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Surviving the Crackdown in Xinjiang

As mass detentions and surveillance dominate the lives of China's Uyghurs and Kazakhs, a woman struggles to free herself.

By [Raffi Khatchadourian](#)

April 5, 2021



I. home

When Anar Sabit was in her twenties and living in Vancouver, she liked to tell her friends that people could control their own destinies. Her experience, she was sure, was proof enough.

She had come to Canada in 2014, a bright, confident immigrant from Kuytun, a small city west of the Gobi Desert, in a part of China that is tucked between Kazakhstan, Siberia, and Mongolia. “Kuytun” means “cold” in Mongolian; legend has it that Genghis Khan’s men, stationed there one frigid winter, shouted the word as they shivered. During Sabit’s childhood, the city was an underdeveloped colonial outpost in a contested region that locals called East Turkestan. The territory had been annexed by imperial China in the eighteenth century, but on two occasions it broke away, before

Mao retook it, in the nineteen-forties. In Beijing, it was called New Frontier, or Xinjiang: an untamed borderland.

Growing up in this remote part of Asia, a child like Sabit, an ethnic Kazakh, could find the legacy of conquest all around her. Xinjiang is the size of Alaska, its borders spanning eight countries. Its population was originally dominated by Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other indigenous Turkic peoples. But, by the time Sabit was born, Kuytun, like other parts of Xinjiang's north, had dramatically changed. For decades, the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps—a state-run paramilitary development organization, known as the *bingtuan*—had helped usher in millions of Han Chinese migrants, many of them former revolutionary soldiers, to work on enormous farms. In southern Xinjiang, indigenous peoples were still prevalent, but in Kuytun they had become a vestigial presence.

As a child, Sabit imbibed Communist Party teachings and considered herself a committed Chinese citizen, even as the *bingtuan* maintained a colonialist attitude toward people like her. Han residents of Kuytun often called Kazakhs and Uyghurs “ethnic persons,” as if their specific culture made no difference. Sabit accepted this as normal. Her parents, a doctor and a chemistry professor, never spoke of their experiences of discrimination; they enrolled her in schools where classes were held in Mandarin, and they taught her to embrace what she learned there. When Sabit was in elementary school, she and her classmates picked tomatoes for the *bingtuan*. In middle school, she picked cotton, which she hated: you had to spend hours bent over, or else with your knees ground into the dirt. Her mother told her that the work built character.

Sabit excelled as a student, and after graduating from high school, in 2004, she moved to Shanghai, to study Russian, hoping that it would open up career opportunities in other parts of the world. She loved Shanghai, which thrummed with the promise of glamorous, fast-paced living. But she was still an “ethnic person.” If she told a new acquaintance where she was from, it usually derailed the conversation. Some people, believing that “barbarians” lived in Xinjiang, expressed surprise that she spoke Mandarin fluently. Just before she completed her degree, the tech company Huawei hosted a job fair, and Sabit and her friends applied. She was the only one not offered an interview—because of her origins, she was sure.

Sabit brushed off this kind of prejudice, and became adept at eliding her background; when circumstances allowed, she fibbed and said that she was from some other region. She found a well-paying job with an investment company. The work was exciting—involving travel to places like Russia, Laos, and Hong Kong—and she liked her boss and her colleagues.

While Sabit was in Shanghai, her parents immigrated to Kazakhstan. They urged her to move there, too, but she resisted their pleas, believing that China was a more powerful country, more forward-leaning. She had spent most of her life striving to be a model citizen, and was convinced that her future lay with China—even as the politics of her homeland grew more fraught.

In 2009, a fight broke out in a toy factory in the southern province of Guangdong. Amid the melee, two Uyghur employees were killed by a Han mob. The next month, hundreds of Uyghurs took to the streets of Xinjiang’s capital city, Ürümqi, waving Chinese flags and chanting “Uyghur”—a call to be seen by the country’s leadership. The police cracked down, and riots erupted. Hundreds of people were injured or killed, and hundreds were arrested. More than forty Uyghurs were presumed disappeared. Dozens were later sentenced to death.

A year after the riots, Sabit was travelling to Kyrgyzstan with a group of co-workers. While trying to catch a connecting flight in Ürümqi, she was pulled aside by the authorities and told that, because she was from Xinjiang, she needed special permission to proceed. As her colleagues went ahead, she had to spend a day at a bureau for ethnic and religious affairs, getting the papers that she needed.

Having absorbed the Party’s propaganda, she believed that such measures were necessary. Still, she began to feel a deep alienation. No matter where she went in China, she remained an outsider. One day, back in Shanghai, she looked up at the city’s towering apartment buildings and asked herself, “What do they have to do with me?”

Not long afterward, she talked with a friend who had moved to Vancouver. Sabit flew over for a visit and was drawn to the openness and opportunity that she found; whenever she told a Canadian that she was from Xinjiang,

the response was warm curiosity. She enrolled in a business-diploma program, and that summer she returned and found an apartment and a roommate. She landed a job as a junior accountant in a Vancouver company. She fell in with a circle of friends. She had met a man whom she loved. Her life was on a course that she had set, and it was good.

In the spring of 2017, Sabit's father died suddenly, of a heart attack. Her mother called, but, to spare Sabit a shock, said only that he was in the hospital and that she should come see him. Sabit, on vacation at the time, dumped her plans and flew to Kazakhstan. Just before the plane took off, she logged on to a family group chat on her phone. Someone had written, "May his spirit rest in Heaven," in Kazakh. But the message was in Arabic script, and Sabit could make out only "Heaven." She spent the flight in painful uncertainty. After she arrived, another relative, unaware of her mother's deception, offered condolences for her loss. Realizing that her father was dead, she burst into tears.



"I love to come to the park and disrupt the fragile ecosystem."
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

Sabit found her mother devastated with grief, so she decided to stay to support her. She asked her boss for several months off, but he couldn't hold her position vacant for that long, so she resigned. She called friends in Vancouver and told them to put her things in storage.

That summer, Sabit and her mother returned to Kuytun, to settle her father's affairs. Friends had warned her not to go: rumors had been circulating of an escalating crackdown on the indigenous peoples of Xinjiang—of Kazakh traders being disappeared at the border. But Sabit had made an uneventful trip there less than a month earlier, and she wanted to be by her mother's side. For two weeks, they met with family and visited ancestors' graves. The trip, she later recalled, "was full of tears and sadness."

On July 15th, Sabit and her mother drove to Ürümqi Diwopu International Airport, for a flight back to Kazakhstan. They arrived in the middle of the night, and the building was nearly empty. At customs, an officer inspected her mother's passport and cleared her to go. But when Sabit handed over her documents he stopped, looked at her, and then took her passport into a back office.

"Don't worry," Sabit assured her mother, explaining that the delay was most likely another bureaucratic annoyance. Minutes later, the officer returned with an Uyghur official, who told Sabit to sit on a bench. "You cannot leave," he said. "You can discuss between yourselves whether your mother will go or stay."

In an emotional torrent, Sabit's mother pleaded for an explanation. The officer replied, "We need to ask her a few questions."

"You hurry and go," Sabit told her mother. "If I don't make the flight, I'll come tomorrow."

The two women had packed their clothes in the same bags. As they separated their things, her mother began to cry, and Sabit comforted her. Then she watched her mother, tears streaming down her cheeks, walk toward the gate. Once she was gone, the official turned to Sabit and coldly explained that she had been assigned a "border control"—a red flag, marking her for suspicion. "Your mother was here, so I didn't mention it," he said. "You should know what Xinjiang is like now. You'd best coöperate."

II. "LIKE RATS"

As Sabit was deciding to move to Canada, in 2014, a dark future was being mapped out for Xinjiang in secret meetings in Beijing. Xi Jinping had become President the year before, and he was consolidating power. As he cleared away the obstacles to lifelong rule, he eventually subjected more than a million government officials to punishments that ranged from censure to execution. With China's ethnic minorities, he was no less fixated on control.

Xinjiang's turbulent history made it a particular object of concern. The region had never seemed fully within the Party's grasp: it was a target for external meddling—the Russian tsar had once seized part of it—and a locus of nationalist sentiment, held over from its short-lived independence. Communist theoreticians long debated the role that nationalities should play in the march toward utopia—especially in peripheral societies that were not fully industrialized. The early Soviets took an accommodating approach and worked to build autonomous republics for ethnic groups. The Chinese pursued a more assimilationist policy.

In the fifties, Mao, recognizing that the Party's hold on Xinjiang was weak, mobilized the *bingtuan* to set up its farms in the region's north—a buffer against potential Soviet incursions. Revolutionaries flooded in, and within decades the population was forty per cent Han. Party officials, hoping to assimilate the indigenous residents, sought to strip away their traditions—their Muslim faith, their schools, even their native languages. The authorities came to regard Uyghur identity as “mistaken”: Uyghurs were Chinese.

In the late seventies, Deng Xiaoping took power, and rolled back the excesses of the Cultural Revolution. In Xinjiang, mosques were reopened and local languages were permitted, giving way to a cultural flourishing. But amid the new openness people began to express discontent with what remained a colonial relationship. Adhering to regional traditions, or even maintaining “Xinjiang time”—two hours behind Beijing—became a subtle act of dissent. Some locals staged protests, bearing placards that read “Chinese Out of Xinjiang.” A few radicals discussed an insurgency.

In April, 1990, near the city of Kashgar, a conflagration broke out between locals and the authorities—apparently started by an amateurish group of militants and then joined by demonstrators who did not fully grasp what was

happening. Police and members of the *bingtuan* quickly quashed the violence. It had been only a year since the Tiananmen Square protests, and the country's ruling élite had little tolerance for disunity. A year later, when the Soviet Union fell, the Chinese Communist Party—convinced that ethnic nationalism had helped tear the former superpower to pieces—became even more alarmed.

With near-paranoid intensity, the government pursued any perceived sign of “splitism.” The Party secretary of Kashgar, Zhu Hailun, was among the most aggressive. Abduweli Ayup, who worked for Zhu as a translator and an aide, recalled that, in March, 1998, cotton farmers protested a ruling that barred them from planting vegetable patches. Zhu railed at them for being separatists, adding, “You’re using your mosques as forts!” On another occasion, he derided the Quran, telling an Uyghur audience, “Your God is shit.” Zhu ordered Ayup to lead a door-to-door hunt for families harboring nationalist or religious books—telling him that he was not to go home until he succeeded. Ayup worked until dawn, rousing people. But, he said, “I couldn’t find *any* books at all.”

Xinjiang’s insurgents had proved unable to gather many adherents; locals favored the Sufi tradition of Islam, which emphasizes mysticism, not politics. At the time of the September 11th attacks, there was no terrorist violence to speak of in the region. But Osama bin Laden’s operation, planned across the border in Afghanistan, put a new and urgent frame around the old anxieties. Chinese authorities drew up a long list of incidents that they claimed were examples of jihad, and made their case to the U.S. State Department. Many of the incidents were impossible to verify, or to distinguish from nonpolitical violence. In China, mass attacks—with knives, axes, or even improvised explosives—are startlingly common, and often have nothing to do with ethnic unrest. Not long ago, a man walked into a school in Yunnan Province and sprayed fifty-four people with sodium hydroxide, to enact “revenge on society,” officials said. Similarly, a paraplegic assailant from eastern China detonated a bomb at one of Beijing’s international airports—apparently an act of retaliation for a police beating. The bombing was treated as a one-off incident. An Uyghur, frustrated that this would never be the case in Xinjiang, asked on Twitter, “Why is everything we do terrorism?”

As the 2008 Olympics approached, Chinese authorities became obsessed with the concept of *weiwen*, or “stability maintenance”—intensifying repression with a ferocity that the Chinese sociologist Sun Liping compared to North Korea’s. Sun, who had served on a committee that reviewed Xi Jinping’s doctoral dissertation, noted that the Party was a captive of its own delusions: by overestimating the chance of an imminent societal rupture, it had become blind to the root causes of discontent. Reflexive crackdowns designed to eliminate a “phantom of instability,” Sun warned, would lead to a downward spiral of repression and unrest, which could bring about the very collapse that had been feared all along.

Nowhere did this seem more apt than in Xinjiang, where China’s leaders continually appeared to mistake popular discontent for a growing insurgency. The 2009 protests in Ürümqi—following similar ones in Tibet—caused Party theorists to call for engineering a monocultural society, a single “state-race,” to help pave the way for “a new type of superpower.” One influential domestic-security official noted, “Stability is about liberating man, standardizing man, developing man.”

A new Party secretary in Ürümqi began to pursue such a policy: women were told not to wear veils, Uyghur books and Web sites were banned, historic buildings were demolished. Within a few years, the downward spiral that Sun Liping had warned of began to occur. In the autumn of 2013, an Uyghur man, accompanied by two family members, plowed an S.U.V. into a crowd of tourists in Tiananmen Square—possibly because his local mosque had been damaged during a raid. The S.U.V., filled with homemade incendiary devices, caught fire. The man and his family died, but not before killing two pedestrians and injuring thirty-eight others.

Several months later, in Yunnan Province, a small group of assailants dressed in black stormed a train station and, wielding knives, brutally killed twenty-nine bystanders and injured more than a hundred and forty others. Although no organization claimed responsibility for the incident, an insurgent group based overseas celebrated the attack. The authorities declared that the assailants were Uyghur separatists, and in Beijing the incident was called “China’s 9/11.” Xi was enraged. “We should unite the people to build a copper and iron wall against terrorism,” he told the

Politburo. “Make terrorists like rats scurrying across the street, with everybody shouting, ‘Beat them!’ ”

In April, 2014, Xi travelled to Xinjiang. At a police station in Kashgar, he examined weapons on a wall. “The methods that our comrades have at hand are too primitive,” he said during the trip. “None of these weapons is any answer for their big machete blades, axe heads, and cold steel weapons.” He added, “We must be as harsh as them, and show absolutely no mercy.”

On the final day of his visit, two suicide bombers attacked a railway station in Ürümqi, injuring dozens of people and killing one. At a high-level meeting in Beijing, Xi railed against religious extremism. “It’s like taking a drug,” he said. “You lose your sense, go crazy, and will do anything.”

Soon afterward, the Party leadership in Xinjiang announced a “People’s War.” The focus was on separatism, terrorism, and extremism—the “Three Evil Forces.” The region’s top official took up the campaign, but Xi grew dissatisfied with him, and two years later appointed a replacement: Chen Quanguo, then the Party secretary of the Tibet Autonomous Region—a tough-minded apparatchik whose loyalty was beyond question.

Ambitious and regimented, Chen had served in the military and then risen quickly through the political ranks. When he arrived in Tibet, in 2011, monks were immolating themselves—an urgent response to a long-running crackdown, which the Dalai Lama called a “cultural genocide.” The crisis was generating international headlines.

In a place where oppression had become the norm, Chen did not stand out for his use of physical violence. Instead, he distinguished himself as a systematizer of authoritarian tactics, ready to target entire groups of people with methods that pervaded daily life.

The vast majority of self-immolations were occurring to the east of the autonomous region, so Chen tightened the borders of his jurisdiction, restricting entry for Tibetans from outside it. In Lhasa, he made it impossible to buy gas without an I.D. He built hundreds of urban police depots, called “convenience stations,” which were arranged in close formation—an overwhelming display of force. He dispatched more than twenty thousand

Communist Party cadres into villages and rural monasteries, to propagandize and to surveil. Some locals reported that members of volunteer groups called the Red Armband Patrols upended homes to confiscate photos of the Dalai Lama, whom the Chinese authorities blamed for the unrest. Detentions appeared to rise. In 2012, when a large number of Tibetans travelled to India to receive a blessing from the Dalai Lama, Chen had them consigned to makeshift reeducation facilities.

The self-immolations continued in neighboring territories, but Chen's jurisdiction recorded only one in the next four years. "We have followed the law in striking out, and relentlessly pounding at illegal organizations and key figures," he declared. He had a flair for cultivating his superiors. In March, 2016, just before his appointment to Xinjiang, delegates from his region arrived at the National People's Congress, in Beijing, wearing pins with Xi's image on them—"a spontaneous act to show gratitude," state media noted. The Party deemed Chen's tactics a success.

In Xinjiang, Chen wore his thin, jet-black hair in a precise coiffure, and travelled with a security detail brought with him from Tibet. Rather than move into the Party secretary's residence, he set himself up in a hotel that was controlled by the government and secured by the People's Liberation Army. The building was in close proximity to facilities that housed police organizations, and Chen had a high-speed data line run from his residence into the region's digital-security infrastructure.

Xi had once compared reform to a meal, noting that after the meat is eaten what's left is hard to chew. Chen made it clear that he came to "gnaw bones." He titled one of his speeches "To Unswervingly Implement the Xinjiang Strategy of the Party Central Committee, with Comrade Xi Jinping at the Core."

His predecessor had borrowed from his Tibet strategy, deploying two hundred thousand Party cadres in Xinjiang. Chen increased their numbers to a million, and urged them to go from house to house, and grow "close to the masses, emotionally." Under a program called Becoming a Family, local Party officials introduced them to indigenous households, declaring, "These are your new relatives." Cadres imposed themselves, stopping by for meals; sometimes they were required to stay overnight. Terrified residents forced

smiles, politely served them, engaged their questions, and even offered them their beds.

Assisted by Zhu Hailun, who by then had become the deputy Party leader of Xinjiang, Chen recruited tens of thousands of “assistant police officers,” for a force that could implement mass arrests and also quell any unrest that they provoked. He began constructing thousands of “convenience stations,” seeking to impose an “iron grid” on urban life. He set out to divide the population into three categories—trusted, average, untrustworthy—and to detain anyone who could not be proved sufficiently loyal.

In early 2017, half a year after Chen arrived, he prepared his leadership for a long, complex, and “very fierce” campaign. “Take this crackdown as the top project,” he instructed them, noting that it was necessary “to preempt the enemy, to strike at the outset.” The mission, he said, was to rip out the separatist problem by its roots. He expressed zero tolerance for any “two-faced” officials who were unwilling to zealously carry out his plan.

Chen went to Beijing to meet with Xi. Then, days later, he held a grandiose rally in Ürümqi, with ten thousand helmeted troops in sharp rows, automatic weapons at the ready. As helicopters hovered overhead and a phalanx of armored vehicles paraded by, Chen announced a “smashing, obliterating offensive,” and vowed to “bury the corpses of terrorists and terror gangs in the vast sea of the People’s War.”

As a command tactic, he liked surprise inspections, sometimes calling police at random, in order to check their response time. “Round up everyone who should be rounded up,” he instructed, and by April, 2017, his forces were arresting people en masse. An official memorandum leaked to an Uyghur activist in the Netherlands indicates that in just one week, that of June 19th, the authorities in Xinjiang’s four southern prefectures seized more than sixteen thousand people; fifty-five hundred more were logged as “temporarily unable to be detained,” because investigators couldn’t track them down.

Even as the number of detentions surged, the authorities pushed for more. One police chief recalled a Party member explaining, “You can’t uproot all the weeds hidden among the crops one by one—you need to spray chemicals

to kill them all.” In June, Zhu drafted a communiqué. “Stick to rounding up everyone who should be rounded up,” it reminded. “If they’re there, round them up.”

At Ürümqi Diwopu International Airport, an official handed Anar Sabit a detention certificate, an administrative document noting orders for her apprehension. It was dated June 20th. Sabit was led to a small interrogation room. Her phone and documents were confiscated, and the airport official told her to prepare for a “video investigation.”

She was positioned before a computer; through a video link, another official began to question her in Uyghur, a language that she did not understand. (Many of the people Chen had recruited to administer the crackdown were from the ethnic groups that he was targeting.)

“Please,” Sabit said, “can you use Mandarin?” The official switched to clumsy Mandarin, asking about her immigration records and her passport. Why had she once renewed it at the Chinese consulate in Almaty, Kazakhstan? Sabit replied that she was there on a family visit, and had run out of pages while travelling. After an hour, a soldier took her outside to wait. She expected to be let go; her answers had been honest, and they were easy to verify. Instead, she was called back into the room, and two soldiers were summoned to guard her.

When the Uyghur airport official who had first told her about the border control checked in on her, Sabit asked what she had done wrong. Irritated, he said, “You know what you have done. Now we have to wait for the people from the Public Security Bureau in Kuytun to take you away.” Sabit asked when that would be. He answered testily, “It depends on when they left.”

An announcement came over a loudspeaker that her flight had been delayed, and she imagined her mother on the plane, overwhelmed with worry. As she sat, her guards chatted with her. They were both women in their early twenties—enlisted from “inland,” as the rest of China is known in Xinjiang. They said that they could not grasp why anyone ever needed to leave China, especially for Kazakhstan. “What a backward country,” one said. Sabit decided that it would be unwise to disagree.

After about six hours, several young men from Kuytun's Public Security Bureau arrived, dressed in black. As Sabit was transferred to their custody, the airport official told her that if there were no issues the bureau could expunge the border control, and then she could leave. Sabit nodded, thinking that perhaps he was a kindhearted man, and could see that she was innocent.

Outside, dawn was breaking. The Public Security Bureau team directed Sabit to the back seat of a car, where a guard sat on each side of her, with handcuffs at the ready. The men looked exhausted, having driven through the night, but they watched her vigilantly. An intelligence officer, in the passenger seat, questioned her as the driver sped with manic intensity toward Kuytun, pushing the car over a hundred and ten miles an hour.

At their headquarters, the men led Sabit into a basement containing several detention cells. Stopping at a narrow cell, they told her to enter. Suddenly, the enormity of her predicament hit her, and she began to cry. "Please, can you not put me in there?" she begged. "I am not a bad person. Please, let me wait in an office."

"We travelled five hundred kilometres for you," the intelligence officer said. "Don't inconvenience us anymore!" She entered the cell, noting that the walls were covered with foam padding—to prevent suicides, she suspected. There were two padded benches, each below a wall-mounted pipe, which a label indicated was for handcuffs. Sabit was too frightened to sit.

An assistant police officer posted outside her cell told her, "You can have some rest." Slowly, she lowered herself to a bench. The officer was Han, from a poor province neighboring Xinjiang which was a source of recruits. He told Sabit that investigators would arrive at nine that morning. Holding her file, he observed that it was very thin, and said that this was a good sign.

With her mind spinning, Sabit tried not to blame herself for ignoring the warnings about returning to China. "My anxiety ate away at me, like ants consuming their prey, bit by bit," she later wrote, in an unpublished testimony. (This account draws on her written testimony, on primary documents, including texts that she saved, and on extensive interviews.) Each passing minute, she hoped, brought her closer to explaining herself to a higher-ranking officer, who would see that her detention was a mistake.

Hours later, two officers, a man and a woman, guided Sabit to an interrogation room containing a “tiger chair”—a metal contraption designed to shackle a seated person. Sabit recoiled. Seeing this, the male officer ordered a normal chair brought for her. “Here we respect human rights,” he said. “All you have to do is coöperate, and truthfully answer the questions. If there are no problems, we will let you go.”

Overwhelmed, Sabit felt a stab of pain in her stomach. The officer called for breakfast. Unable to eat, she asked if she could use a bathroom.

“Come,” the female officer said. Earlier, Sabit had been given access to a toilet near her cell—a squalid hole, with security cameras pointed at it. “Can we not go to that toilet with the surveillance cameras?” she asked. The officer led her to one on another floor. As they returned, Sabit was able to glimpse into an interrogation room across from her own. There she saw a young Uyghur man in an orange vest and black trousers, his wrists and ankles locked into a tiger chair. His face was dirty and unshaven. His eyes were unfocussed. His head was drooping. Officers dressed in black were screaming at him. Sabit was ushered past, back to her room for questioning.

Anyone who has experienced an interrogation knows that it involves repetition. Over and over, the interrogator asks the same questions, looking for small discrepancies that hint at unspoken truths.

Sabit’s interrogation lasted several hours, as officers recycled the same questions that she had been asked at the airport. While she spoke, she could hear smacks and electric shocks from the Uyghur man’s cell across the hall. With his screams filling the room, she found it hard to focus. The lead interrogator turned to his partner. “Tell them to cut it out,” he said. “It’s affecting our work.” The torture quieted, but only for a time.

When her interrogators left, she was brought lunch, but again she could not eat. An Uyghur officer, whom she politely called Older Brother, entered with hot water and medicine for her stomach.

Three hours later, the lead interrogator returned. “You’ve been to many sensitive countries,” he said. “We need to initiate a new interrogation.”

When Sabit asked which countries were problematic, he named the United States, Thailand, Malaysia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Russia.

“Apart from the United States, I went to all those countries because of work!” she said. “My colleagues can confirm that.”

By the time the second interrogation was over, it was evening. Older Brother returned. Desperately, Sabit asked, “Can I leave?” He shook his head and told her, “Keep this cup for hot water, and be sure to eat.”

The intelligence officer who had brought her over from the airport arrived with her luggage.

“Am I going home?” Sabit asked.

“You will know,” he said. He began to walk her out of the facility. Another man came over and whispered something into his ear, but the intelligence officer shook his head. “Her name is on the list,” he said. “Nobody can save her.”

III. SHARP EYES

In 2005, the Chinese government began placing surveillance cameras throughout the country, in a plan called Project Skynet. After Xi Jinping came to power, China rolled out an enhanced version, Sharp Eyes, envisioned as a system of half a billion cameras that were “omnipresent, fully networked, always on and fully controllable.” In Beijing, virtually no corner went unobserved. The cameras were eventually paired with facial-recognition software, giving the authorities a staggering level of intrusiveness. At toilets in Beijing’s Temple of Heaven Park, facial scans insured that users could take no more than seventy centimetres of toilet paper at a time.

In Xi’s effort to build a “wall” around Xinjiang, advanced technology would become central. Researchers with an organization called IPVM, which studies video surveillance, discovered evidence that in 2017 China’s Ministry of Public Security set a requirement: facial-recognition software used with surveillance cameras had to be trained to distinguish Uyghur

faces. Several leading Chinese manufacturers quickly began to develop the technology—an “Uyghur alarm,” as one system was called in a Huawei test report. Although the race-based monitoring systems are of uncertain accuracy, they have been deployed in at least a dozen jurisdictions outside Xinjiang.

Xinjiang itself has become a laboratory for digital surveillance. By 2013, officials in Ürümqi had begun to affix QR codes to the exterior of homes, which security personnel could scan to obtain details about residents. On Chen Quanguo’s arrival, all cars were fitted with state-issued G.P.S. trackers. Every new cell-phone number had to be registered, and phones were routinely checked; authorities could harvest everything from photos to location data. Wi-Fi “sniffers” were installed to extract identifying data from computers and other devices. Chen also launched a program called *Physicals for All*, gathering biometric data—blood types, fingerprints, voiceprints, iris patterns—under the guise of medical care. Every Xinjiang resident between the ages of twelve and sixty-five was required to provide the state with a DNA sample.

To harness these disparate forms of surveillance, it was necessary to centralize them—a problem that had been foreseen at the outset of Xinjiang’s People’s War. In 2015, the Chinese state-security apparatus began building the Integrated Joint Operations Platform, or *IJOP*, where the streams of information could converge. “It’s very crucial to examine the cause after an act of terror, but what is more important is to predict the upcoming activities,” a senior engineer on the project noted. After the system was launched, Zhu Hailun affirmed that it would be used to root out unseen threats. “Problematic people and clues identified by the integrated platform are major risks to stability,” a memo that he circulated said. “Persons or clues that are difficult to check are risks within risks—hazards within hazards.”

Tens of thousands of security officers were given the *IJOP* app and prodded to upload information to it. A forensic analysis of the software, commissioned by Human Rights Watch, revealed thirty-six “person types” that could trigger a problematic assessment. They included people who did not use a mobile phone, who used the back door instead of the front, or who consumed an “unusual” amount of electricity. Even an “abnormal” beard

might be cause for concern. Socializing too little was suspicious, and so was maintaining relationships that were deemed “complex.” The platform treated untrustworthiness like a contagion: if a person seemed insufficiently loyal, her family was also likely infected.

The system was designed to regard gaps in its own knowledge as signs of potential culpability. This was never more evident than when a resident travelled overseas, especially to a country that was deemed “sensitive.” In June, 2017, Zhu signed off on a bulletin underscoring that anyone from Xinjiang who had travelled abroad was to be presumed guilty: “If suspected terrorism cannot be ruled out, then a border control should be implemented to insure the person’s arrest.”

At the Public Security Bureau, Sabit was forced into a car with the intelligence officer who had picked her up from the airport. As she peered out the window, the Kuytun of her childhood seemed unrecognizable, the skyline looking brash and cold as it blurred by. They were travelling west, toward the neighborhood where she had grown up. “I had this hope, or illusion, that he was driving me to my old address,” she recalled. Instead, they arrived at a newly built police station on West Beijing Road. In the main hall, Sabit noticed an elderly man sitting in a chair, a neighbor who had taught at the same institute as her father, and whose daughter she had known since childhood. “Hello, Uncle,” she whispered in Kazakh. “Do you recognize me?” Silently, he motioned to her not to speak.

Sabit’s eyes welled up. “It was like seeing my own father, who had only just passed away,” she later recalled. “I felt immense horror and grief.”

Sabit was ordered to follow a pregnant officer, and as they walked the officer whispered in Kazakh, “Do whatever they ask. Under no circumstances resist, or else you’ll suffer.” In a private room, the officer ordered Sabit to disrobe; she searched her and confiscated her jewelry and shoelaces.

Back in the main hall, another officer took down her personal information. The man looked as if he might be Uyghur or Kazakh, so Sabit felt emboldened to ask, “Why do I have to stay here?”

“You were brought here by the people from the Integrated Joint Operations Platform,” he explained. “You’ve been to so many countries. The problem could be big.” He motioned to the old professor, still in his chair. “He’s been to Kazakhstan more than forty times,” he said. “We’ve had him here for ten days now. It looks like you’ll be staying, too.”

Sabit felt a chill. She took a seat beside the old man. “Child, how could I not recognize you?” he whispered, in Kazakh. “You grew up with my daughter, as if you were my child, too.” He added a blessing for her father: “May his spirit rest in Heaven.” Then he warned her to be careful—to refrain from criticizing the Communist Party, or praising anything that she had encountered while travelling. “You must be strong,” he said. “This will all pass. You don’t need to be afraid here. Old Uncle is keeping you company.”

Detainees normally slept in an interrogation room—men on one side, women on the other—but it was full. That night, the officers placed a military mattress in the hall and ordered Sabit and another young woman to share it. The woman was wearing a red dress. “She was extremely thin, and was calmly looking at me with a pair of innocent eyes,” Sabit recalled. “I could tell from her appearance that she was Uyghur.”

While they were squeezed together, the woman explained that she was a student who had been arrested for using a file-sharing program called Zapya to download music. Officials using *IJOP* were expected to log any “suspicious” apps—there were dozens, but many residents did not know what they were. The woman told Sabit that two Uyghur men locked up in the station, a classmate of hers and a butcher, had been detained because of Zapya, too.

It was July, and the heat and the mosquitoes were intense. Sabit spent a sleepless night trying to fend off bites. The lights in the hall stayed on all night, and the bleeps and static bursts of police walkie-talkies made a constant din, as the officers processed drug addicts, drunks, jaywalkers, and other petty criminals. The police treated people they brought in harshly. Once, an elderly man who was cuffed into a tiger chair began shouting, “Long live Mao Zedong! Long live the Chinese Communist Party!”

The next day, Sabit was shuttled to a hospital for a medical exam. Her blood was drawn, and a urine sample was taken; she was also given an electrocardiogram, an ultrasound, and a chest X-ray. Back at the station, officers took photographs and fingerprints, and sampled her DNA. She was given an iris scan, and compelled to speak into a microphone, so that her voiceprint could be taken: more data to be uploaded to *IJOP*.

That night, Sabit and the Uyghur woman slept in the interrogation room, which turned out to be worse than the main hall. The mosquitoes there were just as relentless, and the walkie-talkies were still audible, only now Sabit was crammed into a tiny iron cage with two other women. The room was hot and airless, and, even though she was drenched in sweat, she wrapped herself in a towel to ward off the mosquitoes. Her stomach churned in pain.

In another cage, the old professor was held captive with the two Uyghur men. At night, the professor slept on a mattress on the floor, and the younger men were handcuffed to the wall, so that they could not recline; in the coming days, Sabit noticed that the young men were unshackled only to eat and use the toilet, and that they never bathed.

As if being swept into a hurricane, Sabit was caught up in the immense program of detentions that Chen Quanguo had initiated. About twenty-five million people live in Xinjiang—less than two per cent of China’s population—but, according to an assessment based on government data, by the end of 2017 the region was responsible for a fifth of all arrests in the country.

At the police station, Sabit noticed that large numbers of Uyghurs were being brought in to have their information uploaded. Many had been stopped at checkpoints while entering Kuytun; others had been flagged by *IJOP* as untrustworthy. Most were elderly, or women, or children. The younger men, it seemed, had already been locked up.

During the day, Sabit was allowed to return to the station’s main hall, but, whenever one of her relatives came to visit, she was quickly ushered out of sight and into her cage. Sometimes other people she knew walked in, and the idea that they were seeing her in detention filled her with shame. Then she realized that they assumed she had merely come to solve a bureaucratic

problem, as they had. On one occasion, an old acquaintance came in, seeking paperwork to visit her parents in Kazakhstan. The woman had heard that Sabit had been detained, and began to approach her, but the professor signalled her to stay away. Before leaving, the woman whispered that she would pass on news to Sabit's mother. Gazing at her silently, Sabit fought to hold back tears.

Nineteen days after her arrest, Older Brother walked into the station. Remembering his kindness, Sabit felt a wave of hope. She called to him and asked if he knew when she could leave. He looked at her and at the others, and said, "You all need to be sent to school." Sabit knew from station gossip that "school" meant a political-reeducation camp. Shocked, she asked, "For how long?" He said half a year.

