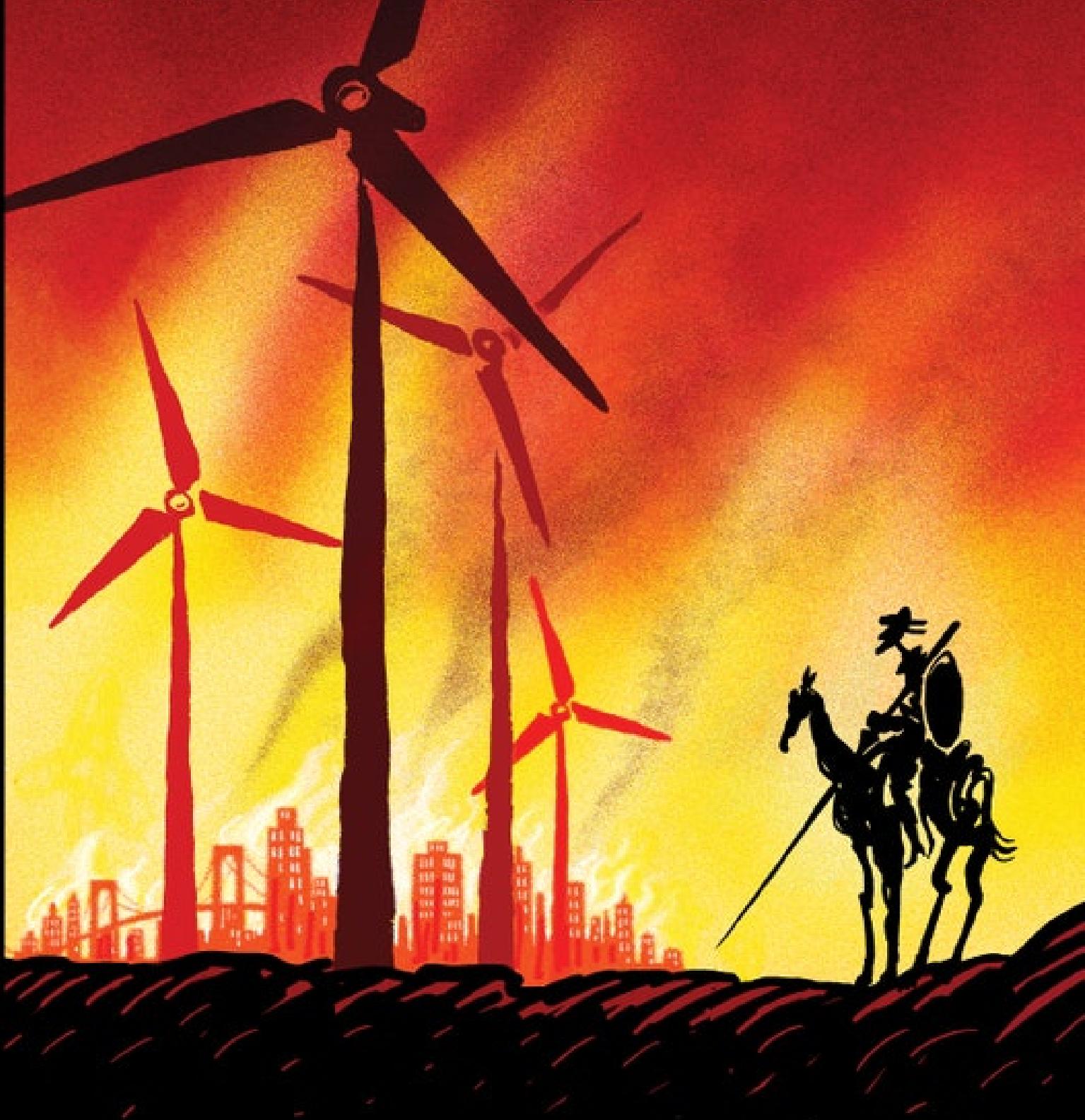


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# A Reporter at Large

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There's no way to confirm that a crop was grown organically. Randy Constant exploited our trust in the labels—and made a fortune.

By [Ian Parker](#)

## Content

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Glen Borgerding met Randy Constant in the late nineteen-nineties, when landowners in northern Missouri hired them to help set up an organic soybean farm. Borgerding, an agronomist from Minnesota, took soil samples and made recommendations about fertilizer and weed control; Constant, a Missouri native who had a day job as a regional sales manager for the Pfister seed company, ran the farm's day-to-day operations. By then, Borgerding had spent more than a decade in organic agriculture. Constant had not, but he had evident ambition. Borgerding recently told me, "Randy was an exciting guy to be around—when things were working well."

Constant, then in his thirties, had a degree in agricultural economics from the University of Missouri. Since graduating, he had "worked his way up the agricultural corporate ladder," as his wife, Pam, later put it. In the eighties, a time of collapse in America's farming economy, he had taken a series of sales and managerial jobs across the Midwest, before returning with Pam and their three children to live in Chillicothe, Missouri—a town of about nine thousand residents, ninety miles northeast of Kansas City, where he and Pam had grown up. Constant became active in Chillicothe's United Methodist church, and later served as president of the town's school board.

Constant appeared to be "the epitome of the Midwestern guy," Ty Dick, a former employee, said recently. "Straightforward, healthy, wholesome." Constant wore button-down shirts; his hair was always neatly combed. Hector Sanchez, who once worked for Constant in Chillicothe, recalls his former boss's solicitousness: "He always asked me, 'Do you need anything? Are you *good*?' " When Constant met Borgerding, he had recently become licensed to sell real estate, and he occasionally sold a farm on behalf of Rick Barnes, of Barnes Realty, in Mound City, Missouri. Barnes, who told me he used to think that Constant missed his calling by not selling real estate full

time, said, “He came across like a deacon in the church. He probably *was* a deacon.”

After the soybean-farm collaboration ended, Borgerding and Constant discussed starting a business together. “I had a lot of trust in him,” Borgerding said. “I felt that he had a lot of integrity. I felt that we had a very unified vision of what we wanted to accomplish.” In 2001, they founded a company, Organic Land Management.

John Heinecke lives and farms near Paris, Missouri, a hundred miles east of Chillicothe. When I called him to ask about Constant, he said, “That cocksucker. He screwed me over to fucking death.” Heinecke was about to drive to his weekend house, on an inlet at the Lake of the Ozarks, and he agreed to meet me there a few days later.

We spoke on his screened-in porch, which had a view down to his dock and his motorboat. Heinecke, who is in his early sixties, was wearing a sleeveless T-shirt and a fentanyl patch; he talked of spinal injuries related to a lifetime of agricultural lifting. Now and then, we had to shout over the straight-pipe speedboats screaming down the lake’s main channel.

Heinecke first went bust in the mid-eighties, when he was farming rented land. “Bank called my notes,” he said. By the time he met Constant, in the mid-nineties, he was enjoying a period of success as a contract farmer, working fifteen hundred acres for various owners. “I probably had forty farms or so,” he said. “A lot of little farms. I was a patch king!”

Heinecke used to have a sign at the end of his driveway which read “*i shoot every third salesman.*” Constant, pitching for Pfister, came to the door. Heinecke remembered him as “a smooth talker, one of these guys you have to worry about.” Constant enlisted Heinecke to become a local seed salesman for Pfister. That was their business relationship for the next few years. Then, around 2000, Constant asked if Heinecke knew of any pastureland that wasn’t being used. Heinecke mentioned a nine-hundred-acre farm, owned by a relative, a section of which hadn’t been tilled in years. “Can you rent that?” Constant asked. He then explained that he wanted to farm it organically.

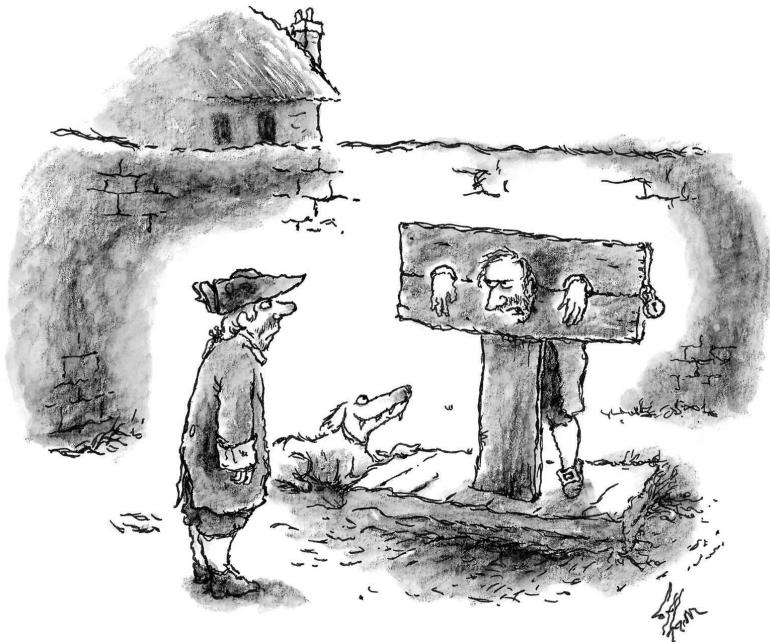
Heinecke recalls replying, “Tell me what this organic deal is.”

More than in most retail transactions, the [organic consumer](#) is buying both a thing and an assurance about a thing. Organic crops are those which, among other restrictions, have been grown without the application of certain herbicides, pesticides, and fertilizers. Close scrutiny of a crop of non-organic tomatoes might reveal that they had been exposed to these treatments. But it might not. And an organic product can become accidentally tainted if proscribed chemicals carry across from a neighboring crop. The rules forgive such contamination—to a point. Testing for residues is not common in American organic regulation.

The real difference, then, between a ton of organic soybeans and a ton of conventional soybeans is the story you can tell about them. The test, at the point of sale, is merely a question: Was this grown organically? That’s not like asking if a cup of coffee is decaffeinated. It’s more like buying sports memorabilia—is this really the ball?—or like trying to establish if a used car has had more than a single, careful owner.

The organic story has legitimate power. A farm’s conversion to organic methods is likely to increase biodiversity, reduce energy consumption, and improve the health of farmworkers and livestock. And, to the extent that agricultural chemicals enter the food supply, an organic diet may well be healthier than a conventional one.

When Constant asked Heinecke about pastureland, American organic agriculture had just begun booming. In 2000, organic sales in ordinary supermarkets exceeded, for the first time, sales in patchouli-scented health-food stores. During the next five years, domestic sales of organic food nearly doubled, to \$13.8 billion annually. The figure is now around sixty billion dollars, and the industry is defined as much by large industrial dairy farms, and by frozen organic lasagna, as it is by the environmentalism and the irregularly shaped vegetables of the organic movement’s pioneers.



*"When I return to public office, some people had better watch out."*  
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

A new national system of organic certification, fully implemented in 2002, helped spur this growth. Previous regulation, where it had existed, had been uneven: farmers in Iowa could become organic by signing an affidavit saying that they farmed organically. Given the inscrutability of a crop's organic status, the new system was likely to preserve an element of oath-making, but the reliance on trust was now overlaid—and, perhaps, disguised—by paperwork. Organic farmers, and others in the organic-food supply chain, were now required to hire the services of an independent certifying organization—one that had been accredited by an office of the [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#), the National Organic Program. A certifier kept an eye on a farm's operation, primarily through an annual scheduled inspection.

Among the new federal rules: land subjected to non-organic treatments couldn't be converted to organic production overnight. The process would take three years. Given how fast the organic market was expanding—including for meat, eggs, and dairy products, derived from animals given only organic feed—land that needed no transition period became valuable.

Organic Land Management proposed to find such land and, in exchange for a share of a farmer's profits, get it certified, and then help grow and market the crops. "At the time, conventional corn was, let's say, two dollars a

bushel,” Borgerding told me. “The first corn crops that we sold were three-seventy-five and four dollars a bushel.”

Constant and Borgerding never worked out of the same office. Borgerding made deals with farmers in Minnesota and the Dakotas; Constant kept farther south. Their company’s pitch was bound to appeal to farmers who had bad credit, or other problems. John Heinecke, the patch king who’d struggled with bankruptcy, agreed to join. In Overton, Nebraska, Constant also signed up James Brennan and his father, Tom—a decorated Vietnam veteran whose alcohol abuse, connected to P.T.S.D., would lead to several convictions for drunk driving.

Within a few years, Organic Land Management was handling six thousand acres, on a dozen farms in five states. In the eyes of American regulators, this was a single operation, requiring only a single organic certification—as if the company’s scattered fields were divided only by railroads or rivers, rather than by, say, Iowa.

Constant and Borgerding settled on Quality Assurance International, based in San Diego, as their certifier. This was not the cheapest option. Q.A.I.’s core business was certifying food-processing companies, not farms; its name is now on every other box of American organic cookies and cornflakes. I recently spoke with Chris Barnier, who, between 2004 and 2007, oversaw Organic Land Management’s finances and records. Though he did not directly criticize Q.A.I., he said, “It’s a huge flaw in the organic industry that the farmers *pay* the certifier—sometimes many thousands of dollars. The certifier has a conflict of interest, because they really don’t want to blow the whistle on a fraud.”

Moreover, any inspection, however principled the investigator, is likely to be cursory. After Barnier left Organic Land Management, he worked for a while as an inspector himself. He explained that extending a farm visit beyond a couple of hours—looking at paperwork, asking questions—can feel like a provocation. The cows need milking, the kids are whining. An established grain trader recently told me that the certification industry is essentially toothless, adding, “If you saw my operation, then came and saw what they do on an inspection, your mind *would be blown*. I do thousands of transactions a year. They look at three.”

Borgerding told me, “Chris and I worked real hard to maintain the integrity of things—to make sure all of our organic paperwork was in order.” Nevertheless, he acknowledged that he had been drawn to Q.A.I. partly because the company was perceived not to nitpick: “It was not my intention to abuse their potential leniency. But I think they kind of glossed over things.” And, because Q.A.I. inspectors were not farm specialists, “they—at least at that time—were a little bit unaware. It was just more of a foreign territory to them.” He added, “They’re way out in California! What did they know about Midwest agriculture?” (A representative for Q.A.I. said that its inspectors understand the “intricacies of their particular region’s agricultural industry.”)

Constant and Borgerding were able to pay themselves a hundred thousand dollars a year. The Constants, who had a son and two daughters, the youngest of whom was in her teens, moved into a spacious house on Oaklawn Drive, in Chillicothe’s more monied end. Their furnishings included ceramic rabbits, two crosses, and a framed map of Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, where the family liked to vacation.

Looking back, Borgerding can see that he failed to notice warning signs about his partner. He said that, in Missouri, he “would mention Randy’s name and people would just close down, back off.” He knew that Constant always had a side project. “When I hooked up with him, *I* was the side project,” he said, referring to Constant’s job at Pfister. “But it always haunted me a little: What happens when our business becomes the main project? What would Randy do on the side?”

He recalled once watching in awe as Constant deflected an agricultural inspector’s query about record-keeping. In a flurry of paper, “Randy threw down *this* document, tied to *this* document, and tied to *this* document, and presented it as ‘It’s so obvious, any idiot can figure this out—why can’t you?’ ” The inspector retreated. Today, Borgerding has a sense that he witnessed a charade. But, he said, “the tone in Randy’s voice, and the way he acted, it was like Novocaine—it just put you at ease.”

In 2001, Constant, on behalf of Organic Land Management, signed a contract to deliver organic soybeans from farmers it worked with to a facility in Beardstown, Illinois, owned by the Clarkson Grain Company. Clarkson,

which buys grain from farmers and sells largely to food manufacturers, was an early specialist in organic grain and in grain that is not a [genetically modified organism](#), or a G.M.O. The grain industry was then being transformed by such new products as Monsanto's Roundup Ready soybeans and corn, which are genetically modified to survive in fields sprayed with Roundup, a weed killer made by the company.

A non-G.M.O. crop might or might not be organic, but a genetically modified crop is definitely not organic. Today, it's nearly inevitable that a commercial buyer of organic grain will subject the crop to a G.M.O. test, which can take only a few minutes. But in 2001 it was unusual for such buyers to test every delivery. Clarkson did.

A Clarkson employee who worked at Beardstown at the time recently recalled that Organic Land Management's soybeans, arriving by truck, tested positive for G.M.O.s. The drivers said that they must have accidentally loaded grain from the wrong storage bins at the farms. The next day, "the trucks came back," the Clarkson employee told me. "More loads with the same results." These, too, were sent away. Constant called up, furious, claiming that there was a mistake on Clarkson's end. The trucks kept coming in for about a week, then stopped. "We eventually tore up the contract with Randy," the Clarkson employee said. "We guessed at the time that he had found another buyer who was not testing for G.M.O.s." In a recent call, Lynn Clarkson, the founder and C.E.O. of Clarkson, compared Constant to an Internet scammer. "He's testing, just like the ransomware guys," he said. "They want to test your defenses and see if they're working."

Around the time that Clarkson rejected the soybean trucks, Duane Bushman, who runs a grain-trading business in Fort Atkinson, Iowa, bought his first load of certified organic corn from Organic Land Management. Bushman felt confident about the transaction: he had visited two Organic Land Management farms. Over the next several years, he bought corn from the company in increasing quantities. Then something odd happened. During a phone conversation in the first half of 2006, Constant mentioned that he was out of corn from the previous harvest. But in a second call, a week or so later, Constant suddenly had a supply. He told Bushman, "I found five more railcars!" A railcar holds about a hundred tons of corn. Five railcars might be the annual yield of a modestly sized Missouri farm. Constant's corn was

covered by his company's organic certification, but Bushman felt uneasy, and asked to see transaction certificates, which can indicate a load's date and place of origin. Bushman, who was about to go on a work trip, told his assistant, Linda Holthaus, who had worked for him for several years, "Don't pay him for those five loads until you get the T.C.s."

When Bushman returned from his trip, Holthaus had paid for the order. She had also taken a new job, at Jericho Solutions—a grain brokerage that Randy Constant and his friend John Burton, a Missouri farmer, had just set up. In September, 2006, Constant created a branch of Jericho Solutions whose registered address was Holthaus's home, in Ossian, Iowa.

Bushman tried and failed to reach Constant. Eventually, he Googled "Organic Land Management, Inc.," found Glen Borgerding's name, and called him. Borgerding was sympathetic, noting that it was often hard to get Constant to return calls, and asked if he could help.

"Well, there's this paperwork on the railcars that you guys sold," Bushman said.

Borgerding was confused: "Excuse me?"

"Remember those railcars?" Bushman said.

Borgerding told Bushman that Organic Land Management had never sold grain to Bushman's company.

There was a pause. Bushman then asked, with evident anxiety, how much corn Organic Land Management had been growing in Missouri in recent years. About fifteen hundred acres, Borgerding said. Both men were again silent. Borgerding recalls, "You could have heard a pin drop."

The math didn't work: Bushman had been buying far more corn from Constant than could possibly have been grown on Organic Land Management's Missouri farms. It began to dawn on Borgerding that "we were not talking about a load or two—we're talking *millions of dollars* of grain." He recalls concluding that Constant might have just been acting as a broker on the side—buying grain from other organic farmers and then

selling it on. Borgerding laughed, weakly, then said, “Or he was doing something else.”

Constant was, in fact, passing off non-organic grain as organic grain. The scheme, in which at least half a dozen associates were involved, is the largest-known fraud in the history of American organic agriculture: prosecutors accused him of causing customers to spend at least a quarter of a billion dollars on products falsely labelled with organic seals.



*"I have a feeling he understands more than we think."*  
Cartoon by Navied Mahdavian

Clarence Mock, a Nebraska lawyer who represented Mike Potter—one of the farmers who worked with Constant—recently proposed that the scheme may have been sustained, in part, by a disdain for organic consumers. “There was a little bit of a sense of effete, latte-drinking, Volvo-driving people,” Mock said. “The whole idea of organic corn versus other kinds of corn, you know—once you grind it up and put it into cornmeal, who the hell knows the difference?” The scheme’s participants, Mock went on, had perhaps recognized that misrepresenting grain as organic was “kind of naughty,” while telling themselves, “Nobody’s getting hurt, or getting sick. It wouldn’t be, like, ‘We’re drug manufacturers, and we’re giving people bad drugs.’”

Several organic old-timers I spoke with said that farmers often turn to organic production purely for the price advantage. At that stage, they may

find the organic idea absurd, or at least disconcerting: more work, more weeds, probably a lower yield. Some give up. For others, the experience of farming organically—of ending a reliance on chemicals and their providers, and perhaps seeing healthier animals, among other satisfactions—creates a convert.

This wasn't Constant's path. He seems to have begun with one idea for easy money—four dollars a bushel, and someone else doing the labor—and then discovered that within reach was a way to get money that was so much easier.

A farm's organic certification is good for a year. It doesn't get used up by sales. If a farmer has only a dozen organic apple trees, but agrees to sell you a million organic apples, you're unlikely to learn that you have a problem merely by looking at the orchard's certification. As the established grain trader explained, "Some certifiers put the acreage on the certification. Some don't. It isn't a U.S.D.A. requirement. It's nuts!"

On at least one occasion, a farmer working with Constant treated a field with herbicides and pesticides—but left the perimeter untouched. To a neighbor, or a hurried inspector, the field would look as scrappy and weed-infested as it should. (Rick Barnes, the real-estate agent who employed Constant, told me that every organic farm "looks like a disaster.") But Constant's illicit activities rarely required much guile. In a market that often seems to value a certificate of authenticity over authenticity, all he had to do was lie.

Constant came to learn that, as long as he maintained control of *some* fields certified as organic, almost nothing stood in the way of his selling non-organic grain obtained elsewhere, as if it all had grown in those fields. In 2016, his sales of organic corn implied a yield per acre of about thirteen hundred bushels—about ten times any plausible number. That year, Constant controlled some three thousand acres certified for either organic corn or soybeans, and brought in about twenty million dollars. If, as Mock suggests, the organic consumer could be seen as a chump, Constant's greater disregard may have been for the organic regulators and traders who agreed to take him at his word. As the Clarkson employee said of Constant, "In his mind, he could slick-talk anyone, and had no fear of actually getting caught."

It isn't hard to see how Constant had developed this confidence. When he was young, the Chillicothe *Constitution-Tribune* had frequently run admiring stories about him. He was a "hard nosed" defensive end on his high-school football team; he called in a report of vandalism to the police; he won scholarships and raised funds for charity. And he was clearly on a path to agricultural success: in 1974, at the age of fifteen, Constant became the "barnwarming king" in the local chapter of the Future Farmers of America. He went on to become the group's chapter president, and to represent his district at a national conference. He won an F.F.A. award for his agricultural record-keeping, and another for his recitation of the organization's creed, which includes these lines: "I believe that American agriculture can and will hold true to the best traditions of our national life and that I can exert an influence in my home and community which will stand solid for my part in that inspiring task."

In negotiations with business partners, Constant liked to say, "Look, I'm just a dumb farmer." John Heinecke said of him, "Hell, he didn't know shit about farming." This is perhaps unfair. Though it may have been odd to think of Constant driving a tractor, he could certainly join a conversation about tractors. "Randy could *speak the language* of agriculture," Lynn Clarkson told me. Constant's sales pitch sometimes included a savvy appeal to nostalgia: organic farming, he would say, was just like "how we did it in the sixties."

Constant leased a few dozen acres of farmland near Chillicothe, and at times he managed thousands of acres elsewhere. But when he called himself a farmer—say, when he ran for the Chillicothe school board—he was simplifying a career of unrelenting hustle. Constant sold seeds, soybeans, fish, and real estate; he considered growing cilantro, for Chipotle restaurants, and growing marijuana; he explored an investment in "lingerie football," played by women, with their midriffs exposed.

A former employee of Constant's, who was keen to remember his better qualities, nonetheless described him to me as "friendly and presentable, but calculating." Other associates shared similar impressions. In the early two-thousands, a young soybean farmer, Ben Austic, spent a week with Constant in London, on a junket that the Missouri Department of Agriculture had organized for people connected to organic farming. Austic, who has since

become a Baptist minister, noticed that whenever the group's conversation turned away from organic farming—say, during the intermission of "Les Misérables"—Constant cranked things back to sales opportunities. "I don't mean this in an evil way, but he was always scheming," Austic said. "If you'll forgive the term, he was a bullshitter."

In 2006, Constant started selling his grain through Jericho Solutions, the brokerage that he set up with his friend John Burton. Instead of negotiating with a trader like Bushman, Constant was now his own trader. He could present Linda Holthaus, Bushman's former assistant, with grain and certifications for grain. And Holthaus, from her time with Bushman, knew where to find customers. In Jericho, Constant now had a reliable, in-house buffer between his grain's source and its eventual customer. (Holthaus, who has not been accused of any wrongdoing, did not reply to requests for comment.)

In June and August, 2007, [two stories](#) published by *The Organic & Non-GMO Report*, a trade magazine, gave the first public hints of Constant's deceptions. The articles centered on a Nevada company that processed soybeans. It had bought some supposedly organic soybeans from Jericho Solutions, but they had tested positive for G.M.O.s. The contamination was said to have cost the company a hundred thousand dollars. The magazine quoted Holthaus, who sounded defiant: "There was no problem on our end. We had the paper trail. . . . Someone's trying to nail us for something we didn't do." Apparently without evidence, she blamed Chinese soybeans that had passed through the Nevada facility. The soy processor said, in response, that it had never had a G.M.O. problem with Chinese soybeans.

I asked John Heinecke about this episode. By 2007, he no longer had an Organic Land Management contract, but he remained open to working with Constant. The Nevada facility had been tainted, Heinecke said, by "railcar loads of fucking Roundup Ready beans." He began to yell. "And Randy *knew* they were, because he knew what he bought! I sold them to him! I sold him the goddam railcars!" Heinecke said that he'd bought the soybeans from a Missouri landowner for whom he farmed. "I said, 'Randy, these are Roundup Ready beans.' He said, 'I don't care. Put 'em on a car. I'll take care of it.' "

Constant and Borgerding, his partner at Organic Land Management, decided to sever ties in April, 2007. They agreed that Constant could keep the company's name. Borgerding told me that the split was friendly, and the result of a cash-flow crisis. But he also said that in 2006 Constant had wildly underreported soybean yields on his portion of Organic Land Management farmland. ("It got dry toward the end of the summer," Constant had claimed.)

There's no evidence that Borgerding was involved in wrongdoing, and his reputation in the organic world remains strong. But, like many other former Constant associates, he can't exactly say that he was floored when, in 2017, federal agents turned up at Oaklawn Drive, in a convoy of vehicles. He had picked up some worrisome clues about Constant's undeclared side projects. The odometer on Constant's truck had suggested incessant travel: it clocked hundreds of miles a day. And Constant had increasingly pushed for puzzlingly high-risk investments, like buying land in Colorado. "What the heck do we want to do in Colorado?" Borgerding had asked himself. "It never rains there."

As Borgerding sees it, he became "dead weight" when he resisted such efforts to rapidly expand the company. So Constant found another way: "With Linda coming on, with all her contacts, suddenly he had a big market. And that became his main gig."

After Borgerding left Organic Land Management, he stopped speaking with Constant. "It's like you're in one of the lifeboats on the Titanic," he said. "You're paddling away from the thing as fast as you can before it goes down and sucks you down along with it."

In 2010, Constant called Heinecke for the first time in a while.

"John, I need some corn."

"Not a problem. We've got half a million bushels."

"Well, let's load it there at Goss—the rail siding."

Goss, a mile or so from Heinecke's home, is a quiet place to do business: in the last census, the town had a population of zero. The siding hadn't been used for years. Heinecke usually delivered grain to Stoutsville, six miles from his home, or at the Mississippi River, forty miles away. "To this day, I have not figured out how Randy got that siding open," Heinecke told me. Constant's success derived partly from his mastery of the railroad freight system, apparently learned during his years of corporate agricultural work.

Heinecke agreed to supply Constant, who, he said, offered "more than the local price, and more than I could get at the river"—a dollar a bushel more than another buyer would have paid, a premium of at least twenty per cent at the time. A bushel of corn weighs fifty-six pounds. Trucks can carry between five hundred and a thousand bushels. A railcar typically carries thirty-five hundred bushels, or about a hundred tons. When Heinecke began making grain deliveries at Goss, Constant usually gave him forty-eight hours to complete the task. In that time, Heinecke would normally fill seven railcars. He told me that, within a year, he had filled about a hundred.

This corn came either from land that Heinecke farmed, as a leaseholder, or from land farmed by neighbors. None of it was organic. Heinecke told me that he never claimed that it was. "It was non-G.M.O., but I was using modern fertilizer, right?" he said. "Phosphorus and nitrogen—the stuff we do for everything. I was using herbicides." He went on, "I sold everything to Randy Constant. I didn't sell to nobody else."



"Keep in mind that by the day of the wedding I plan on being jacked."  
Cartoon by Asher Perlman

Heinecke isn't an easy man to like: he is susceptible to *covid-19* conspiracy theories, and on the day we met he announced his racism with a flat statement of prejudice. He is estranged from both his father and his oldest child. Although he fulminated to me about Constant's slipperiness, he also made a case for not pressing buyers too hard about their intentions. He recalled once asking a buyer who had purchased some moldy corn from him about his plans for it. "Do you like doing business with me?" the buyer said. "I don't ever want to hear you ask that question again."

Heinecke told me he'd always assumed that Constant was selling to buyers of non-organic grain. Theoretically, yes. Constant *might* have had such customers—he had a lot going on—but his land-management company had “organic” in its name, and his brokerage described itself as devoted to “Organic Planning, Production & Marketing.” There’s no sign that Constant, in the years that he bought from Heinecke, ever sold grain that wasn’t described as organic. During this time, corn labelled organic was often worth twice as much as conventional corn. As a railcar began inching out of Goss, its twenty-five-thousand-dollar load became a fifty-thousand-dollar load.

In 2010, Constant was paid \$16.5 million for organic grain. By 2015, the figure was \$24.4 million.

Jericho Solutions once claimed to be the country's fourth-largest organic-feed operator. Clients' payments would be deposited in the Luana Savings Bank, in Luana, Iowa, a town of some three hundred people about twenty miles from Linda Holthaus's home. The bank stands on the town's edge, surrounded by fields.

On February 10, 2017, for example, a customer banking in Sonora, California, transferred \$419,417.50 to Jericho's account in Luana. Duane Bushman told me that Constant regularly sold grain to a Sonora-based company called Oakdale Trading. (The established grain trader knew of this relationship, too.) Bushman knows Oakdale's owner, Jim Parola, and he remembered a time when Parola "started to brag" that, for a period of some weeks, he had been able to send ten railcars of Constant's corn a week to the East Coast, and ten loads to the West Coast. Bushman recalled once asking Parola about his confidence in Constant's grain: "He said that as long as he had a certification that's all he had to care about." (Parola didn't respond to requests for comment.)

A soybean processor in Iowa told me that he handled hundreds of tons from Constant, even after he learned that the grain was sometimes being loaded up in a Walmart parking lot in Chillicothe. ("We're, like, 'Walmart doesn't grow soybeans,'" he recalled, laughing.) Holthaus reassured him: if Constant was concealing his grain's source, it was surely only to prevent other buyers from wooing his farmers. And so the Iowa processor continued to accept them. The soybeans were certified, he reminded me; it was all "in good faith."

After discovering that Constant was under criminal investigation, the processor continued to work with Holthaus for another year. He told me, in a matter-of-fact way, "I make money when I am crushing grain."

In the early two-thousands, Sue Baird, who held a degree in poultry science, helped set up Missouri's state-run organic-certification body, and became an inspector herself. Her friendship with Constant began around then, when Organic Land Management's farms in Missouri briefly used her organization for certification, before switching to Q.A.I. In 2004, Baird helped organize the London junket, and invited Constant along. For two years, she worked in Q.A.I.'s head office, and she later became president of

the Missouri Organic Association, a trade group for farmers. She now serves on the National Organic Standards Board, a high-profile committee whose members are appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture. On that committee, tensions have risen between an organic movement with a long history and a newer corporate industry that is often impatient for growth. In 2017, Baird supported organic certification of farms relying on hydroponics, or growing without soil—a scandalous idea to some traditionalists.

Although Baird had maintained a good relationship with Constant, she sometimes betrayed doubts about his business ethics. Borgerding told me that, shortly after breaking ties with Constant, he complained to Baird that Constant had apparently swindled him out of his share of their 2006 crop; she told him that Constant had a reputation for being dishonest with his contract-farming clients, adding, “Everybody knows that about Randy.” Chris Barnier, the former Organic Land Management employee, recalls Baird telling him in 2008 that “Randy Constant is cheating on his organic certifications—we just don’t know how.” (Baird remembers these conversations, but also says that she never suspected Constant of fraud.)

A few years later, Baird accepted a job offer from Constant. He had a new side project: trying to set up an aquaponics facility in Trenton, half an hour north of Chillicothe, at a former popcorn factory. In an aquaponics operation, plants are nourished by waste from fish farmed alongside them: ideally, one crop supports another. Baird helped hire staff, and she promoted the project in a talk to the Trenton Rotary Club.

According to Larry Willis, a Missouri farmer who worked on the aquaponics project, Constant approached the venture with flailing extravagance. He seemed to have a surfeit of inexperienced associates on the project—including Steve Whiteside, a local pig farmer; David Buttman, Constant’s brother-in-law; and John Burton, his partner in Jericho Solutions. They apparently spent their weekends Googling “aquaponics,” emerging each Monday with new, conflicting plans. “If it wasn’t so sad, it would be comical,” Willis said.

Around 2010, Constant travelled to Colorado and toured a fish farm on the grounds of a prison in Cañon City. The owners of the business, who included an entrepreneur named Steve Abernathy, paid a monthly fee to the

prison, which covered the farm's utility bills and made available several dozen inmate employees each day. Tilapia grown on the farm was being sold in local [Whole Foods](#) stores. At the end of the visit, Constant surprised Abernathy by saying, "I want to buy it. Give me a number."

Before long, the two men had agreed on a price. Abernathy assumed that Constant was acting for a hidden investor. "He seemed to be such a simple guy," Abernathy told me. "He didn't seem like the kind of guy that walked around writing checks for millions of dollars." He added, "In reality, he was trying to launder money."

Pam Constant, who, like her husband, attended Chillicothe High School and then the University of Missouri, had planned to go to law school. But, as she once told a local reporter, she set aside that ambition during her first, peripatetic decade of marriage, because "we rarely lived near any school of law." After the Constants returned to their home town, Pam began teaching preschool, part time, at the United Methodist church. Several years later, she became an English teacher at Chillicothe High.

According to Randy, Pam gave him the idea of using "quixotic" in a business name. The Cañon City tilapia operation became Quixotic Farming. In 2014, the startup opened a second farm, in a former Walmart on Chillicothe's southern edge. Quixotic's name, Constant once told a seafood-industry trade magazine, highlighted the "tremendous adventure" he was undertaking. (Pam Constant declined to be interviewed for this article.)

Constant evidently saw fish farming as an opportunity to reproduce his achievement in grain—exploit a market willing to pay premium prices for qualities that are hard to detect at the point of sale. There's currently no such thing as an American organic fish: a wild-caught fish is not an agricultural product, so the U.S.D.A. has no standing to judge it, and there's resistance to certifying farmed fish. So Constant tried to position his product as unusually wholesome, and "sustainable," in part by describing himself as an organic-industry pioneer. When Steve Whiteside, Constant's operations manager at the Chillicothe fish farm, spoke to a local reporter, he contrasted Quixotic's product with fish that, he said, was raised in sewerlike conditions in China.

This was a bold accusation, given that one of Constant's ideas for Quixotic seems to have been to pass off Chinese fish as homegrown. Ty Dick, who became the chief of operations for Quixotic in Cañon City, told me that Constant once asked him, "Why don't you go check out a couple of these places in China? You could get tilapia for pennies on the dollar. It's way cheaper than us growing them." Dick recalled that he protested, saying, "We can't sell those to Whole Foods! It goes against everything we're saying." But Constant "was, like, 'You think they would notice?'" According to Dick, Constant later returned to the theme: "All you have to do is just get those fillets in, then we put on our seasoning and branding, and *boom*—now it's from America."

Constant never pursued this. Instead, he seems to have let Quixotic function as a portal for redistributing millions of dollars flowing from his fields in Missouri and elsewhere. Quixotic paid salaries of between sixty and a hundred thousand dollars to Constant's son, Lane; his daughter Claire; and the husband of his daughter Morgan, Eric Ely. (They all declined to be interviewed for this article.) These family members were rarely seen on site. The fish were often neglected. As one of Constant's employees dryly put it, without proper care "fish are quite likely to die, unlike cows or sheep."

Before Dick began working at the Cañon City fish farm, he had been a chef and a caterer. He sometimes felt unnerved to be overseeing a multimillion-dollar operation. Dick told me, "I was always calling, saying, 'Why don't you come to town? Let's review some of this stuff.' Randy was, like, 'No, you've got it! You're doing a great job! Keep going!'"

One inmate working at the Cañon City farm, Hector Sanchez, was especially adept and motivated. A former drug dealer born in Brooklyn, he'd been convicted of assault with a deadly weapon. Soon after Sanchez was paroled, in 2015, Constant hired him to be a manager at the Chillicothe fish farm, paying him fifty thousand dollars a year and giving him a free place to live, in a local building that he owned. "I loved that dude!" Sanchez told me. "The way he treated me—I've never lived that good, legally, in my life."

Constant soon gave Sanchez a side gig. Sanchez would drive up to the former popcorn factory in Trenton, which, because of its previous incarnation, had three grain bins on site. His task was to load grain from

these bins onto trucks; as he did this, trucks sometimes arrived to refill the bins. Constant never explained what was going on. “I never really asked,” Sanchez said. It’s now clear that these transfers helped Constant attach a new, organic story to non-organic grain.

It might seem unfair that Constant hired someone recently paroled only to enlist him in criminal activities. “*I’m* not going to say that it wasn’t fair,” Sanchez told me. “Randy never did anything intentionally to hurt anyone.” He went on, “He was in it for the money. Greed—that’s all it was. You start making money, you want more. . . . It’s an addiction, man.”

Soon after Constant met Steve Abernathy, the entrepreneur who sold him the Colorado fish farm, he asked him, “Why don’t you come to Vegas with us? This is going to be really something.” There was a clear suggestion of louche adventure. Abernathy found the invitation jarring: “It was so out of character. He was very quiet and serious most of the time. Then, ‘You want to come out and *play?*’”



*Cartoon by Adam Douglas Thompson*

Not long after Ty Dick began working for Quixotic in Cañon City, Constant called him and said, “Hey, what are you doing?” Dick replied that he was working. “Come to Vegas!” Constant said. “We’ll be there in three hours. How soon can you get there?” Dick flew to Las Vegas that day and met up

with Constant and John Burton, who was now also involved with Quixotic. Constant and Burton were in a giddy mood. It was immediately clear, Dick said, “that these guys have been doing this a *long* time—they’ve got their spots.”

Dick was astonished by what he witnessed. Constant had led youth-mission trips for a church with firm views about the sinfulness of gambling. But he and Burton—a quiet man whose loud hobby was entering souped-up vehicles in tractor-pulling competitions—were spending without apparent restraint. Dick told me, “My limit is twenty bucks. I’m done for the night.” When Dick announced that he was ready to hang it up, Constant handed him thousands of dollars’ worth of chips. “Spend mine,” he said.

“I wasn’t starry-eyed, but I was certainly impressed,” Dick said. “And they could see that. And fun loves company.” He later came to think of that first invitation as a test: would he gossip about Vegas in Colorado? Beyond an amazed report to his wife, he did not—and he was repeatedly asked back. The men tended to stay at the Bellagio, and they had round-the-clock drivers. Constant would buy tickets to M.M.A. fights and rodeos, and he’d book all the surrounding seats—a block of “maybe seventy-five,” Dick said. (He assured me that sitting in isolation was more fun than it sounds.) He added, “There was a *lot* of money spent on women.” In the evenings, Constant and Burton were regularly joined by the same companions, whom the group referred to as “the Vegas girlfriends.” Dick said that on one of his first trips there were “escorts waiting for me up in my suite.” He said that he declined their offers: “I was slightly scared of repercussions from the wife. But it’s more that it’s just not my thing.” Abernathy told me that Constant appeared to be trying to make up for lost time. “He’s a small-town guy,” he said. “He never really got out and *did* anything.” (John Burton could not be reached for comment.)

