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# A Critic at Large

- [The Case Against the Trauma Plot](#)

Fiction writers love it. Filmmakers can't resist it. But does this trope deepen characters, or flatten them into a set of symptoms?

By [Parul Sehgal](#)

It was on a train journey, from Richmond to Waterloo, that [Virginia Woolf](#) encountered the weeping woman. A pinched little thing, with her silent tears, she had no way of knowing that she was about to be enlisted into an argument about the fate of fiction. Woolf summoned her in the 1924 essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," writing that "all novels begin with an old lady in the corner opposite"—a character who awakens the imagination. Unless the English novel recalled that fact, Woolf thought, the form would be finished. Plot and originality count for crumbs if a writer cannot bring the unhappy lady to life. And here Woolf, almost helplessly, began to spin a story herself—the cottage that the old lady kept, decorated with sea urchins, her way of picking her meals off a saucer—alighting on details of odd, dark density to convey something of this woman's essence.

Those details: the sea urchins, that saucer, that slant of personality. To conjure them, Woolf said, a writer draws from her temperament, her time, her country. An English novelist would portray the woman as an eccentric, warty and beribboned. A Russian would turn her into an untethered soul wandering the street, "asking of life some tremendous question."

How might today's novelists depict Woolf's Mrs. Brown? Who is our representative character? We'd meet her, I imagine, in profile or bare outline. Self-entranced, withholding, giving off a fragrance of unspecified damage. Stalled, confusing to others, prone to sudden silences and jumpy responsiveness. Something gnaws at her, keeps her solitary and opaque, until there's a sudden rip in her composure and her history comes spilling out, in confession or in flashback.

Dress this story up or down: on the page and on the screen, one plot—the trauma plot—has arrived to rule them all. Unlike the marriage plot, the trauma plot does not direct our curiosity toward the future (*Will they or won't they?*) but back into the past (*What happened to her?*). "For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge," [Sylvia Plath](#) wrote in "Lady Lazarus." "A very large charge." Now such exposure comes cheap. Frame it within a bad romance between two characters and their discordant baggage. Nest it in an

epic of diaspora; reënvision the Western, or the novel of passing. Fill it with ghosts. Tell it in a modernist sensory rush with the punctuation falling away. Set it among nine perfect strangers. In fiction, our protagonist will often go unnamed; on television, the character may be known as Ted Lasso, Wanda Maximoff, Claire Underwood, Fleabag. Classics are retrofitted according to the model. Two modern adaptations of [Henry James](#)'s "The Turn of the Screw" add a rape to the governess's past. In "Anne with an E," the Netflix reboot of "Anne of Green Gables," the title character is given a history of violent abuse, which she relives in jittery flashbacks. In Hogarth Press's novelized updates of Shakespeare's plays, Jo Nesbø, Howard Jacobson, Jeanette Winterson, and others accessorize Macbeth and company with the requisite devastating backstories.

The prevalence of the trauma plot cannot come as a surprise at a time when the notion of trauma has proved all-engulfing. Its customary clinical incarnation, P.T.S.D., is the fourth most commonly diagnosed psychiatric disorder in America, and one with a vast remit. Defined by the *DSM-III*, in 1980, as an event "outside the range of usual human experience," trauma now encompasses "anything the body perceives as too much, too fast, or too soon," the psychotherapist Resmaa Menakem tells us in "[My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies](#)" (2017). The expanded definition has allowed many more people to receive care but has also stretched the concept so far that some 636,120 possible symptom combinations can be attributed to P.T.S.D., meaning that 636,120 people could conceivably have a unique set of symptoms and the same diagnosis. The ambiguity is moral as well as medical: a soldier who commits war crimes can share the diagnosis with his victims, Ruth Leys notes in "[Trauma: A Genealogy](#)" (2000). Today, with the term having grown even more elastic, this same diagnosis can apply to a journalist who reported on that atrocity, to descendants of the victims, and even to a historian studying the event a century later, who may be a casualty of "vicarious trauma."

How to account for trauma's creep? Take your corners. Modern life is inherently traumatic. No, we're just better at spotting it, having become more attentive to human suffering in all its gradations. Unless we're worse at it—more prone to perceive everything as injury. In a world infatuated with victimhood, has trauma emerged as a passport to status—our red badge of

courage? The question itself might offend: perhaps it's grotesque to argue about the symbolic value attributed to suffering when so little restitution or remedy is available. So many laborious debates, all set aside when it's time to be entertained. We settle in for more episodes of Marvel superheroes brooding brawnily over daddy issues, more sagas of enigmatic, obscurely injured literary heroines.

It was not war or sexual violence that brought the idea of traumatic memory to light but the English railways, some six decades before Woolf chugged along from Richmond to Waterloo. In the eighteen-sixties, the physician John Eric Erichsen identified a group of symptoms in some victims of railway accidents—though apparently uninjured, they later reported confusion, hearing voices, and paralysis. He termed it “railway spine.” Sigmund Freud and Pierre Janet went on to argue that the mind itself could be wounded. In the trenches of the Great War, railway spine was reborn as shell shock, incarnated in the figure of the suicidal veteran Septimus Smith, in Woolf’s “[Mrs. Dalloway](#). [”](#) What remained unaltered was the scorn that accompanied diagnosis; shell-shocked soldiers were sometimes labelled “moral invalids” and court-martialled. In the decades that followed, the study of trauma slipped into “periods of oblivion,” as the psychiatrist Judith Herman has written. It wasn’t until the Vietnam War that the aftershocks of combat trauma were “rediscovered.” P.T.S.D. was identified, and, with the political organizing of women’s groups, the diagnosis was extended to victims of rape and sexual abuse. In the nineteen-nineties, trauma theory as a cultural field of inquiry—pioneered by the literary critic Cathy Caruth—described an experience that overwhelms the mind, fragments the memory, and elicits repetitive behaviors and hallucinations. In the popular realm, such ideas were given a scientific imprimatur by Bessel van der Kolk’s “[The Body Keeps the Score](#)” (2014), which argues that traumatic memories are physiologically distinctive and inscribe themselves on an older, more primal part of the brain.



"I don't eat candy from animal piñatas."  
Cartoon by José Arroyo

"If Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle and the Renaissance the sonnet," Elie Wiesel wrote, "our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony." The enshrinement of testimony in all its guises—in memoirs, confessional poetry, survivor narratives, talk shows—elevated trauma from a sign of moral defect to a source of moral authority, even a kind of expertise. In the past couple of decades, a fresh wave of writing about the subject has emerged, with best-selling novels and memoirs of every disposition: the caustic ([Edward St. Aubyn](#)'s Patrick Melrose novels), the sentimental (Jonathan Safran Foer's "[Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close](#)"), the enraptured (Leslie Jamison's essay collection "[The Empathy Exams](#)"), the breathtakingly candid (the anonymously written memoir "[Incest Diary](#)"), or all of the above ([Karl Ove Knausgaard](#)'s six-volume "My Struggle"). Internet writing mills offered a hundred and fifty dollars a confession. "It was 2015, and everyone was a pop-culture critic, writing from the seat of experience," Larissa Pham recalls in a recent essay collection, "[Pop Song](#)." "The dominant mode by which a young, hungry writer could enter the conversation was by deciding which of her traumas she could monetize . . . be it anorexia, depression, casual racism, or perhaps a sadness like mine, which blended all three." "*The Body Keeps the Score*" has remained planted on the *Times* best-seller list for nearly three years.

Trauma came to be accepted as a totalizing identity. Its status has been little affected by the robust debates within trauma theory or, for that matter, by critics who argue that the evidence of van der Kolk's theory of traumatic memory remains weak, and his claims uncorroborated by empirical studies (even his own). Lines from a [Terrance Hayes](#) sonnet come to mind: "I thought we might sing, / Of the wire wound round the wound of feeling." That wire around the wound might be trauma's cultural script, a concept that bites into the flesh so deeply it is difficult to see its historical contingency. The claim that trauma's imprint is a timeless feature of our species, that it etches itself on the human brain in a distinct way, ignores how trauma has been evolving since the days of railway spine; traumatic flashbacks were reported only after the invention of film. Are the words that come to our lips when we speak of our suffering ever purely our own?

Trauma theory finds its exemplary novelistic incarnation in Hanya Yanagihara's "[A Little Life](#)" (2015), which centers on one of the most accursed characters to ever darken a page. Jude, evidently named for the patron saint of lost causes, was abandoned as an infant. He endures—among other horrors—rape by priests; forced prostitution as a boy; torture and attempted murder by a man who kidnaps him; battery and attempted murder by a lover; the amputation of both legs. He is a man of ambiguous race, without desires, near-mute where his history is concerned—"post-sexual, post-racial, post-identity, post-past," a friend teases him. "The post-man, Jude the Postman." The reader completes the list: *Jude the Post-Traumatic*.

Trauma trumps all other identities, evacuates personality, remakes it in its own image. The story is built on the care and service that Jude elicits from a circle of supporters who fight to protect him from his self-destructive ways; truly, there are newborns envious of the devotion he inspires. The loyalty can be mystifying for the reader, who is conscripted to join in, as a witness to Jude's unending mortifications. Can we so easily invest in this walking chalk outline, this vivified *DSM* entry? With the trauma plot, the logic goes: Evoke the wound and we will believe that a body, a person, has borne it.

Such belief can be difficult to sustain. The invocation of trauma promises access to some well-guarded bloody chamber; increasingly, though, we feel as if we have entered a rather generic motel room, with all the signs of heavy turnover. The second-season revelation of Ted Lasso's childhood trauma

only reduces him; his peculiar, almost sinister buoyancy is revealed to be merely a coping mechanism. He opens up about his past to his therapist just as another character does to her mother—their scenes are intercut—and it happens that both of their traumatic incidents occurred on the same day. The braided revelations make familiar points about fathers (fallible), secrecy (bad), and banked resentments (also bad), but mostly expose the creakiness of a plot mechanism. As audiences grow inured, one trauma may not suffice. We must rival Job, rival Jude. In “[WandaVision](#),” our protagonist weathers the murder of her parents, the murder of her twin, and the death, by her own hands, of her beloved, who is then resurrected and killed again. All that, and a subplot with a ticking time bomb.

Trauma has become synonymous with backstory, but the tyranny of backstory is itself a relatively recent phenomenon—one that, like any successful convention, has a way of skirting our notice. Personality was not always rendered as the pencil-rubbing of personal history. Jane Austen’s characters are not pierced by sudden memories; they do not work to fill in the gaps of partial, haunting recollections. A curtain hangs over childhood, Nicholas Dames writes in “[Amnesiac Selves](#)” (2001), describing a tradition of “pleasurable forgetting,” in which characters import only those details from the past which can serve them (and, implicitly, the narrative) in the present. The same holds for Dorothea Brooke, for Isabel Archer, for Mrs. Ramsay. Certainly the filmmakers of classical Hollywood cinema were quite able to bring characters to life without portentous flashbacks to formative torments. In contrast, characters are now created in order to be dispatched into the past, to truffle for trauma.

Jason Mott’s “[Hell of a Book](#),” which received the 2021 National Book Award for fiction, begins with a slow pan across the figure of a woman sitting on a porch in an old, faded dress: “The threads around the hem lost their grip on things. They broke apart and reached their dangling necks in every direction that might take them away. And now, after seven years of hard work, the dress looked as though it would not be able to hold its fraying fabric together much longer.” It is tempting to read this as a description of the trauma plot itself, threadbare and barely hanging on, never more so than in Mott’s novel. The narrator, a wildly successfully novelist on book tour, finds himself followed by an apparition, who represents both a young Black boy killed by police and a child who witnesses police shoot and kill his own

father. But the rangy, sorrowing themes that Mott wants to explore are subsumed by an array of cheap effects, coy hints of buried trauma in the narrator's own past: amnesiac episodes, hammy Freudian slips, a therapist's sage but unappreciated insights. Once brought to light, this trauma feels oddly disengaged from the story at hand, as tangentially connected as those two entwined strands in "[Ted Lasso](#)," signalling to the same vague homilies (grief haunts, trauma catches up with you) and unnecessary to Mott's more powerful points about police violence as a form of terrorism and the painful perpetual mourning it inspires. Mott uses all the possible cranks and levers of the trauma plot, as if imagining a wire of suspense drawing us in. But the machinery is nothing so fine; it chews up his story instead.

I hear grumbling. Isn't it unfair to blame trauma narratives for portraying what trauma does: annihilate the self, freeze the imagination, force stasis and repetition? It's true that our experiences and our cultural scripts can't be neatly divided; we will interpret one through the other. And yet survivor narratives and research suggest greater diversity than our script allows. Even as the definition of what constitutes P.T.S.D. has grown more jumbled—"the junk drawer of disconnected symptoms," David J. Morris calls it in "[The Evil Hours: A Biography of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder](#)" (2015)—the notion of what it entails, the sentence it imposes, appears to have grown narrower and more unyielding. The afterword to a recent manual, "[Stories Are What Save Us: A Survivor's Guide to Writing About Trauma](#)," advises, "Don't bother trying to rid yourself of trauma altogether. Forget about happy endings. You will lose. Escaping trauma isn't unlike trying to swim out of a riptide."

To question the role of trauma, we are warned, is to oppress: it is "often nothing but a resistance to movements for social justice," Melissa Febos writes in her forthcoming book, "[Body Work: The Radical Power of Personal Narrative](#)." Those who look askance at trauma memoirs, she says, are replicating the "classic role of perpetrator: to deny, discredit and dismiss victims in order to avoid being implicated or losing power." Trauma survivors and researchers who have testified about experiences or presented evidence that clashes with the preferred narrative often find their own stories denied and dismissed. In the nineties, the psychologist Susan A. Clancy conducted a study of adults who had been sexually abused as children. They described the grievous long-term suffering and harm of P.T.S.D., but, to her

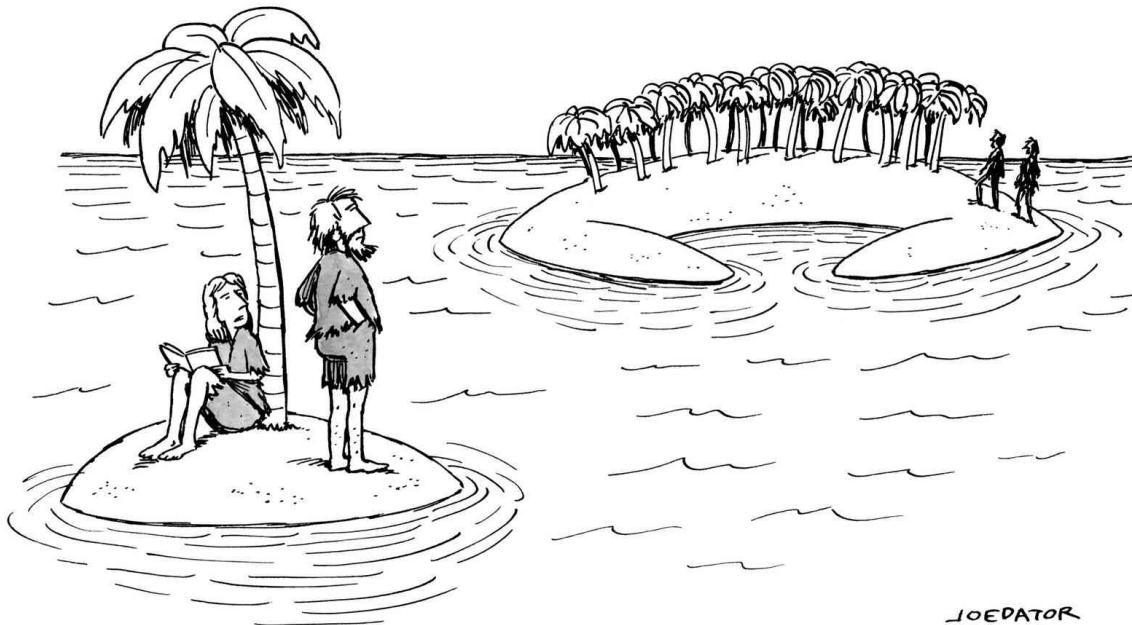
surprise, many said that the actual incidents of abuse were not themselves traumatic, characterized by force or fear—if only because so many subjects were too young to fully understand what was happening and because the abuse was disguised as affection, as a game. The anguish came later, with the realization of what had occurred. Merely for presenting these findings, Clancy was labelled an ally of pedophilia, a trauma denialist. During treatment for P.T.S.D. after serving as a war correspondent in Iraq, David Morris was discouraged from asking if his experience might yield any form of wisdom. Clinicians admonished him, he says, “for straying from the strictures of the therapeutic regime.” He was left wondering how the medicalization of trauma prevents veterans from expressing their moral outrage at war, siphoning it, instead, into a set of symptoms to be managed.

And never mind pesky findings that the vast majority of people recover well from traumatic events and that post-traumatic growth is far more common than post-traumatic stress. In a recent *Harper’s* [essay](#), the novelist Will Self suggests that the biggest beneficiaries of the trauma model are trauma theorists themselves, who are granted a kind of tenure, entrusted with a lifetime’s work of “witnessing” and interpreting. George A. Bonanno, the director of Columbia’s Loss, Trauma, and Emotion Lab and the author of [“The End of Trauma,”](#) has a blunter assessment: “People don’t seem to want to let go of the idea that everybody’s traumatized.”

When Virginia Woolf wrote about her own experience of sexual abuse as a child, she settled on a wary description of herself as “the person to whom things happen.” The mask of trauma does not always neatly fit the face. In [“Maus,”](#) Art Spiegelman strives to understand his overbearing father, a Holocaust survivor. “I used to think the war made him that way,” he says. His stepmother, Mala, replies, “*Fah! I went through the camp. All our friends went through the camps. Nobody is like him!*” Mala won’t cede her knowledge of her husband or of life to the coercive tidiness of the trauma plot. There are other doubting Malas. I start seeing them everywhere, even lurking inside the conventional trauma story with designs of their own, unravelling it from within.

Stories rebel against the constriction of the trauma plot with skepticism, comedy, critique, fantasy, and a prickly awareness of the genre and audience expectations. In the Netflix series “Feel Good,” the protagonist, Mae, a

comedian dealing with an addiction and disorienting flashbacks, struggles to fit their muddled feelings about their past into any straightforward diagnosis or treatment plan. (“People are obsessed with trauma these days,” Mae says ruefully. “It’s like a buzzword.”) The protagonist of Michaela Coel’s “[I May Destroy You](#),” learning that she has been drugged and sexually assaulted, also finds the ready-made therapeutic scripts wanting; some of the show’s most interesting strands follow the ways that focussing on painful histories can make us myopic to the suffering of others. Conversations about trauma in [Anthony Veasna So’s “Afterparties”](#) are seasoned with exasperation, teasing, fatigue. “You gotta stop using the genocide to win arguments,” Cambodian American children tell their refugee parents.



"So the Scharfs have an atoll. Big deal."  
Cartoon by Joe Dator

The appetite for stories about Black trauma is skewered in Uwem Akpan’s “[New York, My Village](#)” and Raven Leilani’s “[Luster](#).“ Scanning the season’s “diversity giveaway” books, Leilani’s Edie, one of the only Black employees at a publishing house, sees “a slave narrative about a mixed-race house girl fighting for a piece of her father’s estate; a slave narrative about a runaway’s friendship with the white schoolteacher who selflessly teaches her how to read; a slave narrative about a tragic mulatto who raises the dead with her magic chitlin pies; a domestic drama about a Black maid who, like Schrödinger’s cat, is both alive and dead.”