The following evening, three harsh-looking men dressed in gray jackets arrived. From the deferential way they were treated, Sabit assumed that they were high-ranking officials. It turned out that one was the director of the Public Security Bureau's domestic-security team, a man named Wang Ting. Sabit was called to meet with the group, as were the professor and one of the young Uyghur men. Wang questioned Sabit, focussing on her Kazakh visa. During the interview, one official lamented, "You cannot be controlled once you leave." Nonetheless, the vice-director of the station told Sabit afterward that she would be released the next day.

Chen Quanguo portrayed his crackdown as a means of bringing order to Xinjiang, but, for people inside the system, the shifting rules and arbitrary enforcement created a condition close to anarchy. A police officer told Sabit that before she could leave she had to sign a document expressing regret and pledging not to repeat her offense. Sabit said that she didn't know what her offense was.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

"I was abroad," she said.

"Then write that you'll not make that mistake again," he said. When she hesitated, he told her to just write down any mistake. Sabit found a

Communist Party magazine in the station's waiting area and copied down some of its propaganda.

The following morning, Sabit walked out of the station and called her mother, who burst into tears. Sabit wanted to fly to her immediately, but the police had retained her passport; before they could release it, they said, she had to gain approval from the bureau's domestic-security team. At its offices, Sabit found Wang Ting and explained that she wanted to return to her mother. He told her that he needed to consult his superiors. When she returned, the following week, Wang explained that her border control would automatically expire after three months, and then her passport could be returned. Sabit was confused: the official who had stopped her at the airport had told her that active steps had to be taken to remove the border control. But, when she tried to explain, Wang waved her away.

Sabit waited until the three months had passed, plus an extra day, to be safe. Then she returned to Wang, and he instructed the police to release her passport. Buoyant with relief, she booked a flight to Kazakhstan. At the airport, though, the same official stopped her again. Her border control had not expired. "Didn't I tell you?" he said.

Within hours, Sabit was again in front of Wang, who glared at her with annoyance. Her border control *had* expired, he insisted; perhaps the system just needed time to reflect the change. He told her to wait another week. Sabit begged him for a document indicating her innocence, and he had someone write one up. It noted that she had been investigated because she had renewed her passport at a consulate, but was cleared of any suspicion. "We did not find that she or her family engaged in activities that endanger national security," it stated, adding that she was "eligible to leave the country." The next day, with the document in hand, she risked another flight. Once again, she was stopped. Whether there was no way to follow the rules or no coherent rules to follow, she was a captive.

The Chinese have an expression, *gui da qiang*, that describes "ghost walls"—invisible labyrinths, erected by phantoms, that confuse and entrap travellers. In Sabit's case, the phantom was the state, and she was determined to find her way through its obstacles.

From a colleague of Wang Ting's, she learned that a request to remove her border control had been sent up the bureaucracy for approval. It would go to the prefecture's seat, Ghulja, two hundred and fifty miles away, and then another hundred and fifty miles to Ürümqi. Desperate to insure that her paperwork was being processed, she decided to follow it and nudge the relevant officials. When she arrived at the train station, she found it awash in propaganda for the Nineteenth National Congress of the Communist Party, which was soon to begin. It was a politically sensitive time.

In Ghulja, Sabit learned that she was too late: her application had already gone to Ürümqi. The next train was not scheduled to depart for hours, so she went to visit a sick aunt who lived there. While they were sipping tea, her phone rang. It was the vice-director of the police station in Kuytun. "Where are you?" he barked.

Sabit told him.

"You were in Kuytun a few days ago," he said. "How did you suddenly go?" He asked her to text him a photograph of her train ticket, as proof that she was in Ghulja. Then he ordered her to return immediately, to sign documents. "You will take the train back tonight," he said.

The vice-director seemed oddly intent on her case. On the train, she got a text from him, asking her to confirm that she was on her way. When she arrived in Kuytun, it was past midnight, and the parking lot was empty. In the lights outside the station, she saw a police car waiting for her, with two officers inside. One was Han, the other Kazakh. They drove in silence, until Sabit asked why she had to return so urgently. The Kazakh officer quietly explained that she was being sent to school.

The officer had spoken to her in Kazakh, and so Sabit felt that she could question him. Incredulous, she asked, "Didn't the vice-director say I was meant to sign documents?" She told him not to tease her, but he shook his head and said, "I am not joking." At the police station, Sabit's things were confiscated, and she was returned to the cage. The following day, she was given another medical exam. It was clear that she was being processed for reeducation, but she could not accept it as reality—a common reaction, which the Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl called the "delusion of

reprieve.” Frankl knew the hold of this delusion well. During the Holocaust, he was taken to Auschwitz; even as his train was pulling in, he later wrote, he believed “to the last moment that it would not be so bad.”

IV. SCHOOL

Chen Quanguo’s crackdown was aimed at a single goal: moving a large percentage of Xinjiang’s population into an archipelago of fortified camps for political reeducation. Shortly after he arrived, he had begun building hundreds of prison-like facilities—what an official later described as trusted destinations for the untrusted.

By treating the entire indigenous population as a target, Chen was realizing a years-old objective. In 2015, around the time the *IJOP* system was being developed, a senior official had argued that a third of the region’s Uyghurs were “polluted by religious extremist forces,” and needed to be “educated and reformed through concentrated force.”

Xi Jinping had compared separatism and radical Islam to a disease, and officials often invoked medicine when they sought to allay concerns about the camps. “Although a certain number of people who have been indoctrinated with extremist ideology have not committed any crimes, they are already infected,” one noted. “They must be admitted to a reeducation hospital in time to treat and cleanse the virus from their brain.”

As the mass arrests began, the *Xinjiang Daily*, a Communist Party organ, offered one of the first public acknowledgments of Chen’s plan. It described two men who had been assigned to a reeducation camp in Hotan Prefecture: a farmer and the owner of a village drugstore. Both described themselves as ideologically healed. “I was increasingly drifting away from ‘home,’ ” the drugstore owner explained. “With the government’s help and education, I’ve returned.”



Cartoon by Karl Stevens

The farmer noted that he had learned, to his surprise, that his thoughts were manifesting religious extremism. "I didn't even know," he said. Now, he added, "our lives are improving every day. No matter who you are, first and foremost you are a Chinese citizen."

An official told the *Daily* that the camp had already processed two thousand people. "We have strict requirements for our students, but we have a gentle attitude, and put our hearts into treating them," he said. "To come here is actually like staying at a boarding school." The drugstore owner, he noted, was resistant at first to being reeducated. "Gradually, he became shocked by how ignorant he used to be."

From the police station, Sabit and another detainee, a young Uyghur woman, were driven to a compound surrounded by a wall topped with concertina wire. A sign read "Kuytun City Vocational Skills Re-education Training Center Administrative Bureau." Inside was a three-story building, a former police station that had been hastily repurposed. The women were ushered in and told to face a wall. Sabit tried to survey the place, but the light was dim. Standing beside her, the Uyghur woman began to cry.

"Don't fidget!" an officer shouted. Sabit, noticing that the man's Mandarin was imperfect, turned and saw that he was Kazakh; immediately, she felt

disgust. The women were directed to the third floor, and, on the way, Sabit glimpsed several male detainees in gray uniforms. Their sullen figures made her fearful, and she looked away.

Sabit was led to a large room, where she was strip-searched. As she was getting dressed, she asked how long she would have to remain, and a guard said that no one would be let go before the Nineteenth National Congress, which was days away.

The detention cells were revamped offices, with walls, doors, and windows reinforced with iron latticework, giving them the appearance of cages. The doors were chained to their frames and could not be opened more than a foot; detainees had to shimmy through. In Sabit's cell, five bunk beds were crammed into a twelve-by-fifteen-foot space, with three cameras and a microphone hanging from the ceiling.

A few women, their eyes red from crying, were already there, and more arrived later. They were all sure that they had been rounded up in a dragnet preceding the National Congress. Some had been brought in for using WhatsApp. One was on leave from college in America; she had been detained for using a V.P.N. to turn in her homework and to access her Gmail account. A seventeen-year-old had been arrested because her family once went to Turkey on a holiday.

The Uyghur woman who was processed with Sabit had been assigned to the cell, too. She was a Communist Party propagandist. Years earlier, she told Sabit, she had booked a flight to Kashgar, but a sandstorm prevented the plane from taking off, so the airline had placed everyone on the flight in a hotel. Later, police officers in Kuytun detained her, and told her that two of the other people in the hotel were deemed suspect. Even though she was working for the Party, the mere fact of being Uyghur and staying in a hotel where others were under suspicion was enough to raise alarms.

The reeducation camp was nothing like a hospital, nothing like a boarding school. Chen Quanguo had instructed that such facilities "be managed like the military and defended like a prison." Sabit and the other women had to exchange their clothes for drab uniforms that were accented with fluorescent stripes and a photo-I.D. tag. Male guards patrolled the halls and the

compound's exterior—each officer working a twenty-four-hour shift—while female staff members served as disciplinarians, following the women wherever they went, including the bathroom. When the disciplinarians were not there, the surveillance cameras were; even when showering, the detainees could not escape them.

The only language permitted in the building was Mandarin. Some of the older women did not know a word of it, and were consigned to silence, except for a few phrases they had to memorize. Everyone was required to shout "Reporting!" when entering a room, but many of the women forgot, enraging their minders. One disciplinarian, a member of the *bingtuan*, routinely insulted and humiliated the women. Detainees who angered her were subjected to punishments, which included being locked in a tiny room and shackled to a tiger chair for the night. She often intoned, "If you don't behave, you'll stay here for the rest of your life."

Sabit quickly learned that every moment was controlled. The women had to wake at precisely eight each morning, but, except for trips to the washroom and the toilet, they were locked in their cells twenty-four hours a day. They had three minutes to wash their faces and brush their teeth, a minute to urinate. Showers could not exceed five minutes. Some women left soapy because they had misjudged their time.

For meals, the women had to line up in their cells to await a food cart, with their backs facing the door. The cups and bowls issued to them were made from cheap plastic, and Sabit, watching the hot food and water soften them, feared that toxins were leeching into her diet. (Later, replacements were introduced.) Sabit's cell had no table, but the women were assigned stools—painful to use, because they were only about a foot tall. The women squatted on them and put their bowls on the floor. If they ate too slowly, or not enough, they were reprimanded. The elderly women, and people with dental problems, struggled, but neither age nor ailments spared them insults.

The detainees were forbidden to sit on their beds during the day, though after lunch they were made to lie down, with eyes shut, for a compulsory nap. At 10 p.m., they were ordered to sleep, but the lights in their cells were never turned off, and they were not allowed to cover their eyes with a blanket or a towel. (The younger women volunteered to take the top bunks, to shield the

older ones from the light.) If anyone spoke, everyone in the room would be punished with an ear-splitting reprimand from a blown-out loudspeaker. Any nighttime request to use the bathroom was treated with contempt, and eventually the women stopped asking. Dispirited, uncomfortable, often verbally abused, they masked their pain, because displays of sadness were also punished. “You are not allowed to cry here,” the guards had told them. School taught them how to turn from the cameras, hide their faces, and quietly cry themselves to sleep.

The women had been told that they were going to be reeducated, but for a long stretch there was only dull confinement. To pass the time, they sat on the stools and traded stories. The college student who was studying in America entertained the others by recounting the entire plot of “The Shawshank Redemption.”

Twelve days after Sabit arrived, the National Congress ended, and the women were summoned for interviews with officials from the Public Security Bureau. Sabit was led to an interrogation room, where an officer told her, “Your case is basically clear now.” She asked how she had ended up in the camp, given that the domestic-security team had provided her with a written declaration of her innocence. The officer said that he didn’t know. Later, a detainee told Sabit that she had heard it was because officials came to view her failed departures at the airport as an inconvenience.

After the interviews, the women waited hopefully, but no one was freed. Then, a month into Sabit’s detention, it was announced that everyone would study Mandarin six days a week—to master the “national language.” After learning of a detainee who was let go after three months, Sabit thought that perhaps she, too, could sail through the lessons and “graduate.”

The classroom, fortified with iron meshwork, was adjacent to her cell. There were rows of desks, and a lectern behind a fence at the front. A surveillance camera was mounted in each corner. During classes, two police officers stood guard.

The women’s instructor—Ms. Y.—had been yanked out of her job as an elementary-school teacher and compelled to live at the facility most of the week. Although she was stern, the women liked her. Ms. Y. spoke frequently

about how she missed her young students, and she brought a grade-school teacher's sensibility to the camp: she sought to teach the women Chinese opera and calligraphy, and pushed the administrators to allow plastic scissors, for making traditional Han crafts. (She also tried, unsuccessfully, to get the detainees time outside for exercise.) One day, she arrived visibly upset; the director had humiliated her for tardiness by forcing her to stand during a meeting.

At the outset, Ms. Y. had no Mandarin textbooks, or even worksheets, so she used first-grade instructional materials; later, she was provided with lesson plans, but they were riddled with errors. The detainees were told that they needed to master three thousand Chinese characters, even though several women, Sabit among them, already knew more than twice that many. No matter how fluent the women were, they were forced to perform the exercises, over and over, until the others caught up. Some of the elderly women who had never been schooled in Mandarin struggled with the lessons. To spare them punishment, Sabit and a few others covertly helped them.

The classes, of course, had nothing really to do with language. As a government document made clear, reeducation was intended to sever people from their native cultures: "Break their lineage, break their roots, break their connections, and break their origins."

Sabit and the other women had to learn Communist songs and sing them loudly before each meal. (If they did not show sufficient zeal, guards threatened to withhold food.) Every morning, they had to stand and proclaim their fealty to the state:

Ardently love the Chinese Communist Party!
Ardently love the great motherland!
Ardently love the Chinese people!
Ardently love socialism with Chinese characteristics!

They were compelled to watch videos like "The Hundred-Year Dream," which celebrated China's economic growth and power. The screenings were followed by discussion groups, in which detainees had to repeat propaganda and profess gratitude to the Party for saving them from criminality. On

Saturdays, guest speakers gave presentations on terrorism law. The detainees were obliged to recite seventy-five “manifestations” of religious extremism.

It didn’t take great insight, Sabit thought, to recognize the absurdity of the curriculum as a counterterrorism tool. Most of the young women who were rounded up had secular life styles; they frequented bars on weekends and had barely any ties to religion, let alone religious extremism. The elderly women, though more traditional, clearly posed no threat, but their internment would stymie the transmission of cultural knowledge to younger generations.

All their work seemed geared toward pageants that were organized for visiting Party dignitaries, who would come to inspect the women’s progress and the camp’s efficacy. During these events—held at first in a room where the guards slept, with beds pushed to one side—the women had to recite maxims of Xi Jinping, sing patriotic anthems, dance, and make a show of Han cultural pride. “You need to have a smile on your face,” guards would say. “You need to show that you are happy.”

Sabit was often a featured performer; because of her fluency and her education, the camp could count on her to demonstrate that the program was a success. She would project excitement and positivity, in an exhausting pantomime. Many of the women felt ashamed by the hollow display, but still campaigned to perform. The preparations offered a respite from the language classes, and the pageants gave them a chance to prove their “transformation” and perhaps be set free.

At some point during every inspection, the visiting dignitaries would ask, “Do you recognize your mistakes?” In preparation, the detainees wrote out statements of repentance; the guards explained that anyone who did not do so would never leave. One detainee, a member of a Christian sect called Eastern Lightning, invoked a Chinese law that guaranteed freedom of religion, declaring, “I did nothing wrong!” She was taken away, to what the women assumed was a harsher facility—a pretrial detention center or a prison.

The logic of these forced admissions was clear: to gain their freedom, the detainees had to tear themselves down. Sabit strove to qualify her answers

with words like “potentially,” and to characterize her life overseas as a “lack of patriotism” rather than as a manifestation of Islamic extremism. But, having lived in Shanghai, she found it hard not to seethe; she knew Han urbanites who had left the country for vacations in Malaysia, and who had used WhatsApp and V.P.N.s. Were they also infected?

Over and over, Sabit and the women confessed. Yet no one was released, and gradually Sabit’s optimistic delusions collapsed. In February, 2018, China’s annual Spring Festival arrived, and the women were preparing for a pageant, when a camp administrator woke them in the middle of the night and forced them into a classroom to write out their mistakes. When they were done, he gathered their papers, tore them up, and berated the women for being dishonest, then kept them writing until dawn. Sabit wondered if she was losing her grip on herself. Could she be wrong? she thought. *Had she betrayed China?*

Then, as the pageant neared, Sabit learned that after the performances any detainee who was a student would be let go. Because Sabit had been enrolled in school in Canada, she made the case that the policy applied to her. The camp administrators agreed, and she filled out forms for her release—discreetly, so that women who were not slated to leave would not grow agitated. The director told her to wait for an official departure date. She tried not to become hopeful, having been let down so often. But, she recalled, she regarded the news as “a ray of light.”

V. THE CONFESSION

Yarkand County is about eight hundred miles from Kuytun, in southwestern Xinjiang, on the rim of the Taklamakan Desert. When Marco Polo visited, in the late thirteenth century, he noted that Muslims and Christians lived alongside one another there, and that the region, with its temperate climate and rich soil, had been “amply stocked with the means of life.”

Yarkand has a large Uyghur population, and the crackdown there has been severe. In 2014, authorities restricted Ramadan celebrations, and, according to a report from the region, police gunned down a family during a house-to-house search for women wearing head scarves. Locals armed with knives

took to the streets, and, in an escalating confrontation with police, dozens were killed. Later, the authorities called in a seasoned Party official, Wang Yongzhi, to manage the county.

Wang moved aggressively to enact Chen Quanguo's policies, but he evidently had misgivings. As he later noted in a statement, "The policies and measures taken by higher levels were at gaping odds with the realities on the ground, and could not be implemented in full." He took steps to soften the crackdown, much to the dissatisfaction of Chen's operatives, who monitored how officials were carrying out the measures. "He refused to round up everyone who should be rounded up," an official assessment of Wang, later leaked to the *Times*, noted. In fact, he had gone further than that. He had authorized the release of seven thousand interned people.

Wang was removed from his post and duly submitted a confession, in which he wrote, "I undercut, acted selectively, and made my own adjustments, believing that rounding up so many people would knowingly fan conflict and deepen resentment." The Party savagely attacked him, accusing him of corruption and abuse of power. "Wang Yongzhi lost his ideals and convictions," one government-run paper noted. "He is a typical 'two-faced man,'" it added. "His problem is very serious." He vanished from public life.

Wang's confession was circulated across the Xinjiang bureaucracy as a warning, and it apparently reached Kuytun. Just as Sabit and the other students were to be released, her camp's management revoked its decision—because, a guard told her, an official had been dismissed for freeing people without authorization. "Nobody is willing to sign off on your release now," he explained. "Nobody wants that responsibility."

A heavy silence fell over the building, as minders—the detainees' conduits for news—became cautious about what they said. At first, Sabit was dismayed, but, just as she had modulated her joy at the prospect of leaving, she now dampened her disappointment. The one certainty she could count on was her patience. She had become good at waiting.

And yet the longer she was confined the more convoluted her path to freedom appeared. By then, her minders had instituted a point system: the

d detainees were told that they had each been assigned a score, and if it was high enough they could win privileges—such as family visits—and even release. Points could be gained by performing well on examinations, or by writing up “thought reports” that demonstrated an ability to regurgitate propaganda. The women could also win points by informing on others. One detainee, Sabit recalled, was “like another camera.”

The threat of losing points was constantly dangled over the women. For a minor infraction, the guards might announce that they were docking a point; for a large one, they might say that the penalty was ten points. Yet the women were never told their scores, so they were never sure if the points were real. One day, a woman got into a fight and was brought to a camp official, who furiously reprimanded her, then tore up a paper that, he claimed, recorded her score. “You now have zero points!” he declared. Back in the cell, Sabit and the others consoled her, but also gently pushed for details of what the official had said, hoping to glean some insight into how the system functioned. “We thought, Well, maybe they really *are* recording our points,” Sabit recalled. “Maybe there is something to it.”

In the winter of 2018, new arrivals began flooding into the camp. Word spread that the arrests were driven by quotas—a new kind of arbitrariness. As an official involved with *IJOP* later told Human Rights Watch, “We began to arrest people randomly: people who argue in the neighborhood, people who street-fight, drunkards, people who are lazy; we would arrest them and accuse them of being extremists.” An officer at the camp told Sabit that the arrests were intended to maintain stability before the Two Sessions, a major political conclave in Beijing.

The camp strained to manage the influx. Most of the new arrivals had been transferred from a detention center, which was also overflowing. There were elderly women, some illiterate, some hobbled. One woman, the owner of a grocery, was in custody because her horse-milk supplier had been deemed untrustworthy. Another was an adherent of Falun Gong; she was so terrified that she had attempted suicide by jumping out of a third-floor window.

For many of the new arrivals, the reeducation camp was an improvement. At the detention centers, there was not even a pretense of “transformation through education.” Uyghurs and Kazakhs were brought in hooded and

shackled. The women spoke of beatings, inedible food, beds stained with urine, shit, and blood. Sabit met two women who had bruises on their wrists and ankles—marks, they told her, from shackles that were never removed.

With more women than beds at the camp, the authorities tossed mattresses on the floor, before shuffling the detainees around to find more space. New protocols were introduced. The women had to perform military drills inside their cells, and submit to haircuts. In Kazakh and Uyghur culture, long hair symbolizes good fortune; some of the women had grown their hair since childhood, until it was, as Sabit remembered, “jet black and dense, reaching their heels.” Later, evidence emerged to suggest that the internment system was turning hair into a commodity. (Last year, the United States interdicted a thirteen-ton shipment of hair, which White House officials feared had been partly harvested at the camps.) In Kuytun, the locks were cut with a few brutal chops, as some of the women begged the guards to leave just a little more. Sabit refused to beg, trying to hold on to some pride, but as her hair fell she felt a great shame—as if she had been transformed into a criminal.

At night, it was announced, the detainees would help police themselves, with the women serving two-hour shifts. For Sabit, the shifts offered rare moments of privacy. Sometimes, blanketed in solitude, she thought of her mother living alone. Over the months, she had convinced herself that she would be able to commemorate the anniversary of her father’s death with her family, in the Kazakh tradition. But a year had passed, and she was still stranded.

While on duty, Sabit often gazed through the small caged window and took in the nighttime view: a garden, a poplar tree, and then Kuytun’s urban panorama—the city’s glowing lights, the cars tracing lines on a highway, reminding her of her old life. Later, she captured these reveries in a poem, written in Mandarin, which ends:

Night watch
I turn toward the darkness and
Its wanton torment
Of the feeble poplar.

As the months passed, the system took its toll on everyone. Guards who were once lenient became erratic and severe. A mild-mannered staff member lost it one evening, after being confronted with multiple requests for the bathroom; she yelled maniacally, then refused to let any woman out for the rest of the night.

The detainees, too, began to buckle. They joked that the state was merely keeping them alive. Some went gray prematurely. Many stopped menstruating—whether from compulsory injections that the camp administered or from stress, Sabit was unsure. Because they could shower only infrequently and were never provided clean underwear, the women often developed gynecological problems. From the poor food, many suffered bad digestion. One elderly woman could not use the bathroom without expelling portions of her large intestine, which she had to stuff back into herself. The woman was sent to a hospital, but an operation could not be performed, it was explained, because she had high blood pressure. She was returned, and spent most of the time moaning in bed.

In class one day, a detainee who had lost most of her family to the camps suddenly fell to the floor, unconscious. Her sister, who was also in the class, ran to her, then looked up at the others with alarm. The women tearfully rushed to her aid but were stopped by the guards, who ordered them not to cry. “They started hitting the iron fence with their batons, frightening us,” Sabit recalled. “We had to hold back our sobbing.”

Signs of psychological trauma were easy to find. An Uyghur woman, barely educated, had been laboring to memorize Mandarin texts and characters. One evening, she started screaming, yanked off her clothing, and hid under her bed, insisting that no one touch her. Guards rushed in with a doctor and took her away. The camp administrators, however, returned her to the cell, arguing that she had been feigning illness. Afterward, the woman occasionally had convulsions and was sent to the hospital. But she was not released.



"I get it. You have a podcast."
Cartoon by Brendan Loper

Sabit, too, felt increasingly frail. She was losing weight. She couldn't hold down anything, not even a sip of water, and had to be given medicine to manage non-stop vomiting. Like the other women, her emotions were raw. Once, she was chatting with a Han guard, who mentioned that the camp's deputy director had told him, "Anar being here is purely a waste of time." Sabit smiled, worried that if she showed distress he would no longer share news with her. But, as soon as he left, she ran to her bed, turned her back to the cameras, and wept.

By the summer of 2018, Chen Quanguo's reeducation campaign had been operating for more than a year. Beijing strove to hide its existence, but accounts leaked out, and it slowly became clear that something on a monstrous scale was taking place.

Reporters with Radio Free Asia called up local Chinese officials, who, accustomed to speaking with Party propagandists, were strikingly candid. When one camp director was asked the name of his facility, he confessed that he didn't know, because it had been changed so often, but gamely ran outside to read the latest version off a sign. A police officer admitted that his department was instructed to detain forty per cent of the people in its jurisdiction. In January, 2018, an official in Kashgar told the news service

that a hundred and twenty thousand Uyghurs had been detained in his prefecture alone.

The growing camp infrastructure attracted notice, too. Shawn Zhang, a student in Canada, began using satellite data to map the facilities. By the summer, it appeared that roughly ten per cent of Xinjiang's Uyghur population was under confinement. Adrian Zenz, an independent academic who has unearthed troves of government documents on Chen's crackdown, estimated that there were as many as a million people in the camps—a statistic echoed by the United Nations and others. Not since the Holocaust had a country's minority population been so systematically detained.

As the crackdown evolved, hastily assembled facilities, like Sabit's in Kuytun, gave way to titanic new compounds in remote locations. When forced to acknowledge them publicly, the government described them as benign or indispensable—noting, “Xinjiang has been salvaged from the verge of massive turmoil.”

That summer, amid these changes, the director of Sabit's camp permitted the detainees time in a walled-in yard; there were snipers keeping watch, and the women were restricted to structured activities, like emergency drills, but he nonetheless insisted that they should be grateful. Eventually, the women were also allowed to air out blankets in a vineyard that the staff maintained. “We would hide grapes inside the bedding,” Sabit recalled. “Then we would bring them back to our cell and secretly eat them.”

When camp officials announced in July that Sabit and the other women were going to be moved to a new facility, the news seemed ominous. Not knowing where they were going, they feared that their situation would get worse. One night, guards roused the women and told them to pack: a bus was waiting to take them away. On the road, a caravan of police cars escorted them, and officers manned intersections. “A lot of people were crying,” Sabit recalled. “I asked the girl next to me, ‘Why are you crying?’ And she said, ‘I saw a street that I used to walk on, and I started thinking of my previous life.’”

In the darkness, they approached a massive, isolated complex. One of the buildings was shaped like a gigantic “L,” and surrounded by a wall. As the

bus drove alongside one of its wings, the women counted the windows, to estimate how many cells it contained. Sabit was struck by the lifelessness of the structure. Its unlit chambers seemed hollow. Inside, she and the others learned that the building was indeed empty: they were its first occupants. It was summer, but inside the thick concrete walls it felt cold, like a tomb.

In the new building, the detainees were divided by ethnicity. With few exceptions, Uyghurs were subjected to harsher measures; some were sentenced, implying that they would be transferred to prison. In contrast, the women in Sabit's cohort were gradually released. That September, as they rehearsed to perform for visiting dignitaries, a camp official asked Sabit if she had street clothes. The next day—the day of the performance—one of his colleagues told her, “Tomorrow, you’ll be able to leave.” Later, it occurred to her that, because of her fluency in Mandarin, she had been held longer just to be in the pageant.

The following day, during class, whispers of her impending release spread through the room. Some of the women begged her for her Mandarin notebook. “I was, like, Why?” she recalled. “They were, like, We know you are leaving! And I was, like, It’s not certain!” A guard winked at her and said that soon her name would be called on a loudspeaker, and she would be free. When the speaker blared, Sabit stood and waited for the door to be unlocked, as the other women wished her well. Then she returned to her room for her clothing. “I finally took off the disgusting uniform,” she recalled.

Sabit was brought to the camp’s Party secretary, who was waiting for her in a room with a chair, a small table, and a bed. She sat on the bed, and he lectured her, telling her that she needed to be more patriotic: “Your life style was too individualistic—completely fighting for yourself!” Sabit was silently outraged. With the prospect of release before her, the doubts instilled by the camp’s propaganda dissipated. She thought, Can only dying for China make me good enough for you? But she nodded and said, “Yes, yes. You’re right.”

The secretary told her that a local Party official and his aide were waiting to take her to her uncle’s home. As she walked from the camp toward their car, she thought about something that the other women had told her: “Don’t look

back. It's a bad sign." She decided to heed their advice. But, glancing to the side, she saw a looming façade across the road: a detention center. Breaking into a run, she raced to the waiting car.

Vi. ERASURE

In the year that Sabit had been confined, Chen Quanguo was transforming Xinjiang. Cherished symbols of Muslim heritage—shrines, mosques, cemeteries—were systematically targeted for destruction. Experts estimate that, since 2017, some sixteen thousand mosques have been razed or damaged, with minarets pulled down and decorative features scrubbed away or painted over. An official in Kashgar told Radio Free Asia, "We demolished nearly seventy per cent of the mosques in the city, because there were more than enough." In some cases, officials pursued an odd tactic: miniaturization. In 2018, the grand gatehouse of a mosque in the town of Kargilik was covered with a banner proclaiming, "Love the Party, love the country." Then the structure was dismantled and rebuilt as an ersatz version of itself, at a quarter the size.

The Uyghur and Kazakh languages were increasingly scarce in public, and so were their speakers. Within the first two years of Chen's crackdown, nearly four hundred thousand children were transferred into state-run boarding schools, designed to block the "thinking and ideas" that they might encounter at home. New infrastructure had to be quickly built to house the children, many of whom had "double-detained" parents. One orphanage worker told Radio Free Asia, "Because there are so many children, they are locked up like farm animals." Sabit recalled that mothers held in her facility were very pliant: "In order to see their children, they were willing to do everything."

These children may mark a demographic milestone. Even as regulations on family planning had been eased across China, they were enforced ferociously in Xinjiang, with violations often punished by detention. Adrian Zenz, the academic, uncovered government records from 2018 which indicate that eighty per cent of China's increase in IUD use occurred in Xinjiang. Amid the myriad stresses imposed by the crackdown, the region's birth rate fell by a third that year. In areas where Uyghurs represent a larger

share of the population, the declines were even sharper. “You see this incredible crash,” Rian Thum, a historian at the University of Manchester who has studied the issue, said. The government doesn’t dispute these figures, but it argues that they are a consequence of gender emancipation. This January, the Chinese Embassy in Washington went on Twitter to celebrate that Uyghur women were “no longer baby-making machines.”

Kuytun, like all Chinese cities, is divided into neighborhood units, each overseen by a Party organization called a residential committee. Although Sabit had not lived there in more than a decade, she was still registered with the committee that oversaw her old home. The Party official who had come to the camp to pick her up was the committee’s secretary, Zhang Hongchao. He was middle-aged but boyish, with the affect of an ambitious petty bureaucrat, skilled in pleasing people above him and bullying people below. He often wore Army-issue camouflage, and he kept the neighborhood under close watch.

To assure Zhang that she had been reeducated, Sabit spoke of her gratitude to the Party—words that poured out automatically, after countless repetitions. He seemed pleased. “We see you don’t have so many problems,” he said. “You’ve been abroad, that’s your problem.” Then he advised her, “Just stay and do something for your country. Don’t think of going abroad for the next ten years.”

Sabit understood that this was not a suggestion. With little more than a nod, Zhang could return her to the camp. She reassessed her future. O.K., she thought, I won’t die if I can never leave. “Can I go to Shanghai?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “After a time.”

At her uncle’s home, Zhang and his aide stayed for tea, along with “relatives”—members of a cadre. Sabit’s uncle later told her that, during her internment, he and his family had been designated “focus personnel.” Every week, they had to attend reeducation classes and a flag-raising ceremony at their residential-committee center. Cadre members also visited, staying for meals and urging the family to serve drinks—an indication that they did not obey Muslim strictures on alcohol. Initially, they spent the night, until they

realized that they could photograph themselves in different clothes and fake an overnight stay.

As the officials sat on floor cushions and sipped tea, Zhang and the head of the cadre explained that Sabit was confined to Kuytun. “We’ll monitor you for some time to see how you’ve transformed,” one of the officials said. Sabit asked if she could shop or see friends, and was told, “You need to be cautious about whom you contact, but you’re allowed to have friends.”

The sun set, and the officials stayed for dinner. After they left, Sabit’s aunt recorded a voice message for Sabit’s mother and texted it to her in Kazakhstan; a direct call seemed too risky. Then Sabit settled into a guest room decorated in a traditional Central Asian way, with a carpet on the wall and flat cushions for sitting or sleeping. Turning out the lights, she felt the warmth of family, the security of reclaimed comforts. For more than a year, she had never been alone, never slept with the lights off. The darkness and solitude felt both welcoming and strange. She wanted to rush to her sleeping relatives to explain, but decided that she was getting carried away. To calm herself, she used a trick that she had developed in the camp. She imagined herself listening compassionately to her inner monologue, as a parent would listen to a child. Soon, she was fast asleep.