Dave Chapman, a Vermont farmer who, in 2018, founded a group called the Real Organic Project, to protest what he and others see as the dilution of principles at the National Organic Program, recently offered me this reading of Constant’s behavior: “He got all this unearned money, and it just kind of destroyed him. It’s ‘Faust’! It’s ‘Randy, don’t do it. Don’t trade your soul!’ ”

It's unusual for a farm to lose an organic certification. If a certifier sees evidence of bad practices, the consequences come slowly. The farmer is nudged to reform, and, if then still found noncompliant, may be invited to a mediation. Only after those efforts fail is a revocation proposed. Actual suspension can take another year.

The National Organic Program accepts complaints from the public, and from interested parties. But, as Sam Welsch, the founder of OneCert, a long-established certification company, told me, "it seems like when you report things, they're looking for reasons *not* to have to investigate." As Lynn Clarkson, of Clarkson Grain, sees it, the system was set up in such a way that "as long as someone is covered with paper documentation you don't go after them." He argued that, across the industry, there's a fear of breaking something fragile. "It's: Do I stand up and talk about the fraud that's happening? Is that going to do more good or more harm? Am I going to kill the movement? Am I going to destroy the market that I'm trying to perfect?"

The N.O.P. never penalized Constant for noncompliance. And in 2018, when the [Department of Justice](#) finally indicted Constant for his crimes, the announcement didn't prompt those who had helped to bring his grain to market—certifiers, grain buyers, food manufacturers, retailers—to inform organic consumers about his deceit. Though the government's case went back only as far as 2010, my conversations with grain dealers and others suggest that Constant's fraud had probably begun by 2001. Any American who regularly bought supermarket organic products while Constant pursued his scheme likely bought mislabelled goods, but the organic industry—however alarmed its internal discussions—seemed disposed to leave the public in the dark. This impulse has survived: the N.O.P. declined to discuss any aspect of Constant's career for this article.

Around the time that *The Organic & Non-GMO Report* wrote about Jericho Solutions, in 2007, Glen Borgerding and Duane Bushman both told their certifiers that they were uneasy about Constant's activities; Borgerding suggested that Q.A.I. subject Constant to an unannounced inspection. Despite these concerns about Constant, there is little evidence that they resulted in increased regulatory scrutiny of his grain supply.

In 2012, Constant sold a truck of soybeans—grown by Tom and James Brennan, in Nebraska, and described as organic—to a company inspected by Sam Welsch’s OneCert. That load tested as one hundred per cent G.M.O. When Welsch recalled this episode to me, he withheld his client’s name, but I later learned that it was Scoular, a Nebraska-based grain company with more than four billion dollars in annual revenue. Scoular had once employed Constant as a salesman. Welsch submitted a complaint to the N.O.P. on Scoular’s behalf. He told me that the N.O.P. made one call to Scoular; after that, there was no further response. He has retained e-mails showing that, for the next six years, he pressed agency officials—including Miles McEvoy, who ran the N.O.P. between 2009 and 2017, and Matthew Michael, then the director of the office’s Compliance and Enforcement Division.

In 2014, the N.O.P. received another complaint about Constant, from the established grain trader. The trader told me that, by that year, he had come to view Constant with skepticism: “We all go to the same trade shows and go out for beers—we’re all in friendly competition. And then this guy that *no one has ever talked to* is selling all this grain?” The supply of organic corn was then “a little tight,” and it was selling for more than four hundred dollars a ton. When the trader talked to a regular customer in Nebraska, the customer said, “Oh, I just bought a bunch of corn at three-seventy-five.” The trader was dying to know its source but didn’t ask; to do so would look unprofessional. His customer then said, “If you guys need any, I’d sell you a car or two.” The trader ordered two railcars. Remembering this, he laughed, and said, “We literally did this just so we could see who the hell was selling the corn this cheap.” The name on the paperwork, he added, was “the name that we suspected.”

No chemical analysis could have settled the question of whether that corn was properly described as organic. Yet Constant, at a time of corn scarcity, was selling corn in great bulk, at prices way under market. (The trader believes in a fair market, but he is not a martyr: the dubious Constant railcars he bought that day were certified organic, and he sold them on as such.)

In the trader’s complaint to the N.O.P., he wrote, “I strongly feel that there is a major fraud occurring in the Organic Grain industry. Please do not take this lightly.” He described—astutely—what he suspected was happening:

Constant was buying non-organic grain, attaching organic certifications to it, and selling it through Jericho Solutions, which provided another “layer to protect” him. A few weeks later, Matthew Michael, the N.O.P. compliance official, e-mailed the trader: “Our investigation did not find any apparent violations of U.S.D.A. organic regulations. The investigation is hereby closed.” The trader lost his mind. He told me, “I call this Michael guy and left him a fucking voice mail, saying, ‘My next call’s to the newspapers! This is bullshit. How can you guys not look into this?’ ” (Michael, who remains a U.S.D.A. official, did not respond to a request for comment.)

McEvoy, the top N.O.P. official at the time, told me that, during this era, the agency was contending with limited resources and a backlog of complaints—and he spoke of current N.O.P. proposals to counter fraud—but he could not explain Michael’s e-mail. In McEvoy’s memory, there was at least one other complaint about Constant around this time, connected to a failed G.M.O. test in Pennsylvania. It was perhaps that infraction, and not the trader’s yelling, that eventually led to government action.

A few months after the trader received Michael’s dismissive e-mail, he got a call from Brad Meyer, of the U.S.D.A.’s Office of Inspector General, which was now overseeing a criminal inquiry into the matter. Meyer, who is in his forties, is a former military-police officer. He has a firm handshake. Because he and his colleagues handle fraud cases across the U.S.D.A., he had no particular expertise in organic agriculture at the time. Meyer asked the trader how to test corn to determine whether it’s organic.

“Well, you can’t really do that,” the trader said.

“*What?*” Meyer said.

In the fall of 2015, more than a year into the criminal investigation—which came to include surveillance of the kind of grain-switching activities sometimes undertaken by Hector Sanchez—Q.A.I. suspended its certification of Organic Land Management. Undeterred, Constant secured a new certification, under his own name, from *mosa*, a Wisconsin outfit. (Steve Walker, *mosa*’s accreditation manager, told me that Constant never mentioned the Q.A.I. suspension.)

That year, Constant had planted a large crop of organic soybeans on the grounds of a federal prison in Forrest City, Arkansas, after agreeing to share the profits from the crop, fifty-fifty, with the prison. A man that he had hired to help run the operation, Dave Block, soon felt confused about his mandate. “He didn’t really push the organics so much,” Block told me. Constant supplied non-organic seeds, and then “put on whatever fertilizer he wanted.”

To run a fraudulent organic farm inside a federal prison suggests an unusual appetite for risk. Block has sometimes wondered if Constant thought of his work inside prisons as insurance against a possible legal reckoning. Block recalled that Constant had plans—never realized—to set up an organic operation at the prison at Leavenworth, just north of Kansas City, which is where a Chillicothe man convicted of nonviolent federal crimes would likely serve his sentence.

Steve Smith, an inmate-labor specialist who helped arrange the Arkansas deal, today regards Constant’s infractions with a degree of indulgence: he laughed when recalling to me the day he heard that Constant had apparently reneged on the agreement to share profits. “I really liked the guy,” Smith said. “He seemed like a really good Christian. Randy was a good, good person.”

In 2016, when the entire organic-corn output of Missouri and Nebraska was about 2.4 million bushels, Constant sold 1.8 million bushels of supposedly organic corn. His corn output that year represented about seven per cent of the national organic crop. His soybean sales represented eight per cent.

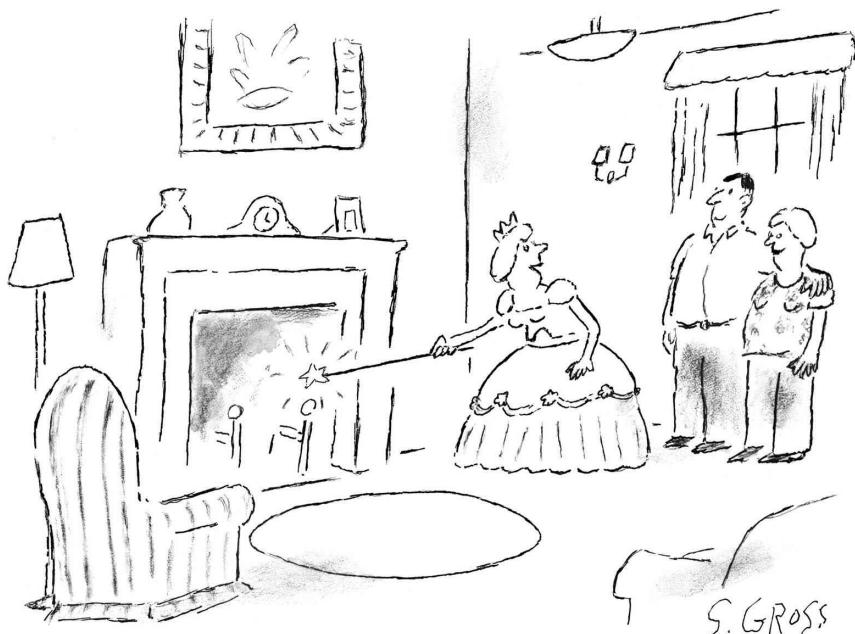
John Heinecke told me that he had probably sold Constant more than half of that grain. Constant’s needs had become seemingly limitless, and his buying habits had developed a frenzied air, which Heinecke now supposes was connected to a weakness for gambling: “He wanted so many damn beans. He never had a stopping point.” Heinecke said that he would sometimes haul grain to Chillicothe and “leave it out by the fish farm.” At other times, trucks sent by Tom Brennan, the Vietnam vet, and his son would pick up grain from Heinecke and haul it back to Nebraska.

Heinecke told me that Constant never paid him in full. Over lunch, at the Applebee’s in Chillicothe, he’d plead with him to settle up. “If he owed

three hundred and eighty, he'd send me three hundred," Heinecke said. "Enough that you could survive and keep operating."

In May, 2017, nearly three years after Brad Meyer and his colleagues had begun the criminal investigation, Constant was included in a "10 Successful Farmers" [feature](#) in *Successful Farming* magazine. That month, he advised Heinecke to get a defense attorney. Heinecke recalls asking him, "What the hell did you do?" The next day, according to Heinecke, Meyer and another agent served a subpoena at his house. That June, agents executed a search warrant at Constant's home on Oaklawn Drive. Around this time, Constant asked Hector Sanchez to give up the rent-free place in Chillicothe. As Sanchez recalled it, "He said, 'Shit's happening right now. I need to figure some things out.'"

Constant and his lawyer began negotiating with the U.S. Attorney's office in the Northern District of Iowa, which had amassed considerable evidence about the fraud. Constant shut down Quixotic, and some of its assets appear to have been transferred to a new organization, the Innovative Aquaculture Alliance, which used his son's home as its registered address. The following spring, the Walmart that had been turned into a fish farm was demolished.



"It's now a working fireplace."  
Cartoon by Sam Gross

This past May, Steve Whiteside, the pig farmer, was sentenced in a Kansas City courtroom for his part in Constant's scheme. A stocky, tanned man in his late fifties, he wore a gray sports coat and slacks; half-moon reading glasses rested on the tip of his nose. His wife, Mary Pat, a retired teacher, sat behind him, on the public benches.

He was the last of six men to be sentenced in crimes related to Constant's deceptions. Whiteside had admitted to signing a document about land use that he knew was false. In the courtroom, Jacob Schunk, an Assistant U.S. Attorney from Cedar Rapids, pressed for a prison sentence. Misrepresenting a product as organic should not be considered a crime with no victims, Schunk said: harm had been done not only to consumers—who paid for something that they didn't get—but also to honest organic farmers who had been forced to compete against cheats. Schunk ended in a beseeching pose, arms aloft. More virtuous farmers “may not be in the courtroom,” he said. “But they’re going to figure out whether it matters to *do the right thing*. ”

Whiteside received three years of probation, and was fined forty-five thousand dollars. Before his sentencing, he spoke to the court about work he did with Constant that did not involve fraudulent grain. “I’ve developed many tilapia facilities . . . highly sustainable tilapia,” he said, adding, “My wife and I have worked thirty-six years to accumulate the financial assets that we have.” (These include a half-million-dollar lake house, near Heinecke’s.) Whiteside’s voice broke. “I want you to know the circumstances around the connection to Randy,” he said. “I *trusted* him. Our wives taught English together. We became good friends, just as hundreds of other people in our community had done so as well. I was shocked when I heard of his crimes.” When he sat down, he was weeping.

Constant and four other men had already pleaded guilty in related cases. The scheme, prosecutors declared, had led to more than a hundred and forty-two million dollars in sales of fake organic grain between 2010 and 2017. There were no trials, and the scheme’s workings were sketched only in outline. Constant, along with Tom and James Brennan, and Mike Potter, their Nebraska neighbor, pleaded guilty to wire fraud. John Burton pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit wire fraud.

Constant made his plea in December, 2018. Assistant U.S. Attorney Anthony Morfitt, who worked on the case with Jacob Schunk, told me that Constant “was a naturally gregarious person,” and “came across as very comfortable and relaxed” in court. He was released ahead of his sentencing. His house was now on the market.

Hector Sanchez had taken a job in Iowa. He had been told not to have any contact with Constant, and for a long while he complied. But, in the spring of 2019, Sanchez was in Chillicothe, and he drove over to Oaklawn Drive. Constant came out to the sidewalk to talk. He was packing up. Sanchez recalled, “He’s leaving his beautiful, humongous, gorgeous house that he raised his kids in.” Constant’s sentencing hearing was scheduled for a few months later, in August. “He was scared shitless,” Sanchez said.

On August 16, 2019, Constant’s thirty-ninth wedding anniversary, he appeared in court a second time. In advance of his sentencing, he had signed a statement that included an acknowledgment of his Vegas expenditures. (Schunk told me, “It’s relevant how you’re spending the money that you’re stealing.”) The statement, which Constant didn’t read in court, noted, “During the course of my travel to Las Vegas, I developed sexual relationships with three women for whom I provided support and for whom I paid some expenses.” It went on, “I transferred over \$2,000,000 to entities related to these women. . . . I also shared a bank account with one of these women from which, over a period of more than one year, approximately \$110,000 was used to pay for her car payments and insurance, plastic surgery in the form of breast augmentation, travel to Spain, and other bills and expenses.”

That afternoon, Mark Weinhardt, Constant’s attorney, mentioned his client’s charitable activities in Chillicothe. He also reminded the court that organic certification technically applies to land, not to any particular crop. “All that happened,” he argued, was that “some additional carloads were claimed to have come from the land that was in fact certified.” The scheme grew, he said, from the realization of “how simple this was.” John Heinecke—who was once told by one of his lawyers that Constant had tried to paint him as the scheme’s mastermind—was in the court’s public seating that day.

Before Constant was sentenced, he gave some spoken remarks, with a composure that detractors might describe as unctuous. “I have contributions I can make to enhance the lives of others,” he said. “I strive to be a learner and a helper. In prison, I’ll have opportunities in programs where I can volunteer my talents to help other inmates.” He referred to his prison businesses: “My motivation was to provide the opportunity to build new skill sets and work ethics for those involved. Ironically, I now will be an inmate myself.”

The presiding judge, C. J. Williams, proposed that Constant was like the organic grain he sold: “not what is advertised.” Williams sentenced him to ten years and two months. Constant was released ahead of the start of his prison term.

Heinecke, recalling Constant’s appearance in court, said, “He was about in tears when he read his big statement about all the good things he’s done! I thought, You’re a dumbass if you think a judge is going to believe all that.”

The anger that Heinecke still directs toward Constant may be partly tactical, in order to distance himself from the scheme. And Heinecke never complained to me that he had been led astray. Rather, his central grievance was that Constant had left him in debt. By the end of Constant’s final, frantic year of grain sales, he owed Heinecke more than two and a half million dollars. In 2017, Heinecke sued Constant. “I knew if I didn’t file for my damn money it would make me look more guilty than ever,” he told me. He never got his money. Heinecke is now in a third bankruptcy restructuring. “It’s broken me,” he said.

Heinecke hasn’t been accused of any crimes. As we stood on the driveway of his lake house, he recalled a conversation with his lawyer: “He said, ‘They think you got too much money for your corn and beans!’ He said, ‘I guarantee you, we’ll get a bunch of old farm people up there in Iowa on the jury—I’ll get you off. Ain’t none of them going to say you got too much! You *never* get too much!’ ”

A week before Constant’s hearing, Sanchez was arrested for larceny. He was later convicted and imprisoned, and he has since been released.

When I spoke to Sanchez, he was living in a motel in a small town in Iowa, and had just finished a shift at a Hy-Vee grocery store. He said that there was nothing shameful in Constant's core crime: "Bitch, if you can make a hundred and forty-two million!" But, as Sanchez saw it, Constant had been humiliated by the Vegas confession. The details of his hidden life "threw a dirty mask on his face."

Clarence Mock, the defense lawyer for Mike Potter, said of Constant, "He seemed like a genteel kind of guy. But a lot of people that are involved in major frauds—what do they say about sociopaths? You want to have a beer with them. Very charming." He recalled Constant's behavior on the day of his sentencing. "He was just sort of acting like he was going to take it," Mock recalled. "He didn't seem to be particularly anxious or strident or combative. He was calm."

The Constants had moved into half of a two-family bungalow, a block and a half from where Randy had lived as a baby. On August 19, 2019, the Chillicothe *Constitution-Tribune* published a story that acknowledged his crimes—its only such story. Constant, once the town hero, was described as "formerly of Chillicothe." That same day, he committed suicide by carbon-monoxide poisoning, in a car parked in his garage.

Tom Brennan, the Vietnam vet, was released from prison in December, 2019, at the age of seventy-two. He died in a car accident several months later. ♦

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By [M. R. O'Connor](#)

## Content

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Mike West began working with the Lassen Interagency Hotshot Crew in the summer of 2004, when he was twenty-one years old. On one of his early missions, the crew was dispatched to Arizona, where lightning had ignited fires in the mountain peaks of the Coronado National Forest. The crew members camped more than eighty-five hundred feet above sea level, amid ponderosa pines and Douglas firs, and joined other crews of hotshots—élite firefighters revered for their endurance and skill—in battling what became known as the Nuttall Fire. The Lassen crew’s job was containment. Along a ridge bordering the main fire, they started making what firefighters call a “handline,” removing trees, roots, and other fuels from a continuous strip of land. Beyond the handline, they ignited their own fires with drip torches, creating areas of blackened ground to starve the main fire. This process, known as backfiring, is one of the core strategies of wildfire suppression.

One morning, the crews hiked along a knifelike canyon ridge. They were heading into “the hole”—the area downhill from their escape route—to contain a small fire that had crossed the handline. The terrain was rocky and punishing; at many points, the slope dropped steeply away. While the hotshots worked, lookouts monitored the main fire, watching for shifts in the wind that might change its behavior or direction. Todd Wood, the assistant superintendent of the Flagstaff Hotshots, observed from a knob of rock facing across the canyon and down onto Nuttall Creek. Over the radio, the fire meteorologist reported a weather update. On a scale of one to six on the Haines Index—a measurement of both the changeability and the dryness of the air—they were heading into a Super Six.

At around 12:30 P.M., Wood turned to check on the handline, then swivelled back. Just seconds had passed, but now he saw a crown fire—a blaze igniting the forest canopy—on the opposite slope. Because hot air rises, fires usually move uphill faster than they do downhill. But Wood saw a fast-moving front of flames, about three hundred yards across, running down the

hill toward the creek. Once it crossed, the fire would move uphill toward the hotshot crews. It was a “blowup”: a sudden increase in fire intensity, accompanied by violent convection. “Nobody saw it coming,” Wood later recalled.

West was sitting on the ground, eating his lunch.

“Hey, W.,” a friend said. “Look at that smoke column.”

West glanced up and saw a churning mass in the sky. Squad leaders ordered the firefighters to assemble their gear. To West, time seemed to stretch. “I was standing in line just thinking, Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go,” he said.

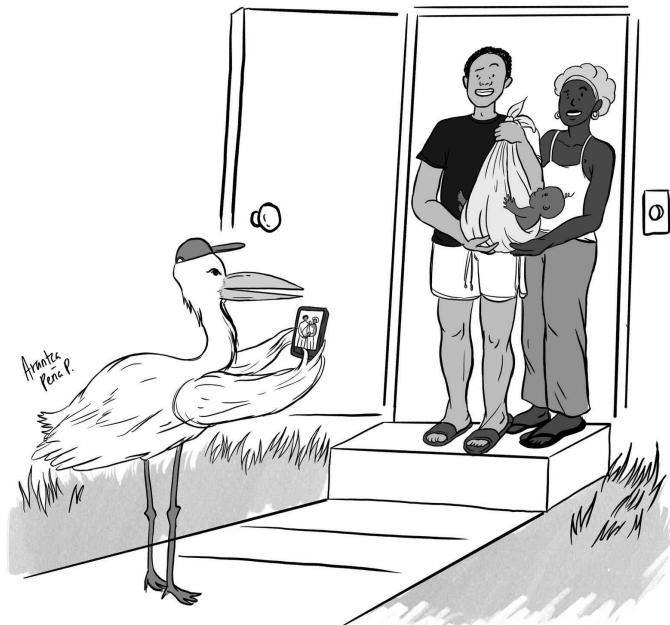
By the time the hotshots started to hike out of the hole, the fire was boiling up toward them from the canyon floor. They moved as fast as they could, crawling over boulders and pulling one another up rock faces. Chainsaws were passed back and forth as crew members grew tired of carrying them. West struggled to breathe. As people began to fall behind, his squad leader yelled, “Just go, just go. Pass ‘em!”

The sound of a running crown fire is sometimes compared to the roar of a freight train or the thunder of heavy ocean surf. It reminded West of a waterfall, or an ongoing explosion. Between the crews and the fire lay a stretch of unburned fuels which wildland firefighters call “the green.” “The fear is that you have this active, loud, roaring fire, and you’re in the green, and you have nowhere to go, and it’s just, is this going to get me?” West said.

The crown fire raced uphill, torching the trees to their right. They watched as the flames reached the ridge in front of them, then flicked over the edge and stopped. It took the group of around forty hotshots half an hour to get out of the hole; at the top, West threw up. The firefighters rested around a small lake. They learned that two crews were still trapped below, and a pensive mood set in. West watched as Skycrane helicopters dropped water on the fire. Behind the choppers, the smoke had risen so high that it had combined with the atmosphere to become a pyrocumulus cloud—a dark column of ash, smoke, and water vapor twenty thousand feet tall. At the top of the formation, where the ambient air temperature dropped below freezing,

the vapor froze to create a smooth white surface, like a meringue—a process called ice-capping. It was the first time West had seen it. Over their radios, the firefighters heard that eleven hotshots in the hole were deploying their fire shelters. The small tents, made of an aluminized cloth, were designed to protect occupants from temperatures as high as seventeen hundred degrees.

“This is really bad,” West said to his squad leader.



*“Sorry, it’s part of our new proof-of-delivery protocol.”*  
Cartoon by Arantza Peña Popo

“Yep,” the man replied, tersely.

After several hours, the trapped firefighters emerged from the hole. No one had died, but one person was taken to the hospital. For West, the Nuttall Fire seemed like a close call—the kind of experience he hoped he’d never have again. He didn’t know that it was a harbinger of things to come.

West’s career as a hotshot coincided with a transformation in American wildland firefighting. In the years following the Nuttall Fire, wildfires increased in intensity and complexity. The new fires often seemed to resist control and could easily spread to a hundred thousand acres or more, costing millions of dollars to suppress. A group of scientists coined the term “megafire” to describe the phenomenon. Megafires now account for a growing proportion of the total area burned in America each year; climate

scientists predict that the number of days conducive to such fires will increase by as much as fifty per cent by the middle of the century.

This past spring, I trained to become a wildland firefighter; in the summer, the Dixie Fire became the largest single fire in California's history. While West was telling me about his ordeal in the Nuttall Fire, Dixie was threatening to force an evacuation of Susanville, West's home town. I was embedded with a firefighting crew sixty-six miles south of Susanville. By digging handline and laying hose, we were trying to contain an edge of Dixie's monstrous perimeter, which would soon grow to encompass nearly a million acres.

Today's largest fires behave in surprising ways. In the late nineteen-nineties, a few scientists began inspecting satellite images of unusual clouds over Australia and elsewhere; the meteorologist Michael Fromm speculated that they could be connected to the convective force of giant wildfires below them. Eventually, the researchers confirmed that particularly powerful wildfires could cause not just pyrocumulus clouds but vast firestorms called pyrocumulonimbus columns. Created by the flames at ground level, the columns are tall enough to generate lightning, and their air currents are so strong that they can punch particles of smoke into the stratosphere, where commercial jets typically cruise. "There were some who literally laughed when we tried to tell them what we thought was going on," Fromm told me. Skeptics believed that "if you saw aerosols in the stratosphere it had to be a volcano."

Since then, pyrocumulonimbus columns, which fire scientists call pyroCbs, have been observed with increasing frequency. In 2003, wildfires in Canberra, Australia, created a pyroCb with enough energy to spawn the first documented fire tornado—a Category F2, with wind speeds of more than a hundred and thirteen miles per hour. In the twenty-tens, scientists identified pyroCbs in western Russia, Europe, Africa, and South America, and the formations have now been seen above the Arctic Circle. Two years ago, during Australia's Black Summer wildfires, eighteen pyroCbs emerged in a single week, causing giant plumes of smoke to spread across the Southern Hemisphere; one such plume grew to be six hundred and twenty miles wide. "It shocked us all," Fromm said.

When the towering formations tumble to earth, they release massive energy in the form of downdrafts. These high-speed winds are dangerous for firefighters; as Crystal Kolden, a professor of fire science at the University of California, Merced, told me, they “are very well known as extreme-fire-behavior generators.” Fed by gusts and fuels, megafires can swallow tens of thousands of acres in hours, overtaking firefighters with little warning. Their smoke shades large areas of the earth, unsettling the usual patterns of night and day and creating sudden wind shifts.

Wildland firefighting has always been risky, but the risks have grown along with the fires. Between 1910 and 1996, the National Wildfire Coordinating Group counted six hundred and ninety-nine on-duty deaths among wildland firefighters; according to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, in the past thirty years, more than five hundred have died. Tom Lee, a Green Beret who deployed to Afghanistan nine times and worked as a wildland firefighter in 2018 and 2019, told me that fighting megafires was one of the most dangerous jobs he has ever done. “Fires are dynamic—they’re unpredictable,” he said. He likened the work to combat: “You can plan for every contingency, but there is always that unknown factor.”

The intensification of wildfires has been driven not just by the weather but by forestry practices. From the nineteen-thirties through the seventies, fire agencies enforced a “10 A.M. policy,” aiming to put out any new wildfire by midmorning the following day. Although the policy officially ended decades ago, its ethos remains pervasive. The U.S. Forest Service and the Department of the Interior employ some fifteen thousand wildland firefighters, who are directed to prioritize fire suppression; as a result, ninety-eight per cent of all wildfires in America are extinguished before they become large. But preventing fuels from burning today preserves them to burn tomorrow. As the stockpile grows, fires burn longer and with greater ferocity. In California alone, an estimated twenty million acres—an area the size of Maryland, Massachusetts, and New Jersey combined—would need to burn to eliminate the so-called fire deficit created by a century of suppression. Federal agencies acknowledge the problem, but bureaucratic risk aversion and budget constraints, among other things, have stalled the adoption of new approaches, leaving America both burning and fire-starved.

In 2017, Timothy Ingalsbee, the executive director of the organization Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology, published an article in the *International Journal of Wildland Fire* in which he argued that firefighters know that large fires will defy suppression until weather conditions change or fuels run out. Steve Pyne, a historian and a former wildland firefighter, asked me, “Why are firefighters there at all? That’s the fundamental question.” Putting out too many fires contributes to the creation of even bigger blazes: fire ecologists call this the “fire paradox.” Today’s wildland firefighters are trapped within it.

In Susanville, some high-school graduates took jobs at one of the town’s two prisons. Others went into firefighting. It was often seasonal work with federal land-management agencies, which could pay for skiing, surfing, or travel in the intervening months. One of West’s football coaches had fought fires in the nineteen-eighties to pay for college. He told West that, with overtime and hazard pay, the money could be good. West, thinking that he might someday become a teacher, applied to join a handcrew—a group focussed on sawing and digging handlines around fires—to make tuition money.

During his first season, West got a temporary assignment with a hotshot crew, which regularly deployed closer to fires. It was the hardest physical labor he’d ever done: sixteen-hour shifts spent hiking with forty-five-pound packs and digging with hand tools. West decided to become a hotshot. “I was definitely trying to chase an adventure,” he said. “The guys a few years older than me, they would describe these situations, they would show me pictures. They talked about how much fun it was.” He loved being part of a tribe of dirt-covered, shit-talking dragon slayers.

The year after the Nuttall Fire, West became a sawyer, operating a chainsaw in heavy timber, often on the hot edge of a fire—one of the most dangerous jobs on a hotshot crew. The friendships West formed with his sawyer partners were thrillingly close. He and a partner would spend hundreds of hours screaming over the saws, synchronizing their movements. “Sawyering took me to places in my mind that I’d never gone before,” West said. “It was almost like chasing a high.” He came back to the crew again and again.

In the off-season, West would go on unemployment, like many seasonal federal employees, or enroll in college courses. He often rented a house with other wildland firefighters, and they would snowboard and drink together. In the winter of 2009, West moved to a little mountain town in Northern California with his childhood friend Luke Sheehy, a smoke jumper, whose crew would launch an initial “attack” on a fire after arriving via parachute. Every day with Sheehy was an escapade. They woke before sunrise to jog through miles of snow and lift weights at the local high school’s gym; they played practical jokes on friends who crashed on their couch, and took road trips together. West, an amateur standup comedian, worked on his material. He started spending time with a teacher from Susanville, Cassie Dunn, who would eventually become his wife.

Wildland firefighters aren’t supposed to show emotion or weakness. “It’s really hard to fight fire if you are overwhelmed by a fear of fire,” Melissa Petersen, a former wildland firefighter who is now a licensed therapist, told me. But there were moments when West experienced intense nervousness. He had trouble falling asleep and would wake up exhausted. He never talked about the Nuttall Fire, but it haunted him—the speed with which it had moved, the sound of it surrounding him. When fire season returned, West’s anxieties grew acute; cutting line, he wondered if he would have to outrun a fire that day. He knew that, on the job, he could be hit by a falling tree or die in a vehicle or helicopter accident, but his greatest fear was burning to death. Before the start of each season, he would say a sort of prayer: “I accept that people are going to die this year on the fire line. I really, really hope it’s not me or anybody that I know.”

Meanwhile, West had more close calls. A blowup took his crew by surprise while they were sleeping, and they narrowly escaped in their trucks. Twice, he was almost killed by a falling tree. He had near-accidents in vehicles and around helicopters, and worked on at least four fires that resulted in the deaths of other firefighters. He started seeing ice-capped pyroCbs on most of the large fires he fought. Leaving for work on any given day, West didn’t know if he’d come back that night or the next month. In 2010, he moved back to Susanville. Returning from weeks in the wilderness, he’d sometimes become disoriented, losing his way around the town where he’d lived most of his life. He suffered from depression.

In 2013, West dislocated his shoulder while clearing brush. A few days later, he received a phone call telling him that Sheehy had died after parachuting into Modoc National Forest to put out a lightning fire—a falling tree limb had killed him. West was devastated. “I just remember this scream coming from him,” Cassie said. “And he couldn’t talk, and I was just holding him.” Two weeks after Sheehy’s funeral, Arizona’s Yarnell Hill Fire, which created a pyroCb, killed nineteen Granite Mountain Hotshots. “I didn’t really process it or think about it until later,” West said. “I was still in such shock from Luke’s death.”

That winter was the first time that West registered the reality of climate change. Around Christmas, his crew drove in the dark to Big Sur, where they saw a fire crowning on a hill. Usually that time of year was rainy, making ignitions and conflagrations impossible. “Oh, my God—it’s supposed to be dumping rain,” West thought. “There’s not supposed to be fires here.” A couple of weeks later, he was deployed to a fire in Lassen National Forest. It grew to a couple of thousand acres in an area that normally would have been under several feet of snow but was instead bone-dry. West began to doubt his ability to predict fire behavior. Sometimes he grew angry, thinking about how someone could get hurt trying to extinguish a lightning fire in a fuel-laden forest that needed a good burn anyway. “I almost felt this weird lost cause,” he said. “Like the generations before us had screwed up, they were suppressing fires so hard.”

During the 2014 fire season, West worked several huge fires. His mental health deteriorated. Constantly scared, he wondered if he was “soft” or had an anxiety disorder. The thought of suicide became a comfort. (In 2015 and 2016, fifty-two wildland firefighters died by suicide in the U.S.—twenty-five more than were killed in the line of duty.) Cassie learned that some of the firefighter spouses she knew were coping with familial stress through antidepressants.



*"When the fires are that big, they don't fit on standard maps,"* a wildfire analyst said. Photograph by Kevin Cooley / Redux

One day in 2017, West was at his office, in Greenville, California. On his computer, he cued up an episode of the podcast “Wildland Firefighter Lessons Learned,” in which a man named Thomas Taylor described his experience as a hotshot in the Nuttall Fire. It turned out that Taylor had been one of the eleven firefighters who had deployed their shelters in the hole. Three years earlier, Taylor had also been trapped, along with five others, during the Thirtymile Fire, in Washington State. Then, lying in his shelter, Taylor had heard praying, talking, and screaming next to him; four of the other firefighters at Thirtymile died in their shelters.

On the podcast, Taylor choked up as he talked about the Nuttall Fire. He recalled the three-hundred-foot wall of flame that had risen over him. His brain, he said, had started to “eat itself” with fear, and he had hyperventilated and felt shame at losing control of his emotions. For years afterward, he lived with debilitating anxiety. The attacks would come during sustained silences, which evoked the quiet in a shelter after the fire had passed.

Taylor discussed trauma and the brain, talk therapy and Xanax. His openness was unusual for a firefighter. West had avoided his own trauma for years, but listening to Taylor was like hearing himself. He locked the door to his office and wept.

By then, West had become a qualified crew boss, sometimes leading nineteen firefighters into the field during the fire season. He became overprotective, often grabbing a chainsaw or a drip torch from someone and doing risky work himself. “I couldn’t let anyone get hurt,” he said. “I saw what Luke’s parents were dealing with.” He had flashbacks and suspected that he had P.T.S.D. He began looking for a way out of wildland firefighting.

Bre’ Orcasitas, a former hotshot and smoke jumper, told me that today she is seeing a “great exodus” among federal wildland firefighters. Some have publicly resigned, penning candid letters detailing their mental-health breakdowns and frustrations with the low pay and high risk. In the course of her career in fire, Orcasitas said, she had lost several colleagues to accidents, suicide, and cancer. (Wildland firefighters have been shown to have an increased risk of lung cancer, because of exposure to smoke.) She resigned from the Forest Service in 2016, after trying to advocate for trauma education and training among firefighters. “I was almost desperate for it to change,” she said of the profession. After she left, she spent a year developing a course for wildland firefighters that focussed on teaching them to recognize trauma in the wake of extreme events. She flew around the country delivering it to any wildland firefighting crew that would invite her.

Jeremy Bailey, another former hotshot, also left wildland firefighting in the hope of changing the profession. He began his firefighting career in 1995, and two years later joined the Santa Fe Interagency Hotshot Crew. He often worked in the Jemez Mountains, in New Mexico, igniting prescribed burns—fires set deliberately in order to reduce fuels, recycle nutrients, and improve the habitat for fire-dependent trees, such as ponderosa pine and aspen. “Almost immediately, I had this awareness of the need for fire,” Bailey told me. It’s an annual tradition for the chief of the Forest Service to send what’s known as a Moses Letter—a sort of wildland-firefighting State of the Union—to the supervisors of federal firefighting employees. To Bailey, the letters always seemed to say the same thing: Let my people go fight fires, because this year things are so bad that we need to suppress every one. “I clearly saw the writing on the wall,” he said. “We were going to continue down the path of the 10 A.M. policy.”

In 2008, Bailey went to work for the Nature Conservancy, a global environmental organization headquartered in Virginia. He is now the

director of its prescribed-fire program, and an advocate for “good fire”—a term used by some activists to describe fires of low to moderate severity that result in ecological benefits, including reducing the fuels that create megafires. In previous centuries, Native Americans managed their forests by setting this type of fire. An estimated eighty per cent of North American vegetation is fire-dependent, and Bailey and others think that good fires are essential if prairies and forests are to become fire-resilient. Bailey argues for the establishment of a workforce dedicated not just to extinguishing fires in the summer but to setting them in the cooler months. “Imagine if for every firefighter poised and ready to extinguish any start, we also had a fire lighter,” he wrote, in an essay published in 2019.

In Ord, Nebraska, in partnership with an environmental nonprofit called Pheasants Forever, the Nature Conservancy conducts a two-week prescribed-fire training program. To attend, I had to qualify as an FFT2—one of the entry-level wildland fire technicians that make up the bulk of America’s fire-suppression workforce. I took about forty hours of online courses from my Brooklyn apartment, and then, in Prospect Park, completed the required Work Capacity Test, carrying a forty-five-pound pack for three miles in less than forty-five minutes. Later, I travelled to Ord—a rural town of two thousand residents, on the North Loup River and the edge of Nebraska’s rolling Sand Hills—where a crew made up of wildland firefighters, former hotshots, and land managers planned to ignite four thousand acres.

I lit my first fire on the slope of a bowl impressed into the prairie. A crew member handed me a red drip torch filled with diesel fuel and unleaded gasoline, and I poured a trickle of it onto the ground. I took out my lighter and lit the yellow grass. I tipped the torch into the flames, lighting its spout, then walked out onto the middle of the slope. The wind whipped my hair around my hard hat. I tipped the spout again, and fire streamed out. Walking with my fire behind me, I fell into a rhythm, each arc of flame feeding into another, creating fish scales all the way to the bottom of the bowl. Then I stood back and watched. Overhead, the sky was brilliant blue; where it met the earth, all was flame and smoke. Everything in view was moving. It dazzled me.

Sometimes the work felt like being on a road crew. We “blacklined” for hours on end, starting fires with our torches and controlling their spread with hand tools or water hoses. Our work left behind undulating, blackened squiggles, about thirty feet wide, which marked the perimeters of the areas we intended to ignite. The early spring weather was frigid. Often, I stood on a patch of smoldering prairie, letting the heat warm my leather boots. The smells of diesel fuel and burning bluestem grass combined into something like incense.

Once the blacklining was done, we could burn hundreds of acres a day without fear of our fires escaping. Sometimes I dragged a torch while driving an A.T.V. with one hand, moving in tandem with three or four other igniters spread across the prairie. Other times I worked alone, running up hillsides or down into drainages, bringing fire with me. One day, I stood on the rim of a basin full of billowing smoke. Flames lapped at my feet. I aimed a shiny silver pistol over the edge; I pulled the trigger and felt the recoil snap through my hands. As the crack of the shot echoed, an incendiary projectile trailed sparks through the air. It landed somewhere in the void below me, igniting a new fire.

Zeke Lunder, the planning-section chief at the Nebraska burn, was another wildland firefighter who had grappled with P.T.S.D. For two decades, Lunder had created wildfire cartography tools, designed for drawing up topographical maps during suppression operations. Then, in 2015, California’s Valley Fire engulfed seventy-six thousand acres and killed four people; Lunder worked to exhaustion for weeks, once on a shift that lasted thirty hours. “When the fires are that big, they don’t fit on standard maps,” Lunder said. A few years later, California’s Camp Fire burned more than a hundred and fifty thousand acres and killed more than eighty people. The fire reached Lunder’s area, bringing with it mass trauma. A carpenter friend who’d helped rebuild his community following a wildfire in 2008 died by suicide after watching it burn again; Lunder himself experienced depression. “This town that I knew pretty well was just gone,” he said. “It was like Dresden or Nagasaki. Just chimneys and rubble and people looking for bodies.” Lunder is now a good-fire activist, and a member of the prescribed-burn association in Butte County, California.

To a large extent, good fire is an Indigenous movement. Leaders speak of their right, as stewards of the land, to practice “cultural burning.” “Fire is life for us. Fire is family,” Elizabeth Azzuz, a Yurok tribal member and the secretary of the Cultural Fire Management Council, said. “It’s a tool that we use to be able to restore our environment, our ecosystem, and maintain the strength and health of our people.”

