idea. I thought it was a rom-com.

Or was I sliced in two with a butter knife? If so, interrogate every waitperson at E.J.'s Luncheonette. Have you ever heard me order an egg-white omelette—"so soft it's medically inadvisable and no butter or oil unless you have to and in that case don't tell me"? (I don't hate myself, but sometimes I do get on my nerves!) Waitperson, you didn't hear it from me, but, if such a thing as mental self-defense exists, plead it.

If I was found duct-taped to death, the murderess is the FedEx lady with the herniated disk who delivers packages to my building. She is allegedly pregnant. Let her off the hook. Do you know how many boxes I receive every day from Amazon?

Let’s turn to the crime scene. If it contains putrefying fishes, especially mackerel, everyone on the Compost Container Aesthetic Committee in my co-op is suspect. As anyone who’s been on a Zoom breakout session with me knows, I interrupt constantly, listening for the briefest pause in conversation so that I can get in my bons mots about the labelling policy for bins. I’d want to kill me.

However, if I was eaten by a—

Oy. Just thinking about the inevitable tragic death of me, Iris Lipoff, is making my blood pressure spike to a hundred and nineteen over seventy-nine, which is on the border of being too high. You see, Detective, as long as I can remember, I’ve been part of my life. I know the back of Iris Lipoff’s hand like the back of my hand. I waited on her in the self-checkout line at Whole Foods. I can’t imagine the world going on without me, Iris Lipoff, and not only because I rely on her to remember my BritBox password.

An anonymous source—O.K., it was me—said that, when my time comes, the obit folks should be informed that I, Iris Lipoff, once donated my buy-one-get-one-free coupon to the woman behind me in line at CVS. One more thing, Detective. When you fill out my age on the death-certificate form, could you say that I was—on second thought, leave it blank. ♦

Patricia Marx is a staff writer. Her children’s book “Tired Town,” illustrated by Roz Chast, was published in October, 2023.

Fiction

- **“The Leper”**
  By Lee Chang-dong | The prosecutor spoke without emotion: “Your father’s been charged with espionage. Spying under orders from the North Korean puppet regime.”

Fiction

The Leper

By Lee Chang-dong
December 22, 2024

Photograph by Ina Jang for The New Yorker

. . . to survive, to hang on,
waiting for the new world to dawn,
what can you do but become a leper
nobody in the world would deign to touch?

—From "Windy Evening," by Kim Seong-dong.

Before I knocked, I took a moment to calm my breathing. But even a couple of deep breaths did nothing to lessen my anxiety, and, to the sound of voices on the other side, I carefully pushed open the thick door.

A female clerk sat at a desk just inside. "How may I help you?" she asked. The room wasn't as large as I'd imagined. Directly in my line of sight from the door, I could see a man in his forties sitting with his back to the window. He seemed to be the boss of this office.

Read an interview with the author for the story behind the story.

"I'm here to see the prosecutor," I said.

"May I ask your name?"

"Uh . . . my name is Kim Youngjin. I got a phone call yesterday."

"Ah, please have a seat and wait over there." Instead of the clerk, it was a man sitting next to her who spoke. He appeared to be the prosecutor's secretary, and perhaps for that reason I found him very blunt and harsh, though I was too preoccupied to take offense at his tone of voice. I sat myself in the chair facing them.

The prosecutor was talking to someone on the phone. Leaning back in his seat, swivelling this way and that, he spoke in a soft voice, as if he were chatting with a close friend. "Legal procedure," "execute the warrant," "keep the case open"—those were some of the phrases he used as he discussed the relationship between senior and junior colleagues, interspersed with observations about the quality of service provided by the madam at a certain bar. Aside from the prosecutor's voice, it was quiet in the office, so quiet that the place felt oddly solemn.

“Are you Kim Hakgyu’s son?” the prosecutor asked as he stood, hanging up the phone.

“Yes, sir. How do you do? I’m Kim Youngjin.” Bowing much lower than necessary, I took his outstretched hand. I noticed that he had just used my father’s name without prefacing it with the title “Mister” and I was struck with the terrifying realization that those three syllables—*Kim Hak Gyu*—were already being treated as the name of a criminal who did not deserve respect.

“I hear you teach at a school out in the countryside. Sorry to inconvenience you, having to come all the way up here.”

“N-no . . . not at all. I should thank *you* for meeting with me. It’s been frustrating. All this time, wondering what’s going on and not knowing who to ask.”

Before I sat down, I politely accepted the business card he handed me. His hair was neatly combed back, and he wore glasses, but other than that there was nothing special about the prosecutor’s appearance—at least at first glance. He had an ordinary face, and yet his plain looks did nothing to mitigate my uneasiness and anxiety.

“So—a family of fighters,” he said, looking up from the thick file he’d been leafing through for some time. “Do you often hear from your sister?”

“I’m not sure what . . .”

“Your younger sister, Hyoseon. Would you say she’s made quite a name for herself in the labor movement? The police are looking for her now, and it’s been quite a headache.”

“Is that so? I live out in the country. I haven’t seen her in more than a year. I really had no idea she would get caught up in something like that. She couldn’t go to school because of the family circumstances, but she was always a kindhearted, good girl.”

As the prosecutor listened to my awkward response, a mysterious smile appeared on his lips. “That’s all fine and good,” he said. “But I didn’t ask

you to come in to talk about Hyoseon."

He looked back down at the file and said, "Mr. Kim, it says here that you have two names. Is that correct? In addition to Youngjin, you have another name, Maksu."

"It's not another name. That was the name I had when I was a kid. I changed it later."

"Why did you change it?"

"It was . . . Maksu just isn't a good name to call someone, is it? My friends would make fun of me because of it when I was young."

As I made that poor excuse, I had the helpless feeling that this was what everything had inevitably come to. I had tried, all that time, to distance myself from my old name, but now I realized that it was no more erasable than the problems of my father's past—I couldn't distance myself from it one bit.

I had first heard about what happened to my father two weeks earlier, when my aunt, his sister, had called the school where I worked. "Kim . . . who? There's nobody by that name here. It's not just one or two Kims here, you know. Ah, Mr. Kim Youngjin? Why didn't you say so the first time? Just a minute."

It seemed that my aunt had asked for me as Maksu, and it had taken the vice-principal, who answered the call, several tries to finally get my proper name out of her.

Even after I was handed the phone, the voice on the other end was still urgently shouting in a thick Gyeongsang accent.

"Hello? May I speak to Mr. Kim, please? I mean Mr. Kim *Youngjin*."

"Kim Youngjin speaking. Who is this?"

"*Aigo,* Youngjin . . . no, Maksu. Is that really you, Maksu?"

It was only then that I recognized the old woman's familiar, heavily accented voice.

"We're getting our money's worth out of this coffee table."
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

"Auntie? What's the matter? Where are you?"

"Where am I? In Seoul, of course! But what are we gonna do, Maksu? Your father . . . they came and took him away."

"What? What are you saying?"

"They came and took him away. *Aigo*, what are we gonna do? What in the world . . . it's been more than thirty years . . . it's like a bolt out of the blue."

"Calm down, and just tell me what happened. My father went away . . . where to?"

Even in the excitement, I managed not to use the words "took him away." I'd realized that there were other teachers in the staff room listening, and the vice-principal had been staring at me for a while over his horn-rimmed glasses, blinking his beady little eyes.

"It wasn't the police, but some *agency*. Intelligence or National Security or something. It's been days already, but I didn't know about it until today. I think he's finally finished. What are we gonna do now?"

"Just a minute, Auntie. I can't explain everything right now. Why don't we talk later, all right? I'll give you a call this afternoon after school," I said,

and hung up.

“Is she a relative of yours, Mr. Kim?” the vice-principal asked. “She was looking for you by a different name—Kim something or other—at first. In any case, she sounded pretty upset. Did something happen at home?”

“Ah, well, yes. It’s nothing serious,” I replied vaguely.

I returned to my desk and collapsed in my chair. As I took out a cigarette, my chalk-covered fingers were trembling. I’d hated the name Maksu when I was a child. There was something strange about it, and the neighborhood kids would make up nicknames for me, like Moksu, meaning carpenter, or Makgeolli—rice wine. But I didn’t truly begin to loathe that name until I was older, after I learned why my father had chosen it. I couldn’t bear the fact that he had branded me with a connection to his failed past. In my sophomore year of college, before I enlisted in the Army, I went through all the bothersome red tape and finally changed my name.

“How much do you know about your father’s past, Mr. Kim?” the prosecutor asked.

“His past . . . What past are you referring to?”

“Your father was a Communist active in the old South Korean Labor Party. You know at least that much, don’t you?”

So that’s what this is all about, I thought. I focussed on staying alert, on not letting my guard down.

“I don’t know the details,” I said. “But generally. I also know that he was in prison for a while after the war.”

I deliberately gave the prosecutor a little more than he’d asked for.

“You seem to know quite a lot,” the prosecutor said, looking me in the eye. “So then, Mr. Kim, what do you think of his past activities or his ideas?”

I tried to swallow, but my mouth was dry.

“I was born after the war,” I said. “The generation in this country that grew up with a strict anti-Communist education. If I were given a choice between the North and the South—though that’s not going to happen, so I’m saying if—I will obviously choose the South. Why? Because my consciousness, my way of thinking, my life style—everything my life is rooted in was formed under the current system. Most importantly, I’m a schoolteacher who actually gives my students an anti-Communist education, aren’t I?”

I felt a cold sweat run down my back. There was no way to know how acceptable my answer was to the prosecutor. His face still showed nothing. I looked up at him, my mouth parched.

“By the way, what on earth is my father being charged with?”

The prosecutor stopped looking through the file.

“You don’t know yet?”

“No. The person who called me yesterday only said that it was a violation of the National Security Act and that he’d give me the details when we met in person.”

The prosecutor’s secretary, who had been writing something, lifted his head slightly and looked at me. I assumed he was the one who had called me at school, speaking to me in a hard and officious tone. The prosecutor examined my face for a moment in silence and then said, curtly, “Espionage.”

I suddenly forgot what I was about to say. The prosecutor, still expressionless, kept his eyes fixed on me, as if he didn’t want to miss my reaction to what he’d said.

“A-are you telling me . . . my father’s a spy?”

The prosecutor spoke without emotion: “Your father’s been charged with espionage. Spying under orders from the North Korean puppet regime to conduct clandestine operations to agitate against the South.”

I still couldn’t believe my ears. From the moment I had got the news from my aunt about my father’s arrest, my intuition had been that it had something to do with his past. But it had never occurred to me that he might have committed an actual crime. I had assumed that, at most, he might have said something he shouldn’t have while drunk at a bar, or that a detail about his past might have surfaced and now required investigation. I didn’t know, but perhaps, unconsciously, I’d been admitting the possibility that his subversive ideas and past activities might get him arrested or taken in for a few days’ questioning, even now. But *espionage*? Like everyone else born and educated in this country, it was a word I had seen or heard used all the time since childhood—in the classroom, on posters and banners, in newspapers—but I had never imagined that it would somehow directly relate to me. Until today, it had been a word that had no sense of reality to it. But now I could envisage a newspaper article in the national section, under the gigantic headline “*Spy Ring Busted*!” It would feature diagrams with arrows pointing this way and that, pictures of my father’s haggard face, and evidence of his spying: coded columns of random numbers, shortwave-radio transmitters. It was terrible even to imagine. I could barely open my mouth to speak.

“Th-that’s . . . just not possible,” I said.

“What makes you say it’s not possible?” The prosecutor reclined in his high-backed swivel chair, his eyes peering at me over the top of his glasses.

“Even if . . . my father had leftist ideas in the past, that was more than thirty years ago. . . . And he’s not the kind of person capable of such a thing.”

“Is that so? Well, then, Mr. Kim, what kind of person do you think *could* do such a thing?”

“Well . . . it requires a strong personality and a fierce determination, doesn’t it? My father is weak-willed and . . . also pretty much a failure in life. Anyone who knows him will confirm that.”

I remembered the last time I’d seen my father. It was during my winter break. For the first time in months, I had gone to see him in Jongam-dong, where he was living in a single rented room on top of a hill. I’d found him

crouching down under the faucet by the kitchen door, his back hunched, washing his underwear by hand. The previous summer, I had hightailed it out of Seoul after finding a position in Gangwon Province at a middle school in the countryside. My little sister, Hyoseon, had been the only one left to take care of my father in our tiny rented room the size of a rabbit hole. But sometime that fall Hyoseon became wanted by the police. She couldn't return home, and so there was no one left to cook my father's meals or wash his clothes. I had offered to pay the landlord some money every month to cook and do his laundry, although I didn't really expect her to take good care of him. With my sister gone, the place was in shambles—it looked abandoned. Blankets left on the floor, clothes scattered here and there, empty soju bottles rolling around in the corners. My father was living alone in that dark, filthy room like an old animal wallowing in its own excrement. There was a foul odor of something rotting. When I realized that the stench was coming from my father, I thought he had started to decompose.

"Earlier, you mentioned your childhood name, Maksu, didn't you?" the prosecutor said. "I bring this up because it's what Kim Hakgyu—that is, your father—also said during his questioning. I mean, as proof of his strong ideological convictions. He was so devoted that he named his son after Karl Marx."

"I know that story, too," I said, "but don't you think it was just some foolish dream he had when he was young?"

"Dream?"

"You might say it's something that he did to make up for his failed life. Don't you think his impulsiveness and self-importance are proof enough that he's not fit for something as daunting as espionage?"

"Mr. Kim," the prosecutor said, a subtle smile on his lips, "that's a very cold and objective analysis of your father you have there."

"It embarrasses me to say this, but from the time I was a child I've never had any respect for my father. My father never once showed any authority or competence as the head of a household. In our eyes, he was completely incompetent and destructive."

My face was red. I was filled with an unbearable sense of shame and, at the same time, an anger directed at no one in particular. I realized I had fallen into the wretched position of having to describe all my father's shortcomings —in my own words—in front of the prosecutor to attest to the fact that he wasn't cut out to be a spy.

"In any case, the truth will come out in the course of the investigation," the prosecutor said. "But more importantly, Mr. Kim, how about meeting with your father? I'll make arrangements for a special visit."

I looked at the prosecutor, bewildered.

"Actually," he said, "the real reason I asked to see you was to get you to meet with him. He's being detained at the moment in a place where no visitors are permitted. But I can set up a special meeting for the two of you."

"Th-thank you, but . . . "

"I guess you're wondering why I would bother to arrange a special visit like this."

Then the prosecutor summarized for me the incident that related to my father. Recently, an entire North Korean spy network had been exposed and rounded up by the A.N.S.P., the Agency for National Security Planning. The network had been activated by recruiting former members of the old South Korean Labor Party and North Korean partisans, most of them now in their sixties or seventies. Using these feeble old men only proved, once again, that the North was an evil regime that would stop at nothing to unify the Korean Peninsula under Communism. About a decade ago, that network had started gathering and reporting intelligence according to plan, and during the arrests a large amount of irrefutable evidence had been seized—coded number tables, operational money, shortwave radios.