The FX series “Reservation Dogs,” set in Oklahoma’s Indian country, draws attention to, and shirks, the expectation that Indigenous stories be tethered to trauma. A sixteen-year-old named Bear and his friends are accosted by members of a rival gang, who pull up in a car and start firing. Bear’s body shudders with the impact, flails, and falls, with agonizing slowness. He is brought down—in a hail of paintballs. It’s a fine parody of “Platoon,” of the killing of Willem Dafoe’s Sergeant Elias. If it isn’t enough to play on one classic narrative of trauma, Bear then has a vision of a Native warrior on horseback, ambling through the mist. “I was at the Battle of Little Bighorn,” the warrior says, as if prepared to give Bear a speech on adversity and heroism. Then he clarifies: “I didn’t kill anybody, but I fought bravely.” He clarifies again: “Well, I actually didn’t get into the fight itself, but I came over that hill, real rugged-like.” Humor protects genuine feeling from sentimental traditions that have left the specificity of Native experience flattened and forgotten. Bear and his friends, we learn, are reeling from the suicide of a member of their group. They face all the present-day difficulties of life on the reservation, but mourning is not the only way they are known to themselves, or to us. They’re teen-agers, and announce themselves in the time-honored ways—their taste, their terrible schemes, their ferocious loyalty to one another.

*My trauma*, I’ve heard it said, with an odd note of caress and behind it something steely, protective. (Is it a dark little joke of Yanagihara’s that Jude is discovered reading Freud’s “On Narcissism”?) It often yields a story that can be easily diagrammed, a self that can be easily diagnosed. But in deft hands the trauma plot is taken only as a beginning—with a middle and an end to be sought elsewhere. With a wider aperture, we move out of the therapeutic register and into a generational, social, and political one. It becomes a portal into history and into a common language. “Stammering, injured, babbling—the language of pain, the pain we share with others,” Cristina Garza has written in “[Grieving](#),” her book on femicide in Mexico. “Where suffering lies, so, too, does the political imperative to say, You pain me, I suffer with you.” That treatment of history feels influenced and irrigated by the novels of [Toni Morrison](#), who envisaged her work as filling in the omissions and erasures of the archives, and by [Saidiya Hartman](#), who espouses writing history as a form of care for the dead. Think of the historian-protagonists in Honorée Fanonne Jeffers’s “[The Love Songs of W. E. B. Du Bois](#)” and in Yaa Gyasi’s “[Homegoing](#). ” In these novels, *my*

*trauma* becomes but one rung of a ladder. Climb it; what else will you see? In “Homegoing,” Marcus, a graduate student, is writing about his great-grandfather’s time as a leased convict in post-Reconstruction Alabama. To explain it, he realizes, he must bring in Jim Crow, but how can he discuss Jim Crow without bringing in the stories of his family fleeing it, in the Great Migration, and their experiences in the cities of the North, and the “war on drugs”—and then? I recall an image from Faulkner’s [Absalom, Absalom!](#): of two pools, connected by a “narrow umbilical water-cord,” one fed by another. A pebble is dropped into one. Ripples stir the surface, and then the other pool—the pool that never felt the pebble—starts moving to its rhythm.

And what water-cord connects us to Woolf’s weeping lady, on whom once hung the fate of the English novel—the woman surrounded by her sea urchins, perched on the edges of her chair, still wearing her coat, scraping her dinner off a saucer? Why are those sea urchins so pleasing to think about, so mysterious yet telling? I wouldn’t trade a single one for a passel of awful secrets from the lady’s past. It’s the sort of detail that stokes the curiosity so crucial to reading—not narrative hunger but the sort of drifting, almost unconscious nourishment we get from looking at strangers, from piecing something together, from knowing and not knowing.

The experience of uncertainty and partial knowledge is one of the great, unheralded pleasures of fiction. Why does Hedda Gabler haunt us? Who does Jean Brodie think she is? What does Sula Peace want? Sula’s early life is thick with incidents, any one of which could plausibly provide the wound around which personality, as understood by the trauma plot, might scab—witnessing a small boy drown, witnessing her mother burn to death. But she is not their sum; from her first proper appearance in the novel, with an act of sudden, spectacular violence of her own, she has an open destiny. Where the trauma plot presents us with locks and keys, Morrison does not even bother to tell us what happens to Sula in the decade she disappears from town, and from the novel. Sula doesn’t exist for our approval or judgment, and, in her self-possession, is instead rewarded with something better: our rapt fascination with her style, her silences and refusals. Stephen Greenblatt has used the term “strategic opacity” to describe Shakespeare’s excision of causal explanation to create a more complex character. Shakespeare’s source texts for “King Lear” and “Hamlet” include neatly legible motivations;

lopping them off from the story releases an energy obstructed by the conventional explanation.

That energy isn't just released by the play. It is the audience's own, the force of our imagination rushing to fill the gap. In "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Woolf describes the impulse to imagine the private lives of others as the art of the young—a matter of survival—and of the novelist, who never tires of this work, who sees an old woman crying in a railway car and begins to imagine her inner life. But it is the province of the reader as well. Looking again at the description I gave of the old woman, I realize that the coat is my addition. Envisioning the scene, I have somehow placed on her shoulders a coat that I used to own, deeply unprepossessing, much missed—old armor. I am confused and stirred to find it here. Stories are full of our fingerprints and our old coats; we co-create them. Hence, perhaps, that feeling of deflation at the heavily determined backstory, that feeling of our own redundancy, the squandering of our intuition.

The trauma plot flattens, distorts, reduces character to symptom, and, in turn, instructs and insists upon its moral authority. The solace of its simplicity comes at no little cost. It disregards what we know and asks that we forget it, too—forget about the pleasures of not knowing, about the unscripted dimensions of suffering, about the odd angularities of personality, and, above all, about the allure and necessity of a well-placed sea urchin. ♦

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# **Art**

- [Japanese Woodblock Prints in the Modern Age](#)

Shikō Munakata (1903-75) brought Japan's woodblock tradition into the modern age with his spontaneous, Expressionist approach. "Shikō Munakata: A Way of Seeing," on view at the **Japan Society** through March 20, includes the artist's "Tōkaidō Series," from 1964—"Yui: Construction at Sea," pictured above, is among its sixty-one images—for which he travelled along the same coastal route that once inspired the Edo-period ukiyo-e masters Hiroshige and Hokusai.

# **Books**

- [How Politics Got So Polarized](#)
- [Briefly Noted](#)

In a new era of hyperpartisan identities, can anything bring “us” and “them” together?

By [Elizabeth Kolbert](#)

## Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

On June 19, 1954, eleven boys from Oklahoma City boarded a bus bound for Robbers Cave State Park, about a hundred and fifty miles to the southeast. The boys had never met before, but all had just completed fifth grade and came from middle-income families. All were white and Protestant. When they reached the park, the boys were assigned to a cabin at an empty Boy Scout camp. They dubbed themselves the Rattlers.

The following day, a second group of boys—also all white, Protestant, and middle class—arrived at the camp. They were assigned to a cabin that could not be seen from the first. They decided to call themselves the Eagles.

For a week, the two groups went about their activities—swimming, tossing a baseball, sitting around a campfire—unaware of the other. The groups had separate swimming holes, and their meal hours were staggered, so they didn’t meet at the mess hall. As they ate, played, and tussled, each band developed its own social hierarchy and, hence, its own mores. The Rattlers, for instance, took to cursing. The Eagles frowned on profanity.

Toward the end of the week, the two groups learned about each other. The reaction was swift. Each group wanted to challenge the other to a contest, and their counsellors scheduled a tournament.

On the first day, the Rattlers won at both baseball and tug-of-war. The Eagles were livid. One of them declared that the Rattlers were too big. They couldn’t be fifth graders; they had to be older. The Eagles, on the way back to their cabin that evening, noticed that their rivals had attached a team flag to the backstop of the baseball field. They tore it down and set it on fire. The next morning, the two groups got into a fistfight, which had to be broken up by the counsellors.

That day, the group's positions reversed. The Eagles won the baseball game, a development they attributed to their prayers for victory and to their rivals' foul mouths. Then they won at tug-of-war. The Rattlers responded to these setbacks by raiding the Eagles' cabin after the Eagles had gone to sleep. The Eagles staged a counterraid while their adversaries were at breakfast. Finding their beds overturned, the Rattlers accused the Eagles of being "communists."

As tensions mounted, both groups became increasingly aggressive and self-justifying. The Rattlers decided that they'd lost at baseball because the Eagles had better bats. They turned a pair of jeans they'd stolen from the Eagles into a banner, and marched around with it. The Eagles accused the Rattlers of cowardice, for having staged their raid at night. They stockpiled rocks for use in case of another incursion. When the Eagles won the tournament, each boy received a medal and a penknife. The Rattlers immediately stole them.

At this point, members of both groups announced that they wanted nothing more to do with the other. But their counsellors, who were really grad students, were just getting going. They brought the bands together for another contest—of the sort that only a social scientist could love. Hundreds of beans were strewn in the dirt, and each boy was given a minute to collect as many as he could in a paper bag. Then, one by one, the boys were called up and the contents of their bags ostensibly projected onto a screen for everyone to count. In fact, the bags were never opened; the same beans were projected onto the screen over and over, in different arrangements. The Rattlers saw what they wanted to, and so did the Eagles. By the former's reckoning, each Rattler had gathered, on average, ten per cent more beans than his rivals. By the latter's, the Eagles were the better bean-picker-uppers by a margin of twenty per cent.

The whole elaborate experiment is now regarded as a classic of social psychology. The participants had been chosen because they were so much alike. All it took for them to come to loathe one another was a different totem animal and a contest for some penknives. In the aftermath of the Second World War, these results were unsettling. They still are.

Americans today seem to be divided into two cabins: the Donkeys and the Elephants. According to a YouGov survey, sixty per cent of Democrats regard the opposing party as “a serious threat to the United States.” For Republicans, that figure approaches seventy per cent. A Pew survey found that more than half of all Republicans and nearly half of all Democrats believe their political opponents to be “immoral.” Another Pew survey, taken a few months before the 2020 election, found that seven out of ten Democrats who were looking for a relationship wouldn’t date a [Donald Trump](#) voter, and almost five out of ten Republicans wouldn’t date someone who supported [Hillary Clinton](#).

Even infectious diseases are now subject to partisan conflict. In a Marquette University Law School poll from November, seventy per cent of Democrats said that they considered *COVID* a “serious problem” in their state, compared with only thirty per cent of Republicans. The day after the World Health Organization declared Omicron a “variant of concern,” Representative Ronny Jackson, a Texas Republican, labelled the newly detected strain a Democratic trick to justify absentee voting. “Here comes the MEV—the Midterm Election Variant,” Jackson, who served as Physician to the President under Trump and also under Barack Obama, tweeted.

How did America get this way? Partisans have a simple answer: the other side has gone nuts! Historians and political scientists tend to look for more nuanced explanations. In the past few years, they have produced a veritable Presidential library’s worth of books with titles like “Fault Lines,” “Angry Politics,” “Must Politics Be War?,” and “The Partisan Next Door.”

Lilliana Mason is a political scientist at Johns Hopkins. In “[Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity](#),” she notes that not so very long ago the two parties were hard to tell apart, both demographically and ideologically. In the early nineteen-fifties, Blacks were split more or less evenly between the two parties, and so were whites. The same held for men, Catholics, and union members. The parties’ platforms, meanwhile, were so similar that the American Political Science Association issued a plea that Democrats and Republicans make more of an effort to distinguish themselves: “Alternatives between the parties are defined so badly that it is often difficult to determine what the election has decided even in broadest terms.”

The fifties, Mason notes, were “not a time of social peace.” Americans fought, often in ugly ways, over, among many other things, Communism, school desegregation, and immigration. The parties were such tangles, though, that these battles didn’t break down along partisan lines. Americans, Mason writes, could “engage in social prejudice and vitriol, but this was decoupled from their political choices.”

Then came what she calls the great “sorting.” In the wake of the civil-rights movement, the women’s movement, Richard Nixon’s Southern Strategy, and Roe v. Wade, the G.O.P. became whiter, more churchgoing, and more male than its counterpart. These differences, already significant by the early nineteen-nineties, had become even more pronounced by the twenty-tens.

“We have gone from two parties that are a little bit different in a lot of ways to two parties that are very different in a few powerful ways,” Mason says. As the two parties sorted socially, they also drifted apart ideologically, fulfilling the Political Science Association’s plea. In the past few election cycles, there’s been no mistaking the Republican Party’s platform for the Democrats’.

By now, party, race, faith, and even TV viewing habits are all correlated. (One study, based on TiVo data, found that the twenty television shows most popular among Republicans were completely different from those favored by Democrats.) As a result, Mason argues, Americans no longer juggle several, potentially conflicting group identities; they associate with one, all-encompassing group, which confers what she calls a “mega-identity.”

When people feel their “mega-identity” challenged, they get mega-upset. Increasingly, Washington politics—and also Albany, Madison, and Tallahassee politics—have been reduced to “us” versus “them,” that most basic (and dangerous) of human dynamics. As Mason puts it, “We have more self-esteem real estate to protect as our identities are linked together.”

Mason draws on the work of Henri Tajfel, a Polish-born psychologist who taught at Oxford in the nineteen-sixties. (Tajfel, a Jew, was attending the Sorbonne when the Second World War broke out; he fought in the French Army, spent five years as a German P.O.W., and returned home to learn that most of his family had been killed.) In a series of now famous experiments,

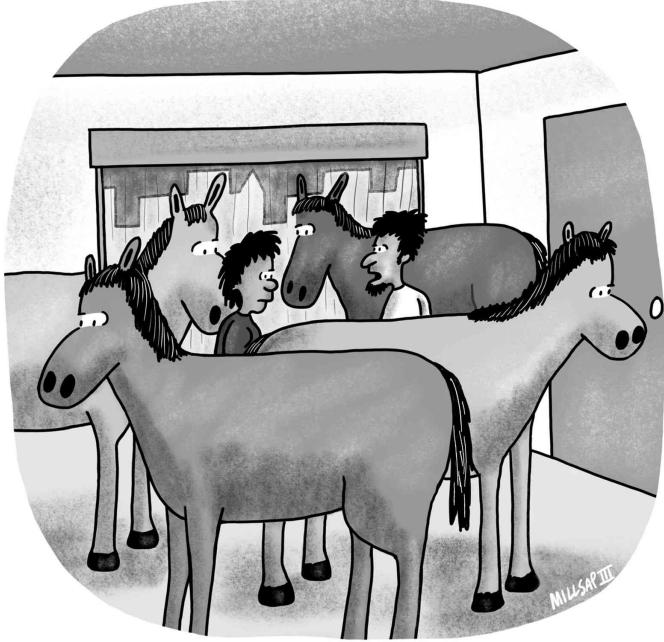
Tajfel divided participants into meaningless groups. In one instance, participants were told that they had been sorted according to whether they'd over- or under-estimated the number of dots on a screen; in another, they were told that their group assignments had been entirely random. They immediately began to favor members of their own group. When Tajfel asked them to allocate money to the other participants, they consistently gave less to those in the other group. This happened even when they were told that, if they handed out the money evenly, everyone would get more. Given a choice between maximizing the benefits to both groups and depriving both groups but depriving "them" of more, participants chose the latter. "It is the winning that seems more important," Tajfel noted.

Trump, it seems safe to say, never read Tajfel's work. But he seems to have intuitively grasped it. During the 2016 campaign, Mason notes, he frequently changed his position on matters of policy. The one thing he never wavered on was the importance of victory. "We're going to win at every level," he told a crowd in Albany. "We're going to win so much, you may even get tired of winning."

In January, 2018, Facebook announced that it was changing the algorithm it used to determine which posts users see in their News Feed. Ostensibly, the change was designed to promote "meaningful interactions between people." After the 2016 campaign, the company had been heavily criticized for helping to spread disinformation, much of it originating from fake, Russian-backed accounts. The new algorithm was supposed to encourage "back-and-forth discussion" by boosting content that elicited emotional reactions.

The new system, by most accounts, proved even worse than the old. As perhaps should have been anticipated, the posts that tended to prompt the most reaction were the most politically provocative. The new algorithm thus produced a kind of vicious, or furious, cycle: the more outrage a post inspired, the more it was promoted, and so on.

How much has the rise of social media contributed to the spread of hyperpartisanship? Quite a bit, argues Chris Bail, a professor of sociology and public policy at Duke University and the author of "[Breaking the Social Media Prism: How to Make Our Platforms Less Polarizing](#)" (Princeton). Use of social media, Bail writes, "pushes people further apart."



*"Frankly, I'm more of an outdoor horse guy."*  
Cartoon by Lonnie Millsap

The standard explanation for this is the so-called echo-chamber effect. On Facebook, people “friend” people with similar views—either their genuine friends or celebrities and other public figures they admire. Trump supporters tend to hear from other Trump supporters, and Trump haters from other Trump haters. A study by researchers inside Facebook showed that only about a quarter of the news content that Democrats post on the platform is viewed by Republicans, and vice versa. A study of Twitter use found similar patterns. Meanwhile, myriad studies, many dating back to before the Internet was ever dreamed of, have demonstrated that, when people confer with others who agree with them, their views become more extreme. Social scientists have dubbed this effect “group polarization,” and many worry that the Web has devolved into one vast group-polarization palooza.

“It seems plain that the Internet is serving, for many, as a breeding ground for extremism, precisely because like-minded people are connecting with greater ease and frequency with one another, and often without hearing contrary views,” Cass Sunstein, a professor at Harvard Law School, writes in [#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media](#).

Bail, who directs Duke’s Polarization Lab, disagrees with the standard account, at least in part. Social media, he allows, does encourage political extremists to become more extreme; the more outrageous the content they

post, the more likes and new followers they attract, and the more status they acquire. For this group, Bail writes, “social media enables a kind of microcelebrity.”

But the bulk of Facebook and Twitter users are more centrist. They aren’t particularly interested in the latest partisan wrangle. For these users, “posting online about politics simply carries more risk than it’s worth,” Bail argues. By absenting themselves from online political discussions, moderates allow the extremists to dominate, and this, Bail says, promotes a “profound form of distortion.” Extrapolating from the arguments they encounter, social-media users on either side conclude that those on the other are more extreme than they actually are. This phenomenon has become known as false polarization. “Social media has sent false polarization into hyperdrive,” Bail observes.

My grandfather, a refugee from Nazi Germany, was all too aware of the hazards of us-versus-them thinking. And yet, upon arriving in New York, midway through F.D.R.’s second term, he became a passionate partisan. He often invoked Philipp Scheidemann, who served as Germany’s Chancellor at the close of the First World War, and then, in 1919, resigned in protest over the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. The hand that signed the treaty, Scheidemann declared, should wither away. Around Election Day, my grandfather liked to say that any hand that pulled the lever for a Republican should suffer a similar fate.

My mother inherited my grandfather’s politics and passed them down to me. For several years during the George W. Bush Administration, I drove around with a bumper sticker that read “Republicans for Voldemort.” I thought the bumper sticker was funny. Eventually, though, I had to remove it, because too many people in town took it as a sign of support for the G.O.P.

Several recent books on polarization argue that if, as a nation, we are to overcome the problem, we have to start with ourselves. “The first step is for citizens to recognize their own impairments,” Taylor Dotson, a professor of social science at the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology, writes in “[The Divide: How Fanatical Certitude Is Destroying Democracy](#)” (M.I.T.). In “[The Way Out: How to Overcome Toxic Polarization](#)”

(Columbia), Peter T. Coleman, a professor of psychology and education at Columbia, counsels, “Think and reflect critically on your own thinking.”