The term “good fire” can seem counterintuitive in the age of the megafire. But in Nebraska I came to see what the rhetoric was hoping to accomplish. Watching my fellow crew members transform the prairie into waves of combustion as far as the eye could see, I felt deep satisfaction. When the flames died, they left behind rich, ashen ground—earth that we ourselves had painted black. On my last day in Ord, I drove on a winding road alongside thousands of acres of black hills illuminated by the rising sun. A full moon hung over the charred landscape. To me, it looked right.

In 2018, West left the fire line. He became a dispatcher at the Susanville Interagency Fire Center, mobilizing firefighters and resources to respond to wildfires. He worked long hours, and the stress of the job was enormous; he also had two young children at home. “I felt very out of place in the real world, like I couldn’t have a real identity outside of fire even if I wanted to,” he told me. West sought counselling through the Forest Service, but the therapist he saw had no experience diagnosing P.T.S.D. Cassie, feeling desperate, found a therapist who specialized in treating first responders. The therapist encouraged him to consider a new career. “I couldn’t really heal if I stayed in fire,” he told me.

In August, 2020, West finished an eighteen-hour shift at his job, then sent a seven-page letter of resignation to the Forest Service. He shared the letter with family members and colleagues, who posted it online. “In my career, I was almost burned over four times,” he wrote. Still, “nothing has been more a threat to my life than the symptoms of PTSD.” West focussed his criticism on the lack of mental-health education and resources for wildland firefighters. “Even though I have PTSD I don’t think I’m dangerous or crazy,” he wrote. “I think wildland firefighting is dangerous and crazy and PTSD is a normal reaction from the human brain.” When he quit, after seventeen years with the Forest Service, his base pay was \$22.80 an hour. A month later, he started work as a middle-school social-studies and English

teacher. But school was cancelled during the first week, when the Sheep Fire threatened Susanville. This year, it was postponed again, because of the Dixie Fire. There was a time when West believed that his home, within the city limits, was safe from wildfire. Now the fire had come to him. “It’s almost like the front is here,” he told me. “It’s where I live.”

In August, 2021, a year after West’s resignation, I embedded as a firefighter-journalist with a Type 2 Initial Attack handcrew—a unit of twenty wildland firefighters qualified to be first responders to wildfire ignitions. We were assigned to the Dixie Fire. At that time, the fire had spread across half a million acres and was just thirty-one per cent contained. More than sixty-five hundred people had been tasked with fighting it. Two weeks before, in the Forest Service’s annual Moses Letter, Randy Moore, the agency’s chief, had described America’s wildfires as a “national crisis”; he’d also called for a policy of full suppression and for the scaling back of prescribed burning.

We drove to our fire camp, in Quincy, California, in a caravan of Ford Super Duty trucks. I rode with five firefighters who ranged in age from twenty-six to fifty-one; a few had started firefighting while in California’s prisons, where prisoners are regularly recruited to fight fires for pay. This was the crew’s third assignment, or “roll,” on the Dixie Fire. Everyone was dressed in green fire-retardant pants made of a material called Nomex, leather boots, and shirts featuring the logo of the private firefighting contractor that employed them. Most people slept, heads resting on windows or seat backs, waking only to buy breakfast, cigarettes, and sunglasses at a gas station. “Just a bunch of fire pirates out here,” the youngest firefighter joked.



*The most severe firestorms are tall enough to generate lightning, and can push smoke into the stratosphere. Photograph by Paul Simakoff-Ellims*

Our route took us through the scar of the 2018 Camp Fire. One of the men in the truck lived in Paradise, California; the fire had destroyed his home, along with the homes of thirty colleagues. “That was the craziest thing I’ve ever been in,” he told me later, on the fire line. He’d driven his mother, wife, and kids four and a half hours to safety, and had seen the road explode into flames created solely by the heat in the air; two days later, he was back cutting handline on the fire with his crew, and searching for human remains in the wreckage of his town.

We spent our first day in Plumas National Forest, in Indian Valley, prepping homes for the coming fire by digging perimeters of bare dirt. The area sat under a smoke inversion, in which a cap of warm air trapped cooler air and smoke low to the ground; the mountains around us were invisible in the pall. The temperature was a hundred degrees, and the Air Quality Index was 368—a “hazardous” rating. An opened but undrunk can of Budweiser sat on the patio of an abandoned house, and the milkweed on the side of the road was drenched in psychedelic-pink fire retardant. We took our breaks sitting inside idling trucks, where we could breathe conditioned air instead of toxic smoke.

We slept that night in fire camp, then woke early the next morning to hike through miles of forest in the dark, up and down steep drainages and along

fresh bulldozer wounds. In places the fire had already burned, we scooped up “moon dust”—white ashes—with our tools and gently brushed them with the backs of our hands, checking for heat to make sure that the fire was really gone. It had been days since the flames passed through, but my fingers grew calloused from digging embers out of the earth. Nature’s comforts were unsettling: a gust of wind cooled the sweat on my face, but I worried that it might awaken embers; a beam of sunlight pierced the smoke, but I wondered if it might portend a lifting of the inversion—a change in the stability of the atmosphere that could bring unpredictable fire behavior. We drove back and forth through the town of Greenville, where West had sat in his office back in 2017, listening to the podcast with Taylor. The week before, the town had been obliterated by fire—it was now a melted husk. My crew had been there, outracing a crown fire that had run downhill out of the forest. They’d retreated to Greenville’s high school and prepared to fight from there; when a local gas station caught fire, they were ordered out. “We call it a standalone,” the crew boss, Gene Lopez, said of the town that day. “If it survives, it will only be by an act of God, because there’s nobody there.”

For a few days, our group supported the operations of several hotshot crews. Choking on smoke, we dug line as helicopters dumped hundreds of gallons of water just yards away. One afternoon, I watched a hotshot superintendent lean against the hood of his truck, scrutinizing an iPad; the screen showed a topo map representing some of the wildest terrain in California. His yellow Nomex shirt was grimy and ripped across the back of his shoulders, as if he’d been mauled by a tiger. The sun was a small fuchsia dot behind the gray smoke pouring from the forest. It was nearly 2 P.M.—the witching hour, when the sun is hottest, humidity is low, and winds are strong. He zoomed the map in and out, then moved it left and right. He was trying to find a safe route for his crew to hike up the ridge and cut a line to slow the fire’s approach.

“It’s a shit show,” he said. “They want someone to get hurt.” Ten years ago, he went on, crews could perform direct attacks—working close to the fire itself—because there was some moisture in the ground. “Now there’s no rain. It’s so dry,” he said. “We can’t go direct anymore, because it’s going to stand up and chase you out.”

Sometimes Dixie seemed to take a breath, returning stronger after the lull. Nearly two thousand miles of dozer line hadn't prevented it from marching toward gigafire status—it grew by a hundred thousand acres in one twenty-four-hour period, and sometimes sent up multiple pyroCbs in a day. I slept amid hundreds of tents for firefighters, and walked past trailers for showers, laundry, food, and meetings held by incident commanders—a pop-up, military-style disaster-response city. In one morning briefing, a frustrated hotshot standing on a makeshift stage described how he'd ordered millions of dollars of fire retardant dropped, only to see it burned over by the next day. (Ultimately, containing Dixie cost more than six hundred million dollars.) Winds were so strong and fuels so dry that the backfires intended to box in the main fire escaped control, increasing Dixie's size by tens of thousands of acres. People were asking, "How big would this fire be if we hadn't tried to fight it?" Later, I checked Zeke Lunder's blog, where he was tracking the Dixie Fire, which threatened his childhood home. "Why do we keep trying to pull off these big firing operations under terrible conditions?" he wrote. "Why are we still focused on containment, when it's clear that parts of this fire are beyond our control?"

While on the Dixie Fire, I'd hoped that our crew might camp in Susanville, so that I could meet up with West. When that didn't happen, I tried to get there on my own. The journey proved impossible: between us were evacuated towns and miles of roads barricaded by National Guard tanks. "I hope the crew gets a good assignment and you learn a lot," West texted. "Stay safe out there." Of the fire, he wrote, "It's all over the map. It's like five giant fires." He and his family were packing in case of evacuation, under a neon-orange sky.

One afternoon, my crew began a mop-up patrol in a place called Lights Creek. It was clear that raging fire had run through it. The trees were still standing, but many were charcoalized. The black stumps of willow bushes jutted out of the barren ground. In my right hand, I held a "rhino"—a tool with a shovel blade at a right angle, for cutting and scraping.

As I walked toward the creek, my front leg sank to the knee in soft brown silt. Recalling stories of hidden ash pits and third-degree burns, I quickly pulled it out and stepped backward. With my rhino, I scooped out some dirt. It looked cold—but when I brushed my hand against it I felt warmth.

“Hold for heat!” I yelled.

Another crew member joined me, and we began to excavate. We dug through the powdery soil and sent up brown clouds of dust. The deeper we went, the hotter the ground became. The heat permeated the soles of our boots—eventually, we were dancing to relieve the discomfort. I stepped away from the pit and took in the situation. We were standing on an oven. Yards away from us, other crew members were also digging. Together, we were uncovering a single network of still smoldering roots.

“We need water,” the guy next to me said.

Someone radioed for an engine to bring hoses. A few people retreated to the rocky creek bank to wait, and I joined them. I leaned against my tool’s wooden handle and drank through the tube of a HydraPak. I tried not to dwell on the bleakness of the scene—the stumps and leafless trees and cooked earth.

“Oh, shit,” someone said.

I turned and saw a massive fire cloud rising over the mountain to the east. The smoke and vapor boiled and expanded. It was a pyrocumulus—the first I’d seen. I took a picture with my phone, then sat and stared. Over the next hour, I watched its white, cauliflower-like head rise to twenty-five thousand feet. It looked like a mushroom cloud. I tried to imagine the combustion taking place below it—the heat and speed of a fire that could send so much smoke and ash into the sky. What powerful, nefarious force was creating this beast? It was us. ♦

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# **Art**

- [Winter Art Preview](#)

By [Andrea K. Scott](#)

This winter, many major museums in New York City look closely at a single artist. An intriguing exception is “**The Hare with Amber Eyes**,” at the Jewish Museum. The exhibition, designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro, takes its title from the British ceramicist Edmund de Waal’s best-selling memoir, which traces the legacy of the Ephrussi family, a European banking dynasty whose fortune was plundered by the Nazis. Paintings by Fragonard, Monet, and Renoir, among others, are accompanied by a selection of tiny ivory netsuke—including the book’s namesake hare. (Opens on Nov. 19.)

In 1966, Andy Warhol’s mother told a reporter that her son was a “good religious boy.” It’s true—the openly gay artist was a quietly devout Byzantine Catholic. The Brooklyn Museum considers the Pop icon’s seemingly inexhaustible œuvre through the lens of his faith in “**Andy Warhol: Revelation**,” a show of some hundred works, including an unfinished film of the setting sun that was commissioned, in 1967, for an unrealized, Vatican-sponsored project. (Opens on Nov. 19.)

A “sense of color is a constant source of joy” wrote Sophie Taeuber-Arp (1889-1943), a Swiss artist whose energies could not be contained by any one medium. Trained as a textile designer, she was also a painter, a sculptor, a dancer, a puppet-maker, a furniture designer, a magazine editor, and the only woman to appear, posthumously, on a Swiss banknote. “**Sophie Taeuber-Arp: Living Abstraction**” arrives at *moma* after a triumphant run at the Tate Modern. (Opens on Nov. 21.)

In 1962, Joseph Elmer Yoakum, a Black Army veteran living on the South Side of Chicago, who had no experience making art, had a dream that instructed him to take up drawing. He was seventy-one. By 1971, Yoakum’s vivid, otherworldly landscapes were hanging in a group show at *moma*, alongside the work of such established figures as Saul Steinberg and Jack Whitten. (Yoakum died the following year.) This winter, the museum surveys his ten-year career in “**Joseph E. Yoakum: What I Saw.**” (Opens on Nov. 21.)

Five centuries before the Swiss city of Basel became synonymous with jet-set collecting (see: Art Basel Miami Beach, Dec. 2-4), it launched the greatest portraitist of the Northern Renaissance: Hans Holbein the Younger,

who joined the Basel artists guild in 1519. The dazzling acuity of Holbein's pictures led one of his sitters, the humanist philosopher Erasmus, to introduce the artist to Sir Thomas More, which led to a position in the court of King Henry VIII. Brush up on "Wolf Hall" and visit "**Holbein: Capturing Character**," at the Morgan Library. (Opens on Feb. 11.)

Born in Harlem in 1930, Faith Ringgold is a painter, a sculptor, a political activist, a performance artist, a professor emerita, and an award-winning children's-book author. (She's also currently at work on a stained-glass commission for Yale.) For sixty years, Ringgold has balanced stories of harsh realities (for instance, the bloodshed in the streets during the civil-rights era) with hopeful visions; her painted quilt "Dancing at the Louvre," from 1991, prefigured Beyoncé and Jay-Z's takeover of the museum, decades later. The New Museum presents the artist's first retrospective in her home town, "**Faith Ringgold: American People.**" (Opens on Feb. 17.) ♦

## Books

- [Are There Hidden Advantages to Pain and Suffering?](#)
- [Briefly Noted](#)
- [A Fearless Experimentalist's Stealth Reputation](#)
- [Victoria Chang's Correspondence with Grief](#)

Two new books examine how we benefit from unpleasant experiences.

By [Meghan O'Gieblyn](#)

## Content

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From 1956 to 1964, one of the most popular daytime television programs was “Queen for a Day,” a game show that rested on a simple, and savage, premise. In each episode, four women who had suffered recent hardships spoke candidly about their experiences on live TV. At the end of the half hour, one woman would be crowned queen and showered with prizes. One of the so-called misery shows of that era, along with “Strike It Rich” and “Glamour Girl,” it largely featured working-class contestants: widows whose husbands had been killed in hunting accidents, mothers of chronically sick children, grocery-store owners who couldn’t afford to stock their stores. In addition to the prizes, each winner was granted a request for some product or service, which tended to be practical and not infrequently macabre. One contestant entered the show in the hope of hiring a carpenter to patch the bullet holes above her bed left by her husband’s suicide. Another, a Holocaust survivor, wanted funds to have her tattoo from Auschwitz removed.

Old episodes can be found online, but they are hard to watch. The contestants aren’t versed, as reality-show stars are today, in the grammar of television; they have trouble maintaining eye contact with the host, and nervously wrap their handkerchiefs around their fingers. The plainspoken dignity with which they narrate their misfortunes is frequently astonishing. “I had two handicapped sons,” one contestant says. “I lost them, and then I took care of an elderly lady in a wheelchair. She passed away, along with my mother and my father, and then my husband passed away. I feel that I would like to have a vacation.” At the end of each episode, audience members applaud for the woman they think is most deserving. The cheers are measured by an applause meter, which rises, predictably, in relation to the severity of a woman’s suffering. The winner is given a jewelled crown and a sable-trimmed robe, plus appliances, new clothes, a vacation.

The television writer Mark Evanier has called “Queen for a Day” “one of the most ghastly shows ever produced,” but it’s merely a crude example of a formula employed by more recent series, such as “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition” and “American Idol,” which also favor contestants who have endured adversity. The appeal of such narratives is ancient, perhaps even primal, recalling the promises of religious traditions: that tribulation begets atonement, that karma will settle all scores, that those who mourn will receive their reward. Surely suffering should get you something—if not redemption and eternal life, then mass sympathy, modest fame, and an Adler automatic sewing machine. The ghastly element of “Queen for a Day,” no less crucial to its appeal, is the starkly transactional way in which this justice is enacted. No matter how fervently we believe that the bearing of pain deserves reward, we blanch when the calculus is made transparent, or when a victim takes too active a role in her own compensation, cashing in on life’s raw deals. God rewards long-suffering in his own time. Deals and bargains are the jurisdiction of the Devil, who was always more in touch with modern economics.

But the truth is that we make these kinds of bargains all the time, trading pain for something better. Studies have identified evidence of “post-traumatic growth,” a phenomenon in which searching for the good in a major life crisis results in higher psychological functioning and other mental benefits. The events we consider most central to our identities are often tragedies—an illness survived, an addiction tamed, a financial difficulty overcome—as though we believed adversity to be the price of wisdom and personal improvement. Contrary to what one might expect of pleasure-maximizing creatures, we often seek out pains, both monumental (going to war) and trivial (going to the gym). We run marathons, have children, and toil long hours in the office, all in expectation of uncertain rewards.

Modern theories of behavior have tried to quantify what, exactly, people hope to get in return for their pain. The British utilitarian Jeremy Bentham held that all actions, including those which might appear antithetical to self-interest, are motivated by the anticipation of an advantage—usually pleasure. Freud’s “pleasure principle” reiterated this idea, allowing that the motivation could be unconscious; in “The Economic Problem of Masochism,” Freud argues that, though the self-flagellating monk and the altruistic saint might convince themselves that they are immune to the allure

of personal profit, their libido is simply exchanging outer pain for the relief of inner guilt. More recently, behavioral economists have demonstrated how bad we are at anticipating the rewards of our actions, but they have preserved the assumption that we all think about the world in terms of costs and benefits, investments and returns. We don't always balance the equation correctly, but we are always, in the back of our minds, doing the math. "Men calculate," Bentham wrote, in 1789, "some with less exactness, indeed, some with more; but all men calculate."

"Why do I like pain, and what am I getting out of it?" Leigh Cowart asks early on in their new book, "Hurts So Good: The Science and Culture of Pain on Purpose." Cowart, a science journalist and a self-described "high-sensation-seeking masochist," maintains that one of the most immediate rewards of pain is physical pleasure. When the brain senses that the body is imperilled, its endogenous morphine system (hence "endorphin") creates an organic painkiller. All you have to do to get a dose is convince your body that it's in danger. Viewed this way, masochism is a kind of biohacking, a way of exploiting the body's electrochemistry. Cowart is a longtime B.D.S.M. enthusiast, but they believe that "pain on purpose" is more than a bedroom kink—it's a universal human experience. Eating spicy foods, getting a tattoo, taking a cold shower: all, for Cowart, are sly attempts to exchange distress for a blast of neurochemical bliss. "Once I started looking for the pattern," they write, "I saw it everywhere."

This acknowledgment of confirmation bias might cast doubt on Cowart's claim that masochism is universal; in many of the activities that Cowart examines, pain is typically considered a means to an end, not an end in itself. At one point, Cowart gets permission to speak with participants in an ultramarathon—but then the organizer, upon learning that Cowart is writing a book on masochism, briefly revokes it. "Like many sport there is discomfort involved, but it is a cost of competition, not an objective," the organizer explains. In the end, Cowart attends the event, and concludes that, for some runners, pain *is* an underlying goal; one contestant claims to look forward to "the slow accumulation of punishment." I thought of Flaubert, who wrote, "I love my work with a love that is frenzied and perverted, as an ascetic loves the hair shirt that scratches his belly." I don't imagine I'm the only writer who has recognized herself in this confession: the rewards of a literary career come so unpredictably, and at such a steep cost, that it's

impossible not to wonder whether you are deriving a deranged pleasure from its more reliable vexations.

Cowart is a former ballet dancer who suffered from eating disorders and self-mutilation during adolescence, and they recall ballet as being both rewarding and abusive: “It was years spent cowering and starving, eternally at war with my poor, battered body.” Studies have found that it’s possible, over time, to build strong associations between pain and pleasure, suggesting that masochism can be learned. “Did ballet make me a masochist?” Cowart wonders. The book does not arrive at a tidy conclusion: pain, it turns out, is as wily and elusive as any other mental experience. Pangs that once produced pleasure won’t necessarily do so again, and the existence of safe words in B.D.S.M. testifies to how quickly desired pain can become undesirable. “I am endlessly drawn to the idea that if you can just get through to some nebulous other side, that pain can open up into wild euphoria,” Cowart writes. “Humans play this game all the time.” Cowart repeatedly refers to masochism as a “game,” but evidently it is one that is governed less by the predictable readings of an applause meter than by the whims of a roulette wheel.

Anna Dostoyevskaya, a writer and the second wife of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, once observed that her husband’s work never went so well as it did after he’d lost all their money playing roulette. Dostoyevsky’s novels are full of characters of this sort: gamblers who are more interested in losing than in winning, men who deliberately make fools of themselves when their reputations have become too pristine. In “Notes from Underground,” the narrator mocks the idea that humans seek only what is beneficial to them; a man, he insists, may “consciously, purposely, desire what is injurious to himself, what is stupid, very stupid—simply in order to have the right to desire for himself even what is very stupid and not to be bound by any obligation to desire what is only rational.” Sometimes the absence of an advantage is the point. We suffer deliberately to prove that we are not machines.

In a 2004 paper, the economists Niklas Karlsson, George Loewenstein, and Jane McCafferty quote that passage to illustrate the kinds of motives long ignored in decision theory, game theory, and behavioral economics. Although these disciplines have moved beyond a fixation on mere utility or

pleasure, and now explore how human behavior is influenced by moral considerations such as altruism and fairness, their practitioners, the economists argue, still have little to say about the kind of outcome Dostoyevsky's narrator seeks. "People want to believe that they have some control over their behavior and hence their destiny, they want to feel as if they are more than the sum of nerve firings happening in obscure parts of their brain," the authors write. They call this motivation the "desire for meaning," and suggest that it warrants further exploration.

Paul Bloom's new book, "The Sweet Spot: The Pleasures of Suffering and the Search for Meaning," is an attempt to delve into this scientifically overlooked dimension of human behavior. Bloom acknowledges that pain often brings pleasure, but he doesn't think that masochism alone can explain why people sometimes gravitate toward suffering. "A lot of the negative experiences we pursue don't provide happiness or positive feelings in any simple sense—but we seek them out anyway," he writes. People enlist in wars and decide to have children despite knowing the consequences; we willingly undertake extreme challenges, such as climbing mountains and writing books. Bloom, a developmental psychologist at Yale, calls himself a "motivational pluralist." He believes that human flourishing depends on a host of different desires beyond mere hedonism: desires for justice, for recognition, for artistic achievement.

In many cases, meaningful pursuits are at odds with pleasure. People who have children generally experience less happiness than those who are childless but report that their lives are more meaningful. Polls of the happiest countries are often topped by wealthy nations with good social-support systems—Norway, Australia, Canada—but, in a Gallup survey that asked whether people believed their lives were meaningful, the top results were Sierra Leone, Togo, Senegal, Ecuador, Laos, Cuba, and Kuwait. G.D.P. is clearly correlated with happiness, but it may have an inverse relationship to meaning. Bloom concedes that religious belief might factor into these results, but he suspects the more likely explanation is that meaning results from struggle. It's no surprise that many citizens of affluent countries find that their lives lack purpose, he maintains: "Some degree of misery and suffering is essential to a rich and meaningful life."

This is not to say that the only meaningful life is one of agony and drudgery, Bloom writes. Some studies have found that happiness and meaning are correlated—that if you have one, chances are you have the other. For Bloom, this is evidence that there is a Goldilocks principle at play, what he calls “the sweet spot.” The key is not to seek out pain indiscriminately but to pursue tasks that entail exertion or an element of risk. The so-called Ikea effect suggests that we associate value with effort: people are often willing to pay more for items that require assembly. Finding creative ways to add friction to our lives is a sure path to making activities more meaningful, whether it’s cooking a meal from scratch or “gamifying” activities by adding gratuitous goals. Better yet, get your kicks from fiction: streaming platforms offer “virtually unlimited choice” when it comes to vicarious suffering, Bloom notes, and the guaranteed resolutions promise to satisfy our desire for meaning. Fiction is “safe,” he writes, “in that it allows for control of what kind of aversive experience one is going to get.”

Bloom’s previous book, “Against Empathy,” was subtitled “The Case for Rational Compassion,” and “The Sweet Spot” is in many ways a case for rational suffering, a guide to making life better through the measured incorporation of pain. Just as Cowart sees masochism as a form of biohacking, Bloom regards deliberately chosen discomfort as a way to “game the system,” exploiting our evolutionary hardwiring to induce more fulfilling experiences. At this point, one might think of another line in “Notes from Underground,” toward the end of the narrator’s rant about rationalists: “If you say that all this, too, can be calculated and tabulated—chaos and darkness and curses, so that the mere possibility of calculating it all beforehand would stop it all, and reason would reassert itself, then man would purposely go mad in order to be rid of reason and gain his point!”

The vast majority of suffering that we experience in our lives is, of course, not within our control. And, as “Queen for a Day” illustrates, it’s these travails—the lost spouse, the sick child, the home destroyed by a fire—that we are most eager to see yield value. Is it possible to find meaning in such tragedies? Bloom, for his part, is skeptical: he believes that run-of-the-mill misfortunes are largely without benefit. Fasting can be meaningful, whereas starving because you don’t have money for food is simple misery. Or recall, for instance, the absurdity of Donald Rumsfeld’s argument that forcing Guantánamo prisoners to stand for hours during interrogation was not so bad

because he himself had a standing desk. “Many of the features that make suffering so rewarding when it’s chosen . . . are absent when it is involuntary,” Bloom writes.

Bloom questions clinical studies that suggest that suffering makes people more resilient or altruistic. One such study found that thirteen per cent of the women who survived the mass shooting at Virginia Tech, in 2007, were less anxious and depressed after the tragedy than they were before. But studies like this can rely too heavily on self-reporting and often lack control groups, Bloom points out. He doesn’t deny that some people find a sustaining purpose in tragedy. Throughout the book, he refers to “Man’s Search for Meaning,” Viktor Frankl’s account of his experiences in Nazi concentration camps; despite the horrors that Frankl endured, he seems to have gone on to live “a rich life, replete with both meaning and pleasure,” Bloom writes. Frankl argued that those who suffer are spurred to help others because it gives meaning to their own pain. But Bloom believes that Frankl is an outlier whose case has been wrongly used to bolster the myth of redemptive suffering. “There is little actual evidence that sufferers are kinder than they would have been had they not suffered,” he writes.

The question of evidence aside, Bloom has larger problems with the idea of redemptive suffering. In his view, this belief prompts people to dismiss pain, blame victims, and turn away from political activism:

“Everything happens for a reason” implies that people get what they deserve—what goes around comes around. It can lead to a reflexive condemnation of those (including, sometimes, ourselves) who have had bad luck, have become sick, or have been victimized by others. It can also lead to apathy and indifference. If there are no accidents, and everything is ultimately in the service of some higher good, why work so hard to make things better? If discrimination and oppression reflect the workings of a deep plan—the meek shall inherit the earth, after all—why worry about it?

The allusion to the Beatitudes is telling. It is religion, after all, that constitutes “our species’ longest and deepest struggle to make sense of suffering, including suffering that is unchosen,” Bloom writes. But he finds the compensatory logic of these traditions just as implausible as the clinical

studies that he critiques. Life, he argues, “has no screenwriter and no director. And so, when we suffer through bad events, we can’t be confident that things will work out in the end.” These creeds undoubtedly bring comfort to some, but Bloom concludes that “unchosen suffering,” as he calls it, is, over all, “less positive” than chosen suffering: “We are smart to try to avoid cancer, mass shootings, the death of our children, and other horrors.”

Of course, the studies that Bloom cites do not argue that we should seek out traumas because they can, in some cases, have good outcomes. And though some radical ascetic traditions encourage disciples to incorporate suffering into their lives, the major faiths do not generally promote the pursuit of pain. Christianity, the tradition that is arguably most fixated on redemptive suffering, has long stressed that the virtues that stem from affliction do not make the affliction itself good. C. S. Lewis, in “The Problem of Pain,” calls this the paradox of tribulation. “Blessed are the poor, but by judgment (i.e., social justice) and alms we are to remove poverty whenever possible,” he writes. The Crucifixion was redemptive, but that does not justify Judas’s betrayal: “the fact that God can make complex good out of simple evil does not excuse . . . those who do the simple evil.” Nor does the possibility of virtuous suffering permit us to ignore those who are in pain. Part of the good in suffering is “the compassion aroused and the acts of mercy to which it leads.”

Lewis, like many religious thinkers, takes for granted that suffering is unavoidable, the price of entry into the human condition. Bloom acknowledges as much, too, albeit somewhat late in his book. (“You don’t have to look for more,” he writes, at the end of the penultimate chapter.) But the term “unchosen suffering”—which, as far as I can tell, is synonymous with what for centuries we have simply called “suffering”—suggests an exception to the rule. If there is a sweet spot between those who suffer too much and those who don’t suffer enough, his imagined audience seems to consist primarily of the latter.

In truth, the line between chosen and unchosen pain is not always clear. Consider the misery that stems from addictions and compulsions, a problem that Cowart takes up when revisiting their adolescent experience with self-harm. “I used the instrument of my body as a muffler to my pain,” they write. “I conspired against myself.” We are not always unified, autonomous

agents; anyone who has returned to a fiercely renounced habit knows that the pleasures sought by one part of the self can be experienced by another part as pain. Think of Medea's famous line in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: "I can see—and I approve the better course, and yet I choose the worse." Or, for that matter, think of the apostle Paul, who, in his Letter to the Romans, writes, "For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." We are rarely in control of our suffering, even when we are the ones inflicting it.

On the one hand, regarding life as a game, or attempting to "game it," allows us to believe that we are in control—that each life choice results in a clear set of advantages and disadvantages, and that racking up more of the former than the latter will lead to satisfaction. On the other hand, games have long dramatized the ruthlessness of chance. Before the wheel of fortune became an iconic piece of game-show imagery, it was the instrument of Fortuna, whose reliance on blind luck brought low the prosperous and parcelled out hardships to the wicked and the noble alike. This tragic view of life, however, was not entirely fatalistic: people's lives may have been governed by capricious gods, or by the aimless roll of the dice, but they had a say in how they responded to misfortunes. Nietzsche spoke of *amor fati*, or "love of fate," an idea he drew from the Stoics, who taught that it was possible to transform the turns of Fortuna's wheel into virtue, or art. "Floods will rob us of one thing, fire of another," Seneca writes. "These are conditions of our existence which we cannot change. What we can do is adopt a noble spirit." Adopting that spirit is a creative act by which the sufferer transforms life's afflictions into something useful. If our technocratic age has grown more optimistic about the potential to control or eliminate unwanted suffering, it has made it harder, at times, to believe in this imaginative capacity.

Something like *amor fati* emerges in Cowart's story. At one point, they confess to thinking back on painful experiences with nostalgia and longing. "Fully unhinged, I know," they write, "but few things are cleanly demarcated into pleasant and unpleasant." Cowart maintains that, after years of therapy, masochism has allowed them to reclaim the pain they once experienced as compulsion—though they find it difficult to articulate what, exactly, has changed: "Feeling bad and then better is still a game I play, a crutch I use, a treat for myself. What, then, is so different about my life then versus my life now?" They interview others who have found safe, consensual pain to be a form of healing after self-harm, or a way to assert

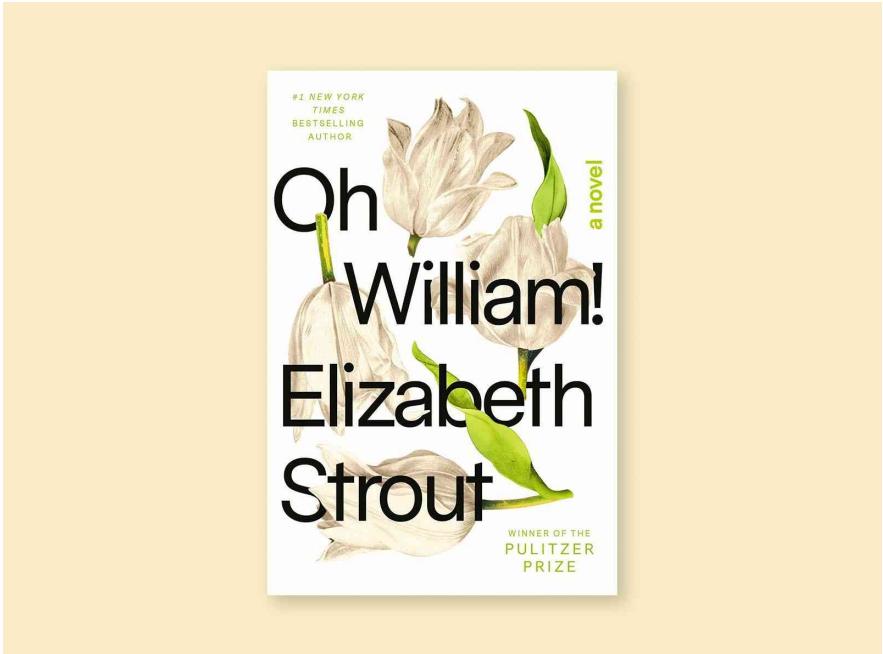
mastery over the impulse, though most of them admit that the line between reclaiming trauma and merely reënacting it is hazy. The difference lies in states of mind that are not easily measurable: emotions, expectations, the psychological narratives they attach to the experience. “Something about the difference in seeking harm versus seeking pain,” Cowart speculates. This echoes a persistent conclusion in clinical studies: pain, like all subjective phenomena, is sensitive to context and inflected by the mental constructs that we use to understand the experience.

To put it another way: although we cannot insulate ourselves from suffering, we do have some say in the narratives we build around it. This conviction unites many communities that coalesce around shared calamities—twelve-step fellowships, grief support groups—and it will ring true for anyone who has managed, however tentatively, to erect an identity or a sustaining purpose out of the unwelcome detritus of their life. It’s impossible to say whether the good of such efforts outweighs the bad that inspires them. Tragedies tend to divest one of the delusion that life is reducible to this kind of arithmetic. In fact, the calculus of cost-benefit analysis may lie at cross-purposes with the attempt to find meaning, which requires a certain suspension of disbelief—a willingness to abandon the idea that life is a scorecard and to see it, instead, as a story. ♦

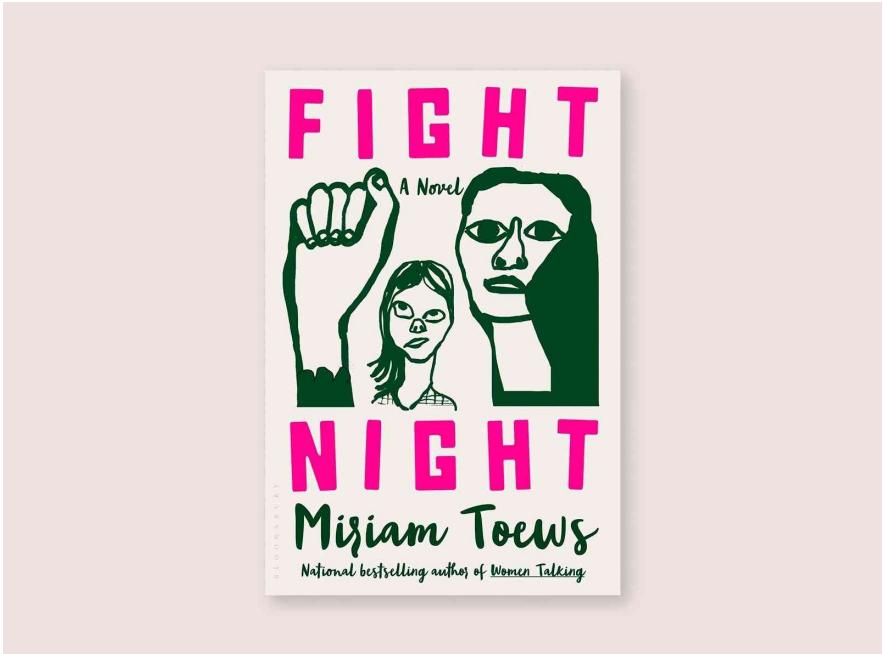
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## New Yorker Favorites

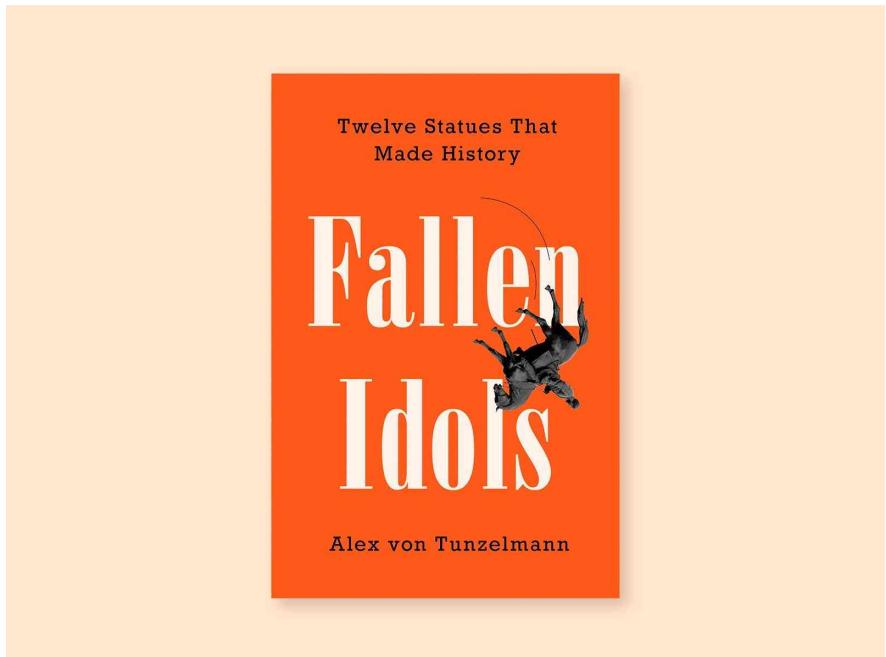
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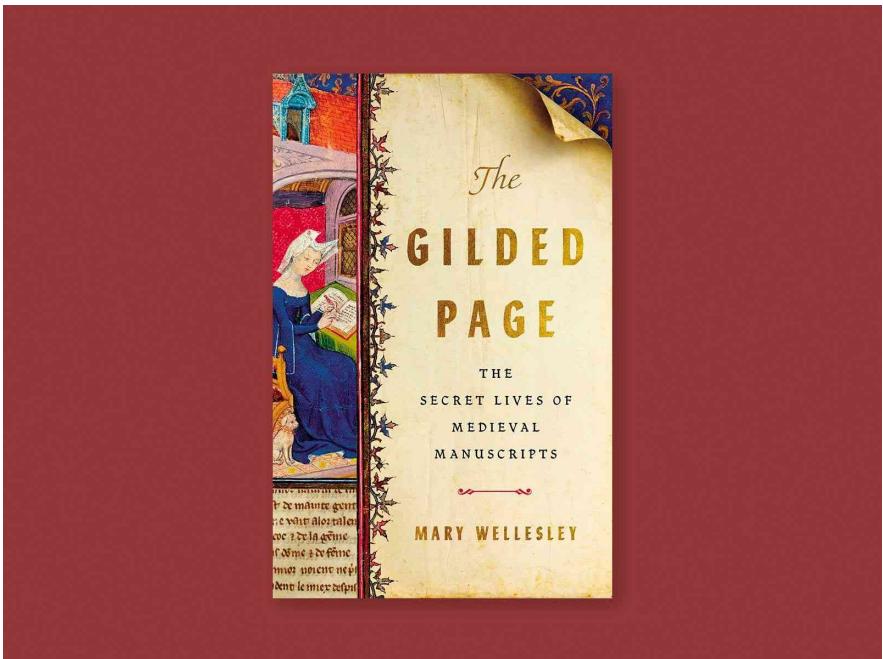
**Oh William!**, by *Elizabeth Strout* (Random House). Lucy Barton, who has featured in two previous books by Strout, is recently widowed and living in New York, in this reflective novel. She maintains an intermittent but intimate friendship with her unfaithful first husband, William, the father of her two adult daughters. When he discovers that he has a half sister who was abandoned in infancy by his mother, he asks Lucy to go to Maine and meet the half sister on his behalf. Although Lucy and William now find comfort in each other, their old marital problems are ever present. Even when William finally seems to truly see her, Lucy realizes that no one can ever really know anyone else beyond a “little tiny, tiny bit.”



[\*\*Fight Night\*\*](#), by *Miriam Toews* (*Bloomsbury*). The three female narrators of this novel are, refreshingly, all outside the age range—the years of romantic possibility, from teens to motherhood—during which authors tend to find a woman most interesting: a nine-year-old girl, precocious and anxiously protective of her family; her mother, pregnant and frustrated; and the family's matriarch, an indignant, joyful survivor of an authoritarian, religious upbringing. Witty and likable, the trio are accustomed to telling their stories only to one another. The intertwined narrative finds the grandmother preparing the other two to live without her, and, when no one else will care for them, to fight for themselves, “to find joy and to create joy.”