"But . . ." The prosecutor paused. "The problem is with your father, Kim Hakgyu. In every other case, the evidence is conclusive, but for him there's some ambiguity."

"Ambiguity?" I said. "What do you mean by that, exactly?"

“In other words, there’s no evidence. This current group was making use of local assets that are a legacy of the old South Korean Labor Party, and the suspects are all friends of Kim Hakgyu, but there’s no concrete evidence. What’s more, all the other suspects have singled him out as being the only one among them who had no involvement with this case.”

“Then that means my father is clearly innocent, doesn’t it?”

“But that’s not the problem. The problem is that your father keeps claiming he was also involved.”

“H-how could that be?”

“When the agency first detained your father, they considered him at most to be an important witness. He himself seemed not to know what was going on initially. I can’t talk about the details of the investigation, but as he began to get a general sense of the situation your father suddenly started to claim that he was also a participant. He’s demanding to be charged with espionage.”

It was an entirely unbelievable story. If what the prosecutor had said was true, then my father was voluntarily giving himself up as a spy. But how could that possibly make any sense? I looked at the prosecutor, confused.

“I’m no legal expert,” I said, “but, if the only evidence you have is my father’s own confession, that doesn’t seem to be enough to establish his guilt.”

“That doesn’t necessarily apply to anti-Communist cases,” the prosecutor said. “Just saying ‘I’m a Communist’ is enough to make you guilty. Besides, can you imagine why anyone who’s not a spy would claim to be one? Unless he’s crazy? Anyway, Mr. Kim, do you understand why I’m making special arrangements for you to pay a visit to your father?”

Cartoon by Roz Chast

The prosecutor seemed to think that—whatever the reason for my father's insistence that he was involved in espionage—a father would at least tell the whole story to his son.

"Th-thank you," I said. "I'm sure there's been some mistake. Like I said before, my father's not the type of person who would be capable of such a thing."

"That will require further investigation. There's nothing to thank me for. I just want to know the truth."

"When will the visit happen?"

"We'll do it tomorrow morning. Come back here by nine. You'll go to the detention center with me."

I left the prosecutor's office. As I came out of the building, the choking tension in my gut was relieved, and I was overtaken by a wave of vertigo. A mix of snow and rain was coming down, unseasonable for February, and I stood there for a moment, looking blankly, right and left, at the dizzying scatter of snowflakes.

"Maksu! Over here. This way!"

Someone was shouting, waving her arms, by the security guard's office. I remembered then that I had told my aunt to wait for me at the coffee shop across the street from the public prosecutor's office building. She must have been standing there in the snow for a long time—the shoulders of her coat were wet and her face was blue from the cold.

"You should've been waiting inside the coffee shop," I said. "Why did you come out here?"

"I was burning up inside with worry. How could I just sit in there?" my aunt said nervously. "You had a hard time. Let's find someplace quiet and go inside."

She pulled me along by the arm, glancing everywhere, as if someone were following us. Seeing the degree of her unease and anxiety, I felt inexplicably irritated and angry.

"What are you so afraid of?" I asked. "It's not like anybody's coming after us. We haven't committed any crime."

"No? And why not? Just staying alive in the country's been a crime. It's shameful."

My aunt was one of my only close relatives. When she was younger, she had been tougher than the average man—there was no business she didn't try her hand at in the local market—suffering all sorts of ills to raise her three children by herself without their father. Now she was just a pathetic old woman who could no longer hide the signs of age and sickness.

We went up to the second floor of a Chinese place on the street. There was a *yeontan* stove in the middle of the restaurant, but it was still chilly inside. My aunt avoided the people sitting around the stove and pulled me to a corner.

"So what happened? What did the prosecutor say?" she asked as soon as we sat down. "What crime did they lock your father up for?" Of course, she spoke in an anxious whisper, constantly looking around the room in case people were listening. I briefly conveyed what I had heard from the prosecutor, and the moment I said the word "spy" she turned pale.

“How could this be happening? *Aigo*, I’m shaking. Your father must have been possessed by some evil spirit.”

“It isn’t time to despair yet,” I told her. “From what I can tell, the prosecutor is determined to see this through properly. Anyway, when I meet Father tomorrow, I’ll find out what’s going on.”

“All right. You go and try to talk some sense into that father of yours. He can’t be so stuck on himself that he’d do something like this and ruin his own son’s future. All my faith is in you, Maksu.”

“Auntie, please don’t call me Maksu anymore. You know I changed my name.”

“Oh, that’s right. Young . . . Youngjin. That’s your name. I used to call you by your old name all the time, and it’s stuck on my tongue. But how can you be so calm, quibbling about your name with all this going on?”

My aunt dabbed at her swollen eyelids with a handkerchief tightly balled in her hand. Her eyes had grown bloodshot.

“Your father’s got such horrible luck. I feel sorry for him. When he was young, he had to be a leftist or some such. He could never rest easy at night, and then he even spent time in prison.

“He’s been living out in the cold for thirty years with that brand on him. I was thinking all that would just be old memories to talk about once you and your sister grew up, but . . . now he’s near seventy and living all alone, no one even to do his cooking for him. Who’d know if they came and took him away in the middle of the night? Before he could even shout out for help? What if he just died where he’s laying? Who’s gonna know?”

My aunt’s words carried with them a sense of bitterness and disappointment regarding me, as usual. To her, I was the bad nephew who’d abandoned his old father to live by himself. Even a fortnight ago, when she’d first delivered the news about my father, she had expected me to respond immediately, but I hadn’t come up to Seoul then.

“How can you be so harsh and unsympathetic?” she’d said.

After that, she had called me again and again to come to Seoul, but I'd kept putting it off with this or that excuse, and now my aunt was finally getting to vent her feelings of disappointment.

"Hate him or love him, he's still your father, ain't he? You wouldn't even ignore an old next-door neighbor like that. The man who gave you your life and name gets dragged away. There's no word from him in days, and you don't care if he's dead or alive? Hyoseon wouldn't be like that. At least that girl is kind and cares about her father. Even animals recognize their parents and children. How can you be this way?"

Contrary to what my aunt said, I clearly hadn't been indifferent to my father's problems. The truth was that I might have been cultivating that concern myself. Sometimes, alone after the school day, I would be reading a book, my ear bent to the silence of the night around me, and I would suddenly be plunged into an unbearable sense of fear and despair.

In the past two years, I had enjoyed peace and quiet in a mountain village too small even to appear on a map. The villagers eked out crops of garlic and peppers on the terraced mountainside, and the settlement was very windy and often covered in dust. The dust was truly awful there. My toothbrush, hanging in the kitchen of my tiny place, was always coated in black grit and had to be rinsed several times before I could use it to brush my teeth in the morning. When I looked out the window during class, I could see dust clouds blowing in over the stream in the distance. They would engulf the schoolyard in a single breath. When I came back to the staff room after class, the first thing I did was use my hand to wipe away the grains of sand that had settled in a thick layer on my desk. Then I went to the sawdust stove—a cylindrical thing made of galvanized steel, with tiny holes punched in the bottom, which allowed the sawdust to slowly trickle down through the holes, as in an hourglass. I always lit my cigarettes by sticking them into one of those holes, and after I'd sucked in the smoke the cigarette would leave an aftertaste, like the persistent powdery smell of sawdust, on the back of my tongue.

I didn't have a special commitment to being a teacher at a rural school. I had half given up on teaching the unruly country children anything in my classes, and to the locals—mostly farmers with sunburned faces—I was

nothing more than part of the dull landscape that surrounded them anyway. But what I enjoyed was the boring and redundant tranquillity that settled on you without your noticing, like the silent trickle of sawdust in the stove. I wanted nothing except that my life not be shaken up by anybody.

The house I had rented was like a poor farmer's house. It had a shabby, old-fashioned outhouse with a crumbling slate roof and a ceiling so low you couldn't stand up straight inside. Each time I had to pee, squatting like a woman, I felt a masochistic pleasure, as if I'd been castrated. And yet, somehow, it was all no big deal. There, I was insulated from everything, from the annoyances and clamor of Seoul, from the sting of past memories that I didn't want floating up again. Most of all, it was a place far away from my father.

"In any case, don't worry so much," I told my aunt. "He'll be out soon, and he'll be fine. You have to trust that and try to stay calm."

"Well, wouldn't it be nice if I could do that? It's been more than thirty years gone by—what kind of karma is this? All those years living in fear that the ground might collapse under him, and now, finally, this happens."

My aunt quietly burst into tears in the corner of the Chinese restaurant.

I*t's been more than thirty years gone by* . . . My aunt's hoarse voice was still ringing in my head after we'd left the restaurant and said goodbye. In her words was the legacy of fear, of the long years of suffering she was unable to escape, and the scars of trauma that could never be erased. She firmly believed that what was happening to my father now was linked to his past of thirty years ago.

Thirty years ago, my aunt had been abruptly separated from her husband. Immediately after the Korean War, when the order was issued to round up all leftists, my uncle had suddenly disappeared without a trace, and his whereabouts were still unknown. We didn't even know if he was dead or alive. The other man she had depended on in the world, her only brother, had lived under a stigma for thirty years.

In the past, my family had existed day by day, each one as precarious as the next. Weighed down by debt, short on food, and late with rent and tuition, we always despaired about tomorrow and yet were somehow always able to put that despair off for another day. But my father had no interest at all in his family's daily struggle for survival, and so the burden of supporting the four of us, including him, fell entirely on my mother's shoulders. But she never once brought up the issue of money in front of my father.

If for some reason, even unintentionally, she worried about money in front of him, my father's temper flared, and he would go into a rant, as if he'd gone insane. "Money! Money! Money! Don't ever say that word to me. What is money, anyway? Money means nothing to me. I'm not a money-grubber. Not on your life! I, Kim Hakgyu, would rather die than live for money!"

If he didn't want to be a money-grubber, then someone else had to be. I never understood how he couldn't grasp that simple fact. That someone else was my poor mother. And, of course, the children he had irresponsibly cast into this world, into the wretched underbelly of society, had no choice but to become yet another kind of money-grubber.

Only after I'd grown up did I learn the truth about my father's past: his embrace of Communism, his devotion to the leftist movement, his three and a half years in prison. But I could not, for the life of me, imagine that someone like him could possibly have devoted himself, even for a day, to fighting for a cause—any cause at all. Even so, my father went out of his way to defy social norms and institutions. When I was about to enroll in college, he opposed it with an anger so fierce it was hard to believe.

"I want to study literature," I had answered, when my father asked me what in the world I was going to do in college.

"Literature?" he thundered. "You punk! You think you need to go to college to study literature? College or not, what kind of literature are you gonna study if you're just reading books? That's for fat asses and their bullshit.

"Literature is something you do while you're sweating at a factory or at a construction site—anywhere you work for a living. That's real literature. Maxim Gorky wrote while he was washing dishes at a restaurant. He's a

thousand times better than those writers or professors these days who go on and on about what's literature and what's art. Bastards like that aren't worth the dirt between Gorky's toes. You punk, we can hardly afford one meal a day, and instead of stepping up to join the struggle of life you talk about college? What are you gonna do with that rotten consciousness, you crazy bastard? Why don't you just go crawl off somewhere and die?"

At that time, I didn't know who Maxim Gorky was, and I wasn't interested. But I found it quite absurd that phrases like "anywhere you work for a living" or "the struggle of life" would come out of the mouth of someone like my father. Of course, I knew it was unrealistic for me to expect to go to college in those circumstances, but the reason I didn't give up on the idea was my mother. From the time I was little, she had always said to me, as if it were a refrain, "Maksu, I wish you'd become a schoolteacher when you grow up. I don't want you to be a rich businessman or a famous celebrity. Just be a good schoolteacher. It won't make you rich or famous, but being a schoolteacher is the best job in the world. Always remember what I said."

My mother believed that the most secure way for me to survive and succeed in society was to become a teacher. That was the kind of wisdom she had gained as she endured a long life of pain and poverty in a society that treated my father as an incompetent and was hostile to her. It was also her last hope. The best way to submit and conform to this society would probably have been to become a government employee, but for my mother working for the government would have felt not only unsafe but even dangerous. In the end, I went to a teachers' college in keeping with her wishes. My literary dreams had yet to be realized, but that actually didn't matter all that much. I had loved to write when I was young because it was a way of escaping my painful reality, and until now being out here in the country, teaching at a no-name middle school, was also a way to keep me more than far enough from reality. My mother, who had so much looked forward to her son becoming a schoolteacher, left this world the spring I started college.

That night, I could not sleep easily. I thought about the small mountain village that I had left. I recalled the familiar scenes as I rode the intercity bus: the mill with the rusty tin roof, the shabby town hall with its peeling paint, the sawmill with piles of red sawdust in the yard—all of it buried in the bleakness of the falling sleet and receding into the distance. Seoul had

felt unreal to me while I lived in that village, and now it was the village that felt like a distant and unreal place I could never return to. I was still imprisoned in the painful reality of the past. I thought of my sister, whose whereabouts I didn't know. I hadn't heard from her in months. And the last thing keeping me awake was my memories of my mother. She had been tortured for more than ten years by stomach pain. It was so bad that, each time it flared up, she would stagger around the room tearing at her clothes as if she were having a seizure. It would happen several times a day, but she never once went to the hospital and never once took any medicine. The only thing she had for it was baking soda. I didn't know how the chemistry worked, but that strong powder somehow helped temporarily kill the pain of what was destroying the walls of her stomach. When the pain started, my mother would open the lid of the tin and put a spoonful of baking soda in her mouth. I could still vividly remember, even now, the sound of the tight metal lid of the can opening and my mother's grimacing face, her eyes tightly shut, swallowing the terribly bitter baking soda.

Eventually, that stomach pain was the cause of my mother's death. At the hospital, after viewing her X-rays, the doctor said that it was already far too late for anything to be done. A simple ulcer had been neglected for so long that it had developed into stomach cancer. The doctor said it was almost a miracle that she was still alive. My mother was bedridden for two months before she passed away. Every day during those last two months of my mother's terrible suffering and her desperate struggle for life, my father was continuously drunk, as if he had resolved not to be sober for even a single moment. Smelling my father reeking of liquor as he lay asleep after falling down drunk in a corner of our tiny room, hearing the sounds of my mother's groans ever increasing in frequency, I gritted my teeth all night and swore to myself a thousand times that I would never forgive him.

The door opened at the detention center, and a guard entered, escorting a prisoner. I almost did not recognize him. It didn't seem possible that the haggard old man in the baggy, ill-fitting blue prisoner's uniform, with his hands cuffed in front of him, was my father. The number 32 was printed on the left side of his chest. It wasn't until the guard practically shoved him in front of the table that he finally noticed me. His stony face twitched with surprise, and after a while he said, "You . . . what are you doing here?"

The prosecutor motioned to the guard to remove the handcuffs. Once they were off, my father sat down.

“How . . . how’s your health?” I barely managed to ask.