Kuytun had become an open-air prison. The city was ringed with checkpoints, where Uyghurs and Kazakhs were forced through scanners, even as Han residents passed freely. “We will implement comprehensive, round-the-clock, three-dimensional prevention and control,” Chen Quanguo had proclaimed while Sabit was in captivity. “We will resolutely achieve no blind spots, no gaps, no blank spots.” The technology was deployed to create a digital-age apartheid.

In Xinjiang, the Sharp Eyes surveillance program had been wired into a large computing center, but sifting through the vast amount of image data had been time-consuming and, according to state media, “required a lot of manual work.” As capabilities increased, so did the need for processing: at first, the surveillance systems could track only the movement of crowds, according to a former Chinese official; later, the technology could assess a person’s gait, even her facial expressions. In the summer of 2017, the authorities unveiled the Ürümqi Cloud Computing Center, a supercomputer

that ranked among the fastest in the world. With the new machine, they announced, image data that once took a month to process could be evaluated in less than a second. Its thousands of servers would integrate many forms of personal data. State media called the new machine “the most powerful brain.”

Lower-level Party officials struggled to keep up with the technological advances. Sabit asked Zhang Hongchao if she could walk around unimpeded. Unsure, he suggested that she and a Party official test her I.D. at a hospital. The next morning, when they swiped her card, it triggered an ear-piercing alarm. Police swarmed Sabit within minutes.

After the experiment, she went to a mall to buy clothes. Almost immediately, police surrounded her again. An officer explained that facial-recognition software had identified her as a “focus person.” Learning that she had already been reeducated, the officers let her go. But it soon became clear that there was nowhere Sabit could walk without being detained. Eventually, police began to recognize her, and, annoyed by the repeated encounters, urged her to stop going out at all. Instead, Sabit laboriously identified convenience stations that she might pass and gave the police notice, so that they could ignore the *IJOP* alerts.

A few times a week, Sabit had to report to the residential-committee center, for a flag-raising ceremony and additional reeducation classes. She hated these visits, but they were her only escape from solitude. Except for her uncle’s family, just about everyone she knew—neighbors, friends, relatives—stayed away from her, fearing that any association would land them in the camps, too.

The only people she could safely mix with were other former detainees, who were similarly isolated. The Party propagandist in Sabit’s cell had been fired from her job. The woman who had run a grocery store could no longer operate her business, so she turned to menial labor; she also discovered that the man she wanted to marry had found another woman. Shunned and vulnerable, they found safety in one another.

Two weeks after Sabit’s release, several officers from her internment camp turned up on her uncle’s doorstep and explained that they had used her file to

find her. It was not an official visit. They emphasized that they, in their own way, were also prisoners: resigning from the camp was impossible. Two of the officers were Kazakh, and they said that they lived in fear that any misstep would send them to the camps as detainees. One of them confessed that he had been drinking to ease his guilt and his nightmares.

Because the men had been kind, Sabit and the other women decided to take them out to dinner, as thanks. The group started meeting regularly, and the officers soon began insisting that the women join them for drinks and give them loans. Sabit usually handed over the money, not expecting it back. But the officers became more demanding. One asked her to buy him a car, and, when she gently declined, his kindness gave way to threats. He called Sabit and, using the *IJOP* data, itemized where she had been the previous day. She decided that isolation was better than such company.

Members of Sabit’s residential committee constantly interfered with her life —trying to mold her into the state’s idea of a good citizen. They urged her to take a Han husband. There was money in it for her, they said; in an attempt to alter the ethnic balance of Xinjiang, the state had launched an aggressive campaign to encourage indigenous women to marry Han men. (Darren Byler, an anthropologist at Simon Fraser University who studies repression in Xinjiang, recently uncovered evidence that some Han “relatives” in Uyghur homes had coerced women into such marriages.) When Sabit demurred, the officials told her that Muslim men were chauvinists—adding, with a laugh, “Han husbands dote on their wives!”

The residential committee urged her to work, and then made it impossible. Sabit found a job teaching English, but on her first day the committee called her in for an unscheduled meeting with officials from her camp. She could not tell the school why she had to leave, fearing that she would be fired if her employer knew that she was a “focus person.” At the meeting, she asked if she could speak first, so that she could return to her job. One of the officials responded with a threat: “I can send you back to the camp with one phrase. Stay!” She lost the job, and decided that it wasn’t worth looking for a new one.

By January, 2019, Sabit understood that this kind of attention was causing her uncle’s community anxiety. Fearing that she was endangering her

relatives, she moved into a hotel. One night, she returned to her family's home for a meal, and posed with them for a photo. She shared it on social media. Immediately, Zhang texted her about an embroidered portrait that was on the wall. "Who's in the picture?" he wrote.

The portrait showed a bearded man in traditional dress: the Kazakh poet Abai Qunanbaiuly. "I was afraid that this would bring me and my uncle's family doom," Sabit recalled. She deleted the photo and sent Zhang a Chinese encyclopedia entry on Qunanbaiuly.

"You were quick to delete," he wrote.

"You scared me," she said.

"Just asking," he said. "Don't be nervous."

She told him that she was no longer living in her uncle's home, and planned to move again. She had found an inexpensive rental apartment, owned by an elderly Kazakh woman, in an adjoining community.

The Spring Festival was again approaching, and Sabit and the other former detainees were compelled to rehearse for a performance at the residential-committee center. As the festival neared, Zhang told Sabit and the other women to hang *chunlian*—holiday greetings on red paper—outside their homes, a Han tradition that Sabit had never practiced before. Returning to her apartment, she hung the scrolls beside her front door. Fearful of being disobedient, she photographed them and texted Zhang the evidence. "I have put up the *chunlian*," she wrote. "I wish you good luck and happiness."

"Same to you," he wrote.

That night, two men pounded on her door—a police officer and the secretary of the local residential committee. "When did you move?" one asked. "Why didn't you tell us?" Stunned, Sabit told them that she had informed Zhang. But the men said that this didn't matter, that she had to leave their community—"tonight."

The men ushered her to a nearby police station, for further questioning. There, Sabit ran into her Kazakh landlady and her husband. As officers

escorted them into an armored vehicle, the landlady glared at her with terror and contempt, and screamed, “Just look! Because of you, we’re going to school!”

Racked with guilt, Sabit asked an officer if they were really being sent to a camp. He told her that they were only being taken to another police station for questioning. Still, Sabit was aghast that she could provoke such fear, just by existing. “I cried a lot that day,” she recalled. “I was like a virus.”

Not knowing where to go, she called Zhang, who told her that his residential-committee center had a dormitory. She moved into it that night with a few of her possessions, and texted him, “Lucky to have you today.”

“You can live here,” he told her.

She shared a room with two other Kazakh women. Later, one of them told Sabit that Zhang had instructed them to monitor her: he wanted to know what she did, what she said, whom she met—“basically all the details.”

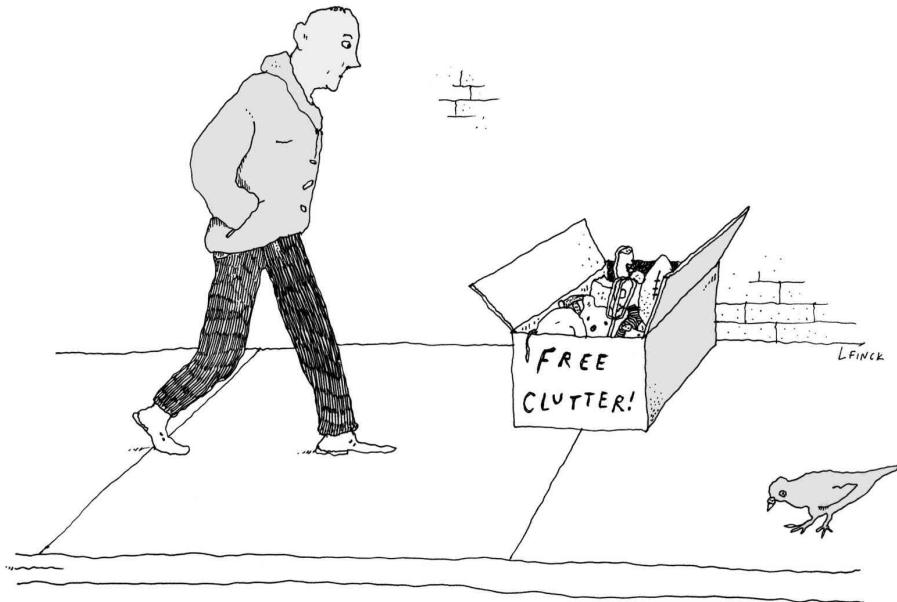


Former detainees faced constant monitoring. Police tracked them; the Party oversaw their work and their personal lives. Illustration by Na Kim; Source photograph by Bernice Chan / South China Morning Post / Getty

VII. ESCAPE

At the time that Sabit was released from the camp, leaving China seemed unthinkable. Then she learned of a Kazakh detainee who had contracted TB, and in the hospital had bemoaned his inability to see his family in Kazakhstan. Eventually, he was permitted to go. Stories like this gave her the idea that leaving might be possible.

A month after her release, Sabit returned to the police station to obtain her passport, and was told that there was a new procedure: she had to be interviewed, and then a transcript would be sent for approval to a legal commission in Kuytun.



Cartoon by Liana Finck

Sabit sat for the interview, but months went by with no news. She was still anxiously waiting when she moved into Zhang's dormitory. One day, a senior Party official who had stopped by the center told her that he had heard she was approved to travel. When Sabit ran into Zhang, he said, "I heard you can go. If you get your passport, when do you plan to leave?"

"Right now!" Sabit said, excitedly.

He frowned. "It looks like your education was incomplete," he said. "Do you want to be sent to study again?" Alarmed, she told him, "No!"

Not long afterward, a member of the legal commission called Sabit to say that he had seen her file and thought that she could help a local import-export company. The firm, he said, had business with Uzbekistan, and needed someone with language skills. “Can you work there?” he asked.

Sabit struggled to make sense of the call. Did it mean that she wasn’t cleared to leave? And, if the whole reason she had to go to the camps was that work had taken her to countries like Uzbekistan, then why was the state introducing her to *this* job? She suspected that she couldn’t turn it down. Later, she reached out to the Public Security Bureau, and was told, “Go do it.”

Sabit took the job. Every time she had to call an overseas client, or write an e-mail to one, she contacted the bureau. “Can I?” she asked. Each time, the question had to go to superiors. The officials told her to stop calling.

After a few weeks, Sabit learned that her passport was ready. She rushed to the police station, where she signed a pile of papers, including an agreement that she would never publicly discuss her time in the camp, and then she retrieved her passport. Fearful of the airport, Sabit bought a ticket for an overnight train to the Kazakhstan frontier. She said goodbye to her uncle and left.

Just past daybreak, she arrived at a town in the far west, where she had to catch a shuttle bus to cross the border. Entering the bus station, she swiped her I.D., and silently urged the scanner, “Don’t go off. Please.”

No alarms sounded, and she went in. The bus ride to the border took ten minutes. As Sabit gazed out the window, her phone rang. It was Wang Ting, the Public Security Bureau official. “If you see anyone with religious or separatist ideas, you need to report it,” he said. She had no interest in spying, but, knowing that he could block her departure, she murmured, “O.K.”

At the border, Sabit could see the Kazakh steppe: wind-strewn grass among patches of snow. Behind it was a mountain range, wild and pristine. Everyone disembarked into a Chinese border station, where each passenger was called for an interview, until Sabit was waiting alone. Finally, in a windowless chamber, three officials, one with a camera mounted on his

shoulder, interrogated her for forty minutes. Then they told her that she, too, could go. Crossing into Kazakh territory, she felt a wave of relief. She thought of the border guards as family. People were speaking Kazakh freely. With barely any possessions, she sailed through customs. A cousin was there to pick her up and return her to her mother. A strong wind blew as she walked to his car, and she took in the crisp air. After a year and eight months as a captive, she was free.

This year marks an important anniversary in the history of human-rights law. A hundred years ago, a Polish attorney named Raphael Lemkin began following the trial of a man who had gunned down the Ottoman Empire's former Interior Minister—an official who had overseen the near-complete eradication of the Empire's Armenian population. The assassin, an Armenian whose mother had died in the massacres, stopped the former minister outside his home in Berlin and shot him dead. During the trial, he proclaimed his conscience clear, saying, "I have killed a man, but I am not a murderer."

As Lemkin read about the case, he was struck by a conundrum: the gunman was on trial, but his victim, who had orchestrated the slaughter of more than a million people, had faced no legal reckoning. How could that be? "I felt that a law against this type of murder must be accepted by the world," he later wrote. In 1944, as Lemkin, a Jew, witnessed the horrors of Nazism, it occurred to him that the vocabulary of modern law was missing a word, so he coined one: "genocide."

Over the years, the term has taken on a specific legal definition, but Lemkin had a broad understanding of it. "Genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accomplished by mass killings," he noted. "It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups." Such a plan is unfolding now in Xinjiang. As in the cases that inspired Lemkin, it is happening under a shield of state sovereignty.

In December, the International Criminal Court declined to rule on the People's War in Xinjiang, because the actions taken there appear to have been committed "solely by nationals of China within the territory of China,"

and China is not a party to the court. For years, most of the world's nations officially ignored what was happening. Only recently did the United States declare that China is committing genocide. Last year, Washington imposed sanctions on Chen Quanguo, Zhu Hailun, and the *bingtuan*, and barred imports of cotton and tomatoes from Xinjiang. The European Union, the U.K., and Canada took similar measures a few weeks ago.

Given the scope of China's global power, it seems likely that only a severe and coördinated international response would have significant impact. Swiftness also matters. The longer a genocidal policy is in place, the more it provides its own rationale; as the Ottoman minister explained to an American diplomat who implored him to stop, "We have got to finish them. If we don't, they will plan their revenge." It is easy to imagine that China, after years of systematically punishing Xinjiang's Turkic minorities, will adopt a similar attitude. Changes on the ground, including newly built infrastructure, suggest a commitment to a long-term process.

In December, 2019, the chairman of Xinjiang's regional government announced, "The education trainees have all graduated." Even as he said it, estimates of the number of detainees were at their peak. Although some people were indeed released, many others have remained incommunicado. Evidence suggests that a large fraction of the people in the camps have been formally imprisoned, or pressed into labor. Last year, an Uyghur woman in Europe told me about her brother, who was released from a camp and then vanished—she suspected into forced labor. Some of his last posts on TikTok showed photos of him moving piles of boxes. "To be honest," she told me, "I am scared for my family."

Fear permeates the émigré community. As a recent Freedom House report notes, "China conducts the most sophisticated, global, and comprehensive campaign of transnational repression in the world." Its tactics have ranged from digital intimidation and threats of lawsuits to unlawful deportation. Recently, Xi Jinping's government took an unprecedented step: sanctioning Western academics whose work on Xinjiang it found objectionable. "They will have to pay a price for their ignorance and arrogance," the Foreign Ministry declared. A number of émigrés who have spoken out about the crackdown describe relatives in Xinjiang who have been targeted for retribution and forced to denounce them.

Ilshat Kokbore, an Uyghur activist who immigrated to America in 2006, told me that some men recently drove up to his home, in suburban Virginia, and overtly began to photograph it; they tried to go through his mail, until they noticed a neighbor watching them. On another occasion, he was attending a protest at the Chinese Embassy in Washington, when a woman he did not know approached him and began speaking in Mandarin. “She said, ‘If you get poisoned, do you know how to treat yourself?’ ” he told me. “I said, ‘Why should I know that?’ ” And she said, ‘You know, the Chinese government is very powerful. You could die in a car accident, or get poisoned.’ ”

For years, Kokbore has been separated from his family: two sisters, a brother-in-law, and a niece are in the camps, and the rest are incommunicado. The last family member he was able to contact was his mother, in 2016. “Don’t call again,” she told him. “And may God bless you.” Her fate remains unknown.

Sabit, as it happens, was confined with Kokbore’s sisters. She thought that the women seemed thoroughly broken. One day, the deputy director of the camp turned to them in her presence and said, “Your problem is your older brother. Unless your older brother dies, your problem cannot be resolved.”

Sabit told me that, for many months, she feared coming forward, but that Chinese propaganda about the camps had caused her to set aside her fear. “I was thinking, *You have done this*. I should talk about what happened to me.”

In October, 2019, half a year after gaining her freedom, she began putting her recollections into writing. She found that it helped her overcome her trauma. Seeing a therapist helped, too. But she still feels severed from the confident and purposeful woman she once was. Nightmares trouble her sleep. “I have one where I’m in the camp, in different forms,” she told me. Sometimes she is in a cell. Once, she was confined in a chicken coop. Another time, she was in a massage parlor, getting a massage; she looked over and saw people imprisoned, then was with them. “For almost a year, I had this dream every night,” she told me. “Many times, I would wake up crying, feeling very scared. That was torture, I would say, because even if you are in a safe place you are reliving the experience.”

With therapy, the nightmares subsided for a time, but recently they returned, in a different form. Sabit now dreams that she is in Xinjiang. “When I try to leave, the police tell me I can’t,” she told me. “I’m at the border, I’m at the airport, they stop me, and I start asking myself, ‘Why did I come? How am I in China?’” ♦

Books

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Helen Frankenthaler and the Messy Art of Life

With her innovative soak-stain paintings, Frankenthaler embraced color for its own sake, animating and elevating the most elemental sensations.

By [Adam Gopnik](#)

April 5, 2021



The American painter Helen Frankenthaler always resisted being treated as a “woman painter,” on the ground that artists should never be asked to be representative of anything except their art. Yet Frankenthaler’s life as an artist does make one think hard about adversity and resilience. Impediments impede; they can also inspire. Anyone who goes to Venice to admire the unimaginable richness of the pictures in its churches will find, on retreating to the museum in the Venetian ghetto, where the Jews were forced to pay their jailers to lock them up, that the visual art made by the persecuted was much less compelling than the art of the people who persecuted them. But, then, art is an outlier activity. In the Victorian age, a majority of the great novelists were women (only Dickens and Trollope hold up as well as the Brontës, Eliot, and Mrs. Gaskell); in the United States, all the most interesting mid-twentieth-century musicians were African-American. In

some instances, oppression can stifle artistic expression; in others, it can serve as a forcing house for it. Often, both things happen at once, or differently to different people.

Now the Stanford art historian Alexander Nemerov brings us a new biographical work, "[Fierce Poise: Helen Frankenthaler and 1950s New York](#)," concentrating on a key decade in the painter's career. His is one of those books (Stephen Greenblatt's "Will in the World" was a sterling example) in which a distinguished scholar says, in effect, to hell with being a distinguished scholar—I'm going to write like a human being. Nemerov refers to his subject not as Frankenthaler but as Helen—very much against the grain of current biographical practice—and he apologizes, in an affecting preface, for having been too much the pedantic puritan, early in his career, to fully appreciate her. The project even involves a sort of apology to his father, [Howard Nemerov](#), the poet (and the brother of the photographer [Diane Arbus](#)), who was a teacher, friend, and admirer of Frankenthaler's. When Nemerov taught an art-history survey class at Yale a dozen years ago, he made the decision, he tells us, to teach art as art, rather than as encoded political cartooning or as social history in pictures. "I abandoned my expertise," he writes. "I let go of the skepticism I hid behind as a younger man. I left no scrim or safety net between me and the students, between me and the art, between me on the stage and the person I was alone. I began speaking—I don't know how else to say it—as a person moved."

Frankenthaler is not an entirely obvious heroine for our moment; even in her own day, she stood out for her good fortune. She was born in 1928, the daughter of a much admired New York State Supreme Court justice, and grew up on Park Avenue. The youngest and the prettiest of three daughters, she was very much her father's favorite; she had a haunted relationship with her imposing mother, Martha, herself an unfulfilled artist. (Martha, caught in depression by Parkinson's, committed suicide, decades later, by jumping from her apartment window.) Frankenthaler had a classic upper-Manhattan upper-middle-class education, switching from Brearley to Dalton, a move from an atmosphere of earnest progressivism to one of even more earnest progressivism. She also took art classes from the Mexican modernist Rufino Tamayo, and she knew that she wanted to paint. Nemerov's book, to its credit, depicts her art not as a collision of art-historical icebergs but as the result of a personal practice, of nonverbal habits, of a way of being in the

world. He tells us that, as a child, Frankenthaler delighted in drawing a single line of chalk tracing her route from the Metropolitan Museum to the family's apartment blocks away—the opening scene of her bio-pic, surely—and loved to take her mother's red nail polish and spill it in the sink, just to see the patterns it made—a surer sign of a painterly sensibility than museumgoing, although she certainly went to lots of museums.

But Nemerov doesn't discount the effects of Frankenthaler's enlightened education. In 1949, she graduated from Bennington, then a women's college, where she studied with Paul Feeley, a Picasso admirer. Feeley taught her a version of Cubist painterly syntax, the first credible grammar for painting since Renaissance perspective. "At Bennington, the study and practice of modern painting was a part of the college's intensity, not an escape from it," Nemerov writes. The women's colleges in the nineteen-forties did a terrific job of empowering women, as we would now say: whatever obstacles to the life of an artist Frankenthaler encountered, they were not found at Bennington. As in Mary McCarthy's "[The Group](#)," about a Vassar class from roughly the same period, the women's colleges gave a slightly unreal, or premature, sense of women's possibilities in the world.

Frankenthaler returned to New York in 1949, and, after a brief flirtation with art history at Columbia, set out to become a painter. She rented a studio downtown, and went to work, still in an essentially European, Picasso-influenced mode. Nemerov describes the young Helen as "larger than life, knowing well enough how to be a party's center of attention." She also had a remarkably unembarrassed sex life. Her peers scrutinized her romantic choices for signs of careerism, never more than when, during her first year back in the city, she took up with the legendary critic Clement Greenberg.

Greenberg was bad-tempered, prone to brawling, and often cruel—a constant critic, he actually kept a diary in which he gave his lovers' bodies bad reviews. Reading about Greenberg now, you wonder why everyone in the art world didn't just tell him to get lost. In truth, he's like Reggie in the Archie comics, obnoxious but essential to the story. Why did the art world find him so irresistible? Some of it was the sheer allure of mischief-making, the unrepentant reprobate being more compelling than the nice guy. More came from his role as a sort of John the Baptist to Jackson Pollock's Jesus: the first proclaimer of a divinity. It can be hard to recall, with our current

seminar sleepiness about the many sources of [Pollock's art](#), how original and audacious his painting looked then—it seemed a spontaneous whirlwind of skeins, the artist becoming nature instead of merely serving it. Frankenthaler and the painter Larry Rivers took an oath, in the early fifties, to be forever true to Pollock's example. As Pollock's oracle, Greenberg had a kind of prestige that no critic has had since. Only Pauline Kael, in the mid-seventies —when, having placed her bets on the epic possibilities of pop “trash,” she was proved right by Coppola and Scorsese—had something like the same kind of cachet.

Yet Nemerov may underrate the connection between Greenberg's actual views of modern painting and Frankenthaler's artistic practice in the fifties. He emphasizes the critic's invocation of the dark existential forces that hover over Pollock's pictures, like the demons in a Goya print. But Greenberg's organizing idea was surprisingly simple: modern painting, having ceased to be illustrative, ought to be decorative. Once all the old jobs of painting—portraying the bank president, showing off the manor house, imagining the big battle—had been turned over to photography and the movies, what was left to painting was what painting still did well, and that was to be paint.

So Greenberg was one of the first to see the incomparable greatness of Matisse, at a time when Picasso still occupied the center ring of the circus. But if Greenberg's insight was that the decorative residue of painting might be the best thing about it, his evil genius was to enforce this insight with a coercive historical scheme, and then police it with totalitarian arguments. The scheme, borrowed from Marxist dialectics, was that History allowed no other alternative to abstract painting—the flatter and the more openly abstract, the better. The policing took place through Greenberg's insistence on his own eye as the only arbiter of the dialectic.

Although everyone was waiting for the next breakthrough in painting, no one would have bet money on Frankenthaler's being the one to achieve it—the general condescension she inspired, rooted in envy, prevented it. But on October 26, 1952, that breakthrough took place when, from a “combination of impatience, laziness, and innovation,” as Frankenthaler later recalled, she decided to thin her paints with turpentine and let them soak into a large, empty canvas. By using the paint to stain, rather than to stroke, she elevated

the components of the living mess of life: the runny, the spilled, the spoiled, the vivid—the lipstick-traces-left-on-a-Kleenex part of life. She retreated, a little cautiously, into the landscape cognates of the abstraction, though, in naming the finished picture “Mountains and Sea.” The results were not much admired at first; the *Times* deemed a 1953 show of her work, which included this painting (it now hangs in the National Gallery of Art), “sweet and unambitious.” But that year two other painters, Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, visited her studio and adopted her innovation. A new style, “color-field painting,” or “post-painterly abstraction,” was born. Under Greenberg’s sponsorship—though outside his tutelage—it became, as Robert Hughes once wrote, “the watercolor that ate the art world.”

It’s a style now under a cloud, which is perhaps where it ought to be, liquidity, rain, and foam being its native vernacular. It’s beclouded, in part, because it doesn’t take much work to grasp. Picasso said once that an artist makes something new in order for someone else to make it pretty, but this was something new that was also something pretty. It was the later color-field variants—made mostly by men—that are more evidently austere.

Women critics made much of the feminine nature of Frankenthaler’s stain paintings, even tying them directly to menstruation. She passionately objected to this reductive reading, as artists often will object to having their art explained or annotated, particularly since all artists of note have a standard sneer directed at them, and the one directed at Frankenthaler was that her art was merely “feminine”—derivative and pleasing, rather than difficult and sublime. In 1957, the painter Barnett Newman, affronted by Frankenthaler’s presence in a feature in *Esquire*, wrote her a cruel letter: “It is time that you learned that cunning is not yet art, even when the hand that moves under the faded brushwork so limply in its attempt to make art, is so deft at the artful.” Even her most gifted rival among the women painters of the time, Joan Mitchell, got in on the act, calling her a “Kotex painter.”

What’s impressive about the early soak-stain Frankenthalsers, of course, is how unpainted they are, how little brushwork there is in them. Their ballistics are their ballet, the play of pouring, and a Rorschach-like invitation to the discovery of form. Paramecia and lilies alike bloom under her open-ended colors and shapes. Pollock is praised for pouring and dripping, as though inviting randomness, but one senses the significant amount of figural

underpainting that exists beneath the surface. Even in the case of a painter as original and as decorative as [Joan Mitchell](#), there's a kind of stenographic calligraphic reduction of Monet, Impressionism remade as Action. By contrast, Frankenthaler's images seep into the material; there really is no paint surface as we think of it, no top to be on top of.

Her work of the fifties and sixties speaks to a world not of action but of reaction, of absorption and fluidity, with intimations of aquariums and hothouse flowers rather than of the usual Eighth Street stoplights and street corners. As much as Mitchell is in active dialogue with Monet—a devotion so intense that it led her to move to Vétheuil, up the hill from his old house—Frankenthaler seems in conversation with Bonnard. They have the same love of faded color, and the same feeling for designs that are almost chatty, this bit laid alongside that bit, rather than “all over,” in the manner that links Monet and Pollock. There are Bonnard watercolors that, if one simply enlarges a sky or a flower surface, look eerily like Frankenthaler paintings. Even Picasso's dismissal of Bonnard's compositions as “a potpourri of indecision” holds for her pictures. In this sense, Frankenthaler's work asks what would happen if you took this kind of Bonnard watercolor—with its deliberately slack, soft-edged intimacy—eliminated the more obvious referents, and worked big. But that principle of displacement is a truth of all modernist art, where shifts in practice come from seeing in the margins of an activity—like the spattered paint on a drop cloth—the possibilities of something central.

In a curious way, Frankenthaler's revenge on Newman has been achieved, almost accidentally, in the past decades, with Newman's pictures inspected for signs of patriarchal phallocentrism. His sublime zips have even been blandly likened to actual zippers—“mundane openings onto male organs,” as one academic put it—an analogy that would have been seen as blasphemously belittling in his day. Meanwhile, Frankenthaler's weepiness, condescended to as feminine, looks more richly fertile.

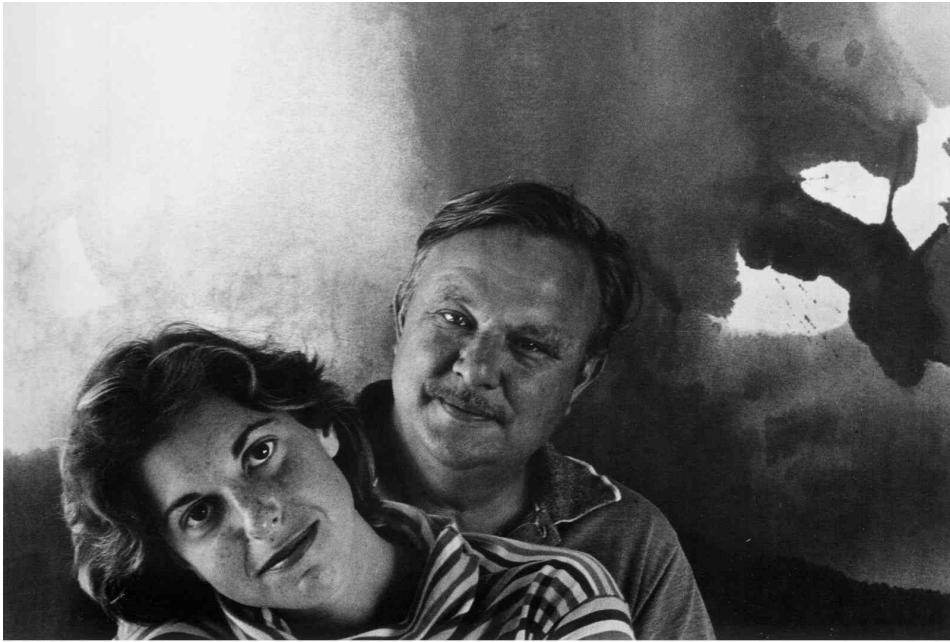


Photo: © Arnold Newman / Liaison Agency

Frankenthaler and Robert Motherwell, a New York power couple of abstract painting, in 1963. Photograph by Arnold Newman / Getty

For a nonparticipant, these arguments will seem crudely reductive. If a straight line is to stand for phallocentrism while a soft center stands for its vaginal opposite, do we have an argument worth winning? Both Tom Wolfe and Robert Hughes were indignant at this seeming smallness of meaning and metaphor in abstract painting. And yet the reduction of the argument to simple gestures is the whole point of the game. What makes good games matter is the commitment of their players to the rules as the springboard of invention. Art is its constraints. Scrabble players don't suppose that spelling words is significant; what's significant is assembling words from a limited array of letters. Chess players don't think about capturing kings and rooks; they think about strategies for capturing kings and rooks. No painter imagined that eliminating perspective or storytelling from pictures was inherently virtuous, or that the picture plane was a prime place in itself; they were drawn to the game of eliminating everything else, then finding out what was left and how it could communicate. The dignity of American abstract art lies in the intersection of the obviousness of its motifs and the complexity of its motives. It says smart things simply.

A great and somewhat limiting event of Frankenthaler's life took place six years after "Mountains and Sea," when she married Robert Motherwell, an older Abstract Expressionist of unimpeachable integrity. At the time, Motherwell had an Arthur Miller-like aura of dignity and authority. His

signature work—big funereal blobs of black solemnly processing across a void, called “Elegies to the Spanish Republic”—provided, in retrospect, a too easily remembered recipe for seriousness in the serious fifties. The work “indicates,” as Method actors of that period learned to say of a too neatly telegraphed emotion, rather than inhabits its mood. The obvious visual metaphor—big black forms meaning big black feelings—was bolstered by an obvious progressive piety in the title. Motherwell’s best works were his less strenuously virtuous collages, built around his favorite brand of French cigarettes rather than around his loftiest beliefs. But the romance between the two artists is genuinely moving: Motherwell and Frankenthaler fell on each other as soul mates. Frankenthaler took in his two daughters by his first marriage, and they made their home in an Upper East Side town house. For a while, Frankenthaler and Motherwell were the Lunts of abstract painting, the unquestioned power couple of the form.

Although the marital connection, as rivals groused, assisted Frankenthaler’s career in certain ways, it may have arrested it in others. For a very long time, Frankenthaler’s style supplied a default look for American abstract art. In Paul Mazursky’s late-seventies feminist film “An Unmarried Woman,” the SoHo artist played by Alan Bates paints in just this style (which, historically, is a little too late); perhaps it was inevitable that the style was appropriated from a woman and assigned to a male painter by a male filmmaker. For all Frankenthaler’s fame, though, she was typed as a member of an earlier generation than the one she belonged to. When subsequent waves of art—Pop art and Minimalism—came washing over, she seemed like an Old Guard holdout rather than, as the lightsome, colorful, improvisational nature of her painting might have suggested, a predecessor of an art less self-consciously angst-ridden than Abstract Expressionism.

The marriage brought other forms of misfortune. Motherwell, whose father had been the president of Wells Fargo, turned out to have been the prisoner of a traumatic childhood, and sank into alcoholism. Frankenthaler and Motherwell divorced in 1971, and perhaps it should have been easier for peers and critics to re-situate her art within the generation that rebelled against the Ab Ex anguish. A painting like her simple silhouette of orange, “Stride” (1969), now in the Met, looks gaily Day-Glo, very much of its time. There was an evident overlap, as the art historian Robert Rosenblum once pointed out, between the high-keyed color and ease of post-painterly

abstraction and the formal qualities of Pop; they were both helium-filled antidotes to the dark agonies of Abstract Expressionism proper.