“We need to work on ourselves,” Robert B. Talisse, a philosophy professor at Vanderbilt, urges in [Sustaining Democracy: What We Owe to the Other Side](#) (Oxford). “We need to find ways to manage belief polarization within ourselves and our alliances.”

The trouble with the partisan-heal-thyself approach, at least as this partisan sees it, is twofold. First, those who have done the most to polarize America seem the least inclined to recognize their own “impairments.” Try to imagine Donald Trump sitting in Mar-a-Lago, munching on a Big Mac and reflecting critically on his “own thinking.”

Second, the fact that each party regards the other as a “serious threat” doesn’t mean that they are equally threatening. The January 6th attack on the Capitol, the ongoing attempts to discredit the 2020 election, the new state laws that will make it more difficult for millions of people to vote, particularly in communities of color—only one party is responsible for these. In November, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, a watchdog group, added the U.S. to its list of “backsliding democracies.” Although the group’s report didn’t explicitly blame the Republicans, it came pretty close: “A historic turning point came in 2020–2021 when former President Donald Trump questioned the legitimacy of the 2020 election results in the United States. Baseless allegations of electoral fraud and related disinformation undermined fundamental trust in the electoral process.”

As the *Times* columnist Ezra Klein points out, the great sorting in American politics has led to a great asymmetry. “Our political system is built around geographic units, all of which privilege sparse, rural areas over dense, urban ones,” he writes in [“Why We’re Polarized”](#) (Avid Reader). This effect is most obvious in the U.S. Senate, where each voter from Wyoming enjoys, for all intents and purposes, seventy times the clout of her counterpart from California, and it’s also clear in the Electoral College. (It’s more subtle but, according to political scientists, still significant in the House of Representatives.)

Klein says that the Republicans, with overrepresented rural counties on their side, can afford to move a lot further from the center than the Democrats can. “The G.O.P.’s geographic advantage permits it to run campaigns aimed at a voter well to the right of the median American,” he writes. Conversely, “to win, Democrats don’t just need to appeal to the voter in the middle. They need to appeal to voters well to the right of the middle.”

Republicans, Klein notes, have lost the popular vote in six of the past seven Presidential elections. If they had also lost the White House six times, presumably they would have come up with a broader, more inclusive message. Instead, in 2000 and then again in 2016, despite having lost, the G.O.P. won. This could easily happen again in 2024.

Such is the state of the union these days that no forum seems too small or too sleepy to be polarized. In October, noting a “disturbing spike” in threats of violence against local school-board members, the U.S. Attorney General, Merrick Garland, directed the Justice Department and the F.B.I. to come up with a plan to combat the trend. Predictably, Garland’s directive itself became the focus of partisan attacks: at a hearing on Capitol Hill, Senator Tom Cotton, Republican of Arkansas, accused the Attorney General of “siccing the Feds on parents at school boards across America.”

“You should resign in disgrace,” Cotton said, wagging his finger at Garland.

If thoughtful self-examination isn’t going to get America out of its rut, what is? According to Stephen Marche, a novelist and a former columnist for *Esquire*, the answer is obvious. “The United States is coming to an end,” he declares at the start of “[The Next Civil War: Dispatches from the American Future](#)” (Avid Reader). Indeed, he writes, “running battles between protestors and militias, armed rebels attempting to kidnap sitting governors, uncertainty about the peaceful transition of power—reading about them in another country, you would think a civil war had already begun.”

Marche is Canadian, and he sees this as key. Americans have become so invested in their duelling narratives that they can’t acknowledge the obvious; it takes an outsider to reveal it to them. “My nationality gives me a specific advantage in describing an imminent American collapse,” Marche writes.

He describes Canada as Horatio to the U.S.'s Hamlet—"a close and sympathetic and mostly irrelevant witness" to the drama's main action.

"The Next Civil War" might be called a work of speculative non-fiction; some parts are reported, others invented. The book is structured as a series of possible disasters, each of which sends the U.S. spiralling into chaos. In one, the President is assassinated when she makes a surprise stop at a Jamba Juice. In a second, a dirty bomb destroys the U.S. Capitol. In a third, a collection of white-supremacist militia groups converge on a rural bridge that the government has closed for repairs. The U.S. Army is called in; eventually, weary of the standoff, it blows the militia members to bits.

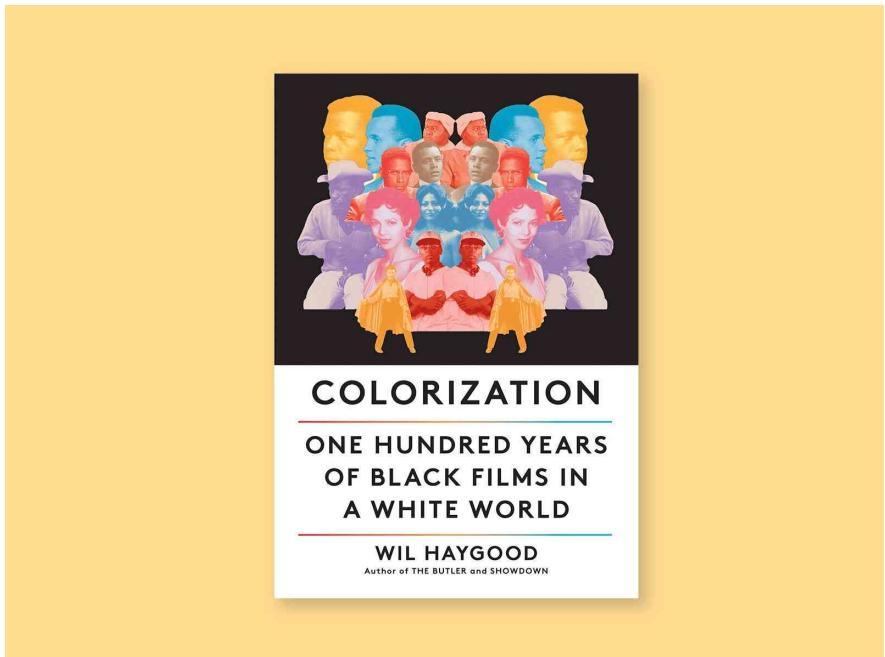
Marche is fond of sweeping claims. "No American president of either party, now and for the foreseeable future, can be an icon of unity, only of division," he writes at one point. "Once shared purpose disappears, it's gone," he declares later in the same chapter. Unfortunately, too many of his pronouncements ring true, such as "When the crisis comes, the institutions won't be there."

Each of Marche's scenarios results in a different form of social breakdown. The carnage at the bridge is followed by a simmering insurgency; the Capitol bombing by government repression, widespread rioting, and summary executions. Toward the close of the book, Marche entertains the possibility that the U.S. could be broken into four separate countries, roughly corresponding to the Northeast, the West Coast, the Midwest plus the Southeast, and Texas. "Disunion could be liberation," he notes.

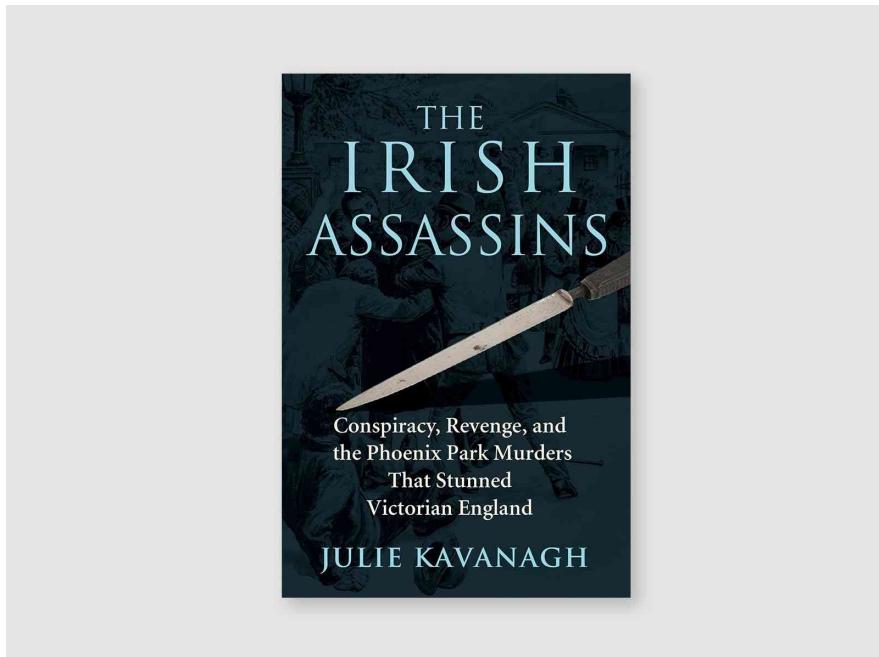
The Robbers Cave experiment suggests another way out. After having nudged the Eagles and the Rattlers toward conflict, the researchers wanted to see if they could be nudged back. They brought the boys together for a variety of peaceable activities. One day, for example, they arranged for the two groups to meet up in the mess hall for lunch. The result was a food fight. Since "contact situations" weren't working, the researchers moved on to what they called "superordinate goals." They staged a series of crises—a water shortage, a supply-truck breakdown—that could be resolved only if the boys coöperated. Dealing with these manufactured emergencies made the groups a lot friendlier toward each other, to the point where, on the

trip back to Oklahoma City, the Rattlers used five dollars they'd won from the bean-collecting contest to treat the Eagles to malteds.

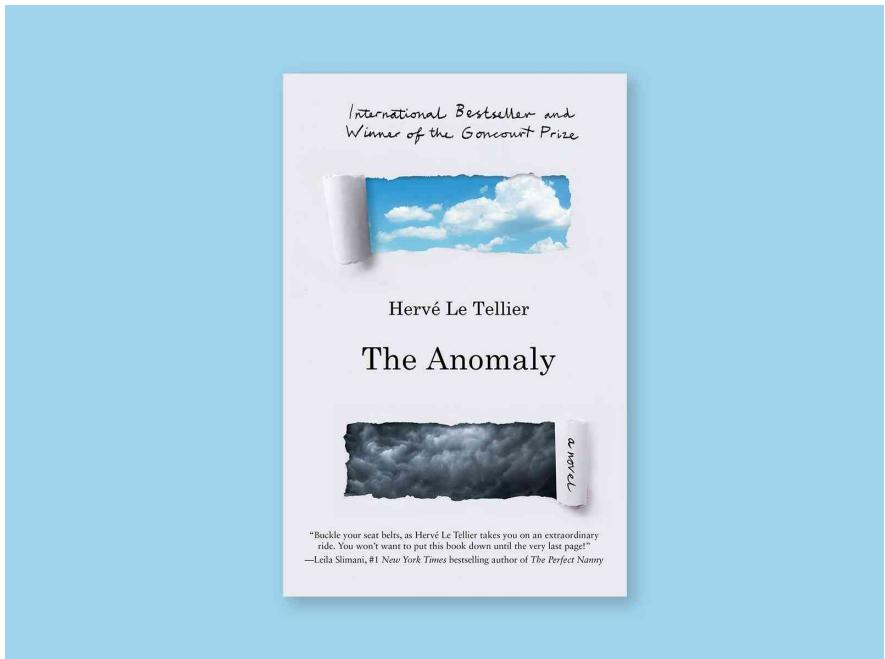
Could “superordinate goals” help depolarize America? There would seem to be no shortage of crises for the two parties to work together on. The hitch, of course, is that they’d first need to agree on what these are. ♦



[\*\*Colorization\*\*](#), by *Wil Haygood* (*Knopf*). This chronicle of a century of Black filmmaking in a white-dominated industry begins in 1915, with a secret White House screening of “Birth of a Nation.” The film’s demonization of its Black characters, and the fact that those roles were played by white actors in blackface, foreshadows the injustices that occupy much of Haygood’s account. Hollywood reduced Black experience to a handful of tropes, and Black artists were persistently denied recognition (the Oscar wins of Hattie McDaniel and Sidney Poitier notwithstanding). The book’s most fascinating portions describe Black filmmakers’ attempts to bypass the mainstream—as in the pioneering career of Oscar Micheaux, a former Pullman porter and homesteader who made forty-four films from 1918 to 1948.



[\*\*The Irish Assassins\*\*](#), by Julie Kavanagh (*Atlantic Monthly*). A wrenching sense of dashed hopes hangs over this account of the Phoenix Park murders, a pair of attacks on British dignitaries in Dublin in 1882, by the Invincibles, a rogue Irish “assassination society.” The murders, Kavanagh shows, derailed secret negotiations on Irish autonomy between Britain’s Prime Minister William Gladstone and the Irish nationalist Charles Parnell. Kavanagh roams to America and beyond, tracing the many factors that led to the attacks. Her portraits of key actors prove riveting, as do her accounts of the dispossession, starvation, and killing that repeatedly brought Ireland’s people to the point of desperation.



**The Anomaly**, by *Hervé Le Tellier*, translated from the French by *Adriana Hunter* (*Other Press*). This sci-fi thriller begins with a half-dozen strangers, including a hit man, a film editor, and a writer, whose stories converge on an Air France flight from Paris to New York. After passing through a storm, the plane lands, but, later, so does an identical plane, with identical passengers and crew. Again and again, Le Tellier's characters—mathematicians, philosophers, and bumbling heads of state—wonder whether the doubles are as genuine as their counterparts, whether the plane is “a bungle in the simulation,” and whether their present reality is the only one. Better to not know, perhaps. As one of them muses, “Ignorance is a good traveling companion, and the truth never produces happiness.”



[\*\*People from My Neighborhood\*\*](#), by *Hiromi Kawakami*, translated from the Japanese by *Ted Goossen* (*Soft Skull*). Delighting in both the fantastical and the mundane, the tales in this collection, each only a few pages long, exemplify the Japanese literary form of “palm of the hand” stories. A nameless narrator guides readers through “my neighborhood” and its peculiarities: a bossy, feral child adopted by the narrator, two identical girls named Yōko who are lifelong rivals, a possible princess who may be a murderer. Recurrent characters—a café owner who serves a limited selection of vacuum-packed meals, a dog school’s eccentric principal—ground the narrative in a measure of reality, and a current of sadness runs beneath the quirky plots.

## **Comment**

- [Mining the Bottom of the Sea](#)

By [Elizabeth Kolbert](#)

It's rare that a tiny country like Nauru gets to determine the course of world events. But, for tangled reasons, this rare event is playing out right now. If Nauru has its way, enormous bulldozers could descend on the largest, still mostly untouched ecosystem in the world—the seafloor—sometime within the next few years. Hundreds of marine scientists have signed a statement warning that this would be an ecological disaster resulting in damage “irreversible on multi-generational timescales.”

Nauru, which is home to ten thousand people and occupies an eight-square-mile island northeast of Papua New Guinea, acquired its outsized influence owing to an obscure clause of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, or *UNCLOS*. Under *UNCLOS*, most of the seabed—an area of roughly a hundred million square miles—is considered the “common heritage of mankind.” This vast area is administered by a group called the International Seabed Authority, which is based in Kingston, Jamaica.

Large swaths of the seabed are covered with potentially mineable—and potentially extremely valuable—metals, in the form of blackened lumps called polymetallic nodules. For decades, companies have been trying to figure out how to mine these nodules; so far, though, they've been able to do only exploratory work. Permits for actual mining can't be granted until the I.S.A. comes up with a set of regulations governing the process, a task it's been working on for more than twenty years.

The complexities continue. To apply for a mining permit, companies need to team up with a country that's party to *UNCLOS*. (Most of the nations in the world are, but not, significantly, the United States.) And this is where Nauru comes in. It's sponsoring a company called Nauru Ocean Resources, which is a subsidiary of the Metals Company, a Canadian firm. The Metals Company wants to mine a nodule-rich region of the Pacific between Hawaii and Mexico known as the Clarion-Clipperton Zone. In June, not long before the Metals Company went public as a “special purpose acquisition company,” Nauru notified the I.S.A. that it was invoking what's become known as the “two-year rule.” The rule—which is actually part of an annex to *UNCLOS*—says that, “if a request is made by a State,” the I.S.A. “shall” finalize the regulations within two years. As it has now been six months

since Nauru invoked the rule, this leaves just eighteen months for the work to be completed.

In mid-December, the I.S.A. held a meeting at its headquarters in Kingston. Because of *COVID*, many countries didn't send delegates, and some that did objected to the two-year timetable, on the ground that it couldn't responsibly be met. Nevertheless, Michael Lodge, the I.S.A.'s secretary-general, said in a press release dated December 14th that the authority would forge ahead: "We have a busy schedule in the coming two years, but I am confident that our common purpose will enable us to make the expected progress."

Both Nauru and the Metals Company have portrayed the effort to mine the seabed as essential to cutting carbon emissions. Clean-energy technologies such as [electric-car](#) batteries, at least in their current form, require metals, including cobalt, that are found in the nodules in relatively high concentrations. "Nauru is part of a pioneering venture that could soon power the world's green economy," a video produced by the country's government declares. "We're in a quest for a more sustainable future," Gerard Barron, the C.E.O. of the Metals Company, says in the same video.

Marine scientists argue, though, that the potential costs of deep-ocean mining outweigh the benefits. They point out that the ocean floor is so difficult to access that most of its inhabitants are probably still unknown, and their significance to the functioning of the oceans is ill-understood. In the meantime, seabed mining, which would take place in complete darkness, thousands of feet under water, will, they say, be almost impossible to monitor. In September, the International Union for Conservation of Nature, which compiles the "red list" of endangered species, called for a global moratorium on deep-sea mining. The group issued a statement raising concerns that "biodiversity loss will be inevitable if deep-sea mining is permitted to occur," and "that the consequences for ocean ecosystem function are unknown."

Critics maintain that the very structure of the I.S.A. biases it toward mining. To finance itself, the body depends on fees from companies doing exploratory work and on contributions from member states. Many member states seem to have stopped paying; a report from 2020 listed almost sixty countries that owe at least two years' contributions. The I.S.A. is expected to

receive a percentage of the profits from seabed mining if it moves forward. The potential for a conflict of interest would seem to be pretty basic. (The I.S.A. said that it could not comment at this time.)

Nauru, for its part, has a long history of disastrous business dealings. Starting in the early twentieth century, the island was stripped of most of its phosphate deposits, a process that reduced a good part of it to a wasteland. In 1968, Nauru, which had been administered by Australia, attained independence. The country used its wealth, which was still being generated by phosphate mining, to invest in a series of money-losing ventures. Now it is banking on seabed mining. Should the rest of the world allow Nauru to dictate the timetable for deciding how the seabed will be governed? The question would seem to answer itself. The noted oceanographer Sylvia Earle has called the attempt to carve up the ocean floor into mining claims the “biggest land grab in the history of humankind.” And yet, unless a lot of other nations finally decide to focus on the issue, this is what appears likely to happen.

“Countries have not really come to grips with the reality, which is that their hand is being forced by this two-year rule,” Duncan Currie, an international lawyer who advises the Deep Sea Conservation Coalition, another group that has called for a moratorium on seabed mining, said in a recent interview. “And so, come July, 2023, a decision is going to have to be made as to whether to go down what is a very one-way street toward deep-sea mining at the enormous expense of the marine environment, or whether they’re going to continue to take a cautious view. And, unfortunately, it is an either-or situation.” ♦

## Crossword

- [The Holiday Crossword: Ring in the New](#)

By [Robyn Weintraub](#) and [Caitlin Reid](#)

# **Dept. of Diplomacy**

- [The Looming Threat of a Nuclear Crisis with Iran](#)

The Biden Administration faces a potential confrontation with a longtime rival that is better armed and more hard-line than at any time in its modern history.