“Um . . . I’m all right,” he said.

I had no idea what I should say next. His cheeks were hollow, and a grizzled beard, which hadn’t seen a proper shave in weeks, made his face look older and all the more haggard. But most surprising was my father’s bearing. He was so calm and dignified that he seemed not to belong in the unsightly prison uniform that was draped over him. Instead of his usual hunched and undisciplined posture, he now sat with his chest out and his back deliberately straight. To me, seeing him so different from his usual self was like watching a performance by a bad actor.

“Mr. Kim. Your son is very worried,” the prosecutor said, breaking the silence. “You’re getting up there in years now. Shouldn’t you be thinking of your children instead of filling them full of worries?” His voice was soft, as if he were correcting a child, but it did not mask the coercive tone he would have used to interrogate a suspect. Then he said, “Guard, please pretend you didn’t see this,” and offered my father a cigarette. Getting the guard’s coöperation might just have been in keeping with protocol, but on the other hand it also seemed to be a gesture of kindness and generosity far beyond what my father deserved as a prisoner. But my father didn’t show much gratitude as he took the cigarette and put it between his lips.

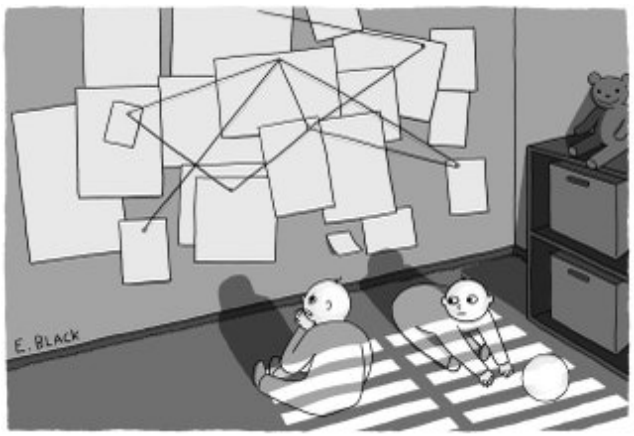
“I specifically asked your son to come,” the prosecutor said. “So why don’t you say what you need to say now? Just tell the truth. Lay it all out. Even if it’s something you couldn’t tell us, you can say it in front of your son, can’t you?”

But my father said nothing. He just puffed cigarette smoke into the thick silence.

“Father,” I said, speaking first, “how the hell did this happen?”

Only then did he slowly turn to look at me. “It just did.”

That was all he said. I was speechless, but I also felt something beyond my control rising up from within me.



“I’ve almost cracked the case of where my mom goes when she covers her eyes with her hands.” Cartoon by Ellie Black

“I was told you’re charged with espionage, but I think there’s been some sort of mistake. If you had to confess for some reason because you were under duress during the interrogation, you can tell me everything now. I know you’d never be involved in anything like that. Something is wrong here. Very wrong.”

“*Wrong*? Nothing’s wrong. Not a thing.”

My father spoke in the same tone of voice. He was unwavering, almost arrogant.

“So are you saying you actually were a spy?”

“I was.”

“Even when there’s no evidence, according to the prosecutor?”

“Why would there be no evidence? Everyone they brought in with me is evidence.”

“But even they’re confirming that you’re the only one who wasn’t involved. So why are you insisting all on your own?”

“Can’t you see they’re doing it on purpose? They can see there’s a way out for me, so they’re trying to save at least one of us.”

I was at a loss for words. My father had clearly changed. I had never seen him so confident and self-assured. His tone of voice and his eyes were those of a man full of conviction, so much so that he might have been a martyr ready to suffer anything for his cause. But as far as I could tell this was all ridiculous and laughable. I stood up from my seat. I walked up to my father’s chair and took his hand. “Father, why on earth are you doing this? You can tell them you’re innocent—even right now. The prosecutor will ask for leniency in your case. Is it your loyalty to the others that’s stopping you? If that’s not it, what other possible reason could you have?”

I pleaded with him, holding his hand, but my father kept his mouth shut. Meanwhile, the others—the prosecutor, his secretary, and the guard—were watching us like a cool audience, and I felt terribly ashamed that my father and I were playing out what seemed like a pathetic comedy in front of them.

My father finally opened his mouth to speak. “You don’t know.”

“I don’t know what?”

“You just don’t.”

At that I leaped up. I could no longer suppress all the impulses that had welled up in my heart.

“I don’t even want to know what it is. I don’t know what you believe in, but could it really be that important? Don’t you think you caused enough pain and suffering for your family? Why should we have to go through it all over again now because of you? For that wonderful ideology of yours? You can’t possibly have forgotten how Mother lived her whole life and died in misery. Because of what? Why did Hyoseon have to slave away at a factory—and now she has to live on the run? And now you’re saying you want her to wear a brand on her back? The daughter of a *spy*? Is that what you want?”

“For you and her . . . I’m sorry.”

“You’re *sorry*? I don’t believe it. You’ve never once thought about your family. You’re an absolute egotist. Even the ideology you said you followed was just some mirage that had no connection with your life. So do whatever you want. Do whatever your convictions and history tell you to do. Go ahead and be a spy, be whatever!”

My legs were shaking. I felt so dizzy that I thought I might collapse on the spot. But the thing I couldn’t bear was the shame. What kind of disgrace was this? My father sitting there in a blue prisoner’s uniform, and the best I could do in front of him was expose myself in such a childish way. Disgusted at myself, I felt an urge to kick open the door and run outside.

“Lepers . . . ,” my father said, his voice hoarse. “It could mean madmen or just people cursed with leprosy. Either way, they’re untouchables. They’re outcasts who can’t mingle with normal people or healthy people. . . . ”

He went on slowly, staring into space, as if he were delivering a soliloquy.

“When the war ended, suddenly there were lots more lepers. Used to be treated worse than animals, and now they roamed in bands out in the countryside and in the cities. Why their numbers suddenly increased like that after the war, I don’t know. But one thing’s for sure—there were some among them who chose to become lepers. When you think about it, I was one of them. . . . ”

Then my father paused for a moment. He was still staring off into the distance, and there was a strange unapproachable kind of dignity about him. And for some reason the longer he did that the more uneasy I became.

“In the old days, we fought for the revolution,” my father continued. “Then the war broke out, and in the end the Party was defeated, the revolution failed, and the organization fell to pieces. Where did all those people go to and what became of them afterward? Did they become partisans and all die fighting in the resistance—every last one of them? If we wanted to serve the ideology we believed in, we were supposed to stay here and start another long, long fight to prepare for the revolution while we remained alive. But I couldn’t do that. And I couldn’t make a lot of money or provide a

comfortable life for my family in this system. Couldn't do this, couldn't do that. . . . Just ended up living the life of a leper."

He paused again and let out a deep sigh.

"How much longer have I got to live? I know it's a terrible thing to do to all of you . . . but I made up my mind. Not to die having lived my last days as a leper. That's all I've got to say. . . . "

He didn't open his mouth again, and so the room was left in an oppressively heavy silence.

"S-so what are you saying? You're going to stop being a leper now? By letting yourself be charged with espionage? That's your idea of escaping a leper's life? You think that's the only way to redeem yourself for the past? But what does that even mean? Would it really change anything about your past? Isn't it just some stupid attempt to deny your whole life? I think it's plain insanity! You're just turning into a different kind of leper."

I abruptly stopped my rant. In disbelief, I saw tears flowing down my father's face. He was still staring off into space, his face gaunt and wrinkled. I couldn't say anything more. Instead, I felt something like a lump of sadness about to burst upward through my constricted throat. I collapsed into the chair as if all the strength had left my body.

My father didn't say another word, and I left the room. The prosecutor must have had more questions to ask him. He told me to leave first, and so I had to walk out of the detention center by myself. Before I left, I could have pleaded with the prosecutor to reconsider my father's case, but I thought better of it. My father was serving time in prison for espionage, a crime of which he was innocent, but in the end I couldn't say that that would make him any more miserable than he already was.

As I walked alone toward the front gate, I stopped and turned around. I spent a long time looking at the high walls of uniform gray, the watchtower, and the huge boulders and cold gleam of snowy peaks on Inwangsan in the background. And then I continued walking, but suddenly stopped again. Murmurs and mumbling, groans through clenched teeth, someone screaming

at the top of his lungs—all manner of sounds, all mixed together, came roaring out toward me like the crashing of waves. But it was only a momentary hallucination. When I looked back, the massive building was still buried in silence, like a tomb. I slowly walked toward the exit I saw in the distance. ♦

(*Translated, from the Korean, by Heinz Insu Fenkl.*)

This is drawn from "Snowy Day and Other Stories."

Lee Chang-dong is a film director and a fiction writer. His books include "Snowy Day and Other Stories."

The Critics

- **Is There Any Escape from the Spotify Syndrome?**
  By Hua Hsu | The history of recorded music is now at our fingertips. But the streamer's algorithmic skill at giving us what we like may keep us from what we'll love.
- **Briefly Noted**
  "Giant Love," "Anima," "Playworld," and "Havoc."
- **Does Morality Do Us Any Good?**
  By Nikhil Krishnan | Our basic sense of right and wrong appears to be the product of blind evolution. The hard question is how unsettling that should be.
- **Kyle Abraham's Extraordinary Dance Memoir**
  By Jennifer Homans | In "Dear Lord, Make Me Beautiful," Abraham offers a deeply personal portrait of his depressed inner state, set against the splendor of the world around him.
- **"Black Doves" Offers a Sentimental Spin on the Spy Genre**
  By Inkoo Kang | The Keira Knightley- and Ben Whishaw-led Netflix series eventually snares its protagonists in a traditional espionage plot—but it's most interested in their friendship.
- **Audra McDonald Triumphs in "Gypsy" on Broadway**
  By Helen Shaw | In the latest revival of Arthur Laurents, Stephen Sondheim, and Jule Styne's iconic musical, George C. Wolfe humanizes a famously monstrous stage mother.
- **"The Brutalist" 's Epic Inversion of the American Dream**
  By Justin Chang | In his latest film, the director Brady Corbet depicts the fate of a brilliant Hungarian architect, who lands in the United States after surviving Buchenwald.

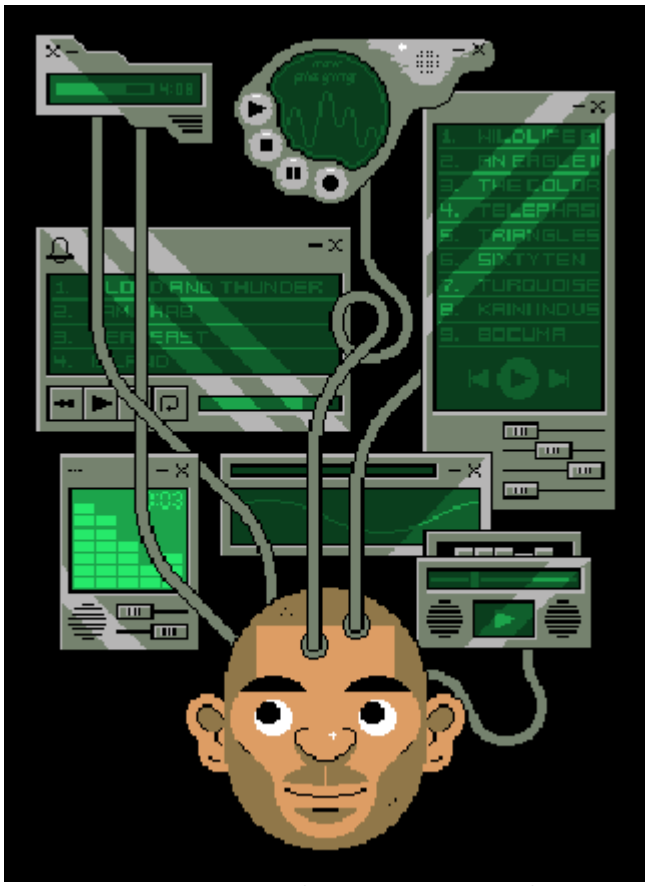
Books

Is There Any Escape from the Spotify Syndrome?

The history of recorded music is now at our fingertips. But the streamer's algorithmic skill at giving us what we like may keep us from what we'll love.

By Hua Hsu

December 23, 2024



File-sharing may have anarchist roots, but Spotify's C.E.O. and co-founder, Daniel Ek, seems more interested in turning us into captive, passive consumers.Illustration by Nick Little

Like countless other people around the globe, I stream music, and like more than six hundred million of them I mainly use Spotify. Streaming currently

accounts for about eighty per cent of the American recording industry's revenue, and in recent years Spotify's health is often consulted as a measure for the health of the music business over all. Last spring, the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry reported global revenues of $28.6 billion, making for the ninth straight year of growth. All of this was unimaginable in the two-thousands, when the major record labels appeared poorly equipped to deal with piracy and the so-called death of physical media. On the consumer side, the story looks even rosier. Adjusted for inflation, a monthly subscription to an audio streaming service, allowing convenient access to a sizable chunk of the history of recorded music, costs much less than a single album once did. It can seem too good to be true.

Like considerably fewer people, I still buy a lot of CDs, records, and cassettes, mostly by independent artists, which is to say that I have a great deal of sympathy for how this immense reorganization in how we consume music has complicated the lives of artists trying to survive our on-demand, hyper-abundant present. Spotify divvies out some share of subscriber fees as royalties in proportion to an artist's popularity on the platform. The service recently instituted a policy in which a track that registers fewer than a thousand streams in a twelve-month span earns no royalties at all. Some estimate that this applies to approximately two-thirds of its catalogue, or about sixty million songs. Meanwhile, during a twelve-month stretch from 2023 to 2024, Spotify announced new revenue highs, with estimates that the company is worth more than Universal and Warner combined. During the same period, its C.E.O., Daniel Ek, cashed out three hundred and forty million dollars in stock; his net worth, which fluctuates but is well into the billions, is thought to make him richer than any musician in history. Music has always been a perilous, impractical pursuit, and even sympathetic fans hope for the best value for their dollar. But if you think too deeply about what you're paying for, and who benefits, the streaming economy can seem awfully crooked.

Although artists such as Taylor Swift and Neil Young have temporarily removed their music from Spotify—Swift pressed the company over its paltry royalty rates, while Young was protesting its nine-figure deal with the divisive podcaster Joe Rogan—defying the streamer comes with enormous risks. Spotify is a library, but it's also a recommendation service, and its

growth is fuelled by this second function, and by the company's strategies for soundtracking the entirety of our days and nights. As a former Spotify employee once observed, the platform's only real competitor is silence. In recent years, its attempts at studying and then adapting to our behavior have invited more than casual scrutiny among users: gripes about the constant tweaks and adjustments that make the interface more coldly opaque, stories about A.I.-generated songs and bots preying on the company's algorithms, fatigue over "Spotify-core," the shorthand for the limp, unobtrusive pop music that appears to be the service's default aesthetic. Even Spotify's popular Wrapped day, when users are given social-media-ready graphics detailing their listening habits from the past year, recently took its lumps. Where the previous year's version assigned listeners a part of the world that most aligned with their favorites, the 2024 edition was highlighted by the introduction of personalized, A.I.-voiced recaps, striking some as the Spotify problem in a nutshell—a good thing that gets a little worse with all the desperate fine-tuning.