Frankenthaler, had she been the careerist some decried, might have benefitted from this resemblance. She didn't, in part because of her allegiance to the "serious" stuff. Some of her best painting, certainly, is her most larksome. Pictures like "*Tutti-Fruitti*" (1966), now in Buffalo, or "*Royal Fireworks*" (1975)—which sold at Sotheby's last June for a handsome, though not Pollockian, sum—have a warmth and a brightness of affect that seem entirely their own. The appealing pousse-café of color in "*Tutti-Fruitti*" implies sherbets, water ices, fireworks—nothing "deep" and everything alive. They have what Nemerov calls "childlike connotations," an unapologetic, inspiring embrace of color for its own, elemental sake.

Frankenthaler continued to paint late into her life. She remarried, in 1994, to an investment banker, and five years later they moved to a house in Darien, Connecticut, right on the Long Island Sound. There her paintings picked up the sea greens and turquoises that, for the last dozen years of her life, she could see from her studio.

Learning to be an aesthete in middle age, as Nemerov has, is like taking tango lessons in your fifties: the spirit is admirable, but the moves are awkward. Almost overequipped to handle the intersection of art and social history—Nemerov does a masterly job on the relation of Frank O'Hara's poetry and Frankenthaler's painting—he is underequipped to make people and pictures live on the page. No one could pick a picture out from all the others after reading his description of it. At one point, we're told, of Frankenthaler's 1955 "*Blue Territory*," "The graffiti of a schoolgirl's private confession takes on the aura of saintly ecstasies, a conventional sign of forlorn adolescence martialed almost against its will into a bold strapping air of titanic achievement"—a description that reveals little about the picture except that the author likes it. Attempting to create novelistic character and an inhabited world, Nemerov relies on mechanical double adjectives and stock word pairings: "Elegant yet earthy, Martha Frankenthaler was a person of vibrant enthusiasms and impetuous moods"; Greenberg is "tough as nails."

Another struggle is presented by Nemerov's puritanical take on Frankenthaler's concern for her career, too much remarked on in her day; she thought nothing of posing for a spread in a popular magazine if doing so would increase her fame and sell her pictures. Nemerov assures us that, nevertheless, "something saved Helen. Her paintings stood apart from her quest for recognition and sales." Why, though, would she need to be saved from being sold? Being part of the world of buying and selling is constitutive of what the visual arts have meant and have been since the end of the medieval era. Only priests and academics find anything shameful in it. Whatever is lost in contamination by commerce is more than made up for by what's gained in independence. Frankenthaler painted what she wanted, and people bought what they wanted.

Nemerov worries, too, about the possibility that bourgeois collectors found her subtle intimacies merely soothing. Yet the idea that New York collectors would seek out pictures they thought comforting is a misreading of the psychology of New York collectors; they like to collect what they don't think likes them. The prestige lies in showing that you don't need to be flattered by the art you own. This is why, in the apartments of Manhattan collectors, sweet photographs of the grandchildren are hived off in the bedroom, while kinky Koonses and Bacons take places of honor next to the coffee table. (The people who thought of Frankenthaler's art as in any way "easy" were, in that period, teaching in colleges, not collecting paintings.)

Nemerov's admiration for his heroine sometimes makes him overrate her originality. "Helen's sensitivity allowed her to grant ordinary experience—faltering, incomplete, apparently meaningless—the large solemnity of art," he writes, as if this were not the achievement of every landscape and still-life since the birth of painting. Of all the constraints that make art matter, that pairing—small, sensual objects seeking big, lifesaving points—is the most familiar. Having once been shuttered in a classroom where commonplace lyricism is censored and the depiction of intimate experience is assumed to be merely a cover for bourgeois ideology, Nemerov is a bit like Molière's M. Jourdain, discovering that he has been speaking prose his whole life—or, in this case, discovering that, while he has been speaking prose, everyone he studies has been reciting poetry all along.

From today's perspective, the most striking thing about Frankenthaler's career is how much all the things that were said to belittle her, sometimes by other women, now seem to point toward her art's larger soul. Joan Mitchell may have sneered at Frankenthaler as that "Kotex painter," while Grace Hartigan said that her pictures seemed "made between cocktails and dinner." Now the Bonnard-like ease within the cycles of domesticity, and even the possible origins of her work in menstrual staining, are seen by feminist critics as an admirable uplifting of the "abject." Nemerov is appropriately voluble on this subject: "The painting that left the studio, the painting that hung on the gallery wall, offered such a range of experiences and emotions that it might disguise how it had all started with a gesture connoting such a private and bodily function."

He is surely right to sense a larger American story here, about women, painting, and the elevation of the decorative instinct in art. Impressionist painting became uniquely valued in America at a time when it was still scorned in France, in large part for being "feminine," instinctive, and soft. (It was no accident that the leading post-Impressionist correctives to Impressionism were almost comically phallic, as with Seurat's Piero-like pillar people.) The Chicago curator Gloria Groom has established that American women played a crucial role here. Mary Cassatt and May Alcott (the original Amy March) formed a circle in France that assisted married women with money to buy pictures, and advised them to heed the judgment of Sara Hallowell, a remarkable curator and art adviser in Paris. These viewers prized exactly the qualities that made the art of Monet, Renoir, and Pissarro dubious in France: non-heroic, housebound subjects like babies and kitchens, an allergy to firm contour and an adherence to the domesticity of the passing day. This tradition of "feminine" defiance is part of the inheritance of Frankenthaler's art. It extends to a painter like Elizabeth Murray, but also to the seemingly Dadaist activity of Janine Antoni, who was rightly included in "Pretty Raw: After and Around Helen Frankenthaler," a 2015 show at Brandeis University. Antoni chews chocolate and then, spitting it out, forms it into her own signature objects—an extension, in deadpan form, of Frankenthaler's revaluing of the messy necessary liquids of life.

In the classic pattern of the oppressed taking on the values of the oppressor, social radicals still sometimes think that only "subversive" art—tense and

tedious—can be serious, while things that look like big watercolors cannot be. This dismissal leaps past gender to the heart of the modernist enterprise, where Monet’s delight in painting for the eye is still suspect, and Matisse’s calm insistence that he saw his art as akin to a comfortable armchair for an exhausted businessman is still the most taboo of all artist manifestos. And yet this unashamedly decorative impulse, experienced as a woman’s domain, is a constant in the American tradition. For her fond biographer, Frankenthaler’s art delights the eye, as it was designed to, and that’s enough. Enough? It’s everything. ♦

The Making of “Midnight Cowboy,” and the Remaking of Hollywood

The 1969 film has become famous for being ahead of its time, but it may be most revealing as an artifact of its time—a turning point in the history of movies.

By [Louis Menand](#)

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In December, 1963, *Life* published a special issue on “The Movies.” The United States, the magazine asserted, had fallen behind the rest of the world. Hollywood was too timid, too worried about the national “image.” Meanwhile, Swedish, Japanese, Italian, and French filmmakers were making movies that people talked about. “While the whole film world has been buzzing with new excitement,” the magazine concluded, “Hollywood has felt like Charlie Chaplin standing outside the millionaire’s door—wistful and forsaken.”

Exactly four years later, which, in feature-film production time, is virtually overnight, *Time*, the sister publication of *Life*, ran a cover story on “The New Cinema.” “The most important fact about the screen in 1967,” it announced,

“is that Hollywood has at long last become part of what the French film journal *Cahiers du Cinema* calls ‘the furious springtime of world cinema.’ ” How this happened, how Hollywood suddenly went from losing millions on bloated spectacles like “Mutiny on the Bounty” (1962) and “Cleopatra” (1963) to producing smart, talked-about pictures like “The Graduate” (1967) and “Bonnie and Clyde” (1967)—how Old Hollywood became the New Hollywood—is a popular subject for movie historians.

One film that’s often left out of the story is “Midnight Cowboy.” When it was released, in May, 1969, “Midnight Cowboy” seemed as fresh, as startling, and as “must-see” as “The Graduate.” But it is not mentioned once in Robert Sklar’s “[Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies](#).” It comes up a few times, but only in passing, in Peter Biskind’s “[Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock-’n’-Roll Generation Saved Hollywood](#)” and in Mark Harris’s “[Pictures at a Revolution: Five Movies and the Birth of the New Hollywood](#).”

Glenn Frankel’s new book, “[Shooting ‘Midnight Cowboy’: Art, Sex, Loneliness, Liberation, and the Making of a Dark Classic](#)” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), aims to change all that. “More than fifty years later,” Frankel believes, “*Midnight Cowboy* remains a bleak and troubling work of novelistic and cinematic invention, floating far above most other books and films of its era.” Frankel’s book is generous with context, but it is, essentially, the biography of a movie. He has also written books on “The Searchers” and “High Noon.” These have the same interest that biographies of famous people do: they show us the “what if’s and the “but for’s hiding in the backstory of the finished product.

Many more movies don’t get made than get made: there is so much that has to go right, and so much that can go wrong. Movie production requires the collaboration of creative people working under constant pressure to control costs and turn a profit. With dozens of egos in the game and millions of dollars on the table, it is inevitable that things won’t go entirely as planned.

So it is not too surprising to learn that the director of “Midnight Cowboy,” John Schlesinger, had difficulty getting studio financing, which wasn’t helped by the fact that his previous movie, “Far from the Madding Crowd,” with Julie Christie, had bombed. Or that he initially considered the novel

that the film is based on to be unreadable. Or that he did not want to cast either of the actors who became the movie's stars: Dustin Hoffman, as the Times Square lowlife Rico (Ratso) Rizzo, and Jon Voight, as Joe Buck, the Texas innocent who comes to New York seeking to make his fortune servicing rich women and ends up taking care of Ratso.

Robert Redford (who had also hoped to get the role Hoffman played in "The Graduate") and Warren Beatty both lobbied to get the part of Joe Buck. Someone at M-G-M, which declined to produce the picture, suggested Elvis Presley, and the role was offered to Michael Sarrazin, but the deal fell through, when the studio that he was under contract to asked for more money. The name of the casting director responsible for getting Hoffman and Voight onto the project, Marion Dougherty, was left off the credits.

What most people remember from the movie, after Hoffman's and Voight's performances, is Harry Nilsson singing "Everybody's Talkin'." Frankel says that Nilsson actually disliked the song, and had recorded it on one of his albums only as a favor to his producer. What might have been: Leonard Cohen pitched "Bird on the Wire" by singing it to Schlesinger over the phone, and Bob Dylan wrote a song for the movie, probably "Lay Lady Lay," but it didn't make the cut, because he submitted it too late. Another thing everyone remembers, a line eternally implanted in every New Yorker's head, "*I'm walkin' here!*," is not in the screenplay. Hoffman ad-libbed it.

The screenwriter hired to adapt the novel, Waldo Salt, was another gamble. He had been blacklisted, and for eleven years he seldom wrote under his own name. He was fifty-two years old and had not worked on a notable Hollywood movie since the nineteen-forties.

The film's editor was Hugh Robertson. Schlesinger didn't get along with him; the producer, Jerry Hellman, called him "a catastrophe." Robertson, for his part, was contemptuous of what Schlesinger had shot. He thought it was ignorant, a tourist's idea of New York City. (Schlesinger was English.) Eventually, Schlesinger brought in a film editor he had worked with before, Jim Clark, to fix the mess he thought Robertson was making of his movie.

"[The Graduate](#)" had made Hoffman a matinée idol. Female fans mobbed him. But he felt that people thought he was just playing himself in that

picture, and he badly wanted the part of Ratso in order to show off his range as an actor—even though Mike Nichols, his director on “The Graduate,” warned him that it would ruin his career. Hoffman got top billing, but he was annoyed when he realized that Voight was the movie’s center of interest. He complained that Schlesinger had cut a scene he was especially proud of. He was a no-show at promotional events. The producer denied him points.

And yet it all worked out. “Midnight Cowboy” made almost forty-five million dollars on a budget of under four million. It won Academy Awards for Best Picture and Best Director. Hugh Robertson was nominated for film editing, and Waldo Salt won for best adapted screenplay. “Everybody’s Talkin’” made Harry Nilsson famous, went to No. 6 on *Billboard*, and sold a million records. And the movie did not ruin Dustin Hoffman’s career. He and Voight both received Academy Award nominations for Best Actor. The Oscar, however, went to John Wayne, who called “Midnight Cowboy” “a story about two fags.”

Of course, “Midnight Cowboy” is not a story about “two fags.” But, somehow, it very quickly became associated with a new era of frankness about homosexuality, an association enhanced by the fact, completely unrelated, that the Stonewall riots, which conventionally mark the start of the gay-liberation movement, broke out a month after “Midnight Cowboy” opened.

Frankel thinks that the association is important. He sees the movie in the context of “the rise of openly gay writers and gay liberation.” And Mark Harris, in the liner notes for the Criterion DVD, says that “Midnight Cowboy” is, “if not a gay movie, a movie that at least helped to make the notion of a gay movie possible.” They’re right, but it’s a tricky case to make.

It’s true that “Midnight Cowboy” is the story of two men who develop an affectionate relationship under trying circumstances, but so is “Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid,” which came out the same year and was its principal rival for Best Picture. You can read an element of homoeroticism into buddy pictures like these, in which the women are often treated as expendable accessories. But no one imagines that such films give audiences a more enlightened way to think about homosexuality.

Frankel believes it's important that Schlesinger was gay. But, as he concedes, this was not common knowledge. Schlesinger did not come out publicly until the nineteen-nineties, and he said that he did not consider "Midnight Cowboy" a "gay" picture. His next movie, "Sunday Bloody Sunday" (1971), had a sympathetic gay character, played by Peter Finch. But there is no one like that in "Midnight Cowboy."

Joe and Ratso are shown to have little sympathy for homosexuals, and they use John Wayne's F-word often. According to Schlesinger's biographer, William Mann, Hoffman thought his character should also use the N-word, but Schlesinger was horrified and refused to let him. Still, he was fine with homophobic slurs. Many years later, he claimed that the use of the word by the characters was "a sign of overprotestation," but this seems a justification in hindsight.

There are few gay characters with speaking roles in the movie. One is a sad-sack teen-ager, played by Bob Balaban, who goes down on an obviously grossed out Joe in a Times Square movie house and afterward confesses he has no money to pay him. Another is a self-hating middle-aged man (Barnard Hughes) who takes Joe to his hotel room and gets beaten up, which excites him.

Women characters are given much more screen time; almost all of them are played as sexually voracious. A party sequence supposed to resemble scenes at Andy Warhol's Factory (and filmed the same month, June, 1968, that Warhol was shot) devolves into a trippy montage of louche-looking characters doing louche-looking things (and a lot of drugs). The sexuality is clearly meant to be repellent.

This is true to the novel—whose author, James Leo Herlihy, was also gay, but who did not want people to think of his book, which was published in 1965, as gay fiction. There is no suggestion in the book that Joe and Ratso are gay self-deniers. The major influence on Herlihy's fiction was Sherwood Anderson, who called the characters in his most famous work, the collection of linked stories "Winesburg, Ohio," "grotesques." That is how Herlihy saw the world. "It seems to me that the fundamental experience of being alive on this planet is a gothic and grotesque experience," he said, in an interview

that Frankel quotes. “It’s really a frightening place. None of us feels that he’s entirely normal.”

This is the world view Schlesinger and Salt set out to capture. With the exception of the story’s Don Quixote/Candide character, Joe Buck, everyone in “Midnight Cowboy” is creepy. When [Pauline Kael](#) (who hated Schlesinger’s work) complained that “the satire is offensively inaccurate,” she was maybe looking at the movie through the wrong end of the telescope. Of course it’s not accurate. This is how life looks from the bottom of the barrel.

Whatever effect “Midnight Cowboy” might have had on attitudes toward homosexuality, one thing it had a negative effect on was attitudes toward New York City. The movie was shot on location, in Texas and New York. (Schlesinger had originally intended to make it in black-and-white—another big “but for.”) The cinematographer was a serendipitous discovery, too. He was a twenty-nine-year-old Pole named Adam Holender, recommended by Roman Polanski. It was his first feature film. To the annoyance of the veteran crew, Holender insisted on shooting as much of the movie as he could in natural light. The result is a kind of gritty realism that we don’t see in films like “Bonnie and Clyde” and “The Graduate.” In 1969, this was still a powerful cinematic experience. It made Times Square look like a scene from Dante’s Inferno.

This seems to be what Robertson found objectionable in Schlesinger’s direction. But New York in 1968, the year the movie was shot, was not all Fun City. As Frankel reminds us, it seemed to many people to be dying. Crime tripled between 1960 and 1970. In 1968, there was a teachers’ strike, a sanitation workers’ strike, and a strike by fuel deliverers and oil-burner servicemen. And the city was deeply in debt; in 1975, it almost went bankrupt. The symbolic center of urban decay was Times Square—“the Worm in the Apple,” as Dick Netzer, a financial adviser to several of the city’s mayors, called it.

Times Square began to enjoy a reputation as a bohemian enclave a decade or two after it was named (for the newspaper), in 1904. That was where the Beats—Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Herbert Huncke—hung out in the nineteen-forties. In the nineteen-fifties, when the movie

theatres stayed open late and admission was cheap, people would go there to sit through multiple screenings. Broadway was still thriving.

By 1960, though, the area was in unmistakable decline. “*Life on W. 42d st.: A Study in Decay*” was the headline on a *Times* story that year. (The paper had moved to Forty-third Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues in 1913, but kept a close, and usually disapproving, eye on the neighborhood.) Major upscale establishments began disappearing. The Paramount Theatre closed in 1964, the Hotel Astor in 1966. The next year, the old Metropolitan Opera House was demolished, a desecration that for some New Yorkers was equivalent to the demolition of the original Penn Station, which began in 1963.

“By the early sixties, Times Square had become New York’s capital of male prostitution,” James Traub says in his history of Times Square, “[The Devil’s Playground](#)” (2004). The area filled up with peep houses, massage parlors, and pornographic bookstores, all accompanied by a rise in crime. The most notorious parts were toward Seventh and Eighth Avenues, but even Bryant Park was crowded with hustlers and drug dealers. People avoided walking down those blocks, day or night. (A Save the Theatres campaign started in the nineteen-seventies and eventually rescued several Broadway theatres from being razed. The Disneyfication of the Times Square area did not really get under way until the nineteen-nineties.)

What happened? The decline of Forty-second Street had something to do with changes in the movie industry (fewer feature films were being released, because of competition from television, and movie houses shut) and in Broadway theatre (there was a slump in box-office receipts, which closed theatres). But Traub thinks a crucial factor was the relaxation of legal restrictions on pornography and sex work.

Obscenity has always been (and, technically, remains) unprotected by the First Amendment. But, in a series of Supreme Court decisions starting in 1959 with *Kingsley Pictures v. Regents*—a dispute over a French film adaptation of “Lady Chatterley’s Lover” that had been banned in New York State—the definition of obscenity began narrowing. It became more and more difficult to prove in court that things like pornography or nude dancing should be suppressed.

There were raids and there was police harassment, but they did not drive away the grind houses, peepshows, and pornographic bookshops or their patrons. The latitude provided by the obscenity decisions, along with the social currents they aligned with, helped widen the scope of legally protected, or officially ignored, behavior. The riots outside the Stonewall Inn, a West Village bar, were the result of a routine exercise in police harassment. To the astonishment of the cops, this time the patrons fought back. They must have felt that they now had history on their side.

That is only half the story, though. The other half is what happened in the culture industries. In 1963, when *Life* lamented Hollywood's timidity and excessive concern for the national image, it was really referring to the Production Code, the highly restrictive rules, dating back to the nineteen-thirties, that governed what Hollywood movies could show. The Supreme Court decision in *Kingsley*, followed by decisions in *Grove Press v. Gerstein*, which permitted the publication of "Tropic of Cancer," and *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, another movie case, made it clear that the Code was an albatross for the industry. The movies were losing audience. They were becoming unhip.

So when Jack Valenti became the president of the Motion Picture Association of America, in 1966, practically the first item on his agenda was replacing the Code. This was formally accomplished in 1968, when the M.P.A.A. adopted the ratings system. No studio would have released "Midnight Cowboy" five years earlier. For decades, the Code had effectively banned even the use of the word "homosexual." Schlesinger and Hellman were betting that by the time their movie was slated for release the rules would have changed.

And they bet right. So did Mike Nichols and Arthur Penn, the director of "Bonnie and Clyde." And this is why, as the turtle said after it was attacked by a gang of snails, it all happened so fast. Moviemakers could see as well as *Life* could that the conditions for a new kind of Hollywood movie were on the horizon. When the moment arrived, they were ready.

"Midnight Cowboy" is often cited as the only X-rated movie to win Best Picture at the Academy Awards. To the extent that this implies that the M.P.A.A. still resisted certain subject matter in 1969, the statement is

misleading. The real story, which has been known at least since Stephen Farber published “The Movie Rating Game,” in 1972, is that the board assigned the film an R (which is almost certainly what it would get today), but Arthur Krim, the head of United Artists, which produced the film, had it changed to an X. Krim worried that young moviegoers might get the wrong idea about sex. That was the attitude *Life* was referring to.

From a business point of view, this was a dumb move on the studio’s part. The X rating reduced the number of theatres willing to exhibit the picture—although, from the start, people lined up to see it. After the Academy Awards, United Artists asked the ratings board to review the movie again, and it was assigned an R—again. More theatres were able to show it.

In other words, the changes in the movie business and in the legal environment for artistic expression that led to the decline of Times Square also led to the rise of the New Hollywood. As Frankel and Harris suggest, once Hollywood saw the success of “Midnight Cowboy,” a movie that treated homosexuality frankly, even if as a sordid pursuit, you could more easily sell a movie that treated homosexuality as another way of being normal. Whatever John Schlesinger intended to do, he helped to open up a new cultural space. ♦

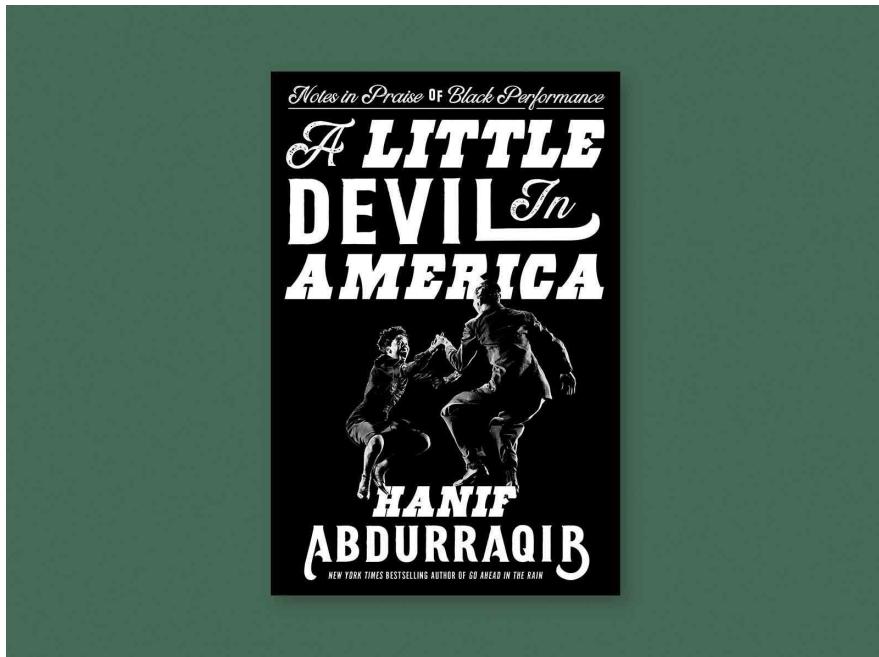
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Briefly Noted

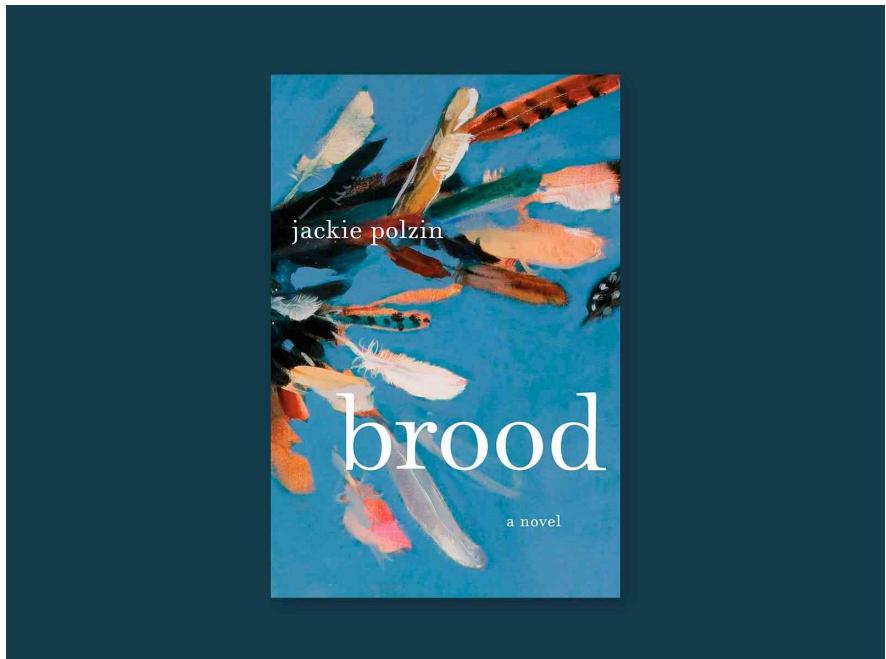
“Plunder,” “A Little Devil in America,” “Brood,” and “Mona.”
April 5, 2021



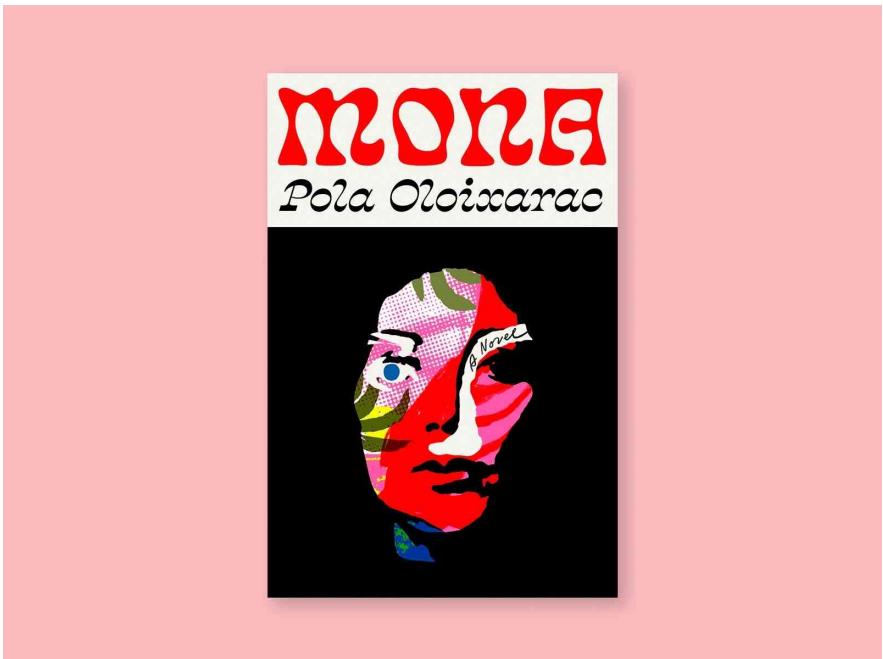
[Plunder](#), by Menachem Kaiser (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt). At the start of this memoir, Kaiser, a third-generation Polish-Canadian, sets out to reclaim a building in Poland that his Jewish family owned before the Second World War. Armed with evidence of ownership and of family members' deaths (only his grandfather survived the Holocaust), Kaiser discovers that, in an increasingly illiberal Poland, ideas of evidence, ownership, and even death have become absurdly fluid. There follows an often hilarious, often poignant odyssey in which Kaiser falls in with a group of Nazi-treasure hunters whose quest has bizarre ties to his own. A light tone belies the book's seriousness of purpose: to tease out thorny issues of inheritance, reparations, and what it means to honor one's dead.



[**A Little Devil in America**](#), by *Hanif Abdurraqib* (Random House). These “notes in praise of Black performance” encompass dance, music, film, and standup, along with everyday affectations and embodiments of masculinity, fear, intimacy, and belonging. Subjects include Josephine Baker, Michael Jackson, blackface, “Soul Train,” and brotherhood. Abdurraqib, an award-winning poet, combines meditations on personal experiences—losing his mother, navigating the Midwestern punk scene—with affectionate studies of cultural moments and figures, beloved and under-sung alike. Abdurraqib views performance as an expression of life and a means of survival. “Okay, lover,” he writes, in an essay on dance marathons. “It is just us now. The only way out is through.”



Brood, by Jackie Polzin (*Doubleday*). After a miscarriage, the unnamed protagonist of this début novel pours her motherly instincts into raising a quartet of chickens with her husband, Percy. Without any prior experience, they are drawn in by the promise of being the kind of people who would own chickens, but the enterprise, in a suburban Minnesota town of extreme temperatures, proves difficult, with chickens dying “suddenly and without explanation.” The story is acutely observed, and the chickens provide metaphors for the world at large: “Do the chickens think of warmer times? They do not. By the time a snowflake has landed, snowflakes are all a chicken has ever known.”



Mona, by Pola Oloixarac, translated from the Spanish by Adam Morris (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). This novel by an acclaimed Argentinian writer is both a wicked satire of the literary élite and an exploration of art and violence. Mona, a Peruvian novelist, has been nominated for a prize that brings many thousands of euros and worldwide fame. She ingests more Valium than food, wears blood-red Chanel lipstick, pseudonymously trolls her critics online, masturbates to fantasies of terror, and worries about an unfinished novel. She and the other nominees spend the days before a winner is announced at a lakeside camp in Sweden, drinking, sniping, and, in Mona's case, psychologically disintegrating. The novel is the kind that Mona imagines writing: "terrifying, brilliant, and dangerous."

Cynthia Ozick, Smasher of Idols

In her tenth decade, Ozick finds a new perspective on envy, ambition, and the perils of blind conviction.

By [Giles Harvey](#)

April 5, 2021



Aspiring young novelists often feel they're in a race against the clock to get themselves between hard covers and safely into print. It isn't simply that the canon teems with early birds: Thomas Mann, who published "[Buddenbrooks](#)" at twenty-six; F. Scott Fitzgerald, who published "[This Side of Paradise](#)" at twenty-three. There is also the competitive incitement of one's contemporaries. To look on as others your own age, or younger, launch brilliant careers while you remain unpublished and at large can do lasting damage to the nascent literary ego. The longer it goes on, the easier it gets for the apprentice to view his obscurity as a sign, in Mark Twain's words, "that sawing wood is what he was intended for."

Few writers have borne witness to the slow-healing bruises of early neglect more memorably than Cynthia Ozick, whose own first novel, "[Trust](#)" (1966), didn't appear until she'd reached the practically geriatric age of thirty-seven. "There one sits, reading and writing, month after month, year

after year,” Ozick has said of her long pre-print limbo. “There one sits, envying other young writers who have achieved a grain more than oneself. Without the rush and brush and crush of the world, one becomes hollowed out. The cavity fills with envy.” As it happened, “Trust,” a six-hundred-and-fifty-page homage to Henry James, Ozick’s once and future inspirator, did little to enhance her name recognition. (“Nobody has ever read it,” she said several decades later, only mildly overstating the case.) In the end, it was envy itself that became the means of her literary ascent.

In the years after “Trust,” Ozick took a hiatus from the novel form, producing a sequence of ferocious stories and novellas in which her most memorable characters—typically Jewish-American writers, like their creator—are inflamed by “the anguish of exclusion” from mainstream literary culture. Ozick has been a fervent critic of identity politics since the nineteen-seventies (see, for example, her diatribe against second-wave feminism, “Literature and the Politics of Sex: A Dissent”), and yet few have written so well about the inconstant self-esteem of the socially marginalized. In “Envy; or, Yiddish in America,” from [The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stories](#) (1971), an untranslated Yiddish-language poet named Herschel Edelshtein wants what his contemporary the short-story writer Yankel Ostrover has: namely, a large American audience. Ostrover, too, writes in Yiddish (a “lost, murdered” language), but with the help of a translator he has escaped from the “prison” of his native tongue. “Out, out—he had burst out, he was in the world of reality,” as Edelshtein, who positively vibrates with resentment, sees it. Edelshtein’s psychology, like that of all Ozick’s outsiders, is dense with humiliating paradox. On the one hand, Yiddish and the obliterated culture of European Jewry it evokes are what give meaning to his life; on the other, they are a ghetto from which he yearns to break free into a wider American reality. He despises Ostrover for being a sellout even as he yearns to become him.

Ozick’s stories from this period—there were also those collected in “Bloodshed and Three Novellas” (1976) and “Levitation: Five Fictions” (1982)—didn’t win her an Ostrover-sized readership, but they marked an artistic coming of age. The influence of James was still apparent in her sumptuous phrase-making and labyrinthine syntax, but now it was tempered by more vernacular rhythms. (“I would like to make a good strong b.m. on your friend Ostrover” is not the kind of remark you would find in a story by

the Master.) Thematically, too, Ozick was staking out her own distinctive terrain. She'd come to recognize her youthful worship of James as a form of idolatry, a sin under Jewish law. For Ozick, this wasn't a matter of theological nitpicking but one of pressing moral concern. "When we see a little girl who is dressed up too carefully in starched flounces and ribbons and is admonished not to run in the dirt, we often say, 'She looks like a little doll,'" Ozick wrote in an essay from the late seventies, explaining her investment in the subject. "And that is what she has been made into: the inert doll has become the model for the human child, dead matter rules the quick. That dead matter will rule the quick is the single law of idolatry." From Edelshtein, whose devotion to Yiddish induces a paralyzing contempt for the uninitiated, to Rosa Lublin in "[The Shawl](#)" (1989), a semi-lucid Holocaust survivor who persists in writing letters to her daughter, long since murdered by the Nazis, Ozick's characters make idols of their passions, and in the process transform themselves into living dolls.