By [Robin Wright](#)

## Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Shortly after his Inauguration, Joe Biden appointed Rob Malley to be his special envoy for [Iran](#). Malley, who is fifty-eight, grew up in France and was in the same high-school class in Paris as Secretary of State Antony Blinken. He graduated from Yale and Harvard Law School, won a Rhodes Scholarship, and clerked for Supreme Court Justice Byron White. Ruth Bader Ginsburg officiated at his wedding.

Malley has long experience with the Middle East. His father was a French journalist known for his support of anti-colonialist movements. Working on the National Security Council during the Clinton Administration, Malley participated in the Camp David peace talks. After they collapsed, in 2000, he broke with the conventional analysis that the summit had failed because of Yasir Arafat's intransigence. Malley published detailed insider accounts about how the Israelis shared the blame, for making proposals difficult for Arafat to accept. Critics declared Malley rabidly anti-Israel. Former colleagues publicly called the attacks on Malley "unfair, inappropriate, and wrong." After Clinton left office, Malley worked on Iran at the International Crisis Group, which tracks global conflicts. As part of his job, he met with Iranian officials and travelled to Tehran.

During the Obama Administration, he was on the team that produced the [Iran nuclear deal](#), in 2015. The agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, was the most significant nonproliferation pact in more than a quarter century. Britain, China, France, Germany, and Russia were equal partners, but the United States had a virtual veto, and Iran knew it. During two years of tortuous talks, the Iranians often met the Americans in hotel hallways to thrash out issues. Malley, who deliberates with the intensity of a lawyer but is soft-spoken in person, was on a first-

name basis with his Iranian counterparts. They exchanged family stories, cell-phone numbers, and e-mail addresses.

The agreement survived for only two years. Influenced by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel and by Republican hawks, President Donald Trump abandoned the deal in 2018. He also imposed more than a thousand sanctions on Iran. They targeted the Supreme Leader, the Foreign Minister, judges, generals, scientists, banks, oil facilities, a shipping line, an airline, charities, and allies, such as the President of Venezuela, for doing business with Tehran. Trump also designated the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the country's most powerful military branch, as a terrorist group—an action that the U.S. had never taken against another nation's military, even the Nazi Wehrmacht.

During the Trump years, Malley was appointed president of the International Crisis Group. He kept in touch with some of his Iranian contacts. But when he became Biden's envoy the Iranian diplomats he'd known for decades refused to meet with him. During talks in Vienna this past spring, the Americans stayed at the Hotel Imperial. The Iranians were eight blocks away, at the InterContinental. Enrique Mora, a Spanish diplomat for the European Union, carried proposals back and forth. Delegations from the other five nations consulted at a third hotel.

Malley compared proxy talks to a Woody Allen story, "The Gossage-Vardebedian Papers." In it, two men play chess by mail. A letter goes "missing." Moves are lost. Both players claim that they are winning. Infuriated, they stop playing before the game is finished. The Russian envoy, Mikhail Ulyanov, described the Vienna process as one of the strangest in modern diplomacy. "The aim isn't to update an agreement or elaborate a new one," he tweeted. "The goal is to restore a nearly ruined deal piece by piece. Was there a similar exercise in the history of international relations? I can not recollect anything like that. Can you?"

The bizarre diplomacy, Malley told me, took on unprecedented urgency in November. "We've seen Iran's nuclear program expand, and we've seen Tehran become more belligerent, more bellicose in its regional activities," he said. "They are miscalculating and playing with fire."

The stakes extend well beyond Iran. The world's nuclear order, already perilous, is now at risk of unravelling. Nuclear pacts hammered out in the last century are dated or fraying, as the U.S., Russia, and China modernize their arsenals. The Pentagon estimates that China could have at least a thousand bombs by 2030. The talks with Tehran are designed to prevent a tenth nation—the latest was North Korea, in 2006—from getting the bomb.

In the Middle East, Israel has had a nuclear weapon since the late nineteen-sixties. Saudi officials have also threatened to pursue the bomb if Iran obtains one. "The Iranian nuclear crisis can't be viewed in a vacuum," Kelsey Davenport, of the Arms Control Association, told me. "The broader nuclear order is in chaos." The collapse of the talks with Iran—Biden's first major diplomatic foray—would have consequences worldwide.

Both Washington and Tehran are violating the deal. A year after Trump abandoned the accord and launched his "maximum pressure" campaign, Tehran began breaching its obligations. It installed IR-6 centrifuges—which are much faster than the IR-1s allowed by the deal—and developed even more efficient models, including the IR-9. Centrifuges are tall tubes that enrich a gaseous form of uranium. They spin at supersonic speeds several thousand times faster than the force of gravity. Iran also increased enrichment from under four-per-cent purity—the limit in the agreement, and a level used for peaceful nuclear energy or medical research—to sixty per cent. "Only countries making bombs are reaching this level," Rafael Grossi, the chief of the International Atomic Energy Agency, said in May. Weapons grade is ninety per cent, which, for Israeli officials, is a decisive juncture. "We don't want to reach a point where we will have to ask ourselves how Iran was allowed to enrich to ninety per cent," Zohar Palti, the former director of intelligence at Mossad, who is now at the Israeli Ministry of Defense, told me. The so-called "breakout" time for Iran to produce enough fuel for a bomb has plummeted, from more than a year to as little as three weeks. "It's really short, and unacceptably short," a senior Administration official said. "Every day they spin centrifuges, and, for every day they stockpile uranium, the breakout time continues to shrink." Additional steps—including weaponizing the enriched uranium, marrying it to a warhead, and then integrating it with a delivery system, such as a missile—are required to field a bomb.

Israel has tried to slow Iran's progress. In late 2020, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, the father of Iran's nuclear program, was assassinated as he drove with his wife and bodyguards to a weekend home. From more than a thousand miles away, the killer used artificial intelligence and a satellite connection to trigger a machine gun mounted on a parked pickup truck, spraying Fakhrizadeh with bullets. Tehran retaliated with a law that limited international inspections by blocking access to surveillance footage at nuclear sites. Experts fear that Iran may be considering a "sneak-out"—a covert path to a bomb. Tracking Iran's facilities has become like "flying in a heavily clouded sky," Grossi said.

The first six rounds of diplomacy this spring, Malley told me, made "real progress." In June, he presented a nuclear package that included ending most of Trump's sanctions. "The collective sense of everybody—obviously the Europeans, the Russians and Chinese, but also the Iranian delegation at the time—was that we could see the outlines of a deal," he said. "If each side was prepared to make the necessary compromises, we could get there."



"It's cardio day for me and external-obliques day for Joan."  
Cartoon by Julia Suits

The talks paused that month, after Iran's Presidential election. [Hassan Rouhani](#), the previous President and a reformist, had won in 2013 and 2017 on a platform of engaging with the United States. But Trump's sanctions sabotaged the economic benefits promised by the nuclear accord, so in 2021

a majority of Iranians didn't bother to vote. Ebrahim Raisi, a rigid ideologue and the head of the judiciary, was elected. The U.S. had already sanctioned Raisi, noting his role on a "death commission" that ordered the execution, in 1988, of some five thousand dissidents. At his Inauguration, in August, Raisi pledged, "All the parameters of national power will be strengthened."

Malley had left his suits at the hotel in Vienna, expecting talks to resume before long. But five months passed, and Iran's nuclear program advanced further. Malley eventually had his suits shipped home. By the time diplomacy resumed, in late November, Malley told me, Iran's program had "blown through" the limits imposed by the J.C.P.O.A. "As they're making these advances, they are gradually emptying the deal of the nonproliferation benefits for which we bargained," he said. The Biden Administration has pushed back. "We're not going to agree to a worse deal because Iran has built up its nuclear program," Malley added. At some point soon, trying to revive the deal would "be tantamount to trying to revive a dead corpse." The U.S. and its allies might then "have to address a runaway Iranian nuclear program." Without a return to the deal, a senior State Department official said, it is "more than plausible, possible, and maybe even probable" that Iran will try to become a threshold nuclear state.

The wild card is Israel. In September, at the U.N. General Assembly, the new Israeli Prime Minister, [Naftali Bennett](#), charged that Iran's nuclear program had "hit a watershed moment, and so has our tolerance. Words do not stop centrifuges from spinning." Israel is due to soon begin training for possible military strikes on Iran. During a visit to Washington in December, Defense Minister Benny Gantz urged the Biden Administration to hold joint military exercises with Israel. "The problem with Iran's nuclear program is that, for the time being, there is no diplomatic mechanism to make them stop," Palti told me. "There is no deterrent. Iran is no longer afraid. We need to give them the stop sign." U.S. officials counter that Israeli operations have often provoked Tehran and set back diplomacy.

Iran can still reverse technological advances if a deal is reached. Its knowledge, however, is irreversible. "Iran's nuclear program hit new milestones over the past year," Kelsey Davenport said. "As it masters these new capabilities, it will change our understanding about how the country may pursue nuclear weapons down the road." Even if the Biden

Administration does broker a return to the accord, Republicans have vowed to scuttle it. In October, Senator Ted Cruz, of Texas, tweeted, “Unless any deal w/ Iran is ratified by the Senate as a treaty—which Biden knows will NOT happen—it is a 100% certainty that any future Republican president will tear it up. Again.”

As the nuclear talks foundered earlier this year, I flew to the Al Asad Airbase, in Iraq’s remote western desert, with Kenneth (Frank) McKenzie, Jr., a Marine general from Alabama, who heads U.S. military operations across the Middle East and South Asia. It was part of an extended tour of Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Qatar, and Lebanon. In the cavernous cabin of a C-17, he sat alone in a room-size container draped with an American flag. McKenzie’s military experience with Iran has been perilous and bloody. When he was a young officer, two hundred and forty-one marines were killed in the 1983 suicide bombing of U.S. peacekeepers in Beirut. It was the largest loss of marine lives in a single day since the battle of Iwo Jima, in the Second World War. The Reagan Administration blamed Iran and its then nascent proxies in Hezbollah. Almost four decades later, McKenzie told me that Tehran’s nuclear capabilities were far from the only danger it now poses.

Under Trump, hostilities between the United States and Iran escalated. They peaked in 2020, when Trump ordered the assassination of General [Qassem Suleimani](#), the revered head of Iran’s Quds Force, the élite wing of the Revolutionary Guard. As Suleimani arrived in Baghdad to meet local allies, McKenzie called in an M-9 Reaper drone to fire four Hellfire missiles at the General’s convoy. Suleimani and nine others were shredded. His severed hand was identified by the large red-stone ring often photographed on his wedding finger.

Five days later, Iran fired eleven ballistic missiles—each carrying at least a thousand-pound warhead—at Al Asad Airbase. U.S. intelligence had tracked Iran’s deployment of the missiles, giving the Americans a few hours to evacuate their warplanes and half of their personnel. Lieutenant Colonel Staci Coleman, the commander of an air expeditionary squad, had to decide which of her crew of a hundred and sixty should leave and who was “emotionally equipped” to stay. “I was deciding who would live and who would die,” she later told military investigators. “I honestly thought anyone

remaining behind would perish.” Many of the service members leaving Al Asad anxiously hugged the ones staying. No American military personnel had been killed by an enemy air strike since 1953, during the Korean War.

The first salvo struck around 1 A.M. Master Sergeant Janet Liliu recounted to investigators, “What happened in the bunkers, well, no words can describe the atmosphere. I wasn’t ready to die, but I tried to prepare myself with every announcement of an incoming missile.” The bombardment dragged on for hours; it was the largest ballistic-missile attack ever by any nation on American troops. No Americans died, but a hundred and ten suffered traumatic brain injuries. Trump dismissed the suffering at Al Asad. “I heard they had headaches,” he told reporters. Two years later, many of those at Al Asad are still experiencing profound memory, vision, and hearing losses. One died by suicide in October. Eighty have been awarded Purple Hearts.

The lesson of Al Asad, McKenzie told me, is that Iran’s missiles have become a more immediate threat than its nuclear program. For decades, Iran’s rockets and missiles were wildly inaccurate. At Al Asad, “they hit pretty much where they wanted to hit,” McKenzie said. Now they “can strike effectively across the breadth and depth of the Middle East. They could strike with accuracy, and they could strike with volume.”

Iran’s advances have impressed both allies and enemies. After the 1979 revolution, the young theocracy purged the Shah’s military and rebuilt it almost from scratch, despite waves of economic sanctions. Iran fought a ruinous eight-year war with Iraq in the nineteen-eighties that further depleted its armory. Its Air Force is still weak, its ships and tanks are mediocre, and its military is not capable of invading another country and holding territory.

Instead, the regime has concentrated on developing missiles with longer reach, precision accuracy, and greater destructive power. Iran is now one of the world’s top missile producers. Its arsenal is the largest and most diverse in the Middle East, the Defense Intelligence Agency reported. “Iran has proven that it is using its ballistic-missile program as a means to coerce or intimidate its neighbors,” Malley told me. Iran can fire more missiles than its adversaries—including the United States and Israel—can shoot down or

destroy. Tehran has achieved what McKenzie calls “overmatch”—a level of capability in which a country has weaponry that makes it extremely difficult to check or defeat. “Iran’s strategic capacity is now enormous,” McKenzie said. “They’ve got overmatch in the theatre—the ability to overwhelm.”

Amir Ali Hajizadeh, a brigadier general and a former sniper who heads Iran’s Aerospace Force, is known for incendiary bravado. In 2019, he boasted, “Everybody should know that all American bases and their vessels in a distance of up to two thousand kilometres are within the range of our missiles. We have constantly prepared ourselves for a full-fledged war.” Hajizadeh succeeded General Hassan Moghaddam, who founded Iran’s missile and drone programs, and who died in 2011, with sixteen others, in a mysterious explosion. They had been working on a missile capable of hitting Israel.

Israelis call Hajizadeh the new Suleimani. McKenzie called him reckless. In 2019, Hajizadeh’s forces downed a U.S. reconnaissance drone over the Persian Gulf. He also orchestrated the missile strikes on Al Asad. Hours after that attack, his forces shot down a Ukrainian Boeing 737 passenger plane, with a hundred and seventy-six people on board, as it took off from Tehran’s international airport. Everyone perished. For three days, Iran refused to accept blame until, under pressure, Hajizadeh went on television to admit it.

Iran now has the largest known underground complexes in the Middle East housing nuclear and missile programs. Most of the tunnels are in the west, facing Israel, or on the southern coast, across from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf sheikhdoms. This fall, satellite imagery tracked new underground construction near Bakhtaran, the most extensive complex. The tunnels, carved out of rock, descend more than sixteen hundred feet underground. Some complexes reportedly stretch for miles. Iran calls them “missile cities.”

In 2020, the Revolutionary Guard marked the anniversary of the U.S. Embassy takeover by releasing a video of Hajizadeh inspecting a subterranean missile arsenal. As suspenseful music plays in the background, he and two other Revolutionary Guard commanders march through a tunnel lined with rows of missiles stacked on top of one another. A recording of

General Suleimani echoes in the background: “You start this war, but we create the end of it.” An underground railroad ferries Emad missiles for rapid successive launches. Emads have a range of a thousand miles and can carry a conventional or a nuclear warhead.

Iran’s missile program “is much more advanced than Pakistan’s,” Uzi Rubin, the first head of Israel’s Missile Defense Organization, told me. Experts compare Iran with North Korea, which helped seed Tehran’s program in the nineteen-eighties. Some of Iran’s missiles are superior to Pyongyang’s, Jeffrey Lewis, of the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, told me. Experts believe that North Korea may now be importing Iranian missile technology.

The Islamic Republic has thousands of ballistic missiles, according to U.S. intelligence assessments. They can reach as far as thirteen hundred miles in any direction—deep into India and China to the east; high into Russia to the north; to Greece and other parts of Europe to the west; and as far south as Ethiopia, in the Horn of Africa. About a hundred missiles could reach Israel.

Iran also has hundreds of cruise missiles that can be fired from land or ships, fly at low altitude, and attack from multiple directions. They are harder for radar or satellites to detect, because, unlike ballistic missiles, their motors do not burn brightly on ignition. Cruise missiles have altered the balance of power across the Persian Gulf. In 2019, Iran unleashed cruise missiles and drones on two oil installations in Saudi Arabia, temporarily cutting off half of the oil production in the world’s largest supplier.

The Biden Administration has hoped to use progress on the nuclear deal to eventually broaden diplomacy and include Iran’s neighbors in talks on reducing regional tensions. “Even if we can revive the J.C.P.O.A., those problems are going to continue to poison the region and risk destabilizing it,” Malley told me. “If they continue, the response will be robust.”

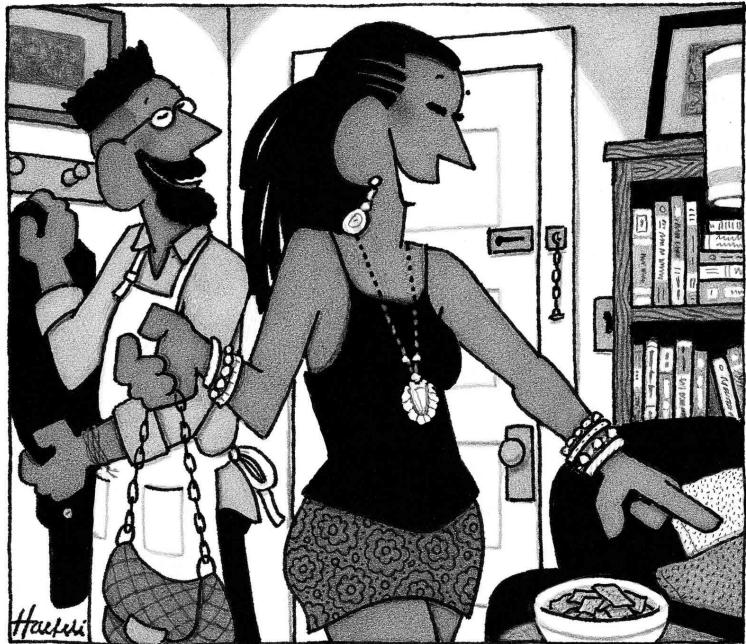
It may be too late. Tehran has shown no willingness to barter over its missiles as it has with its nuclear program. “Once you have spent the money to build the facilities and train people and deliver missiles to the military units that were built around these missiles, you have an enormous constituency that wants to keep them,” Jeffrey Lewis said. “I don’t think

there's any hope of limiting Iran's missile program." President Raisi told reporters after his election, "Regional issues or the missile issue are non-negotiable."

From Al Asad, I flew with McKenzie to Syria in a convoy of Osprey helicopter gunships. Airmen were positioned at machine guns from an open ramp in the rear as we crossed the border. Our first stop was at Green Village, a former compound for oil-field workers on the Euphrates River. I was last there in 2019, for the final military campaign against the Islamic State. A small contingent of U.S. forces has been deployed in northeast Syria since late 2015 to aid and advise a Kurdish-led militia fighting *ISIS*. Officially, their mission is to contain *ISIS* remnants. Unofficially, they are also supposed to prevent Iran from gaining access to strategic border crossings from Iraq.

Abu Kamal, a once sleepy desert outpost, is sixty miles southeast of Green Village. *ISIS* jihadis seized it in 2014, and it became their main border-crossing point between Syria and Iraq. In 2017, three Iranian-backed Shiite militias and the Syrian Army captured it. Iran's proxies have since absorbed—politically and militarily—much of the territory ruled by the Islamic State, including areas liberated by the Iraqi Army and the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces. "The best thing that ever happened to Iran was the U.S. coalition taking out *ISIS*," a senior American military official told me.