What We're Reading

Discover notable new fiction and nonfiction.

Just as we train Spotify's algorithm with our likes and dislikes, the platform seems to be training us to become round-the-clock listeners. Most people don't take issue with this—in fact, a major Spotify selling point is that it can offer you more of what you like. Liz Pelly's new book, "Mood Machine: The Rise of Spotify and the Costs of the Perfect Playlist," is a comprehensive look at how the company's dominance has profoundly changed the way we listen and what we listen to. A contributing editor to *The Baffler,* Pelly has covered the ascent of Spotify for years, and she was an early critic of how the streaming economy relies less on delivering hit tunes than on keeping us within a narrow gradient of chill vibes. Her

approach is aggressively moralistic: she is strongly influenced, she explains, by D.I.Y. spaces that attempt to bring about alternate forms of “collective culture,” rather than accept the world’s inequities as a given. She sympathizes with the plight of artists who feel adrift in the winner-take-all world of the Internet, contending with superstars like Adele or Coldplay for placement on career-making playlists and, consequently, a share of streaming revenue. But her greatest concerns are for listeners, with our expectations for newness and convenience. Pelly is a romantic, but her book isn’t an exercise in nostalgia. It’s about how we have come to view art and creativity, what it means to be an individual, and what we learn when we first hum along to a beloved pop song.

A great many people over forty retain some memory of the first time they witnessed the awesome possibilities of Internet piracy—the sense of wonder that you could go to class and return a couple of hours later to a Paul Oakenfold track playing from somewhere inside your computer. In 1999, two teen-agers named Shawn Fanning and Sean Parker launched the file-sharing application Napster, effectively torching the music industry as it had existed for nearly a century. There had always been piracy and bootlegging, but Napster introduced the free exchange of music at a global scale. Rather than maintain a publicly accessible archive of recordings—which was clearly illegal—Napster provided a peer-to-peer service that essentially allowed users to pool their music libraries. After a year, Fanning and Parker’s app had twenty million users.

At first, anti-Napster sentiment echoed the hysteria of the nineteen-seventies and eighties around the prospect of home taping killing the record industry. Yet online piracy was far more serious, moving at unprecedented speed. One label executive argued that Fanning and Parker belonged in jail, but there was no uniform response. For example, the media conglomerate Bertelsmann made plans to invest in Napster even as it was suing the company for copyright infringement. Some artists embraced Napster as a promotional tool. Chuck D, of Public Enemy, published a *Times* Op-Ed in which he praised Napster as “a new kind of radio.” The punk band the Offspring expressed its admiration by selling bootleg merchandise with the company’s logo. On the other side was the heavy-metal band Metallica, which sued the platform for “trafficking in stolen goods,” and thereby

became seen—by many of their fellow-musicians as well as by listeners—as an establishment villain. Faced with too many legal challenges, Napster shut down in July, 2001. But the desire to break from traditional means of disseminating culture remained, as casual consumers began imagining an alternative to brick-and-mortar shopping and, with it, physical media. Just four months after Napster's closure, Apple came out with the iPod.

In Sweden, where citizens had enjoyed high-speed Internet since the late nineties, piracy took on a political edge. In 2001, after a major anti-globalization protest in Gothenburg was violently put down by the police, activists formed online communities. In 2003, Rasmus Fleischer helped found Piratbyrån, or the Pirate Bureau, a group committed to flouting copyright laws. "We were trying to make something political from the already existing practice of file-sharing," Fleischer explained to Pelly. "What are the alternative ways to think about power over networks? What counts as art and what counts as legitimate ways of using it? Or distributing money?" That year, a group of programmers associated with Piratbyrån launched the Pirate Bay, a file-sharing site that felt like a more evolved version of Napster, allowing users to swap not only music but movies, software, and video games.

Alongside Pirate Bay, file-sharing applications like LimeWire, Kazaa, and Grokster emerged to fill Napster's void and were summarily targeted by the recording industry. Meanwhile, the music business marched forward, absorbing losses and deferring any hard decisions. So long as fans still thought of music in terms of ownership, there were still things to sell them—if not physical media, at least song files meant to be downloaded onto your hard drive. The most common model in the United States was the highly successful iTunes Store, which allowed listeners to purchase both albums and single tracks, abiding by a rough dollar-per-song value inherited from the age of LPs and CDs. "People want to own their music," Steve Jobs said, in 2007, claiming he'd seen no evidence that consumers wanted a subscription model. "There's definitely a hurdle with subscription because it's not an exact replica of the model people are used to in the physical world," Rob Williams, an executive at Rhapsody, one of the largest early-two-thousands music-subscription services, observed, in 2008.

Daniel Ek, Spotify's C.E.O., taught himself programming as a teen-ager in Stockholm and was financially secure by his mid-twenties, when he began looking for a new project to work on. Like many, he credits Napster for providing him with a musical education. While some of his countrymen saw piracy as anarchist, a strike against big business, Ek sensed a more moderate path. He and Martin Lorentzon, both well versed in search engines and online advertising, founded Spotify, in 2006, in the hope of working with the music industry, not against it. Ek explained to a reporter, in 2010, that it was impossible to "legislate away from piracy." The solution was making an alternative that was just as convenient, if not more. The year he and Lorentzon launched Spotify, the census showed that thirteen per cent of Sweden's citizens already participated in file-sharing. "I'm just interested in building a company that doesn't necessarily change lives but adapts people's behavior," Ek said.

Spotify benefitted from the emergence of smartphones and cheap data plans. When we are basically never offline, it no longer matters where our files are situated. "We're punks," Ek said. "Not the punks that are up to no good. The punks that are against the establishment. We want to bring music to every person on the face of the planet." (Olof Dreijer, of the Swedish electronic pop group the Knife, griped to Pelly that the involvement of tech companies in music streaming represented the "gentrification" of piracy.)

Cartoon by Sofia Warren

Spotify made headway in Europe in the twenty-tens, capitalizing on the major labels' seeming apathy toward committing to an online presence. It began offering plans to U.S. users in 2011—two paid tiers with no ads and a free one that, as an analyst told the *Times* that year, was "solidifying a perception that music should be free." Ek sought partnerships with major labels, some of which still own Spotify stock. Around this time, a source who was then close to the company told Pelly, Spotify commissioned a study tracking the listening habits of a small subset of users and concluded that it could offer a qualitatively different experience than a marketplace like iTunes. By tracking what people wanted to hear at certain hours—from an aggro morning-workout mix to mellow soundscapes for the evening—the service began understanding how listeners used music throughout the day. People even streamed music while they were sleeping.

With all this information, Spotify might be able to guess your mood based on what time it was and what you had been listening to. Pelly argues, in fact, that its greatest innovation has been its grasp of affect, how we turned to music to hype us up or calm us down, help us focus on our homework or simply dissociate. Unlike a record label, a tech company doesn't care whether we're hooked on the same hit on repeat or lost in a three-hour ambient loop, so long as we're listening to something. (This helps explain its ambitious entry into the world of podcasting, lavishing nine-figure deals on Joe Rogan and on the Ringer, Bill Simmons's media company, as well as its recent investment in audiobooks.) Spotify just wants as much of our time and attention as possible, and a steady stream of melodic, unobtrusive sounds could be the best way to appeal to a passive listener. You get tired of the hit song after a while, whereas you might stop noticing the ambient background music altogether.

Last spring, a Swedish newspaper published a story about a little-known hitmaker named Johan Röhr, a specialist in tepid, soothing soundscapes. As of March, Röhr had used six hundred and fifty aliases (including Adelmar Borrego and Mingmei Hsueh) to release more than twenty-seven hundred songs on Spotify, where they had been streamed more than fifteen billion times. These numbers make him one of the most popular musicians in the world, even though he is not popular in any meaningful sense—it's doubtful that many people who stream his music have any idea who he is. Spotify's

officially curated playlists seem to be a shortcut to success, akin to songs getting into heavy rotation on the radio or television. Röhr has benefitted from being featured on more than a hundred of them, with names like “Peaceful Piano” or “Stress Relief.” His ascent has raised a philosophical question about music in the streaming age: Does it even matter who is making this stuff? At least Röhr’s a real person. What about A.I.-generated music, which is increasingly popular on YouTube?

It’s tricky to make the argument that any of this is inherently bad for music fans; in our anti-élitist times, all taste is regarded as relative. Maybe Johan Röhr does, indeed, lower your stress levels. Who’s to say that A.I. Oasis is that much better or worse than the real thing? If you harbor no dreams of making money off your music, it’s never been easier to put your art out into the world. And even if we are constructing our playlists for friends under “data-tuned, ultra-surveilled” circumstances, feeding a machine data to more effectively sell things back to us, it’s a trade that most users don’t mind making. We’ve been conditioned to want hyper-personalization from our digital surroundings, with convenience and customizable environments the spoils of our age. For Pelly, it’s a problem less of taste than of autonomy—the question she asks is if we’re making actual decisions or simply letting the platform shape our behaviors. Decades ago, when you were listening to the radio or watching MTV, you might encounter something different and unknown, prompting some judgment as to whether you liked or loathed it. The collection of so much personalized data—around what time of day we turn to Sade or how many seconds of a NewJeans song we play—suggests a future without risk, one in which we will never be exposed to anything we may not want to hear.

Spotify recently projected that 2024 would be its first full year of profitability; one investment analyst told Axios that the company had “reached a level of scale and importance that we think the labels would be engaging in mutually-assured devastation if they tried to drive too hard a bargain.” Its success seems to have derived partly from cost-cutting measures: in December, 2023, it eliminated seventeen per cent of its employees, or about fifteen hundred jobs. Some music-industry groups also say that Spotify has found a way to pay less to rights holders by capitalizing

on a 2022 ruling by the Copyright Royalty Board which allows services bundling different forms of content to pay lower rates.

I wonder if any of Pelly's arguments will inspire readers to cancel their subscriptions. I remain on my family's Spotify plan; it's a necessary evil when part of your job involves listening to music. For all the service's conveniences, one of my frustrations has always been the meagre amount of information displayed on each artist's page, and Pelly's criticisms made me think this might be by design—a way of rendering the labor of music-making invisible. Except for a brief biographical sketch, sounds float largely free of context or lineage. It's harder than it should be to locate a piece of music in its original setting. Instead of a connection to history, we're offered recommendations based on what other people listened to next. I've never heard so much music online as I have over the past few years yet felt so disconnected from its sources.

In 2020, Ek warned that "some artists that used to do well in the past may not do well in this future landscape where you can't record music once every three to four years and think that's going to be enough." Rather, he suggested, artists would have to adapt to the relentless rhythms of the streaming age. I've long been fascinated by musicians who explore the creative tension between their own vision and the demands of their corporate overlords, making music in playful, mocking resistance of the business. A personal favorite is R.A. the Rugged Man's "Every Record Label Sucks Dick," which has been streamed about a quarter of a million times. Although I've heard many artists lament Spotify's effect on their livelihoods, it's hard to imagine someone channelling that animosity into a diss track. For that matter, it's a conversation I rarely hear on podcasts—the chances of finding an audience without being present on the world's largest distributor are slim. Instead, artists make music about the constant pressures of fame, as Tyler, the Creator, did with 2024's "Chromakopia." Or they try in vain to protect themselves from it, as the singer Chappell Roan, known for her theatrical take on dance pop, did this past summer. One of the breakout stars of 2024, Roan had difficulty coping with the unyielding demands of her sudden superstardom, eventually posting a TikTok begging her fans to respect her personal boundaries. The targets within the industry

were once varied and diffuse, but they were identifiable. Now the pressure comes from everywhere, leaving artists to exploit themselves.

Reading “Mood Machine,” I began to regard Spotify as an allegory for life this year—this feeling that everything has never been so convenient, or so utterly precarious. I’d seldom considered the speed at which food or merchandise is delivered to my house to be a problem that required a solution. But we acclimate to the new normal very quickly; that is why it’s hard to imagine an alternative to Spotify. Rival streaming services like Apple Music deliver slightly better royalties to artists, yet decamping from Spotify feels a bit like leaving Twitter for Bluesky in that you haven’t fully removed yourself from the problem. Digital marketplaces such as Bandcamp and Nina offer models for directly supporting artists, but their catalogues seem niche by comparison.

In the past few years, artists have been using the occasion of Spotify’s Wrapped to share how little they were paid for the year’s streams. The United Musicians and Allied Workers, a music-industry trade union, was formed in 2020 in part to lobby on behalf of those most affected by the large-scale changes of the past decade. Four years later, Representatives Rashida Tlaib and Jamaal Bowman introduced the Living Wage for Musicians Act, which would create a fund to pay artists a minimum of a penny per stream. With a royalty rate at around half a cent—slightly more than Spotify pays—it would take more than four hundred and eighty thousand streams per month to make the equivalent of a fifteen-dollar-an-hour job. But the bill hasn’t made any legislative playlists.

Earlier this year, responding to questions about Spotify’s effect on working musicians, Ek compared the music industry to professional sports: “If you take football, it’s played by hundreds of millions of people around the world. But there’s a very, very small number of people that can live off playing soccer full time.” The Internet was supposed to free artists from the monoculture, providing the conditions for music to circulate in a democratic, decentralized way. To some extent, this has happened: we have easy access to more novelty and obscure sounds than ever before. But we also have data-verified imperatives around song structure and how to keep listeners hooked, and that has created more pressure to craft aggressively

catchy intros and to make songs with maximum “replay value.” Before, it was impossible to know how many times you listened to your favorite song; what mattered was that you’d chosen to buy it and bring it into your home. What we have now is a perverse, frictionless vision for art, where a song stays on repeat not because it’s our new favorite but because it’s just pleasant enough to ignore. The most meaningful songs of my life, though, aren’t always ones I can listen to over and over. They’re there when I need them.

Pelly writes of some artists, in search of viral fame, who surreptitiously use social media to effectively beta test melodies and motifs, basically putting together songs via crowdsourcing. Artists have always fretted about the pressure to conform, but the data-driven, music-as-content era feels different. “You are a Spotify employee at that point,” Daniel Lopatin, who makes abstract electronic music as Oneohtrix Point Never, told Pelly. “If your art practice is so ingrained in the brutal reality that Spotify has outlined for all of us, then what is the music that you’re not making? What does the music you’re not making sound like?” Listeners might wonder something similar. What does the music we’re not hearing sound like? ♦

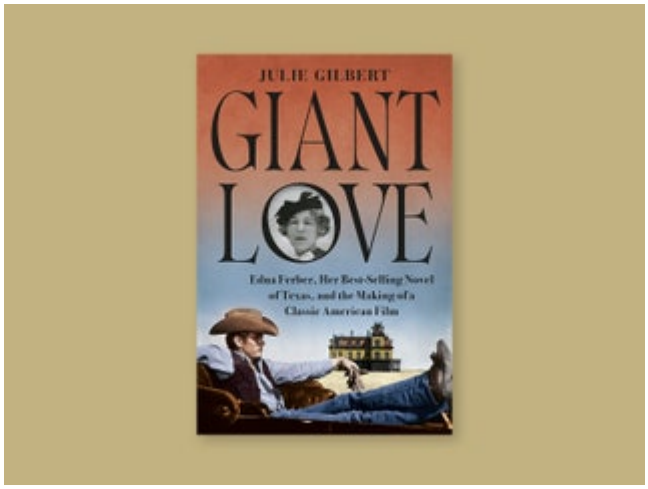
Hua Hsu is a staff writer at The New Yorker and the author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning memoir “Stay True.” He teaches at Bard College.