**[Fallen Idols](#)**, by *Alex von Tunzelmann* (Harper). Taking its cue from Black Lives Matter's "extraordinary wave of iconoclasm," this global history documents twelve statues that have been variously toppled, blown up, tarred, or beheaded. Von Tunzelmann examines portrait statuary's links to totalitarianism and racism, from Revolutionary America to apartheid South Africa, and also questions whether idols even belong in the civic space. "Statuary itself is the problem," she argues. "It's didactic, haughty, and uninviting." She champions more conceptual, interactive memorials—like the engraved steel columns suspended in Montgomery, Alabama, commemorating victims of lynching—and suggests that a world of empty plinths might be salutary.



[\*\*The Gilded Page\*\*](#), by *Mary Wellesley* (Basic). This history of medieval illuminated manuscripts vividly evokes the corporeality of objects that, in a museum display, can seem almost ethereal. Wellesley opens with the stomach-churning process of rendering parchment from animal hides, and then delves into stories of the authors, scribes, artisans, and benefactors who contributed to the creation of a manuscript. The collaborative nature of the work, which often unfolded across decades, and the varied identities of the collaborators (monks, yes, but also laypeople of both genders), resulted in texts that were anything but stable. Highlighting instances in which texts about women were radically recentered on men, Wellesley offers a nuanced glimpse of the shifting nature of the written word.

Revered among better-known New Narrative writers, Dodie Bellamy has made uncompromising excess her artistic credo.

By [Leslie Jamison](#)

When Dodie Bellamy was a little girl, she used to ask, “Why doesn’t anybody go to the bathroom in the movies?” In Bellamy’s work, people definitely go to the bathroom. Cats go to the bathroom. Metaphors go to the bathroom. “I imagine existence as a boundless expanse of dirt and I’m a worm burrowing through it, gorging on it on one end, shitting it out on the other,” she writes. In Bellamy’s essays, we see her bending down to pick up cat turds, scanning the streets of her not yet fully gentrified San Francisco neighborhood for human excrement, writing at her desk next to a litter box: “One of the cats will sit in the box beside me, doing their business, and I feel like such an animal. They don’t understand most of what I do, but this they get. . . . Throughout all my writing the shadow of *dejecta* looms.” Thrusting shit in our faces is part of Bellamy’s commitment to visceral honesty, wry abjection, and all forms of too-much-ness. It’s a way of answering her own childhood question by insisting that art can go to the bathroom, which is really a way of saying that art can represent the parts of ourselves we feel most ashamed of. One of her characters wonders if it’s true “that you can never trust anyone with a neat bedroom,” and Bellamy’s œuvre is the literary equivalent of a messy apartment: full of hard-ons, affairs, cat piss, genital infections, and vibrators drying on the dish rack.

For decades, Bellamy has burrowed a path through literary culture which has been simultaneously hugely influential and largely invisible. Now seventy years old, she occupies the cult-icon sweet spot: worshipped in certain literary circles and virtually unknown beyond them. She is part of a lineage of frankly personal, formally experimental, and unapologetically sexual artists—mostly female, some queer—which includes the writers [Eileen Myles](#), [Chris Kraus](#), [Kathy Acker](#), and [Maggie Nelson](#) and the visual artists [Sarah Lucas](#), Ellen Cantor, and [Jay DeFeo](#). Kraus—whose press, Semiotext(e), has just published “[Bee Reaved](#),” a collection of Bellamy’s essays, many of which were written after the death of her husband, the poet Kevin Killian, in 2019—called Bellamy “one of the most important living American writers,” in a profile of Bellamy by Megan Milks. In the same essay, Nelson called her “an inspiration, a provocation, a legend, a treasure, and a call to arms.”

A call to arms against what, exactly? Against minimalism in the vein of Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Carver, and the generations of writers who have idolized them, and against the ethos of restraint often preached in M.F.A. programs. During my own M.F.A. days, at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, the program's venerated director, Frank Conroy, used to tell us that, whenever someone read one of our stories, it was as if that reader were climbing a mountain. Every detail we included was another object we were asking that reader to put in her backpack; it would piss off the reader to make her carry weight she didn't ultimately need. Years later, when I encountered Bellamy's work, I found myself thinking frequently of Conroy's rule, because Bellamy violates it with such flamboyance, as if telling her reader: *Put all this stuff in your backpack—I don't care how heavy it is.* She embraces gratuitousness—the electricity of transgressed boundaries—to create a certain invasive intimacy between reader and writer. In her work, she strives toward “a highly-crafted mystique of the unmediated that seduces the reader into profound discomfort.” Bellamy uses confession the way Lucio Fontana used knife slashes on canvases—as a gesture of both form and content, a way of creating a texture of radical and unexpected openings. In one poem, riffing on Emily Dickinson, she writes, “Tell all the truth but tell it like the Earth hatching.” This is what it feels like to hear Bellamy tell the truth—like a queer, disruptive form of birth.

Born in 1951, Bellamy spent her early years in Hammond, Indiana. Her father was a union carpenter and her mother worked in a school cafeteria; her brother ended up with a job in the steel factory near their childhood home. In one essay, Bellamy imagines him working in the “small windowed box” of a crane above the steaming vats of steel: “I can’t eradicate this image of my brother hovering precariously above a raging Inferno.” She goes on to recall her yearning to leave the world of her childhood:

I lived in notebooks, lying on my bed writing feverishly along their cool blue lines, while in the living room my father the carpenter smokes and cusses. . . . In my notebooks I dreamed I knew Latin and I lived in the Alps, where I hovered above the world craneless, educated and beautiful, with a mind lofty and brilliant enough to defy.

She writes, “It was the lie of art I wanted more than anything else as a child.” Ultimately, though, her writing has been an art not so much of lies

but of steelwork: turning the hard metal of autobiography into something molten, a substance that sparks and hisses and flows. Although Bellamy's writing resists traditional linear forms of autobiography—by jumping around in place and time and genre, veering between criticism and confession, and complicating her first-person perspective with various fictive alter egos—it is rarely far from her own experience. Taken as a whole, her books assume the shape of an exuberant, jagged mosaic of anecdotes, asides, riffs, and gossip, collectively telling the story of what Bellamy has called the “project of leading The Most Decadent Life Ever Lived By a Girl From Indiana.”

Bellamy's working-class background has also sharpened her voice. “Both the elegance and shockingness of Dodie's work seem to be about her class relation,” Eileen Myles, another blue-collar child, has said. “Part of the thing of feeling like you don't belong in a room is that you're kind of like, ‘Oh yeah, you think I don't belong here, well, I'll *show* you I don't belong here.’” Bellamy's autobiographical narrators—often grumpy, resentful, self-pitying—are gleefully confrontational. A therapist tells her that she has “reverse charisma,” and one of her fictive alter egos calls an unsuspecting wife to say, “I just wanted you to know that Quincey and I have been having sex several times a week.”

After Bellamy left home to attend college, at Indiana University, she became involved in the spiritual group Eckankar, which she now considers a cult. She was in her first significant romantic relationship, which had begun when she was just eleven, with a girl whom she first met in kindergarten. They were together for fifteen years, and both of them became deeply involved in Eckankar. Bellamy, who left after ten years, now sees that she was drawn to the group by her deep hunger for connection. “I was dysfunctionally shy, a borderline agoraphobic, afraid to talk to salesladies in department stores,” she has written. “As Eckankar filled my life, I felt like I was entering Shangri-la; a new glistening world of love, of possibility opened before me.” Fascinating traces of these cult years linger in her aesthetic. The experience provided early exposure to the sublimity of the ordinary—sex, the physical world, the body—and offered glimpses of self-acceptance. For most of her childhood, Bellamy writes, “I would have dumped this lump called Dodie in a minute. When I joined the cult I no longer needed a dream world, no longer needed a glamorous avatar, for I was Soul and Soul is the most beautiful.”

Bellamy ultimately found an enduring sense of community in the New Narrative movement that emerged from the San Francisco poetry scene in the late seventies, especially in the workshops that the poet Robert Glück hosted in the bookstore Small Press Traffic. The writers in this group—many of them queer and making work that was often sexy and transgressive—embraced what Glück called the “found material” of autobiography and “the pleasures and politics of story, gossip, fable, and case history.” Bellamy took workshops at San Francisco State University and ran a reading series at Small Press Traffic, eventually becoming its director, in 1995. In 1998, when she was forty-seven, after a decade or so of writing in workshops and publishing with small indie presses, she published her début novel, “[The Letters of Mina Harker](#).” The book, which Semiotext(e) has just reissued, is an epistolary novel written from the perspective of the heroine of Bram Stoker’s “[Dracula](#)”: once a “plain-Jane secretarial adjunct to the great European vampire killer, Dr. Van Helsing,” but now a sort of vampiric spirit inhabiting the body of an AIDS-era San Francisco writer named Dodie. This hybrid perspective allows for a wry form of autobiography: we get Dodie’s largely happy open marriage to a character named KK (Kevin Killian), and her volatile affairs with a handful of men, told from the perspective of a spirit ravenous for sex and for emotional intensity. The device of being inhabited by Mina is a way of creating distance between the first-person “I” of the text and the identity of the writer: it’s a way for “Dodie” to stand outside herself, with Mina as the spectral distillation of her id. Bellamy writes, “*There are so many Others camping out in Dodie’s body,*” and this sense of crowdedness applies both to the body of the narrator, possessed by a vampiric spirit and constantly seeking the bodies of her husband and lovers, and also to the body of the text, which borrows prose from other writers. This chorus of Others is yet another way in which Bellamy insists on excess: she understands the self as a jostling horde of influences and intimacies, rather than as a coherent or singular entity.

If Bellamy is a patron saint of contemporary literary excess, it’s worth asking what makes this excess feel artful rather than merely, well, excessive. It’s partly a matter of observational acuity. Her avalanches of prose are studded with sharp moments of specificity, and her descriptions, though heated by curiosity, affection, or lust, are always cooled by wit. In “Mina Harker,” she describes one of her lovers as “a blind noun fumbling about for a seeing-eye verb,” and another as a man with “armpits reeking of musk and

meanness [who] decorated his apartment in a style that I could only call ‘boys dorm’ [and] cooked jambalaya with a prepackaged seasoning mix—but when he lay down on my back I felt so hollow, his arms looming on either side . . . his colossal heart pounding my rib cage like a drum.” It’s a character sketch with a distinct emotional arc: the razor-sharp dismissiveness about the lover’s taste ultimately punctured by the desperate satisfaction of their bodies moving together, the raw sentiment of his pounding heart against her rib cage. Her desire wrestles with her frantic cognitive machinery; the mind appraising and rejecting, the body still craving.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Bellamy’s excessive prose, however, is her masterly deployment of brevity. Her snowballing associational riffs often stop short at a brief, blunt declarative sentence. An essay about her cluttered apartment meanders into a meditation on the “communities of symbiotic bacteria and viruses and fungi that live on and inside my body,” before arriving at a moment of aphoristic elegance: “My physical being is a hoard.” When Bellamy condenses sentiment in this way, it’s as if she had just taken an entire messy bedroom and stowed it in a fanny pack. (This, Frank Conroy could tolerate.)



*“While the duck appears to be calmly working from home, under the surface it is frantically checking social media.”*  
Cartoon by Will Santino

In her fifties and sixties, Bellamy continued to calibrate her distinctive blend of excess and precision. She has written the kind of candidly sexual material

that older female authors don't often attempt, publishing two volumes of cut-up poetry—titled “[Cunt Ups](#)” (2001) and “[Cunt Norton](#)” (2013)—and a genre-bending collection of personal writings, “[Pink Steam](#)” (2005), which inspired a Sonic Youth song of the same name. In 2011, she published a memoir made up of blog entries, “[The Buddhist](#),” recounting a self-destructive affair with a third-rate self-help guru. Her 2014 book, “[The TV Sutras](#),” incorporates material that draws heavily from her own experience in Eckankar. In one scene, the narrator articulates a sense of stinging disappointment at hearing her spiritual master’s terrible jazz record: “How could an enlightened being produce music this bad and not even realize it?” Rather than simply disavowing or ridiculing cult belief, however, Bellamy tenderly explores this longing for meaning and community, asking, “Dare I reclaim what’s considered vulgar in spirituality?” Reclaiming vulgarity has always been at the core of Bellamy’s project: reclaiming the vulgarity of the body, in all its discomforts and desires, and reclaiming the vulgarity of unregulated emotions—needy desire, obsessive fixation, corrosive heartbreak, and, now, in “Bee Reaved,” the repetitive, all-consuming grief of widowhood, as the great scribe of excess turns her gaze toward its dark twin: loss.

At the end of “Mina Harker,” a character based on Bellamy’s husband crouches above Dodie and tells her, “I’m your house. . . . This is what you always wanted, isn’t it, a house that talks.” It’s a funny, sharp, sweet articulation of marriage: domesticity as gothic and playful and generative. In Kevin Killian, Bellamy found not only her life partner but also her greatest subject. For all the bad behavior and sensationalism that defines her writing, the most fascinating emotional plotline running through her œuvre turns out to be the story of her thirty-three-year marriage.

Bellamy met Killian during her early days in San Francisco, just before the onset of the *AIDS* crisis; she was queer and he was gay, a recent transplant from Long Island, but their friendship ultimately turned into a lifelong romance. “On the surface, you sounded like a horrible choice,” she writes. “An alcoholic homosexual who’d never had a mature relationship. But we could talk and I felt like I could tell you anything.” Their marriage was open, and in Bellamy’s autobiographical texts she and Killian often discuss the emotional dynamics of her affairs. The queerness of their union was liberating for her. “I sometimes think of heterosexuality as a form that never

“felt natural to me,” she has written. “Kevin came to me as a gift to create this in-between state; I see our marriage as a poem rather than an overburdened project proposal.” The fluidity that Bellamy sought in her creative life, living ecstatically between and across genres, found an echo in the fluidity of her emotional life, and of her marriage. In “My Mixed Marriage,” an essay published in the *Village Voice* in 2000, Bellamy writes, “Sometimes our lovemaking felt like lesbian sex, sometimes like gay sex, but it never felt like straight sex. . . . With straight guys I felt like I was alone in the dark, being acted upon. With Kevin, it felt like we were two people in mutual need and at equal risk.”

“Bee Reaved” explores many of Bellamy’s long-standing obsessions—abjection, shame, community, intimacy—but the vantage point of grief brings something new. The frenetic, gossipy relaying of events in earlier writing gives way to a pandemic landscape of dulled quietude. “Now she has things she always wanted—an office of her own, enough closet space,” Bellamy writes, of herself. “She mocks up excitement for her newfound expanses, then clenches with guilt, then she doesn’t give a damn.” Mourning alone during lockdown, she writes, “Widowhood is an anti-space.” But, in Bellamy’s rendering, grief isn’t so much the opposite of excess as its extreme: an emotion so large it has no edges. Bellamy “thinks back to a line she read in a Jungian book in the 1980’s, about women whose lives fell apart: *the contained has lost its container.*” She seeks out homes in form: the Bee Reaved of the book’s title is the tongue-in-cheek name of an alter ego she creates to inhabit her grief. Narrative becomes another “house that talks”—expressing experience by containing, bounding, and organizing it.

Reading “Bee Reaved,” I was struck by the sense that the outsized emotions in Bellamy’s previous works—heartbreak, familial distance, even the death of her mother—were a kind of training for mourning this great love on the page. In a 2015 essay about her mother’s death, Bellamy writes, “I have the urge to write down everything, to embalm the trivial against the onrush of death.” “Bee Reaved” asks us to recognize that the form of her work—frenzied association, heaping accumulation, sensual abundance—has always been driven by an awareness of mortality. There’s been a skull lurking in every cluttered still-life. Her style has been about death the whole time.

But now all her chaotic energy, once smeared across whole vistas, feels more contained. In these grieving essays, she digs deeper into the thorny dynamics of intimacy than she did in her more sensational early work. (As the husband character in “Mina Harker” remarks, “Not *another* sex scene!”) The emotional terrain of mourning is so inexhaustible, and so exhausting, that Bellamy keeps circling around it to peer at it from numerous angles: she does close readings of the movie car chases that Kevin loved; she explores a YouTube mogul’s grief for his dog, finding herself “ravenous for media images that resonate with my unendurable”; she summons the spectral, multifaceted figure of Kevin himself, “the mess of a popcorn-eating chainsmoking Stephen King fan I fell in love with.” Bellamy describes three decades of marriage as “a study in redundancy and variation, and so much love there is no need to fixate on any particular moment of it.” But these pages radiate an aching hunger to do justice to every particular moment. At one point, Bellamy addresses Killian directly: “How dare you leave without having resolved every narrative thread of our relationship. I’d weigh instances where you seemed to demonstrate love against that one time in the movie theater when you didn’t hold my hand.”

When Bellamy writes that grief makes her mind “a sticky thing that bits stuck to, random bits,” the image recalls the “heap of garbage” she would dwell in to resurrect her “other one,” as if creating a mound of memories and associations could bring him back. In the last essay in “Bee Reaved,” framed as a long letter to Killian, Bellamy writes, “I was eager to take on your dying, to totally devote myself to your sickness. It’s as if this hidden cave in my psyche opened and out flew a swarm of bats wearing little nurse’s caps.” It’s an unexpectedly and delightfully cartoonish image that summons a conflicted truth about pain: how it makes available parts of ourselves that we might not otherwise have known. Ultimately, however, its glee has the aftertaste of death—one of the most wrenching elements of “Bee Reaved” is how its artistry always gestures back to the cave of grief from which it emerged. As Bellamy puts it, “Anything I do to survive you is a betrayal.”

Throughout the collection, Bellamy’s use of the second person reveals a recognizable yearning: to resurrect the dead by staying in conversation with them. Relating Killian’s final hospital stay, she tells him about moments he wasn’t conscious for: “You would have loved the nurse. She had tattoos down her arms and was very performancey, dramatically announcing her

every move.” In telling Killian the story of his own death, Bellamy hungers to bring him close to her again—to make even this experience something they can share.

The impulse to make writing a form of dialogue only intensifies something that has always been true of Bellamy’s work: it seeks the intimate texture of conversation. Reading her often feels like sitting at a bar with a friend who makes the world vibrate with wit, humor, tenderness, dynamic detail. Sometimes her perfectly distilled sentences make me wonder if her work would be stronger if it consisted *only* of these whittled moments, like pristine scrimshaw. But her writing feels more proximate and tender in its cultivated messiness, as if we were accompanying Bellamy through the undomesticated landscape of feeling in all its lush wilderness. How bloodless and transactional it would be to have friendships or marriages in which we offered one another only our best lines, rather than all the fumbling between them. It’s consoling, even consolidating, to be witnessed in our uncertainty, our banality, our clutter. Ultimately, the genre that Bellamy’s work tends toward is not the essay or the novel but partnership itself, and the promise of totality that it carries: the fantasy of a relationship that can hold everything. ♦

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In “Dear Memory,” Chang experiments with the grammar of loss, addressing letters to those who will never respond, and finding meaning in their silence.

By [Kamran Javadizadeh](#)

Certain losses change your grammar. The writer Victoria Chang lost her mother six years ago, to pulmonary fibrosis. Six years before that, her father had a stroke, then slid into dementia—there but not there, another kind of lost. In “[Obit](#)” (2020), a book of poems written in the form of newspaper obituaries, Chang observes the effect of these absences on language: “The second person dies when a mother dies, reborn as third person as *my mother*.” The lost loved one is no longer a “you”; she is someone Chang can describe but can never again address.

“Obit” accepts this transformation of grammar as generative poetic constraint: the obituary is defined by the remove of the third person, the brisk objectivity of someone writing about death on a deadline. The book is a catalogue of losses, from the obviously traumatic (“My Mother,” “My Father’s Frontal Lobe”) to the seemingly trivial (“Voice Mail,” “Similes”). Chang has said that she chose the obit form because she “didn’t want to write elegies.” The elegy, poetry’s traditional response to death, is a genre for mourning, usually in the first-person singular. By contrast, an obituary measures; it yields a public record of a completed life. Chang’s poems, too, attempt to contain loss. Occasionally—beautifully—those attempts falter. The book includes four obituaries for “Victoria Chang.”

A year after publishing “Obit,” Chang is still writing about her grief. Now, however, she is speaking not only of loss but also to it: her new book, “[Dear Memory](#)” (Milkweed), is made up of letters—to the dead and the living, to family and friends, to teachers, and, ultimately, to the reader. She has given up the authority of the third person for the vulnerability of direct address. If “Obit” sought a container for loss, “Dear Memory” is a messier formal experiment, an open-ended inquiry not of a bounded life but of an ongoing present, full of longing and imperfection.

Part of what makes this project difficult is that Chang feels the loss of things she never really possessed. Her grandparents fled mainland China for Taiwan, and both her parents left Taiwan for Michigan, where Chang was born and raised. Each move granted the next generation access to the kind of

future the previous one could only imagine. But opening new doors required closing old ones. Even the most basic facts about Chang's family's past remain mysterious to her: it is only by sorting through old documents that she learns her mother's birthday, her father's rarely used American name. These are details of lives that cannot be straightforwardly commemorated through elegy or captured through obituary. As Chang writes, "What form can express the loss of something you never knew but knew existed? Lands you never knew? People? Can one experience such a loss? The last definition of absence is *the nonexistence or lack of*. See how the *of* hangs there like someone about to jump off a balcony?"

Chang has followed language to the edge of what she knows; the question her book asks is whether language can go further still, whether it can be trusted to secure a safe landing for that dangling preposition. In one letter, Chang asks her mother about leaving China for Taiwan: "I would like to know if you took a train. If you walked. If you had pockets in your dress. If you wore pants. If your hand was in a fist, if you held a small stone. . . . If you had some preserved salty plums, which we both love, in your pocket." Here is a set of wishes that can't be granted. And yet there's alchemy in the prose: the serial "if" of Chang's wondering becomes a kind of conjuring; the elusive conditional—the unknowable scene, the imaginary pockets—ultimately yields a tangible, familiar, "preserved" fruit.

What makes this magic possible is the form and the grammar of letter writing. Letters accept the absence of their addressee and the asynchrony of contact—and out of those constraints make another kind of presence possible. To send a letter is to believe in a time and place in which it will be read. Writing to her mother, Chang begins with hypothetical desire ("I would like to know") but arrives at present-tense fact ("we both love"). A lonely fantasy turns into a shared reality; that "we" is the reward, however provisional, of epistolary intimacy.

"*I write to you. I receive no letter.*" Those are [Emily Dickinson](#)'s words, sent to friends, which Chang quotes in a letter of her own. Dickinson's is an ordinary complaint, but Chang's is profound: she has, necessarily, lost all hope of a response. "When she died," Chang writes of her mother, "I thought there had to be letters to me inside her body, but someone burned her body." The poignance here is double: even when her parents were alive

and well, they kept their stories to themselves. “The only language we had wholly in common was silence,” Chang writes. “Growing up, I held a tin can to my ear and the string crossed oceans.”

This is a child’s fantasy of connection. What, then, is the writer’s? As Chang understands it, her family sacrificed “to build a better life, without the incisions of the past.” Her own project is not to erase those incisions—or even, as a child might hope, to heal them—but to retrace and redescribe them. If there are wounds in the past, she seeks to live with them as scars.

These incisions take a literal form in collages that Chang intersperses throughout the book, made from fragments of her family’s informal archive—photographs, government documents, snippets of correspondence—which she manipulates, sometimes cutting away elements of the documentary record, often adding anachronistic commentary. Over an old snapshot of herself and her sister in amusement-park teacups, waiting to spin, Chang layers two lines of poetry: “Childhood can be reduced / to an atlas.” On consecutive copies of her mother’s certificate of United States naturalization, a strip of Chinese characters obscures first the eyes and then the mouth in a passport-style photo—a palimpsest formed by the past’s intrusions on the future’s promises.

A decade before her mother died, Chang conducted an interview with her. Where the letters in the book are searching and digressive, written without expectation of an answer, the interview is a formal, real-time exchange. In excerpts that appear in the collages, Chang asks her mother straightforward questions: When did you come to America? Where did you go to graduate school? Had you always planned to stay? In one collage, the answers (“1964”; “*YOU DON’T NEED TO WRITE IT DOWN*”; “*OH NO NO NO*”) are superimposed on an architectural diagram of a suburban home, similar to the one where Chang grew up. The text and the image stitch Chang’s curiosity about her family’s forgotten dreams together with a blueprint for what became their lived reality. The result is ambiguous: the floor plan sells prospective buyers on a generic, idealized formula for Anglo-American life (“The Oxford”), even as the interview betrays the contingency of Chang’s Asian American childhood.

In one of their conversation's most wrenching moments, Chang's mother recalls a memory from her journey to Taiwan: "I still remember a woman holding a small child's hand to get on the boat and then she realized it wasn't her child." What did she do?, Chang asks. "Brought her on the boat," her mother replies. The simple story haunts the book, revealing a latent truth of these letters: between parents and children, there is always some radical gap —one that we must live with, and in. A child may feel as though the hand she holds will never let go; a mother may think that the child is "hers." Neither is right. The connection between them is an invention, an experimental grammar. We make it up as we go. ♦

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# **Classical Music**

- [Winter Classical-Music Preview](#)

By [Ussama Zahr](#)

After last year's season of deprivation, classical presenters are rebounding with a feast of winter events that provide familiar comforts and some surprising delights.

The **Metropolitan Opera** undertakes its second twenty-first-century opera in as many months, Matthew Aucoin's "**Eurydice**" (Nov. 23-Dec. 16). Then it pivots to a time-tested holiday game plan, condensing Laurent Pelly's dreamy production of Massenet's "**Cendrillon**" into an English-language, family-friendly attraction (Dec. 17-Jan. 3) before unveiling Bartlett Sher's Art Deco-inspired take on "**Rigoletto**" on New Year's Eve.

The **New York Philharmonic's** annual "Holiday Brass" concert returns, in all its refulgence, to Alice Tully Hall (Dec. 16-18). The **Oratorio Society of New York** and **Musica Sacra** each bring their own *COVID*-friendly abridgment of Handel's eternal oratorio "**Messiah**" to Carnegie Hall (Dec. 20 and Dec. 21, respectively).

At the 92nd Street Y, **Jeremy Denk**, whose memoir, "Every Good Boy Does Fine," comes out in February, plays Book I of Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavier" (Dec. 4), and the violinist **Randall Goosby** plays Florence Price (Dec. 9). In Morningside Heights, **Miller Theatre** resumes in-person activities with a "Composer Portraits" concert of Kati Agócs's work (Dec. 9), and the magnificent Cathedral of St. John the Divine hosts free events by the **Orchestra of St. Luke's** (Nov. 19) and the **American Symphony Orchestra** (Dec. 16).

The **Prototype Festival**, marking ten years of vital contemporary opera and music theatre, rushes into the classical calendar's post-holiday vacuum with a barrage of premières (Jan. 7-16). The drag artist and MacArthur "genius" grant recipient Taylor Mac portrays Socrates in "**The Hang**," a queer reimagining of the philosopher's final hours, and the hip-hop-jazz band Soul Inscribed recounts the history of marijuana in "**Cannabis! A Viper Vaudeville**."

A steady stream of stars, including **Igor Levit** (Jan. 13), **Maxim Vengerov** (Jan. 20), and **Renée Fleming** (Jan. 23), pass through Carnegie Hall's gilded proscenium, and the painterly pianist **Víkingur Ólafsson** makes his

anticipated début in Zankel Hall (Feb. 22). The **Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center** gives the New York City premières of Marc Neikrug's chamber opera "A Song by Mahler" (Feb. 17) and Anna Clyne's string quartet "Breathing Statues" (March 24). **Death of Classical**, which has one concert series in a crypt and another in a catacomb, unearths a third subterranean space, below St. George's Episcopal Church, for "**The Cave Sessions**," inaugurated by the violinist Jennifer Koh (Feb. 8-28). ♦

# **Comment**

- [Running Out of Time at the U.N. Climate Conference](#)

By [Elizabeth Kolbert](#)

For those inclined to see them, there were plenty of bad omens last week as the latest round of international climate negotiations—*COP26*—got under way in Glasgow. A storm that lashed England with eighty-mile-per-hour winds disrupted train service from London to Scotland, leaving many delegates scrambling to find a way to get to the meeting. Just as the conclave began, Glasgow’s garbage workers went on strike, and rubbish piled up in the streets. Prime Minister [Boris Johnson](#), in his opening speech, compared the world’s situation to that of [James Bond](#), who often finds himself “strapped to a doomsday device, desperately trying to work out which colored wire to pull to turn it off, while a red digital clock ticks down remorselessly to a detonation that will end human life as we know it.” As one commentator pointed out, in his latest movie—spoiler alert!—Bond ends up dead.



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

[Joe Biden](#)’s performance in Glasgow, too, was inauspicious. In his formal remarks to *COP26*, the President declared that the United States was “back at the table” and “hopefully leading by the power of our example.” Later that day, Biden was undercut by Senator [Joe Manchin](#), Democrat of West Virginia, who announced that he wasn’t quite sure he could support the \$1.75-trillion spending package on which Biden’s claims rested. The timing was, as the A.P. noted, “unfortunate.” In separate, unscripted remarks in

Glasgow, Biden circled back, acknowledging that the U.S. is not leading by example—or, really, leading at all. “I guess I shouldn’t apologize, but I do apologize for the fact the United States, in the last Administration, pulled out of the Paris accords,” he said, referring to the set of climate agreements negotiated at *COP21*, in 2015. He added, by way of understatement, that this has “put us sort of behind the eight ball.”

*COP26* is a sequel to *COP21*, which was an attempt to recover from the mess of *COP15*, held in Copenhagen in 2009. To really appreciate America’s fecklessness, however, you have to go all the way back to the conference that preceded all these bad *COPs*—the so-called Earth Summit, in 1992. At that meeting, in Rio de Janeiro, President [George H. W. Bush](#) signed the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, which committed the world to preventing “dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system.” At the United States’ insistence, the convention included no timetable or specific targets for action.

With no benchmarks to meet, there was, it turned out, no motive to do anything. At an early Conference of the Parties—*COP3*, held in Kyoto in 1997—an addendum, or protocol, was added to the treaty, laying out different emissions-reduction targets for different countries. The U.S., which at the time was by far the world’s largest emitter of greenhouse gases, was supposed to cut its annual output by seven per cent. President [Bill Clinton](#) signed the Kyoto Protocol, but the Senate wouldn’t ratify it, and, under [George W. Bush](#), the country withdrew from the agreement.

Over the next decade, the U.S.’s emissions didn’t drop by seven per cent; instead, they rose. In the meantime, China, which, as a developing nation, had no Kyoto target, overtook America as the world’s biggest emitter on an annual basis. (The U.S. retains the title on a cumulative basis.) By 2009, it was clear that the planet was headed for dangerous warming and beyond. That fall, President [Barack Obama](#) flew to Denmark and pledged that the U.S. was, at last, ready to act. Nevertheless, *COP15* ended in bitterness, with no agreement on how to move forward.

At *COP21*, in Paris, nations were invited to submit their own, voluntary emissions targets. This choose-your-own-adventure approach was aimed at avoiding a repeat of Copenhagen and also at circumventing the U.S. Senate,

which would have had to approve a new binding agreement. When all the voluntary targets were tallied, analysts concluded that the world was poised for warming of almost three degrees Celsius—roughly five degrees Fahrenheit—a disastrous prospect. Then Donald Trump announced that the U.S. wouldn’t honor its commitments.

All of which brings us to Glasgow. The Paris accords stipulate that countries return to the negotiating table every five years to offer new commitments, which are supposed to reflect each nation’s “highest possible ambition.” (Owing to the pandemic, five years became six this time around.) The Biden Administration has indeed submitted a more ambitious target, pledging to cut emissions by fifty per cent over the next decade. But even if the Manchin-delayed bill, which contains some five hundred billion dollars’ worth of clean-energy investments and tax credits, does pass the Senate, it’s hard to see how the country could meet this new target, U.S. politics being what they are. In fact, America is barely on track to meet its old, more modest Paris target. As Laurence Tubiana, a French diplomat who helped craft the Paris accords, told the *Guardian*, the U.S. has a “historical climate credibility problem.” Meanwhile, China’s commitments have been criticized as “highly insufficient,” and President [Xi Jinping](#) didn’t even attend *COP26*. “We showed up,” Biden noted, chiding Xi and the Russian President, [Vladimir Putin](#), another prominent absentee.

Last Tuesday, as Biden was preparing to leave Glasgow, there was a flurry of announcements. More than a hundred countries, including the U.S., pledged to cut their emissions of methane, a potent greenhouse gas. Roughly a hundred countries also pledged to halt deforestation by 2030. On Thursday, twenty countries, the U.S. among them, vowed to stop spending tax money to finance fossil-fuel projects abroad. These announcements were hailed by many as a reason for optimism, and perhaps they were. But as no less an expert than the U.N. Secretary-General, António Guterres, noted on Twitter, “Signing the declaration is the easy part.” (Among the signatories of the forestry pledge is Brazil, where deforestation has surged in recent years.)

The sad fact is that, when it comes to climate change, there’s no making up for lost time. Every month that carbon emissions remain at current levels—they’re running at about forty billion tons a year—adds to the eventual misery. Had the U.S. started to lead by example three decades ago, the

situation today would be very different. It's still not too late to try—indeed, it's imperative to try—but, to quote Boris Johnson, “humanity has long since run down the clock on climate change.” ♦

# Crossword

- [The Crossword: Wednesday, November 3, 2021](#)

By [Natan Last](#)

# **Dance**

- [Winter Dance Preview](#)

By [Marina Harss](#)

At one point during the Joyce Theatre's streaming presentation of the tap dancer and choreographer **Ayodele Casel's "Chasing Magic,"** in April, Casel turned to the pianist Arturo O'Farrill and said, "What will be will be." With a smile, they launched into a joyously intimate passage of rhythmic repartee. "Chasing Magic" conveys, with great power, the pleasure of dance, of rhythm, and of making music together. It comes to the Joyce, live at last, Jan. 4-9.

**Jamar Roberts** emerged as a powerful new force in dance just before the pandemic, with works that explore pain, history, and the beauty of the body in motion. Roberts is the choreographer-in-residence at Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, where he has been a dancer since 2002; he retires from Ailey with a show on Dec. 9. In the next few months, he produces two new works: "Holding Space," for Ailey, premières during the company's winter season (at City Center, Dec. 1-19); the other, as yet untitled, for New York City Ballet (at the David H. Koch on Feb. 3, as part of N.Y.C.B.'s winter season, Jan. 18-Feb. 27), is his first staged dance for a ballet company.

**Pam Tanowitz's "Four Quartets"** lands at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (Feb. 10-12) almost four years after its creation. In this ambitious work, poetry (by T. S. Eliot) converges with music (by Kaija Saariaho), visual imagery (by Brice Marden), and dance, in a structure that allows each to breathe and glow. At its heart are Eliot's "Four Quartets," meditations on existence and time, read here by the actress Kathleen Chalfant. The dance, with its bracing clarity, springs from them while suggesting narratives of its own.

Instead of slowing down during the pandemic, **Tiler Peck**, of New York City Ballet, orchestrated a series of Zoom rehearsals with the choreographer William Forsythe. The result was "The Barre Project," a set of physical tongue twisters in which dancers dazzle with their speed and articulation. The dance is the centerpiece of a program curated by Peck (at City Center, March 3-6) that also includes works by Alonzo King and Michelle Dorrance.

If ever a dance provided food for the soul, it is **Mark Morris's "L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato,"** from 1988, set to Handel's pastoral of the

same name. The dancers stream out of the wings, buoyed by the music and surrounded by Adrianne Lobel's luminous sets. When it returns to *BAM* (March 24-27), all troubles are forgotten, at least for a while. ♦

# Fiction

- “[Hello, Goodbye](#)”

By [Yiyun Li](#)

## Content

### [View Iframe URL](#)

*Audio:* Yiyun Li reads.

Nina held between her hands baby-shaped air, her left hand supporting an unseen head, heavy for the supple neck, her right hand patting. She had read somewhere that an infant found it calming when the mother's patting matched her heartbeat.

“Guitar?” Ethan guessed.

Nina shook her head. She changed her position so the baby would be upright. She had recently begun to pay attention to mothers with infants.

### [Yiyun Li on friendship and Tolstoy.](#)

“Burping?” Katie said. “Nursing?”

Nina blinked twice, and switched back to rocking the air.

“Baby?” Katie said. “Infant?”

The second word might be easier. Nina waddled around the ottoman.

“Duck?” Ethan said. “Duckling?”

“Baby duckling?” Katie said.

“Baby duckling? That’s what I would call redundancy,” Ethan said. His voice had a grating quality, like sandpaper, but Katie didn’t seem to notice. Perhaps even the coarsest sandpaper would leave no damage on a night smoothed by drinks and youthful optimism, Nina thought. “Ugly duckling?” Katie tried again.

Nina went back to pampering the air. Then waddling. Pampering and waddling.

“Oh, I know, I know!” Katie shouted. “Mother Goose?”

“Yes!” Nina said, making way for the next person. *Hickory dickory dock, the mouse went up the clock*, she hummed as she took a seat. Nina was twenty-seven, not helplessly young, yet far from being trapped in a mildewed marriage, as she tended to believe many middle-aged women were. Things were going well for her and her friends that year. The Y2K bug had not materialized. The Twin Towers still stood. Everyone had a few ideas for a startup. Katie and Nina worked in marketing in Silicon Valley, and both were confident that before long they would find the next hot company. They were planning to travel to Prague the following summer. They were impressionable, and therefore predictable, though neither realized it then. They found joy in what they were told contained joy: Birkenstocks, artistically designed CD racks, a new platform for bloggers called LiveJournal, Yo-Yo Ma’s solos in “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon.”

Nina and Katie had met as roommates in their freshman year at Berkeley. Neither was a California native, and they had spent their college years together, becoming Californians. There had never been a doubt that after graduation they would stay in California—returning to where they had come from was not an option. Nina was the daughter of Chinese immigrants who owned a grocery store, East-West Market, in a college town in Kansas. Her father drove a refrigerated truck to Chicago once a week to pick up stock, her mother tended the shop, and her paternal grandmother cooked homemade food, which was sold inexpensively and served in their minimally remodelled garage, to graduate students and visiting scholars from China. Katie had grown up in a small town in Indiana. Her father was a locksmith, and her mother worked in the cafeteria at the high school. A genetic disease that affected only boys ran in her family; Katie, who had no brothers, felt for her male cousins and their parents. She thought her family, with three daughters, was luckier.

They were both girls with some history, but it was history taken on credit from their families. They scarcely had a past, mistaking a backpacking trip in Wales to celebrate their twenty-fifth birthdays together for their past, and, before that, the ordinary heartaches they’d collected in high school and college. They thought about their future as a game of connect the dots: from ideas to I.P.O.s. They were lucky—that much they knew. They both had

friends in their home towns, whose futures, seen through their Californian prism, looked dim, even bleak. They were lucky, but they did not know that theirs was beginner's luck.

Twenty years had passed since that game of charades. Katie had not married Ethan, who had not reciprocated her love. Nor had she married any of the slew of men after him, all seemingly suitable yet each exhibiting flaws that were intolerable to Katie. Sometimes Nina thought about the Matthews and the Jakes and the Dustins whom Katie had dated, and wondered where they were in their lives. Harmless bores, Katie called them. Nina's husband, Daniel, a pediatric dentist, fell into the same category, though Katie never pointed that out. She did not have to.

Raymond, the man Katie did marry, was twenty-eight years older than she, and had sold three companies and taken up a semiretired life by the time they married. Raymond was not a harmless bore. Rather, he was a bully and a bore, though Nina had voiced this thought only to herself.

One afternoon, Nina sat on her porch with Katie, who had arrived with four marigolds and several rosemary sprigs from her garden, which garnished the gin-and-tonics they were now drinking. Raymond was on the road again, this time in a new, extra-deluxe R.V. He dreaded flying. Nina had never asked what was behind that, but she wished he were plagued by many more fears. At the beginning of the marriage, Katie had travelled with Raymond in his R.V. In recent years, she had been joining Nina and her family on their summer holiday instead.

"The way he goes around as though *COVID* were fiction, I won't be surprised if he gets it," Katie said.

"But you could get it from him," Nina said. What she really wanted to say was, Well, he's not that young, is he?

"I'm moving out," Katie said. "He's away for more than two weeks. Now's the perfect time."