Iran now uses Abu Kamal as a strategic hub for smuggling missiles and technology to its militia surrogates. The matériel includes kits used to upgrade rockets. By adding G.P.S. navigation, so-called "dumb" rockets, which are hard to control and rarely hit the target, can be converted into guided missiles that have a longer range and greater accuracy. The U.S. and the region "are worried by the degree to which Iran has been providing, sharing sophisticated weapons to its proxies," Malley told me.



"Wow! Fresh vacuum tracks? For me?"  
Cartoon by William Haefeli

Under Suleimani, Iran expanded its “axis of resistance” with six core militias, including Hezbollah, in Lebanon; the Houthis, in Yemen; and Hamas and Islamic Jihad, in the Palestinian territories. In the nineteen-eighties and nineties, the resistance coalition carried out amateurish, albeit deadly, operations, such as suicide bombings and hostage seizures. Its forces today are coördinated and well armed, and project power region-wide. “Most countries look at what’s available and try to establish partnerships with what’s there. Iran created a network of regional proxies from scratch—its own alliance system,” Michael Eisenstadt, at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, told me. “It’s the most cohesive alliance system in the region.”

The United States military is still vastly more powerful than anything built or imagined in Iran. Yet Iran has proved to be an increasingly shrewd rival. It has trained a generation of foreign engineers and scientists to assemble weaponry. It has dispatched stateless dhows loaded with missile parts for Houthi rebels, who have fired missiles at military and civilian targets in Saudi Arabia. It has provided the older “dumb” rocket technology to Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The majority of the “precision project” kits crossing at Abu Kamal go to Lebanon, where Hezbollah upgrades its short-range rockets and missiles to hit more accurately and to penetrate more deeply

inside Israel. Hezbollah is now estimated to have at least fourteen thousand missiles and more than a hundred thousand rockets, most courtesy of Iran. “They have the ability to strike very precisely into Israel in a way they’ve not enjoyed in the past,” McKenzie told me.

The difference between Iran’s reach in 2016 and in 2021 is “simply remarkable,” a senior naval intelligence officer told me. Distributing missile technology is strategically cost-efficient. Missiles are a small fraction of the price of the defense systems needed to protect against them. Iran spends between two and three billion dollars a year to support the resistance coalition, according to the State Department. Yet its defense budget is also a fraction of what Saudi Arabia, an important U.S. ally, spends annually.

Iran now has enormous reach in several directions from afar. “If you can imagine a ring anywhere in Iraq that goes out, let’s say, seven hundred kilometres, draw your circle,” a senior intelligence official with Central Command explained. “Do the same thing in Yemen. Draw your circle. You quickly see the range and capability that Iran has provided. You can push it all the way to Syria, because, if they have it in Iraq, they probably have the ability also in Syria. What’s important,” he added, “is that the rings are now interlocking.”

Iran is gambling that it can harass the United States into eventually withdrawing from the entire Middle East, as it did from Afghanistan. Its actions across the region will have to be addressed in the not too distant future, Malley said. “If not, it will be a perpetual diversion from the U.S. shift to China,” and “a cauldron always being one step or misstep away from a much more dangerous conflagration.”

Seven American Presidents have failed to contain Iran’s political influence and military leverage. Distrust has only deepened since Iranian students seized the U.S. Embassy four decades ago and held fifty-two Americans for fourteen months. “Each side sees the other as so devious, malign, and mendacious,” John Limbert, a former hostage, told me. “Any proposal from the other—especially one presented as a concession—becomes another means to cheat and deceive.”

Rather than back down under Trump's pressure, Tehran accelerated its nuclear and missile programs. Options, such as sanctions, are exhausted, the senior State Department official said. "That has clearly not produced the result that we all would have wanted."

Besides diplomacy, President Biden has few preventive tools, and military action is not an attractive or effective long-term option. Five weeks after he took office, the U.S. tried to disrupt a nexus of Iranian proliferation. Two American F-15s dropped seven five-hundred-pound bombs on Abu Kamal. The air strike was in retaliation for a rocket attack, by an Iranian proxy, on a military base used by American forces in Iraq. The American bombs had little impact. "Without being able to crater the place, you're not going to stop the flow," the senior intelligence official with Central Command told me. "In fact, I think they were back up and running pretty quickly." Israel has launched dozens of air strikes in or near Abu Kamal and hundreds more on Iranian targets in Syria. Weaponry still flows across the border.

Biden has also tried intimidation. In October, an American B-1B bomber flew from South Dakota to the periphery of Iran. Fighter jets from Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain escorted it across the Middle East. Since November, 2020, the United States has dispatched seven missions of B-52 bombers—nicknamed *BUFFs*, or "big ugly fat fuckers," for their size and shape—around Iran. Even senior officials wonder about the efficacy of such tactics. The naval intelligence officer said, "I think to disrupt is easy, but sustained pressure to change behavior? That requires a decision to develop some capability on the ground in areas that, I think we've said, we're just not that interested in, from a national-priority perspective." U.S. officials concede that the flights do more to reassure allies in the region than to scare Iran.

Tehran seems undaunted. In October, it launched a drone attack on Al-Tanf, a military outpost in Syria where two hundred Americans have been based. Al-Tanf's wider strategic value is its position on the vital highway between Baghdad and Damascus—and the route to Lebanon and the Mediterranean. Unofficially, the U.S. goal is again to hinder the transfer of Iranian weapons and influence. A Hezbollah news site described the Iranian attack on Al-Tanf as "a new phase in the confrontation" to force America out of the Middle East.

Iran's surrogates in Iraq have taken on bigger targets, too. On November 7th, three quadcopter drones attacked the home of the Iraqi Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi. Several guards were injured. The strike followed a parliamentary election in October, when Iranian-backed parties lost dozens of seats and claimed voter fraud. In a television interview, McKenzie accused Iran's allies of "criminal" acts against a head of state. "What we have seen are groups linked to Iran that see that they cannot legally cling to power, and now they are resorting to violence to achieve their goals," he said. The attack was initially tied to two Shiite militias—Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al Haq. Both have engaged in weapons transfers at Abu Kamal.

In September, I met twice with the new Iranian Foreign Minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, when he attended the U.N. General Assembly in New York. For years, he was considered Suleimani's man in the Foreign Ministry. He noted that the United States had walked away from the nuclear agreement and imposed massive sanctions. "If the wall of mistrust can be reduced, then there may be some commonalities, but it's such a high wall," he said. "When we're forbidden to access our own money for life-saving vaccines, can there be even a trace of trust between the two countries?" To prove American good will, Amir-Abdollahian said, Biden must first lift sanctions and help free billions of dollars of Iranian assets frozen in other countries, such as South Korea. "If we reach an agreement, it can be used to make further progress," he said. "If it fails, we have already said that we do not tie the future of the country to the J.C.P.O.A."

Malley proposed that the two countries agree to return simultaneously to the accord, and then decide on a sequence of steps. The Administration does not want to reward Iran without proof that it is reversing its nuclear advances, reverting to older centrifuges, reducing its uranium stockpile, and allowing full inspections. Working with five world powers, the U.S. may somehow manage to restore the nuclear deal. Iran does face unprecedented challenges at home and from the outside world. The original revolutionaries are dying out, and their grandchildren are more into social media than ideology. In 2021, sporadic protests erupted as more than three hundred cities dealt with shortages of water and electricity; demonstrators also took to the streets to complain about low or unpaid wages. But if diplomacy stalls and Iran continues to accelerate its nuclear program, the senior Administration

official warned, the U.S. could face a nuclear crisis in the first quarter of 2022.

McKenzie has analyzed how a conflict with Iran might play out. “If they attack out of the blue, it would be a bloody war,” he told me. “We would be hurt very badly. We would win in the long run. But it would take a year.” Or potentially more, as the United States has learned in Afghanistan and Iraq. And a full-scale military campaign by Israel or the U.S. would almost certainly trigger a regional war on multiple fronts. Iran is better armed and its military and political powerbrokers more hard-line than at any time in its modern history. The nuclear deal could be just the beginning—and the easier part of the Iran challenge for an eighth American President. ♦

# **Family Business**

- [How Smithers Came Out](#)

By [Andrew Marantz](#)

“The Simpsons” takes place in what has been called a “continuous present.” Time passes, but everyone generally stays the same. From the first episode, which aired in 1989, to the seven hundred and sixteenth, which aired earlier this month, Maggie has been a pacifier-sucking infant, Bart has been a fourth-grade rebel, and Homer has worked the same dead-end job at the same nuclear power plant. Even as developments in the real world are reflected in the world of the show—new Presidents, new Popes, legal weed, TikTok—the characters don’t evolve. But there are exceptions.



*Johnny LaZebnik* Illustration by João Fazenda

The power plant’s owner, the villainous energy magnate C. Montgomery Burns, has an executive assistant, a bow-tied lackey named Waylon Smithers. Smithers pines for his boss, who remains oblivious even as the come-ons grow more overt. (Burns, about to open a jar of pickles: “No one will want to kiss me after these.” Smithers: “Well, it’s their loss, sir.”) For years, Smithers’s sexuality was treated as a running joke—sometimes clever, sometimes cringeworthy, but never fodder for a real character arc. Meanwhile, in the outside world, the times kept changing: “Ellen,” “Will & Grace,” Obergefell, Mayor Pete.

In 2015, Johnny LaZebnik was a senior at Wesleyan, where he had recently directed an all-drag production of “The Importance of Being Earnest.” Out

of the blue, he got a text from his father, Rob, a genial Midwesterner who has, since the turn of the millennium, worked as a “Simpsons” writer in Los Angeles. “Do you swipe on Grindr?” Rob asked. Johnny assumed, correctly, that this was a research question. Rob was writing an episode called “The Burns Cage,” in which Homer and some pals from the plant would try to find Smithers a boyfriend—the first time Smithers’s sexuality would be a plot point, not a mere punch line. In the episode, Homer uses an app called Grinder as a matchmaking tool. (“Finally, a use for the Internet!”) As Rob worked on the script, he kept consulting with Johnny. (Where might Homer and Smithers go shopping together? Johnny’s answer: Kiehl’s.) “I like that Smithers didn’t have to have a big ‘Springfield, I’m gay!’ moment in the episode,” Johnny said. “The reaction from Homer and everyone else was more ‘Yeah, everyone except Mr. Burns already knew.’ ” The inspiration for this was Johnny’s real-life coming-out story, which wasn’t much of a story. As a teen-ager, “I was texting with someone I had a crush on,” he recalled. “My mom asked, ‘Boy or girl?’ I went, ‘A boy.’ And that was basically it.”

After college, Johnny discovered, to his chagrin, that he wanted to be a comedy writer. “I absolutely adore my parents, but no one wants to do what their parents do,” he said. (His mother, Claire Scovell LaZebnik, is a writer of fiction and nonfiction books.) Johnny moved back to Los Angeles and started writing for animated kids’ shows, such as “Clash-A-Rama!” and “Norman Picklestripes.” As comedy families go, the LaZebniks are unusually close and non-neurotic, and Johnny often asked his parents for notes or career guidance. After a while, Rob and Johnny began kicking around ideas for another Smithers-centric “Simpsons” episode—one that they could write together. “It was nepotism, obviously,” Johnny said. “On the other hand, the show is older than I am, and I’ve been rewatching it on a loop since I was born. If there are two things I know intuitively, it’s what a ‘Simpsons’ joke should sound like and what a gay joke should sound like.”

In “The Burns Cage,” Smithers had a brief fling that was overshadowed by his devotion to Mr. Burns. For the LaZebniks’ episode, “Portrait of a Lackey on Fire,” they gave Smithers a more serious suitor: a fast-fashion tycoon, voiced by Victor Garber, who is far more glamorous than Mr. Burns but just as ethically compromised. “I squeezed in as much insidery gay-culture stuff as I could,” Johnny said. There’s a joke about the micro-demographics on the beaches of Provincetown and Fire Island, and a cameo from Christine

Baranski singing “Dancing Queen.” As they worked on the script together, “my dad would pitch these very niche, extremely filthy gay jokes,” Johnny said. “I don’t think I’ve ever been more proud.”

The LaZebniks had friends over for champagne when the episode aired, in November, and Johnny live-tweeted it. When Baranski made her appearance, he shared an anecdote from her recording session. (“Christine Baranski logged into the Zoom and immediately said ‘I hope you’re not going to direct me on how to play *MYSELF.*’ ”) When Smithers dumped his boyfriend but kept custody of their puppy, Johnny tweeted, “Her name at one point was ‘Kate Spayed.’ ” Near the end of the show, he posted a joke that he said had been cut for time—Homer assumes that Smithers will never see the ex again, and Smithers says, “No, of course I will. We’re not dating anymore but we’ll still hook up.”

“My dad wrote it,” Johnny tweeted, “which proves how well he knows the gay community.”

Matt Selman, one of the show’s executive producers, commented, “It was cut for more than time.” ♦

# Fiction

- “What the Forest Remembers”

By [Jennifer Egan](#)

## Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

*Audio:* Jennifer Egan reads.

Once upon a time, in a faraway land, there was a forest. It's gone now (burned), and the four men walking in it are gone, too, which is what makes it far away. Neither it nor they exist anymore.

But in June, 1965, the redwoods have a velvety, primeval look that brings to mind leprechauns or djinns or fairies. Three of the four men have never been in these ancient woods before, and to them the forest looks otherworldly, so removed is it from their everyday vistas of wives and children and offices. The oldest, Lou Kline, is only thirty-one, but all were born in the nineteen-thirties and raised without antibiotics, their military service completed before they went to college. Men of their generation got started on adulthood right away.

So: four men moving among trees whose trunks resemble the muscular thighs of giants. When the men throw their heads back to search the sunlight for the trees' pointed tips, they grow dizzy. That's partly because they've just smoked marijuana, not a common practice in 1965 among squares, which anyone would agree these four are. Or three of them. There is a leader —there is usually a leader when men leave their established perimeters—and today it is Quinn Davies, a tanned, open-faced man accoutred with artifacts of a Native American ancestry that he wishes he possessed. Normally, Quinn would wear a blazer, like the rest of them, but today he's donned what strikes his pals as a costume: a purple velvet coat and heavy moccasins that prove far better suited to navigating this soft undergrowth than the oxfords they're sliding around in. Only Lou manages to keep pace with Quinn, despite the fawnlike skittering this feat requires of him. Lou would rather look spastic than risk falling behind.

[Jennifer Egan on the dangers of knowing.](#)

These men all moved to California recently, driven by a hunger for space that couldn't be satisfied by old cities, with their tinge of Europe and horse

carts and history. There is an ungoverned feel to California's mountains and deserts and reckless coast. Quinn Davies, the only bachelor in the group, is homosexual, and was on the lookout early for a graceful exit from Bridgeport, Connecticut, where his family has lived for generations. After the Navy, he followed the Beats to San Francisco, but, now that he's here, they've proved maddeningly elusive. Still, there are always sailors who share Quinn's view that a man can be a multitude of ways, depending on the circumstances. He has a flickering hope about one of the other three men: Ben Hobart, from Minnesota, married to his high-school sweetheart, a father of three. But it's too soon to tell.

All four work in San Francisco in banking, doing their part to feed an expansion that will draw more restless folk like themselves to the city. Over drinks on Montgomery Street a few weeks back, they got to talking about "grass," as marijuana is known even to those who have never seen it. They know that grass is around, but what *is* it, exactly? What does it do? All four like to drink. Quinn Davies drinks so that those around him will drink, too—which occasionally makes possible unexpected adventures. Ben Hobart drinks because it subdues a greedy energy that can find no outlet around his wife and kids. Tim Breezely drinks because he's depressed, but that isn't a word he would use. Tim drinks to feel happy. He drinks because, after several bourbons, he's overcome by a sensation of soaring lightness, as if he'd finally set down a pair of heavy valises he didn't realize he was carrying. Tim Breezely has a complaining wife and four complaining daughters. Inside his small Clement Street house, he floats in a tide of shrill feminine discontent that followed him here all the way from Michigan, ranging from aggrieved and exhausted (his wife) to shrieking and infantile (the baby). A son would have made the difference, Tim is convinced, but drinking helps—oh, it helps. Well worth the two bent fenders, the broken tail-light, and the multitude of dents he's made in the Cadillac.

No matter how much Lou Kline drinks—and he drinks a lot—a part of him is always removed, watching with faint detachment as the men around him get plastered. Lou is waiting for something. He thought it was love until he met and married Christine, whom he worships; then he thought it was fatherhood; then moving West, as they did two years ago. But the sensation of waiting persists: an intimation of some approaching change that has nothing to do with Christine or their kids or the house in Belvedere on a

man-made lake, where Lou swims a mile each morning and sails a little Sunfish. He's become the social impresario of their cul-de-sac, organizing cookouts and cocktails, even a dance one night last summer, dozens of neighbor couples swaying barefoot by the lake to Sinatra and the Beatles. At Christine's urging, he unearthed his sax and played it that night for the first time since his jazz-combo days at the University of Iowa, mildly electrified when everyone clapped. Life is good—it's perfect, really—yet Lou is haunted by that sense of something just beyond it, something he is missing.

Charlene, whom they call Charlie, is six. This morning she scrutinized Lou, wrinkling her sunburned nose, and asked, "Where are you going?"

"Short trip north," he said. "Some fishing, a little duck hunting, maybe."

"You don't have a gun," Charlie said. She watched him evenly, her long tangled hair raking the light.

Lou found himself avoiding her eyes. "The others do," he said.

His little boy, Rolph, clung to him at the door. Pale and dark-haired—Christine's coloring, her iridescent eyes. It's the strangest thing when Lou holds his son, as if their flesh were starting to fuse, so that letting go of him feels like tearing. He has a guilty awareness of loving Rolph more than Charlie. Is that wrong? Don't all men feel that way about their sons—or, at least, those lucky enough to have sons? Poor Tim Breezely!



*"Deliveries are in back."*  
Cartoon by Christopher Weyant

There will be no fishing, no hunting. What Quinn divulged, that afternoon on Montgomery Street, as they drank and smoked their Parliaments and roared with laughter before driving their big cars home to their wives and kids, was that he knew of some “bohemians” who grew grass in the middle of a forest near Eureka. They welcomed visitors. “We can go overnight on a weekend sometime, if you like,” Quinn said.

They did.

How can I possibly know all this? I was only six, and stuck at home, despite my fervent wish to come along—I always wanted to go with my father, sensing early (or so it seems, looking back) that the only way to hold his attention was to stay in his presence. How can I presume to describe events that occurred in my absence in a forest that is now charred and exudes an odor like seared meat? How dare I invent across chasms of gender, age, and cultural context? Trust me, I would not dare. Every thought and twinge I record arises from concrete observation, although getting hold of that information was arguably more presumptuous than inventing it would have been. Pick your poison—if imagining isn’t allowed, then we have to resort to gray grabs.