Ozick has avoided this fate. Five and a half decades after her belated *début*, she has established herself as one of our era's central writers, with an ample supply of exquisite fiction and *belles-lettres*; and she is still going. To publish a novel in your early twenties is impressive; to publish one at the age of ninety-three is something else altogether. That is the age that Ozick turns on April 17th, a few days after the publication date of her latest book, which bears the self-ironic title "[Antiquities](#)" (Knopf). A brisk work of some thirty thousand words, it explores her favorite subjects—envy and ambition, the moral peril of idolatry—in her favorite form. As you might expect, it also has much to say about last things, and the long perspectives open to the human mind as it approaches its terminus.

"The limitless void that awaits us" is much on the mind of Ozick's narrator, as well it might be. Lloyd Wilkinson Petrie, a retired lawyer, is getting on in years. It is 1949, and Petrie has come to live at Temple Academy, the esteemed Westchester boarding school he attended in his youth. The school, long defunct, has lately been converted into a retirement home for its trustees, all former pupils. Each has agreed to write a short memoir of his school days as part of a sort of institutional history. What sounds like a harmless exercise in group nostalgia soon takes on an air of the macabre as Petrie's recollections bring into the light things better left in darkness.

A person “of lineage,” Petrie likes to dwell on his gentle ancestry, though not all of it makes for happy contemplation. In 1880, before Petrie’s birth, his father, a man “enamored” of the ancient world, abandoned his young wife and his position at the family law firm to go in search of a distant relative, Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie, a renowned archeologist, who at the time was excavating the Great Pyramid of Giza. Although he came home after several months and lived out his days as a conventional family man, his “mad episode”—which was “rarely alluded to and never defined”—dealt a psychic blow to his wife and son. Decades later, Petrie still recalls how his father would gaze at the glass cabinet that housed the artifacts he’d brought back with him from Egypt: “I was always a little afraid of him during these motionless scenes, when he seemed as wooden and lifeless as one of my toy soldiers.” Upon his father’s early death, Petrie inherited these ancient idols.

As a member of the tight-lipped, politely anti-Semitic Wasp establishment, Petrie is hardly your standard Ozick protagonist. What he offers her, it seems, is a way of tackling Judeophobia from the other side. Temple Academy, Petrie explains, was constructed on a plot of land that had previously belonged to the illustrious Temple family, cousins of Henry James, and was, in Petrie’s smugly euphemistic terms, “premised on English religious and scholarly principles.” But try telling that to the local riffraff, who suspected “that ‘Temple’ signified something unpleasantly synagogical, so that on many a Sunday morning the chapel’s windows (those precious panels of stained glass depicting the Jerusalem of Jesus’ time) were discovered to have been smashed overnight.”

Petrie’s narrative turns on his relationship with a quiet, elusive classmate, Ben-Zion Elefantine, one of a handful of Jewish students who were admitted in the eighteen-nineties under the auspices of a liberal headmaster. Petrie, in spite of his well-bred bigotry, is drawn to Elefantine, whose olive skin tone and unusual accent make him an object of suspicion and ridicule. A wary friendship blossoms, even though this means that Petrie himself becomes a pariah by association. Mostly the two boys just direct silences at each other from across a chessboard, until one afternoon, following an argument about the artifacts Petrie inherited from his father (“You know nothing of Egypt,” his friend exclaims in a sudden fit of pique), Elefantine reveals an astonishing

secret: he is, he says, descended from a little-known colony of Jews who lived on Elephantine Island, in the Nile, sometime in the fifth century B.C.E.



"The store was out of eggs, so we're dyeing my roots instead."
Cartoon by Ali Solomon

It's here, around the halfway point, that Ozick begins to move through the gears of her formidable imagination, introducing a tincture of magic to what has so far been a piece of fairly standard realism. In a bravura monologue, which Petrie cautions is an imperfect reconstruction, Elefantin recounts the story of his people—a story that, he claims, official Jewish sources have distorted and obscured. Far from being the wayward band of polytheist mercenaries that scholars have described, the Elephantine Jews, alone among the tribes of Israel, "were unyieldingly faithful" to the teachings of Moses. Elefantin's parents, who pass themselves off as traders in antiquities, are really "pilgrims in search of a certain relic of our heritage." Their peripatetic life style is the reason Elefantin has been enrolled at Temple Academy, which is only the latest in a series of makeshift homes he's had to put up with during his young life.

Divided by ethnicity, Petrie and Elefantin are thus really secret sharers, the neglected children of parents who, in different ways, have made an idol of the past. Petrie wonders whether the relic his friend's parents have been searching for might be among his father's heirlooms, but Elefantin refuses to examine them. At length, the two classmates drift apart. Looking back on

this time from the other end of his life, Petrie wonders what became of Elefantin. “Today he is no more than an illusion, and perhaps he was an illusion then.”

Is Elefantin’s story true? Although the Elephantine Jews, like Sir Flinders Petrie, belong to the historical record, his claims about their willful misrepresentation by “falsifying scholars” belong solely to Ozick’s novella. Those claims, set forth in mesmeric detail, certainly have a ring of credibility; at the same time, the book supplies enough internal evidence to suggest they may be little more than a lonely child’s precocious daydream. Elefantin wouldn’t be the first of Ozick’s characters to channel a desire for belonging and identity into personal mythmaking. In “[The Messiah of Stockholm](#)” (1987), another short work that deftly fuses fable and psychology, Lars Andemening, an isolated, middle-aged book reviewer in the Swedish capital, believes himself to be the son of the Polish-Jewish writer Bruno Schulz, who perished in the Holocaust. This makes Andemening an easy mark for quacks and grifters, and yet the book also accords his fantasy a certain tender respect.

In “Antiquities,” there seems to be as much at stake for Petrie in the legend of the Elephantines as there is for Elefantin himself. A friendless widower with an estranged adult son who tells himself stories about his past accomplishments in a desperate effort to evade self-knowledge, Petrie is the descendant of a long line of unreliable narrators which includes Ford Madox Ford’s John Dowell and Kazuo Ishiguro’s Mr. Stevens. “I am not a jealous man,” Petrie insists at one point. “As the heir and partner of a highly reputable law firm, I have never had a reason to envy. Rather, throughout my career, others have envied me.” Or so he likes to think. Petrie boasts of the “considerable esteem” he has earned “in the civic arena,” but by 1949 this civic arena is starting to look very different from the way it had in his youth. F.D.R., that traitor to his class, whom Petrie says he voted against four times, and the transformative impact of the Second World War, have begun to chip away at Wasp hegemony; American Jews are rising through the professional ranks. Another of Petrie’s Jewish schoolmates, Ned Greenhill, is now a district-court judge in New York. Greenhill’s son is a wealthy property developer who ends up buying Temple Academy when it runs into financial trouble, forcing Petrie to find another home. Normally, in Ozick’s work, it is

the Jewish characters who envy their more assimilated brethren, or even Gentiles themselves; for Petrie, this dynamic has been stingly inverted.

More obliquely, Petrie also envies Elefantin, whose origin story seems to connect him to something eternal and transcendent, an escape hatch from history's humiliating reversals. Confronted by his failings as a human being and the impending expiration of the patrician values by which he's lived, Petrie can at least say that he was "Elefantin's Boswell," a man who, if not himself remarkable, encountered someone who was and is leaving a record of it for future generations. Of course, if it transpired that Elefantin's story was false, then Petrie would be deprived of even that consolation. This appears to be the reason he has waited so long to record his memories of his schoolmate and subject them to scrutiny, and why finally doing so causes him such grief. "I am, if I may express it so, in a state of suffering of the soul as I write," he says, somewhat histrionically, even as he deplores what he sees as the Jewish tendency toward "overflowing sentimentalism" and a "motion picture style of exaggerated feeling."

As Petrie is obliged to work ever harder to suppress his skeptical thoughts regarding Elefantin, his testament begins to shade into idolatry. The more he asserts his belief in his old friend's remote heritage, the more he feels himself succumbing to a sort of spiritual sclerosis—a natural consequence, as Ozick sees it, when "dead matter rules the quick." But then, Ozick's own immodest dreams of literary glory must once have seemed as far-fetched and self-important as believing you are Bruno Schulz's son or a Boswell to one of the last surviving members of an ancient tribe. Like her protagonist, Ozick has turned more and more to the past—in this case, the distant past—for inspiration, and away from a present she seems to consider hopelessly shallow. Her last two novels, "[Foreign Bodies](#)" (2010) and "[Heir to the Glimmering World](#)" (2004), are set in the nineteen-fifties and the nineteen-thirties, respectively.

Some readers may find this all off-puttingly retrograde: not to write about the time in which you live is to forfeit one of the great advantages that a contemporary novelist has over the looming giants of the past. Petrie's mannered, sub-Jamesian voice ("if I may express it so," etc.) could feel like a particular liability, a reversion to an earlier phase of Ozick's artistic maturation; and yet you could equally see it as a calculated risk. "Take away

the Jews and where, O so-called Western Civilization, is your literary culture?" Edelshtein muses in "Envy." In her critical essays, Ozick has pursued this line of thought, arguing that Jewish-American writers such as Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud, who rose to prominence after the Second World War, had a bracingly disinhibiting effect on the era's genteel literary prose. (They certainly helped Ozick herself cut the apron strings attaching her to James.) In "Antiquities," Petrie's pre-Judaized English, with its euphemistic circumlocution, is the perfect corollary for his stifled inner life. A man who expresses himself this way, Ozick implies, is incapable of telling the truth.

In Ozick's view, Western civilization, so-called, has never been able to tell the truth about itself. A few years ago, she said to an interviewer that "Anti-Judaism," a 2013 book in which the Chicago historian David Nirenberg argued that anti-Jewish prejudice was fundamental to Western thought, had left her in a state of "irredeemable despair." Her new novella often reads like an illustration of Nirenberg's thesis. Petrie's narrative is full of unwitting or suppressed Jewish echoes, starting with the "unpleasantly synagogical" name of his old school, which recalls the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E. In Nirenberg's account, that event marked the beginning of a two-thousand-year effort by Christians to distance themselves from, and define themselves against, the Jewish tradition in which their own beliefs were rooted. When Petrie remarks on the irony that Temple Academy should have been vandalized by anti-Semites, given its foundation on "English religious and scholarly principles," he is missing the larger irony that those principles are themselves profoundly Jewish in origin. This selective blindness finds its darkest expression in Petrie's failure to assimilate emerging reports about the Holocaust. "The newspapers are rife with grotesque tales of camps and ovens," he says irritably, as though what he is objecting to is not what has happened but that he is now obliged to read about it. "One hardly knows what to believe, and I am nowadays drawn far less to these public contentions than to my own reflections."

Is this a wry description of Ozick herself? For all her own parochialisms and prejudices, she is generally drawn less to the public contentions of our age than to the ferment of previous ones. But "Antiquities" is not as antique as it first appears. For what could be more "timely" than the story of an old white man who vents his rage over his declining social status on ethnic minorities

and takes refuge in an idealized past? During the previous Presidential Administration, anti-Semitic tropes and conspiracy theories became the stock-in-trade of the online right. Our habit, as a culture, has been to lurch from outrage to outrage, treating each new horror as unique and unprecedented before moving swiftly on to the next. Responding to a felt imperative to address the news cycle, more than a few Trump-era novels have run aground under the weight of their contemporary cargo. Ozick's book about a man ensnared by history is at once a warning against the hazards of nostalgia and an invitation to take a longer view of how we got to where we are. Transfixed by the unfolding spectacle of current events, the modern reader is apt to miss her richest and most subtle suggestion: that we have made an idol of the present. ♦

Comment

- [Biden's Jobs Plan Is Also a Climate Plan. Will It Make a Difference?](#)

[April 12, 2021 Issue](#)

Biden's Jobs Plan Is Also a Climate Plan. Will It Make a Difference?

The Administration has an ambitious vision for combatting global warming, but it's only a start.

By [Elizabeth Kolbert](#)

April 4, 2021

The first known reference to Japan's cherry blossoms comes from the country's oldest surviving text, the *Kojiki*, completed in 712. Japan was trying to shrug off the influence of its more powerful neighbor, China, and cherry blossoms became a symbol of Japanese identity, in contrast to the plum blossoms of the Chinese. By the early ninth century, the practice of cherry-blossom viewing had become so well established that the date of the peak bloom appeared in Japanese poems and other literary works.

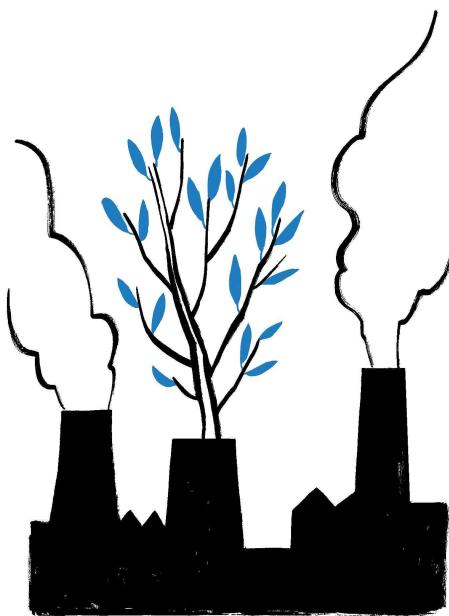


Illustration by João Fazenda

Based on these sources, researchers have pieced together more than a millennium of botanical history. The trees, the data show, have in recent

decades been blooming earlier and earlier. Last month, they shattered records. In the city of Kyoto, peak bloom was the earliest it's been in twelve hundred years, and ten days earlier than the thirty-year average. In the city of Hiroshima, the blossoms appeared eight days earlier than the previous record, which was set in 2004. In addition to being a sign of spring, the blossoms have now become, as the *Washington Post* put it, "a sign of climate change."

Last week, as the blooms in Kyoto were prematurely fading, [President Joe Biden](#) travelled to Pennsylvania to pitch his latest spending plan, aimed, in part, at combatting global warming. The proposal, which the Administration has dubbed the American Jobs Plan, includes eighty-five billion dollars for mass-transit systems, another eighty billion dollars for Amtrak to expand service and make needed repairs, and a hundred billion to upgrade the nation's electrical grid. It would allocate a hundred and seventy-four billion dollars to advance the transition to electric vehicles, thirty-five billion dollars for research in emissions-reducing and climate-resilience technologies, and ten billion to create a New Deal-style Civilian Climate Corps.

The plan will lead to "transformational progress in our effort to tackle climate change," Biden declared, speaking at a carpenters' training facility outside Pittsburgh.

The green spending Biden is proposing is contained in a two-trillion-dollar package so sprawling that it would affect just about every aspect of American life. This sprawl is, presumably, deliberate. The Administration is touting the proposal as a way to fight inequality, put millions of people to work, reduce carbon emissions, rebuild the country's aging roads, bridges, and water systems, and—shades of the cherry blossoms—outcompete the Chinese. Implicit in the plan is the assumption that these goals are compatible. Whether or not this is the case, however, is very much an open question.

Twelve years ago, when [Barack Obama](#) became President, he confronted a situation not unlike the one Biden faces today. The Bush Administration had left behind an economic mess; unemployment was high, and it remained so even as the country, technically, entered a recovery. Obama pushed through

a stimulus package—the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, or A.R.R.A.—that included roughly a hundred billion dollars for programs aimed at reducing emissions. China, South Korea, Japan, and the European Union approved similar packages, which, on paper at least, added another three hundred and fifty billion dollars’ worth of “green stimulus” spending.

A recent report on all this spending by analysts at the World Resources Institute, a nonprofit research group, found that it had mixed results. While the green-stimulus money produced jobs and “helped build up new industries,” the effect on carbon emissions was underwhelming. In the decade following A.R.R.A., emissions in the United States bounced around. In China and South Korea, they continued to climb. During the same period, “carbon intensity”—the amount of CO₂ generated per dollar of economic activity—fell slightly in the U.S., but no faster than it had been falling before the crisis. A.R.R.A. “was a success at creating jobs, but it did not meet emissions-cutting goals,” David Popp, a professor of public administration at Syracuse University and the co-author of another report on the act’s effects, told the *Times* recently.

Why is this so? One possibility is that not enough money was spent. In the context of the U.S. economy, a hundred billion dollars is barely a rounding error. Globally, it’s been estimated that replacing all existing fossil-fuel infrastructure would take at least twenty trillion dollars. Last week, as the details of Biden’s plan were revealed, Representative [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#), a New York Democrat, tweeted that the President’s plan needed “to be way bigger.”

Another possibility is that spending money isn’t enough. When it comes to cutting carbon, the stick may be just as important as the carrot—perhaps more so. Putting up wind turbines doesn’t, in itself, accomplish much for the climate: emissions fall only when fossil-fuel plants are shuttered. The Biden Administration seems aware of this fact, even if it chooses not to play it up. To help fund its plan, the Administration is proposing to eliminate fossil-fuel subsidies. Depending on who’s doing the accounting, these run anywhere from ten to more than fifty billion dollars a year. The President’s plan also includes an “Energy Efficiency and Clean Electricity Standard,” which would require utilities to produce a portion of their electricity from carbon-free sources.

From a political standpoint, it makes sense to link jobs and justice and decarbonization. Union wages and electric school buses are a lot easier to sell than a hike in the gasoline tax. And an infrastructure package that doesn't pass won't do anyone any good. Unfortunately, though, the laws of geophysics are indifferent to politics.

Researchers in China and Australia recently published a study on the effects of global warming on the seasons. In the mid-latitudes of the Northern Hemisphere, they found, the length of summer has increased by more than two weeks since the early nineteen-fifties. Eighty years from now, under a high-emissions scenario, summertime will persist for nearly six months. Even if global emissions peak in the next couple of decades, by the end of the century summer will last a month longer than it used to. In the meantime, winter will grow ever shorter, and so, too, will spring—the season of cherry blossoms. ♦

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Friday, April 2, 2021](#)

[April 12, 2021 Issue](#)

The Crossword: Friday, April 2, 2021

A lightly challenging puzzle.

By [Robyn Weintraub](#)

April 2, 2021

By [Erik Agard](#)

By [Natan Last](#)

Dance

- [Passion Fruit Dance Company, Inside the Guggenheim](#)

[April 12, 2021 Issue](#)

Passion Fruit Dance Company, Inside the Guggenheim

The “Works & Process” series has begun holding shows indoors for masked audiences, who spread out on the museum’s spiral walkway.

April 2, 2021



Photograph by Widline Cadet for The New Yorker

When masked audiences spread out at the Guggenheim Museum—as they periodically have since late March, when the **“Works & Process”** series restarted indoor performances—they do so in a spiral formation, up and around the walkway of Frank Lloyd Wright’s rotunda. The show happens at ground level, and the energy rises. On April 11, that energy comes from the Passion Fruit Dance Company (pictured above) as the all-female troupe employs hip-hop and house dance to tell stories of personal liberation.

Dept. of Adapting

- [Uber, but for Drag Queens](#)

[April 12, 2021 Issue](#)

Uber, but for Drag Queens

Patrons of the Rosemont, in Williamsburg, can order delivery of food, drink, and Magenta, one of the bar's regular performers, who drives across Brooklyn for outdoor drag shows.

By [André Wheeler](#)

April 5, 2021

The Rosemont is situated in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, across from a football field. In the Before Times, throngs of maskless L.G.B.T.Q.+ patrons, most of them in their twenties and thirties, squeezed into the small bar for elaborate drag performances, dancing, and "RuPaul's Drag Race" watch parties.



On a recent crisp Friday night, Troy Carson, a Rosemont co-owner (he also lives above the bar), and Magenta, one of the bar's resident drag queens, hopped into a fog-gray Jeep parked outside, on Montrose Avenue. "Here we go," Carson shouted, through his surgical mask. Magenta, who'd opted for a face shield in the interest of protecting her makeup, placed a Bluetooth

speaker and a large paper bag with liquor, mixers, and biodegradable paper cups in the back seat. Although establishments like the Rosemont can now operate at fifty-per-cent capacity, many New Yorkers are hesitant to return to indoor restaurants and bars. A few months ago, Carson and Magenta decided to bring drag performances to their customers, who can place orders via text message or Instagram direct message. It's like Seamless for drag.

First stop: two dads in Ditmas Park. "Which house is it?" Carson asked, inching along a street near Ocean Parkway.

"We've been here before!" Magenta said. "You don't remember it? It *looks* like a gay dads' house." She peered at houses painted in tones of beige and taupe and grimaced. "These definitely belong to straight people."

Google Maps led the pair to a house with a jaunty teal façade. "See!" Magenta said. "It looks like 'Pinocchio'!"

Carson pulled into the driveway, and Magenta leaped out of the Jeep, her heels clicking on the pavement. She removed her coat, revealing a crop top, high-waisted cutoff shorts, and white stockings. The dads had invited an audience—their two young daughters, plus other kids and parents from the neighborhood—and the group sat on the porch, all in masks.

Magenta shouted, "Yas-s-s-s-s! Hi, everybody!" her Bronx accent ramped up. The crowd whooped. "I'm here with the Rosemont drag-delivery service," she continued. She set down the Bluetooth speaker, and Carson hit Play on his iPhone. The opening chords of Dua Lipa's "Don't Start Now" blared out. "Give it up for . . . me!"

Magenta, who is twenty-two, treated the dads and their guests to a dizzying sequence of high kicks, spins, finger wags, and hair flips, all while lip-synching. The children sat silent and wide-eyed. A few mouths were open.

"Enjoy the rest of your night!" Magenta said after her performance, a big smile on her face. "Be good in school, kids!" She laughed at herself: "I've always wanted to say that to somebody and have it mean something!"

Brian Rubin-Sowers, the father of Anna, five, and Joni, two (“like Joni Mitchell,” he said), and his husband, Toby, who works in advertising, have ordered drag delivery before, at a cost of seventy-one dollars, plus tip. “As much as I say that the kids are the perfect age to be surviving what we’re going through right now, Anna is still very aware,” Rubin-Sowers said. “She keeps asking, ‘When is the virus going to be over?’ So we keep trying to find experiences she can be excited about.”

Anna, who has a YouTube channel featuring cooking videos (a banana-bread installment starred talking bananas, voiced by Anna), is a drag-queen aficionado. “When we told her there was going to be a drag queen tonight, she asked, ‘Is it going to be Shangela?’ ” Rubin-Sowers said. “Then she asked, ‘Oh, is it going to be Trixie Mattel?’ ‘RuPaul’s Drag Race’ is kind of a religion in this household.”

Next stop: to meet a group of twentysomethings in Ridgewood, Queens. When Carson and Magenta pulled up, the youngsters stood huddled on the front steps of an apartment building, iPhones at the ready. On the sidewalk, Magenta did her thing, and the audience members held out cash tips and shouted “Yas-s-s-s!” and “Work!” A boy with green hair handed Carson a twenty and requested “Test Drive,” by Ariana Grande. Magenta grabbed a puffer jacket from the Jeep and wore it half slung off her body, like the ponytailed pop star.

For this particular group, the Rosemont delivery service has been a lifesaver. They all get frequent *Covid* tests so that they can convene each Friday to watch “Drag Race” together indoors.

“We’ve had to go underground with our social gatherings,” a regular named Nathan Bennett said. “We can’t post pictures of our gatherings anymore—”

“—for fear of being cancelled,” Dallin Robinson, who held a beer can, finished, rolling his eyes.

A young man named Sam Rolfe, who has a bald head and wore a red bandanna as a mask, said, “If there’s anything I miss the most right now, it’s being in a bar seeing drag queens, surrounded by other queers.”

Bennett nodded wistfully. “You have to carve out queer spaces,” Bennett said. “So to have a reminder like tonight that all of that will come back? It’s amazing.” ♦

An earlier version of this article used an incorrect pronoun when referring to Nathan Bennett.

Dept. of Persuasion

- [Do the Rich Support the Tax the Rich Campaign?](#)

[April 12, 2021 Issue](#)

Do the Rich Support the Tax the Rich Campaign?

Before New York's budget deadline, a group of progressives, calling for tax increases on the wealthy, phone-banked for support among the one-to-five-per-centers in Westchester and on the Upper East Side.

By [Ray Lipstein](#)

April 3, 2021

At 1 P.M. on a recent Sunday, faces and distinctive red-rose graphics began appearing in the windows of a Zoom meeting, as Pete Seeger's "Which Side Are You On?" played in the background. The call's chat box filled up with names, pronouns, and affiliations, including ten different New York chapters of the Democratic Socialists of America (the rose is the group's logo), from Buffalo to Nassau County. "Big statewide energy," Stephanie Lemieux, from Brooklyn, wrote. The attendees were volunteers, and their mission was to phone-bank registered voters and ask if they supported taxing the rich.



In December, the six socialist members of the state legislature, staring down a multibillion-dollar deficit and incensed by Governor Andrew Cuomo's quiet defunding of social services (Medicaid, housing) during the pandemic, began advocating for a series of levies on corporations and on the one-to-five per cent (starting with single New Yorkers who earn more than three hundred thousand dollars a year). The legislators helped launch the Tax the Rich campaign, which, working with a coalition of progressive groups, aims to add fifty billion dollars a year to the state treasury.

On the Zoom call, Bobby Gross, a square-jawed socialist who works as a political economist, outlined the endgame: The state's budget would be ratified in a few days, and a tax hike of seven billion dollars had already been proposed by the State Senate and Assembly—if the increase survived, it would be the largest ever in New York. The goal was to get residents on the phone, persuade them with a pitch, and then patch them through to the offices of lawmakers in Albany, to leave voice mails in support of taxing the rich. The messages, Gross said, would keep pressure on the speaker, Carl Heastie, and the majority leader, Andrea Stewart-Cousins, the two legislators who were designated to “meet with Cuomo behind closed doors, or, like, in their private WhatsApp group.” He went on, “We need to keep the fire on them, so that they don't give big concessions over to Cuomo, which is what normally happens.” The day's target areas were Westchester, the Bronx, and the East Side of Manhattan.

An auto-dial program connected volunteers, who had muted themselves on Zoom, with voters. They updated their fellow-callers in the chat box: “lol someone just said ‘boi bye’ and hung up”; “OMG just had the BEST CALL with Larry Sr. (he asked me if I wanted Larry Jr. or Larry Sr. and I told him, whoever wants to Tax the Rich!).” A volunteer named James Cole got a woman who said she'd been close to Speaker Heastie's mother—she left the Speaker “a voicemail saying that Heastie's mom would be very disappointed in him, lol.”

As the auto-dialler moved through Westchester, Lemieux reached several people who were all for taxing the rich, as long as it wasn't them. “They're, like, ‘Well, I want everyone to have a good quality of life and be able to access schools, hospitals, good transit, and all that,’” Lemieux said. “‘But, I just don't know, why can't you have a threshold that's, like, five hundred

thousand or a million?’ ” Three hundred thousand dollars, the Westchesterites suggested, didn’t make you rich in New York.

“That’s a rough argument,” Kelly Cahill said. “I’m from Long Island, and we get that a lot.”

“Clearly capitalism doesn’t even work for the rich,” Bran Acton-Bond observed. “Because *they* feel oppressed!”

One obstacle for the callers was being lumped in with telemarketers. Brandon Medina found some success with the line “We’re not asking for money, just voice mails.” A few women politely said that they did not take solicitations of any kind.

Gross connected with a middle-aged Scarsdale resident named Kenneth, who at first complained that the pitch was too vague. Gross laughed and told him, “I had to start a little broad, because there are actually six different tax bills that would raise, in total, tens of billions of dollars in annual revenue, to fund infrastructure, hospitals, schools, etc. I’d be happy—”

“—So you’re saying my taxes should go up?”

“To go through that in detail . . . Well, it depends how ri—”

Before Gross could say “rich,” Kenneth cut him off: “I have *literally* fifteen other things on my agenda for today. Listening to you detail six different tax bills is not one of them.”

Despite the short tempers and the hangups, the volunteers were able to transfer almost a hundred people to their representatives’ mailboxes, to leave voice mails. But what buoyed them most was the opportunity for political education. “A lot of working-class calls that I got just didn’t know about Cuomo cutting public services,” a phone-banker named Luke Sullivan wrote in the chat.

Jeremy Joseph concurred: “Yeah some lady responded, ‘Cuomo’s not doing that! Not true.’ *click*.”

Nick Irvin added, “The Last Cuomosexual Standing.” ♦

Fiction

- “Separation”

Separation

By [Clare Sestanovich](#)

April 5, 2021



Audio: Clare Sestanovich reads.

He asked Kate out at the reservoir, where she went skinny-dipping in the summer. Early in the morning, before the kids arrived, or sometimes late at night, when the water was almost black. She was towelling her hair when he appeared, and she wasn't wearing any pants. Her pubic hair was unkempt.

Kate was taken aback, but she said yes. As he walked away, she noticed his uncertain footing on the rocks and the spray of eczema, like something coughed up, all over his back and disappearing into his bathing suit. Already she had forgotten his name.

When she arrived at the restaurant—white tablecloths, heavy menus, a basket of bread swaddled to keep warm—he was wearing enormous glasses. He stood up and his napkin fell out of his lap. They ordered the special, mussels that left sand between Kate's teeth, and by the end of dinner her plate was a pile of empty shells, each one three different shades of blue. When he took off his glasses to clean the lenses, there was a red mark on

either side of his nose. His name was Nick, and as they undressed in her bedroom that night, his hands darting all over her skin, she felt certain he was seeing her for the first time.

[Clare Sestanovich on narrative coherence.](#)

In two years, they were married.

The story of the pants—the pantslessness—had become well known. It featured in several wedding toasts. The glasses were removed to demonstrate. He really can't see! Nick smiled good-naturedly, pawing the air helplessly to make them all laugh. The eczema crawled out from under his collar.

Someone drove them home after the ceremony, and at the last minute Nick said to turn the car around. He checked them into a hotel, a cheap one, and they rode the elevator laughing. They had sex in overstarched sheets. They had agreed they didn't believe in honeymoons.

“Does this count?” Kate said. She waved at the plastic nightstand painted like wood, the warping watercolor above the headboard—a flimsy French lake.

Nick just smiled. He kept his glasses on. She kissed him. Her pubic hair was more kempt than it used to be. He tasted her.

“You don’t need those,” she said, taking his glasses off. “You know me.”

“I do.”

In two years they were married and in three years he was dead.

They didn’t have the chance to make rash decisions.

By the time they might have considered buying a house, idling the engine in unaffordable neighborhoods, spinning fantasies and squandering savings, they were already carrying around the diagnosis. Kate imagined it on a slip of paper—in pockets and purses, in the glove compartment during long

drives, in the cluttered kitchen drawer where they kept cheap indispensable things. They never forgot where it was.

They kept the medical bills in a pile on the bedside table, and, when there was nothing to do but wait, Kate stacked and restacked them, pushing the edges into alignment. The bills were hard to decipher. Numbers they had to look up, which were codes for words they also had to look up.

They said, “Let’s do some math.”

They never said, “Let’s plan ahead.”

They found a new apartment, near the hospital. One and a half baths, the listing said, which just meant there was an extra sink in the bedroom. The kitchen had old pink curtains and cabinet doors with holes where the handles should have been.

Everyone talked about fighting, being a fighter.

“For newlyweds, we do an awful lot of fighting,” Nick said, while they waited for the doctor to be right with them.

There was time, in the end, for him to make his own arrangements.

“No speeches, of course.”

“Of course?”

“Just put some snacks out,” he said. “Pigs in blankets.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Kate said.

“And Pringles.”

“Don’t you have a favorite poem?”

“You can make it a joke,” Nick said. “A joke will be a relief.”

Kate did what he asked, because she wanted it to be exactly as he had pictured it. He had been afraid—when he admitted to being afraid—of the size of the future, of his own desperate predictions, of the simple question that only time would tell, but not to him: Now what?

She chopped the hot dogs and wrapped them in dough from a cannister, the kind that twisted and popped, jolting her each time. She piled them in pyramids and put platters everywhere. She overdid it. On all the countertops, above the fireplace they'd never used, on the bedside table, for people waiting to use the bathroom. She took bowls of chips from one person to the next, raw faces whose tears seemed to have nothing to do with her. They offered to help, but Kate held the serving dishes tightly against her chest. And when they were gone, the pyramids still mostly intact, she sat down and cried over his joke.

What happened next wasn't that she recovered—never that, really—but she did move to a new city, where she would have to bump into life every day. She got a job at a nursery school. She rented an attic room with a slanted turquoise ceiling. On weekends, she woke to the sound of things being banged in the house's shared kitchen. Old muffled sounds, which she heard and remembered all at once. Kate lingered like that, her eyelids erupting with morning color.

The children at the school where she worked were undergoing separation. A technical term—to be left on one's own. It involved several steps, which could not be skipped or performed out of sequence.

First, the mothers left the room for five minutes. This was just practice. They timed themselves and returned as soon as the second hand permitted.

“Ta-da,” they said, waiting to see relief mirrored on their children's faces.

Next, the mothers said goodbye in earnest. Kate told them to wait in the hallway—in case. Sometimes children drifted out the door, crawling beside dump trucks or steering shopping carts of plastic produce, and were surprised to find the mothers hiding, towering over miniature chairs. They drove their trucks into the high heels or sensible flats blocking their way.

“Beep beep,” they said.

“Move,” they said.

Kate worked at the nursery school for too long.

The women she worked with had gray or orange hair and arms that jiggled when they scrubbed the tabletops. Kate wondered if she really belonged there. Her stomach sank between her hips, her muscles showed through her skin. She didn’t think this looked attractive. She thought it looked a little grotesque.