Books

Briefly Noted

“Giant Love,” “Anima,” “Playworld,” and “Havoc.”

December 23, 2024



Giant Love, *by Julie Gilbert (Pantheon)*. Fusing biography and Hollywood history, this book chronicles the creation of Edna Ferber’s novel “Giant” and its transformation into a film, starring Elizabeth Taylor and James Dean. Ferber, a Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist and playwright (and the author’s great-aunt), spent nearly thirteen years “assembling the stones and bricks and mortar and metal” for her novel, which was set in Texas. As Gilbert recounts Ferber’s duodenal-ulcer-inducing work ethic and her impressions of the state as “bombastic; naïve, brash,” she also delves into the drama behind the 1956 film, directed by George Stevens, which heightened the novel’s focus on racial prejudice by, among other things, featuring a climactic diner fight not present in Ferber’s original text.

Anima, *by Kapka Kassabova (Graywolf)*. This lyrical but unsentimental book is a eulogy for transhumance—the seasonal movement of livestock and the people who watch over them. For the final installment in a quartet of books about the Balkans, Kassabova travels to her native Bulgaria to live in the Pirin Mountains with some of Europe's last modern pastoralists. What she finds is a world that appears at once out of time—bedeviled by wolf attacks and sheep theft—and entirely contemporary, with industrialization and the pull of consumerism threatening to finally consign the shepherds, and the rare animal breeds they cultivate, to extinction. As Kassabova deepens her relationships with her subjects, she is both confronted and enchanted by their lonely, often harshly beautiful existence.

What We're Reading

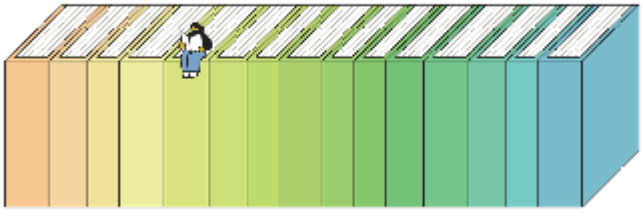


Illustration by Rose Wong

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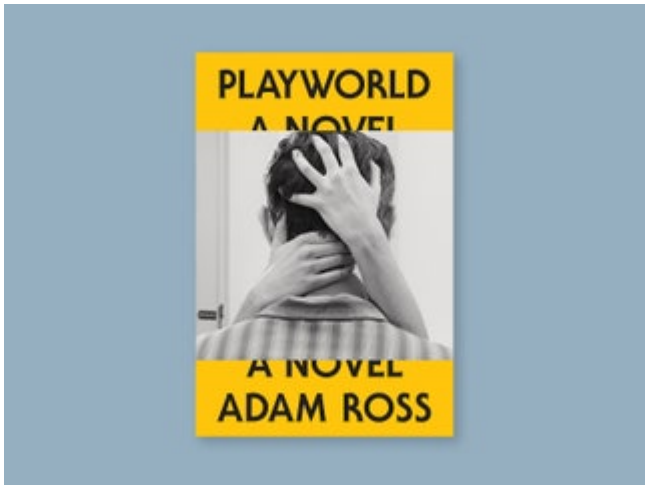


Playworld, *by Adam Ross (Knopf)*. Griffin, the teen-age protagonist of this engrossing coming-of-age novel, set on the Upper West Side in the early nineteen-eighties, is living an unusual childhood: an actor in a hit TV show, with parents in the performing arts, he longs to do normal-person things, like fall in love with someone his own age. But Naomi, a thirtysomething friend of his parents', has other ideas for him, as does his abusive high-school wrestling coach. Onscreen, Griffin plays a superhero; if he has a superpower in real life, it is detachment. Things come to a head one fateful summer as, amid personal and family tumult, the maturing Griffin begins to inhabit his most important role: himself.

Havoc, *by Christopher Bollen (Harper)*. This abidingly wicked novel of suspense and one-upmanship is narrated by an eighty-one-year-old American widow permanently installed in a hotel on the Nile catering to

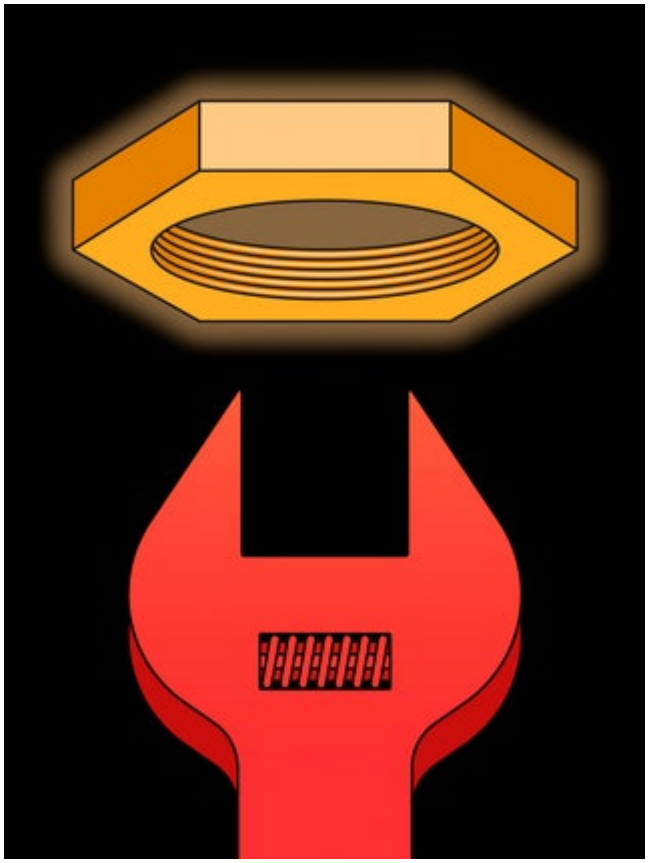
Books

Does Morality Do Us Any Good?

Our basic sense of right and wrong appears to be the product of blind evolution. The hard question is how unsettling that should be.

By Nikhil Krishnan

December 23, 2024



According to the philosopher Hanno Sauer, morality hasn't always existed. Unlike science, it had to be invented rather than discovered.Illustration by Till Lauer

Nothing kills your appetite, they say, like discovering how the sausage is made. In the realm of superhero cinema, origin stories explain our protagonist's driving motivations. But in the realm of faith and values? I stopped believing everything the tabloids said after I went on a school trip to the offices of my local paper. Others have grown disillusioned once they

scrutinized the early history of their religion as historians, not as adherents. It's harder to keep believing some things once you find out why you believe them.

Naturally, I hold slavery to be an abomination and liberal democracies to be better than totalitarian dictatorships. But why? I could draw on my years of education to tell you it has something to do with my belief in freedom, autonomy, the awfulness of treating a fellow human being as a mere instrument. But a skeptic can point out that I had these convictions before I was ever in a position to articulate a cogent argument for them. The arguments came afterward; they are rationalizations of things I already believed.

The unflattering truth, this skeptic might continue, is that my views on slavery simply reflect the moral common sense of the society I was born into. My affection for liberal democracy may come from the simple fact that I grew up in one, surrounded by its propaganda. Who knows what I'd think if I'd been raised as a member of a plantation-owning family in the antebellum South, where abolitionists were regarded as dangerous eccentrics? I used to fancy myself a rational creature who believed things for reasons; now, attuned to the question of origins, I see myself as no freer of the nexus of causes than my dog, my cactus, or my tennis ball.

What We're Reading

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And not only me. We can all be viewed as the culmination of history, physics, and biology. Yes, our beliefs about math and the natural sciences are products of a history, just as much as our moral beliefs are. But, happily, we have something with which to assess our scientific beliefs. There are lab tests to determine whether Newton's first law holds. The trouble is that

there's nothing we can test our moral convictions against—except perhaps other moral convictions, our own and those of other people. Of course I think my moral convictions are the right ones; that's why they're my convictions. Maybe all I'm entitled to say, though, is that they happen to be mine—as my tastes happen to be mine. A different childhood, different genes, and you'd find a man with the views of John C. Calhoun instead.

When the German philosopher Hanno Sauer titled his ambitious new book "The Invention of Good and Evil: A World History of Morality" (Oxford), he made it clear that he sees morality as quite different from science. In his account, morality—that body of judgments about good and evil, the practices that reflect those judgments, and the blame, guilt, and punishment that sustain them—hasn't always existed. That's why it had to be invented, rather than discovered.

For Sauer, the story of the invention of morality is really the story of the evolution of humanity. The processes that produced our morality are simply the processes that produced *us*, produced us as beings who have *this* morality—rather than, say, the norms that govern ants in their caste-bound colonies, or wolves in their packs, or the snow leopard in its solitude. To understand ourselves as moral creatures, we have to understand that we're built that way.

And who exactly are "we" in all this? That question can be answered in several ways. "We" might simply be all human beings, members of the species *Homo sapiens*. Or something much narrower: human beings in the twenty-first-century West, with all the values and behavioral quirks peculiar to us. Or something in the middle: human beings in a certain stage of a journey that began a few million years ago, shaped by some combination of physics, biochemistry, neurobiology, and history. The structure of Sauer's book reflects this ambiguity, dividing itself into sections that focus on distinct stages of human evolution, as he draws on research—some of it now well known—from evolutionary biology, game theory, neuroscience, behavioral psychology, and big-picture history of the sort done by writers such as Jared Diamond, David Graeber, and Yuval Noah Harari.

Sauer isn't the first writer to embark on an ambitious "genealogy " of morality. The example of Friedrich Nietzsche, the author of the most

ambitious such work, makes one expect something similarly dark and unsettling. Curiously, Sauer's tour of the sausage factory, far from leaving him stricken with nausea, seems to have whetted his appetite for the product. To understand why, we might as well follow his example and start at the very beginning.

It was five million years ago, Sauer tells us, that creatures rather like ourselves, having only just evolved from some now extinct ape, started to develop the psychological dispositions that made them capable of coöperation. Unlike the chimpanzees and bonobos of the dense forests around central Africa, our ancestors had to survive in exposed grasslands. Coöperating for mutual defense against our predators, and for collectively pursuing prey, was our way of compensating for our new vulnerability. Among the dispositions that emerged to help us get along, Sauer writes, was the capacity for altruistic behavior: "putting aside the interests of the individual in favour of a greater common good."

Sauer enlists a thought experiment, proposed by the American anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, to bring out the distinctiveness of the human capacity for coöperating. Compare how human beings typically behave when flying—"crammed together among strangers, silent and motionless"—with how chimpanzees might act in the same conditions. "There'd be pools of blood on the carpet, torn ears, fingers and penises, countless dead apes throughout the plane, and great howling and gnashing of teeth," Sauer writes. None of this tells us that nonhuman apes can't coöperate. It does suggest, Sauer continues, that we may be unique in how we do it: "more flexibly, more generously, with more discipline and with less suspicion, even with strangers."

As our environments changed, five hundred thousand or so years ago, and our groups grew larger, we developed the useful new practice of punishment. In evolutionary terms, this was enormously significant. "A species that kills its most belligerent, aggressive and ruthless members over hundreds of generations creates a strong selection pressure in favour of peacefulness, tolerance and impulse control," Sauer argues. "We are the descendants of the friendliest."

These friendly apes were not so friendly that they gave up on their newly acquired “punitive psychology.” They had some version of sentiments and customs we still recognize: blame and shame. But they also began to develop habits of trust and mistrust that enabled them to make good use of information and skills bequeathed by previous generations. So far, things were relatively egalitarian. Then, five thousand or so years ago, after agriculture spread and prehistory gave way to history, hierarchies emerged, dividing our societies into groups—the socioeconomic élites and everyone else.

As things became more unequal, we developed a paradoxical aversion to inequality. In time, patterns began to appear that are still with us. Kinship and hierarchy were replaced or augmented by coöperative relationships that individuals entered into voluntarily—covenants, promises, and the economically essential contracts. The people of Europe, at any rate, became what Joseph Henrich, the Harvard evolutionary biologist and anthropologist, influentially termed “*WEIRD*”: Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic. *WEIRD* people tend to believe in moral rules that apply to every human being, and tend to downplay the moral significance of their social communities or personal relations. They are, moreover, much less inclined to conform to social norms that lack a moral valence, or to defer to such social judgments as shame and honor, but much more inclined to be bothered by their own guilty consciences.

That brings us to the past fifty years, decades that inherited the familiar structures of modernity: capitalism, liberal democracy, and the critics of these institutions, who often fault them for failing to deliver on the ideal of human equality. The civil-rights struggles of these decades have had an urgency and an excitement that, Sauer writes, make their supporters think victory will be both quick and lasting. When it is neither, disappointment produces the “identity politics” that is supposed to be the essence of the present cultural moment.

His final chapter, billed as an account of the past five years, connects disparate contemporary phenomena—vigilance about microaggressions and cultural appropriation, policies of no-platforming—as instances of the “punitive psychology” of our early hominin ancestors. Our new

sensitivities, along with the twenty-first-century terms they've inspired ("mansplaining," "gaslighting"), guide us as we begin to "scrutinize the symbolic markers of our group membership more and more closely and to penalize any non-compliance." We may have new targets, Sauer says, but the psychology is an old one.

Sauer, who cautions that his chronological arrangements "shouldn't be taken too literally," terms the results of his multidisciplinary triangulation a "deep history," one that "doesn't use dates or names, sketching out instead a feasible scenario that could have gone along these lines." But his approach does lead him to conclude that there are "universal moral values that all people share with each other."

Thinkers who see morality as having been constructed are often supposed to have trouble accounting for the possibility of moral progress. What is progress, after all, if not swapping error for a timeless truth? The anxiety induced in us by genealogical reflection comes, in large part, from having to accept that what we'd taken to be an eternal verity might be a fairly recent product of human history, biological and social. If our moral commitments don't rest on deeper truths, how can we hope to resolve the conflicts that continue to divide us? Sauer's perspective here is notably sunny. He sees a possible future in which our values do not so much converge as reveal themselves never to have really diverged in the first place.