I got lucky; all four men's memories are stored in the Collective Consciousness, at least in part—surprising, given their ages, and downright miraculous in my father's case. He died in 2006, ten years before Mandala's Own Your Unconscious was released. So how could my father have used it? Well, remember: the genius of Mandala's founder, Bix Bouton, lay in refining, compressing, and mass-producing, as a luscious, irresistible product, technology that already existed in crude form. Memory externalization had been whispered about in psychology departments since the early two-thousands, with faculty speculating about its potential to revolutionize trauma therapy. *Wouldn't it help you to know what really happened? What you've repressed?* Why does my mind (for example) wander persistently to a family party my parents took me to in San Francisco around the time this story takes place? I remember scrambling with a bunch of kids around the roots of an old tree, then being alone in someone's attic beside a white wicker chair. Again and again: scrambling with those children, then alone in an unfamiliar attic. Or not alone, because who took me there, and why? What was happening while I looked at that chair? I've wondered many times whether knowing the answers to those questions would have allowed me to live my life with less pain and more joy. But by the time one of my father's caregivers told us about a psychology professor at Pomona College who was uploading people's consciousnesses for an experimental project, I was too wary to participate. A gain is also a loss when it comes to technology—my father's imploding recording empire had taught me that much. But my father had little to lose; he'd had five strokes and was expiring before our eyes. He wanted in.

Rolph had been dead for years, and my other siblings were elsewhere. So it fell to me to greet the young professor, who wore red high-top sneakers, along with his two graduate students and a U-Haul full of equipment, early one morning at my father's house. I parted the sparse remnants of my father's surfer shag and fastened twelve electrodes to his head. Then he had to lie still—asleep, awake, it didn't matter and there wasn't much of a difference at that point—for eleven hours. I'd moved his hospital bed beside the pool so that he could hear his artificial waterfall. It seemed too intimate a process to let him undergo with strangers. I sat next to him for most of the time, holding his floppy hand while a wardrobe-size machine rumbled beside us. After eleven hours, the wardrobe contained a copy of my father's

consciousness in its entirety: every perception and sensation he had experienced, starting at the moment of his birth.

“It’s a lot bigger than a skull,” I remarked as one of the graduate students wheeled over a hand truck to take it away. My father still wore the electrodes.

“The brain is a miracle of compression,” the professor said.

I have no memory of that exchange, by the way. I saw and heard it only when I reviewed that day from my father’s point of view. Looking out through his eyes, I noticed—or, rather, *he* noticed—my short, uninteresting haircut and the middle-aged gut I was already starting to acquire, and I heard him wonder (but “hear” isn’t the right word; we don’t hear our thoughts aloud, exactly), *How did that pretty little girl end up looking so ordinary?*

When Own Your Unconscious came out, in 2016, I was able to have the wardrobe’s contents copied into a luminous one-foot-square yellow Mandala Consciousness Cube. I chose yellow because it made me think of the sun, of my father swimming. Once his memories were in the Cube, I was finally able to view them. At first, the possibility of sharing them never crossed my mind; I didn’t know it was possible. The Collective Consciousness wasn’t a focus of early marketing for Mandala, whose slogans were “Recover Your Memories” and “Know Your Knowledge.” My father’s consciousness seemed like more than enough—overwhelming, in fact—which may be why I began, with time, to crave other points of view. Sharing his was the price. As the legal custodian of my father’s consciousness, I authorized its anonymous release, in full, to the Collective. In exchange, I’m able to use date and time, latitude and longitude, to search the anonymous memories of others who were present in those woods, on that day in 1965, without having to invent a thing.

Let us return to the men scrambling behind or (in my father’s case) alongside Quinn Davies, their guide. The introduction to grass took place at the trailhead, where Quinn passed around a small pipe, refilling it several times. Most people didn’t get high on their first exposure. (This was good old-fashioned *pot*, mind you, full of stems and seeds, long before the days of hydroponic sinsemilla.) Quinn wanted to get this first smoke out of the way,

to prime his pals—Ben Hobart in particular—for getting well and truly *wasted* later on.

A river flashes in and out of view far below, like a snake sliding among leaves. As the men climb, their stumbling and guffawing yield to huffing, wheezing, and struggle. All four smoke cigarettes, and none exercise the way we think of it now. Even Ben Hobart, one of those preternaturally fit guys who can eat anything, is breathing too hard for speech by the time they crest the hill and glimpse A-Frame, as the house is known. Tucked in a redwood clearing and built from the cleared redwood, A-Frame is the sort of whimsical structure that will become a cliché of seventies California architecture. But, to these men, it looks like an apparition from a fairy tale: *Is it real? What kind of people live here?* Compounding the eeriness is Simon and Garfunkel’s “Sound of Silence” eking from hi-fi speakers facing outward on the redwood deck. A-Frame’s mastermind, Tor, has somehow managed to get electricity to a house in the middle of a forest, that is accessible only on foot.

*Hello, darkness, my old friend . . .*

A hush of awe engulfs the men as they approach. Lou falls back, letting Quinn lead the way into a soaring cathedral of space whose vast triangular windows reach all the way to its pointed ceiling. The scent of redwood is overpowering. Quinn introduces Tor, an austere eminence in his forties with long prematurely white hair. Tor’s “old lady,” Bari, is a warmer zaftig presence. An assortment of young people mill about the main room and deck, showing no interest in the new arrivals.

This odd setup leaves our three newcomers unsure what to do with themselves. Lou, who can’t tolerate feeling like a hanger-on, is abruptly angry with Quinn, who speaks quietly and privately with Tor. *What the hell kind of greeting is this?* Nowadays, a man ill at ease in his surroundings will pull out his phone, request the Wi-Fi password, and rejoin a virtual sphere where his identity is instantly reaffirmed. Let us all take a moment to consider the isolation that was customary before these times arrived! The only possible escape for Lou and his friends involves retracing their steps through the forest without bread crumbs to guide them. So Lou paces around A-Frame in a way he cannot seem to help (though he feels its disruption),

barking occasional questions at Tor, who sits aloft on a tall wooden chair that looks irritatingly thronelike: “Nice place, Tor. What sort of work do you do? Must’ve been hell getting pipes laid this far out.”

Lou opens doors and peers inside redwood-smelling nooks that are what pass for rooms in this kooky place. He’s stopped cold in one room by the sight of a dark-haired girl sitting naked on the floor, cross-legged under a small window, her eyes shut. Tree-filtered light dapples her flesh and the dark spread of her pubic hair. Her eyes open slowly at the intrusion. Lou chokes out, “Beg pardon, I’m awfully sorry,” and slinks away.

The desultory group begins, at last, to congregate around Tor in preparation for getting high. The Yardbirds are playing, but the world of their music is too far from Lou’s own world for him to enjoy it. Still, he welcomes the sense of incipient coherence, a fresh structure of meaning. Tor has a knack for orchestrating such moments. Intimate of Kerouac, occasional lover of Cassady, future provider of LSD for Kesey, Gravy, Stone, and the rest, Tor is one of those essential figures who catalyze action in other people and then fade into nonexistence without making it into history.

By my count, there are seventeen revellers: Tor and Bari, our four, the naked girl Lou was surprised by, now clothed in a loose flowered dress and meeting his gaze without embarrassment, and sundry others who look to be in their late teens and early twenties, who live in A-Frame’s several outbuildings and farm Tor’s marijuana crop.

Lou vastly prefers Tor’s totemlike bong to the diminutive pipe he smoked with Quinn. In the course of an hour’s communal smoking and record changes, the group drifts into a state of blinkered absorption that is unprecedented for Lou, Tim, and Ben, who until now have known only booze as a means of consciousness alteration. Basic exchanges elongate like time-lapse fruits ripening and dropping into outstretched hands.

“This . . . grass . . . was . . . grown . . . around . . . here?” (Ben Hobart asking Tor.)

“Yeah, the . . . crop . . . is . . . walking . . . distance.” (Quinn answering Ben Hobart.)

“You . . . live . . . up . . . here . . . full . . . time?” (Lou asking Tor.)

“We . . . finished . . . building . . . a year . . . ago.” (Bari answering Lou.)

Tor, you may have noticed, says virtually nothing. He has a story, too, but I can’t tell it—he and Bari are childless, and there are no intimates’ memories in the Collective to scavenge from. Since Tor will pass away long before the era of Own Your Unconscious, we have only these glimpses of him through the eyes of his acquaintances.

There are still some mysteries left.



*“Restless spirit, we don’t know who or what you are, but thank you for your amazing Wi-Fi, and for keeping the signal strong.”*  
Cartoon by Sara Lautman

When a widespread high has been achieved, the group gathers at a long table. Or, rather, the men gather. Bari and the other women ferry to and from the kitchen a lavish vegetarian meal in bowls and on platters. To Midwestern men whose days start with pork sausage and end with beef stroganoff or corned-beef hash (or, better yet, steak or roast), the term “vegetarian meal” is an oxymoron. What can it mean? For Lou, it means the most delicious repast he has ever consumed in his life—although, given the stoned arousal of his appetite,hardtack and warm water would have prompted similar raptures. Bari serves squash and turnips and tomatoes from her garden, along with “tahini sauce,” something our visitors have never tasted but can

well believe was harvested from the Elysian Fields. Then come bowls of sorghum and buckwheat, chewy and wet and warm, served in towering piles that they devour in spoonfuls, together with tufts of alfalfa sprouts and sliced avocados and Bari's fresh-baked whole-wheat bread.

As I watched all this through my father's eyes, I found myself asking a question he was likely too stoned or disoriented to ask for himself: *Why?* Why are Tor and Bari—and Quinn, for that matter—giving the red-carpet treatment to three squares who are entirely on the consuming end of the business? Well, how many reasons could there be? Money or sex: pick your poison! For Quinn, it's sex, which he's had before with men at A-Frame (including Tor once) and which he's hoping he'll have tonight with Ben Hobart, based on nothing more than a hunch. For Tor, it's money. He's run through most of his inheritance building this place and planting ten acres of marijuana; he could use an investor or two. But there's a deeper reason: Tor has thrown himself into creating an alternate world, but hardly anyone has seen it. As a person who feels most alive in the act of awakening others, he longs to witness his vision ablaze in new eyes.

Toward the end of the meal, the sun drops behind the mountains, leaving the redwoods silhouetted like iron cutouts through the windows. As if at a signal, the young denizens of A-Frame leave the table and begin removing instruments from the nook where Tor and Bari stow them: bongos and castanets, shakers and recorders and ukuleles, plenty of options for those who can't carry a tune. The formerly naked girl appears with a clarinet that must be her own. Several people have guitars, and Tor carries a flute. They begin to leave the house, walking in twos and threes along a path that leads uphill through the redwoods. Lou and his friends are swept along into the cool, fragrant woods. Quinn dares to sling an arm around Ben Hobart's shoulders, causing a rogue flash of electricity to judder down Ben's spine. He glances at Quinn, deeply startled, and doesn't move away.

Tim Breezely trudges along at the rear. He'd like a drink. Smoking grass has drained his energy, and added to the weight of his invisible valises is that of a mandolin that someone handed him to carry. He's the last to reach the hilltop. When he does, the redwoods give way to cleared land and it's sunny again, the final rays browsing among the serrated leaves of a waist-high marijuana crop. Tim Breezely's mood lifts in this openness and light. The air

has a dry, tart snap. A circle has already been cleared for bonfires on cold nights, and the group assembles there as if by habit, each putting down instruments to take the hands of those adjacent to them before they sit. Emboldened by his earlier success, Quinn seizes Ben Hobart's hand, eliciting jolts of sensation in Ben that approach the orgasms he has with his wife. Lou happens, just happens, to find himself beside the formerly naked clarinettist, but his legs won't really cross; he hasn't sat "Indian style" since boyhood.

Once seated, they all close their eyes as if in meditation. I've witnessed this silent period from every available consciousness in the Collective, and I have glints of what ran through each mind as they sat together in the dregs of sunlight: First Communion on a rainy morning; scooping black goldfish from a pond; a ringing in his ears; the sensation of landing a backflip. But my problem is the same one that everyone who gathers information has: What to do with it? How to sort and shape and use it? How to keep from drowning in it?

Not every story needs to be told.

Tor breaks the silence with the first and only sustained utterance his guests will hear from him today. In a thin voice, he asks them to feel the presence of a higher power in the food they've eaten, in the land beneath them and in the sky above; to feel the uniqueness of this moment of the twentieth century —to forget, briefly, the scourge of wars and apocalyptic weaponry in favor of this beauty, this peace. "Feel it, my friends," Tor says, "and be grateful for our blessed convergence."

A vibration seems to roll up from the warm earth. The sun slips behind the mountains with a click of cold, an intimation of the Pacific Ocean snarling at cliffs just a few miles west. Tim Breezely finds that his eyes are wet. He wipes them discreetly as the others begin to play their instruments, and then he gives the mandolin a tentative strum. A guitarist with a fledgling beard leads the group, along with the clarinettist, through "Michael Row the Boat Ashore." It's a song these two know from the church they went to as kids. They're an older sister and younger brother, like Rolph and me.

The array of instruments and harmonizing voices has a rousing effect. Bari floats to her feet and begins to dance. The others do the same, still playing their instruments. Quinn and Ben Hobart dance together, hands fiercely clasped; Tim Breezely sways with his mandolin. All of them move, together and apart, in the fading light.

Lou and Tor alone remain seated. For Lou, my father, the music and the dancing provoke a riot of alarmed awareness, as if he were remembering a flame left on, a door left open, a car left running beside a cliff. With a prescience that will distinguish him to the end of his life, Lou understands that the change he's been awaiting is upon him now. He has reached its source, can feel it in the soles of his feet. But he knows that he's too old to partake. He's thirty-one, an old man! Still, Lou Kline won't tolerate being left behind. He must catapult himself into a producer's role, like Tor—who's older than he is, for Christ's sake! Not by growing grass; agriculture is too redolent of the Iowa landscape he left behind. But the music—there he can do something. He remembers the night in his cul-de-sac when everyone danced by the lake. Different dancing, different sound: the Yardbirds and their ilk have nothing to do with the life Lou Kline planned for himself, the one he's living now. They belong to the life he'll live next. He watches the brother-and-sister musicians and imagines them together on a stage. He thinks, *I can put them there*. And he does. We all know their music today.

Late that night, after Tor and Bari have gone to bed and Quinn Davies and Ben Hobart have disappeared to parts unknown and some others have returned to the cleared land to make a bonfire (fire danger being a threat even then), Lou and Tim Breezely and the sibling musicians and their young friends descend the mountain to the river for a night swim. Lou leads the way—he has always been drawn to water. He goes barefoot, a big improvement over his oxfords and downright sensuous on this carpet of velvety decay, as if sharp objects didn't exist.

The river is smooth and still, pressed between walls of redwoods and so cold that their fingers throb when they dip them in. Could swimming in it harm them? Lou has heard of very cold water causing heart attacks, and feels responsible, having led everyone here. As they're mulling over the safety of submerging, Tim Breezely suddenly strips off his clothes and dives from a log, buck naked. The smash of cold stops his breathing; he has a brief

blackout sensation of death. But when he surfaces, howling, what has died is his sorrow—he's left it on the river bottom. Freedom! Joy! Tim Breezely will soon divorce—they'll all divorce—everyone will divorce. An entire generation will throw off the fetters of rote commitment in favor of invention, hope—and we, their children, will try to locate the moment we lost them and worry that it was our fault. Tim Breezely will become a dedicated jogger before anyone jogs without being chased. He'll write books about exercise and mental health that will make him a household name, and will receive thousands of letters from people whose lives he has transformed, even saved.

Cursing himself for not having jumped in first, Lou sloughs off his clothes and hurls himself into water so frigid it sends his nuts into his throat. There are splashes and screams as everyone follows him in. But, when the agony passes and they've paddled around a bit, the cold reverses itself and becomes radiant heat. They leave the river tingling and euphoric, bound by their adventure, and scramble back up the mountain to A-Frame, naked and unashamed.

We waited at the window, Rolph and I, for our father to come home. Eventually, we went outside into our cul-de-sac. Our mother let us go barefoot, although we'd already had our bath. It was a warm summer twilight. I wore a paisley brown-orange bathrobe, but I don't think I truly remember that. I have "memories" that are really just pictures from the albums our mother loved to make, telling our family story in small square photographs, still mostly black-and-white, with an occasional blaze of color as if everyone had woken up in Oz. That paisley bathrobe came back to me only when I watched our father's approach to the house through his eyes. I felt him note the blue beauty of the hour and experienced the surge of love that overwhelmed him at the sight of Rolph, in his cloth diaper, running toward him on stumpy three-year-old feet.

We seized our father's legs, and he put a hand on each of our heads, cupping Rolph's and holding it against him. Then he looked up at our mother, Christine, who smiled at him from the front door in a blue sweater, her dark hair falling from a clip. All around her were the spindly saplings they'd chosen together at a greenhouse and planted outside their brand-new California home, assuming that they would live there forever. ♦

## **Letter from Fuling**

- [China's Reform Generation Adapts to Life in the Middle Class](#)

My students from the nineteen-nineties grew up in rural poverty. Now they're in their forties, and their country is unrecognizable.

By [Peter Hessler](#)

## Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

As far as I knew, North was the last of my former students to become an entrepreneur. By the time he finally started his business, in 2017, it had been twenty years since he sat in my classroom at Fuling Teachers College. The majority of his peers were now teachers who had as little as a decade left before they reached retirement age in China: sixty for men, fifty-five for women. In addition to the teachers, a handful of my former students had become government officials. During the nineteen-nineties, I taught English literature, and I sometimes asked students to act out scenes from Shakespeare. As we stayed in touch over the years, certain character roles continued to develop, like plays that never ended. One girl who had performed Juliet—wearing a red dress, standing atop a wooden desk in the balcony scene—enjoyed a successful post-Romeo career with the local government bureau that managed the one-child policy. The best Hamlet I ever taught died in Horatio's arms, joined the Communist Party, moved to Tibet, and became a cadre in the Propaganda Department.

And then there were the entrepreneurs. There weren't many of them, and they'd mostly got started during the boom years of the late nineteen-nineties and early two-thousands, when Chinese-business stories had their own Shakespearean qualities. One man was reportedly fired from his teaching position after he disciplined a naughty middle-school student with a harsh beating. Too proud to try to find another job in education, he became a cabdriver in remote Qinghai Province, where one thing led to another, and he ended up a millionaire with a fleet of cars—a taxi tycoon, a hero whose hubris turned to gold. Two of North's college roommates, also former students of mine, stumbled onto products or services that proved unexpectedly profitable. Whenever we got together, they reminisced about the excitement and hard work of their early years in business. But they also remembered a great deal of confusion, ignorance, and dumb luck. For a

Chinese person born in the nineteen-seventies, success sometimes felt like an accident.

Nowadays, though, the business climate had become far more competitive. Few middle-aged people abandoned stable jobs in order to become entrepreneurs, but North hoped that there were also some benefits to being older. After all, there were lots of other Chinese like him—in 2019, the government identified North’s cohort, ranging in age from forty-five to forty-nine, as the most populous of any five-year grouping. Middle-aged Chinese had grown up alongside the changes that were initiated in 1978, by Deng Xiaoping’s Reform and Opening policy, and many of them had participated in the largest internal migration in human history, as more than a quarter of a billion people moved from the countryside to the cities. North believed that his advantage was that he understood the things that these urban residents would need as they grew older. And one of those things, in his opinion, was elevators.

North had been the class monitor during my first two semesters as a teacher. In the fall of 1996, the Peace Corps had sent me to Fuling, a small city on the banks of the Yangtze River, in southwestern China. As monitor, North collected assignments, organized study sessions, and conveyed messages to classmates from college leaders. He was an organizer and a connector, and to some degree he remained in that role for the next quarter century. These days, when old classmates meet up, they often still address North as *banzhang*, or class monitor. If I want an update about somebody, North can usually help, although his information tends to be elevator-centric. Once, I told him that I was about to visit a woman named Emily, and North said that she lived on the sixth floor and had inquired about his services. “There are about fifty or sixty residential units, but no elevators,” North continued, describing the complex where she resided. Another time, I mentioned Grant, a student from a different year. I didn’t expect North to know Grant, but his response was immediate. “He lives on the top floor of his building,” North said. “He asked me to take a look, but it won’t work. There’s a car-repair shop on the ground level. You can’t put an elevator there.”