Each year, Kate separated a new group of children. Some of the mothers envied her stomach and her throaty neck, her bare face a reproach to theirs, which were painted gold and pink with time they didn’t have. There were occasions, Kate suspected, when they despised her. When their clothes were no longer clung to, when they entered the classroom and no one looked up. Or all the times in between, at a desk or a sink or a jammed-up intersection, when their children surged back into awareness, when the mothers realized —a crest of guilt and fear—how long they had managed to forget.

At the end of every day, Kate stood by herself in the center of the carpet, a checkerboard of loud colors. She held out the implausibly small knapsacks.

One year, there was a father among the mothers. His face was big, nearly ugly. But he was tall and tanned and his voice was so softly beautiful that Kate let herself assume it was full of the same grief as hers.

When she looked at his tongue on her skin, she didn’t believe her own body. When she lowered herself onto him, she wished she had dimples at the base of her back, hips with flesh he could hold on to. He cooked her cream sauces and meat sauces, bought expensive, oozing cheeses. For one month, she had sex with him and hoped to change shape. He told her that she was warm inside, and she shook her head, unconvinced.

“Touch yourself.”

He propped himself up on an elbow and watched. Kate slid her index finger inside her vagina. The skin—or was it muscle?—was slick and smooth,

except where it was rough. It seemed as if the walls of her body were closing in around her finger. It had never occurred to her that she had walls.

Then one afternoon, while the classroom emptied, she held out the knapsack for the man's son. She was weaving his arms through the straps when she heard a woman's voice calling his name, high and kind and careless. Kate followed the boy outside and stood in the parking lot, waving at her reflection in his mother's car window.

Kate up and left. Years later, she still repeated this phrase, she liked it so much. That "up" could be a verb! A house lifted right off its foundation. She pictured the moment when the whole clapboard thing hovered over its footprint, casting a shadow on the dirt.

She went to work in a cubicle where she answered two phones and took notes on many pads. Sometimes she unplugged the phones and listened to the bleating rings and the disembodied scribbling on the other side of the gray particleboard. According to company policy, the phones rang exactly once. It was boring; it delighted her.

The women in the office wore belted dresses and tortoiseshell hair clips. They enjoyed setting Kate up on dates with men their husbands or brothers knew, or sometimes with the brothers themselves. The men all had dependable jobs, some in cubicles like hers and others, as they made known, in offices with multiple windows.

She was on a date with a management consultant—two windows—when she met her second husband. They were both waiting for change, their drinks sweating in their hands. Kate saw him in the mirror behind the bar, where his face hovered above two bottles of gin. In the other corner of the mirror, beside the liqueurs, she saw the back of her date's head.

"Can you make eye contact in a mirror?" the man above the gin said.

"What?" She picked up the bills from the counter.

"If I'm looking at you from across the room," he said, "and you're looking at me. We both know we're looking."

“Ah,” she said, “but if I’m looking at you in the mirror, and you’re looking at me in the mirror—”

“Yes,” they said at the same time.

When Kate and Felix’s daughter was old enough to start nursery school, Kate put her foot down. Leah was three. She had fine yellow hair—Felix’s hair—and too many teeth in her mouth.

“Not yet,” Kate said.

Felix had called several schools. He had found one with an enlightened pedagogy and baby rabbits in the classrooms. There were no reptiles. Leah hated reptiles.

“She’s ready,” he said.

“Don’t use the script on me,” Kate shouted. “I wrote the script.”

In general, she didn’t shout.

“Next year,” she said, more gently. “Can one more year really hurt?”

Leah wrapped herself around Felix’s leg. He lifted her above his head and made her laugh. She kicked her feet, pretending to be afraid, hitting him in the chest, then in the nose.

“Be careful,” Kate said.

Felix raised her even higher.

“It’s all right. It’s nothing.”

Leah looked down and he looked up, two golden heads in the air.

Kate went upstairs. She sat at her desk, listening to them laugh. She gave herself tasks—untangling a pile of paper clips, testing her pens for ink. The desk was filled with pictures and letters and other scraps. Mostly, they were scraps of Nick. A matchbook, a receipt with his signature, a Post-it note

from the fridge: *Need more ketchup*. Every year, she promised herself she would go through it all. She called them *remnants* once, but the drama of the word embarrassed her.

Someday—soon—she'd take it all up to the attic, because this was how she had arranged the story in the version she liked best. Leah, long and lean, with straighter teeth, would be upstairs, sliding boxes, banging her knees and elbows in the crawl space. Two floors below, Kate would close her eyes and wait for the moment when her daughter would emerge, filmed with dust, radiant with her question: Who is *this*?

Of course, Kate's story never happened. She labelled and stacked the boxes in the attic, but no one ever went up there, and, anyway, Leah didn't like photo albums. She'd taken a photography class for a few weeks, but couldn't get used to the camera—all its cruel sounds. Clicks and flashes, the menacing zoom. Whenever she saw a picture of herself, she winced.

When Leah turned fifteen, she began starving herself. This was the sort of thing, Kate knew, that teen-age girls did, but she had imagined it differently. She'd imagined vain girls or boring girls, girls with boyfriends and shiny makeup. Or maybe sad girls, girls with bad parents, secret abortions—things that swallowed them up. Leah's life was smooth and unblemished.

It took them months to notice. By then, Leah's clothes were all too big, and she was always cold. Kate wondered how they could have been so stupid.

“What if we'd caught it earlier?” she said to Felix.

There was hair all over Leah's body, which the doctors had a special name for. It was the same hair that newborns had. Soft and colorless, the kind that looks, in the right light, like the glow of a halo.

Once the doctors were involved, the rules were strict. Five meals a day, thick and white: whole milk and real butter, yogurt with cream on top. Leah had to quit the swim team and then the track team. When Felix found her doing sit-ups in the middle of the night, Kate called the nutritionist's cell phone.

“Eat a big breakfast,” he suggested.

“Like what?”

“Well.” The nutritionist sounded groggy. “How about a bagel with cream cheese?”

The rules made Leah cry. She’d followed all the others, hadn’t she? No drugs, no sex, no driving without a license.

“This isn’t punishment,” Kate said.

Leah stared at the bagel. She licked her finger and ate the sesame seeds one at a time. “Don’t rush me.” Tears dribbled into her mouth.

“We’ve got time,” Felix said. “All the time in the world.”

Kate didn’t really believe him. She followed the rules, too, out of something like penance. Potato chips at lunch, ice cream before dinner. Her coffee came with skim milk—watery, almost blue—and she sent it back. She weighed herself every day, because she wanted to see the numbers grow. But nothing changed. If anything, her skin got cleaner, her hair got shinier.

One afternoon, Kate came home early and found Leah in the bathroom, blood streaming down her leg and all over her foot. She was standing in the tub with the faucet running, the water turning faintly pink before it disappeared down the drain. She was dressed from the waist up, her socks and jeans draped neatly over the sink.

Kate knew about mothers who did heroic things with the help of adrenaline—vaulted over fences, jumped into the ocean. And so when she sprang into action, when she felt the panicked hum in her temples and the knotted confusion in her throat, she told herself that this was how rescue stories were supposed to go. When she found herself kneeling beside the tub, holding her daughter’s shin in her hands, what she said was “Who did this to you?”

“What?”

Kate looked up at Leah, who seemed so tall and calm—almost a stranger.

“I’m fine.”

Up close, Kate could see that the cut was small. The kind of cut she had made a hundred times. These things—accidents—happened. Didn't they? She let go and there was blood on her fingers. *Collect yourself*, she said in her head, because it was something to visualize: a rewound video of broken glass, all the pieces reassembling themselves into a single, seamless shape. When Kate spoke again, her voice was her teacher voice. She found the paper towels and the Band-Aids, she squeezed the very last of the Neosporin from the tube. Leah sat down in the tub. Her hips were two sharp blades. The Band-Aid bloomed red. For a moment, Kate thought about climbing in beside her. But Leah didn't look at her—not pleadingly, or searchingly, or any of the other ways that eyes are said to look—so she stayed where she was.

When it was time for Leah to leave home, she moved across the country. She didn't have any particular reason—no school, no job, no far-flung romance. A city she'd only ever seen on postcards.

One night, when they were still getting used to the empty house, Kate slept in Leah's bed. She had a bad cough. Felix said he could sleep through anything, but she insisted. Her lungs burned and her ribs ached; she tossed and turned for hours. For a moment when she woke up—how had she finally fallen asleep?—she had no idea where she was. In daylight, her body seemed huge in the narrow bed. The quilt was clearly made for a child. Felix came and sat on the edge of the mattress, like a dad. They stayed that way for a while, not speaking, looking around the room as if it were a museum, or a dream.

She got better—it was just a cough—but after that the room was a little frightening. When Felix suggested that they renovate the kitchen, Kate consumed herself with the details of transformation. Blueprints and paint chips, ten different kinds of door handles.

Construction began. Kate wanted to stay and watch, but Felix said the pleasure would be in the surprise—how much could change in the course of a single day. Walls were knocked over between breakfast and dinner, and by the next night new ones had appeared in their place. They saw what was underneath the floorboards. Holes were filled with glass. One evening, they came home and the wallpaper had been hung upside down. The pattern was

simple and geometric—it was admittedly not so clear which side was up. They left it that way. Soon enough, they liked it better that way.

Leah called on Sundays. Most of the time, Felix picked up on the first ring. She told him about her job and her girlfriend, about the community garden around the block—the tomatoes and the gladiola and the two orange hens. Kate learned the details afterward, when Felix told her. She pictured the hens with their bulging chests, their dinosaur feet. He couldn't remember the girlfriend's name.

"Did you even ask?" she said.

"It isn't always good to ask."

The next week, he put Leah on speaker in the middle of a sentence, and her voice filled up the empty kitchen. Kate and Felix looked at the phone in between them. It was surprisingly easy to forget that it didn't really contain anything. Kate wanted to know if the hens laid eggs.

"I don't sound like myself," Leah said.

There were too many hard, clean surfaces. Kate looked from the phone to Felix. Leah's gray eyes and yellow eyelashes. She didn't want to say the wrong thing. *Eggs?* she mouthed.

"I'm hearing my own echo."

The fridge was still in plastic, silver and unsmudged. There was a sink-shaped hole in the counter.

"I'll take you to a different room," Felix said. "With softer things."

He carried the phone into the hall, the voice coming out of his palm, tinny and getting quieter, then gone. ♦

By [Willing Davidson](#)

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Life and Letters

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Nathaniel Mackey's Long Song

Listening to music with the poet whose alternative history of humankind intersects with the realities of Black life in America.

By [Hua Hsu](#)

April 5, 2021



When the poet Nathaniel Mackey was young, he would lie in bed and think about where he had gone that day. He was born in Miami in 1947. His father, who had roots in the Bahamas, worked as a butcher. His mother, whose family was from Georgia, raised their four children. They split up when Mackey was about three, and his mother moved with the kids to California, where they eventually settled in Santa Ana. Orange County was still lined with orange groves. “Every night, in bed, I would reflect on the farthest points north, east, south, and west I had gone in the course of that day,” he told me. “It would not be very far. The farthest east I would have gone might be Bristol Street. The farthest south I would have gone would be McFadden Avenue. The farthest north would be First Street.”

Mackey was the youngest child, and the self-described “little egghead” of the family. When he was in his early teens, his brother told him he might like jazz, because it was “serious” music. Mackey found a copy of Miles

Davis's "Sketches of Spain," from 1960, whose brooding, fugitive spirit Mackey recognized underneath Davis's playful trumpet and Gil Evans's regal arrangements. He heard a "dark knowledge," a melancholy undercurrent in Davis's horn passages. It was "speaking to something that was there in me," he said.

Listening to Davis, Mackey began to notice esoteric systems of knowledge all around him. He bought a book of differential equations at the drugstore, simply because he was fond of math and imagined that these equations would grant him access to "a kind of heaven," he said. He would stare at the book as if its pages were filled with holy art that he would one day understand.

The more he listened to "Sketches of Spain," the more he heard. Over time, he imagined that the trumpet was a sorrowful bird. Sometimes, he heard it as the cry of an orphaned boy. Deep within the album's rhythms lurked hidden dances and rituals, fleeting traces of a suppressed Moorish culture, a secret history tying Spanish flamenco to African-American blues music. "I may not have gone further west than Townsend Street, but I could listen to Miles and go to Spain," he recalled. "I was seeking out a larger world."

It's been decades since Mackey thought about this nightly exercise in mapping. He recounted it last summer, when we were listening to "Sketches of Spain" together over Zoom. I had asked if we could talk about the music that had opened his imagination. In his book- and record-lined den in Durham, North Carolina, where he is a professor of creative writing at Duke, he held up his original copy of the album. "I would listen to the scratches on a Miles Davis record," he said.

Mackey, who is seventy-three, won the National Book Award, in 2006, for the collection "Splay Anthem," and he has been awarded Yale University's Bollingen Prize and the Poetry Foundation's Ruth Lilly prize. At the heart of his work are two series of poems he's been writing and publishing for about forty-seven years. He started one, "Song of the Andoumboulou," in the mid-seventies, after he heard a recording of funeral chants from the Dogon people of Mali. The poems, of which there are now more than three hundred, explore the Dogon belief in what Mackey calls a "rough draft of a human being, the work-in-progress we continue to be." "Mu," a series that he began

at roughly the same time, was originally a tribute to the trumpeter Don Cherry but then unfurled into a decades-long trancelike vision of the origins of music and mythology. He is approaching his three hundredth “Mu” poem.

Over the years, these two works have intertwined into what he calls “the long song,” recounting the travels of a band of refugees, a “philosophic posse” exiled somewhere outside of history as we understand it. The destination or substance of their wanderings—the surreal moments when they cross paths with a description of Eric Dolphy’s clarinet, an imaginary tune about Eric Garner, the view from a slaver’s ship, or a nineteen-eighties military campaign—matters less than the sensations and mystical visions they gather along the way. They are constantly starting over, discovering worlds within their worlds. Their journeys don’t tell a story so much as they map a kind of alternative history of humankind. “The world was ever after, / elsewhere. / . . . no / way where we were / was there.”

“It’s almost like he’s writing music in English,” Jeffrey Yang, his longtime editor at New Directions, told me. “It’s a song that includes this parallel universe, as what we’re going through as individuals, as a community, as a country. It’s taking another spin on poetry as being a form of diary writing, but what’s included isn’t just the personal, it’s everything around it.”

This month, New Directions will publish “Double Trio,” the continuation of Mackey’s long song. It consists of three volumes, “Tej Bet,” “So’s Notice,” and “Nerve Church,” each of which is some three hundred pages, twice the length of one of Mackey’s previous poetry books. He refers to the books as double albums and the collection as his boxed set. This spring, Fonograf Editions will release “Fugitive Equation,” an album Mackey recorded with the Creaking Breeze Ensemble. And, in June, the University of Iowa Press will publish “Nathaniel Mackey, Destination Out,” a collection of critical essays reflecting on his career.

Some poets, Mackey explained, get that “sigh of recognition” when they perform. “We try not to have that happen,” he joked, in reference to his style. “Audiences never know when I’m done.”

Yang was an undergraduate when he first heard Mackey read, in the mid-nineties. He told me, “I was, like, *What is going on?* He was quiet, soft-

spoken, and these words were just spilling out.” Mackey often sounds tranquil and digressive when he reads, as though he’s working out a series of anagrams on the fly. “It’s not that kind of release, when you think that someone has said what I always thought,” the poet and critic Fred Moten, who won a MacArthur Fellowship last year, explained. “It’s more like *What is that?*”

Mackey’s work calls to mind the world-building ambitions of Ezra Pound as well as the experiments in chronicling the Afro-Caribbean diaspora which are at the heart of Wilson Harris’s and Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s poetry. It’s also influenced by what jazz musicians such as John Coltrane, Charles Mingus, and Cecil Taylor did in the sixties and seventies, stretching songs out to a full side of an LP. He describes his career in terms of “ongoingness,” the sense that “you’re never finished.”

“You read it the first time,” Moten said, “and there’s all this richness. Then you go back the thirty-seventh time, and what you discover is not the true meaning. What you discover is that all that’s left to find is way more than you’ll ever have time to find. It’s more than you could ever have imagined. It’s an amazing thing to see the whole thing and a detail of the thing at the same time. He writes the way that Brueghel painted crowd scenes.”

As well as working on the long song, Mackey has been an editor of *Hambone*, a respected poetry journal, since 1974. (He became the journal’s sole editor and publisher in 1982.) He has also written five epistolary novels as part of a thirty-year-old open-ended prose project titled “From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate.” It consists of letters written by N., a jazz musician in nineteen-seventies and eighties Los Angeles, to someone or something called the Angel of Dust, about the progress of a band he has formed.

Mackey has spent the past year at his home, with his wife, Pascale, and two of their children. Except for an occasional doctor’s appointment, he’s been content to wait out the pandemic indoors. Last summer, we began Zooming weekly. I wanted to hear “Sketches of Spain” the way he did, though I quickly realized that this was impossible.

Mackey is five feet eleven inches tall, with the lean frame of a former athlete and shoulder-length dreads flecked with gray. He speaks slowly and carefully, rhythmically cycling through descriptions until he settles on the most precise language he can summon. He made me feel hopelessly inarticulate. Every so often, New Directions would send him a set of proofs of “Double Trio,” and he would giddily point at the enormous pile of paper on his desk. “It’s so unusual to be putting out a thousand pages of poetry in one fell swoop. There are all kinds of negative ways to interpret that,” he said, before bursting out into laughter. “Now I’m asking people to read these three suckers!”

In high school, Mackey was one of the only Black students in his honors classes. He was also a star defensive back for the football team. Élite schools were admitting more Black students, and a group of Princeton alumni invited him for a campus visit, hoping that he might play football, or pole-vault for the school’s track-and-field team. He and another local student, Gene Washington, later a star wide receiver with the San Francisco 49ers, flew out together.

After Mackey told one of his student hosts that he had never seen jazz played live, the student arranged for Mackey to stay with his father in Harlem for a couple of days. The student’s father took him to some jazz clubs, and Mackey saw the wildly inventive saxophonist and flutist Roland Kirk play with his band. “I couldn’t take my eyes off the players,” he recalled. “These gods were there.” It became an easy decision. “An hour-and-fifteen-minute bus ride from this? I was *going* to Princeton.”

The university introduced him to notions of prestige and status. “I’d never met a Black preppy,” he said. “The Black middle class wasn’t a part of Santa Ana.” Although he was homesick and disliked the snow, the proximity to living, breathing artists opened his eyes to a new path. He ran into Amiri Baraka, then known as LeRoi Jones, at a bookstore in Manhattan and invited him to give a reading at Princeton. Jones politely agreed. When he arrived, he addressed the assembled group of Black students as “Pavlov’s dogs” and spent his visit warning them about the domesticating tendencies of white institutions. Mackey went to a Coltrane gig in New York City and saw the saxophonist sitting at the bar between sets. Mackey introduced himself and

asked if he would play “Equinox.” “We’d like to,” Coltrane gently replied, “but we have a piece of music prepared.”

This was in 1965, when Coltrane had begun pursuing a freer, noisier, more liberated style. Mackey was transfixed. There was “a quantum escalation in intensity,” he said, as Coltrane and his group spent the entire night playing the standard “Out of This World,” in a frenzied style that radically deviated from the 1962 recording that Mackey knew by heart. “I thought I knew Coltrane,” he said. “He’s moved on, so I gotta follow him.”

Seeing his idols made the possibility of pursuing a creative life more feasible. “When I was a teen-ager, poets were not alive—they were only in books,” he said. At Princeton, he published some Jones-inspired poetry. But his primary creative outlet was d.j.’ing at the campus radio station, where he became infatuated with searching for segues, resonances, and juxtapositions: “How different can two things be and still have something in common?”

After graduation, he moved back to Southern California and taught algebra at a junior high school. In 1970, he went to graduate school for English at Stanford, where his dissertation dealt with the Black Mountain poets, who believed that poetry should be driven by the human rhythms of breath and utterance.

One day, Mackey was d.j.’ing at KTAO, a free-form community radio station in nearby Los Gatos, when he started browsing a stack of new arrivals. He came across “Les Dogon,” an ethnographic recording originally released in 1958 by the Ocora label. The liner notes described one track as a funeral song to mourn the passing of a tribesman. He listened to “Chant des Andoumboulou” and was captivated.

I have heard “Les Dogon” many times, and I have always found this particular track, which is full of groans and mutters, a somewhat grating experience. I played it over Zoom. Mackey explained what he was hearing: “It’s a bell tolling. What could be more pertinent in a funeral song than time, the fact that one runs out of it.” Soon, a man begins singing—his voice has a dry, croaking quality. “It’s deep, it’s troubled. Raspy. It’s got that rust. It both abrades and sounds like it has been abraded. Attenuated. Under pressure, some kind of strain.” At this point, other voices join in, at a distance, a kind

of rote call-and-response. “And then this choral interaction,” Mackey said. “The background voices. They’re higher. It’s *almost* jubilant, but it can’t really be jubilant while it’s interplaying with that tapping and the raspy voice.” He was grave as he talked about what he was hearing, as though reciting his own incantation.

“And then you get more raspy voices!” he cried out, as the singer was joined by others. He started laughing hysterically. “You thought you were in trouble just listening to that one, and then you find out, you know, *he’s got a posse!*” By now he was cracking up. “Oh, my God. That is some strong stuff.”

Mackey said that whenever we returned to pieces like this he could “hear the echo of those repeated listenings.” When he first heard “Chant des Andoumboulou,” he was reading “The Special View of History,” a series of lectures that Charles Olson gave at Black Mountain College, in 1956. Olson wondered what role poetry might play in helping us access the distant past: “What did happen? Two alternatives: make it up; or try to find out. Both are necessary.” Even in antiquity, Olson wrote, poets were cast as unreliable chroniclers of history. Plato had “used the word ‘mouth’ as an insult, to say it lies, and called poets muthologists.”



“This kitchen ain’t big enough fer the both of us.”
Cartoon by Kim Warp

Yet poetry seemed capacious enough for both approaches to history: making it up and plumbing its depths. Returning to “Chant des Andoumboulou” gave Mackey “a sense of society as a kind of poem, social ritual as a kind of poem. So, therefore, the poem as a kind of society, made up of elements like sound, and sense, and the look words have on a page, the look line breaks give to a poem.” He began moving away from poems as discrete pieces of writing—the sealed-off odes that we are taught in school. He thought of how the musicians he loved, like Coltrane or Cecil Taylor, the avant-garde pianist, were always “pulling more and more song” out of an old piece of music. His poetry began scouring histories—the ill-fated Andoumboulou, Sufi mysticism, Gnosticism. In the early seventies, he found a copy of “Mu,” an album by the trumpeter Don Cherry. In Mackey’s mind, the title, and Cherry’s primal, ecstatic music, filled with huffing and puffing, echoed Olson’s fascination with the mouth and “muthologists,” the rhythms of breath that had been central to Black Mountain writing. “If they weren’t talking to each other,” he said, “you know I was going to get them to talk to each other.”

At Stanford, Mackey began dating Gloria Jean Watkins, who later wrote as bell hooks. After finishing his Ph.D., Mackey taught briefly at the University of Wisconsin and the University of Southern California before taking a job in the literature department at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in 1979. During this time, Watkins pursued graduate work and worked on what would become her first book, “Ain’t I a Woman?” They broke up in the mid-eighties. (hooks has alluded to their relationship in her own writing, in which she describes a “quiet and still” lover she met at Stanford.)

Mackey did all the normal things literature professors do—serving on committees, publishing academic monographs in his areas of expertise (experimental poetics, jazz studies), attending conferences, commenting on student work. His academic work brought the Black Mountain Poets into conversation with the Afro-Caribbean writings of Harris and Brathwaite, whose knotty works sought to free long-suppressed histories and languages. In Mackey’s analysis, both sets of writers were trying to reckon with the impossibility of ever representing the past through straightforward language. He also did some unusual things, like hosting “Tanganyika Strut,” a weekly show on KUSP, a community radio station. But he felt unfulfilled by the pace and decorum of academic life. He believed that he had “a finite amount

of words” in him, and he wanted to conserve them for his creative work. In 1985, he published his first poetry book, “Eroding Witness.”

While shopping for records in Los Angeles in the late seventies, he had noticed an advertisement for a jazz ensemble called A Love Supreme. He took a seat in an empty theatre, and waited for others to show up. Nobody did. The band came onstage, dressed in costumes and robes. “They were playing for me,” Mackey said. The experience inspired him to begin writing a series of letters imagining what it would be like to play in a band like that. He began using the letters as explorations of the ideas and theories around Black performance that he would once have formulated into academic articles. In 1986, he published “Bedouin Hornbook,” the first in what became his “Broken Bottle” prose series. It was followed by “Djbot Baghostus’s Run,” in 1993, “Atet A.D.,” in 2001, and “Bass Cathedral,” in 2008. Mackey continued to build the world of the long song during this time, publishing the poetry books “School of Udhra,” in 1993, “Whatsaid Serif,” in 1998, “Splay Anthem,” in 2006, and, five years later, “Nod House.”

In 1991, Mackey married Pascale Gaitet, a specialist in French literature at U.C. Santa Cruz. In 2010, they moved with their children, Naima, Gabriella, and Ian, to North Carolina. Gaitet retired from teaching and now works as part of legal-defense teams for people facing the death penalty. The position at Duke allowed Mackey more time to focus on writing. In 2012, he began writing the “Double Trio” poems, and in 2017 he published “Late Arcade,” the fifth book of the “Broken Bottle” series.

Mackey likens his poetic style to the way Coltrane seemed to “exhaust his horn,” testing each note “as if there were infinite possibilities to it.” Over time, the long song enacted this sense of trying again, or exploring paths not taken. Mackey’s work, premised on pulling more song out of the original composition, became influential among Black artists and academics interested in experimental or Afrofuturist approaches to thinking about what one could do with the historical archive, the seemingly settled facts of the historical past. As Mackey wrote, “Where we were, not- / notwithstanding, wasn’t there . . . / Where we / were was the hold of a ship we were / caught / in. Soaked wood kept us afloat. . . . It / wasn’t limbo we were

in albeit we / limbo'd our way there. Where we / were was what we meant by ‘mu.’ ”

“This was writing that indicated a curriculum I could follow,” Fred Moten told me. Earlier that day, Moten had been teaching a course on Pan-Africanism and performance at New York University. “I read two pages of ‘Atet A.D.’ to my class. It wasn’t because I planned to do it. It’s because the road I had been thinking led me there,” in turn leading the class back to Mackey. “There’s this formulation about Shakespeare, where everything is in Shakespeare. I would say, everything might be in Shakespeare, but it’s all in Nate. ‘Everything’ is a counting term. This plus this plus this. ‘All’ is a mass word. It’s not about the coalescence of separable things. It’s *all*. Nate makes you understand the difference between ‘everything’ and ‘all.’ ”

One of the first things that Mackey does each morning is log on to Facebook. He misses hosting a radio show, and he likes to begin each day by sharing a song or marking a great musician’s birthday. Sometimes he will pose a tongue-in-cheek “research question”: “Ornette Coleman or Coleman Hawkins?” “The audience reaction at 7:07 on Yusef Lateef’s ‘Number 7’ (*LIVE AT PEP’S*) or the audience reaction at 1:53 on Miles Davis’s ‘Stella by Starlight’ (*MY FUNNY VALENTINE: MILES DAVIS IN CONCERT*)?” “H.D. or HD?”

In October, he posted a piece by the American composer Conlon Nancarrow, whose style was willfully abstruse and highly technical, and largely devoted to exploring what a player piano could do. “I almost got sad thinking about it,” Mackey said, reflecting on the obscurity that came with Nancarrow’s commitment to a stubborn and highly technical artistic vision. “He’s no sadder than I am. ‘Song of the Andoumboulou . . . 275?’ ” He chuckled to himself. “I might as well be punching holes in piano roller paper.”

When “Splay Anthem” won the National Book Award, he said, he got messages from other experimental poets who felt that “it had won one for our side, finally.” Still, he’s surprised that he has ever received any acclaim for his work. He seemed more excited when he recounted the time that Cecil Taylor told him he loved “Bedouin Hornbook” so much that he gave a copy to Sun Ra.

One week, we listened to Taylor's music together. I wanted Mackey to help me make sense of Taylor's chaotic, percussive style on the piano. "A rolling, ringing sound," Mackey began. "The way he works the bottom registers, a lot of bass down there. Seismic stuff. It just seems so terrestrial. Epic and apocalyptic. A big, epochal sound from Cecil that's so *where we're at*, and have been for a long time, though I think we see it more clearly nowadays. Listening to it again, I heard that more. I heard that I had heard that in the seventies. Beyond those formal questions of dimensionality and the long song, something about the body, the flesh, the fibre of the long song being epic and apocalyptic and epochal. You hear that in Cecil. He's going for the tale of the tribe. And the tribe is the whole world."

"Listen to Cecil's music. All that rumbling. You know, that sense of coming up from below, all that thunder. Sounds of wrath. There's a challenge and a dare, a kind of discontent in what Cecil's doing. He's saying, You gotta do better. You gotta listen more closely. You gotta be more focussed. That sound announces that we're going to a different place."

"At least, that's what I heard."

I felt as though I had never actually heard before. We talked about apocalypse, not in the sense of the end of days, but as an uncovering. "That word that has been coming up since George Floyd was killed is relevant, too," he said. "'Reckoning.' Apocalypse in terms of reckoning. The revelation of that which has been suppressed." Although Mackey's work has always frolicked in the utopian possibilities of creation, the realities of Black life in America often flash through. One of the "Broken Bottle" books closes with a Black academic, wary of approaching cops, imagining what a choke hold must feel like. The academic recalls "having once written that the use of the falsetto in black music, the choked-up ascent into a problematic upper register, had a way, as he'd put it, of 'alchemizing a legacy of lynchings.' He'd planned to make use of this idea again," Mackey writes, "but the prospect of a cop's arm around his neck reminded him that every concept, no matter how figural or sublime, had its literal, deadletter aspect as well."

The spectre of mortality haunts "Double Trio." In 1999, Mackey noticed a cut across his forehead that wouldn't heal. It turned out to be sarcoidosis, a rare autoimmune disorder. Until then, Mackey had been exceedingly fit and

robust. But this started off a litany of health issues. “Speaking of serial form,” Mackey joked. The following year, doctors found sarcoidosis in his lungs, too. In the course of twenty years, he needed a hip replacement and required treatment for cancer in his pelvis, prostate, and lungs. He began reflecting on the “precarity of one’s bodily life. It changes things. I couldn’t take the endlessly ongoing as given.” This realization brought a keener sense of urgency to his writing. In the early twenty-tens, Mackey sought out a state of what he refers to as “all-day music,” training his mind to “always be on call,” should something inspire him to write, and to remain open to any form of inspiration: “I like interruptions. I like the writing to be situated within the realm of my ordinary life.” He was constantly toggling between everyday activities and the world he has been constructing in his head.

I asked him about a line in “Tej Bet,” in which his band of travellers encounters “the abandoned boy grown up, grown / old, worried he’d be leaving soon.” Mackey reminded me of our conversation, months earlier, when we listened to “Sketches of Spain,” and he had heard the cry of an abandoned boy. Now abandonment pointed to something else. As you grow older, he explained, you feel “abandoned by your vigor, your life. The sense of owning your body fades away.” Old muses and lovers appear in his poetry. This was the beginning of a goodbye. In “Nerve Church,” he finds himself in a hospital gown, dreaming of the past: “I kept imagining / mas- / tery, only to find it fell apart. I lay chas- / ing it, dreamt I lay chasing it, never to be / caught short or caught out I promised my- / self, only to find it fell apart.”

“So’s Notice,” the second book of the “Double Trio,” is dedicated to Mackey’s niece Carla and nephew Pee-Wee. “I didn’t expect to outlive them,” he told me. “They both died earlier than they should have. My nephew Pee-Wee because of getting into trouble with the law. That’s not a healthy life. And he got out, and got his life together, but it came back to kill him. He had a heart attack in his early fifties. Similarly, my niece Carla, not because of running into trouble with the law, but, you know, health problems, heart problems. She was still in her fifties. That’s living Black. Our life chances are not as great as white people’s. That’s not by accident. Access to health care, eating the right foods, being subject to the predations of the criminal-justice system. I managed to escape. They did not. There’s a way in which Black people in general—the obvious way in which Black

lives don't matter, as a kind of abandonment, a state of having been abandoned.”

A sense of recursion and repetition runs through Mackey’s career, the idea that song itself is a ritual to be revisited over time. It offers a chance to start again. His poetry is like an archive of all that the world forgot, what might have been had humans resisted the desire to enslave and colonize one another. It’s also an archive of the world as Mackey has taken it in, from concerts and records to poems and lyrical scraps from old anthropology textbooks to the things his niece and nephew once said. And the capaciousness of these works, stretching across decades, is both a tribute to those who blew his mind as a teen-ager and an expression of awe that he survived. “I’m seventy-three,” he said. “Earlier in my life, when people gave out numbers like that, that was like talking about a distant galaxy light-years away. Now I’m there.” The durational project, the long song, is also a celebration of a life that defied the odds. In “So’s Notice,” a line reads, “Cop-show utopia, cop-show ‘blues’ / revue, splat panoply on the tol’you screen.” “Tol’you,” Mackey said, was what Carla and Pee-Wee called the television before they could pronounce the word. The screen was there to tell them things. “That’s me stealing from my abandoned niece and nephew,” he said. “We were watching the news on the ‘tol’you.’ ”

Mackey spent a lot of the past year on Zoom, teaching his classes or giving talks. Many Friday nights, he had drinks with the Surf Club, a loose community of poets and scholars—including Ed Roberson, Joseph Donahue, Fred Moten, Ken Taylor, Brent Hayes Edwards, Pete Moore, and Peter O’Leary—who used to frequent a bar of that name in Durham. They would talk about politics or sports, gossip, and tell stories. At one meeting, Roberson read a new poem that contained some cursing, setting off a conversation about the use of profanity in their work. A few days later, Mackey wove the name Ed into a poem he was working on.