"Oh." The resolution was not a new one, and Nina did not expect much to come of it.

“I’m serious. I hired that forensic accountant I told you about.”

Until the week before, Nina had not known what a forensic accountant’s job entailed, or that such an expert might be needed to dissolve a marriage. Katie had stopped working in marketing after the wedding, and had started a boutique spice shop with two other women, who, like Katie, needed something to do and a reason to get out of the house. For years Katie had been talking about divorcing Raymond. Crying wolf, but now the real wolf was about to show up, in the form of a forensic accountant.

“What do you think?” Katie asked.

“Why now? Don’t you want to wait until the pandemic is over?” Nina said. It was a refrain for her at the moment. Anything that required her attention, anything that demanded a decision, she moved to an indeterminate future time when she would no longer have an irrefutable excuse.

“How long will the pandemic go on?”

“Who knows.”

“Then I don’t want to wait,” Katie said. “Nothing happens now. I need to get something done.”

Was boredom a good reason to divorce Raymond? No reason would be bad, Nina thought. “All right. What can we do to help?” she said. “Do you need a place to stay?” Their house was a quarter the size of Katie and Raymond’s house, up in the hills, but they could make room for Katie. The girls wouldn’t mind, and Daniel had foreseen this inevitability for years.

Katie said that she would think through everything that weekend. They drank more and talked about their cancelled trip to Japan. They had been planning to fly to Tokyo after the Olympics. They had gone to Rio in 2016 and London in 2012. Going to a party after the revels were over appealed to both of them: for Nina, it was a financial consideration; for Katie, something akin to a good joke.

“Remember the innkeeper in Dubrovnik? The guy who complained about his wife?” Katie said, recalling another vacation they’d shared, right after

Nina got engaged. Katie had said that they needed a holiday to celebrate their last days of freedom.

“Sort of,” Nina said. “Tell me again?”

Nina liked to be told stories, and Katie was good at telling stories. In college, when they watched a movie together, Nina would have forgotten nearly everything about it within days, but Katie could recount the movie, sometimes shot by shot, so that Nina could see it in her mind’s eye once more. Memories—the shared ones and the ones that Katie saved up from her life to amuse Nina—were related as if they were scenes from movies. Even the most mediocre stories became entertaining in Katie’s telling.

The man in Dubrovnik was one of those harmless bores. After taking down their passport information, he had seated himself on the patio, speaking to Nina and Katie in fairly fluent English. Other than the bench and a patch of space around it, the patio was covered by flowerpots. The man complained about his wife, whose biggest sin, he said, was her addiction to buying potted plants.

“But they make the patio look nice,” Katie said.

“Three pots are enough for looking nice. She has thirty-six here,” the man said. He pointed to the courtyard. “There are more down there. And she’s still buying. They cost money. The water costs money.”

The exchange had gone on for a while, Katie talking, Nina listening, the husband complaining, and the wife, who spoke no English, smiling at them while carrying a giant watering can up and down the steps. “You should buy her a garden hose,” Katie said to the man.

“Why should I?” the man said. “I don’t want to make it easy for her.”

On Nina’s porch, Katie reproduced their exchange with the innkeeper, altering her voice and accent and acting out his grudge. Later that night in Dubrovnik, Katie and Nina got lost heading back from a club, and an English couple had tried to help, but none of them could identify where they were on the map, all having drunk a bit too much and having difficulty

distinguishing one statue from another. In the end, it was Nina who decided to follow a trickle of water that the night breeze had not yet dried.

“Remember, you said you’d noticed the water running down from the patio into the street when we left the apartment,” Katie said. “Why, have you forgotten that? Why is it that some people’s memory is not as good as others’, have you ever wondered?”

There was a difference between forgetting and not remembering. Nina was not as forgetful as Katie thought; it was just that she did not indulge herself by bringing the past into focus. Nina did not believe in the benefit of seeing the past or the future with too much clarity—one could lead to undue nostalgia, the other to unwarranted alarm. The present was another matter. She wanted to be as clear-eyed as possible about the present. But she said none of this to Katie. She liked to imagine Katie revisiting their fairy-tale-like youth, when the water from thirty-six drenched pots had led them back to safety in a foreign city. “Who knew we could do this,” Nina said, taking the marigold out of her glass and swirling it.

“Do what?” Katie asked. “What is ‘this’?”

“Being married,” Nina said. “And being middle-aged.”

“Well, we’ve done more than that, haven’t we? You have your children, and I’ll get my divorce.”

“Children are optional,” Nina said. Of course she loved her daughters, but being stuck in the bungalow since the beginning of March had made the girls at once older and younger. They sounded more like the teen-agers they would become in a year or two, and they had also rediscovered their talent for throwing tantrums.

Raymond had had two childless marriages before Katie. He had never wanted children. Katie had offered this up as an argument in support of his candidacy as a husband. A marriage has to start with some consensus, Katie said, as though that could explain away the impulsiveness of her decision. She had seen several aunts devastated by their sons’ inherited illness. She

herself did not want any heartache from her marriage, she said. Nina preferred to think that Katie had been spared that.

At dinner that evening, Nina told her family that Katie might need to move in for a short time. The girls liked Katie, as she did not commit the cardinal sin common among adults—interfering where she had no right to. Daniel, an experienced calmer of squirming and screaming children in his dentist’s chair, was good at keeping his opinion to himself. Even so, he had drawn the line at Raymond, whom he despised. Daniel was a solid and good man. Nina’s two sisters adored him: a family man with an even temper. Her mother approved of Daniel’s profession but not his receding hairline. Her father, making his best effort to tone down his criticism, remarked only that he himself could not see the merit in a man “who would not give out as much as a silent fart even if you beat him with a stick.”

“Will Katie take a *COVID* test before she moves in?” Ella, the cautious twelve-year-old, asked. Nina had once fretted about Ella’s rigidness, but her habit of frequent hand washing had turned out to be a desirable thing under these new circumstances.

Nina said that for sure Katie would get tested. Paige, who was eleven, asked if her best friend, Cameron, could move in if she, too, took a *COVID* test. Nina replied that Cameron’s parents might not see that as a good idea.

“If her parents are fine with the idea?” Paige pressed. “Can we have her, too?”

“You see her on Zoom every day,” Nina said.

“But we haven’t seen each other in person for four months,” Paige said. “If Katie can come for a drink, why can’t Cameron come over for a visit?”

Before Nina could form an answer, Ella said, “Grownups think they’re more trustworthy, but there’s no evidence for that.”

“It’s so not fair,” Paige said.

Nina would be fine with Paige and Cameron doing a few outdoor activities, but Cameron’s grandparents lived nearby, and her parents, having made a

family pod, weren't socializing with anyone else. Nina wished Daniel would say something about the good they were doing for the future by tolerating some inconvenience now. Nina could not bring herself to say those reasonable words; even the thought made her feel tired. She wished she could tell Paige to shut up and finish her meal, but there was a reason she never talked to her children like that. She and her sisters had grown up with similarly strong—and stronger—words from their parents.

"Really, Mommy, don't you think grownups are stupid enough to mess up the world for us?" Paige said.

"There's no guarantee we'll be better when we grow up," Ella said.

Ella's premature defeatism often alarmed Nina; shouldn't a child have a childlike sense of justice, and a childlike optimism? The few times that Nina had brought up the worry with Daniel, he'd rightly pointed out that Nina also wished Paige could be more rational, like Ella. "Who wants ice cream?" Nina said. Diversion was a parental tactic she had learned from Daniel. "Katie and I made some this afternoon."

"What flavor?" Daniel asked.

"Mango," Nina said. "Katie brought mangoes."

"Cameron can bring mangoes, too, just so you know," Paige said.

Nina scooped four perfect balls of ice cream into four bowls. Only then did she allow herself to speak. "Paige, Cameron's mom does not feel comfortable with the idea of a playdate."

"More of a reason for us to rescue her," Paige said.

"Rescue her from what?" Nina asked.

"Some children feel homeless even when they have a home," Ella explained with a patient equanimity, the way she would point out to Paige that the snail she had drawn was a rare species, as most snails had shells that swirled in the opposite direction.

Daniel looked at Ella, and then Paige. “Is that how you feel?” he said.

“No,” Ella said. “But I can’t speak for Cameron.”

“I can,” Paige said.

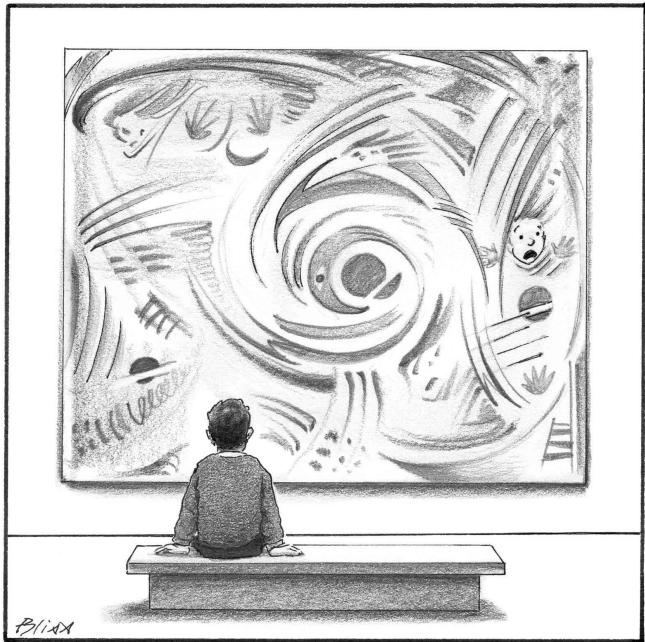
“Do you think she’d be happier if she moved in with us?” Daniel asked.

“Of course,” Paige said. “Do you know how hard it is to be the only child? It’s always two to one, her parents outvoting her and then saying it’s democracy.”

“Have you thought of moving in with Cameron?” Ella said. “So you get a vote there?”

Nina wished that Ella had not put that idea into Paige’s head, but fortunately a chunk of mango in Paige’s bowl distracted her. The children believed that finding a piece of mango or strawberry in their ice cream brought special luck, which struck Nina as illogical: she could easily offer them a bowl of mango or strawberries without generating such enthusiasm.

At the end of August, Katie moved into Ella and Paige’s playroom. Only for a couple of weeks, until she found a place, Katie said. She had hired a real-estate agent, who, dressed in P.P.E. that looked like a spacesuit, visited the potential rentals with her iPad and showed Katie the walk-through from different angles. The good thing about Katie looking for an apartment or a house virtually was that Nina could be there to offer a second opinion. She would not have been able to check out all the places with Katie in normal times.



*"It's almost as if you can get lost in it, Timmy. Timmy?"*  
Cartoon by Harry Bliss

Having an additional person interrupted the monotony of housebound family life. Paige's remarks were now often addressed to Katie, hoping for agreement or approval, which Katie was always ready to offer. "You wouldn't have known what a doomsday looked like when you were our age, right?" Paige said to Katie one morning, when they were all dumbfounded by the unfamiliar eerily orange color of the sky, as smoke from a wildfire covered the Bay Area.

"No, I never saw a real doomsday," Katie replied. "I only worried about things that would never happen."

"Like what?"

"Like a nuclear war. I worried that I would still be a virgin when the world ended," Katie said. "Why is your mom frowning at us?"

"Because she's trying to look like a parent," Paige said. "And she's a puritan."

"Where did you learn that word?" Nina said. "You don't know what a puritan is."

“She learned it from me,” Ella said. She was reading a brick-thick book at the far end of the living room. “A puritan, a.k.a. a hypocrite, is a condition, like a virus. Parents catch it easily.”

Nina wanted to say that a person cannot be a condition, but who was she to teach Ella anything?

One afternoon, while Katie was showing Nina a bed she was thinking of ordering, Ella stood behind them, knocking her teeth against the edge of a glass of lemonade as though it were the glass she meant to consume. It was a habit that Nina found distracting, though she had never said anything. “I feel bad for the bed-makers’ lack of imagination,” Ella said, after finally taking a sip of the lemonade. “Queen bed, king bed, California king, why is there never a dictator-size bed?”

“Don’t suggest that to Trump,” Katie said.

“Some entrepreneur could make a fortune naming a bed after him,” Ella said.

“Like Raymond,” Katie said. “He would do that in an instant.”

Raymond’s name was not forbidden in the house, but Nina had never told the girls anything concrete about the man. She herself preferred not to dwell on the many dramas that Katie had told her about over the years. Once, at a restaurant, Katie had thrown her wine in Raymond’s face, and he, in turn, had thrown his wine in her face, and, when a waiter approached, Raymond had pushed a hundred-dollar bill into his hand and told him to shut his mouth and bring an extra set of napkins. Once, after a quarrel, Raymond had left Katie in a parking lot in Reno and driven on to Idaho by himself, and Katie, instead of renting a car, had taken a two-thousand-dollar cab ride back home because, she said, why not—it’s his money, in any case. After a wedding in San Diego, Raymond had cornered Katie in their hotel room, insisting that she remove her underwear because he wanted to take a sniff—he had seen her flirt with a guest, he said, and then had noticed that they were both absent from the party for some time. Katie had narrated these episodes to Nina as though they were merely scenes from movies about bad marriages, which could be forgotten afterward.

“He sounds like an awful person,” Ella said.

“He is an awful person,” Katie said.

“Why did you marry him?” Ella asked.

Why indeed, Nina thought. Katie glanced at her. “Because I wasn’t as smart as you are, and I didn’t have parents as smart as yours to tell me a thing or two.”

“Mostly we’re smart,” Paige said, appearing just in time to correct Katie. “No offense, but grownups are mostly pretty stupid.”

“Well, that’s why I married an awful man,” Katie said.

Nina wondered why neither she nor Daniel was good at having conversations with their children. They sounded like dull parents, and they sounded as though they didn’t have much confidence in their impostor selves but nevertheless hoped for some reward for their effort. When she voiced this worry, Katie said, “But you love them, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“That’s enough.”

Is it, though, Nina thought, watching Katie measure their drinks. The air outside was heavy with smoke, and they had to forgo the porch.

“Did your parents ever worry about their conversational skills with you guys? Mine didn’t. And we’ve turned out fine,” Katie said. “Besides, what can parents do for children? Things go well for a child, or things don’t go well. We know it’s really just luck.”

Someone working with a forensic accountant had to be pragmatic and unsentimental. Still, Nina frowned at the drink passed to her. “What? You think I’m too indifferent?” Katie asked.

“No, not that,” Nina said. “Did I tell you about Ella’s friend who shoplifted at Sephora?”

“When? What happened? You never tell me stories,” Katie said.

But it was not a mere story, Nina thought, looking at Katie with her usual inarticulate doubt. Early in the year, a girl in Ella’s class had been posting pictures on Snapchat of lip glosses she had sneaked out of Sephora. When it happened a third time, Ella told Nina, who wondered if she should talk to the girl’s parents, or if she should check in with any of the other parents in the class, but Ella sternly warned her not to.

“Surely she’d be mortified if her mother was a snitch,” Katie said.

“That’s how Paige would feel,” Nina said. Ella, she explained, had a different attitude. She thought her friend was stupid to post the pictures: someone was bound to take a screenshot; in fact, Ella said, she had done just that, all three times, though she refused to show the pictures to Nina. What if the girl kept doing it and then was caught one day, Nina asked Ella. Did she not think that the parents should know, so that they could do something to help her? But that was exactly the reason the parents shouldn’t be told, Ella said. Grownups would be of no help; they would only kick up a big fuss about the wrong thing and make life difficult for the girl, and for her friends who had seen the pictures without reporting the crime.

“She said, and I quote, ‘Things will go right for us if we’re lucky, things will go wrong if we’re not lucky, there is nothing you parents can do.’ ”

“Didn’t I just say the same thing?” Katie said.

“Ella,” Nina said, “is twelve.”

“If a twelve-year-old hasn’t thought through these things, how much hope do you have for her? You should be happy for Ella.”

How could I be, Nina thought. The world holds a perpetual scolding power over all parents—no, not all parents, but those who want to be good and do the right thing for their children. Even so, she could muddle through being Paige’s mother. But being Ella’s mother made her feel that she was no more than a frog trapped in a pot of water along with Ella. If they were unlucky, if the water were brought to a slow boil, what could Nina do but endure that

fate with her daughter? A long-forgotten moment from Ella's infancy came to Nina. Ella was seven months old, and had just begun to crawl. One day Nina noticed that the baby's knees, once smooth and unblemished, had started to show a few creases. No parenting handbook or blog had prepared Nina for that: wrinkles and creases on a baby's kneecaps, a price paid for mobility. Nina, uncharacteristically, wept. Another person—Daniel or Katie or, one day, Ella herself, as an adult—would explain Nina's tears as a result of exhaustion and postpartum hormone changes. They would not be wrong, and yet Nina, caressing her baby's knees, had envisioned all the things she would not be able to shield her child from, starting with the carpet. What blind courage had led her into motherhood?

And yet, she thought now, those knees, less perfectly smooth than they had been the day before—what did that matter in the larger scheme of things? Her mother, toiling away amid the shelves at East-West Market, had hardly noticed the scrapes and bruises that Nina and her sisters had incurred as they grew up. Her maternal grandparents, boat people on the Yangtze River, had begun one day with eight children on the boat and at the end of the day counted seven.

“So did you say anything to the girl’s parents?” Katie asked.

“No.”

“What happened after?”

“Nothing, as far as I know,” Nina said. “The pandemic started. The girl wouldn’t have an easy opportunity to do it again. Why? Do you think I should’ve said something?”

“Would you prefer to be told about it, if you were the girl’s mother?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t be so certain,” Katie said. “Did I ever tell you the story about my cousin Jock?”

“The one who died in his sophomore year?”

“Yes, but I only told you about his death,” Katie said.

How strange, Nina thought, that after a young life ends people think and talk about the death more than the life. It is easier that way: tragedies and catastrophes always have an ending. Perhaps that was why Katie could tell many good stories about the violent and dire moments in her marriage; dramas lent a sheen of bravado to a bad choice. Harder to communicate—which was perhaps the reason Katie never did—was the enduring unhappiness. Boring, Katie would call the stretches of time between crises: physical closeness fused by a passion that was not love, everyday interaction without the kindness of everydayness, a truce that promises no peace. Katie would insist there was nothing to say about those times. But the truth was that neither she nor Nina had words for what could not be fitted into the mold of a story. Are good choices and bad choices all that different? The consequences of those choices are where life is, and there Nina and Katie were similarly muddled.

“There was this crazy teacher, Mrs. Gill, in fifth grade,” Katie said. “Every year she picked out one boy. A sort of psychological pincushion for her. And physical, too. Don’t ask me why no adult interfered. They knew about it, but they would tell themselves two things: one, Mrs. Gill has been teaching for decades and must be respected, and, two, it affects only one boy per year, so the rest of the class will still benefit from having a good teacher.”

“What did she do to the boys?”

“Nothing criminal. She gave them nasty nicknames. She pinched them on their upper arms when she felt like it. In winter she hid their coats and told them they had to go out to the playground during recess without the coats. One boy per year. No one could do anything to help you if you happened to be that boy. And the funny thing is, she knew to choose the boys who could do nothing to help themselves.”

Nina thought of protesting—how could people let this go on?—yet she knew not to. Terrible things happen all the time, to the deserving and the undeserving; people are never short of excuses for inaction.

“And, when we were in fifth grade, my cousin Jock was the chosen boy.”

“What about the parents of those boys? What about your aunt and uncle?”

“Jock’s father had already left, so there was only my aunt. Do you think Jock should have told her about it? He didn’t. None of Mrs. Gill’s boys was a tattletale.”

There was an unfamiliar rigidity in Katie’s face. Nina felt an ache in her heart. The day before, Raymond had phoned. He had talked coolly about how many more years he would live, how much money Katie would get if she stayed in the marriage, how often he expected her to have sex with him, and calculated out that each time she had sex with him she would make eight thousand dollars. More money than most women can earn in their wildest imaginations, Raymond had said. When Nina was told about the conversation, she’d had to remind herself not to get too upset—with Raymond, but with Katie also. Katie had simply laughed, at Raymond’s predictability, and at her own predicament.

“Did you tell your aunt?” Nina said.

“Yes. I thought someone had to tell her. Someone had to help Jock. But I was wrong. My aunt went to Mrs. Gill, she went to the principal, but what good did that do for Jock? Or for herself?”

“What happened after?”

“Nothing. The same old treatment for Jock. The only thing he could do was wait until fifth grade was over. My mother said she wished I hadn’t told Aunt Clara,” Katie said. “She was right. If a person doesn’t have the power to solve a problem, she’s only causing pain by sounding an alarm.”

Nina shook her head. “Surely I should’ve warned you not to marry Raymond.”

“Surely there was a reason you didn’t,” Katie said. “You knew I would insist on making the mistake.”

“You knew it was a mistake?”

“Not the same kind of mistake as telling Aunt Clara about Mrs. Gill. I regretted that. The pain I caused her and Jock,” Katie said. “And yet what was it compared to his death?”

“You don’t regret marrying Raymond?”

“If you’d grown up in Pigeon Blanc, Indiana, you’d think a bully with money was ten times better than a bully without money,” Katie said. “I don’t mind dramas. I’m not afraid of jerks.”

So Katie had entered her marriage, Nina thought, with the same blind courage that had propelled her into parenthood.

“I couldn’t marry one of those good men you thought I should have, you know that.”

“I don’t know,” Nina said. “Why couldn’t you?”

“They would’ve had expectations I wouldn’t be able to meet,” Katie said. “The point is, you can’t marry a good man casually. It causes pain.”

And yet a casual marriage to a bully—had it not made Katie suffer, in ways she would never admit? Nina thought about that game of charades all those years ago. They had been lucky then, not knowing that once the dots were connected their lives would look nothing like what they had fantasized about. That, too, should give her some hope: for better or for worse, there are always things that remain unknown to the young, even to the most precocious children, like Ella.

“Hey, are you all right?” Katie said.

“Not quite,” Nina said. “But I’ll be all right.”

She was crying, as uncharacteristic of her now as her weeping over a baby’s knees had been. It was the past brought into focus, or the future that was always there, taunting them, eluding them. She remembered Ella’s winter concert in kindergarten. During the days leading up to it, Ella had practiced taking a bow as meticulously as a scientist conducts an experiment. The music teacher had taught the children to bend at the waist, look at their toes,

and say in their quietest voice, *Hello, shoes. Goodbye, shoes*, before straightening up.

“I always thought she was a genius teacher,” Nina said after telling Katie the story.

“Hello, sadness. Goodbye, sadness,” Katie said, handing Nina the box of Kleenex.

“Yes, yes,” Nina said, wiping her eyes. “Wouldn’t it be nice if everything could be that simple? Hello, pandemic. Goodbye, pandemic.”

Katie stood up and took a deep bow. “Hello, bad choice. Goodbye, bad choice,” she said, with the confidence of a good actor, knowing that the next moment the curtain would fall and she would be free to think about her real life elsewhere. ♦

By [Cressida Leyshon](#)

# **Field Trip**

- [George Floyd Curriculum](#)

By [Zach Helfand](#)

On a sunny morning last month, the students in Ms. Jones's second-grade class and Mr. Wilkinson's fourth-grade class lined up single file outside P.S. 213, in East New York, Brooklyn, for a field trip to learn about police brutality. The second graders wore sky-blue polos and the fourth graders were in maroon. They had little masks with polka dots or the logos of football teams. They'd been invited by Terrence Floyd, a former school-bus driver, to visit Union Square to see the new statues of [John Lewis](#), [Breonna Taylor](#), and [George Floyd](#), who was Terrence's brother.



*Terrence Floyd* Illustration by João Fazenda

Terrence was waiting in the schoolyard for the buses. He was dressed in a black T-shirt printed with his brother's name. After George's murder, Terrence started a foundation, We Are Floyd, to rebuild communities affected by police violence. This was his first local school program. He chose P.S. 213 because that's where he'd gone to grade school. (George grew up in Houston with his mother, and Terrence lived in Brooklyn with their father.) He wondered how much the students knew about George. "These kids shock you nowadays!" he said.

When the buses arrived, Terrence rode with the second graders. Ms. Jones explained that George Floyd was now part of the class's lesson plan. "We teach who he was, what happened to him, why it happened," she said. "It's

very real, very honest. We talk about injustice and inequality. They are very, very shocked. A lot of them actually want to be cops when they grow up.”

Terrence said he had fond early memories of the police in his neighborhood. They’d play ball with kids or go to block parties. But that changed as he grew older—several times, he’d had guns drawn on him. “I had a big one pointed at my head,” he said. “I’m walking down the street and all I heard was ‘Stop!’” He laughed. “I fit the description of somebody—you know, that same story.” When it happened, he’d been about five years older than the fourth graders.

A boy sitting in back, eating apple slices, was looking curiously at Terrence. “Is he really real?” the boy said.

“Yes, he’s real, he’s right here!” a chaperon replied.

“Is that *him*? ”

“No, this is Mr. Floyd’s brother. Remember? You thought we were making the story up?”

“I thought it was just faking it!”

“No, it’s not a fake.”

The boy stood up and shouted, “I saw your brother die for real!”

The chaperon replied, “Yes, but we’re gonna have to stop yelling—inside voice—and, yes, his brother did die. We didn’t like how it happened, right?”

Terrence looked undisturbed. He said to the chaperon, “If they ask, that means they’re curious.” He went on, “I want them to know the truth. How much he was about love. One of his biggest statements was ‘I’m for you.’ That’s what we would say in English, but because he’s from Houston, he’s always telling me, ‘I’m fah ya, little bro.’ ”

The students shouted out the sights. “We’re in Chinatown!” . . . “China?!” . . . “Town! ” . . . “Ooh.” . . . “This is awesome!” . . . “I don’t like China.” . . . “You haven’t been to China!” . . . “O.K., yeah.”

At Union Square, the students sat pretzel-style around the bronze busts. Ezra Pean, a facilitator from Confront Art, the group that commissioned the statues and helped organize the trip, said, “Does anybody know who George Floyd is?”

A fourth grader stepped forward and spoke in a loud staccato. “What I know about George Floyd is that he passed away from police brutality. What happened is the police suffocated him, and he didn’t even do anything. And that was a part of racism. They had him on the ground, and one of them put their knee on his neck, and then he ended up running out of oxygen and dying.”

Pean invited the kids to discuss racism, fairness, and why, even if they do something wrong, they still deserve to breathe. Pean explained the story of Breonna Taylor. (“So there’s something called a no-knock warrant. Everybody say, ‘No-knock warrant!’ ”) Passersby stopped to watch; when Pean asked if anyone had heard of John Lewis, a bald Black adult raised his hand.

Afterward, everyone ate pizza and drew pictures about what they had learned. There were dolphins, monsters, school buses, hearts, stars, seagulls, moms and dads, clouds, houses, PlayStation 4s, and little notes to George or Terrence. A boy missing a front tooth drew his family, including George and a wife he’d sketched for him. On the back, he’d scribbled some letters. “I tried to write, ‘We want justice,’ ” he said. “But I kind of made an oopsie.”

What else did he learn?

“I don’t want to say.” Prodded by another boy, he finally said, “O.K. We learned how to be famous! And we learned about justice. And I’m sorry that George Floyd died. That’s what I learned.” ♦

# L.A. Postcard

- [The Death of a Sweatpants](#)

By [Carrie Battan](#)

In June, the fashion designer Scott Sternberg made plans to vacation in Hawaii in October. He wasn't sure if the trip would be a celebration or a consolation. If things went according to plan, he would have sold his company, the cult leisure-wear brand Entireworld, to a larger apparel company, and stayed on as creative director. But if the sale didn't fly, he would run out of money and be forced to shut down the business.



*Scott Sternberg* Illustration by João Fazenda

The second scenario happened. On October 13th, Sternberg's forty-seventh birthday, he announced on Instagram that Entireworld was closing. He had been trying to find a buyer or investors for months, and now the anticipated deal, he wrote, "disappeared in a flash." He took off for Hawaii.

"It wasn't like I was dying to be acquired by this company," Sternberg said, after his trip. He was in his silver Audi, driving on the freeway in L.A., where he lives. His Brussels griffon, General Zod, snoozed on his lap. He explained that the deal's terms kept getting worse. "My intent was always to land the plane, not crash the plane," he said. He is now facing all of the unglamorous duties associated with shutting down a business: communicating with creditors and factories, and getting rid of as much merchandise as possible in a half-price liquidation sale. In the future, Sternberg may venture outside of clothing. "I don't want to sound

egotistical, but I think I do well giving brands a sense of purpose,” he said. “And by that I mean, like, why are you here? Why should anybody care?”

Sternberg has an unusual résumé for a garmento. An Ohio native with a degree in economics, he was an agent at C.A.A. (clients included Diet Coke and Sprite) before launching the fashion brand Band of Outsiders, in 2004. The label became a fashion-world favorite, known for skinny ties and a clever take on preppy classics. Although he won two C.F.D.A. awards, a bad investment deal forced him to shut down, in 2015. In 2018, after a stint with Gwyneth Paltrow’s [Goop](#), he launched Entireworld, which specialized in affordable but elegantly designed basics in vibrant hues—T-shirts, underwear, socks, and sweats.

When the pandemic hit, Entireworld’s signature monochrome sweatshirts (\$176) became the unofficial W.F.H. uniform for cosmopolitan office workers. Sales were up six hundred per cent; the business brought in almost five million dollars in the span of a year, and items were often sold out. Selena Gomez and Aidy Bryant were fans, as was the fashion editor Eva Chen.

Sternberg parked and strolled into the high-fashion department store Dover Street Market, which was almost empty, the boom-boom of electronic music echoing off its concrete walls. An employee dressed in casual goth cooed at General Zod.

“How’s it going?” Sternberg asked.

“Not much to do,” she said. “We’re just kind of moseying around, dancing a little bit. Trying stuff on. You know?”

Sternberg is disillusioned about the luxury business and what he considers its crazy-making price points. Like a lot of designers, he prefers to wear nondescript casual clothes, and that day he had on oversized drawstring canvas pants and an Entireworld T-shirt. Still, he enjoys surveying the market. “I love coming in here and touching everything,” he said. “I come here to be inspired.”

In a store full of outlandish garments, he was instantly drawn to a rack of duds that resembled his Entireworld line. He held up a pair of cropped twill trousers. “They’re by some guys called Evan Kinori?” he said, peering at the tag. He fondled a dark-green hoodie. “Two hundred twenty. Not insane.” He shrugged. “This, I like. It’s honest. It’s pure. It feels special but anonymous.”

He picked up an asymmetrical women’s blouse in a baroque print, by Junya Watanabe. “Like, that shirt is an *idea*. Don’t let anybody order that,” he said. He grabbed a white lineny dress by Jonathan Anderson. “So pure,” he said. “It’s *not* an idea.”

Consumers might assume that Entireworld went under because people have returned to their offices, but that’s not the case. Sternberg said, “Listen, once you get people into sweatpants, it’s hard to get them out of sweatpants.” The truth, he went on, is that a company like Entireworld was simply not sexy enough for investors. “I found myself not really putting the gimmick over.” He curved his fingers into air quotes and said, “We’re a circular economy,” mimicking a Silicon Valley pitch. “Fuck you, no, you’re not.”

He stared down the [Gucci](#) rack. “This is all in the realm of costume,” he said. He touched an embroidered linen dress (\$3,500). “This is just Gucci trying to fill a *SKU* plan.” But a pale-green pleated skirt (\$1,800)? “Chic as shit.”

“What I love is that it’s everybody’s little arts-and-crafts project, in a way. Even Gucci,” he said. “But where I get lost is, you just look at a price tag and it doesn’t make sense. The values of the marketplace just don’t seem to align.” ♦

# **Letter from Honduras**

- [Is the President of Honduras a Narco-Trafficker?](#)

By [Jon Lee Anderson](#)

## Content

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Outside the Daniel Patrick Moynihan Courthouse, in lower Manhattan, police stood watchfully behind yellow “Do Not Cross” tape. An agitated crowd had gathered: people chanting, jostling, shouting into megaphones. Some waved blue-and-white Honduran flags. Others held up signs in English and Spanish: “No Clemency for Narcopolitics.”

It was March 30, 2021: sentencing day for Juan Antonio (Tony) Hernández, a former Honduran congressman who had been arrested in Miami in 2018, on suspicion of drug trafficking. After a trial in the Southern District of New York, Hernández had been found guilty of taking part in the smuggling of at least a hundred and eighty-five thousand kilos of cocaine into the U.S.—enough to supply five doses to everyone living in America.

On the street, protesters waved a huge hand-painted banner that read “Extradition for the Narcopresident”—a reference to the most explosive aspect of the trial. According to witnesses’ testimony, Hernández had been aided in his criminal enterprise by his brother Juan Orlando Hernández, the President of Honduras. Prosecutors charged that the Hernández brothers had been on the take for a decade or more, and that Tony had used his proximity to power to help move Colombian cocaine through Honduras and toward the United States, sometimes in collaboration with Mexico’s Sinaloa cartel.

Inside the building, Hondurans packed an overflow room, intently watching a monitor that showed the interior of the court. As they waited for Hernández to be brought in, a middle-aged woman complained about conditions back home: “The price of beans has risen so much, only the rich can eat them.” Another woman announced that her grandfather had been murdered—a victim of the drug-related violence that has overwhelmed the country. Peering at the monitor for signs of Hernández, she said angrily, “I just want to see his face before I die.”

A moment later, Hernández was led to his seat. A clean-shaven man of forty-three, he is known at home as a blustering extrovert. Now, surrounded

by guards, he was subdued. A man observed, “Look how these people, who had so much power in Honduras, end up here like rats.”

The prosecutors’ case described a career of corruption that had helped transform Honduras into a virtual narco-state. Hernández, they said, had sold weapons to drug traffickers and tipped off dealers about U.S. efforts to train Honduran pilots for night raids. He had used millions of dollars from drug sales to finance his party’s elections; on behalf of his brother the President, he had accepted a million-dollar bribe from Joaquín (El Chapo) Guzmán, the head of the Sinaloa cartel. The lead prosecutor called Hernández a “uniquely bad character, who, along with his brother, is at the center of years of state-sponsored drug trafficking.” His criminal behavior, the prosecutor said, had left Honduras “one of the principal transshipment points for cocaine in the world” and “one of the most violent places in the world.” President Hernández has strenuously denied any involvement, and defense lawyers dismissed the key witnesses—several confessed drug traffickers—as serial killers who were looking for “get-out-of-jail-early cards.” Prosecutors pointed out that the evidence included a ledger of drug proceeds containing the President’s initials: J.O.H., as he is universally known in Honduras. They also noted that Tony sometimes carried an Uzi inscribed with the name Juan Orlando Hernández and the title Presidente de la República.

When Tony Hernández was given time to speak, he raised procedural objections: crucial evidence had not been reviewed, and his lawyers did not meet his standards. He said he felt that the U.S. had “betrayed” him, by failing to uphold his constitutional rights.

The judge, P. Kevin Castel, a slender, white-haired man, spoke with restrained outrage. He said that he had tried many defendants for drug crimes, from small retailers to drivers of go-fast boats. “Many are unskilled and impoverished, and are endeavoring to support their families,” he said. Hernández was different. “He makes an excellent appearance,” Castel went on, “well dressed and wearing a warm and engaging smile. He is well educated.” But, rather than use his advantages for productive work, “he became a major facilitator of the movement of cocaine,” going so far as to have his initials emblazoned on shipments of his own brand.

Castel listed some of the men who Hernández was believed to have put to death. Among them was his former business partner Nery López Sanabria, who reportedly had planned to coöperate with the D.E.A. In October, 2019, eight days after Hernández was convicted, López Sanabria was shot and stabbed to death, by assassins who had been allowed to breach an area of the maximum-security Honduran prison where he was being held. Six weeks later, his lawyer was killed. Three days after that, the warden of the prison was killed, too.

Hernández sat with hands clasped as his crimes were enumerated. Castel sentenced him to life plus thirty years in prison, and ordered him to forfeit a hundred and thirty-nine million dollars. He concluded, “We can hope that, looking back in years to come, today will have been an important step in eliminating the corrupting influence of narco-trafficking.”

The Honduran spectators were in a celebratory mood, but they were skeptical about the prospect of immediate change. In the overflow room, a young man blamed the United States for supporting corrupt Latin American governments, and for imposing “neoliberal policies” that had led to hunger and misery. The U.S., he said, bore responsibility for allowing a *pícaro*—a rascal—like Juan Orlando Hernández to remain in office.

In the U.S., Tony Hernández’s trial garnered less publicity than El Chapo’s had, in 2019, but in some ways its implications were more significant. Honduras is a longtime American client state, the recipient of billions of dollars in foreign aid and the home base of a strategically critical U.S. military force. Its President was allegedly actively involved in a large-scale trafficking operation, while the American government counted him as an ally. When I asked a U.S. official with extensive experience in the region how Hernández got away with it, he replied bitterly, “Because we let him. We looked the other way.”

For a powerful politician in Latin America, Juan Orlando Hernández is an unimposing figure. At fifty-three, he is a bespectacled man of medium height, medium weight, medium everything. He seems to have spent a lifetime following the most conventional route available. The fifteenth of seventeen children, he attended a military high school and studied law at the National Autonomous University of Honduras, where he was student-body

president. After college, he worked as a lawyer and a notary public. His most visible adventure as a young man was a stint abroad in Albany, New York, studying public administration at the state university there.

When Hernández entered politics, in the nineties, he joined the conservative National Party, a rival to the centrist Liberal Party. In 1997, he was elected as a congressman from Lempira, his rural home province. Married with four children, he opposes same-sex marriage and abortion and favors compulsory Bible readings in public schools. In his first term as President, he led a purge of the corrupt Honduran police force, and agreed to coöperate with the U.S. on counter-narcotics operations. Was this really the same man who promised to help drug traffickers ship cocaine to the United States, in order to, as one witness put it, “shove the drugs right up the noses of the gringos”?



*President Hernández denies the allegations against him, but graffiti around Tegucigalpa, the capital, suggest that many Hondurans are not convinced. Photograph by Tomas Ayuso for The New Yorker*

A few hours after Tony’s sentence was handed down, Hernández recorded an audio message for his loyalists. “What happened today is hard for the family, hard for me personally,” he said, in a brooding voice. “It makes me indignant, and it seems incredible that the false testimony of confessed murderers was credited in such a way.” He went on, “Sooner or later, it will be shown who is who in Honduras, what we have done and stopped doing, because between Heaven and earth nothing is hidden.”

Despite the suggestion of transparency, Hernández's appearances since then have been mostly limited to tightly controlled events: addressing the United Nations General Assembly, inaugurating a new Honduran Embassy in Jerusalem. Government-funded media outlets avoid mentioning the allegations against him. Before going to Honduras, I corresponded for months with Hernández's communications ministers, but once I arrived his officials refused to speak to me. Hondurans are mostly unconvinced by Hernández's denials. In the capital, Tegucigalpa, the walls are marked with graffiti deriding the President: "*Fuera J.O.H.*" ("J.O.H., get out") or simply "*J.O.H. Narco*."

On Avenida Francisco Morazán, a commercial boulevard named for Honduras's nineteenth-century national hero, the graffiti share space with billboards for Popeyes, McDonald's, and K.F.C.—a small sign of the symbiosis with the United States that has defined Honduras for a century. The relationship has brought little apparent benefit. When I first visited Tegucigalpa, in the nineteen-seventies, pine forests covered the surrounding mountains, but they were cut back as the city sprawled. In their place, slums have grown in red-dirt swaths gouged from the hillsides. More than a million people live in the city, and many of them are poor. Gangs run life in most neighborhoods. Tegucigalpa is a city of security walls and razor wire, where the wealthy move around in armored cars. The U.S. Embassy is protected by reinforced walls, of a kind more commonly seen in the Middle East; a vast new embassy is under construction nearby.

Over the years, Hernández has proved adept at cultivating American politicians. Tim Rieser, an aide to Senator Patrick Leahy who has worked for decades on foreign policy, recalled that Hernández visited Washington and invited him to meet at the Willard InterContinental, a Beaux-Arts hotel near the White House. "He told me how much he loved human rights—he actually used the term 'love,'" Rieser said. "J.O.H. is a polished politician. He calls you by your first name and tells people in Washington what they want to hear. With me, it was about human rights. With others, it's about capturing drug traffickers."