North’s standard sales pitch is that you should think of an elevator the way you think of a car. He named his business accordingly—Chuxingyi Dianti Gongsi, or the Travel Easy Elevator Company. The first time he took me to a

project site, in the fall of 2019, we visited a twelve-story building in downtown Fuling. The city's urban population has tripled since I lived there, with some of the growth coming from the resettlement of migrants during the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, which inundated many low-lying settlements in the early two-thousands. Back then, construction tended to be rushed and of poor quality, and it wasn't unusual for a tall building to have no elevator. North told me that the twelve-story structure dated to that era.

"In those days, elevators and cars were basically the same," he said. "People didn't have either. But now pretty much everybody has a car. It's a basic tool for transportation. And elevators should still be the same—if you have a car, then you should also have an elevator."

The building had the characteristic look of millennial Chinese construction: aging concrete, small windows, cramped balconies with rusted railings. But a gleaming new glass-and-metal elevator shaft had been attached along one side of the building's exterior, like a splint to a wounded limb. North and I entered the shaft at the ground floor, and he inserted a key into the elevator's console. A set of speakers in the ceiling started playing "Going Home," by Kenny G. In most of North's elevators, "Going Home" runs on an endless loop. He once told me that the song makes people feel good about returning to their apartments.

He pushed the button for the top floor. "You need a key to use the elevator," he said. "Just like driving a car." He explained that this was necessary because each resident had contributed a different amount toward the construction. The price got higher with each floor, so every key was programmed to take the elevator only to the resident's landing. It was like owning a car, if your car always went to the same destination while playing the same song by Kenny G.

North mentioned that a twelfth-floor resident had refused to pay, so she had to keep trudging up the stairs. I asked if anybody ever opted out and then secretly acquired a key from a neighbor.

"It's not common, but I've had it happen," North said. He took out his phone, opened an app, and showed a live video feed: North and me, viewed from above. I looked behind us and saw a surveillance camera. "I can watch

any of my elevators with this app," North said. He switched the feed to an elevator across town. On the screen, the doors opened and a woman entered. Believing herself to be alone and unobserved, the woman faced the elevator's mirror, leaned close, and began working intently on her makeup. Kenny's sax played while North and I watched the woman fix her face. "See?" North said. "If anybody uses the elevator illegally, it's easy to check. That video stays up for seven days."



*"If you're going to mope around the house, at least do it in a fresh new way."*  
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

Like all my students, North had majored in English, and I was initially surprised when he told me about his new business. But he explained that his partner handled all the technical aspects. North's role was to negotiate with residents, figuring out the fee structure for each elevator project. He told me that the process is complicated because, unlike in the past, most buildings no longer belong to Communist-style work units. Many residents had moved from the countryside, and their lack of familiarity with the people around them was part of the shift to city life. "Usually, they haven't even met their neighbors until they start talking about getting an elevator," North said.

When I arrived in Fuling, I was only a few years older than my students. All of us were in our twenties, and the college was part of a huge expansion across the Chinese educational system. My students, trained as teachers, had most of their tuition paid by the government, which at that time assigned

graduates to work in rural secondary schools. These assignments were usually near students' home towns in Sichuan Province and Chongqing municipality. The overwhelming majority of Fuling students, like most Chinese, had grown up on farms: in 1974, the year that North and many of his classmates were born, China's population was eighty-three per cent rural. But by the mid-nineteen-nineties that percentage was falling fast. As part of the college-enrollment process, the *hukou*, or household registration, of any young Chinese switched from rural to urban. The moment my students entered college, they were transformed, legally speaking, into city people.

But inside the classroom it was obvious that this process still had a long way to go. Most students were small, with sun-darkened skin, and they dressed in cheap clothes that they washed by hand. In winter, they often got chilblains on their fingers and ears, the result of poor nutrition and cold living conditions. North had grown up on a farm, and he told me later that his parents gave him a hundred yuan a month, a little more than twelve dollars, which was what most students received to cover living expenses. They usually described themselves as "peasants," a word that had no stigma at a Marxist college. When they wrote essays about their families, they put themselves somewhere between the horrors of the Communist past—the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution—and whatever the future might hold:

Today, when we see those days with our own sight, we'll feel our parents' thoughts and actions are somewhat blind and fanatical. But if we consider that time objectively, I think, we should understand and can understand them. Each generation has its own happiness and sadness.

In China, passing an entrance examination to college isn't easy for the children of peasants. . . . The day before I came to Fuling, my parents urged me again and again. "Now you are college student," my father said. . . . "The generation isn't the same with the previous generation, when everyone fished in troubled waters. We have to make a living by our abilities nowadays. The advancement of a country depend on science and technology."

My mother was a peasant, what she cared for wasn't the future of China, just how to support the family. She didn't know politics, either.

In her eyes, so long as all of us lived better, she thought the nation was right. . . . But I see many rotten phenomenons in the society. I find there is a distance between the reality and the ideal, which I can't shorten because I'm too tiny. Perhaps someday I'll grow up.

Most of them had studied English for seven or more years before encountering a native speaker, and they had come up with their own foreign names. Some of these had a literal or symbolic meaning, in the manner of a Chinese poet's *biming*, or pen name. North had selected his name in part because it's the traditional direction of authority in China: faraway Beijing. He had also read in a history book that there was once a British Prime Minister named North. He wasn't aware that Frederick North, the Earl of Guilford, was mostly distinguished by having held office during the period in which the empire lost its American colonies.

The position of monitor had a political dimension, and North eventually joined the Communist Party. But after graduation he declined the Party's assigned teaching job. There was often a financial penalty for doing this, and North had to pay a sum that represented a year's income for his parents. He told me that he couldn't bear to return to the village where he'd grown up.

He was determined to live in Fuling, which, from his perspective, was a big city. In truth, it was small by Chinese standards, with more than two hundred thousand urban residents, and its only claim to fame was *zhacai*, a local vegetable product that's cultivated and cured along the banks of the Yangtze. There's no English word for *zhacai*, and the official dictionary translation is at once extremely descriptive and utterly mysterious: "hot pickled mustard tuber." The vegetable became North's entrée to urban life: he was hired by the city's largest state-owned *zhacai* company at a starting monthly salary of two hundred and seventy-six yuan. When I visited him in 1997, during his first year on the job, the "t" had fallen off the large English sign at the company's entrance. It didn't seem promising that my former monitor was earning thirty-three dollars a month at a firm that identified itself as "Fuling Ho Pickled Mustard Tuber."

The few students who refused government teaching jobs tended to come from both extremes of the class spectrum. A handful of students had city backgrounds, which gave them the connections and sense of adventure

necessary to find their own paths. At the other extreme were the truly desperate. A young person's village might be so remote, or his family situation so dire, that he couldn't afford to become a public-school instructor. The most common alternative was to migrate, usually to the boomtowns in the south or the east. After graduation, one boy wrote a letter describing his journey to Zhejiang Province:

On the boat, there were so many Sichuan people who were going to coastal cities that some of them slept in the toilet. At the railway station, the Sichuan people were just like refugees or beggars. . . . We were forced to use 40 yuan to buy fast-food which was just like swill. Two Sichuan young men were beaten to the ground just for that they did not have money to buy something to eat.

One of North's college roommates was an athletic, square-jawed boy who called himself Anry. Anry's parents had grown up illiterate, but the boy loved poetry, and he became the first person from his village to enter college. Like many young literary Chinese in the nineteen-nineties, he believed that a poet should be both angry and romantic. Though he dropped the "g" for English class, Anry was true to his name: he had a quick temper, and he dated one of the prettiest and smartest girls in our department.

As the youngest of four brothers, Anry had been designated his family's best hope. The third brother dropped out of high school in order to earn money to help pay Anry's tuition, and the eldest brother worked for the local government in road construction. The job gave him access to dynamite, and occasionally he took some explosives, detonated them in a lake, and harvested the fish that floated to the surface. Dynamite fishing was illegal in China, but it wasn't uncommon in poor areas, and every now and then somebody got caught with a short fuse. When this happened to Anry's brother, he was holding the explosives close to his face. He was blinded, and both of his hands had to be amputated at the wrists.

Anry graduated shortly after the accident. By then, he knew the full extent of the burden that he and his other brothers would share, because the eldest had a wife and a fourteen-year-old son. After graduation, Anry reported to his assigned job at a remote middle school, where he spent the first night in the faculty dormitory. The mud-walled building was perched high on a

mountaintop; at night, Anry lay awake listening to the wind. The job paid less than thirty dollars a month. In the morning, Anry walked down the mountain and never returned.

He travelled to Kunming, in the far southwest, where his college girlfriend had migrated. Anry found a job as a cold-call salesman of dental chairs, working on commission, but he never sold a single chair. He didn't do much better with his next job, selling film for X-ray machines. Next, he tried water pumps. "I had no experience," he told me, years later. "I didn't know how to interact with people or how to sell things. I just walked around, trying to find customers who might want this stuff."

When Anry's money was almost gone, he took a train to Shanghai. He and his girlfriend had broken up, and he travelled alone to the east. He arrived in Shanghai with less than three dollars. That evening, he slept in a public square next to the city's Hongqiao station. He couldn't believe how many other young people were there—farm boys and girls, migrants from small cities, recent college graduates, all of them sleeping under the open sky. Since leaving home, Anry had often recited "Love of Life," a poem by Wang Guozhen, who was a favorite of young people in the nineteen-nineties:

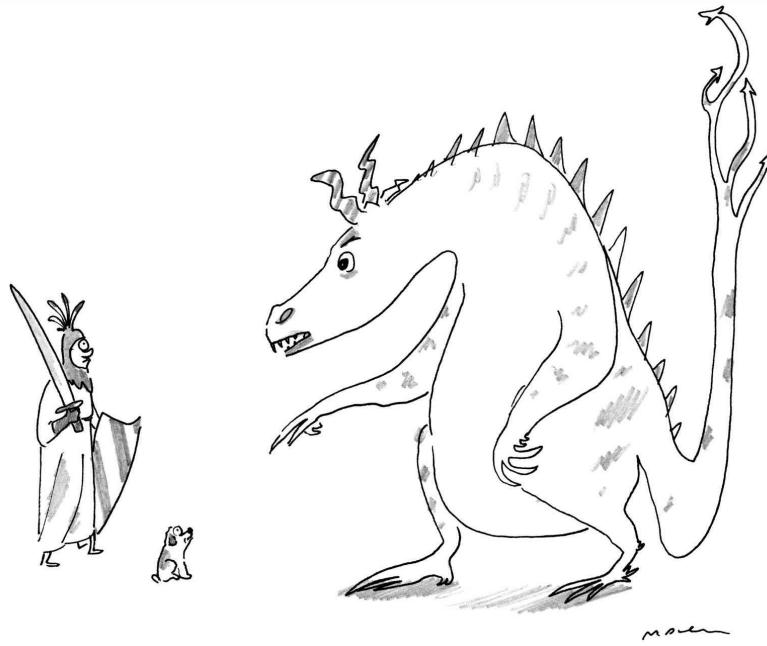
I don't think about success  
Since I chose the distant place  
Simply travel fast through wind and rain.

In 1999, I moved to Beijing, where I became a freelance writer. In those days, few Chinese had cell phones or e-mail, and I kept a list with the home addresses of more than a hundred former students. Every six months, I wrote a group letter, addressing each envelope by hand, a process that took hours because of my poor Chinese calligraphy. The responses arrived in cheap brown paper envelopes, postmarked from places I had never heard of: Lanjiang, Yingye, Chayuan.

I'm working in a small village. As you know, I can't make more money as a teacher in China. But I feel very happy. Because my students here all respect me and like me very much. . . . Maybe I will have a girlfriend next year. She is not very pretty and beautiful, but she is very kind to me.

I now know that I had been a frog in a well. There is an awfully large distance between Zhejiang and Sichuan province. Here it is the Shangrila of the rich. While Sichuan is just the very hell of the poor. . . . There is a great distance between [my girlfriend] and I. I know we'll never be together if I'm a poor man all my life. Here I must work hard, hard, and hard.

Often, it seemed as if the ones who migrated and the ones who taught were describing different countries. But the connections were closer than they appeared: the teachers in those obscure Sichuanese towns were instructing students who, after completing middle school, often left for the coast with enough basic skills to serve as assembly-line workers. The system aimed for maximum efficiency, which was why the Fuling college, like many other teacher-training institutions in the region, had been classified as a *zhuanke xuexiao*, a kind of junior college. At a *zhuanke xuexiao*, potential teachers completed their degrees in three years instead of four, allowing them to move quickly into the expanding school system.



"Is he friendly?"  
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

In some of the poorest places, the rush to turn out instructors became a kind of triage. One of my best students, Linda, had been the middle-school *tongzhuo*, or desk mate, of a quick-minded boy who tested higher than she did at the end of ninth grade. Because of his scores, the boy was sent

immediately to a three-year institute that specialized in training teachers for primary schools in undeveloped areas. Linda went on to high school, after which she was selected to enter the Fuling college. Back then, nobody spoke of algorithms, but clearly there had been some kind of large-scale calculation: by identifying bright kids in rural areas and pulling them out of the normal educational track, the government produced primary-school teachers who were fully licensed by the age of eighteen. Of course, some of them were bright enough to realize that they were essentially being sacrificed for the sake of the larger system. Linda, by virtue of scoring lower than her desk mate, had ended up with more education and a much better job. But in May of 1999, when she sent me a long letter, the desk mate had returned:

Nowadays there is a boy who is hunting for me. His name is Huang Dong. He was my classmate in middle school. . . . He only taught in primary school for half a year. After that, he went out and did all kinds of jobs, to be a singer, to be a salesman, and to be vice manager in an investment company in Chengdu. . . . He is kind and brave and aggressive. Most of all, he is very responsible. In a sense, he is trustworthy. And above all, he and his family love me very much. Perhaps, he will be my husband in the future.

During my first years in Beijing, letters often described courtships and marriages. Like most rural Chinese, the students usually married early, and they could come across as brutal realists:

Last winter, I was married with a doctor. He is not very handsome but he is very kind to me. Next spring we will have a baby.

What makes me happy is that I married an ugly woman who graduated from the math department of Fuling Teachers College.

Now I find a girlfriend finally, she will be my wife after 2000. She isn't beautiful, there are many black points on her face, but I love her, because she has more money than me, maybe I love her money more. . . . I have many things to say, but I can't write out. This letter is typed from my girlfriend's computer.

Few of them had much dating experience. During college, the administration had strictly prohibited any kind of romance, especially for a student with a political position like North's. Anry told me that he had never had any interest in joining the Party, because of meddlesome rules like the anti-dating policy, which he flouted. Another habitual romantic rule-breaker was a student named Youngsea. Technically, Youngsea didn't share Anry and North's dorm room, but he spent so much time there that they considered him a *shiyou*, a roommate. The three boys were inseparable on campus.

In my class, Youngsea was a mediocre student, but he was strikingly handsome. He had blue-black hair, large round eyes, and a high, aquiline nose—in a section populated entirely by Han Chinese, Youngsea looked almost as if he belonged to a different ethnic group. He dated a girl in the Chinese department, writing her poems in the classical tradition. He had named himself Youngsea, a literal translation of his Chinese poet *biming*.

Youngsea was the second person to enter college from his remote village, in northeastern Sichuan. After graduation, he earned a little more than thirty dollars a month at his assigned middle-school job. Hoping to supplement this income, Youngsea bought two cheap keyboards and set up a private typing course at the school. People had just started to hear about the importance of computers, and dozens of parents signed up their kids for Youngsea's course. He taught in assembly-line fashion: at each computer, twenty students lined up, and every two minutes another kid took a turn at the keyboard. Tuition for each class was about twenty-five cents. Youngsea quickly earned more money from the private course than he did from his actual job.

After a year, he was able to transfer to a training institute in Fuling. He began dating a woman who was so beautiful that she seemed out of place in the small city. "Everywhere she went, men would proposition her and harass her," Youngsea remembered, years later. She worked at a shop where the boss's younger brother became so infatuated with her that she felt unsafe. Every afternoon, Youngsea sent two students from his institute's martial-arts department to escort his girlfriend home. "I knew that the only way to keep her was to become a big boss," he said. "If I was a boss, she could work with me, and men would leave her alone."

A retired teacher in her sixties who had taught at Youngsea's school was impressed by his energy and drive. When he told her about his girlfriend and his dream of becoming a boss, the retired teacher agreed to lend him more than a thousand dollars. It was 2000, and successful entrepreneurs had started to buy cell phones, so Youngsea opened a shop in downtown Fuling. His girlfriend helped manage the store, and the business thrived. In less than four months, Youngsea paid off the loan, and he never returned to teaching.

Youngsea's shop stocked other electronic devices, and when walkie-talkies started flying off the shelves it took him a while to understand what was happening. Construction companies used the devices to communicate on building sites, and every time a project expanded, hiring more workers, it needed more walkie-talkies. Invariably, the company returned to the same dealer, in order to buy devices that operated on the same frequency. In the early two-thousands, it seemed that every Chinese construction company was growing at an explosive rate, especially in the resettlement areas of the Three Gorges Dam. Walkie-talkies became much more profitable than cell phones, a fact that most dealers were slow to realize. But Youngsea soon opened a second shop in Fuling.

Later in life, Youngsea described this period in terms that were almost fable-like. Initially, he had been motivated by a desire to protect his girlfriend, but, after he became rich beyond his wildest dreams, it was as if the money numbed his desire. "What we had was true love," he said, years later. "But at that time the drive for money was stronger than anything else. She was going back and forth from home to the shop, working constantly. We bought an apartment and a car together. We were so busy; I was doing business all the time."

When Youngsea's girlfriend wanted to have a child, he resisted. "I thought it wasn't the right time," he remembered. He was still building his company, and new opportunities kept cropping up; it didn't make sense to start a family now. He expanded into Chongqing, where he sold other things that were in demand in the new urban environments: alarm systems, video intercoms, and parking-lot management systems. Periodically, his girlfriend talked about marriage and a child, but Youngsea always put it off. By the time he was finally ready, five years after they started dating, a businessman

from out of town started pursuing Youngsea's girlfriend. Before he realized what was happening, she had left him.

As the years passed, the brown envelopes that arrived in Beijing started to include letters from the students of my students. Rural schools were being closed and consolidated on a scale that was almost unimaginable—from 2000 to 2010, according to one government report, China shut down an average of sixty-three elementary schools a day. Most children from the countryside left their home villages in order to receive a secondary education in the kinds of small cities and towns where my students taught. Typically, children lived in dormitories, and their letters often mentioned parents who had migrated:

My family is very poor, my mom went crazy when I was very young, so my father goes to Yunnan to look for work. . . . I love my father very much, during the Spring Festival my father didn't come home to spend the festival because he wanted to send me more money.

My English name is Hunt, born in a poor family in the Country. From the time when I can remember things, I know my parents are weak and often fall ill. But I want to study, just like the man in the desert wants to get water.

I am a girl. I am sixteen years old. . . . I intend to learn five languages well [in addition to] Chinese and English. That's to say, I will learn Russian, French, German, Spanish, and Arabic. . . . I don't fear the force of the wind, the slash of the rain; I will go face them and fight them, be savage again. Go hungry and cold like a wolf, go wade like the crane. I must get success, if I study hard and insist all the time. I am not afraid of tomorrow for I have seen yesterday and I love today. Such is me.