Mostly, Mackey watched the news or sports, often with a notebook on his lap. “I’m always more or less watching that basketball game and more or less writing poetry,” he said. The Black Mountain school promoted an “open field” approach, he explained, which included remaining receptive to poetry wherever it might be, however it might help one gain “leverage” on present-day life. “You know, I hang out and I’m available for the writing to happen.

I'm not clamped down to my desk. I get up and go downstairs and make fun of Ian, or play with the dogs, or tease Gabby about the music she's listening to. It's all part of the weave." The description of a wide receiver arching toward a pass might find its way into his work, and nobody would ever recognize it as such. One day, he received a CD in the mail from a harpist named Rhodri Davies. "He plays the horsehair harp. *Horsehair harp*. That's going in the poetry."

He went on, "You build this place. You're making this place, it takes time to lay it out, stock it, to walk around in it, to get to know it." The farther he steps into it, he explains, the easier it's become to find more places within. "Doors open, lead to other doors. It's a place I like. I guess it's why I'm staying there." Since finishing "Double Trio," Mackey has nearly completed two more books of the long song. He envisages a "double quartet" next.

The night before the Presidential election, Mackey received an e-mail from the poet Susan Howe, checking in and reflecting on "the need in our lives for this thing we do."

There's a Jack Spicer line, Howe later told me, that reminded her of Mackey: "Deathward, we ride in the boat." She felt a deep kinship with Mackey's commitment to serial work. "I think Nate has that sense of deathwardly riding in the boat. But as we're riding in that direction we're part of a whole group of people from the deep past, from the past before print. They're on the sea. They're still riding. He continues this ride. I can't believe he never stopped working."

On Election Night, Mackey sat in front of the television and worked on "Song of the Andoumboulou 310" in the Notes app of his iPhone. He was getting frustrated with both the writing and the early returns. He went outside to his porch.

"You go out and you look in the sky. We live in this act of creation that is unfathomable and overwhelming. The intricacy, beauty, fearsomeness," he said. "We push back by becoming active, becoming producers, and putting our little pieces of creativity down next to it. It's this idea, I can do something, too.

“But every now and then, when the flow’s not coming, you gotta get up from your couch or the desk, you gotta go out on the porch, look up at the sky and enjoy the humility of just taking in this obviously superior and more complex creativity. What we do could never match that. Could I ever write a poem as intricate as a pinecone? Wallace Stevens has got nothin’ on this.” ♦

On Television

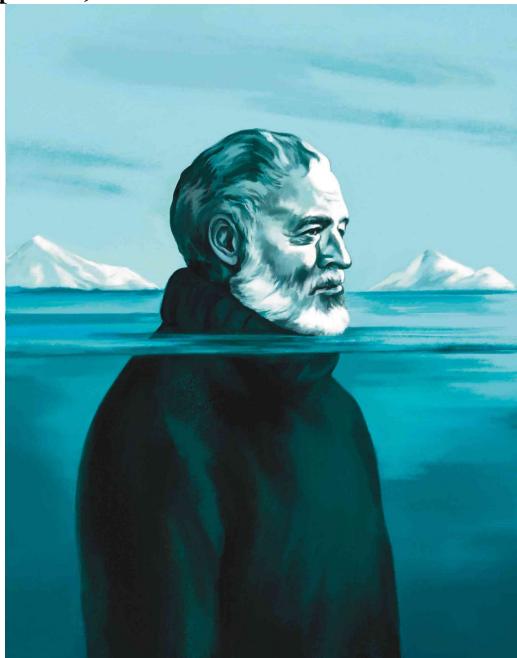
- [A New Hemingway Documentary Peeks Behind the Myth](#)

A New Hemingway Documentary Peeks Behind the Myth

Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's film examines the burden of the author's performance of himself.

By [Hilton Als](#)

April 5, 2021



I'm not exactly sure when I first read Ernest Hemingway, but I do remember when I first recognized Gertrude Stein's indelible influence on his sentences. I was in my mid-twenties; a close friend turned me on to her difficult, hilarious, and unclassifiable work. I was no stranger to literary modernism, but to me Stein wasn't part of that group so much as its mother, one who took a monstrous and roiling joy in exposing what lay underneath conventional narrative: thinking as it was thought. I'm almost certain my friend started me off with Stein's relatively "easy" 1909 book "Three Lives," which ends with a story titled "The Gentle Lena." Halfway through, Stein writes:

Herman's married sister liked her brother Herman, and she had always tried to help him, when there was anything she knew he wanted. She

liked it that he was so good and always did everything that their father and their mother wanted, but still she wished it could be that he could have more his own way, if there was anything he ever wanted. But now she thought Herman with his girl was very funny.

As I read “The Gentle Lena,” I recalled the sound of Hemingway’s 1921 short story “Up in Michigan.” Near the beginning of this tale about a woman’s infatuation and the sexual violence that follows, he writes:

Liz liked Jim very much. She liked it the way he walked over from the shop and often went to the kitchen door to watch for him to start down the road. She liked it about his mustache. She liked it about how white his teeth were when he smiled. . . . One day she found that she liked it the way the hair was black on his arms and how white they were above the tanned line when he washed up in the washbasin outside the house. Liking that made her feel funny.

A year after Hemingway wrote “Up in Michigan,” the younger writer—he was twenty-two—showed it to Stein, who was then forty-eight. By that time, he was working as a foreign correspondent for the *Toronto Star* and living in Paris with his sensitive first wife, Hadley Richardson, whose trust fund did much to improve his circumstances. The starving-artist myth that Hemingway put forth in his memoir, “A Moveable Feast,” and in any number of interviews, is one of several that the filmmakers Ken Burns and Lynn Novick debunk in “Hemingway,” their careful three-part documentary, which premières on PBS on April 5th. The Hemingways were introduced to Stein and her de-facto wife, the equally formidable Alice B. Toklas, by the innovative American writer Sherwood Anderson, who considered Hemingway something of a protégé; indeed, Anderson had encouraged his literary charge to pull up stakes and head to Paris, where modernism lived. Stein and Hemingway took to each other almost at once. Mary V. Dearborn’s nuanced 2017 biography, “Ernest Hemingway,” reports that Stein found him “extraordinarily good looking,” while Hemingway said later, “I always wanted to fuck her.” Although Stein liked Hemingway’s short, declarative sentences, she didn’t admire “Up in Michigan,” which she pronounced “inaccrochable.” Still, he could learn from her. “She’s trying to get at the mechanics of language,” he wrote to a friend. “[To] take it apart and see what makes it go.”

Hemingway, who died by his own hand in 1961, nineteen days shy of his sixty-second birthday, was always interested in trying to understand what lay at the moral heart of a sentence, a paragraph—how to make it all go. Appropriately, Burns and Novick’s “Hemingway” begins with words: the familiar slow, rhythmic Burns camera moves almost fetishistically over a handwritten manuscript page, before cutting to clips of the writer Michael Katakis, who manages the Hemingway estate, talking about the legend’s universality. Katakis’s remarks are interwoven with slow-motion footage of a bullfight, of an Atget-like photograph of a Parisian café—signs and symbols we associate with “The Sun Also Rises,” Hemingway’s first novel, published in 1926, which tells the story of Americans living in Europe amid the dissolution, ennui, and recklessness of a postwar, moneyed white world. As these images scroll by, Jeff Daniels, who portrays Hemingway in voice-over, reads a passage from a letter to his father:

You see I’m trying in all my stories to get the feeling of the actual life across—not just to depict life—or criticize it—but to actually make it alive. So that when you have read something by me you actually experience the thing. You can’t do this without putting in the bad and the ugly as well as what is beautiful. Because if it is all beautiful, you can’t believe in it. Things aren’t that way. It is only by showing both sides, three dimensions, and if possible, four, that you can write the way I want to.

Although Burns and Novick scrupulously acknowledge the efforts Hemingway made to achieve his literary goals, the documentary makes less of a case for what he did on the page than for what he was doing *off* the page. In the end, this is not really the filmmakers’ fault; writers and writing don’t necessarily lend themselves to cinema, which is about movement and showing. Ultimately, talking about writing is rarely as substantive as reading it. “Hemingway” is a disembodied movie about a writer who was disembowelled by depression, alcoholism, sex shame, and vanity.

Hemingway came of age as a man and an artist during a time of myth—myths about the Great American Novel, about the Great American Man. His attempts to live up to those myths were perhaps also attempts to supersede the influence of his domineering mother, Grace, an opera singer and music teacher, and his depressive father, Clarence, a well-regarded doctor. Born in

Oak Park, Illinois, in 1899, Ernest was the second child of six. He was doted on by his mother, who was, by most accounts, self-absorbed and self-regarding. (“My father was very devoted to my mother,” a sister of Ernest’s once said. “But she was devoted to herself.”) Ernest shared his father’s love of the natural world, which he depicted in his work as a perfect and perfectly ruined Eden. Grace had other ideas about Adam and Eve. It amused her to pretend that Ernest and Marcelline, the sister closest to him in age, were twins. Sometimes she dressed them as boys, sometimes as girls. She had their hair cut in the same style—blunt bobs with bangs—and encouraged them to play with both tea sets and air rifles.

One could view these experiments in gender not only as Grace’s bid to control biological destiny, and thus behavior, but as a way for her to express her own dual nature: the masculine and the feminine, the assertive and the adored. Hemingway’s interest in androgyny began with her. Burns and Novick report that in bed with his fourth wife, the journalist Mary Welsh, he sometimes liked to pretend he was a girl, and that Mary was a boy. His unfinished novel “The Garden of Eden” also revolves around sexual ambiguity. The book’s protagonist, David Bourne, is a young writer living in France with his wife, Catherine. The couple want to be “changed,” to defy gender roles and have an affair with the same woman, but David grows more and more uncomfortable with this fluidity, just as Hemingway wasn’t comfortable with it in life. One of the more heartbreakingly honest sections in “Hemingway” is the film’s description of the author’s excruciating relationship with his third and youngest child, Gloria, who was born as Gregory, and lived the latter part of her life as a trans woman. Perhaps Gloria recognized some of her impulses in her father, too. In one angry letter, she called him “Ernestine.”



"Sometimes they try to catch you off guard by getting all conversational."
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

After high school, Hemingway went to work as a journalist for the Kansas City *Star*, where he paid special attention to the style guide: "Use short sentences. Use short first paragraphs. Use vigorous English." In 1918, still hungry for experience, he volunteered to work for the Red Cross and signed on to be an ambulance driver in Italy. Just over a month into his service, Hemingway was wounded by a mortar, and spent some time recovering in a hospital in Milan. While there, he fell in love with an American nurse named Agnes von Kurowsky. When he returned to Oak Park, in 1919, it was with the understanding that he and Agnes would marry. But she soon wrote to say that she planned to marry someone else. Hemingway never got over Agnes's rejection. But he put his anguish to work. In "A Farewell to Arms," his second novel, published in 1929, Lieutenant Frederic Henry, an American ambulance driver, falls in love with Catherine Barkley, an English nurse stationed in Italy. What do the young couple believe in besides themselves, and their love, amid all that death? Realism. Frederic observes:

If people bring so much courage to this world the world has to kill them to break them, so of course it kills them. The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very

brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry.

Gertrude Stein's roundelay-like syntax and logic feel very present here. "A Farewell to Arms" is about perspective and perception, and what to do with life as you're living it. Part of the sadness at the core of the film "Hemingway" is how much life we see happening to the writer that he doesn't seem to feel, or doesn't want to feel, protecting a self he didn't know, or could not face.

One way that he managed to have a feeling for who he was was to tell lies. When, in 1919, he returned home to Oak Park with the goal of making, he said, "the world safe for Ernest Hemingway," the boy played up his idea of heroism by giving talks for a fee, describing how he had carried a soldier to safety before he collapsed. That was fiction, his theatre. Whenever he hit the streets, he wore his uniform, including a black velvet Italian cape. That was his costume. He wanted to be known, and would be known. Like many writers, he began his life as an author by performing. But once you start telling whoppers like that you can't stop, because one lie always leads to another. On the other hand, hadn't his life—with its various cruelties and manipulations—begun with a lie? How could he know who he was if Grace had told him that he was something else and even dressed him for the part, or when Agnes promised an everlasting love that didn't last? Were life and, more specifically, a woman's love a fiction?

"Hemingway" is chock-full of writers. There's Edna O'Brien on Hemingway in love, and Tobias Wolff on his influence. In the end, these opinions amount to a kind of distraction, but it's necessary filler. It's possible that Hemingway was a complicated shallow person, addicted to the high of being known to feed a continually diminishing self. As Stein mused in her 1933 book, "The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas," "But what a story that of the real Hem, and one he should tell himself but alas he never will. After all, as he himself once murmured, there is the career, the career." He took on the role of "Papa"—a man of genial but firm paternalism, a hunter and a drinker—the way an actor might embody Mark Antony, through study and persistence. Hemingway always seemed to be in the right place at the right time: Paris with the Steins and the Fitzgeralds, Gstaad with the Murphys, Spain with Ava Gardner. There was writing, and there was the fashionable

life, and his great masterpieces—“The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,” “The Snows of Kilimanjaro”—are about fashionable lives derailed by nature, by death, and by a belief in the myth of arrival, which, ultimately, gets you nowhere. Indeed, Harry, in “Kilimanjaro,” can’t go anywhere; he has gangrene, and he’s dying, and we are meant to understand that maybe Harry died a long time ago, when he couldn’t become the artist he dreamt of becoming:

Now he would never write the things that he had saved to write until he knew enough to write them well. Well, he would not have to fail at trying to write them either. Maybe you could never write them, and that was why you put them off and delayed the starting. Well he would never know, now.

It’s the comma before “now” that kills me. That pause before the end. Because pauses do come before the end, and with Hemingway, as with Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, I am grateful for what is left out, for what the writer has allowed me to have to myself: my imagination, prompted by his.

There’s ugliness in Hemingway, and not the kind of ugliness meant in the documentary’s opening statement about writing. Like Stein, Hemingway was not above the impulse to reduce people to types; nor did he entirely resist the pointed, class-informed racism of his time. It’s hard to get through the condescending, lousy, “sho nuff” chat in Stein’s novella “Melanctha,” and the deeply rotten race elements in Hemingway’s novel “To Have and Have Not.” Those things are as much a part of America as the myth of idealized masculinity. But why a film about Hemingway now, and not, say, Faulkner? Is Faulkner not a more vibrant figure, who prefigured in his Snopes stories and novels the age of Trump and Derek Chauvin’s trial, and the Gordian knot of race that continues to choke large portions of our country? In this context, Burns and Novick’s “Hemingway” feels a little anachronistic, and “smells of the museums,” as Stein once said of Hemingway.

As I watched, I kept returning to Dearborn’s biography to fill in details I felt I was missing, such as the observation that the ample-fleshed, boasting Grace was not unlike Gertrude Stein in body, attitude, and work ethic. Every

writer is every writer they've loved and quarrelled with who came before, as every parent is every parent they loved and quarrelled with. Hemingway was Stein and Grace and his father, too. The drama was always which person would win out.

Revisiting his writing, I remembered it was its movement that touched me—how he gets characters from one part of the room to another. Easier said than done, and one of the ways in which he separated himself from Stein. He replaced thinking with action—which Stein considered an affront to modernism. “Gertrude Stein and Sherwood Anderson are very funny on the subject of Hemingway,” Stein wrote in “Alice B. Toklas.” “They both agreed that they have a weakness for Hemingway because he is such a good pupil. He is a rotten pupil, I protested. You don’t understand, they both said, it is flattering to have a pupil who does it without understanding it.” Stein’s voice and her experiments with sound are part of the spine of his work, and how gripping is that? To realize that Hemingway’s famously muscular prose was born of admiration for a middle-aged lesbian’s *sui-generis* sentences and paragraphs? Absorbing Stein’s influence, and admitting to his attraction, was one way of getting at what he always longed for: to be a girl in love with a powerful woman. ♦

Onward and Upward with the Arts

- [Josh Thomas's Comedy of Self-Diagnosis](#)

Josh Thomas's Comedy of Self-Diagnosis

After his beloved series “Please Like Me” ended, the writer and actor decided to make a sitcom about autism. Then he wondered why.

By [Alex Barasch](#)

April 5, 2021



The Australian comedian Josh Thomas was at the oldest gay bar in New York, debating how much to say about a breakup. It was March, 2020, and he was touring with his standup show “Whoopsie Daisy,” in which he riffed on, among other things, the loneliness he’d faced after moving from Melbourne to Los Angeles. “I don’t like being alone, but I’m not good at being *around* people,” he’d told an audience earlier that night, at the SoHo Playhouse. “I asked my friends how I could be better at socializing. I had never considered it before—I was twenty-eight! And they said, ‘Josh, what you need to do is, you need to ask questions, and then listen to the answers.’” Glancing around the theatre incredulously, he asked, “Have you guys heard about this?” After the performance, I walked with him to the West Village, eventually ducking into the bar, Julius’, in search of food. Upon entering, Thomas ran into an ex-boyfriend from Australia, who was

vacationing in the city. They exchanged a few pleasantries—then, after the ex was out of earshot, he confided to me that the relationship had ended gruesomely. “I’m a bit embarrassed now,” he admitted. “But it’s good narrative for you, isn’t it?”

Thomas, now thirty-three, is the creator of “[Please Like Me](#),” the Australian series that became a queer cult classic, and the American sitcom “Everything’s Gonna Be Okay,” about a teen-ager on the autism spectrum, which is about to begin its second season on Hulu. Whether onscreen, onstage, or off, he speaks quickly and editorializes often. If he decides that an anecdote is insufficiently interesting, he’ll abandon it, refusing entreaties to keep going. If a story is good, his desire to tell it defeats any sense of self-preservation. Thomas said of the ex, “We had had, like, a proper romance. And he said to me, ‘I really like you, but I don’t want to have sex with you. I’m not attracted to you. I think it’s better that I tell you the truth.’ ” Thomas, who has compared his own face to a “melted candle,” mimed outrage to me, but he was suppressing a grin. “I said, ‘Absolutely not! You should have lied! No one wants to be told that. I would so much prefer it were my personality, or *anything*, than this. This is the worst thing anyone’s ever said to me—but at least it’s so crazy that I can use it.’ ” On “Please Like Me,” in which he played a gay twentyomething also named Josh, he restaged the breakup almost word for word.

As with many contemporary comedians, mining unpleasant experiences for humor—even tragic ones—is second nature to Thomas. On “Please Like Me,” the most striking element taken from his personal history is the first suicide attempt of his mother, Rebecca, who was subsequently given a diagnosis of bipolar disorder. In the pilot, Thomas re-creates the experience: Josh wakes up late the following morning to a slew of voice mails from his father, which he listens to in reverse chronological order, with mounting panic. His mother, named Rose in the show, survives, but the hospital won’t release her unless she has someone to watch over her. Josh’s parents are divorced, so he moves in. As Rose contends with her mental illness, Josh begins to come to terms with his sexuality.

As Thomas observes in “Whoopsie Daisy,” fictional characters confronted with bad news tend to “really quickly understand the emotional ramifications, and then show all the emotions on their face.” He goes on, “I

don't do that. I usually feel a bit startled and, honestly, a bit embarrassed I'm not behaving the way I think I should, because of television." On Thomas's shows, traumatic events aren't cleanly processed. Characters routinely stumble and regress; there are no tidy "arcs." According to Thomas's longtime friend Tom Ward, who appeared on "Please Like Me" and has written for both shows, Thomas so dislikes sitcom clichés that he leans on people around him to supply authentically awkward material. "We had an unspoken agreement that honesty was the best way to create work," Ward said. "It was a gift when something terrible happened to one of us." He described entering the writers' room for "Please Like Me" and announcing, with a sigh, that over the weekend an ex-girlfriend's rabbit had died in his care. Inevitably, the incident was incorporated into a script. Thomas told me, "It's nice when bad things happen and there's a little ray of sunshine—like, 'Oh, I'm gonna get something out of this.' "

Thomas, who grew up in Brisbane, began performing at comedy venues in high school. At seventeen, he won the open-mike competition at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival. Within a few years on the standup circuit, he had risen to national prominence, but started to feel the limitations of the form. In a monologue, he could present only one side of a story, and confessional anecdotes had to be defanged to keep the audience on his side. "That really annoyed me—having to be cute, and that getting in the way of honesty," he said. He began developing "Please Like Me" in consultation with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, which eventually commissioned a first season.

By then, he was in his early twenties, and just beginning to acknowledge the fact that he was gay. As part of this reckoning, Thomas rewrote the pilot of "Please Like Me," changing the sexuality of his character—and the network found itself in possession of a sitcom with a gay lead. In an early episode, Josh complains that the coming-out ritual feels "so nineties," and Thomas, in his own life, took the most perfunctory approach possible. He texted his dad, "When does your flight get in tomorrow? Also I live with my boyfriend. See ya!"

When "Please Like Me" first aired, in 2013, it was refreshingly unconcerned with the respectability politics of the moment. While Cam and Mitch were embodying sexless, just-like-you domesticity on "Modern Family," Josh was

meeting guys on Grindr and experimenting with non-monogamy. The show's millennial-auteur-as-star format, meanwhile, drew comparisons to [Lena Dunham](#)'s "[Girls](#)." Like Hannah Horvath, Josh was a more flawed version of his creator, prone to impulsive and selfish behavior. He left his mother in the care of her elderly, irascible aunt so that he could go on a date; after a friend ate his truffle mac and cheese, he barricaded him in his room—and turned off the Wi-Fi. Ultimately, though, the show's tone was forgiving: yes, Josh could be a jerk, but so could everybody. "The superpower I had with 'Please Like Me' is that the gay person was based on me," Thomas told me. "I didn't have to really justify anything. I could just be, like, 'Yeah, this is what *I* do,' and no one could really challenge me."

Thomas's onscreen persona, a student whose main passion was cooking elaborate meals, was gentler than that of [Larry David](#), whose character on "[Curb Your Enthusiasm](#)" revelled in overstepping social boundaries that Josh seemed not to recognize at all. Larry antagonized people on purpose; Josh was largely an accidental offender. And though the protagonist of "Please Like Me" was self-centered, the show was a model of empathy. As Josh spun his wheels professionally and romantically, other characters were given ample room to have dramas of their own.

Partway through the series, a manic episode led Rose to enter a psychiatric clinic, and the show turned much of its focus to the people receiving treatment there. These characters grappled with everything from panic attacks to self-harm, and for many viewers the show's candid treatment of mental health was a revelation. To portray the patients' lives convincingly, Thomas decided, research was required. "My own personal experience didn't make me an expert," he explained. "I didn't really know what was going on for my mum. We were kind of too awkward to talk about it." He toured a clinic in Melbourne and consulted a psychiatrist there. Thomas recalled "an awful day where he ran me through all the ways people have killed themselves in the hospital, in spite of all the measures that they take." In a conversation with another expert, Thomas's interest in a romantic subplot for one of the inpatients inspired him to ask, "When people have sex in the hospital, where do they do it?" (The answer: the disabled toilets.)

Some of these characters became more stable, but, late in the series, one died by suicide, leaving behind a note whose contents were never shared

onscreen. Thomas told me, “I didn’t show the note because it would have created this moment that, to a lot of people, would’ve looked quite *attractive*. Instead, we just show her cold corpse in a morgue on a stainless-steel bench. Because that’s the reality of the decision she made.” He paused. “The real reason why I was thinking about it more strongly than most people is—my mum’s gonna watch that scene. I don’t want her sitting there watching some fantasy. I don’t want it to look attractive *to her*.”

Thomas hadn’t blamed his mother for attempting suicide, but neither had he considered the thinking behind it. “My attitude was always ‘It’s mental illness,’ ” he said. “Trying to find logic in her actions—I always thought it was fruitless.” He learned from experts that suicidal people often believe that they’ll be “doing everyone a favor” by freeing their loved ones from the burden of care. Thomas told me, “I absolutely knew, when I heard it, that *that’s* what was going on in my mum’s head.” He wrote an episode in which Josh’s mother makes such a confession (after insisting that he smoke weed with her). He said, “Writing it helped me understand my mum better, actually. My character got to grow, and I guess I grew as well—but my character kind of led me to do it.”

In June, 2018, Thomas walked onto the [Disney](#) lot, in Burbank, to lay out his plans for a new series, “Everything’s Gonna Be Okay.” He and Stephanie Swedlove, a Canadian producer who’d worked on “Please Like Me,” were meeting with executives at Disney’s Freeform, a channel known for socially conscious programming. As Swedlove acknowledged, “The log lines of Josh’s shows don’t *immediately* scream comedy.” At the meeting, Thomas unveiled the show’s first episode, in which a middle-aged man dies, of pancreatic cancer, in a suburb of Los Angeles, and his son—Thomas’s character, a neurotic young entomologist visiting from Australia—moves in to assume care of two half siblings, one of whom is on the autism spectrum. Thomas, aware that he might come off as an enemy of fun, concluded his presentation by shooting a confetti cannon. He ended up on his hands and knees in the meeting room, picking up colorful scraps of paper.

“Freeform was really chill,” Thomas told me. “They wanted it to be queer, they wanted it to be progressive—that’s their whole shtick.” He joked, “It’s, like, ‘Well, you’re gay, so that’ll be *noble*.’ ” Immediately, he tested the limits of his mandate, by fighting for the right to say “faggot” onscreen.

Thomas's character, Nicholas, recounts a fight with his sister Genevieve, who used the slur against him as a young child without understanding its meaning. Genevieve, now a teen-ager, is mortified by the anecdote; Nicholas is simply amused. It's a moment one can easily imagine playing out between siblings in real life, but executives were skittish, and insisted on running the scene by *GLAAD*, the L.G.B.T.Q. media watchdog.

"I was, like, 'Why are *GLAAD* better authorities on homosexuality than I am?'" he told me. He recalled informing Freeform executives, "I am a *top-tier* homosexual. They're not *more gay* than me." Fortunately, *GLAAD* signed off, so Thomas didn't have to battle the network. "I do think it was the first time anything Disney had ever used the word 'faggot,' which I'm really proud of."

In a more serious tone, he said, "I've had guys kick me in the head and call me a faggot—I know how painful that word is. But, by being so scared of it, you add power to it. You give them a tool." He grinned conspiratorially. "Also, honestly, I just thought it was a funny story—and I will find a socially conscious reason to justify something that I think is funny to the end of days."

Having created twentysomething and middle-aged characters for "Please Like Me," Thomas took on a new demographic for "Everything's Gonna Be Okay." He decided that a cast filled with teens would, among other things, settle "all our decisions about tone." Whereas Josh could mostly get away with dancing around his feelings, Nicholas, as the guardian of two teenagers, *had* to learn to communicate, particularly with Matilda, a high-functioning autistic girl who has deeply held convictions about what a high-school experience should entail—the house parties, boyfriends, and underage drinking promised by pop culture.

"Everything's Gonna Be Okay" is the first American show to feature an autistic lead played by an autistic actor. Neurotypical girls had read for Matilda, but, Thomas said, they all slipped into a "sort of robot voice." After meeting Kayla Cromer on the first day of auditions—and seeing her give a spirited, expressive performance—Thomas knew she was right for the role. Matilda is open about her autism, direct about her desires, and confident in her talent as a budding composer. Eager for romance and intimacy but

unsure how to secure them, she consults YouTube for advice on flirtation, emerging with a patchwork of ideas that are half old-fashioned, half avant-garde. After trying alcohol for the first time, she concludes a message to her crush with a cheerful sign-off: “Things are getting lit. Best of wishes!”

Matilda’s difficulty understanding unspoken rules and social cues heightens the challenges of being a teen-ager. Her schooling is overseen by a special-education teacher, who cautions that Matilda’s dream of living alone in New York City probably isn’t attainable, and criticizes Nicholas for failing to prepare her for such limitations. Nicholas, meanwhile, is brutally frank in ways that leave him on equally unstable footing: he disconcerts his siblings by telling them that he’s not “the best catch” as guardians go, and horrifies his sweet-tempered boyfriend, Alex, with the revelation that there are moments when he doesn’t love him. “I think that’s normal!” Nicholas insists. “I just think other people are better at lying about it.” Though he is indeed ill-prepared to be an authority figure, his unorthodox approach sometimes succeeds where more conventional methods might fail. As Matilda begins asserting her independence, and Nicholas grows into his responsibilities, the central tension between them becomes what Thomas calls “a universal truth to parenting: how much do you step in and stop your kid from making mistakes, and how much do you let them learn for themselves?”

Thomas insists that the show is not “a blanket comment on autism—it’s supposed to be these very specific characters.” He’s conscious of the awkward broadness of the “autism spectrum” label, which encompasses both people like Matilda, who can pick up unintuitive social skills with practice, and those who may never learn to speak more than a few words, and require extensive, lifelong support. Even among the comparatively high-functioning teens featured in the series, the condition manifests in distinct ways. “We wanted to show that they’re all pretty different,” Thomas said.

As he developed plots for Matilda and her friends, Drea and Jeremy, Thomas interviewed people on the spectrum. He would present a scenario for a character, asking, “Do you believe that?” For the first season, he furnished neurodiversity consultants with detailed descriptions of the trio, double-checking his understanding of such traits as Matilda’s tendency toward sensory overload and Drea’s hyposensitivity to touch. By the second season,

the process was made easier by the fact that several advisers had become fans of the show. “They’ll be, like, ‘I don’t think *Matilda* would do this,’ ” he said. “They have a sense of who she is.”

At table reads and on set, Thomas was attentive to suggestions from castmates like Cromer and Lillian Carrier, who is also on the spectrum. Although he’d chafed at commentary around the gay characters on “Please Like Me” which had treated them as if they were part of a P.R. campaign for the L.G.B.T.Q. community, the experience had alerted him to the stakes of representation for more marginalized groups. “One of the central things that advocates in the neurodiversity space want is for people to have an understanding that not everyone is interacting with the world the same way,” he said. “They’re just asking people to be more forgiving of the fact that different people are going to understand things differently, and different people are going to make different kinds of mistakes. Which is a really nice thing to take on board *outside* of autism or neurodiversity, I think.”

Shortly after our night out in the West Village, Thomas returned to L.A. for what would be his final performance of “Whoopsie Daisy” before the city went into lockdown. He cancelled a flight to Australia, and sequestered himself in Laurel Canyon with his dog John and a new puppy, named Bilby. “Quarantine kind of snap-froze everyone’s lives,” he told me over Zoom, as Bilby dozed in his lap. “If you went in with some trauma, or some grief, or not in a happy place, then you got stuck in it. But I was quite happy when it froze.” “Everything’s Gonna Be Okay” had been well received, and he’d made some friends in L.A.

Amid this relative calm, he found time to address something that had begun to nag at him. When people had asked Thomas why he was so interested in autism, he had often cited the 2015 documentary “[Autism in Love](#),” which follows four people on the spectrum at various stages in their lives and relationships: a boy attempting to date after a painful breakup; a couple contemplating marriage but still working to reconcile “particular routines and rigidities”; a man whose wife of twenty years is terminally ill. Thomas had never seen the emotional lives of people with autism taken so seriously, and now that he had it astonished him that the “Rain Man” stereotype of the inexpressive savant still dominated pop culture. He called up Swedlove and asked, “How *didn’t* I know this?” He spoke to her about the documentary

subjects' obvious depth of feeling, and said that their frankness about their needs and desires had moved him. Thomas believed that the skills he'd honed through "Please Like Me" might equip him to tell such a story himself.



"It's not waffles. It's never waffles."
Cartoon by David Borchart

As he worked on "Everything's Gonna Be Okay," he began to wonder whether there was more to his sense of kinship. Years earlier, a psychiatrist had warned him about his "social dysfunction" and frequent obliviousness of the wants of others. (He later recounted the experience in a standup set: "Basically, I give this lady a hundred and eighty dollars, she sits me down, she tells me I'm a cunt, and she follows it up with 'It's incurable.'") Though he didn't exhibit some traits strongly associated with boys on the spectrum—patterns and numbers held no appeal—his research for the series lent other quirks new resonance. "If you mention autism to someone, they have a pretty specific image of a pretty specific type of person, and I don't think I fit that," he told me recently. But some of the stories recounted by people he'd interviewed felt surprisingly familiar. And, as Season 1 aired, Thomas had noticed that, among fans—many of whom are on the spectrum themselves—there was "a lot of chatter about Nicholas being autistic." They'd been speculating on Twitter since the show's January première episode, in which Nicholas becomes so overwhelmed by the news of his

father's cancer that he leaves the room and refuses to engage. As the season progressed, Nicholas's behavior strengthened viewers' impressions.

That spring, Thomas decided to consult a psychiatrist, but he was unable to secure a referral during lockdown, so he turned to a series of self-assessments on the Internet. "It's not like a BuzzFeed quiz," he assured me. "It's not, like, 'What Kind of Shortbread Are You?'" He also shared his suspicions with Swedlove and his friend Tom Ward. When, a few months later, Thomas mentioned to the other writers that he might be on the spectrum, it was couched in terms of a possible story line for his alter ego. Thomas promised that he wouldn't give Nicholas such a diagnosis "unless I confirm that *I'm* actually autistic."