Under the Trump Administration, American officials hailed Hernández as a trusted partner on sensitive issues, including counterterrorism and anti-narcotics efforts. Perhaps most significant was Hernández's willingness to

help Trump curb immigration—especially from Honduras, from which a succession of highly publicized migrant “caravans” had set out toward the U.S.

According to estimates, there are at least five hundred thousand Hondurans in the United States, more than half of them undocumented; most have come in the past two decades. Always a poor country, Honduras has been increasingly beset by entrenched corruption, devastating hurricanes, and a persistent lack of jobs. As Mauricio Díaz Burdett, the director of a leading Honduran think tank, told me, “People don’t immigrate to the United States in search of the American Dream. They go there in order to survive.”

Nevertheless, Hernández signed a “safe third country” agreement, which allowed immigrants who arrived at the U.S.’s southern border, seeking asylum, to be sent instead to Honduras, to file claims there. Activists pointed out that Honduras, which has one of the hemisphere’s highest murder rates, was by no means a safe country, but Trump was pleased. Chad Wolf, the acting Secretary of Homeland Security, met with Hernández in Tegucigalpa and praised Honduras as a “valued and proven partner.”

The Administration’s most important assistance to Hernández came at the beginning of his second term, in 2017. The country’s constitution historically limited Presidents to one term, but a controversial Supreme Court ruling had lifted the stricture, allowing him to run again. The election was marred by claims of fraud, and by protests that resulted in at least twenty-two civilian deaths. Nevertheless, after a recount, the rubber-stamp Honduran electoral tribunal affirmed Hernández’s victory. A few days later, so did the Trump Administration. In 2019, as prosecutors pleaded their case against Tony Hernández, the U.S. Embassy tweeted out praise for its “strong relationship” with Honduras.

Cresencio Arcos, a former U.S. Ambassador to Honduras, described the transactional nature of American officials’ relationship with the government there: “The most important thing to our people is their access to the élites. It’s not important whether they’ve committed human-rights abuses, or even if they’re drug traffickers. J.O.H. is an evil scoundrel, and he outsmarted us because he figured out that by supporting us on drug interdiction and migrants he could blackmail us into going along with him.”

In January, 2021, a few days after Kamala Harris was sworn in as Vice-President, she was briefed about the allegations against President Hernández. An official who was present said that Harris, a former prosecutor, had an immediate response: “Let’s go get him now.” (A White House official said that the Vice-President’s team has never heard her say anything like this.) The attendees informed Harris that the U.S. government had a long-standing unwritten policy against indicting sitting heads of state —though the official added that he personally would like to “cut him off at the knees.”

A senior Biden official told me that the Administration intended to work around Hernández, by engaging with other levels of the Honduran government, and would avoid sending officials to visit while he remained in office. Much of this awkward work will fall to Ricardo Zúniga, the newly appointed special envoy for the Northern Triangle—as Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador are called. On several trips this year, Zúniga has refrained from stopping in Honduras. Instead, he has held Zoom meetings with leaders in civic society and in the private sector.

The Administration defined Central America as a priority early on, not least because of the way that Trump had weaponized concerns about immigration. A few days after Joe Biden’s Inauguration, a Presidential adviser on U.S.-Mexico border issues told me, “It’s not a case of *if* there will be a crisis but *when*.” Since then, hundreds of thousands of people have been detained trying to cross the southern border. It is a chronic emergency with growing political ramifications. The senior Biden official told me, “The thing is, these countries have the ability to change the outcome of the next U.S. elections. If we can change things just a little bit for the better, we’ll have done a lot.”

Soon after taking office, Biden handed the Central America portfolio to Harris. The new Vice-President had little experience with international diplomacy and no special expertise in Latin America. Biden seemed unconcerned, pointing out that he had carried the same brief when he was Vice-President. But many policymakers and analysts in Washington told me that the situation in the Northern Triangle has deteriorated significantly since the Obama era. Eric Olson, a Central America expert at the Seattle International Foundation, noted that decades of U.S. intervention had in

many ways made things worse. “Central America has not landed well, and it’s hard to argue that U.S. policy has been a success,” he told me. The United States has aided governments in this region, while ignoring corruption and abuses of power. “We didn’t regard these things as important as long as they stayed on our side in the Cold War,” Olson said. “A lot of foreign aid has been wasted, and now there is a lot of cynicism” about U.S. intentions. “The new Administration knows that it can’t do business as usual in Central America. Will they be successful? In the long run, possibly. In the short run, I fear not.”

Roberta Jacobson, who worked for decades as a U.S. diplomat specializing in Latin America, called the Northern Triangle “a poisoned chalice.” Harris and Zúñiga need reliable partners, but the United States’ willingness to encourage despots has left the region largely in the hands of corrupt autocrats. As Jacobson said, “Who is there to trust?”

The senior Biden official acknowledged that even the old playbook of propping up ruthlessly effective autocrats didn’t seem feasible anymore. “If there was an efficient authoritarian like Lee Kuan Yew out there, maybe we’d look the other way,” he said. “But there isn’t.”

In his view, the most worrisome Central American leader is Nayib Bukele, the President of El Salvador. “He’s hitting the whole authoritarian punch list —demonizing your enemies, dominating the legislative assembly, and then controlling your population through the media,” he said. Bukele, a forty-year-old former night-club manager, is an abrasive populist who tweets without restraint. (He got along notably well with Trump, whom he once described in a press conference as “very nice and cool.”) Bukele took office in 2019, and has become enormously popular, through an effective crime-reduction program and a relatively efficient response to the *COVID-19* pandemic. But he has also relentlessly undermined democratic institutions. In 2020, he ordered armed troops into the Salvadoran Congress to coerce legislators into facilitating the purchase of new security equipment. This past May, he fired the country’s attorney general and replaced five senior Supreme Court justices with his own picks. After Vice-President Harris, among other critics, registered “deep concerns about El Salvador’s democracy,” Bukele tweeted, “We’re cleaning our house . . . and that is none of your business.”

A few weeks later, Bukele ended his country's coöperation with the International Commission Against Impunity in El Salvador—a group, backed by the Organization of American States, that had been investigating corruption in his government. In September, Bukele's Supreme Court ruled that Presidents can serve two consecutive terms, allowing him to run for reëlection in 2024. The top U.S. diplomat in El Salvador lamented the move as a "decline in democracy." Days later, Bukele changed his Twitter bio to "The Coolest Dictator in the World."

In late June, Harris made her first foreign trip as Vice-President, with a stop in Mexico and a visit to Guatemala. With Hernández a pariah and Bukele openly defiant, Guatemala was the only Northern Triangle country where the Administration could hope to muster a semblance of official coöperation.

The trip did not go well. In a press conference with President Alejandro Giammattei, Harris announced a new U.S.-led task force, to oversee anticorruption efforts. "I can tell you from my work on this issue—follow the money," she said. There was surely money to follow. In 2007, the U.N. had created an investigative commission in Guatemala, which helped secure the prosecution of two Presidents, a Vice-President, and dozens of other officials, before being dismantled by Giammattei's predecessor.

Now the country's primary anticorruption body was the Special Prosecutor's Office Against Impunity, which Harris pointedly mentioned, promising the support of the United States government. Giammattei, visibly uncomfortable, denied malfeasance by his administration, and vowed to assist the U.S.'s efforts. But, when I talked with Giammattei several days later, he complained about the intrusiveness of international judicial systems, and said that he objected to calling the new anticorruption unit a "task force." He said, "It reminds me of the eighties"—a decade when the U.S. used the prospect of foreign aid to try to restrain Guatemala's military during a bloody civil war.

Not long afterward, I met with Juan Francisco Sandoval, who at the time led the Special Prosecutor's Office Against Impunity. When I described Giammattei's concerns, he replied diplomatically: "The President is entitled to his opinions, and he's a temperamental man." Sandoval was grateful to Vice-President Harris for offering support, though. Laughing, he said, "At

least now I know there's a place to which I can escape." A month later, Sandoval was removed from his post, and fled to the United States. In a press conference before leaving the country, he suggested that he had been pushed out because his office was looking into evidence that Giammattei had taken bribes from shadowy Russian investors. Soon after that, a warrant was issued for Sandoval's arrest.



"Take your time."  
Cartoon by Carolita Johnson

In Nicaragua, democratic norms are under even more direct assault. During the summer, the longtime Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega and his wife and Vice-President, Rosario Murillo, arrested scores of civic activists and opposition politicians, including eight candidates in this fall's Presidential election. Even old comrades have become targets. Ortega issued an arrest warrant for his former Vice-President, the seventy-nine-year-old novelist Sergio Ramírez, accusing him of money laundering, inciting hatred, and "conspiracy to undermine the national integrity." A senior White House adviser said he believed that Vladimir Putin, a close ally of Ortega, was instigating the crackdown, "just to undermine the U.S."

The United States has had little incentive to change the situation in Nicaragua; historically, most migrants from there have headed south, to Costa Rica, rather than toward the U.S. In much of the region, the Biden Administration has tried to apply pressure with targeted sanctions. This past

July, Congress authorized the State Department to sanction several officials close to Bukele, as well as others from Guatemala and Honduras. The Engel List, as the register of names became known, has since grown to include sixty-two people in the region. Those on the list had their U.S. visa rights revoked; they may also face frozen financial assets and, potentially, criminal prosecution.

These are more aggressive steps than the previous Administration took, but they are unlikely to produce radical change. Edgar Gutiérrez, a former Guatemalan foreign minister who is now a political strategist, told me, “One of the characteristics of mafia states, like the Central American ones, is that they are increasingly impervious to this sort of international pressure.” Migration and remittances prevent citizens from becoming desperate enough to demand change; complicit militaries protect corrupt leaders from real threats. “Their sources of enrichment and power—the corruption of the public budget, the flourishing trade in drug and people trafficking—are left intact,” Gutiérrez said.

In 2015, when Biden was Vice-President, he visited Capitol Hill to promote his solution for emigration, which encompassed the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America and the Alliance for Prosperity. “As far as I could tell, it was mostly a slogan, a repackaging of what we had been doing,” Rieser, the congressional aide, said. “I recall telling him we didn’t have credible partners in the national governments of those countries. They went ahead with it anyway.” The programs tripled U.S. expenditures on Central America, to more than \$3.6 billion. But, despite some local successes, the plans didn’t halt the region’s decline. In 2019, Trump restricted the aid for seven months, as leverage for new migration strictures.

During the 2020 campaign, Biden renewed his efforts, with the optimistically named Plan to Build Security and Prosperity in Partnership with the People of Central America. The plan called for spending four billion dollars to address conditions that encourage emigration—everything from corruption and violence to poverty and climate change.

This past May, Harris issued a “Call to Action,” urging international companies and organizations to pledge “significant commitments to help send a signal of hope to the people of the region and sustainably address the

root causes of migration.” Chobani and Nespresso signed up. Microsoft promised to expand Internet access and to invest in technology for greater transparency in government spending. Mastercard committed to digitizing a million small businesses.

To succeed, though, the Administration will need support from civil society in the countries of the Northern Triangle. One afternoon in Tegucigalpa, I attended a meeting hosted by Fredy Nasser, an industrialist who is thought to be one of Central America’s richest men, at the local offices of his conglomerate, Grupo Terra. In an expensively tasteful boardroom, Nasser suggested that Grupo Terra could help the Administration’s plan for the region; perhaps *UNITEC*, a private university that his family had recently acquired in Tegucigalpa, could be transformed into an educational hub, with a think tank working on Central American problems. With the right sort of backing, he said, it could also provide Hondurans with improved access to education, through scholarships for rural students.

We were joined by Nasser’s brother-in-law, Miguel Mauricio Facussé, an amiable, sandy-haired man in his early fifties. Facussé was excited by the possibility that the Administration’s goals might jibe with those of his company, Dinant—a consortium with interests in palm oil, snack foods, and detergent. He pointed out that Dinant employed nearly eight thousand Hondurans directly, and provided livelihoods for twenty-two thousand more. With U.S. government support, he said, the company could expand its operations and improve the lives of many others.

There was a potential complication: for much of the past decade, Dinant was notorious among human-rights organizations. The company was founded by Facussé’s father, Miguel, who died in 2015 as one of the country’s wealthiest men. His business was built in part on a vast network of African-palm plantations, acquired with the help of a law, passed in 1992, that allowed small personal plots in peasant coöperatives to be sold to private owners. As Facussé bought up thousands of acres, activists accused him of malfeasance and began invading his land. In the ensuing conflict, dozens of people died, most of them activists and farmers killed in executions that human-rights groups have linked to Facussé’s private security force.



*Airstrips in plantations have become a favored venue for drug runners looking to land planes. Photograph by Tomas Ayuso for The New Yorker*

“It was like a civil war,” Miguel Mauricio Facussé told me, in the Grupo Terra offices. But, he argued, the violence had really been carried out by farmers and activists, not by the company’s security men. Seventeen Dinant guards had died, he said, and land invaders had occupied nearly a third of the family’s palm groves. He conceded that the conflict had eased after Dinant consented to disarm its guards. But he noted with pride that the company had agreed to a strict code of conduct, monitored by a law firm in Washington, D.C.

He told me that the land invasions continued, some of them apparently backed by organized crime. This was where the U.S. could help Dinant, he suggested—by encouraging the Honduran government to uphold the rule of law. He offered to show me the situation at his main palm-oil plantation and food-manufacturing facility, in Tocoa, in the north. We could go there by helicopter. It wasn’t a long ride, and we could stop at his family’s wildlife preserve nearby.

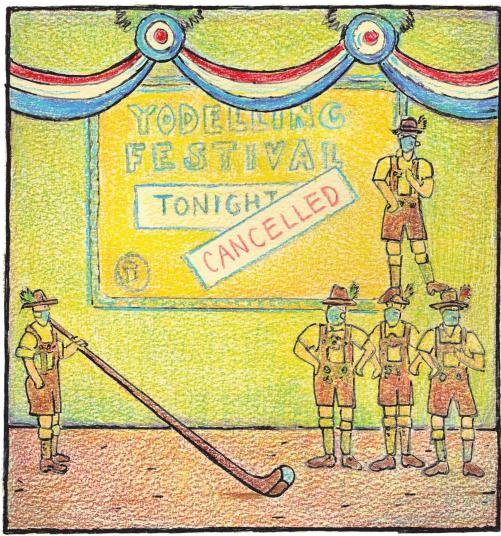
The Facussés’ preserve, known as Farallones, is twelve thousand acres of wild coastline and jungle-covered hills, home to jaguars, tapirs, and howler monkeys. It sits just down the coast from Trujillo, one of the ports used by the United Fruit Company to ship out bananas. It was a stay in Trujillo that

inspired O. Henry to write “Cabbages and Kings,” the story in which he coined the term “banana republic.”

In the first half of the twentieth century, United Fruit was the largest employer in Central America, with such comprehensive control over the region that it evoked the East India Company’s dominion in Asia. In Guatemala, it abetted the C.I.A.-backed overthrow of President Jacobo Árbenz, after he expropriated the company’s land during an agrarian reform. In Honduras, it bought and sold leaders. The U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission revealed in 1975 that the company had bribed the government of the Honduran dictator General Oswaldo López Arellano to lower export taxes on bananas. Soon afterward, the general was overthrown in a military coup.

In Farallones, there are a few visible reminders of that era, including the track bed of a railway operated by a United Fruit subsidiary called the Truxillo Railroad Company. When I lived on the nearby Honduran coast, in the seventies, it was said that, if you murdered someone and dumped his body on the tracks, it was the banana company’s responsibility to deal with the ensuing legalities—a burden of its kingmaker’s role.

The railroad tracks in Farallones have long since been pulled up, and the banana farms in the area have mostly been replaced by African palm. There have been other changes, too. For the past two decades, the airstrips of the local plantations have become a preferred venue for drug traffickers seeking to discreetly land shipments of cocaine on the way to the United States. Bananas have ceased to be Honduras’s main source of corruption; now it is cocaine.



JN A WORLD OF UNCERTAINTY  
- SOME WELCOME NEWS

Glen Baxter

*Cartoon by Glen Baxter*

In 2004, one such plane, likely bearing a ton of cocaine, was destroyed on the airstrip in Farallones. Facussé, the family patriarch, scoffed at suggestions that he was complicit, saying, “The narcos are building airports all over the place.” In a State Department cable made public by WikiLeaks, the U.S. Ambassador reported that Facussé claimed that his guards had spotted the plane and shot at it, causing it to burst into flames. But the Ambassador also presented a different story, from a source in law enforcement: the plane had landed on the Farallones airstrip, while Facussé was present at the estate, and its cargo was unloaded onto a convoy guarded by heavily armed men. Only then was the plane burned and buried with a bulldozer, as if to hide the evidence.

In Tocoa, I was given a tour of the palm-oil installations and introduced to employees, who spoke of their gratitude to Dinant for providing jobs. One woman wept as she recalled being menaced by land invaders. A sturdy young man who ran the security forces spoke loyally about Dinant’s human-rights record, and condemned the “terrorists” who had invaded its plantations.

But, at a meeting with community leaders in a settlement just outside one of the plantations, people were more concerned with poverty. One man, who asked for anonymity, said that many people who didn’t work for Dinant

earned no more than three or four dollars a day—not enough to sustain a family—and so it was tempting to flee. Eight of his relatives had already immigrated to the United States. “The dilemma is between staying here without anything or taking to the road and heading north, and possibly losing one’s life in the process,” he said.

It was difficult for small farmers to support themselves. When Facussé’s father bought up much of the surrounding area, the man said, some farmers felt pressured to sell their land. His own father had sold, he said: “When he saw it was either his land or his life or that of his family, he gave it up.”

In Farallones, Facussé showed me his family’s collection of imported red stags and axis deer, as well as a stable that housed a pair of fine white stallions. He explained that they were the offspring of a stud horse that Fidel Castro had given his father, when the two of them began working together to bring palm plantations to Cuba. (The program reportedly ended after U.S. officials asked Facussé to stop.)

Along a dirt track, Facussé pointed out the notorious airstrip. It was largely overgrown, and had heavy metal cables stretched across, to thwart drug traffickers. Despite the obstacles, a narco plane had landed there a couple of years earlier. The compound’s guards had cut the cables.

Edgar Gutiérrez, the former Guatemalan foreign minister, told me, “I think the Biden idea of working with civil society and not the governments is romantic but not very realistic.” Washington, he suggested, was paying the price for its intermittent attention to Central America. “It tends to deal with immediate crises in the zone, and when they become systemic ones it doesn’t know how to tackle them,” he said. “The four years of Trump compounded this, and left these countries in a state of even greater disrepair.” In the absence of strong governance, civil society might provide some modest achievements in development, he said, but “it cannot replace the functions of a nation-state.”

How does a nation-state fail? In the 1969 novel “Conversation in the Cathedral,” about a corrupt military dictatorship in Peru, Mario Vargas Llosa posed a version of that question: “At what precise moment had Peru fucked itself up?” When Hondurans ask the same thing, many say that the answer

begins in the eighties, when the U.S. government made their country a front in the Cold War.

The impetus was Daniel Ortega's socialist regime in Nicaragua, which President Ronald Reagan described as a "mounting danger in Central America that threatens the security of the United States." The U.S. opened a sprawling military base, called Palmerola, in Honduras, and poured money into the country's Army. The C.I.A. also launched a covert program to destabilize Ortega, by organizing a group of rebels known as the Contras. Secret camps were set up along the border, and the Contras launched forays into Nicaragua, while their leaders took meetings with C.I.A. handlers in Tegucigalpa. When Congress uncovered the program and ordered it shut down, the White House circumvented the ban with a gimcrack scheme: American operatives sold arms to Iran and funnelled the proceeds to the Contra fighters in the Central American jungle.

Within Honduras, the U.S.-backed military brutally quashed any attempts at an insurgency. When a handful of Marxists sneaked across the Nicaraguan border, they were swiftly hunted down and killed. In the cities, government assassins targeted campus radicals and trade-union supporters. Among their suspected victims was the father of Ricardo Zúniga, the U.S. special envoy for the region. A former major in the Honduran Army, Zúniga's father had spoken to the U.S. Congress about the killings, and soon afterward was found tortured to death.

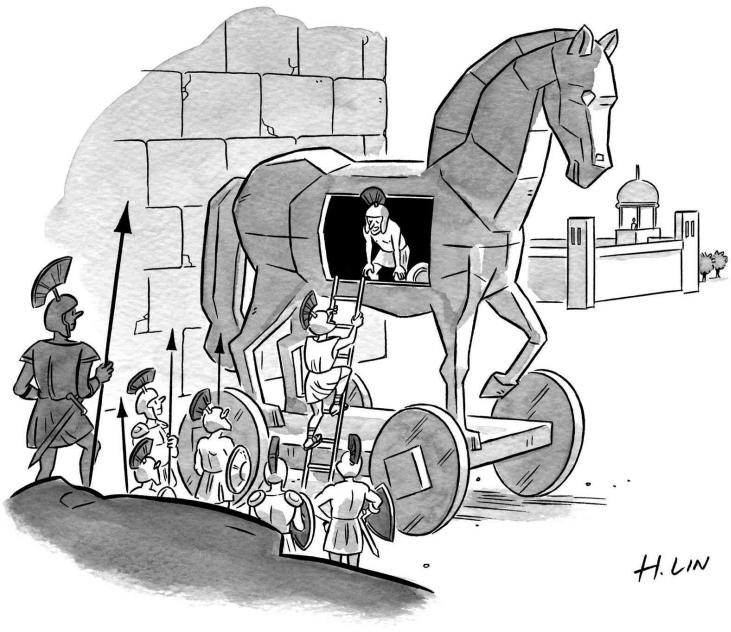
By viciously repressing the left, Honduras escaped the civil wars that devastated its neighbors, but it also never experienced the reconciliation that followed. Dan Restrepo, who served as a national-security adviser for Latin America during President Obama's first term, told me, "The peace processes at least helped metabolize the ideological conflicts that had led to the civil wars, but in Honduras it was as if the page had never been turned."

Throughout the eighties, drugs and international politics were inseparably entwined in Latin America. Manuel Noriega, the dictator of Panama, was a C.I.A. asset and was also involved in large-scale drug trafficking. When I interviewed him in prison, in 2015, he told me that the Americans had asked him to let Colombian drug runners launder cash in Panamanian banks. "They wanted to follow the money," he said. According to a Senate

investigation, led by John Kerry in the late eighties, the U.S. supplied assistance to the Contras using airplanes owned by Juan Ramón Matta-Ballesteros, an infamous Honduran drug lord.

Matta-Ballesteros, an early partner of Pablo Escobar, has become a legend in the narco underworld. His innovation was to link the Medellín cartel, in Colombia, with the Guadalajara cartel, in Mexico, completing a kind of cocaine superhighway to the United States. In Honduras, Matta-Ballesteros corrupted politicians, military officers, and police. He is also suspected of taking part in the 1985 torture and murder of an American D.E.A. agent. Following the killing, Matta-Ballesteros lived openly in Tegucigalpa, protected by lawmakers who pointed out that the nation's constitution prohibited his extradition. After three years, the Honduran government finally sold him out; he was forced onto a plane and transported to the U.S. In Honduras, his arrest set off widespread rioting, as some fifteen hundred protesters marched on the U.S. Embassy, broke into its annex, and set it on fire. Five died in the unrest.

These days, Matta-Ballesteros is at a federal prison in the U.S., thirty-one years into a life sentence for drug trafficking and other charges. But the network that he built in Honduras has grown, subsuming the government and civil society. “The narco money is just too overwhelming,” one political observer said. “It makes doing the wrong thing easy, and this country has fallen into that. Nobody fears consequences for anything, because of the level of impunity.”



"Hey, wait—who's in charge of snacks?"  
Cartoon by Hartley Lin

A decisive moment came in June, 2009, when President Manuel (Mel) Zelaya was pushed out of office in a coup. Zelaya, an ebullient politician with a signature white cowboy hat, had run as a conservative populist, and then surprised the country by allying himself with Hugo Chávez and Raúl Castro. The nation's conservative business élites and its armed forces, fearful of a leftist incursion, united to oust him. Zelaya was abducted early one Sunday morning and was hustled, still in his pajamas, onto a plane out of the country.

New elections were held a few months later, and the winner was Porfirio Lobo Sosa, from the conservative National Party. As the U.S. government determined its position on the coup, Restrepo visited officials in the new government. "It was like getting in a time machine," he said. "They were all old-school Latin American Cold Warriors. They saw Chávez behind every tree and had an apparent deep distrust of the broader population." Restrepo found Lobo "an underwhelming guy, very much an empty suit." But, he said, "there was no really good way for us to reinstate Zelaya, so it became a matter of them running out the clock." Secretary of State Hillary Clinton accepted the elections, and the coup seemed impossible to reverse.

In office, Lobo called for "national reconciliation," and began building a team. Juan Orlando Hernández, who by then had served three terms as a

legislator, became the president of the Honduran Congress. But the country deteriorated rapidly, with unrestrained gang violence and frequent assassinations of journalists, politicians, and land-rights activists. Much of the mayhem was evidently drug-related, though it was unclear who was behind it all.

Then, in 2015, two Honduran brothers, Devis and Javier Rivera Maradiaga, turned themselves in to U.S. authorities. The Rivera Maradiagas had started out as cattle rustlers before forming a drug-running organization known as Los Cachiros. Their business had brought them enormous wealth, including a property portfolio worth hundreds of millions of dollars, but they felt increasingly threatened. The U.S. had announced sanctions against them, and Honduran authorities had begun seizing their assets. Fearing for their lives, they struck a deal with the U.S. government and began to coöperate. Their testimony revealed the extraordinary extent to which drug trafficking had penetrated Honduran life.

Devis Rivera Maradiaga acknowledged responsibility for the murders of seventy-eight people, including Honduras's anti-drug czar, its national-security adviser, and a noted journalist. The brothers' testimony implicated some of the country's most prominent people. Along with Tony Hernández, there was Yani Rosenthal, who had been in Mel Zelaya's cabinet. Rosenthal pleaded guilty to money laundering; in 2017, he was sentenced to three years in an American prison. According to the brothers' testimony, top officials and close relatives of three of Honduras's most recent Presidents had been involved in drug trafficking. The accusations also implicated two of the Presidents themselves: not just Hernández but his predecessor, Porfirio Lobo.

Former President Lobo received me one afternoon in his apartment in Tegucigalpa. It occupied an entire floor of a recently constructed building, which towered above a neighborhood of walled private compounds that house some of Honduras's wealthiest citizens. Juan Orlando Hernández lives nearby.

In the foyer, security men doused the soles of my shoes with antiseptic before buzzing me through. Every surface of Lobo's apartment was shiny: white marble floors, high white walls, and a vaulted ceiling. Panoramic

windows looked out toward the Basilica of Suyapa, which houses an eighteenth-century icon of Honduras's virgin patron saint. The slums were far enough in the distance not to spoil the view.

As a servant led me to a sofa, a middle-aged woman greeted me and then vanished. It was the former First Lady Rosa Elena Bonilla, who, after her husband's term in office, had been sentenced to fifty-eight years in prison for fraud and embezzling public funds. She served two and a half years and was released in 2020, after the Honduran Supreme Court threw out her conviction and ordered a new trial.

Lobo came into the living room, wearing a checkered shirt and jeans and giving off the relaxed air of a man in comfortable early retirement. He has been out of office for seven years, but he began our talk with a long recitation of his Presidential achievements. When I asked about the accusations against President Hernández, he smiled and told me, "It is said there are two things in this life you can't hide—pregnancy and wealth."

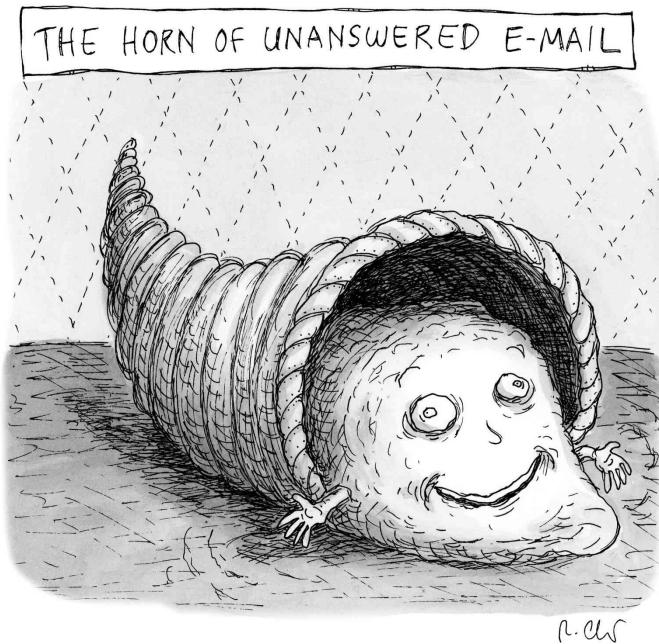
"So you do believe the rumors of his involvement in narco-trafficking?" I asked. Lobo nodded. The power of *el narcotráfico* was very real, he said. His own son Fabio had been caught collaborating with Los Cachiros—ensnared by a sting operation in which D.E.A. agents, posing as Mexican drug runners, persuaded him to help smuggle several tons of cocaine. Fabio pleaded guilty in a Southern District of New York court in 2016 and was sentenced to twenty-four years in prison. Lobo gave me a beseeching look. "I have five sons, but Fabio is the only one born out of wedlock," he said. He added, sadly, "I didn't exercise enough control over him."

President Lobo had himself been accused of profiting from the drug business. One of the Rivera Maradiaga brothers claimed that they had bribed him, during and after his election. In return, Lobo had allegedly offered political protection, and designated Fabio as a security liaison. Lobo denied this, insisting that his family was being persecuted by political enemies. "When my son Fabio was sentenced in 2017, the prosecutors came up with the story that I was the head of the narcotics and my son was my lieutenant," he said. Because Fabio had not grown visibly richer, Lobo said, it was "logical that people would have come to the conclusion that I was the one receiving the payoffs." I looked around the apartment, taking in a grand

piano, Lalique crystal, sculptures of lovebirds. But that was all a misapprehension, Lobo said.

Nevertheless, Lobo said that he had maintained good relations with the American Ambassador and had been lauded for his leadership by the U.S. government. Lobo noted that he had tried to reconcile the country after the coup that brought him to power. Among his achievements was a pact that he signed with Zelaya which allowed him to return from exile.

In recent months, the Americans' tolerance seems to have ended. On July 1st, Lobo and his wife were included among the "corrupt and undemocratic actors" on the State Department's Engel List. They would no longer be able to travel to the United States, and Lobo seemed more likely to face drug-trafficking charges in the Southern District of New York. Lobo threw up his hands; he said that it was what he had expected. "I'm on that list for presumption of guilt, for supposedly doing favors to Los Cachiros," he said. "But Juan Orlando Hernández isn't on it. Without him, it's a *churro*"—a joke. He noted that the Hernándezes, unlike his family, had displayed an "exaggerated" accumulation of wealth. "There's corruption in every government, but nothing like this one," he said. The evidence was visible in Gracias, Hernández's home town. "If you go to Gracias," he said, "you'll see there was a big leap in his income."



Cartoon by Roz Chast

Gracias lies nestled in pine-covered mountains, a six-hour drive west of Tegucigalpa; the road is winding and badly pitted, except for the last twenty miles, which are beautifully paved. This is where Tony and Juan Orlando Hernández and their fifteen brothers and sisters were raised, the children of a thrice-married former Army colonel who owned a coffee finca there.

Gracias does not look like a narco-trafficking town. It has a feeling of rustic prosperity, with cobblestone streets, a whitewashed sixteenth-century church, and a plaza with enormous shade trees and quiet cafés. Nearby is the Posada de Don Juan, a gracious Colonial-style hotel owned by the Hernández family. There are no flashy cars or mansions in sight, and the homes of two Hernández siblings that were pointed out to me looked doughtily middle-class.

A Honduran friend introduced me to a man in his fifties who grew up with Juan Orlando Hernández. When we sat down, he was visibly nervous. In a halting voice, he confirmed that he and Juan Orlando had gone to school together, but said that his parents had moved him to a different school and they had lost touch. When I asked what else he could tell me, he mentioned that J.O.H.'s father had been a colonel.

"What about Tony?" I asked. "Oh, yes, Tony!" the man exclaimed, as if he had forgotten all about him. After a pause, he said, "When it comes to the President, nobody around here will speak ill of him." No one he knew had ever laid eyes on a drug shipment in Gracias, so the testimonies that had been given against the Hernández brothers in New York seemed like so many falsehoods.

Was he saying that the New York justice system—the judges and prosecutors and witnesses—was making things up? He thought for a moment and conceded, "Everything is known here in the pueblo." There had been a time, he said, when *narcotráfico* owned the town and everyone looked the other way, so as not to end up dead. There had been a lot of rumors about Tony, who held bullfights and threw expensive parties with his friends—people whom U.S. authorities have identified as drug traffickers. (A spokesperson for President Hernández denied this.)

After we talked, I drove to an area outside of town where I'd been told that the Hernández brothers and some of their cronies had built homes. A new road led up a verdant hillside, where expansive villas looked out over the red-tiled roofs of Gracias and the mountains beyond. When I asked two local women how to get to the President's house, they smiled knowingly and pointed to a dirt road, leading into a deep pine forest. I followed it until I found myself next to a high fence covered with green cloth. It extended all along the roadside, concealing everything inside from view.

Before leaving Gracias, I asked Hernández's former schoolmate what he thought would happen to the President. Honduras has elections scheduled for this month, and, with Hernández ending his final term, American officials believe that he may be indicted by the Southern District of New York as soon as he leaves office. Many speculate that he will try to circumvent the constitution and run again, or will even cancel the elections. "He's got power, and he knows that's his only protection, so he's not going to give it up," the schoolmate said. "Whatever he does, he's not going to let himself be taken by the gringos just like that."

In June, the Organization of American States called a vote to condemn abuses perpetrated by Daniel Ortega's regime in Nicaragua. A large majority of the members approved the resolution, but Hernández's government abstained. Hondurans speculated that he was trying to ingratiate himself with Ortega, hoping for refuge in Nicaragua when his term is up. It is not an unthinkable scenario: two former Salvadoran Presidents who were accused of corruption now live in Nicaragua, under Ortega's protection.

With his options narrowing, Hernández has seemed eager to prove his value to the United States. In late October, Honduras extradited the drug lord Fredy Donaldo Mármol Vallejo to the U.S. In response, the American prosecutor in charge of the case issued a press release expressing gratitude to the Honduran government. Hernández may also be looking for support from China. In recent years, several countries in the region, hoping to cultivate the Chinese, have abandoned their diplomatic recognition of Taiwan. El Salvador has done so, and has been rewarded with the promise of major investments (a fact that Bukele enjoys using to taunt the Biden Administration). Several prominent Central Americans told me that they believed Hernández was considering a similar move. He has recently been

endorsing a closer relationship with China, ostensibly to seek *COVID-19* vaccines.

If the elections proceed, Hondurans have little hope of a radical break from the past. One leading candidate is Xiomara Castro—the wife of Mel Zelaya, the ousted former President, who is helping her campaign. Her strongest ally is Salvador Nasralla, a sixty-eight-year-old television host who lost to Hernández in the contested election of 2017.

The nominees for the country’s two major parties have their own links to previous administrations. The National Party candidate is Nasry (Tito) Asfura, the mayor of Tegucigalpa. Asfura, a contractor and businessman, is a hyperkinetic man who bills himself as “*Papi a la Orden*”—Daddy at Your Service. As mayor, he has spent years tearing up and rebuilding roads, to relieve gridlock; Tegucigalpa is a mess of construction sites and bulldozers. He is under investigation for allegedly embezzling public funds, but so far no one has accused him of links to cocaine traffickers.

Asfura met me in Tegucigalpa one morning, a mustachioed man in jeans and work boots. He gave me a bear hug and greeted me as “*papito lindo*”—pretty little daddy. For more than an hour, he spoke in an exalted baritone, rarely pausing or even blinking, as he described his work to renovate the city. Whenever I brought up the allegations against the President and his brother, Asfura talked over me. He preferred to dismiss the “fake news” about Hondurans migrating. “It’s not true that everyone is fleeing,” he boomed. “Insecurity has decreased. Juan Orlando has done a good job.” His solution was to give the poor microcredits, so that they could open small businesses. “What the people need is work,” he said. “More security has to be given to investors. We have to open our doors to them.”

His opponent from the Liberal Party is Yani Rosenthal, the disgraced former member of President Zelaya’s cabinet. Rosenthal recently returned to Honduras, after completing his prison term in the U.S., and reentered politics, winning his party’s primary by more than a hundred thousand votes. Biden officials told me that they were alarmed by Rosenthal’s rapid return to politics, and that they strongly opposed his candidacy.

Rosenthal's victory in the primary displaced the leader of the Liberal Party, Luis Zelaya. A pensive man in his early fifties, Zelaya entered politics a few years ago, after more than a decade as the rector of *UNITEC*. Zelaya was appalled that his party had chosen a convicted drug profiteer as its candidate. But he was equally concerned that, if Asfura won, Juan Orlando Hernández would retain control of the country. "Asfura can claim he is his own man," Zelaya said, "but it'll really be J.O.H."

Zelaya saw little reason for Hondurans not to flee. He said, "The U.S. Embassy here tries to dissuade potential migrants by telling them, 'Don't venture into the unknown.' But, the thing is, there is nothing here for them." Hondurans represent less than a third of the combined population of the Northern Triangle countries but nearly half of the people apprehended on the migration trail to the U.S. this year. According to a recent study, six out of ten Honduran students would prefer to leave the country after finishing school. At *UNITEC*, Zelaya once asked an assembly of students, "How many want to leave the country?" Almost all of them raised their hands.

Zelaya recalled this as a terrible moment of truth. "I was fortunate enough to study abroad, but I never considered not returning to the country," he said. "That's changed now. Whether they go in American Airlines to Miami, like the kids I spoke to, or in caravans, everybody wants to leave. The danger is that this leaves the country in the hands of people who can do whatever they want with it." ♦

# Movies

- [Winter Movies Preview](#)

By [Richard Brody](#)

Last year's slate of holiday-season releases was slender, owing to the pandemic. Despite ongoing uncertainty about in-person attendance, many of the major films that were held back then are coming out now, alongside more recent high-profile productions. The robust crop of likely awards contenders includes a typical dose of bio-pics, including Reinaldo Marcus Green's "**King Richard**" (Nov. 19), which traces the efforts of Richard Williams (Will Smith) to overcome prejudices and practical obstacles while coaching his daughters Venus (Saniyya Sidney) and Serena (Demi Singleton) to tennis stardom. In "**House of Gucci**" (Nov. 24), Ridley Scott unfolds the family conflicts that culminated in the murder of the fashion label's scion, Maurizio Gucci (Adam Driver), ordered by his ex-wife, Patrizia Reggiani (Lady Gaga). Aaron Sorkin wrote and directed "**Being the Ricardos**" (Dec. 10), a drama about the marital and professional troubles of Lucille Ball (Nicole Kidman) and Desi Arnaz (Javier Bardem) as they struggled to keep "I Love Lucy" on the air.

Sequels and remakes loom large, starting with Steven Spielberg's take on "**West Side Story**" (Dec. 10), featuring Rachel Zegler and Ansel Elgort as the star-crossed lovers; Ariana DeBose and Rita Moreno co-star. "**Nightmare Alley**" (Dec. 17), Guillermo del Toro's version of the 1947 film noir, stars Bradley Cooper as a carnival mentalist who teams up with a psychiatrist (Cate Blanchett) for lucrative scams. With "**The Matrix Resurrections**" (Dec. 22), Lana Wachowski returns to direct the fourth installment in the series, which she co-wrote with David Mitchell and Aleksandar Hemon; Keanu Reeves and Carrie-Anne Moss are back as Neo and Trinity.