"She said you could call her Mom, not Mommy."
Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

"In reality, it is simply not true that, at the most fundamental level, different cultures have different values," he argues. Widely shared values, as revealed

by the World Values Survey, include “personal safety and freedom, care and tolerance, happiness, autonomy and self-fulfilment.” Distracted by our seeming divisions, he writes, we can forget the fundamentals: “We all share the same history of morality; our political disagreements are often shallow; underneath them are deep-seated, universal moral values that all people share with each other, and that can be the basis for a new understanding.”

Can such optimism be justified? Other genealogists of morals—notably Nietzsche—doubted that moral beliefs could long retain their grip after we’d learned how they arose. Nietzsche’s genealogy, needless to say, was a more impressionistic affair, and didn’t reach back to any evolutionary savanna. Instead, he was interested in the shift from the values of antiquity (focussed on heroism, worldliness, power) to those of the Christian early Middle Ages (focussed on humility, renunciation, compassion, and sin). For Nietzsche, this shift was almost entirely to be deplored. The older ethics, a “master morality,” had been replaced by something—a “slave morality”—motivated principally by the hatred, resentment, self-assertion, and wishful thinking of the slaves, who sought to transform the necessities of their situation into virtues. It’s no surprise that the meek of the world were drawn to a philosophy that promised them they would inherit the earth.

If Nietzsche was right, altruism comes from selfishness, humility from arrogance, love from hate. And the success of the moralization process was to be found in the fact that it made these tawdry underpinnings invisible. Exposing these origins, in turn, was bound to sap our faith in the modern ideology of good and evil. The question is whether the pedigree that Sauer lays out will prove less discomfiting. “In the cold light of day,” he asks, “will the uncomfortable truth shatter our confidence in our values? Will it show that our morality can stand up to closer scrutiny?” He plainly thinks that it can—or, at least, that quite a lot of our morality will survive, and, indeed, that understanding its origins may actually strengthen our confidence in it. In taking this attitude, he disclaims “the hyperbolic polemics that are part of Nietzsche’s own entertaining, but bad, habits” and chooses, instead, the optimism of a very different thinker, the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume.

Take an institution that demands absolute allegiance to its laws, such as the nation-state. People throughout history, especially those who have been the targets of state violence, have wondered whether we owe this entity our allegiance at all. One way to answer the question "Why obey the law?" is to explain why the law exists in the first place—to address the question "What's it for?" Hume saw that the question could be asked with equal force about the *moral* law. It was perfectly reasonable to inquire after the point of it, to try to figure out its function. But, unlike Nietzsche, he thought that doing so was unlikely to turn us against it.

Hume's strategy was to invite us to imagine a world before morality—or, specifically, before human beings came to value such qualities as justice or to care much for property rights. We were to suppose that human beings in these very ancient times had a basic psychology much like ours—self-interested but capable of sympathy—and needs much like ours: to be fed, housed, and protected from random violence. Should we be surprised that they would have come up with something like the concept of justice—that is to say, principles setting out who owes what to whom? Surely, it was only natural that they would count it a good thing if you were the sort of person who told the truth, kept your promises, paid your debts, didn't take other people's stuff without asking, and did your share of the dishes.

One might say that the concept of morality here is a construction, or that, as Hume put it, the virtue is "artificial." But so what? Artificial doesn't mean unreal or without authority. The rules of morality, even as Hume conceived of them, are no less real or authoritative than other things we have also made up: traffic lights, norms of etiquette, the principles of grammar. Discovering that the rules in question are there for a reason, far from shattering our respect for their authority, may serve to reinforce it.

Stories like Sauer's are inheritors of Hume's confidence. The point of these evolutionary narratives is not to show morality to be in any serious way problematic; it's to show that morality has a function. Sauer, accordingly, enlists the evolutionary history of morality on behalf of what, in much of the twentieth century, seemed a quaint and outmoded notion: moral progress. "There seem to be mechanisms *between* the generations that have

the potential gradually to improve human morality," he writes. "Progress is always possible and often tangible."

Sauer wrote his book in German—Jo Heinrich's English translation preserves the deadpan quality of the prose—but it is not, in any stereotypical way, Germanic. Much of the book's bibliography consists of works in English, and the books he cites as authoritative are nearly all recent works in psychology and the social sciences. He finds little to interest him in imaginative literature or theology. Sauer's optimism seems almost to be intended as a rebuke to the dour ideal of intellectual seriousness that runs from such canonical thinkers as Arthur Schopenhauer in the nineteenth century to Theodor Adorno in the twentieth.

Still, toward the end, he briefly entertains some challenges to his expectation of halting but reliable moral progress across the generations. The conditions in which our morality evolved, he notes, equip us well for coöperation within small groups, but how can we orchestrate coöperation "on a scale that encompasses all of humanity, and includes generations living far into the future?" The challenge of climate change is one of several we face now that show that problem to be more than theoretical.

His answer is equivocal, and sits uneasily with the optimism that has preceded it: "This is the first time we have faced this task: we do not know if we are capable of doing it." The note of uncertainty is welcome in a text marked by its confidence in cutting-edge evolutionary biology and social science.

To be sure, the curtains are soon drawn on this less inspiring view. Sauer's tone of reassurance prevails, grounded in the thesis that our divisions rest on a more or less shared moral system. We'd been wrong to worry that morality lacked foundations. The facts on which moral judgments depend are not themselves up to us. We can't choose not to be social animals. Nor could we decide tomorrow to adopt the social structures and psychologies of the bumblebee or the arctic fox. Although Sauer's picture of morality has no room for moral facts as God's laws, it finds another respect in which they might be objective nevertheless. The ethical facts are what they are because *we* are who we are.

If some societies weigh our shared values differently, he says, that's because of "socio-economic differences and not radically divergent morals." The same is true, he suggests, for polarization within societies. It's simply a matter of "group identities" assuming outsized importance: "We don't disagree—we just hate each other." Given the basic psychological structures we've all inherited, he contends, "there is an underestimated potential for reconciliation that is hard for us to see," but which may be sustained by "a silent majority of reasonable people" who reject the ideological extremes. The book ends with a vision of "feverish discord and hatred" replaced by a "feast of calm and community." Evidently, we can put aside our superficial moral differences and reach these sunlit uplands by reminding ourselves of how we came to have the values we have.

Will the story do the trick? Several ancient epics would be a lot shorter if all it took to reconcile the feuding brothers was a reminder of their shared lineage. Unfortunately, our origin stories don't tell us how to resolve any particular ethical dispute. The essence of such disputes, as with the fratricidal wars of the ancients, is that they are between factions who share the same psychology, the same history, the same aspirations. The history that made us into creatures capable of coöperation also gave us the capacity to hate one another in the aggregate, to draw sharp lines dividing the in-group from the out-group. Sauer's book may cast a gloomier light than he acknowledges. Our capacity for endless conflict may be just as much a part of our inheritance as is our ability, every now and then, to get along.

In Sauer's final chapter, which deals with the moral (or "moralistic") developments of the past five years, one can find some reasons for pessimism. In the standard picture of moral progress, popularized by philosophers such as Peter Singer, morality advances when we expand the circle of our concern beyond the narrow original in-group of family or clan. The welfare of human beings from other tribes and nations starts to count, too. We even begin to extend our moral concerns beyond the human, newly troubled at the thought of factory farms that made possible the cheap burgers on which we once cheerfully gorged.

Yet that vaunted expansion itself creates a new out-group, the deplorables who, say, persist in voting against greater immigration or who won't sit

quietly and eat their tofu. In other words, we learn to define the out-group—the people we don't have to care about, rather like the orcs in a fantasy video game—by its *moral* failings. The in-group is diverse in terms of race and gender, but morally homogeneous. It wasn't so long ago that American progressives on social media, weighing in on the #PandemicOfTheUnvaccinated, would occasionally betray a grim sense of satisfaction that the red-county orcs were getting their comeuppance.

Does that mean that real moral progress can come only if we give up on moralism? That's too easy. When the much derided moralism of our times relaxes, the newly emancipated deplorables will focus their ire on the do-gooders of the previous generation, their detested out-group. Some visions of moral progress look forward to a world in which the in-group/out-group distinction has vanished. The real lesson of Sauer's genealogy may be that we're just not built that way. ♦

Nikhil Krishnan is the author of "A Terribly Serious Adventure: Philosophy and War at Oxford, 1900-1960."

Dancing

Kyle Abraham’s Extraordinary Dance Memoir

In “Dear Lord, Make Me Beautiful,” Abraham offers a deeply personal portrait of his depressed inner state, set against the splendor of the world around him.

By Jennifer Homans

December 23, 2024

Abraham’s dancers can sink down into the floor and in the next breath push up into lightness and flight, without making a show of it.Illustration by Balint Zsako

Kyle Abraham is one of today’s most sought-after choreographers. He has been on the downtown contemporary-dance scene for more than two

decades, and in 2006 he founded his own company, A.I.M by Kyle Abraham (the initials stand for Abraham in Motion), focussing on Black and queer culture. Abraham's career took off, with international tours and commissions from major companies; in 2018, he brought the music of Kanye West into the sanctum of New York City Ballet. The dances I've seen are always accomplished and full of ideas, but now he has done something truly extraordinary: "Dear Lord, Make Me Beautiful," which had its world première recently at the Park Avenue Armory, is a deeply personal portrait of his depressed inner state, set against the splendor of the world around him. He made it for himself and sixteen dancers, mostly from A.I.M, and it marks his return to dancing in this ensemble.

In the program notes, Abraham, who is forty-seven, writes about aging, the fragility of memory, and his father's early-onset dementia. He began work on the dance in 2021, and he laments the "chaos of pandemic debris"; he also references the environmental crisis, Octavia Butler's "apocalyptic narrative of Black American Futures," and his own "fading hope and prayer" for change. These are thoughts. Yet the work he has made has no narrative and no familiar gestures. It is a fully abstract dance that, like nature and aging, works organically, seeping into us through skin and eyes and ears. And it is a beauty.

Inside the cavernous hall of the Armory, I found myself enveloped in an intimate and enchanted space at its center, demarcated by a dappled green forest, a continuously morphing digital backdrop (designed by the artist Cao Yuxi, with light by Dan Scully) that spread like a lush carpet across the stage floor, to our feet. The musicians of the chamber ensemble yMusic, who composed the original score in collaboration with Abraham, sat high on a platform to the left. As they played a soft, reedy sound, Abraham ran into the green wilderness wearing a loose white speckled costume (by Karen Young), which seemed to change colors in synchrony with the ever-shifting backdrop. He kept running, circling the large stage several times with an easy gait, occasionally flipping backward with a light kick at the past, then resuming his forward pace. At times, he slowed; his posture changed, the shoulders giving slightly, the gaze lowered, and we saw the unencumbered run of youth give way to the weight and thought of age.

Finally, he stopped, his back to us, standing on one leg, arms raised to the immensity of green, before eventually disappearing into the wings.

For the next hour, Abraham and his troupe performed a kind of dance memoir that unfolded in finely wrought patterns. The dancers seemed close and unified, with shared habits gained over months of moving together. There were duets, solos, trios, groups. The theme of running recurred, as did moments of isolation, with Abraham appearing preoccupied and diminished, unable to fully participate as the others moved around him. We sensed his vulnerability from within, as if his mind's eye could see only his own invisibly faltering insides. This was subtly done. His body is still very much whole; his being is not.

Abraham's performers, meanwhile, offer an intimate and flowing dance that seems as natural to them as water and air: sweeping movements, elegant and fluid line, with an intense physical focus on the inner life. They are a diverse group—Black, Asian, white—but there is no hint of performative identity. They seem to come from nowhere and everywhere at the same time: we might trace their vocabulary to Bill T. Jones (with whom Abraham has danced), or back to José Limón and other modern and postmodern dancers, or to ballet, or street and club dancing, but, whatever the influences, the dance has the unself-conscious ease of a fully integrated and naturalized form. It is worth stopping for a moment to appreciate just how difficult this is to achieve. Influences have a way of appearing, like family traits, in idiosyncratic details such as the turn of a head or position of a hand, but here the steps and styles have been stripped of attitude and etiquette, to their elemental forms. The discipline is physical, but also mental and emotional, and it is achieved by an interiority that seems to leave the materiality of everyday life behind.

One way we see this is in their range: these are terrific dancers who can occupy both the earth and the air at the same time. Most dance techniques privilege one or the other, because weight is so difficult to master. Dancers trained in ballet spend years aiming for the sky, and their bodies do not easily fold to the ground, whereas many modern dancers practice falling until it is second nature; the earth is their habitat. Abraham's dancers can sink down through the knees into the floor and in the next breath push up

into lightness and flight, without making a show of it. Take Amari Frazier, an extraordinarily sensitive performer of almost androgynous qualities. His movement seems to happen to him, as if it were rising from within or coming from some mysterious outside source. We watch the consequences, for example, as a quick sharpness passes through his inner torso, or as he absorbs a gesture into his smooth carriage and the wide lunging walks that structure his dance. I was reminded of how emotions and memories can physically embed themselves in us, and how their release can move like a small storm through the body. Frazier notices and directs this storm, as if psychology were physical.

There were moments when the flow of the dance slipped, surprisingly, into cliché—for instance, when the dancers gathered at the back of the stage, two women hugged each other and we felt that perhaps someone had died. Abraham stood aside, unable to feel, and the music wound itself into a compulsive free-jazz-like cacophony. The scene made words like “community” and “empathy” rush to mind, disrupting fragile and abstracted interiority with something more instructional and sentimental. Yet the moment felt more protective than manipulative, almost like a closing of ranks after too much had been exposed. It was only later that I realized a strange reversal was occurring: the highly crafted beauty of the stage world —dancers, set, sound—was taking on the oppressive and restricted character of Abraham’s own mind. There was little place in this dance for eruptions of human temperament. Beauty can be a refuge, but it can also be a harbor for depression.

Abraham’s depression, I sensed, was shading into melancholia, a group sadness with no individual remedy. The vividly colored backdrop and stage dissolved to white; pattern, the organizing principle of the bodies and of the world that Abraham had so carefully constructed, was gone. Then the dancers disappeared, too, except for Abraham and a couple, who separated and lapped the stage one last time before leaving. Abraham was alone, drenched in white and walking, as small shudders passed through his body. His pace slowed until he was walking in place, and, as the lights went dark, a bright spot picked him up for a moment, and then went black.

I did not fully believe this too literal final image, which seemed to evoke the peace of eternal white in an otherwise devastating portrait of despair. Or was it ambivalence, a resort to truism when nothing else seems possible? By making a dance so personal and whole, grounded in nothing but itself, Abraham reminds us that abstraction, which we sometimes think of as coldly formal and detached, can also be a language of loss—an impulse to purify and isolate art from violence and feelings too overwhelming to express. Even the prayerful title, “Dear Lord, Make Me Beautiful,” contains a cry of anguished doubt about what is to come—will you make me beautiful?—and points us to the problem of endings. The future is hard to mourn. ♦

Jennifer Homans, the magazine’s dance critic, is the author of books including “Mr. B: George Balanchine’s 20th Century.”