Ward recalled, "We just discussed it the way we would any story topic, which is, like, 'What's realistic? Let's draw on your experience, because you're the person who's going through this.'" By this point, Thomas had taken a battery of more formal diagnostic tests—including those, like the empathy quotient, which are often used in clinical contexts. But the online quizzes had been the first step. As the writers weighed how best to approach such a story line, Thomas decided that they should know what these questionnaires entailed.

In a Zoom meeting, he clicked through a series of statements, marking his responses on a scale from "Definitely Agree" to "Definitely Disagree." Though the test was nominally for Nicholas, it quickly became an exercise in delineating how Thomas compared with others on the call. Some of the prompts, like "I don't have any problems making small talk with new people," felt unhelpful. "Doesn't everybody hate small talk?" Thomas asked the group. Others seemed eerily apt. When the writers reached the statement "I would find it really hard to play imaginary games with children," Thomas admitted that he had failed miserably at this when meeting Ward's son, Teddy. Ward, laughing, recalled, "Teddy mimed pouring Josh a cup of tea, and, under the pressure of the expectation from my one-year-old to in turn mime *drinking* the tea, he crumbled. He hesitated in a way that really confused my son."

A few slides later, a result flashed onscreen: "Your score suggests you experience *many or all* of the most common traits experienced by those with

an autism-spectrum disorder.”

Around this time, Thomas broached the subject with one of the series’ autism consultants. “When you watch the show, do you think maybe Nicholas is autistic?” he asked.

Carefully, she responded, “Yeah—I think there’s probably something there.”

“Do you think *I’m* autistic?”

She paused, then said, “I’ll help you get an evaluation.”

When Thomas is working with writers on scripts, his emphasis is on emotion, not beats. “Plot structure feels like a lie,” he said, adding that he had little interest in a series “where you know there’s a grand romantic gesture coming at the seventeen-minute mark.” (This skepticism extends to overly rosy relationship dynamics more generally. When a viewer asked, on Instagram, if he was interested in showing “positive nonmonogamy on tv,” noting that “Please Like Me” had been “middling in that regard,” Thomas replied, “I don’t really want to see a ‘positive’ anything story. Non-monogamy *is* actually middling, the same way monogamy is. Fine!”) At another Zoom meeting for Season 2, his focus was on balancing earnest exploration and humor. As staffers outlined each episode, he flagged stretches that felt “thin on high jinks.”

True to form, Thomas pushed for less flattering moments—even for otherwise “good,” well-liked characters. When the writers sketched out a lovers’ spat between Nicholas and Alex—in which an argument over watery spaghetti Bolognese abruptly turns more serious—Thomas reminded the others that, at this stage in the season, Nicholas has made many missteps. To avoid alienating viewers from him completely, the scene needed to emphasize “that we think Alex is *also* being unfair.”

A producer, Marissa Berlin, suggested that Alex make a joke with a sour undertone, to lend a “subtle, nuanced, passive-aggressive cruelty” to the fight’s resolution. Thomas went further. “I don’t know what we have to lose,” he mused, by making Alex “a bit terrible in that scene.” No one responded. “Everyone looks like they hate it!” he said.

Ward hedged: “As long as it’s not, like, so out of character that it doesn’t make sense.”

“No one’s *ever* on my side!” Thomas said, mock-indignant.

Thomas told me that he wanted the audience’s affections for each character to ebb and flow. This philosophy had also undergirded “Please Like Me.” Years ago, a fan submitted a question to Thomas’s blog, asking whether he was “supposed to hate” Ward’s character. Thomas responded, “I think if we’ve made the characters real enough you should hate them sometimes and love them sometimes.”

Thomas’s realization that he is on the autism spectrum has helped him pinpoint what appealed to him about comedy in the first place. At a time when he was less confident in his conversational abilities, standup allowed him to express himself: “I could plan what I wanted to say, and then it would go the way that I wanted it to go, and people could see that I was interesting.” Scripted television afforded even greater control. “I can, word by word and frame by frame, go in and control the meaning and intent of what I’m trying to say,” Thomas said. “I can be better understood that way than in on-the-fly social interaction.”

He recently rewatched “Please Like Me,” and was struck by what he saw as retrospective evidence of his condition: “As far as a show about an undiagnosed autistic person goes, it is *mint*.” Countless episodes centered on Josh’s inability to discuss his emotions, and on his clumsiness in responding to others. Thomas emerged with a deepened appreciation for why he’d so often described the series as one in which “I get up and try to get through the day without hurting anyone’s feelings.”

Ward told me that Thomas’s diagnosis has been clarifying for him, too. “Josh begins, like, sixty per cent of conversations with ‘I just don’t understand why . . .’ And I always thought that’s how he joked,” he said. “But now I think he genuinely didn’t understand why people did the things that they do, or why people adhered to these social norms that made no sense to him.”

Season 2 of “Everything’s Gonna Be Okay” wrapped production on January 25th, after eleven weeks of filming under quarantine strictures. When Thomas and I spoke later that week, he had just begun reviewing footage from the first day of shooting. His mandate, he’d discovered, was to edit out the existential dread. “You really see in all the actors’ eyes, including me, just how bewildered and scared everyone is!” he said, laughing. “We’re starting all our sentences happy, but then, by the end of the sentence, no one’s smiling.”

The show’s small cast and crew had been tested for *COVID-19* three times a week, then five, and managed to avoid the shutdowns that had plagued other sets. Many showrunners worked remotely during the pandemic, but Thomas’s acting role required him to be on set. To bolster everyone’s spirits, he initiated spontaneous dance parties. He also told Cromer and Carrier that, in September, a clinical psychologist had confirmed that he, too, was on the autism spectrum.

Cromer, who plays Matilda, took the disclosure in stride. “She didn’t care,” Thomas said, cheerfully. “This label is *so* broad that you can talk to an autistic person and say that you’re autistic, but your experience of autism is going to be so different to their experience of autism. Like, Kayla doesn’t understand sarcasm—she’s learning how to understand sarcasm. It can be frustrating for her, because I’m *very* sarcastic, and I’m making jokes all the time. You’re kind of, like, ‘O.K., you’ve got this thing that I have, but also you don’t.’ It’s different.”

Thomas’s psychologist had presented the results of his evaluation gingerly, as though he were waiting, Thomas said, for “some *reaction*”—the sort of sudden revelation or vehement denial that you might see on TV. To Thomas, the diagnosis felt less like a thunderbolt than like a quiet confirmation. The cascade of smaller revelations leading up to that point—and the way he’d begun to recalibrate his relationships accordingly—“became what was interesting, and what had emotional weight.” This more fitful narrative, Thomas decided, would become Nicholas’s story on “Everything’s Gonna Be Okay.” His series, and his life, would follow the same meandering path. “This is about me understanding why I am the way I am,” he told me. “And it’s about trying to figure out how I can make the world fit with how I’m going to be.” ♦

Poems

- “[Let Me](#)”
- “[Post-Fire Forest](#)”

[April 12, 2021 Issue](#)

Let Me

By [Camille T. Dungy](#)

April 5, 2021

Audio: Read by the author.

Let me tell you, America, this one last thing.
I will never be finished dreaming about you.
I had a lover once. If you could call him that.
I drove to his apartment in a faraway town,
like the lost bear who wandered to our cul-de-sac
that summer smoke from the burning mountain
altered our air. I don't know what became of her.
I drove to so many apartments in the day.
America, this is really the very last thing.
He'd stocked up, for our weekend together,
on food he knew I would like. Vegetarian
pad Thai, some black-bean-and-sweet-potato chili,
coconut ice cream, a bag of caramel popcorn.
Loads of Malbec. He wanted to make me happy,
but he drank until I would have been a fool
not to be afraid. I'd been drinking plenty, too.
It was too late to drive myself anywhere safe.
I watched him finger a brick as if to throw it
at my head. Maybe that's a metaphor. Maybe
that's what happened. America, sometimes it's hard
to tell the difference with you. All I could do
was lock myself inside his small bedroom. I pushed
a chest against the door and listened as he threw
his body at the wood. Listened as he tore apart
the pillow I had sewn him. He'd been good to me,
but this was like waiting for the walls to ignite.
You've heard that, America? In a firestorm
some houses burn from the inside out. An ember
caught in the eaves, wormed through the chinking, will flare up

in the insulation, on the frame, until everything
in the house succumbs to the blaze. In the morning,
I found him on the couch. Legs too long, arms spilling
to the carpet, knuckles bruised in the same pattern
as a hole in the drywall. Every wine bottle
empty. Each container of food opened, eaten,
or destroyed. “I didn’t want you to have this,”
he whispered. If he could not consume my body,
the food he’d given me to eat would have to do.
Have you ever seen a person walk through the ruins
of a burnt-out home? Please believe me, I am not
making light of such suffering, America.
Maybe the dream I still can’t get over is that,
so far, I have made it out alive.

[April 12, 2021 Issue](#)

Post-Fire Forest

By [Forrest Gander](#)

April 5, 2021

Audio: Read by the author.

Shadows of shadows without canopy,
phalanxes of carbonized trunks and
snags, their inner momentum shorted out.
They surround us in early morning
like plutonic pillars, like mute clairvoyants
leading a *Sursum Corda*, like the excrescence
of some long slaughter. All that moves
is mist lifting, too indistinct to be called
ghostly, from scorched filamental
layers of rain-moistened earth. What
remains of the forest takes place
in the exclamatory mode. Cindered
utterances in a tongue from which
everything trivial has been volatilized,
everything trivial to fire. In a notch,
between near hills stubbled
with black paroxysm, we spot
a familiar sun, liquid glass globed
at the blowpipe's tip. If this landscape
is dreaming, it must dream itself awake.

You have, everyone notes, a rare talent
for happiness. I wonder how
to value that, walking through wreckage.
On the second day, a black-backed
woodpecker answers your call, but we
search until twilight without finding it.

Shouts & Murmurs

- [Insomnia: The Opera](#)

[April 12, 2021 Issue](#)

Insomnia: The Opera

By [Henry Alford](#)

April 5, 2021



Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

PERSONAGGI

Enrico, *an insomniac*

Valerian, Melatonin, Ambien, Klonopin, ZzzQuil, Pot Gummy, *suitors*

The Ghost of Unfulfilled Ambitions

Villagers

The Parade of High-Intensity Spectres

ATTO PRIMO

(10 P.M. *A bedchamber, with a balcony overlooking a village square. Enrico is putting on pajamas. He sings at half voice.*)

Enrico: My raccoon eyes and zombie stare
Boldly sing the woes of bodily miscare.
O, hundred-dollar white-noise machine! O, yoga dude named Tevin!
Help me reverse twelve months of 24/7.
Collective woe has ravaged my breast,
America, you put the “un” in unrest.

(He parts his blackout curtains, opens the window, and addresses the villagers.)

Hark, twentysomething coder! Hark, seasoned whore!
Tonight's the night I finally snore;
When *might* turns to *wil*, and *is* rises from *seems*.
I've reduced my caffeine and I'm ready to dream.

Villagers: He's reduced his caffeine and he's ready to dream!

ATTO SECONDO

(1 A.M. Enrico, restless, has positioned his five sleep aids/suitors on his bureau.)

Enrico: O, sleep aids, I beseech thee,
Which of you has the puissance to short-term deep-six me?

Klonopin: When cartoon characters are clobbered with a rolling pin,
The sound it makes is “*KLONOPIN!*”

Pot Gummy: No, no: today's insomniacs want their remedies bespoke,

And I can make everything seem like a private joke.

Valerian: Sure, K-pin and Gummy are sexy, but this herb is not havin' it.

I won't make you Carrie Fisher scrabbling at her medicine cabinet.

Melatonin: I'm a hormone that's already in your body, right?

Prithee—do you feel hormy tonight?

ZzzQuil: I won't unmoor you, and I'll reinstate your bounce.

I'm safe and effective, though difficult to pronounce.

Enrico: Ambien, this talk of aftereffects has rendered you silent.

Is reticence a mask for thine oft-told violence?

Ambien: You reference sleepwalking like it's the "Saw" movies, or "Seven,"

But sleepwalkers lose weight while they slumber: in a word, Heaven!

(*Enrico pops a gummy and gets in bed.*)

ATTO TERZO

(4 A.M. Enrico is awakened by a parade of spectres, each of which erupts in a brief paroxysm of screeching recitative.) Sirens, Car Alarms, Helicopters, Barking Dogs, Thunder, Fear of Contagion, Vaccine Envy, Mitch McConnell's Dewlap, Festive Neighbors, A Ticking Sound from the Basement, Unreturned E-mails, Concern That This Is All Leading to a Hannibal Lecter-ish Sleep-Apnea Mask, Irritation from Having Other People Yell "Unmute Yourself!" Like They Are Uta Fucking Hagen, Concern That Putin Is Downloading Information from His Memory Foam, Concern That Prestige Television Has Overplayed Its Bourgeois-White-People-Get-Caught-Up-in-a-World-of-Crime Card, Anxiety That the Term "Space Heater" Is a Huge Mandate for Such a Tiny Machine, Discomfort with the

Word “Terry,” Anxiety That if He Doesn’t Vacuum His Apartment Daily
He’ll Drown in a Drift of Dead Skin.

(*Sobbing, Enrico opens his window and prepares to leap. Right then, he hears the most terrifying spectre of all, the Ghost of Unfulfilled Ambitions.*)

Ghost: Your squandering dead-heats with the best deadbeats’,

You jam every grinder with your over-fatted forcemeat.

Through your numbness inviolate and your passivity tectonic,

Your recent business deal disappeared because you slept on it!

Also, Tubby—you should have listened to Ambien

And paid a visit or two to the Somnambulist Gym.

(*Renewing his attempt to jump, Enrico looks down at the street, singing furiously. Just as he takes a deep breath and summons the will to leap, the window crashes down on his head; Enrico, like all characters in opera when stabbed or shot, reacts by singing even more loudly, appearing to have no agency over his diaphragm. It is only when he attempts to jump a third time, and the window crashes on his head again, that Enrico, reeling, finally collapses into bed, unconscious at last.*) ♦

Sketchpad

- Heard on the Street: After the Jab

April 12, 2021 Issue

Heard on the Street: After the Jab

Just-vaxed New Yorkers hit the sidewalks with sighs of relief.

By [Peter Arkle](#)

April 5, 2021



Tables for Two

- [A Pasta Factory in Brooklyn](#)

[April 12, 2021 Issue](#)

A Pasta Factory in Brooklyn

The chef Amit Rabinovich, of Forma Pasta Factory, in Greenpoint, has devised a dough that cooks as quickly as fresh pasta but has the sturdiness of dried, and is served—with sauces such as a luscious white ragù—nearly instantly.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

April 2, 2021



An amateur anthropologist trying to track down the origins of pasta could drive herself insane. Legends abound. Dates conflict. Definitions are as slippery as freshly drained spaghetti. Did Marco Polo bring noodles from China to Italy in the thirteenth century? Did invading Arabs introduce something pasta-like to Sicily in the ninth century? Did pasta exist in ancient Greece? Does couscous count as pasta? Some scholars suggest that the first Italian pasta factory was licensed to open in Venice in 1740. Let the record state clearly that an Italian pasta factory seminal in its own way opened in Brooklyn in 2019.



Cooked pasta dishes are twelve dollars, with the exception of specials, which rotate with the day of the week, and sides are all six dollars. Pastas, left to right: pappardelle bolognese; spaghetti pomodoro; pipette with pork-sausage ragù. Sides, clockwise from center: market vegetables with bagna cauda; arancini with Calabrian-chili aioli; eggplant parmesan.

If you're assuming, as I did, that Forma Pasta Factory is a warehouse filled with conveyor belts, you'll be either disappointed or relieved to learn that it's more like a restaurant, a very small one on a quiet block in Greenpoint. By the strictest definition, it's a factory, too: behind the same narrow counter where chefs tend simmering pots of sauce and assemble salads, a workstation is crowded with extruders.

Visit during the day and you can watch as dough takes the form of stubby, ribbed, slightly curved tubes called pipette, or of ruffle-edged sheets for lasagna. Bring them home raw, to cook yourself, or eat them on the patio out front, tossed in a luscious white ragù, nubs of pork sausage clinging to ridges, or layered with eggplant, amatriciana sauce, and Parmigiano Reggiano and baked until bubbling. (The menu is also available for delivery, as well as takeout; McCarren Park, which you can see from the front door, is perfect for a picnic.)

Of course, Forma is far from the first place in town to manufacture pasta. (One of the first pasta factories in America opened in Brooklyn in 1848.) What earns Forma its place on the historical time line is the product itself. In the past few years, others have tried, and failed, to give pasta the fast-casual treatment. At Forma, a young chef named Amit Rabinovich, who has cooked at Babbo and Salumeria Rosi, seems to have finally nailed it.



Pastas are flash-boiled and then quickly sautéed in a chosen sauce.

Rabinovich's trick was to devise a dough that cooks as quickly as traditional fresh pasta, which boils in as little as two minutes, without sacrificing the profoundly satisfying, sturdier texture of dried pasta, which can take ten minutes or more. He spent six months doctoring the recipe, doing away with egg yolk, which is key to most fresh pasta, and experimenting with ratios of durum-wheat flour to water.

During several meals at Forma, I marvelled not only at how near to instantly my pasta was served but also at how it redefined my understanding of al dente. A chef friend likened Rabinovich's pasta to Asian noodles: spaghetti, slick with a bright, not too sweet pomodoro made with San Marzano tomatoes and fresh basil, was not just firm but almost buoyant, like Japanese udon. It veered toward a chewy springiness known in Taiwan as "Q," exemplified by tapioca pearls.



The fresh pasta is made daily and, like traditional fresh pasta, cooks in under five minutes, but it retains an al-dente texture normally achieved only with dried pasta.

Unlike some of its recent predecessors, including the short-lived Pasta Flyer, Forma does not feel born of a capitalist obsession with efficiency. It is not, by any means, the Chipotle of pasta, though it may be a scalable business model. You order and pay at the counter, take a number, and seat yourself, but a busser delivers your food on real plates, and your wine in real glasses. The sidewalk tables are covered with checkered cloth, and the cozy interior evokes a trattoria, with whitewashed brick walls and tin ceilings.

That Forma is fast and casual, not to mention affordable, makes it feel refreshingly unpretentious. (It's also well suited to a pandemic.) Pastas are twelve dollars, with the exception of specials, which are sixteen and rotate based on the day. (Lasagna is on Sundays, and tends to run out early.) Sides, including grass-fed-beef meatballs and a lovely plate of vegetables served with bagna cauda, are six dollars. A fresh-shaved-truffle supplement would be out of place here. It's pasta for the people, reclaimed. (*Pasta \$12-\$16.*) ♦

The Current Cinema

- A Journey to the Center of the Earth in “Godzilla vs. Kong”

[April 12, 2021 Issue](#)

A Journey to the Center of the Earth in “Godzilla vs. Kong”

Adam Wingard’s film reaffirms the franchise’s ability to waste talented actors, in this case including Alexander Skarsgård, Millie Bobby Brown, and Rebecca Hall.

By [Anthony Lane](#)

March 31, 2021



There is a touching scene, toward the end of “Godzilla vs. Kong,” when the creatures of the title draw near to each other. With a mighty thump, Godzilla lays Kong flat, then leans tenderly over him, almost exactly like Fred Astaire holding Ginger Rogers in a prolonged backbend, in “Top Hat” (1935). As for dancers, so for rampaging beasts; they seem to find the happiness they seek when they’re out together fighting cheek to cheek—or, in this case, snout to snout. What’s interesting is that Godzilla, armed as he is with a bright-blue radioactive roar, could take this opportunity to barf his opponent into extinction. But he doesn’t. Gazing down, he snarls and steams, as if to

say, “I’ve missed you *so* much,” then stalks away in a huff. The moment passes. Pity. The two of them could have taken a room.

The film, directed by Adam Wingard, begins on Skull Island, with Kong, a bachelor, waking up alone, stretching, and greeting the fine day, to the sound of Elvis singing “Loving Arms.” Alas, Kong’s residence is soon revealed to be a stately pleasure dome, resembling the one in “The Truman Show” (1998), and designed not so much to fence him in as to keep out unsolicited visitors, such as Godzilla and the I.R.S. A stickler for the niceties, Kong receives few callers except for Jia (Kaylee Hottle), who, in strict accordance with the laws of melodrama, is a little deaf-mute orphan. (Does she play with a simian doll? You bet.) Also on hand is Dr. Ilene Andrews (Rebecca Hall), described as the Kong Whisperer—a very niche aptitude, though we never actually see her being winched up to have a word in Kong’s ear. Her main concern is that he and Godzilla should, whatever happens, remain socially distanced. “There can’t be *two* alpha Titans,” she says. Tell that to the makers of this movie.

One mark of the Godzilla franchise is the ingenuity with which each director manages to waste the talents of an excellent cast. Among those squandered by the latest film are Brian Tyree Henry as Bernie Hayes, a conspiracy-minded podcaster; Millie Bobby Brown as Madison Russell, one of his more gullible listeners; and Kyle Chandler as her flustered father, Mark. The focus of Bernie’s suspicions is Apex Cybernetics, a seemingly benign but secretly wicked corporation—the opposite, that is, of the major movie studios, which appear to be bellicose and mean but in fact donate the bulk of their profits to the rescue of stray kittens. Apex is headed by Walter Simmons (Demián Bichir), who we *know* is evil because of the caressing way in which he cradles a tumbler of whiskey. He, too, has a daughter, the smoldering Maia (Eiza González). To her falls the honor of declaiming my favorite line: “Dump the monkey!”

She has her wish. The monkey does indeed get dumped, next to a large hole in the Antarctic. This turns out to be a portal, via which Kong and other characters are whooshed to the kernel of our planet. The science behind this narrative, I hasten to add, is totally sound; you can read all about it in “Hollow Earth,” by Dr. Nathan Lind (Alexander Skarsgård), of Denham University. Listen for the echoes. The professor in Jules Verne’s “Journey to

the Center of the Earth” was named Lidenbrock, and Denham was the headstrong adventurer in “King Kong” (1933). The new film is a pale and blundering shadow of those rousing tales, spoiling their brio with sentimental qualms; we are asked to believe not just that other Titans dwell beyond the intraterrestrial tunnel but that, among them, our giant hero may find his family and his natural home. Where will it all end? Keeping up with the Kongdashians?

And yet this ridiculous trip to the earth’s core does engender the one great beauty of the film. In wide shot, we see a green and pleasant land; above it, in mirror image, another country, upside down; and, in between them, something amazing, an ape falling out of the sky. Even the dumbest flicks can spring these graceful surprises. Equally unexpected, if rather less charming, is the location of the finale. With the whole world to choose from, why pick Hong Kong? That, for some reason, is where the story pitches up, and where our two contenders are joined by a third party, for a city-wrecking threesome. There’s a nice image of Kong grasping the peak of a tall tower, much as his predecessor clung to the Empire State Building in 1933, but there’s also an unpleasant sense of order having to be restored to the streets of Hong Kong, irrespective of the human cost. If I were a young protester there, I would be more perturbed than entertained by this remorseless work. Five days before the movie’s American release, by the way, it opened in China, and earned more than seventy million dollars in its first weekend. Fancy that.

If you had to guess, you’d probably say that “This Is Not a Burial, It’s a Resurrection” was the title bestowed on a piece of conceptual art. In fact, it’s a new movie—the third full-length film from the director Lemohang Jeremiah Mosese, who grew up in Lesotho and now resides in Berlin. His previous venture was a documentary called “Mother, I Am Suffocating. This Is My Last Film About You,” so, in one respect, he’s beginning to pare things down.

The story is set in the north of Lesotho. Such is the altitude that the meadows of flowers seem alpine in their abundance. We find ourselves in and around the village of Nasaretha; it was named by Christian missionaries, although to inhabitants with long memories “it’s always been the Plains of Weeping.” So says Mantoa (Mary Twala Mhlongo), the elderly widow who

is the heart and the burning conscience of the tale. She has already lost her husband, her daughter, and her grandchild, and, as the movie starts, she learns that her son, too, who was employed in the South African gold mines, and whose return she was eagerly awaiting, has passed away. One death alone remains to be attended to: that of Mantoa herself. She pays a gravedigger to prepare her resting place, but he refuses to do the job for a living soul. And thus, with sweat inundating the deep lines of her face, the old woman digs her own grave.

The purpose of this elemental gloom is not just to nourish the mood of the film but to push the narrative onward: the cemetery is the site of the plot. A dam is due to be built, and Nasaretha will soon be flooded. The residents will be forcibly relocated, and the dead, beneath their simple headstones, will be drowned forever. Naturally, there is bitter resistance to this plan. Mantoa goes to the Ministry of Local Affairs and is told to fill out a form in capital letters; the village pastor, encircled by his parishioners, writes a letter to their king; and one of the elders laments the very principle of modernization. “Every time I say the word ‘progress,’ my tongue literally rolls backwards,” he says. “I can’t get myself to spit it out.”

You may feel the need, as I did, for some broader context here. The dam is presumably a component of the vast Lesotho Highlands Water Project, which has been under construction for decades, and which generates not just electricity for Lesotho but valuable revenue from supplying water to surrounding areas of South Africa. “This Is Not a Burial,” though, contains no mention of the project, nor does it care to glance at the likelihood that *some* lives and incomes, downstream, must have been improved as a result. Such omissions are not a fault; rather, they emphasize Mosese’s determination to burrow past issues of politics and governance into the stratum of myth. Hence the outlandish character who prefacing the movie, glaring at us, and crops up now and then, like a Greek chorus, to comment on the action and to bewail the heroine’s plight: “Redeem your days, old widow, for the wheel of time has cast you out like an old cloth and turned you into a dung beetle. It’s finished.” Can I help?

Between his jeremiads, this nameless figure also plays the lesiba—a stringed wind instrument, if you can picture such a thing, that conjures a baleful mixture of dirge and honk. The entire film, in fact, is made more haunting by

its sound design, and by Yu Miyashita's score. Listen to the low and scratchy drone of the music as Mantoa finds her home ablaze, and then, afterward, to the high keening of the strings as she sits amid the ashes, on her charred bedstead, with sheep nosing peacefully around her. Compare those noises with the airy fluting that accompanies the torching of the house at the end of Tarkovsky's "The Sacrifice" (1986), and I'd say that Mosese has the edge. How blessed is he, too, by the presence of Mhlongo, so stricken and yet so serene in the leading role. In solemn garments (a dress of rich bronze, surmounted by a wide black lace collar that glitters in the light), framed against walls of midnight blue, she looks as proud as a queen. Mhlongo has died, at the age of eighty, since the movie was made. Let it stand as her memorial. It will not be washed away. ♦

The Pictures

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[April 12, 2021 Issue](#)

Sigourney Weaver and James Cameron Back in the Deep End

The frequent collaborators reunite for a Disney+ docuseries on whales, which the director calls the Beatles of the high seas.

By [Michael Schulman](#)

April 5, 2021

James Cameron's obsession with the ocean deep began when he was an adolescent, in rural Canada. He read *National Geographic* accounts of deep-sea excursions and idolized Jacques Cousteau and his crew. "They always had this great French sense of style," he said recently. "They breathed it, quite literally, with their Aqua-Lungs. They got in their silver wetsuits and went exploring. It was like a science-fiction movie. I said, 'I need to do that.' " The problem: he lived five hundred kilometres from the nearest ocean. He begged his father to find him a scuba course, and, one winter, he crossed into Buffalo to join a nighttime Y.M.C.A. class. "It was all adults, and I was this skinny sixteen-year-old," he recalled. "It was hard-core."



Sigourney Weaver and James Cameron Illustration by João Fazenda

Eventually, Cameron's aquanaut tendencies bled into his movie career. He filmed his 1989 underwater thriller, "The Abyss," in a seven-million-gallon containment vessel at an abandoned nuclear plant. In 1995, he made twelve dives to explore the wreckage of the Titanic, taking footage that appeared in his world-conquering hit film. In 2012, he became the first solo visitor to reach the bottom of the Challenger Deep, the planet's lowest point, in the Mariana Trench. (After the multimillionaire explorer Victor Vescovo claimed to have gone deeper, two years ago, Cameron pushed back, saying the seabed there is flat.)

His latest fascination: whales. As an explorer-at-large at National Geographic, Cameron executive-produced "Secrets of the Whales," a docuseries premiering on Disney+ on Earth Day. "Whales are very alien to us, but when you start studying them you realize how much we have in common," he said. He was joined, on Zoom, by his frequent collaborator Sigourney Weaver, who had supplied the show's voice-over. Neither physically entered the world of the whales; the series was shot by some twenty wildlife cinematographers, who spent three years getting up close to whales in twenty-four locations, including the Antarctic, Norway, and the Azores. But both had been whale-watching, and Weaver once had an encounter with thirty bottlenose dolphins, which swam up to her while she was snorkeling in Hawaii. "I wrote to Jim afterward," she recalled. "I remember what you said: 'The ocean gave you a gift.' "

Both found whales easy to relate to. Like Cameron, they're hitmakers. "You've got these male humpbacks off Western Australia that get together and cook up the song for the year," he said. "And other whales around the entire Southern Hemisphere sing that exact song. That's not just culture—that's *pop* culture. That's the Beatles, right?" One episode captures a whale in Patagonia teaching her granddaughter how to pull off a risky hunting move. "I equated it to driving lessons for my son," Cameron continued. "They must be communicating with language on a high enough order that they can conceptualize the future: 'If this happens, do this.' "

"The point is made, too, with the belugas and the humpbacks," Weaver said, describing another sequence. "The mother has this special cry to call the young one. As a mother, I thought, Wow, if we could have a sound that we could send out into the universe that would call back our child—"

“—It’s called a text,” Cameron said. They recalled a mating scene, reminiscent of an Elvis concert, in which a male sperm whale swims into a group of females. “The male is ready, he is unsheathed, and he’s ready to party,” Weaver said, blushing. “I just thought, My goodness!”

“The more you look into evolutionary biology,” Cameron said, “the more you realize that the males are just these ridiculous creatures that grow giant antlers or big red snouts or whatever it is to impress the ladies, and it’s the ladies who figure out who’s going to get some.”

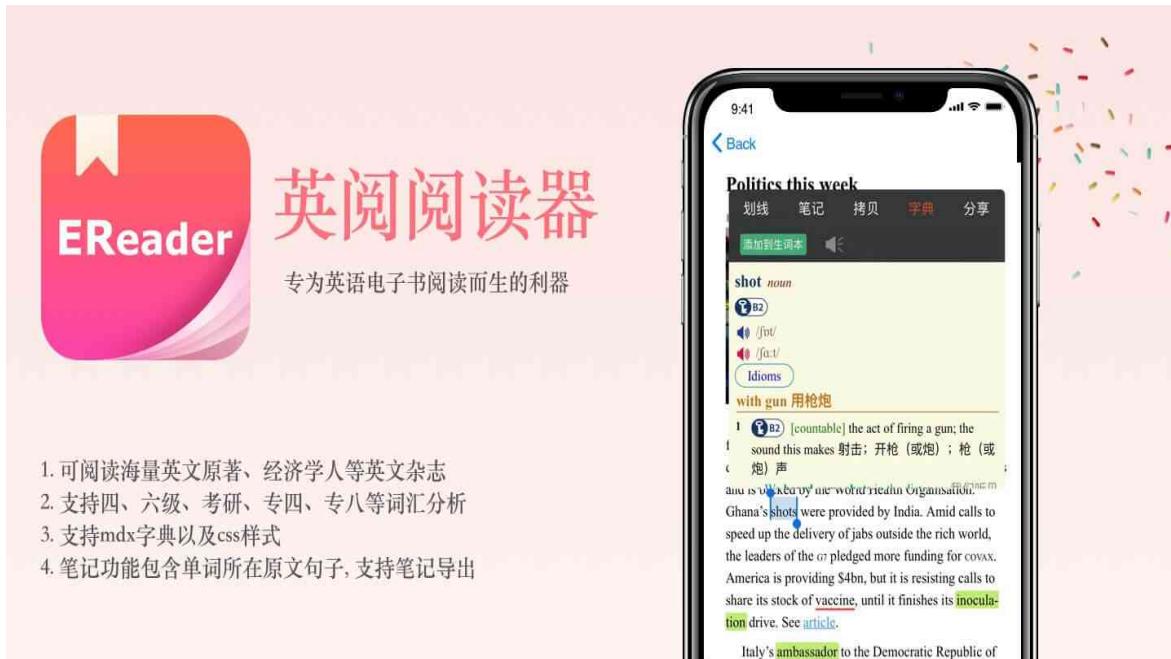
Weaver seemed pleased by this assessment. (She taped her voice-over in New York, where her assistant constructed a “cave made out of clothes” to muffle the construction noise outside.) The two first met in the mid-eighties, when Cameron was hired to write and direct “Aliens,” another tale of interspecies encounters, and had to persuade Weaver to revive her butt-kicking character, Ripley. “I was petrified—plus, I’d read that you were six feet tall,” Cameron recalled. “When we were all set to start shooting, you tapped me on the shoulder and said, ‘Oh, by the way, I’m an anti-gun lobbyist, and I can’t fire a machine gun.’ ”

“Rewrite, please!” Weaver said, laughing.

“We went out in the back lot and gave you a .45-calibre Thompson submachine gun, the old mobster kind, and you fired it,” Cameron said. “I thought, All right, we’re going to be O.K.” More recently, the two spent eighteen months in L.A., shooting motion-capture scenes for “Avatar 2.” Before the pandemic hit, Cameron had been shooting in New Zealand, and he lobbied the government to let him continue his operations in Wellington, where he is now in postproduction. Weaver was calling from California, meaning that Cameron was twenty hours ahead. “I’m living in the future,” he said. “If you want to know what happens tomorrow, just ask me.” ♦

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