Plays provide the basis for some of the season's most anticipated movies. Lin-Manuel Miranda makes his feature-film directorial début with "**Tick, Tick . . . Boom!**" (Nov. 12), an adaptation of Jonathan Larson's autobiographical play, in which a rising young composer (Andrew Garfield) wrestles with self-doubt. Stephen Karam directs the film version of his play "**The Humans**" (Nov. 24), about a Scranton couple (Jayne Houdyshell and Richard Jenkins) who spend a turbulent Thanksgiving in Manhattan with their musician daughter (Beanie Feldstein) and her boyfriend (Steven Yeun). Denzel Washington and Frances McDormand star in Joel Coen's "**The**

**Tragedy of Macbeth”** (Dec. 25); the cast also includes Brendan Gleeson and Corey Hawkins.

Among the acclaimed directors presenting new projects this season is Jane Campion, whose Western, “**The Power of the Dog**” (Nov. 17), stars Benedict Cumberbatch as a rancher who persecutes his brother’s wife (Kirsten Dunst) and stepson (Kodi Smit-McPhee). Paul Thomas Anderson’s coming-of-age drama “**Licorice Pizza**” (Nov. 26), set in the San Fernando Valley in the nineteen-seventies, stars Cooper Hoffman (the son of Philip Seymour Hoffman) and the musician Alana Haim. And Pedro Almodóvar blends romance, politics, and history in “**Parallel Mothers**” (Dec. 24), a wide-ranging drama about a photographer (Penélope Cruz) who has a child with a forensic archeologist (Israel Elejalde) as they prepare to exhume the body of her great-grandfather, a victim of Francoists during the Spanish Civil War. ♦

## Night Life

- [Winter Contemporary-Music Preview](#)

By [Sheldon Pearce](#)

For most of this year, concert dates have continually shuffled as a recuperating industry tries to make sense of a chaotic schedule and a host of new variables. With the winter's contemporary-music slate, however, the docket finally seems to be stabilizing—a return to the night life of old. Stadium shows are back, and in bigger numbers, and we are seeing fewer cancellations. Veteran acts relish the opportunity to delve back into their catalogues, and artists sitting on albums now get the chance to see how people respond to the music in the wild.

**Bob Dylan** finally heads out on his “Rough and Rowdy Ways” tour, supporting his exceptional 2020 album of the same name, at the Beacon Theatre (Nov. 21). Oddball producers descend upon Brooklyn in the days before: after releasing his best solo work so far, “The Life of Pi’erre 5,” in June, the beat-maker turned rapper **Pi’erre Bourne** brings his carnivalesque productions to Warsaw (Nov. 17), and the experimental composer **Dan Deacon** draws on an entirely different trippy electronic sound at Brooklyn Steel (Nov. 19). Indie pop takes the stage at Terminal 5, with performances from the beaming synth act **Chvrches** (Nov. 26) and the Chairlift co-founder **Caroline Polachek** (Dec. 2), both presenting their most recent albums to audiences for the first time—Chvrches’s stunning “Screen Violence,” from this past August, and Polachek’s critically acclaimed “Pang,” from 2019.

Thrashers across genres reëmerge this December. The bruiser rapper **Young M.A.** puts her juggernaut flows on display at Irving Plaza (Dec. 6). On Dec. 10, two Canadian post-punk bands, **Preoccupations** and **METZ**, split a bill at Bowery Ballroom, in what is certain to be among the year’s loudest shows. After a turn toward grunge, on last year’s “Sugaregg,” the guitarist and singer Alicia Bognanno amps up her project **Bully**, now a solo act, at Brooklyn Bowl (Dec. 14). The year comes to a close with two divergent shows at Barclays Center: the rising punk-rock rapper **Playboi Carti** reaches for stardom on Dec. 17, and the indie pioneers **the Strokes** play a legacy set on New Year’s Eve.

The New Year begins with fan favorites and critical darlings. At Madison Square Garden, the ultimate jam band **Phish** (Jan. 1), the progressive country star **Kane Brown** (Jan. 15), and the psychedelic rock band **the War on Drugs** (Jan. 29) headline. There are quirkier shows elsewhere: the

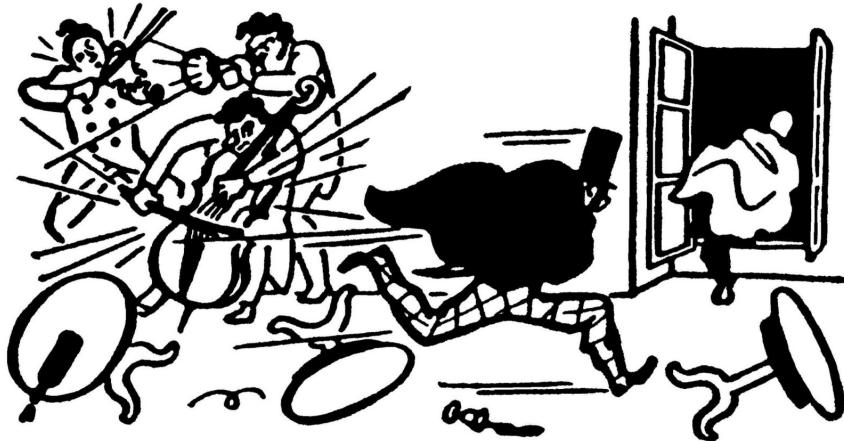
experimental polymath **Genesis Owusu** energizes Bowery Ballroom (Jan. 25), the noise-pop duo **Best Coast** hits Brooklyn Steel (Jan. 25), and the K-pop boy band **Monsta X** plays Radio City Music Hall (Jan. 29). At Music Hall of Williamsburg, niche acts offer up the new gems in their discographies. The anonymous hardcore collective **the Armed** presents “Ultrapop” (Jan. 15), **Indigo de Souza** shares “Any Shape You Take” (Jan. 24), and Tamara Lindeman unfurls her latest **Weather Station** album, “Ignorance” (Jan. 28). On Feb. 5, two first-rate songwriters impart the messages of their latest records to their faithful: **Courtney Barnett** dispatches “Things Take Time, Take Time” at Radio City Music Hall, and **Kacey Musgraves** delivers “Star-Crossed,” the follow-up to her Grammy Award-winning “Golden Hour,” at M.S.G. ♦

# **On the Airwaves**

- [Parquet Courts on the Dance Floor](#)

By [Nick Paumgarten](#)

Public Records late on a Friday night. A café-bar connected to a night club, in the former headquarters of the A.S.P.C.A., by the canal in Gowanus. Andrew Savage and Austin Brown, of the Brooklyn band Parquet Courts, at table, Savage with a Martini, Brown with a mezcal. They were sharing a slice of banana cream pie. “Look at those bananas,” Brown said.



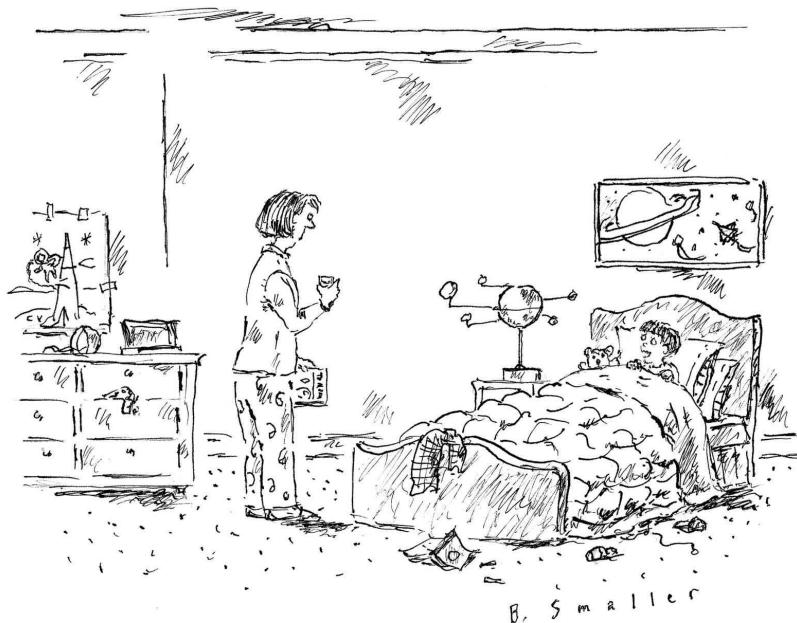
Savage, in a brown cardigan, has short dark hair and a solemn, ingenuous aspect that made possible more than several registers of droll. Brown, in a T-shirt featuring yin and yang and the caption “Same Team,” has John Lennon glasses and unexpectedly long King Charles II hair and a for-now-I-shall-suffer-fools tilt of the chin. Savage and Brown are the band’s principal songwriters. Missing were Savage’s brother, Max, the drummer, and Sean Yeaton, the bassist, who lives in rural Pennsylvania.

Savage had recently visited Yeaton. “He’s way out there in the sticks,” Savage said. “I was there for four nights, and we were trying different tinctures of [T.H.C.](#) On the first night, we were, like, ‘Man, I wish I had some candy.’ We decided to drive to the Wawa. It was a half hour away. We realized it could be done. So the next night, after more tincture, Sean says, ‘Let’s get some candy.’ So we do it again. Wawa and back. We get the

candy. We eat the candy. Night three, we're sitting there, like, 'We should've gotten more candy.' ”

Savage and Brown are from Texas. Savage from Denton, north of Dallas, and Brown from Beaumont, on the Gulf. They met at the University of North Texas. Parquet Courts formed in 2011, a scrappy, punky outfit of the order Velvet Underground (if also the genus *Our Influences Aren't What Everyone Always Says They Are*). Their 2018 album, “Wide Awake!,” produced by Danger Mouse, found pop success, and their new one, “Sympathy for Life,” out last month, has dance-music roots as well as a genesis in Brown’s disenchantment with indie rock and Savage’s experiments with weight lifting while tripping on acid. They finished recording it in March, 2020, and yet in sound, sense, and spirit, it comes across, serendipitously, as a mid- or post-pandemic artifact, a celebration of hard-won good vibes, and a queasy framing of the bad ones. The video for the first single, “Walking at a Downtown Pace,” consists of exuberant street scenes shot by the photographer Daniel Arnold in the East Village last June, as the city came out of its *COVID* crouch.

“I love things like that that are really of their time and place,” Savage said.



*“I used to want to be an astronaut, but now I think I’d rather be a billionaire space tourist.”*  
Cartoon by Barbara Smaller

Brown lives in Williamsburg but just bought a farm upstate, in Delaware County. “First rule of bunker ownership is no one knows about my bunker,” he said. Savage has lived in the same Bed-Stuy apartment, with two roommates, since 2013. This fall’s flash flooding swamped the basement and led to a bloom of mold. The city never lets up. “I had a guy wigging out on my stoop the other night,” he said. “He painted the front door shut. He covered everything—buzzers, lights—in white paint.”

Savage paints, too—on canvas—and does the art work for the band’s albums and merch. He was flying to France the next day to teach a still-life-drawing class, as a stunt to promote the record, and to visit a girlfriend in Alsace. Parquet Courts doesn’t really use social media as a promotional tool. (Savage has a flip phone.) Its approach is heavily analog. It has staged events in eleven cities (one for each song on “*Sympathy for Life*”). Tokyo, Chicago, Mexico City. Last month, they d.j.’d a dance party at a bumper-car parlor in Coney Island.

“It wasn’t clear that concerts would be happening,” Brown said. “We’re trying to provide a context for our frame of mind when we were making the album. This is psychedelic dance music.” He went on, “To me, ‘psychedelic’ means subversive, underground, striving for a utopian future. We’re anti-spiteful.”

They’d come to Public Records for the sound system. “This place was built around high-fidelity listening,” Brown said. There was a d.j. spinning good stuff in the café, but around midnight, after polishing off the pie and a few more drinks, Savage and Brown got up to go to the dance club next door.

The music was Memphis-ish, the sound pristine, the floor not unduly dark or jammed. Savage announced that he was going to go look around and vanished into a crease in the crowd. “He’s gone,” Brown said. Brown edged toward the d.j. booth and danced for a while, more or less alone. Later, out among the cigarette smokers, they found each other again, and caught separate cars home. ♦

# Poems

- “[Thin Air](#)”
- “[The End of the World](#)”

By [Linda Gregerson](#)

## Content

### [View Iframe URL](#)

*Audio:* Read by the author.

As I recall, the play  
    was mediocre, late  
    low energy from one  
who ought to have honored

    the work of his better days  
in better form. We were bored,  
    we were waiting to be  
        released.

When, in one of those  
    moves that throws  
    the poor actors like meat  
on the fire, he must have written

*Starts to cry,*  
and she did and did not stop and when  
    the character beside her asked,  
        with faint

disgust, *Just what*  
    *do you think you're*  
    *crying for;* the question  
was fair if cruel because

    it lacked all preparation it  
was cheating, we hadn't been made  
    to care. On stony ground.  
        And that's

when it happened, and somehow  
    that was why as well,

the utterly improbable three-  
or-four-times-in-a-lifetime thing we

come here for, the god-  
from-a-machine for whom  
we hope to be the congregants.

*Because,*

she said, still crying, *I'm*  
*unhappy*, and the moment  
was majestic, we were crying  
too, or I was, in the presence

of the one true conjuration,  
which is something-out-of-  
nothing, which is  
mother

grief and loneliness-on-earth  
assuaged, confessedly  
premised on pure  
technique, the from-us-but-not-of-us

which is why we call it make  
believe.

By [Clarence Major](#)

## Content

### [View Iframe URL](#)

*Audio:* Read by the author.

I look out the window

at a silent dark night—a night of blue  
and rust with specks of yellow.

Neighborly windows mostly dark.

Entryway across the street, bright.

The front door locked.

Always locked at eleven.

Below my window, under street lights,  
brightly lighted from inside,  
a three-car commuter train  
quietly slides by, as if on water—

I turn back to the TV.

I'm watching a movie  
about the end of the world—  
always about to happen.

## **Shouts & Murmurs**

- [Want to Get Junior Away from That Screen?](#)

By [Jay Ruttenberg](#)

Children's absorption in screens is a bane of modern parenting—and such dependency has reached alarming heights during the pandemic. Here are some parenting hacks to help wean your little ones off their electronic devices.

**1.** Extracurricular activities. The martial arts offer a safe platform for releasing energy while gaining valuable self-defense skills. Remember to set reasonable expectations—those flamboyant tornado kicks don't happen overnight. However, once you have attained mastery at the brown-belt level, you are ready to guard your phone or iPad from your children. Put on your white *karategi*, and, with your spouse, form a human defense wall in front of your household's electronic devices. As your children approach like a pack of ferocious wolves, eyes aflame and mouths curled into ungodly sneers, assume the *kiba-dachi*, or "horse-riding stance." Some less determined children may then retreat to a favored non-screen activity, such as staring into the abyss, plotting ways to get hold of a screen. Most, though, will continue their hungry advance toward the devices. Bellow a heated warrior's cry—*Hoong-ahh!*—and, as your nemeses draw near, deploy a swift roundhouse kick. If they continue their assault, keep a cool head, and let your training guide you. Always remember Sun Tzu's adage: "In war, then, let your great object be victory, not lengthy campaigns."

**2.** Find a quiet moment with your son, preferably when he is not live-streaming a video game for an audience of perfect strangers. Explain to him how, when Grandpa was a boy, he occupied his spare time by playing jacks.

"What are jacks?" your son will ask.

"It is an old-timey game played with a small ball and six-pointed metal stars," you'll reply. "Its formal name is knucklebones."

"And what is a Grandpa?" your son will ask.

"He's that lonely old man who has been stuck in a condo in Florida for the past two years. Sometimes he appears on your screen in a FaceTime box that you minimize while you play Minecraft."

“Oh, him,” your son will say. “Next time he FaceTimes, I’ll tell him to go outside and play jacks.”

This may not persuade your child to relinquish his screen. But it may get your father away from his.

3. This strategy will require a little time travel, which is admittedly challenging—but certainly no more difficult than wresting your phone from the steely grip of a four-year-old. Set your time machine to mid-seventies California, and head to Crist Drive in Los Altos, near Cupertino. There, you will encounter an arrogant young man, no doubt tinkering on a primitive, boxlike computer and wearing a black turtleneck. After you explain to him that you are visiting from 2021, he will likely ask you about the role personal computers will play in the future.

“Computers?” you are to ask. “Um . . . oh, right. Those things. I think I know what you’re talking about. In the future, they’re used exclusively by hobbyists and geeks. Not a very lucrative market, that’s for sure.” Go on to explain that the smart money—the place to direct one’s enviable intelligence and maniacal ambition—is on finding a fix for climate change. “That,” you will say before heading back to the future, “is where the big money is. Certainly not on . . . what are those things called again? Personal condoodlers?”

If he seems unconvinced, kill him. ♦

# **Slow News Day**

- [Thanks for the Bitcoin! How Does It Work?](#)

By [Ben McGrath](#)

The [\*West End Phoenix\*](#), a four-year-old community newspaper in Toronto, bills itself as “slow print for fast times”—a reaction against global forces that have been decimating local journalism, if not an analog way of life altogether. The *Phoenix*, which publishes periodically, is a broadsheet, defiantly large and ill-suited to manipulating on the subway. Its design is heavy on art photography, and feature articles range from “Pet of the Month” to examinations of the demonizing of Black communities by traditional crime reporting. The founding publisher, Dave Bidini, is an author and a musician, best known for fronting the Rheostatics, who used to tour with the Tragically Hip. Owing in part to Bidini’s celebrity, in 2019 the *Phoenix* office received a personal visit from [Justin Trudeau](#) (“It’s got a real heft to it,” the Prime Minister said of the paper), and [Margaret Atwood](#) has contributed book reviews. Nonetheless, paid circulation hovers below three thousand, and the recent anonymous donation of a [bitcoin](#) to the paper’s coffers presented a welcome opportunity for expansion—assuming, that is, that management could figure out how to receive it.



“I bemoaned to Richard that we were having trouble getting our bitcoin activated,” Bidini said the other day, referring to Richard Berman, an occasional *Phoenix* contributor who’d previously covered Silicon Valley for the San Francisco *Chronicle*. “He said, ‘You should talk to my friend

Anthony.’ I was, like, ‘O.K., cool! Anthony’s going to come over?’ Once I did a bit of research, I realized I wasn’t just getting, like, a tech guy. I was getting one of the foundational crypto people to help us.”

Anthony Di Iorio, one of the co-founders of [Ethereum](#), is a Toronto native, and, as it happens, is in the midst of a transition toward philanthropic endeavors that extend to combatting misinformation and other problems engendered by faulty business models. “We need media that is trustworthy,” he said. “Ninety-nine per cent of the stuff I’m reading? Grain of salt.” He dispatched some associates to help set the *Phoenix* up with a so-called cold wallet and later joined Bidini and his top editors for a Google Hangouts session to “whiteboard” strategies for growth, using a model that he calls his “perfect formula.”

They made at first for an awkward party, the cryptocurrency guru and the ink-stained journalists. Di Iorio sat in a futuristic white swivel chair with a couple of talismans hanging from chains around his neck, one of them given to him by the organizers of Burning Man and the other by a Costa Rican shaman. (“It stands for protection,” he said.) Between bites of salad, he spoke of scalability, disruption, utilization, stakeholders, and the importance of “empowering people to be in control of their digital lives.” Bidini, who likes to joke about his unfamiliarity with smartphone features, sat on a couch with his wife, Janet Morassutti (the managing editor and a co-founder of the paper), and their snoozing rescue dog, Sandy. He interrupted Di Iorio at one point to ask, “Can you just define what a stakeholder is?” He reverted to a music analogy to articulate his concerns about selling out. “I always use R.E.M. as an example. How do they go from ‘Murmur’ to ‘Losing My Religion,’ and they continue to be R.E.M.? They navigated it so beautifully.”

The *Phoenix* staff may have been short on data, but they were long on hunches—about, for instance, the efficacy of hot-pink lawn signs (“I Read the *West End Phoenix*”) in disseminating the word, compared with ads they were placing on the boards of local ice rinks, say, and with social media, where engagement was measurable but potentially in conflict with their ethos. Melanie Morassutti (the executive editor, Janet’s sister, and the third co-founder) said, “Do we hire somebody to produce more local online news? Well, that’s not really the heart of this operation.” She added, “I feel like I trust the lawn sign.”

Talk moved to bumper stickers and window decals. Di Iorio stressed the importance, in his formula, of broadening your message and giving people—future stakeholders—reason to associate your product with improvements in their lives. Janet had a eureka moment. “In Toronto, pedestrian safety’s a big issue, so slowing down is something we want people to do, and our whole thing about print journalism is about slowing down,” she said.

Di Iorio knit his hands behind his head and smiled. “I love the idea of ‘Slow Down,’ ” he said. “It’s also mindfulness and being present—all those things are also very popular right now. A lot of times, things go up in a cycle and then come back down again. I see the space that you’re in maybe having a comeback. People might say, ‘Print media, who needs more of that?’ But, with the world changing and things happening, maybe that’s what communities need.” ♦

## Tables for Two

- [At Senza Gluten, the Gluten Isn't Missed](#)

By [David Kortava](#)

Ever since the phrase “gluten-free” entered the vernacular, it has been deployed, in some circles, as a term of mild disparagement. In 2015, the American comedian and life coach J. P. Sears went viral with a YouTube sketch titled “How to Become Gluten Intolerant,” in which he describes gluten-free bread as a “coagulation of mysterious flours that form a brick with a density of a black hole and the dryness of a desert.” It’s unlikely that Mr. Sears has dined at Senza Gluten, a reliably good and gluten-free Italian restaurant in Greenwich Village.



*The substitution of wheat with alternative flours (rice, chickpea, tapioca) in these Italian classics does not call attention to itself.*

A few years ago, I took my gluten-free girlfriend there just hours before making her an offer of marriage. The scheme worked. The photograph from that day in which my soon-to-be wife looks happiest shows her inspecting the dessert menu. “The biscotti is gluten-free?” she asked the server. Yes. “And the tiramisu is gluten-free?” “Everything is gluten-free here,” he declared, like St. Peter at the gates of Heaven. Such scenes are common at Senza Gluten, which is Italian for “without gluten.” Not long after the place opened, seven years ago, an elderly woman came in alone and ordered a shrimp salad and lasagna, with layer upon layer of rich Bolognese sauce and melted Parmesan. After a few bites of the lasagna, she started crying. She asked to see the chef. “For fifteen years, I haven’t tasted lasagna,” she told him, and kissed his hands.



*Red-velvet cake, vanilla-custard éclairs, and bomboloni alla crema are among the offerings at Senza Gluten's café and bakery, a block south of the restaurant on Sullivan Street.*

There are few surprises at Senza Gluten, and that's largely the point. Someone who hasn't had lasagna in fifteen years, or even passable croutons in their salad, does not crave novelty so much as the familiar, a conjuring of recognizable tastes and textures from the Before Time. Besides, making Italian food without wheat is bold enough; any further deviation from protocol risks courting controversy. Done right, gluten-free cookery is an act of gastronomic legerdemain: the substitution of alternative flours (rice, chickpea, tapioca) should not call attention to itself.

On a recent evening, the fried-and-baked cauliflower, coated in white-rice flour, in the Cavolfiore alla Parmigiana antipasto, was delectably crunchy—a perfect foil to the soft, warm mozzarella in which it was entangled. The rigatoni, made with corn flour and dressed in smoked prosciutto, three varieties of wild mushroom, and white-truffle oil, was flawlessly al dente. The corn-based spaghetti alla pomodoro that accompanied the chicken parm had a lovely bounce, the kind I've never pulled off using substitutes at home. Most of the pasta is imported dry from Italy. The one exception is an off-menu special: the handmade, silky-smooth potato-flour gnocchi, submerged in a prodigal sauce of mozzarella, Fontina, Parmesan, and Taleggio.



*The kitchen at Senza Gluten recently acquired a commercial pasta machine, but for now most of its pasta is imported dry from Italy.*

For dessert, consider walking down to Senza Gluten’s café and bakery, a block south on Sullivan Street. I once fell into a deep well of analysis paralysis in front of its display case, stuck between a vanilla-custard éclair, a pillow-y bombolone alla crema, and a slice of chocolate cake topped with Grand Marnier ganache. The staff kindly guided me to the red-velvet cake, and to a sparkling Italian wine that arrived in a champagne flute and tasted of candied fruit and flowers. The exquisite pairing is liable to spark a madeleine moment, calling up involuntary memories of an idyllic summer day in the hills of Tuscany, even if you’ve never been there.

Curiously, the head chef at both establishments, Jemiko Solo, is neither gluten-free nor Italian. He’s a Georgian guy whose intimacy with celiac disease is entirely vicarious, and he learned his craft by working at various trattorias around town. In fact, some of Solo’s recipes are near-verbatim translations of Italian classics he used to prepare as a line cook, minus the gluten. The other day, one of his old bosses, a six-foot-six chef from northern Italy, dropped by for some lasagna on the house. “That’s my dish,” he told Solo, with mock severity. “No, it’s not yours,” Solo fired back. “It used to be yours—not anymore.” (*Dishes \$14-\$47.*) ♦

# The Art World

- [Choose Your Own Kandinsky Adventure at the Guggenheim](#)

“Vasily Kandinsky: Around the Circle” takes the viewer from joy to perplexity—or the reverse—depending on where you start on the museum’s ramp.

By [Peter Schjeldahl](#)

Choose a direction for your perusal of “Vasily Kandinsky: Around the Circle,” a retrospective that lines the upper three-fifths of the Guggenheim Museum’s ramp with some eighty paintings, drawings, and woodcuts by the Russian hierophant of abstraction, who died in France in 1944, at the age of seventy-seven. The show’s curator, Megan Fontanella, recommends starting at the bottom, with the overwrought works of the artist’s final phase, and proceeding upward, back to the simpler Expressionist landscapes and horsemen of his early career. This course is canny in terms of your enjoyment, which increases as you go. The teeming complexities of the enigmatic glyphs and contradictory techniques that mark Kandinsky’s late phase defeat my comprehension: they are numbingly hermetic. A middle range, from about 1910 to the early twenties, seethes with the artist’s excitement as he abandons figuration to let freely brushed, spontaneously symphonic forms, intended as visual equivalents of music, enthrall on their own. He became a devoted fan and friend of the atonal composer Arnold Schoenberg.

Finally—that is, primarily—we are engulfed in cadenzas of hue that have come to impress me as the strongest art of their kind and their time, relatively crude but more vigorous than the contemporaneous feats of Matisse, Derain, Braque, and other Parisians whose Fauvism anchors standard accounts of modernism. There’s much to be said for *Der Blaue Reiter*—a movement, centered in Munich, where Kandinsky had moved to study art, and which shares a name with one of his paintings, from 1903. It enlisted such colleagues of Kandinsky’s as Franz Marc and Alexei Jawlensky in the project of rendering nature with chromatic audacities. Seen from the bottom up, the show progressively dispenses with arid affectation on the way to freshets of inspiration. I took it from the top, beginning in joy and ending in downbeat perplexity, then returned upward to assess what had happened to a visionary who had been onto something epochal.



"Three Sounds," from 1926. Art work courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Kandinsky was right on time when he published the eloquent book "On the Spiritual in Art," in 1911. It called for artists to reject materialism—a soul-crushing evil—in favor of, ideally, a worldwide spiritual awakening. He graphed artistic intention as a triangle with gross materiality at the bottom and perfect transcendence, true to inward experience, at the peak. He located previous artists at points in the ascent. His exhortation bore fruit in subsequent work that included the Orphism of the French painter Robert Delaunay, for one, who was shown with him in the vastly influential 1913 Armory Show, in New York. However, the drive for enlightenment would ultimately fall prey to self-seductions that led Kandinsky up desultory paths.

Kandinsky was born in Moscow in 1866. The son of a prosperous tea merchant, he moved to Odessa as a child, and then returned to Moscow to study law and economics. Smitten with a haystack painting by Monet and an intuition, from Richard Wagner's opera "Lohengrin," of synesthesia—sounds seen, colors heard—he began to paint, with a bang, at the age of thirty, on folkloric themes that were infused with the quasi-religious tenets of Theosophy. As he would write in the 1911 book, "Color is the keyboard. The eye is the hammer, while the soul is a piano of many strings. The artist is the hand through which the medium of different keys causes the human soul to vibrate." His initial variations on nature gave way to spontaneous gestures and energized shards of geometric form. Some intoxicating

breakthrough paintings include “Black Lines” and “Light Picture” (both from December, 1913), which stage dances of liberated line atop passages of effulgent color.

Kandinsky hit on a symbiosis of mysticism and geometry that had affected religious traditions (the European Gothic, the Indian tantra) since well before its ancient Greek codification, notably by Pythagoras: a force field in which the least rational of entities, the soul, meshes with the utter rationality of mathematical design—the latter subliminal but still present in Kandinsky’s brushy manner. The conjunction had never before been consistently addressed in fine art. And Kandinsky wasn’t alone in seizing on it in the early years of the twentieth century, as a wildly and justly popular show in 2018, also at the Guggenheim, of the all but unknown (partly because she was secretive, surely because she was female) Swedish painter Hilma af Klint (1862-1944) proved. Af Klint, for those keeping score, seems to have beaten Kandinsky to the punch of modern abstraction by five years. She did so most dramatically with a suite of huge, stunning floral and geometric paintings, begun in 1906, whose genesis she attributed to dictation from named supernatural beings.



“Around the Circle,” from 1940. Art work courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Kandinsky was no Spiritualist of af Klint’s table-rapping-séance type, but he shared an affinity for the occult which was rife among otherwise levelheaded

intelligentsia before the First World War. Kandinsky held back from the ghostlier variants of Spiritualism but was in key with the anti-worldly tendencies of a period that has long embarrassed art historians. Many still skate past the mystic roots of the formally reductive painters Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich. That scanted tradition is up for rediscovery. I sense stirrings of a renewed interest in spiritual motives today, primarily among young artists who are fed up with postmodernist irony. If I'm right, I sort of empathize with the urge as a matter of speculative faith, albeit one short of conviction. You can't gainsay results, however peculiar their premises.

Staked to wealth by the inheritance from an uncle of a building in Moscow, in 1901, Kandinsky lit out for a bohemian existence in Germany, abandoning a wife for a partnership with the dashing German painter Gabriele Münter. They travelled widely, including to Tunisia. Kandinsky, determined to counter French aestheticism with modes that were both earthier and less tied to observation, quickly attracted allies and followers. Owing to his classification in Germany as an enemy alien, he returned to Russia at the onset of the First World War and was trapped there by the Revolution, which expropriated his property, and which he toiled to serve as an educator and an administrator until, with difficulty, he managed to leave, in 1921. He did so with a new wife, Nina Andreevskaia, who may still have been a teen-ager when she married the fifty-year-old Kandinsky, in 1917. He taught at the Bauhaus, where he pursued his commitment to abstraction alongside valued friends and rivals, mainly Paul Klee, who maintained tenuous links to real or imagined reality. After 1933, when the school closed under pressure from the Nazis, the Kandinskys took refuge in Paris. Vasily came to know practically everyone associated with Surrealism and abstract art while solidifying his chief dogma, "inner necessity"—a motive that was his to know and baffling to anyone else. But the impenetrable puzzle of a painting like "Around the Circle" (1940), a riot of heterogeneous whatsit shapes—whimsies, really, adrift in zero gravity—acquired a fashionable sort of prestige, as emblematic of far-out modernity. Didn't get it? That was the point. You weren't supposed to.

The mining heir and mogul Solomon R. Guggenheim met Kandinsky in 1930 and began collecting him in bulk. The two men were connected by a mediocre German painter, Rudolf Bauer, who further ingratiated himself as the boyfriend of Guggenheim's principal adviser, the enthusiastic German

baroness Hilla Rebay. (Pastiches by Bauer lurk in the institution's deep storage.) Rebay styled Guggenheim's emerging public profile and the midtown quarters of his collection, the Museum of Non-Objective Painting—a solecism, given that all paintings are objects with subjective content—mounting shows on velour-covered walls and piping in classical music. She merits credit for recommending Frank Lloyd Wright as the architect of the museum's hypermodern whorl, which opened in 1959, though she resigned amid controversy in 1952, three years after Solomon's death. Her devotion to Kandinsky lingers in the ancestral DNA of the museum. Even absent works by Kandinsky, his equivocal majesty haunts every visit to a building that cannot cease to amaze. ♦

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# **The Control of Nature**

- [Deer Wars and Death Threats](#)

A small subset of wild animals thrive alongside humans. An unusual—and polarizing—set of conservation projects have sprung up in response.

By [Brooke Jarvis](#)

## Content

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On a hot afternoon in late August, a member of a specialized strike team, carrying a custom dart gun, drove to Fresh Kills, a piece of land on Staten Island that had once been a quiet estuary of streams and swamps and, after that, for nearly fifty years, the world's biggest landfill—the dumping ground for the nation's largest and densest city. Now the dump was capped and the land atop it was hilly, covered in tall grasses that host goldfinches and kestrels, and it was in the process of being converted into New York City's newest public park. The strike team, which takes on the nocturnal schedules of its targets while working, had been baiting the area with kernels of dried corn every night as part of an ambitious and controversial project: to sterilize ninety-eight per cent of the male deer on the island.

The darter parked his car where it wouldn't be visible from the bait site. "Deer don't like abrupt change," Dane Stevens, a wildlife biologist who was leading the team, explained. "You don't want to change the carpeting the day that it's supposed to come to the house." Stevens was working on behalf of White Buffalo, an unusual conservation nonprofit that the city had contracted for the sterilization project in 2016. It had been a difficult summer, Stevens told me, with lots of rain and ever-shifting winds. The former meant abundant natural food, making the bait corn less interesting. The latter meant that, even when deer did come, Stevens couldn't always send in one of his darters. To be allowed in the city, the dart guns carry approximately the firepower of a paintball gun and aren't legally considered guns at all. The shooters had to get within twenty yards of their targets to make a hit; if the wind changed and snatched on them, the animal could end up permanently wary.

At Fresh Kills, the wind had finally stabilized, and the team's game camera had shown a young buck eating the bait corn at the same time every evening for a week. The darter was in place well before the buck was due to arrive.

He erected a camouflaged tent that would serve as a blind and readied his darts, which carried a payload of xylazine and Telazol, as well as a VHF transmitter. The yearling, graceful and dark-eyed and still so young that it was living alongside its mother—"Think of it as a teen-ager who's about to get kicked out of the house," Stevens said—approached the corn on schedule, and the darter took aim at the large muscles of one of the animal's thighs. The shot was good. Because of the need to stay silent, the protocol was for the darter to send a message to Stevens by WhatsApp. The message started the clock on a tightly choreographed operation.

Once a deer is darted, the drugs take fifteen minutes to work, and the darter then uses a VHF receiver to find where the buck lies snoring. Often, this is in deep brush; at other times, the buck loses consciousness in a cemetery or an industrial park or near a soccer field. Whatever the location, that site becomes an operating theatre, and Stevens has to insure that a team veterinarian, equipped with a headlamp and a bag of sterilized supplies, can make it to the spot, through city traffic, before the buck metabolizes too much of the anesthetic.

At Fresh Kills, a vet arrived, readied his instruments, and laid out a blue paper sheet. He made a three-fifths-inch incision in the deer's scrotum, then pulled out the pampiniform plexus, teased out both of the vasa deferentia, and removed a one-inch section from each of them. To be sure that nothing would grow back, he cauterized the incisions and closed them off with titanium clips. Then it was time for a few quick stitches, the placement of ear tags to show that this particular buck, like nearly two thousand other animals before it, had been crossed off the team's to-do list, and, finally, a shot to reverse the effects of the xylazine.

Before long, the buck opened its eyes, twitched its ears, and raised its head. Then it climbed to its feet and walked into the night, leaving behind two crucial inches of tissue. The vasectomy itself took just five minutes. It was everything else about the team's mission that was more complicated.

Our world is in the midst of a crisis of biodiversity. The U.N. estimates that at least a million species are at risk of extinction, many within decades, and warns that we keep speeding them toward oblivion by converting more and more of the world's natural spaces into human ones. Already, we've

significantly changed three-quarters of the planet's land and two-thirds of its oceans, squeezing out untold numbers of wild creatures.

Yet there's a small subset of animals that are doing remarkably well. Known as synanthropes, these are the tiny minority of wild animals—not livestock or pets—that have adapted to thrive in the places that humans like and are forever building more of. City pigeons—the descendants of rock doves, birds that roost on steep cliff faces—are a good example. After the birds were partly domesticated as food and messengers, they learned to nest in the crevices of buildings and to eat our trash, and their numbers followed our skyscrapers upward. Other familiar examples include opossums, coyotes, raccoons, rats, wild turkeys, Canada geese, and crows. Some researchers have observed the latter using cars to crack walnuts, timing the stops between traffic-light changes in order to slip the nuts underneath the tires. Other birds have learned to line their nests with cigarette butts, whose residual nicotine keeps mites away. Some urban populations—such as lizards, whose toes are becoming more grippy, the better to climb glass and concrete instead of trees—seem to be actively evolving to live in the habitats that we're creating. Mice in Central Park have developed genes that allow them to metabolize fatty foods and rancid peanuts; mountain lions that live near the Seattle exurbs have shifted their predation from ungulates to rats, opossums, and raccoons. Studies have shown that many synanthropes are actually more successful—living at greater densities and achieving larger body sizes—in urban and suburban landscapes than they are in the wild.



Cartoon by Felipe Galindo

Twenty years ago, the environmental lawyer Holly Doremus wrote a law-review article examining what she called “The Rhetoric and Reality of Nature Protection.” In America, she wrote, conservation had focussed on protecting animals in reserves and parks separate from humans. But there was a fundamental problem with this, Doremus argued: “It assumes that nature can be allowed to function without human interference within reserves, while humans can be allowed to function without concern for nature outside them.” Real nature doesn’t work that way, and, when the two worlds inevitably spill into each other, what Doremus calls “boundary conflicts” arise.

On Staten Island, this reality is hard to ignore. It is a place where you can see groundhogs crossing the street, hawks hunting above the expressway, and drivers honking at flocks of wild turkeys, which are known to attack cars in which they can see their own reflections. It’s a place where a young wood stork—a large, beautiful bird accustomed to more tropical places—can find enough inviting saltwater marsh that it decides to stay, as one did right before my visit in August, but also a place where the marsh in question is next to an Amazon warehouse, and where what must have looked like a delicious eel was in fact a nearly four-foot-long piece of foam insulation, which choked the stork to death.

No one can say exactly when, in the borough's long history of colonization and urbanization, deer were hunted out of Staten Island. Nor is anyone quite sure when they began to return. One resident told me that he was so shocked the first time he heard a news story about a car hitting a deer on the West Shore Expressway that he tracked down the driver and called to see if the story could be true. (Despite the accident, and the awkwardness of the call, the driver was thrilled by what he'd seen.) Ed Burke, the borough's deputy president, remembers first seeing deer in the news in the nineteen-nineties. Every once in a while, one would swim over from New Jersey, a feat that is impressive not necessarily for the swim—deer are strong swimmers and the Arthur Kill is fairly narrow—but for the fact that the deer first had to navigate a heavily trafficked industrial corridor of the Jersey shoreline sometimes known as the Chemical Coast. Once on the island, the animal's exploits were often covered like those of a visiting dignitary, or a colorful drunk: someone who did not understand the local customs but who was nevertheless appreciated for his peculiarity and his novelty. “Did he pay the toll?” Burke joked.

In the early two-thousands, people began to see not just occasional visitors but entire families. The deer spread into the borough's parks, but were also spotted darting across highways, snacking in yards, or, on more than one occasion, breaking through the plate-glass window of a store and making a mess of the merchandise. By 2014, a survey by low-flying plane and infrared camera found seven hundred and sixty-three deer in the borough's 18.7 square miles of green space, almost forty-one deer per square mile of park. Ecologists warned that this was likely an undercount. One rule of suburban deer management, Paul Curtis, a wildlife specialist at Cornell, told me, is that “there are always more deer on the landscape than you know about.”

Some people were delighted by the new arrivals—these beautiful “animals of yesterday,” as Burke called them. In Facebook groups, residents urged one another not to give away the deer's locations, for fear that they'd be poached or harassed. Many people began feeding deer: watermelons in summer, pumpkins in the fall, bagels and Italian bread and breakfast cereal in the winter. “I saw a deer eating a layer cake,” Stevens told me. Katrina Toal, a Staten Island native and the deputy director of the wildlife unit for N.Y.C. Parks, recognized the feeding as an expression of both affection and

misplaced empathy. “A lot of people think that wildlife in New York City need help to survive,” she said.

Other residents saw the deer as causes of collisions, chompers of expensive landscaping, and vectors for disease, especially Lyme. (The black-legged ticks that spread Lyme couldn’t establish populations on the island without deer, which they use as hosts. Today, New York City’s Lyme cases are concentrated on the island, and a single deer often plays host to hundreds of ticks.) Some people demanded that the city capture and relocate deer to more rural places upstate, not understanding that such places had deer problems of their own. Others wanted the city to start culling the deer or offered to hunt them themselves. A few actually did start hunting them, leading to arrests.