On Television

“Black Doves” Offers a Sentimental Spin on the Spy Genre

The Keira Knightley- and Ben Whishaw-led Netflix series eventually snares its protagonists in a traditional espionage plot—but it’s most interested in their friendship.

By Inkoo Kang

December 23, 2024

Helen, in her dual role as politician’s wife and mole, feels twice the pressure to keep up appearances.Illustration by Carlo Giambarresi

In the new mystery thriller “Black Doves,” the purview of secret agents can include school plays, bedtime stories, and holiday decorations. By day, Helen Webb (Keira Knightley) is a model wife to the U.K.’s Defense

Secretary (Andrew Buchan) and a doting mother to their two young kids; by night, she relays intelligence to her handler, Mrs. Reed (Sarah Lancashire), who sells information gathered by "black doves" like Helen to the highest bidder. That's when things go right. In the second episode, things go wrong: an assassin breaks into Helen's kitchen, where she and the intruder tussle in the dark, their knock-down-drag-out brawl lit by the glow of a Christmas tree. Upon gaining the upper hand, Helen threatens him in the manner of a wrathful domestic goddess. "I have a cheese grater in the dishwasher," she says. "I have a peeler. I have skewers. I have a kettle." With vicious emphasis, she adds, "I have a *NutriBullet*." By the next morning, she has a dead body in her garden shed—and is left fretting about the dried blood under her fingernails.

"Black Doves," a six-part Netflix series created by Joe Barton, is populated by opportunists and mercenaries who nevertheless forge genuine partnerships. Helen, in her dual role as politician's wife and mole, feels twice the pressure to keep up appearances. (Her gift for spycraft also has its consequences in the familial sphere, as when she taps her husband's phone and is irked to find evidence of a flirtation with a pretty young assistant.) The suspicious death of a Chinese ambassador and the disappearance of his hard-partying daughter gradually ensnare Helen in a traditional espionage plot, but the questions that feel most urgent are interpersonal: namely, how she and her onetime trainer, Sam (Ben Whishaw), came to be friends, and what ultimately severed their bond. When Sam surprises Helen after seven years away, she says that she thought she'd only see him again if he was hired to "retire" her. "You know I'd never take that job," he replies. "Unless the money was really good."

His cynicism, like hers, is quickly revealed to be a self-protective pose. It's probably not a coincidence that this sentimental spin on the spy genre foregrounds women and gay men—and that love, not geopolitics, is the governing force in its protagonists' lives. Sam's return to London is complicated by unfinished business with his civilian ex-boyfriend, and Helen is propelled by the murder of her own paramour, to whom she'd confessed her double life. The case supervisors and crime bosses are female, too—played by such veteran character actresses as Lancashire, Tracey Ullman, and a gnomic Kathryn Hunter. Respectable-seeming

women can go unnoticed more easily than their male counterparts; Helen's ever-oblivious husband mistakes Mrs. Reed for a government functionary when she sneaks into a party he's throwing. She's so soft-spoken, in fact, that even Helen routinely underestimates her ruthlessness.

In most respects, though, "Black Doves" is like a box of bonbons gifted around the holidays: pleasing, elegant, forgotten as soon as it's consumed. Like so many spy tales, the show is driven by intricate plotting rather than by meaningful character development. Helen's indifference to the sale of state secrets, in particular, is hard to square with the decency she exhibits in the other facets of her life. Her friendship with Sam is too thinly sketched for its gooey dénouement to achieve real resonance, and the few glimpses we get, via flashback, of her affair are insufficient to lend her revenge plot much emotional heft. She expresses regret that neither she nor anyone around her knows her true self, but the series fails to delve any deeper into that existential crisis. The more poignant admission comes from Sam's ex, Michael (Omari Douglas)—who says that, after discovering that all he knew of his boyfriend had been a front, he found it difficult to trust again, out of fear of falling for another man who didn't exist.

Douglas conjures a lovely, lived-in chemistry with Whishaw, who wears his character's world-weariness like a second skin. Yet these more grounded performances are undercut by the show's need to provide the very kind of action that haunts its heroes. One of Sam's unlikeliest allies is a young hit woman who offers fist-bumps between kills and proves alarmingly determined to deploy a rocket launcher. Her cheerful bravado is a jarring contrast to his inner turmoil; it's also rather silly. But, as an old contact suggests after Sam's homecoming, times have changed. Spectacle is in. "It ain't like in your day," the other man says wistfully. "At least you used to kill people with a touch of class."

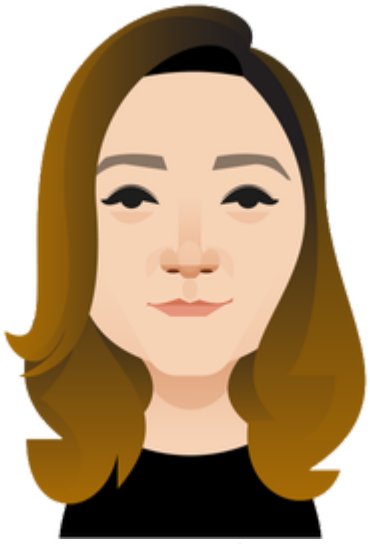
If "Black Doves" aspires to inject some coziness into the generally chilly espionage genre, "The Agency," on Paramount+, turns the thermostat way down. In comparison with the gentle subversions of the Netflix show, this remake of the French thriller "The Bureau" goes all in on the loneliness of saving the world. Michael Fassbender plays a C.I.A. operative who gets abruptly pulled from an assignment in Ethiopia, where he'd met the love of

his life, a historian named Samia (Jodie Turner-Smith). Now stationed in London, he's nicknamed Martian by his colleagues and reacquainted with his resentful college-age daughter (India Fowler). Martian, often the smartest guy in the room, chafes at his employers' insistence on surveilling him for signs of "post-mission disorder," a condition that goes unexplained. His grievances intensify when he secretly rekindles his romance with Samia, whose own role in sensitive diplomatic matters he never imagined.

Fassbender's calling card is his intensity, which exposes the raw humanity of his characters—or something terrifying within them that doesn't feel human at all. That ferocity is a sorely needed asset to "The Agency," but even great performances from the likes of Fassbender, Richard Gere, and Jeffrey Wright can't make up for its syrupy-slow pacing and its dependence on familiar tropes. Worse still are its vague, belabored meditations on the psychic toll of life undercover. When a C.I.A. psychologist (Harriet Sansom Harris) interrogates Martian's state of mind, he seemingly channels the Joker, insisting that his unwellness is what allows him to do the job. "You're not trying to help me," he says. "You're worried I may have somehow become sane." He reassures her with a line so dopey not even Fassbender can save it: "The person sitting in front of you is, was, will remain purely, deeply, identifiably one hundred per cent nuts."

"The Agency" is set against a renewed Cold War, and strains to assert its relevance to the present. One subplot takes place in Ukraine; another involves Tehran's nuclear efforts. But the six episodes made available to critics are too preoccupied with Martian's ostensible nuttiness to say anything about our world. The supposed international stakes of "Black Doves"—that the ambassador's death might somehow trigger World War III—feel similarly removed from reality. In the face of these recent missteps, it's worth wondering if the spy drama of today can—or even cares to—serve as more than escapism. The rare exception to the rule is the excellent "Slow Horses," a British series on Apple TV+ which conveys both institutional rot and the sense of personal betrayal that comes with being deemed expendable by one's own government. But many of the show's U.S. counterparts have fallen short, even as real-life issues of national security have seldom felt more pressing. Disinformation is rampant, and Tulsi Gabbard, a former congresswoman infamously accused by Hillary

Clinton of being “a Russian asset,” has been nominated by Donald Trump to oversee the nation’s eighteen intelligence agencies. A new world order—one that decenters America as the planet’s reigning superpower—appears to be ascendant. Such narratives are present in our daily lives but unusually absent from our popular culture, which has historically distilled the anxieties of the times. Distancing espionage thrillers from our own political tumult can give them a comforting gloss; it also robs them of their staying power. In the end, the drama unfolding on the news is the one that sticks. ♦



Inkoo Kang, a staff writer, has been a television critic for The New Yorker since 2022.

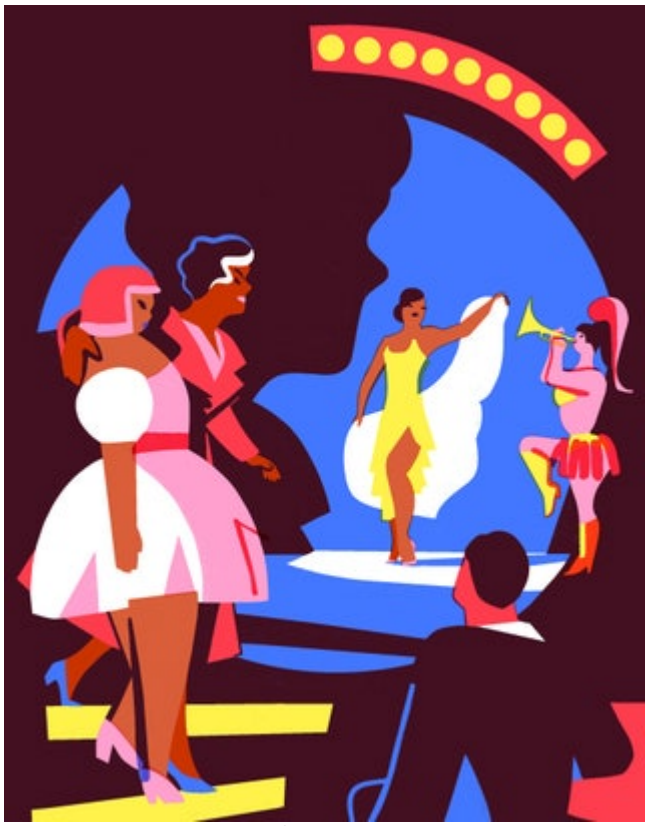
The Theatre

Audra McDonald Triumphs in “Gypsy” on Broadway

In the latest revival of Arthur Laurents, Stephen Sondheim, and Jule Styne’s iconic musical, George C. Wolfe humanizes a famously monstrous stage mother.

By Helen Shaw

December 21, 2024



Joy Woods plays the stripper Gypsy Rose Lee (formerly Louise) in the quintessential show-business tragedy, which is set in the fading world of vaudeville.Illustration by Virginie Morgand

In the nineteen-thirties, Gypsy Rose Lee, perhaps the world’s most famous stripper, helped transform burlesque from a vulgar pastime to café-society entertainment, simply by acting refined. She made arch references as she

stripped—dropping names like George Bernard Shaw next to her garter. You can find one of her routines on YouTube, in an excerpt from the 1943 film “Stage Door Canteen.” Even in the sanitized movie clip, her coy allure comes through. Men gather before her, their eyes avid, but she stays playfully aloof, as cool and elegant as an opera glove.

Promise the audience something, then make ’em wait; that’s also the strategy of the fifth Broadway revival of the legendary musical “Gypsy,” from 1959, now at the Majestic. The key promise here lies in Audra McDonald, the once-in-a-generation soprano megastar and winner of six Tony Awards, who plays Rose, Gypsy’s ambitious juggernaut of a stage mother. Lee’s 1957 memoir—also called “Gypsy”—was adapted for Broadway in a lightning-quick few months by an unbeatable supergroup: the book writer Arthur Laurents, the lyricist Stephen Sondheim, the composer Jule Styne, and the director Jerome Robbins. With a wink to the truth (even the autobiography played fast and loose with the story of how Louise Hovick became Gypsy Rose Lee), the quartet built the quintessential show-business tragedy: a battle royal between a stardom-obsessed mother and her daughters, whose childhoods she feeds into the industry’s hungry maw.

In the years since, the mythical version of Gypsy’s mother has eclipsed Gypsy’s own fame. There’s a pantheon of terrifying Roses now: she can appear as a gorgon (Ethel Merman, Patti LuPone) or as a vain, manipulative pixie (Bernadette Peters). The newest production, directed by George C. Wolfe, who has his own stack of Tonys, must realize that we are keen, even avid, to know what kind of monster *this* Rose will be. And, in number after number, the show teases us with the answer.

For a long time, McDonald’s Rose Hovick is . . . warmly, nervously human. In the first act’s several dingy interiors—Rose’s father’s house; a crummy variety theatre, where Rose coaches her children, Baby Louise (Kyleigh Vickers) and Baby June (I saw Jade Smith)—Rose almost blends into the curtains of the designer Santo Loquasto’s set. (The costume designer Toni-Leslie James puts McDonald in a sad mauve coat, which connects her to the muted purple fabrics of her unsatisfying milieu.) McDonald’s Rose does become a little loud and embarrassing on her daughters’ behalf, and she’s

clearly learning to stay on the defensive—she strides along with her feet wide, like a new sailor trying to get her sea legs. But she's no steamroller. When Rose assures her daughters that she doesn't mind eating dog food, because she'd rather her children eat well instead, McDonald becomes only slightly antic. Her big personality is, at first, a distraction technique, to keep the girls from letting poverty depress them.

At the same time, McDonald's singing voice is so enchanting that it seems to be from another plane entirely. Unlike those other Momma Roses, who belted out numbers like baseball sluggers driving balls into the outfield, the classically trained, Grammy Award–winning McDonald sings in operatic tones that glow and soar. When the mild-mannered agent Herbie (Danny Burstein, deft and sweet as always) courts her, she sings, "Small world, isn't it," and we marvel at the chasm between McDonald's gleaming cathedral sound and Rose's cramped existence.

Wolfe has cast the Hovicks as a Black family, and, without altering the text, he depicts some theatres as effectively segregated venues, where Baby June's relatively pale complexion seems to allow her to "pass." Baby June and Baby Louise get older, of course, but Rose denies it: the girls have been playing the small-time vaudeville circuit as a juvenile act, so, goddammit, they'll stay little until they make it big. Traditionally, the mid-act "Baby June and Her Newsboys" number goes on long enough that the younger members of the ensemble are replaced by grownup performers. Here, as the actors execute Camille A. Brown's vigorous choreography, Jordan Tyson tap-dances on as an older June, and Joy Woods enters as a teen-age Louise. But Wolfe also has Rose change the backup dancers from a cohort of Black children to a company of young white men. Rose's decision to hide Louise, her darker-skinned daughter, behind a cow costume takes on a new, uncomfortable charge.

What Wolfe has paid less attention to is the shift from one medium to another. As vaudeville dies out, desperation drives the little group first apart and then into a burlesque house. After June has taken off with one of her newsboys, Rose, grasping at any scrap of opportunity, forces Louise, who has so far been awkward and reticent, into stripping. McDonald has been laying down bread crumbs all along; we've watched her Momma gradually

change from being a protective, if eccentric, champion to a harridan who pushes her child into harm's way. But Wolfe hasn't given Woods any stage business to suggest her own journey; there's no sense that she's been learning the ropes, or developing any particular style. One minute she's a shy Cinderella, and the next she's a va-va-voomy ice queen, gorgeous and self-assured.