In 2015, the city captured two deer at a construction site on Coney Island and moved one of them to Staten Island. (The other escaped.) It was a flash point that helped link a growing frustration with an old grievance. “It felt like another issue of dumping on the forgotten borough,” Toal said, referring to the years in which Staten Island was the city’s landfill. The borough president, James Oddo, sent a public letter to the city’s Parks Commissioner, stating, “Whether it is one deer or one thousand, whether it is one ounce of garbage or one hundred tons, we refuse to be the solution for another borough’s problems.”

Others took up a metaphor already common in suburban places with deer conflicts. When rats are a problem, one resident told me, “they don’t cordon them off and they don’t treat them nicely. And, if there’s a distinction between a rat and a deer, I don’t know what it is.”

The complaint that deer are “rats with hooves” is a significant departure from the animal’s former, and more accustomed, symbolism, as icons of the American wilderness. (Think Davy Crockett’s buckskin pants, Bambi, and “Home on the Range.”) But at least some of this symbolism evolved as nostalgia for an America that existed largely in our imaginations.

Early white settlers in the New World failed to notice that the forests they regarded as wilderness primeval were actually, for the Native peoples they were displacing, carefully managed landscapes, designed to be, among other

things, good habitat for game. The settlers considered the abundance of white-tailed deer, like that of other animals, to be inexhaustible. In what later became East Tennessee, a short-lived independent state used deer hides as currency, with the governor earning a thousand of them as his annual salary. Settlers exported pelts with abandon until their regimen of deforestation and large-scale commercial hunting proved that there were limits, after all.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, deer had been more or less wiped out in many states, from Vermont to Pennsylvania to Illinois; the deer population in New Jersey was estimated at just two hundred. Many people assumed that the animals had become relicts, with little, if any, place in the nation's urbanized future. In Minnesota, in 1896, a newspaper contributor marked the arrival of venison season, writing, "Nothing like enjoying the good things on the frontier while they last and before civilization makes the game scarce."

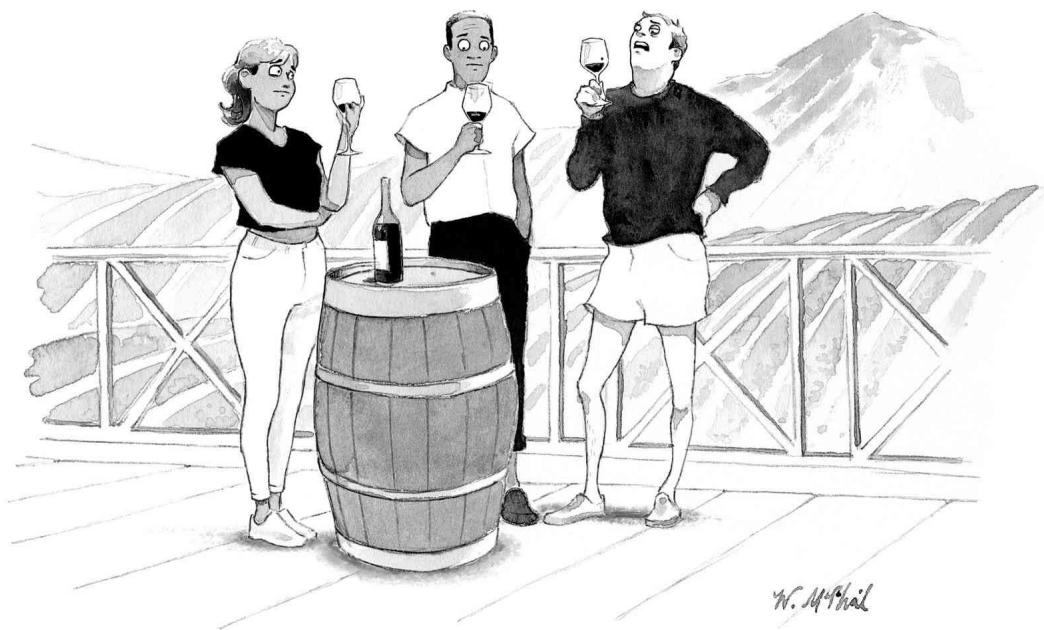
In fact, civilization soon did the opposite. Officials began implementing hunting restrictions to protect deer, and, in 1900, the Lacey Act made it illegal to sell them and other wildlife commercially. Meanwhile, Americans moving to cities and suburbs changed the landscape again. The places they'd denuded for logging and agriculture began to regrow, not into deep forests, which aren't ideal habitat for deer, but into mile after mile of the "edge" habitat—a mixture of woods and cleared spaces and human-husbanded plants that we often refer to as "sprawl" but which the journalist Jim Sterba called "a kind of Petri dish for whitetail propagation." It's common for does to give birth to twins each spring, but females that live in these environments have smaller ranges, larger fat reserves, and an elevated likelihood of birthing triplets. A suburban deer population can double in as few as two to three years.

Places like Pennsylvania and New England began restocking deer, importing them from the places where they still lived. The new arrivals—whose predators had been hunted and pushed out—multiplied rapidly. Soon, there were so many deer that people began to complain about the animals destroying forests and crops and gardens. By 1956, a guide to "The Deer of North America" observed that "deer problems often result from too many rather than too few." Once the land was stripped of food, or winter came, animals sometimes died in large numbers, a phenomenon that the ecologist

Aldo Leopold described as “the starved bones of the hoped-for deer herd, dead of its own too much.” Today, there are an estimated thirty million white-tailed deer in the U.S., a hundred times more than there were when the Lacey Act was passed.

As the pressure of the population built, deer had to look farther afield for new territory. They followed more tenuous corridors, through denser human landscapes, in search of somewhere to live.

The wildlife biologist Anthony DeNicola, who founded White Buffalo in 1995, describes Staten Island as an unusually urban, liminal habitat for deer: “parks and then concrete.” When the White Buffalo team first came to the island, they pored over satellite maps, looking for green spaces large enough for deer to live in or pass through, then went searching for paths, scat, and browse patterns. They put tracking collars on deer that they had darted and set up enough cameras to take hundreds of thousands of photographs a month, analyzing the movements of the island’s deer like detectives. When I told DeNicola that I wanted to learn about his team’s work for the city, he suggested that I go to the top of a certain hill near the Staten Island Expressway and look west, at a tangle of trees and buildings stretching far into the distance. “Think about finding every male deer in that landscape,” he said. “It can be overwhelming.”



*“I’m getting oak, cherries, and the urge to tell my ex that we made a mistake.”*  
Cartoon by Will McPhail

DeNicola is a square-jawed fifty-five-year-old who vibrates with energy, talks fast, and swears often. He's been sued by hunters and by animal-rights activists, but he saves his choicest words for state wildlife agencies, which he says can be blinded by the fact that their funding comes largely from hunting licenses. "Deer management is complicated, and it's ruled by idiocracy," he told me. DeNicola once estimated that he'd been responsible for the death of ten thousand deer—and that was seven years, and many projects, ago. In an emotionally heated field, he sees himself as a pragmatist and a problem solver. "If I were an addict," he said, "I'd be a puzzle-solving addict."

In the nineties, when DeNicola did a Ph.D. on fertility control, the field of deer-population management was in its infancy. State wildlife agencies had suggested increased hunting as a solution to the problem of overabundance. But recreational hunting was often unwelcome in residential areas, and studies showed that it wasn't effective at reducing deer populations to the levels that communities wanted. As opposed to biological carrying capacity—the number of deer that human-mediated landscapes can sustain—this is often referred to as social carrying capacity: the number of deer that human societies are willing to tolerate.

Local officials began working with state wildlife agencies and the U.S.D.A.'s Wildlife Services division to engineer new ways of controlling deer, often in the same places where they'd recently worked to protect them. (Wildlife Services adjudicates a wide variety of "boundary conflicts," stepping in when wolves prey on ranchers' sheep, beavers build unwelcome dams, or birds fly too close to airport runways. Sometimes the division offers nonlethal solutions—suggesting that roosting starlings, whose poop is often problematic, can be forced to move by harassing them with lasers—but it also regularly kills millions of animals a year.) No one I spoke to knew of any centralized tracking of deer-culling or fertility-control programs, so it's hard to capture the scale of operations around the country. "I just know there are many," Curtis, the expert at Cornell, told me. "And there are more all the time."

DeNicola views White Buffalo as a way to fund, and get data for, scientific studies on population management. The organization has worked on other species, including wild pigs and vultures, but deer are its main focus. In

2000, Princeton, New Jersey, contracted White Buffalo to reduce its deer population after a string of car accidents and other incidents, including deer giving birth on residents' porches. The company began using a bait-and-shoot method, employing professional sharpshooters to work in designated safe areas with tools like thermal imaging, night-vision equipment, and spotlighting. Unlike typical hunters, their goal wasn't to be "sportsmen" or to give "fair chase" but to kill as quickly and humanely as possible. Guns in suburbia created extra controversy, though, so the team switched to a net-and-bolt method. (The bolt gun was developed to deliver quick death at slaughterhouses, but watching it in action is upsetting.) Protesters left deer entrails on the mayor's car and hired detectives to trail White Buffalo's sharpshooters, who began wearing bulletproof vests. So did Princeton's animal-control officer, whose pet dog and cat were found, respectively, poisoned and crushed to death. As the township administrator explained to the *Times* two years into the project, "This is obviously the most controversial issue in Princeton in a long time."

Princeton was just one battle site of what are often known as "the deer wars," vitriolic disagreements among hunters, environmentalists, animal-rights activists, and suburbanites over how to manage deer populations. When Gary Alt, a supervisor with the Pennsylvania Game Commission, changed hunting regulations to give priority to the shooting of does, he received death threats. "The management of no other wild animal has been so controversial, so contentious," Alt wrote after retiring from the job. When the village of Hastings-on-Hudson, which had as many as two hundred deer in its two square miles, debated hiring White Buffalo to net-and-bolt, an online petition accused the company of being "contract killers," and called the town leaders "hell bent to slaughter." Bruce Jennings, a bioethicist who also served as a village trustee, told me that some residents who didn't necessarily have a problem with the targeted deaths of, say, mosquitoes or skunks saw deer as occupying a different emotional, and moral, world. Jennings thought that the intense fighting that erupted might tear the community apart. And then, he said, "immunocontraception, as it were, came over the hill to the rescue."

Immunocontraceptive birth control consists of vaccines that create antibodies to block pregnancy, but the vaccines must be readministered regularly. (One, PZP, neutralizes the proteins around an egg where sperm

attaches, while another, GonaCon, operates in the brain, inhibiting the creation of reproductive hormones.) Uses for wild deer are still considered experimental, performed under research permits. Vaccines are more palatable than culling, but they haven't been able to reduce deer populations to the ten or so animals per square mile that many communities want. And repeatedly capturing does in order to administer the drugs is an expense that few places are willing to shoulder.

Curtis told me that, after studying contraception, he suggested that the deer program at Cornell move to tranquilizing and sterilizing does, a one-time expense. But does, which tend to hang out in groups, eventually wised up to the danger of the bait. Plus, deer kept moving in faster than they could be sterilized, which Curtis attributes to new bucks being attracted to the ongoing estrus of the does that didn't get pregnant. (The ways in which sterilization affects the reproductive ecology of deer is still a matter of study.) Cornell began controlled hunting, and now uses a technique called dart-and-euthanize, in which deer are sedated so that they don't feel pain when a lethal drug is injected directly into their veins, a version of the current veterinary best practice for the euthanasia of pets. Despite the field's many debates about the efficacy of various methods, Curtis told me, "it's definitely more difficult to manage the human side of the equation than the wildlife side." He saw the Staten Island program as proof of that. "This was a political decision," he said. "People didn't want to see deer killed."

Richard Simon, the director of the wildlife unit for N.Y.C. Parks, told me that culling was never seen as a viable option on Staten Island; there was too little community support, too much risk of a program's getting delayed by lawsuits, and too many people in too small a space. White Buffalo had previously performed ovariectomies in suburbs from New York to California, and on the campus of the National Institutes of Health. But since vasectomies are less involved surgeries than ovariectomies, and since solitary bucks can be tricked longer with bait corn, Staten Island decided to try something new. The borough also had a unique advantage: an island with a moat that would, the city hoped, keep the influx of new deer to a minimum.

One evening, at dusk, I met a Staten Island resident named Cliff Hagen at Clay Pit Ponds State Park Preserve, which is considered the first park on the

island in which deer established themselves. The forest was carpeted in a lush grass that seemed almost to glow in the dim light. “Beautiful green understory, right?” Hagen said. “It almost looks like ‘The Hobbit,’ or something.”

Hagen—a schoolteacher and the president of Protectors of Pine Oak Woods, a group that fought to preserve the park as a key habitat for birds—was joking. The beautiful grass was stiltgrass, an invasive species that the deer won’t eat. As we wandered around the park, Hagen kept shaking his head at how few other plants were growing. There were no young saplings of the hardwoods that made up the overstory, and the only places we saw young native plants thriving were inside two fenced exclosures that deer can’t access. Studies have shown that high deer presence reduces the over-all biodiversity of forests, helps invasive plants dominate, and suppresses the seedlings of trees and flowers that deer like to eat. To Hagen, the forest was less like the Shire and more like “Children of Men”—a society that’s about to collapse for lack of a new generation. “This forest, in a sense, is already dead,” he said. “It just doesn’t know it yet.”

Every few minutes, Hagen interrupted himself to whistle back and forth with a bird. He could name the birds by their songs: eastern wood pewee, hairy woodpecker, northern flicker. Then came a low noise that stopped him. “Honest to God, I thought I heard a great horned owl,” he said. “But it could have been a truck on the bridge or something.”

This reminded me of a conflict in my part of the country, the Pacific Northwest. Barred owls, I told Hagen, had crossed the Great Plains as humans changed the region’s ecology, and had eventually arrived in forests that weren’t accustomed to them, where they outcompeted the endangered spotted owl. In response, the Fish and Wildlife Service began a surprising experiment: shooting thousands of barred owls. I’d once visited a freezer full of the culled birds and held one, which felt tiny and delicate in death. Hagen, the bird-lover, took the news in stride. “Those are the drastic measures we need to take now to restore the balance,” he said.

“Restoring the balance” is a phrase that comes up a lot when discussing deer, though it is difficult to determine what it means. In Westchester County, I met Patrick Moore, a volunteer wildlife rehabilitator who regularly

treats injured animals from Staten Island and the rest of New York City. While Moore and I were talking, two women brought in a Canada goose that would need surgery after being hit by a car. (Geese, like deer, have bounced back dramatically after being extirpated from much of their range, and are now regularly culled.) An exterminator arrived with two baby squirrels that he had retrieved from the ceiling of a bank after poisoning their mother. Moore sighed. The exterminator had been paid to create a problem that Moore would fix for free, and the squirrels had been orphaned so young that, in addition to feeding them with a specialized syringe, he'd have to rub their genitalia every few hours so that they could urinate.

When the *Times* recently covered Moore's work, publishing a photograph of three orphaned fawns resting in his home shower, one commenter observed, "This is horrible! These cute babies will grow up to be a menace in the not too distant future." Moore was unimpressed. "You'd have to be a demented human being to look at a tiny baby and say, 'You shouldn't be alive, there's too many of you,'" he told me. He thinks that culls and sterilization are the result of a strange combination of hubris and responsibility-dodging. "Deer mess up plant life a lot less than humans do," he pointed out. "We sit here and try to balance something that's much bigger than us."

In the only scientific article I have read about deer management that quotes Foucault, John Patrick Connors and Anne Short Gianotti argue that our current paradigm of human-nature separation springs from the creation of the "sanitary city" in the nineteenth century. For thousands of years, people had been accustomed to living amid both livestock and wild animals, but now came the idea that humans could create clean, managed spaces where animals' mere presence made them "pests." The success of deer and other synanthropes invites strong emotions, Connors and Gianotti write, because it challenges "the perception of cities and suburbs as *human* territories." Likewise, deer management may be a means of "shifting a broader anxiety of environmental change to deer" in a way that makes us feel less culpable and more in control. They point out that burgeoning deer populations are considered "unnatural" because they result from human disruptions, but that further human interventions are "presented as a natural remedy to these circumstances, restoring a lost balance of nature."



*"We're constantly looking for ways to dispose of leaves we rake up from the boss's front yard."*  
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

Many of our ideas about animals—which we eat, which we keep as pets, which we vilify or protect—are changeable with time and context and culture. These ideas sometimes lead us to odd and inconsistent places. New Zealand is famous for enthusiastically culling non-native predators in a large-scale effort to protect its endemic species, but feral cats, because of the close association with their domesticated relatives, haven't been included in the purge. In the American West, the government shoots coyotes but rounds up wild horses and puts them up for adoption. The U.K., which has waged a long war against gray squirrels in order to protect red ones, recently approved a plan to dose the grays with contraceptives concealed in hazelnut spread. Families feed bread to geese in the same cities that cull them. Other places give them pellets laced with birth control or cover their eggs in vegetable oil to keep them from hatching. According to Allen Rutberg, a research associate professor at Tufts' Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine who worked on Hastings-on-Hudson's deer campaign, only a fraction of wildlife management is about biology. "The rest is sorting out why people believe what they do," he said.

Rutberg told me that the first question most people ask him is what the "right" number of deer is—as if there were a "natural" world to which we could return, as if nature were ever static to begin with, as if we hadn't

transformed it into something new. Ticks, for example, are moving into new places not only because of deer migration but because of the warmer winters of our changed climate. Studies have shown that substantial decreases in tick populations would require reductions in deer density greater than almost any management program has ever achieved—to levels below those of the pre-settler era that is used as a baseline of imagined naturalness.

Rutberg believes that the deer's symbolic history has colored our debates about how to manage them. "However we feel about how people and nature interact gets projected onto deer," he told me. "Deer are a convenient focus for our concerns about what we're doing to the environment. But removing them won't fix what we've done."

The first deer I saw on Staten Island was in the Greenbelt, a twenty-eight-hundred-acre park that runs down the center of the island. A browsing doe slipped past as Meredith VanAcker, wearing high rubber boots and latex gloves, dragged a large piece of corduroy across the leaf litter of the forest floor. After a moment, VanAcker flipped the corduroy over and leaned close to inspect it. "O.K., here's a little guy," she said, pointing to a larval tick, a dark speck about the size of a grain of table salt. Farther up the fabric was a dense cluster of specks. "That's a larval bomb," she said. "It's where a female had dropped off—she laid a big cluster of thousands of eggs, and then they all hatch."

For five years, VanAcker, a Columbia Ph.D. student involved in a project on the ecology of ticks and tick-borne diseases, has studied the population in New York City parks. Most of her time has been spent on Staten Island, where a quarter of ticks are infected with the bacterium that causes Lyme disease. She has spent a lot of time dragging for ticks and trapping for mice, which are a key but much less famous part of the complicated web of relationships that scientists call ticks' "host communities."

VanAcker had contracted with White Buffalo to study the bucks that the company had collared, and to put tracking collars on a group of does. Ticks, VanAcker explained, don't move horizontally in a landscape, but only upward. They find a high point, usually about calf height on a human, and then "quest," holding their legs out to be ready to grab onto the first host that comes along. In the parks of the borough, deer were the connective tissue

between otherwise isolated tick habitats, a natural infrastructure overlaid on a human one.

In deer management, the animals are often spoken of as an undifferentiated mass. But as VanAcker followed their movements, surprising nuance and individuality emerged. The deer had patterns, and favorite places. There was a pair of does that never left the College of Staten Island, doing the same foraging circuit together day after day, and a buck that commuted regularly between Great Kills, a park on the Atlantic coast, and the suburban yards of the island's center. The ear tags that bucks wear have provided a similar education for some residents, who can now identify specific deer as neighbors.

VanAcker began to see the borough as far less divided than she'd expected. In places with the densest development, deer often confined their activities to the quiet hours of night, but, once it was late, she saw their collars ping from a certain Target parking lot turned deer passage. There was a route used by lots of deer which she imagined must be a corridor of green, but which turned out to be a concrete drainage structure. A member of her Ph.D. committee suggested that she do an analysis of road crossings, but when she started to dig into the data she found a single deer making some fifty crossings in a day. The project would be next to impossible in a place like Staten Island, VanAcker said: "Roads are too embedded in the landscape structure." Everything was intertwined.

As of this year, White Buffalo's vasectomy project has reduced fawn births by sixty per cent on the island, and the over-all population by twenty-one per cent. The cost has also risen to \$6.6 million, a significant increase over the original budget. Deer-management programs are sometimes compared to mowing a lawn, a task that's never really complete; new arrivals mean new surgeries on an indefinite basis.

Whenever I discussed deer demographics with city officials, they emphasized that their metric for success isn't counting deer but counting things like collisions and infections, which are down, respectively, forty-three and sixty per cent. Richard Simon, of N.Y.C. Parks, stressed that although the vasectomy project gets most of the attention, it's only half of the city's plan for deer. The other half is an educational offensive to make

people see them differently (and stop feeding them). There are classes for children, who, Simon noted, will grow up seeing deer as normal presences, and public-awareness campaigns about ticks and Lyme disease. The city has also plastered buses and taxicabs with posters of deer and other wildlife, labelling them as “commuter” or “New Yorker.” (Ticks are labelled “hitchhiker.”) “We want people, humans, to understand that the environment that we’re creating is not a sterile environment,” Simon said—to understand that wild animals will always have a place in the city, too.

Shortly before I left Staten Island, more than eight inches of rain flooded the borough. The next evening, I went looking for deer, and found four bucks exactly where the trackers at White Buffalo had told me they would be, on a strip of grass that separates a city park from rows of houses. All were wearing ear tags advertising their vasectomized status. A woman out for an evening walk told me that she feels sorry for the deer and regularly feeds them—“It’s my joy to see them,” she said—and in the next breath cursed the turkeys that had congregated at the other end of the street.

The bucks retreated into the park. I trailed after them until they crossed a large puddle of floodwater that was too deep for me to follow. For a long time, we stood on either side of it, watching one another in silence as the darkness gathered. Finally, I turned away, and began picking my way back through the mud. It was filled with their footprints and mine, all mixed up together. ♦

## The Current Cinema

- [In “Spencer,” Kristen Stewart’s Princess Diana Is Forever Trying Out Roles](#)

By [Anthony Lane](#)

Picture the scene. The Duke and Duchess of Sussex, mooching around their Montecito stronghold and desperate to get out for the evening, are picking a movie to see. “Dune”? Too long. “No Time to Die”? Too sad. Harry won’t watch “Venom: Let There Be Carnage,” because it reminds him of the British press. Meghan won’t watch “The Addams Family 2,” because it reminds her of lunch at Windsor Castle. “Hey, I know!” she cries. “Let’s go and see a film about your *mother*. ”

“Spencer” is a rum concoction, starring Kristen Stewart as the late Princess of Wales. It is written by Steven Knight, directed by Pablo Larraín, and described at the outset as “a fable from a true tragedy”—fancy talk for “We kind of made this stuff up.” The time frame is concise: Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and December 26th. (No year is specified, but I would guess 1991.) Most of the action takes place in and around Sandringham House, the royal residence in the county of Norfolk. Diana travels there alone, in a Porsche, without a security detail. She gets lost along the way and stops to ask for directions, admitting, “I’ve absolutely no idea where I am.” This is unlikely, since she should know the area well; she was born and raised on the Sandringham Estate. What Larraín wants to make thumpingly clear, though, is that Diana is now a soul adrift, wretched in her marriage to Prince Charles (Jack Farthing) and all but ostracized by his relations.

Anyone who endured a film like “Diana” (2013)—a starchy royal bio-pic, with Naomi Watts—will gather, within minutes, that “Spencer” is going to be far more elastic, not to say expressionist, in regard to the rules of the genre. The people we meet here, as in a children’s game, are split into goodies and baddies. One side comprises Diana, her sons, William and Harry (very well played, with a solemn charm, by Jack Nielen and Freddie Spry), and Maggie (Sally Hawkins), her favorite dresser and confidante, who says things like “Hold on. Fight them. Be beautiful.” There is also the head chef, Darren (Sean Harris), who is sympathetic to Diana’s plight, though he is busy overseeing the foodstuffs, lobsters included, that are ferried to the house by troops. A sign on the kitchen wall, possibly borrowed from the set of “The Handmaid’s Tale,” reads “Keep noise to a minimum. They can hear you.” Yikes.

“They,” of course, refers to the opposing team, captained by the Queen (Stella Gonet) and concentrated in the frigid—and fictional—person of Major Alistair Gregory, who is played, in a lavish piece of miscasting, by Timothy Spall, one of the warmest of character actors. Gregory has been drafted in to keep everything safe and secure; instead, he merely fortifies Diana’s belief that she is being imprisoned. To deter the prying lenses of photographers, Gregory has her bedroom curtains sewn shut. She promptly cuts them open and, as an afterthought, deliberately snips her bare arm. Or maybe she imagines doing so, since the flesh is then shown to be, as yet, un傷.

The movie teems with bad dreams of this kind. Diana’s necklace—a present from her husband—breaks, at dinner, and the pearls drop into a bowl of thick green soup. She fishes them out, swallows them, and later regurgitates them: a gloopy, gothic heightening of the bulimia from which Diana, at her unhappiest, is known to have suffered. Other fantasies are more tenuous still, notably the appearance of Anne Boleyn (Amy Manson), who pops up here and there as a cautionary kindred spirit, the implication being that to lose your mind (“I’m a magnet for madness,” Diana says) is the latter-day equivalent of losing your head, as the luckless Anne did in 1536. Her presence in “Spencer” also answers a nagging question: Why do filmmakers keep on lugging the saga of modern British royalty onto our screens? Because it is the only costume drama that happens to have lingered, unaccountably, into the here and now.

The most telling invention devised by Knight and Larraín concerns Diana’s birthplace, Park House, a short walk from where she is staying for Christmas. One night, she sneaks over to the dark, deserted building, where relics of her childhood, such as a doll’s house, are conveniently strewn. The staircase cracks underfoot, and she envisages launching herself from the top of it. But here’s the thing. In 1983, well before the events depicted, or cooked up, in “Spencer,” the Queen gave Park House to Leonard Cheshire Disability, a charity of which she is the patron—a gesture of no interest to this ungenerous film. (Leonard Cheshire, a much decorated Second World War pilot, and an observer at Nagasaki, was a saintly, efficient, and altogether remarkable man, who devoted the second half of his life to the care of others.) In 1987, Park House opened as a hotel for the disabled. It was *not*, therefore, available for paranoid prowling.

“Spencer” is, in many ways, baloney, abundantly spiced with slander. It is contemptuous of those whom it accuses of treating Diana with contempt. Although Maggie says to her, “Don’t see conspiracy everywhere,” the film sees nothing but. I can’t decide what made me laugh louder: the dead pheasant, stiffly positioned on the road at the entrance to Sandringham, like a prop from a Monty Python sketch, or the Prince of Wales informing his wife that “you have to be able to make your body do things you hate.” He sounds like a Pilates instructor.

And yet, strange to say, the film is hard to ignore. For all its follies, I would rather watch it again than sit through further episodes of “The Crown.” The sight of that show clawing toward the credible, without ever quite getting there, is painful to behold, whereas Larraín is somehow freed by the liberties that he takes with historical facts. Just as he drew us into the grieving consciousness of Jacqueline Kennedy, in “[Jackie](#)” (2016), so, now, he tunes in to Diana’s high anxiety; the camera is constantly on her, with her, and around her, as if drunk on her perception of the world.

Much is demanded, then, of Kristen Stewart, and she responds with vigor. What we get is not so much an authentic portrait (though the shy tilt of the head is uncanny) as a set of variations on the theme of Diana, ranging from the tender to the loopy, and stressing the extent to which she herself is forever trying out roles. The best scene finds her waking her sons up, for early-morning Christmas presents, and starting a game—gruffly pretending to be in the military. (“Do you want to be king, soldier?” William is asked by his brother.) Keeping Stewart company is a wonderful score by [Jonny Greenwood](#), which mingles echoes of Purcell with noodling riffs. Unbalanced and unjust, “Spencer” is nonetheless perversely gripping. It dares to unbend, playing the angry fool amid kings-to-be, queens, princes, princesses, and all that jazz.

If you doubt that any movie could pay more exhaustive attention to its heroine than “Spencer” does, try “Hive.” Written and directed by Blerta Basholli, it’s another feature film based on a real person: in this case, a woman named Fahrije (Yllka Gashi), proud and severe, who seldom escapes our frame of vision. Like the Princess of Wales, Fahrije is the mother of two children, but she dwells at the opposite end of the economic spectrum, in a village in Kosovo, and I suspect that she would, if apprised of Diana’s

unusual predicament, advise her to toughen up fast. It takes a lot to make Fahrije smile and even more to make her weep, so how come she cries when she realizes that her daughter has begun her periods? Is it because of what awaits her as a woman, in the teeth of a wolfish society?

Not until the end credits are we told what has befallen Fahrije, though vigilant viewers will have pieced the tale together. Her husband was among the local Albanian Kosovars rounded up by Serbian forces, seven years earlier, in 1999. He is still missing, presumed dead, though Fahrije doesn't share this presumption. She is a widow-in-waiting, that most forlorn of creatures, and she is joined and sustained in her limbo by fellow-wives, who also fear the worst. Somewhere behind "Hive," I think, you can hear the far-off cry of Euripides' "The Trojan Women," which recounts the agony of Hecuba, the Queen of Troy, and of others bereaved by the ruination of their home—and which, incidentally, was staged out of doors in Pristina, the Kosovan capital, in 2018.

The bitterest aspect of Basholli's film is the attitude of the men in the village. Far from supporting the single women, they scorn them, and resent any hint of female enterprise or independence. Fahrije has plenty of both. She learns to drive, she keeps bees, and she branches out, with the aid of her friends, into producing *ajvar*, a paste made from roasted red peppers, to be sold in a Pristina supermarket. And what does she get for her pains? She is called a whore. A stone is thrown through the window of her car. And, in the most evocative scene, she finds her jars of *ajvar* smashed, and the womenfolk picking through the debris, like gleaners on a battlefield. In a movie that is redolent of violence, yet devoid of bloodshed, here is a welter of scarlet. Fahrije, of course, clears up, and carries on. ♦

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# The Theatre

- [“Morning Sun” Glimmers with Meaning](#)
- [The Vampy Comedy of “Nollywood Dreams”](#)
- [Winter Theatre Preview](#)

In Simon Stephens's dreamily extended riff, Edie Falco plays a woman whose life is dramatic but unsung, the kind that never makes headlines but is nonetheless dense with incident.

By [Vinson Cunningham](#)

If you sit around your apartment for long enough, you'll see the light carve a whole life across the walls. Certain silhouettes become acquaintances. You can almost tell the time by the shadows. So perhaps it's appropriate that some of the most affecting light I have seen onstage was in Simon Stephens's new play, "Morning Sun" (presented by Manhattan Theatre Club, at City Center Stage I), which has as its sole setting the interior of an apartment in Greenwich Village.

Lap Chi Chu's lighting design is a wonder of minutely dislodged naturalism. A beam streaks through a kitchen; a row of upstage windows glows, suggesting strengthening sunshine outside. When a character turns a dimmer and an overhead light perks up, we remember that there are some stories you tell only in the dark.

"Morning Sun" is a dreamily extended riff on the life of Charley McBride (Edie Falco), who has lived in this place on West Eleventh Street for all but a few years of her life. She's sandwiched between generations—her mother, Claudette (Blair Brown), and her daughter, Tessa (Marin Ireland). But the life whose ray we follow, from beginning to end, is Charley's. "This isn't your story," she says to her mother early on, setting things straight as much for the audience as for Claudette. "It's my story. Not yours."

Charley's life is dramatic but unsung—the kind that never makes headlines but is nonetheless dense with incident. Some events pass her by as history; others, utterly personal, echo through the decades. The telling of it is a chance to make it all glimmer, however softly, with meaning. A fleeting encounter gives her the sharp surprise of a baby—Tessa—and a subsequent life as a single mom. Later, she meets a man at a museum: he guards a room with a painting by Edward Hopper, that genius of alienated daylight, who hails from Nyack, New York, where Claudette lived before settling in the city. Hopper is Charley's favorite painter; the guard loves him, too. Together, they look at the painting, his masterwork "Morning Sun," and their talk probes the picture's details. "I like trying to figure out what that building is,"

he says, interrupting her reverie and cutting through the silence of the gallery.

*CHARLEY*: Excuse me?

*GUARD*: I mean it looks like the top of a tenement building or a factory but I don't know.

*CHARLEY*: It could be a prison.

*GUARD*: That's what I think. It's his wife.

*CHARLEY*: It is?

*GUARD*: Yeah. Jo. Is her name.

*CHARLEY*: Oh. Hey Jo.

The man, Brian, is played by Ireland—both she and Brown flit through several roles, peopling Charley's world through quick acts of transformation. They're her friend, her boyfriend, her doctor, a one-night stand. It's possible to think about the play as almost realistic—three women stuck at home, struggling to get the plot and the poetry of a story just right—but also as an act of remembered collage.

One of autobiography's necessary lies is that a life can live in just one tongue. "Morning Sun," with its tight-knit ensemble, prone to impromptu impersonation, offers something closer to the truth: it takes a crowd to remember even one person at her fullest. All these angles and ways of seeing add up to something rich, worth telling. The production shares an interest in artful interplay between a place and the larger milieu it symbolizes with another current show, Stefano Massini's "The Lehman Trilogy," adapted by Ben Power and directed by Sam Mendes, at the Nederlander. "Lehman" is performed on a swivelling set, made up to look like a conference room, but roves, in its story, across a wide swath of the United States.

Both shows, too, have three performers do the work of a much larger ensemble. The maneuver is possible because—bucking many decades of tired writing advice—these plays insist on telling, not just showing, the

stories they take on. (Of course, telling comes with its elisions: “We’re just done with the sixties like that?” Claudette laments.) The effect is a kind of puff pastry: shinily laminated and bursting with layers. Even when Brown is playing a terse airline pilot whom Charley has brazenly seduced, we see a mother’s concern glistening in her eyes. When we see Ireland, as Charley’s closest childhood friend, in a devastating scene, wincing ever so slightly, she is doing so not only as the friend but also as Tessa, so sorry to re-inflict this pain on her mother: she’s making it live again by playing it out.

It’s appropriate that this world-première production is directed by the talented Lila Neugebauer. In 2018, Neugebauer directed Kenneth Lonergan’s “The Waverly Gallery,” which, like “Morning Sun,” wears its obsession with, and affection for, an aging Manhattan on its sleeve. One mark of poor character in Brian, the museum guard, is his constant noddging, later in the relationship, for Charley and Claudette to sell their apartment and buy a big house in Queens. These are New Yorkers schmaltzily and, sure, somewhat snobbily devoted to their place: when Charley complains that her mother never took her to Nyack, Claudette’s reply is, “Why in God’s name would you want to go there?”

The procession of place-names that runs through the play can feel like corny pandering—nothing gets a crowd on Fifty-fifth Street nodding and moaning with recognition like a passing mention of the White Horse Tavern. Joni Mitchell—whose “Song to a Seagull” recurs throughout the piece—fights Hopper for top billing as the most mentioned bourgeois-darling artist. But it’s to Stephens’s credit that he keeps the particulars of Charley’s life pinned to the political and cultural events that spin around her. She’s a longtime receptionist at St. Vincent’s Hospital, the Village institution, now demolished, where she also happens to have been born. In the seventies, when she started working there, the clientele, as she remembers them, were “the school janitors. And the store owners. And the hairdressers. And the hotel cleaners. And the bakers. And the bartenders. And the school teachers. And the locksmiths.”

In the eighties and nineties, though, St. Vincent’s becomes an epicenter of the *AIDS* crisis, and Charley begins to understand her job as a vocation. (My dad died at St. Vincent’s, in the nineties; a real-life Charley might have met him a time or two. A thought of him passed through me as I watched,

prompted not only by the mention of that place but also by “Morning Sun” ’s intent focus on the ghostlike way in which generations pass one another by.) Charley’s life isn’t all family, or just a procession of strong loves and smarting disappointments. She’s conditioned, like a stone in a stream’s glinting flow, by the uncontrollable exigencies of history and place.

Neugebauer—obviously interested in New York, and in real estate, and in the sweetly disfiguring effects of nostalgia and the onrushing noise of death —directs the show tenderly. The women move through the apartment, using it more as an emotional and imaginative space than as a stage for family conflict. (The collective dots designed the simple but psychologically resonant set.) They turn the lights off and on again, pose tentatively in pools of weak sunlight, and express their resentments and regrets spatially as well as verbally. (When somebody’s sitting off to the side, we start to expect a blowup.)

Edie Falco is a wonderful vehicle for all this thought. Her face is open and tender; her eyes stretch out easily, embodying all the wonders and the unspeakable fears of childhood—including the ones that last a lifetime. As Charley, she takes on a version of something that has often played in my nightmares: a game of “This Is Your Life,” with a lifetime’s frailty and self-doubt recalled for an audience to see. It’s no simple wish, to be remembered. ♦

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Nigeria's film industry boomed in the nineteen-nineties, with thousands of low-budget, high-spirited movies shot and distributed on video. Nollywood, as it became known, now produces some twenty-five hundred films per year. Its formative era is the setting for Jocelyn Bioh's vampy Off Broadway comedy "**Nollywood Dreams**" (opening on Nov. 11, at MCC Theatre), which finds two sisters dreaming big when one of them lands an audition. The cast features (clockwise from top) Emana Rachelle, Sandra Okuboyejo, and Ade Otukoya.

By [Michael Schulman](#)

It's been fourteen long months since a marquee heralding a splashy revival of "**The Music Man**," starring Hugh Jackman and Sutton Foster, went up at the Winter Garden. Originally scheduled to open in the fall of 2020, the production was delayed until spring, then winter, holding out a post-pandemic promise of seventy-six trombones and a big parade. Along the way, it lost its lead producer, Scott Rudin, who stepped back amid accusations of workplace bullying. River City, meet trouble. Meredith Willson's classic finally starts previews on Dec. 20, under the direction of Jerry Zaks.

It's one of several mammoth musicals careening toward midtown. Michael Mayer's production of "**Funny Girl**" (starting March 26, at the August Wilson) is the first attempt at a Broadway revival since the show premiered, in 1964—likely because Barbra Streisand so owned the role of Fanny Brice that even Fanny Brice couldn't fill her shoes. The job falls, nonetheless, to the dauntless Beanie Feldstein. "**Paradise Square**," a new musical directed by Moises Kaufman and choreographed by Bill T. Jones, is set in 1863, as the Irish and Black citizens of Manhattan's Five Points neighborhood face off in barroom dance contests (Feb. 22, Barrymore). And there's the curious case of "**MJ**" (Dec. 6, Neil Simon), which uses the Michael Jackson catalogue to tell the story of the King of Pop (Myles Frost) preparing for his "Dangerous" world tour, in 1992. If a Michael Jackson jukebox spectacle seems off-key, consider that the humanitarian-minded playwright Lynn Nottage wrote the script.

Also on Broadway, a slew of postponed plays find their moment, including "**Take Me Out**," Richard Greenberg's comedy about a pro baseball player who comes out as gay (March 9, Hayes); Tracy Letts's satire "**The Minutes**," set at a meeting of a small-town city council (March 19, Studio 54); and a revival of Neil Simon's 1968 comedy "**Plaza Suite**," starring Sarah Jessica Parker and Matthew Broderick as three different couples passing through the same hotel room (Feb. 25, Hudson). New to the lineup is "**Skeleton Crew**," Dominique Morisseau's drama about workers in a Detroit auto factory facing hard times on the eve of the 2008 financial crisis, directed by Ruben Santiago-Hudson and featuring Phylicia Rashad (Dec. 21, Samuel J. Friedman).

Off Broadway, Cecily Strong stars in “**The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe,**” Jane Wagner’s multicharacter feminist solo play, for which Lily Tomlin won a Tony Award in 1986 (Dec. 21, the Shed). The New Group premieres “**Black No More,**” a musical inspired by George S. Schuyler’s 1931 Afrofuturist novel; Tariq Trotter, of the Roots, who wrote the music and lyrics, plays the inventor of a machine that turns Black people white (Jan. 11, Pershing Square Signature Center). In Dave Harris’s “**Tambo & Bones,**” two characters trapped in a minstrel show plot to escape and make their fortune (Jan. 12, Playwrights Horizons). And, just in time to spike the holiday eggnog with arsenic, Kiki and Herb, the wizened alter egos of Justin Vivian Bond and Kenny Mellman, return with “**SLEIGH at BAM,**” at the Harvey Theatre (Nov. 30-Dec. 4). ♦

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