The four theatrical talents who originally turned Gypsy's story into a musical were all showmen, which is to say, they were recyclers, in love with Broadway's antecedent forms, and conscious of how much repurposing they were doing. They enjoyed the way that influences, aesthetics, and methods could run into one another: Styne sometimes used melodies he'd written for other shows; Sondheim, in his book "Finishing the Hat," describes how he came up with the showstopper "Rose's Turn," Rose's eleven-o'clock breakdown, which operates as a kind of omnibus for the other songs in the show, like an overture in reverse. Yet Wolfe and Brown don't make much of the musical's extraordinary interconnectedness. Apart from the dancing newsboys' dogged repetitions, we don't get a sense of how each form—say, the variety act—might have shaped what replaced it.

Luckily, McDonald's operatic soprano does much of that bridging work, connecting her Rose not to the bright trumpet hotcha of vaudeville but to the mad arias of Lucia di Lammermoor. Some people might regret McDonald's so-called "legit" sound as she flies up into her exquisite head voice, but it made me think of the way that low art often hides high art underneath its glitz. In the second act, the stripper Tessie Tura (Lesli Margherita) takes great pride in dancing on pointe, for instance, and, of course, someday there will be Gypsy in her G-string, speaking French and citing Shaw.

That soprano also gives McDonald something beautiful and glasslike to shatter. Many writers have tried to describe the ruined grandeur of the Momma Rose role: Sondheim compared her to Oedipus, lost in hubristic delusion; several critics have called her the Lear of musical theatre; in the second act, Loquasto's set design—Rose's busted old car holds up one side of a clothesline—is, I think, pointing us to Brecht's "Mother Courage."

McDonald, though, provides her own metaphor. Her voice is her grandeur, and it's her right to break it, which she seems to do over and over again in her immense climactic song. The day I saw the show, McDonald, after throwing down a velvet coat the same luxe red as a theatre curtain, staggered out onto the passerelle, a little bridge that lets her walk partway past the orchestra and into the house. The audience leapt to its feet. From where I was sitting, the shouting, applauding crowd obliterated everything but Rose's shaking figure. The slow striptease of this ferocious woman's agitated mind was over, at last, and, unlike Gypsy, she showed us everything. ♦

Helen Shaw, The New Yorker's theatre critic, joined the magazine in 2022.

The Current Cinema

“The Brutalist” ’s Epic Inversion of the American Dream

In his latest film, the director Brady Corbet depicts the fate of a brilliant Hungarian architect, who lands in the United States after surviving Buchenwald.

By Justin Chang

December 20, 2024

Adrien Brody stars in Corbet’s film, alongside Felicity Jones and Guy Pearce.Illustration by Chris W. Kim

Not long into “The Brutalist,” the director Brady Corbet plunges us into darkness—a darkness that, although neither formless nor void, marks the film as a creation story. Deep in the hold of a ship that has just arrived in New York Harbor, the camera is propelled deckward, alongside a weary Hungarian Jewish refugee, László Tóth (Adrien Brody), as he pushes his way through the crowd. It’s 1947, and the horrors that László fled in Europe—he survived Buchenwald—seem to coalesce, below deck, in Corbet’s virtuosic shadow play. The weight of the past bears down on László in the handheld jostling of the camera, in the ticking-time-bomb percussion of Daniel Blumberg’s score, and, most of all, in the sombre, disembodied voice of László’s wife, Erzsébet (Felicity Jones), from whom he was cruelly

separated. “There is nothing left for us here,” she writes to him. “Go to America and I will follow you.”

Now László has done that, and, as he emerges from the ship—out of darkness, light!—and catches a glimpse of Ellis Island, his haggard features twist into a boyishly jubilant grin. Should it alarm us that, owing to the severity of the angle, the Statue of Liberty is upside down? Of all the memorable images captured here by the cinematographer Lol Crawley, this one amounts to a visual thesis: we are witnessing an inversion, even a refutation, of the American Dream. Before the war, in Budapest, László was a much admired architect; adrift in America, trying to claw back some semblance of a legacy, he will, during the next thirteen years, be taken in and ejected, indulged and sneered at, embraced and exploited—and, finally, horrifically abused and cast aside. The patterns of rise and fall are built, with ruthless intelligence, into the movie’s structure. “The Brutalist,” which Corbet co-wrote with the Norwegian filmmaker Mona Fastvold, runs three hours and thirty-five minutes, and unfolds in two coldly gripping acts: an astounding ascent, a precipitous decline. There is a fifteen-minute intermission, and it’s the only stretch of the picture that even remotely tests your patience.

As László arrives in America, his career glories—and his beloved Erzsébet, stuck back in Hungary with their young niece, Zsófia (Raffey Cassidy)—seem lost to the past. All he has now are his clothes, a persistent heroin addiction, and the faintest of hopes for the future. The movie, for its part, peers relentlessly forward. Crawley’s recurring signature shot is a head-on view of a road or train tracks rushing beneath us, often backed by the quickening churn of the score: the music of industrial progress. László makes his way to booming Philadelphia, where he moves in with a friendly cousin, Attila (Alessandro Nivola), who has a frosty shiksa wife (Emma Laird) and a furniture store with more supply than demand.

“They are not very beautiful” is László’s honest appraisal of the sturdy, characterless wooden tables and chairs in Attila’s showroom, and the grace of Brody’s performance can be found in his delicate modulation of that line—critical yet forgiving, and reluctant to render too superior a judgment. Still, there is no stifling László’s belief in beauty. When the cousins are

commissioned to renovate a personal study in nearby Doylestown—as a surprise gift for its owner, the millionaire Harrison Lee Van Buren (Guy Pearce)—it is László who transforms the room into a minimalist wonder. And, when Harrison is caught furiously off guard by what these men have done, it is László who calmly stands his ground, certain that beauty will win the day.

He proves correct. After falling out with Attila (the excellent Nivola exits too soon), László finds himself swept up, in a stunning reversal of fortune, into the good graces of Harrison, a self-made titan of industry and a greedy connoisseur of other people's gifts. Pearce, in a magnificent performance, plays him as a kind of citadel—towering yet human-scaled, his immaculate dress and coiffure barely mussed by the occasional burst of temper or spasm of ego. "I find our conversations intellectually stimulating," he declares to László, over a snifter of brandy, and although the line gets a laugh, Pearce doesn't reduce Harrison's dilettantish pretensions to a joke. Even in the character's most transparently manipulative moments, Pearce endows him with a seductive conviviality—a bracing largeness of spirit. When Harrison installs László in his guesthouse and tasks him with designing a Doylestown community center, you can't help but share László's sense of triumph—or his instinctive yearning, against his better judgment, for his benefactor's approval.

Others, however, do not approve—certainly not Harrison's treacherous young failson, Harry (Joe Alwyn), though his daughter, Maggie (Stacy Martin), is made of gentler stuff. There are also the people of Doylestown, who scarcely bother to hide their hostility toward the Jewish outsider in their midst, or their suspicions of the sharp, clean lines and modular elements of his brutalist style. Tensions mount further as the second half begins, in 1953, and Harrison arranges for Erzsébet and Zsófia to be reunited with László, at last, in Doylestown. The two women, initially welcomed, soon affront their hosts with their pesky independence of mind and spirit. They have survived far worse than the Van Burens of the world, and they are, if anything, even less inclined than László toward compromise.

If László Tóth reminds you of Howard Roark, then Corbet, clearly having a Rand old time, is already a few steps ahead of you. Like Roark (played by a grave Gary Cooper in King Vidor's juicily grandiloquent 1949 film version of "The Fountainhead"), László is unswerving in his allegiance to his vision, resisting every effort to curb his ideas and refusing to coddle the fickle, foolish whims of public taste. What makes László the more interesting character is that, however stubborn and exacting his judgments, he doesn't allow genius or hubris to define him. Nor can he be reduced to his addiction, his war trauma, his love for his wife, his devotion to Judaism, or his uncertainty—as other Jews flock to Israel—about where that devotion begins and ends. When you think back on "The Brutalist," it is not László's arrogance but his thoughtfulness that is likely to stick with you—that, and the soft lilt in his hard scrape of a voice, like a cushion laid over gravel.

Brody hasn't been this good, or had a role this powerful, since his Oscar-winning performance as the Polish musician Władysław Szpilman, in "The Pianist" (2002). There are moments when Corbet's film suggests a sequel: after surviving the Holocaust, where does an artist go next? Encountering "The Brutalist" for the first time, I wondered if I were watching a bio-pic, so entranced by the flow of the story and the pointillist precision of the details that I couldn't help assuming the underlying truth of the material—the integrity of the foundation. I should have known better; Corbet delights in concocting ersatz case histories, submerging fictional characters in the tides of real-life catastrophe. His first feature, "The Childhood of a Leader" (2015), wove a chilly-creepy origin story for a fledging Fascist. The darkly entrancing "Vox Lux" (2018) dreamed up a pop diva named Celeste—a patchwork of inspirations (Madonna, Lady Gaga), birthed in a cauldron of American tragedy.

"Vox Lux" was about the sinuous, cultish connections between musical celebrity and terrorist violence, with Celeste as their pop-supernova hellspawn. "The Brutalist" similarly regards László's arrangement with Harrison as a Faustian bargain—and not much of a bargain, really, as the years stretch on, delays set in, budgets skyrocket, and László begins to slip and stumble, and on ever more precarious slopes. A stunning passage brings Harrison and László to the mountains of Italy, where gargantuan slabs of

marble await their man-made destiny. Perhaps it's no surprise that here, in the face of such natural beauty, the drama shrinks and contracts, not fulfilling Corbet's overarching ideas so much as literalizing them. A resonant, thematically nimble story—about the predations of capitalism, the obstacles to cultural assimilation, the inherent imbalance of the patron-artist relationship, and the plunder and violation of Jewish-immigrant genius—suddenly feels trapped in stone.

No matter. "The Brutalist" is an American epic of rare authority, and what gives it its power, I think, is what lends some buildings their fascination: a quality of dramatic capaciousness and physical weight, a sense that what we're seeing was formed and shaped by human hands. Modernist aesthetics may be Corbet's subject, but Hollywood classicism, as a style, suits him well; you can feel him surrendering, as he has seldom done before, to the sweeping pleasures of the well-told tale. And yet his flair for provocation persists in the film's scorpion sting of a coda, which brings forth a new interpretation of László's legacy: one that essentially recasts his work as stealth propaganda, a Zionist Trojan horse. Some viewers might take this attempted reclamation at face value, though only if they miss the bitterly sardonic chill of Corbet's tone, or the contradiction in the interpreter's own words, reminding us of the cold inscrutability of László Tóth's masterworks: "They indicate nothing, they tell nothing, they simply are." ♦

Justin Chang is a film critic at The New Yorker. He won the 2024 Pulitzer Prize for criticism.

Poems

- **“Prelude in Grey Major”**
  By Christian Wiman | “I was not alone, that much I know, / though no one was with me.”
- **“Bass Lake”**
  By Safia Elhillo | “The year, that year, had been especially / cruel. Sickness and war.”

Poems

Prelude in Grey Major

By Christian Wiman

December 23, 2024

Melancholy, most beautiful word,
like a sound some ancient instrument unearthed—
or earthed, its fusion of cave and cloud.

Or *cloud*, come to think, so close to *could*,
how the mouth rounds, sounds
not just the shape itself but a sky in which to float,

gentle hills, a home in the distance,
then a whole fall filled with cool sun and stuttered colors
through which one's walking,

considering the long and polar O of *alone*,
which has its own beauty,
and a silent *one*,

hiding like the seal I saw in the strait of San Juan
when the pod of killer whales glided past the rocks.
Another life, as they say, though there is always only one,

sound and mind so mysteriously aligned
one strains to tell if memory's foghorn is real
or if that's simply the sound that memory makes.

I was not alone, that much I know,
though no one was with me,

gentle swells, mists tearing and repairing,

and all the fine gradations of greys
like *melancholy* made visible,
holding its *holy* like a secret for the end.

This is drawn from “The Dance.”

Christian Wiman is an author whose books include “Survival Is a Style: Poems” and “Zero at the Bone.”

Poems

Bass Lake

By Safia Elhillo

December 23, 2024

For a week we walked
the roadside without pavement

to the lake, cooked meals in the heavy
iron pan, slept in the afternoons

and talked easily, bare feet
propped against the furniture

The year, that year, had been especially
cruel. Sickness and war. I slept

chemically inside the hospital
while my first country fell

my grandmother leaving behind
books and gold to flee into the desert

home shrinking into the rearview
mirror and then gone

Before cutting into my body
the surgeon asks about my name

correctly pronounces the ح
the letter fizzing in his throat

After crossing into Egypt my uncle sends
a photo, my grandmother’s hair undyed

for the first time, shock of white
against her unlined face

I know I am being strange with my friends
on this holiday, disappearing

for hours into sleep, walking barefoot
between the back yard and the house

rolling lemons onto the floor to make
the baby smile and crawl toward them

On the seventh day we pack the cars
wipe out the fridge with bleach

Every day I’ve waited for another bad thing to happen
waking in the mornings and holding my breath

Because they made it out alive I am not allowed
to mourn: the book I’d left tented on a nightstand

my grandfather’s office furnished
in mother of pearl

Crossing the threshold for the last time, returning
the keys to the lockbox, we find the body

of a scorpion upturned against the hardwood
I am afraid to name everything

this year has taken
afraid there will be more

Its body not yet dried by time
tail like a beaded necklace and glinting in the light

I study its anatomy, its knuckled abdomen
an organ whose name I learn is *book lung*

Orion and the scorpion sent to kill him
eternal neighbors now in the night sky

I was just there, not eleven months ago
sleeping in the desert, on holiday

the dark hot with constellations, thick streaks
and swaths of visible stars

Pyramids jutting from the sand like so many
broken teeth. In the retelling I don't think to mention

that we lived, only that we walked barefoot
that the baby crawled on those floors

Almost, I can't stop saying, *almost*
My family lived, and still I can't stop writing

about the house, the broken windows, the shot books
Prosoma, metasoma, pincers, mouth

In this way I waste my living
A gone blue room, gone garden

of gone succulents, my grandfather's
gone grave. My living friends

teeth glinting in the low light
silverware against ceramic

Tarsus, manus, stinger, legs. Book
lungs, dark joints, the claws almost black.

Safia Elhillo is the author of books including the poetry collection "Girls That Never Die" and the novel in verse "Bright Red Fruit."

Cartoons

- **Cartoon Caption Contest**
  Submit a caption, plus vote on other entries and finalists.
- **Cartoons from the Issue**
  Drawings from the December 30, 2024 & January 6, 2025, magazine.

Puzzles & Games

- **The Holiday Crossword: Monday, December 23, 2024**
  By Patrick Berry | Today’s theme: 2024 in language.

Crossword

The Holiday Crossword: Monday, December 23, 2024

Today's theme: 2024 in language.

By Patrick Berry
December 23, 2024

Patrick Berry has been publishing puzzles since 1993 and lives in Athens, Georgia.