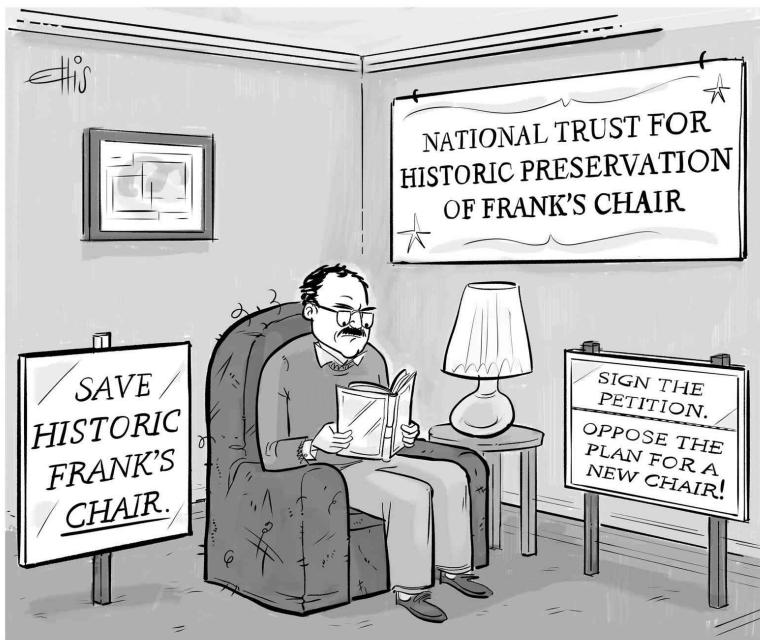
Their English study materials seemed to include a steady diet of inspirational passages. In letters, kids often mixed and matched quotes, and they had a fondness for boom-time writers whose subject had been the interior of another country long ago. The sixteen-year-old girl took some words from William Allen White, a Kansan who became a leader of the Progressive movement in the early twentieth century. Other descriptions—

the force of the wind, the slash of the rain—came from Hamlin Garland, a contemporary of White's who wrote about hardworking Midwestern farmers.

I heard less often from students who had migrated. For years, I wasn't in direct contact with Anry, although occasionally I received updates in letters from his former girlfriend:

I called Anry the other day. I found I was happy to know that he was doing well—he works as the head of Plastics Department in a large factory.

After arriving in Shanghai and sleeping in the public square, Anry had walked six miles across the city to find a contact from his home village. He visited factory gates, inquiring about job openings, and a Taiwanese manufacturer of plastic computer cases hired him in marketing, because of his degree in English. At the Taiwanese factory, Anry followed the routine of many ambitious young people at that time: during the day, he worked, and at night he looked for better work. Soon he found a higher-paying position at a company that manufactured cordless phones. Every year, he sent about a tenth of his salary to the family of his disabled brother.



Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

Anry told me later that this period was his true education. In Fuling, he had never been a motivated student, but in Shanghai he began to take night classes, including a course on something called Six Sigma. In 1986, an American engineer at Motorola had developed a management system that aimed at quality control: according to the theory, a person who correctly follows a rigorous Six Sigma process should be able to manufacture a product with a statistically infinitesimal chance of defects. Motorola implemented the process, and then, in the nineteen-nineties, it was picked up by other large American firms, including General Electric and Honeywell.

For Anry, Six Sigma had the force of a religious awakening. Until then, life seemed to unfold by chance: he migrated because of his brother's tragic accident; he went to places where he happened to know people; he accepted whatever jobs he could find. But now he started to grasp the importance of system and process. He applied Six Sigma to his manufacturing job, and then he quit to become a Six Sigma evangelist. He travelled to factories all over the eastern provinces—Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Anhui, Shandong—and gave presentations about the management system. When he started, in 2001, most manufacturers that he visited still lacked basic protocols. “They didn’t have any clear work instructions,” he remembered recently. “They didn’t have official documents. Workers just relied on experience. It was all trial and error, and people learned things directly from others, by word of mouth. I told them that you have to define your parameters, you have to document your operations. You need work instructions. You need standards. You need basic process control.”

Anry expanded his consulting firm to a half-dozen employees, and he spent most days on the road. The money was excellent, but mostly he enjoyed witnessing the impact of his work—often, he visited the same factory a few times, observing changes. During the two-thousands, the quality of Chinese manufacturing began to improve rapidly, although Anry understood better than anybody that it still wasn’t good enough. In 2003, his third brother, the one who had quit school to support Anry’s studies, was working at a Shanghai factory that produced computer cases and cables. One day, he was repairing an injection-molding machine when there was a high-voltage malfunction. Anry’s brother was electrocuted and died instantly.

Once again, Anry was forced to move in the wake of a family tragedy. He shut down his business and returned to Chongqing, to be closer to the relatives who needed support. But now he had a specialty. He found a well-paying job as a quality-control auditor with the International Automotive Task Force, a group of companies that seek to improve auto-parts manufacturing. By then, he had discarded the poetic anger and changed his English name to Allen. Like many Chinese basketball fans of his generation, he admired Allen Iverson as a scrappy, undersized player who overcame adversity.

In 2011, China's population officially became majority urban. Around that time, I realized that even former students who taught in small cities were starting to become prosperous. In 2014, I sent a long questionnaire to about eighty of the people I had taught. Thirty responded, and of those twenty-eight owned both an apartment and a car, and their median household income was nearly eighteen thousand dollars. This year, when I asked the question again, the median income was more than thirty-five thousand dollars. Back in the late nineteen-nineties, they had usually started out with an annual salary of around five hundred dollars.

Most of the students had grown up in large rural families, but they were part of the generation that was most intensely affected by the *jihua shengyu*, the government's planned-birth policy, which limited almost all urban families to a single child. By the time the policy was finally loosened, in 2015, my students were around forty—too old, most of them believed, to have another baby. In questionnaires, they described their child rearing as vastly different from that of their parents:

They raised us like they raised pigs or chickens. We did not get much love from them. But now our kid is the only hope of us.

I give [my son] all my love and care. I feel bad when I think of my time as a student because our parents gave us nothing. Chinese peasants did not know how to care for their kids at all. I was very often sick and feeling cold but my parents did not care at all.

Since 2014, I've sent out surveys on a regular basis, focussing on different topics. There's undoubtedly some selection bias, because students with more

stable lives are probably more likely to respond. But there are also a number of people who serve as connectors, like North, and I can talk with them about trends that I notice among the group. Despite my students' transition to urban life and prosperity, their thinking and values still follow many patterns that I associate with rural Chinese. In 2014, I asked respondents to define their social class, and only eight out of thirty identified as middle class or higher. Twenty-two defined themselves with terms like "proletariat," "low class," "down class," "poverty class," "poor," and "we belong to nothing." According to the World Bank, more than eight hundred million Chinese have been lifted out of poverty, but the concept of a middle class is still relatively new. And, for many of my students, the trauma of having been poor seems hard to shake. The boy who wrote me the letter about his harrowing boat journey to Zhejiang, during which Sichuanese migrants slept in the toilet, eventually learned fluent English, became a private-school teacher with a salary of around eighty thousand dollars, and owned three apartments and a car, without any debt. But on the survey he responded, "We belong to lower class."

In Fuling, Linda wrote, "I think if you are in the middle class, you should at least have an apartment and a car without a loan." She defined herself as lower than middle, because she and Huang Dong had borrowed money for their apartment. The former middle-school desk mates were still together: he now ran a small business selling construction materials, and Linda taught at the best high school in Fuling.

Among my former students, the divorce rate is strikingly low. In 2016, only one out of thirty-three respondents had been divorced, and this year the figure was one out of thirty-two. North and others confirmed that almost all their classmates are still with their original spouses. Nationwide, the divorce rate has more than tripled since 2000, and it's now higher than in the U.S. But these social changes haven't seemed to affect my students. "We are very traditional Chinese," one woman wrote on the questionnaire. "We don't think it is good to divorce."

Other traditional ideas surprised me. The college had indoctrinated all students in Marxism, and in class they were extremely scornful of religion. But some of this ideology seemed to be a veneer that vanished over time. In 2016, twenty-seven out of thirty-three respondents said that they believed in

God. Twenty-eight believed in *baoying*, the Buddhist concept of karmic retribution. A clear majority—twenty-three—had visited a place of worship during the previous year. “I am a Party member, so I am not allowed to do that,” one woman wrote, and then continued, “But I like going to the Buddhist temple.” Unlike the Abrahamic religions, pre-Communist Chinese traditions of faith didn’t emphasize exclusivity, and I recognized this quality in my students. Sometimes they shopped around. “I think the Chinese local God works much better than Jesus,” one man wrote, after visiting both temples and churches. They tended to be flexible in their faith. “I want to believe in Jesus, but there is no church here,” one woman wrote. “So I have to believe in the Chinese God.”

Even when they participated in city activities, their rural roots were often visible. In June of 2021, Linda and Huang Dong’s son took the *gaokao*, the multiday national college-entrance exam. On the first morning, I met the family at the entrance to the testing site in Fuling. In Chinese cities, it’s become a tradition for exam-day mothers to dress up in fancy *qipao* outfits, and Linda dutifully wore red silk, with her long hair neatly braided. When I complimented her on the dress, she said proudly that she weighed the same as she had in college.

Over the years, the *gaokao* has become increasingly stressful, but nobody in Linda’s family was visibly nervous. “Be confident,” Linda told her son, before he walked through the gate. The moment the boy was out of sight, his parents began to speak dismissively of his chances.

“He hasn’t prepared very well,” Linda said. When I asked what her son hoped to do in the future, she shook her head: “He doesn’t have any goals.”

“He just needs to find some kind of stable job,” Huang Dong said. “His mind isn’t nimble enough for business. If you’re not completely focussed on everything these days, you’ll lose money. He shouldn’t be a teacher, either. It’s too demanding.”

They continued in this vein for a while. The previous year, I had accompanied North when he dropped off his boy at the exam, and North’s remarks had been similar. This was another pattern that I associated with rural Chinese, who sometimes attempt to ward off bad luck through

negativity. And it reminded me of the letters I had received two decades earlier, when my students were embarking on their marriages. *He is not very handsome. There are many black points on her face.* The month after the *gaokao*, Linda wrote that her son had tested into a good university, and that was exactly what had happened with North's boy, a year earlier.

Sometimes North regretted his decision to leave his position at the hot-pickled-mustard-tuber company. In 1997, when I visited him at his first job, I was skeptical of his prospects, but he rose in product sales. Eventually, he was made chairman of a subsidiary in Guizhou Province, and he represented the company on business trips to Malaysia. He bought five apartments, including one in Fuling's most luxurious new development. I sensed that one reason he left the hot-pickled job was that he admired the independence of his former roommates, Anry and Youngsea.

But North worried that he had started too late. Nowadays, Chinese often speak of *neijuan*, a word that's usually translated as "involution": a kind of self-defeating competition. When North started his elevator business, there were only a few competitors, but by 2020 there were more than a dozen. The margins were falling fast, and every time I visited North there was a *neijuan* quality to the surveillance-camera feeds on his phone: all these little boxes, all over town, all of them potential sites of conflict and negotiation. North said that the hardest part was dealing with people who resided on lower floors. They paid nothing for a new elevator, but even when they agreed to a project they tended to change their minds as construction proceeded. They couldn't bear the idea of upstairs neighbors getting benefits: after an elevator was installed, upper-floor property values increased dramatically, whereas those of the lower floors changed relatively little.



*"I'm gonna make him an offer he could refuse but won't because he's afraid of conflict."*  
Cartoon by Asher Perlman

One afternoon in July, 2020, I accompanied North to a mostly finished site. Some lower-floor residents had sabotaged the project's electricity, in order to delay progress, and there had been confrontations with upstairs neighbors. When we arrived, a man in his forties took out a tape measure and started complaining about the size of the elevator's entrance. Then he claimed that everybody would get stuck with high electricity bills after the elevator started to run. "And what about the maintenance?" he said.

"Neither has anything to do with you," North said. "If you use the elevator, you pay. If you don't use it, you pay nothing."

The man swore in dialect: "The Devil's own uncle knows! We are talking about those people upstairs—what if they sell their apartments, or if the elevator has to be fixed?"

"Since you aren't using the elevator, none of those things concern you," North said. He calmly produced a document with a state seal: "Building Project Permit." But a woman in her thirties wearing a pink T-shirt began to shout. "You have made your mistakes!" she said. "A prime minister's belly should be broad enough for a boat!" The phrase basically means: Be magnanimous. North spoke gently and pointed to the permit; after a while,

the man took out the tape measure again. For most of an hour, the argument continued, with each side flourishing its prop: the permit, the tape measure.

Later, North told me that it was all a performance intended to prepare for further negotiations. He would have to go door to door on the upper floors, figuring out how much people would be willing to pay off their downstairs neighbors in exchange for allowing the project to continue. “But they won’t push it too far,” he said. “That woman is a government official.”

She hadn’t mentioned her job, but North had figured out earlier that she worked for a local government bureau. This status emboldened her, but it also reduced her appetite for serious conflict. Ever since 2012, when Xi Jinping, the General Secretary of the Communist Party, initiated a series of strict anticorruption campaigns, local officials had become more careful in their interactions with civilians. I was still in touch with a few former students who had become officials, but they never said much about their jobs, and they didn’t answer my questionnaires. One former student told me that the Party had instructed many officials not to attend school reunions, which might present opportunities for old classmates to ask for favors.

Increasingly, Chinese officials have become a class apart. In 2017, I asked on a survey if respondents frequently had contact with government officials, and twenty-six out of thirty said no. But to the next question—would you want your child to pursue a career in government service?—twenty-one responded in the affirmative. “I don’t like government men, but I like the job,” one man said. “I hope my kid could get a job as an official. The job is not hard and rewarding.”

That year, I also asked respondents if they believed that China should become a multiparty democracy, and only about a quarter said yes. A number of them said that China’s system has been successful. For others, though, the reasons were more cynical. “We already have one corrupt party,” one man said. “It will be much worse if we have more.” A woman responded, “We have seen America with multiparty, but you have elected the worst president in human’s history.” When I asked if they expected a significant change in China’s political system during the next decade, more than ninety per cent said no.

My former students are often scathing about the state-mandated material that they have to teach. “China’s education is like junk food,” one woman responded, in 2016. Another wrote, “I think China’s education is rubbish. No creativity, too much work, pressure, and most of what the students are learning at school is useless in the future.” Part of the problem is that textbooks reflect a repressive political climate—the Party still educates people as if it preferred them to become assembly-line workers rather than creative, independent thinkers. In 2017, when I asked my former students to identify China’s biggest success in the previous decade, nobody mentioned education. The most common answers were all related to development: transport, infrastructure, urbanization.

But it’s remarkable how many of them remain in education. From surveys and from my conversations with North and others, I estimate that more than ninety per cent of my former students still work as teachers. This year, I asked how many jobs they’ve had since graduation, and the average for teachers was 2.1. More than a quarter had held the same position for nearly twenty-five years. In education, such stability probably serves to humanize what could otherwise become a relentlessly competitive and restrictive system. In China, there’s a long cultural tradition of respecting teachers, and the state seems to have increased salaries at a suitable rate. Despite all the teachers’ complaints about materials, when I asked them to rate their job satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 10, the average response was 7.9.

In China, generations are not usually named. There’s no equivalent of boomers, or Gen X, or millennials: the Chinese media tends to identify a cohort simply by its decade of birth. But I think of my Fuling students as part of a group that could be called the reform generation, because their lives paralleled the changes initiated by Deng Xiaoping. For them, so many fundamental experiences—leaving the countryside, being limited to one child, entering a wide-open business climate—occupied relatively brief historical windows that have now closed. The rapid expansion of the primary-and-secondary-school system has also ended, because of aging demographics. In July, I visited a former student who teaches at a secondary school in the Yangtze city of Wushan, and he said that his department recently had ninety applicants for a job opening. Other teachers report similar applicant numbers at their schools. At the teachers’ college in Fuling,

a dean told me that only about fifteen per cent of graduates go into education, because there are so few job openings.

In rural areas, the schools and villages that remain often feel as if they are dying. In July, I accompanied Grant, my former student, to his home settlement, west of Fuling. Traditionally, residents produced corn, soybeans, and vegetables, but now most of the fields appeared to be fallow. Grant's three-story home, like a number of neighboring houses, was empty. His family had rebuilt the structure in 2000, thinking that at least one of the three children would continue living there. Now Grant and his siblings return only once a year, for the Spring Festival holiday. We walked through the silent house, where certain objects—a thermos sitting on a table, a pair of pants draped over a bed—gave the impression that residents had departed just yesterday.

Outside, Grant pointed to a large white-fig tree that he had planted as a teenager, in 1991. Ten years ago, a developer offered Grant more than a hundred dollars for the tree, in order to replant it in one of the new suburbs of Fuling, but Grant declined, for sentimental reasons. He said that developers often scouted these areas for healthy trees to uproot. In China, the scale of movement was almost Biblical, and perhaps this was the final stage of the exodus: in the beginning, the people migrated to the cities, and then the trees followed.

We visited Grant's old primary school, where he said that student numbers were about a third of what they had been when he was a child. As we drove back to Fuling, he told a story about a former classmate. The boy came from one of the village's poorest families, and he attended class dressed in rags. He dropped out before middle school and headed off to Shanxi Province, in the north. The boy found a position as a laborer in a rock quarry, and then continued to mining jobs. "Eventually, he started opening his own mines," Grant said. "That was during a time when there was a lot of illegal mining. They were doing things that you can't do anymore. He made a lot of money, and he came back here and started a construction company."

The company is now involved in a road-building project worth more than fifteen million dollars, and Grant had invested in it. He received a significant dividend each month. "We're still good friends," he said. "Sometimes we get

together and play mah-jongg.” He noted that his classmate’s two children had both tested into highly ranked universities.

Grant fell silent, and I thought the story was finished. But then he spoke again. “His younger brother died in one of those mines,” he said. “That was early in his time there, before he became a boss. There was an accident.”

For the reform generation, even the most spectacular success stories are often accompanied by some kind of sadness or loss. But this side of the experience is usually left unspoken. When I talked with Anry about his life, he told me that his oldest brother was never able to work again after the dynamite accident. The disabled man’s wife eventually divorced him, and he now lives in a full-time care facility in Chongqing. The second brother died suddenly, of illness, in 2008. Of the four brothers, Anry is the only one who is both alive and healthy. He’s married and has two children. As a migrant, he had married later than most of his classmates, which meant that his wife was young enough to have a second child after the planned-birth policy was changed.

Youngsea’s first love never returned after their breakup. She married the other businessman, with whom she had two children, although they eventually divorced. Today, Youngsea is happily married to a middle-school teacher. Like Anry, Youngsea married late enough that he was able to have two children legally. He has never tried to contact his former girlfriend. “It’s better that way,” he said. Another student had corresponded with me about a number of suicides of young people in her city over the years, which she believed were caused in part by the demands of a new age. Once, in an e-mail, she commented on the tendency to avoid talking about these deaths. She wrote, “When everybody is busy trying to catch the fast-moving train, no one has time to care about someone who got off.”



Cartoon by Sarah Kempa

In May, 2021, Anry and Youngsea drove from Chongqing to Fuling, where they met North and me for lunch. All of us gathered at a hot-pot restaurant, and, as the broth boiled, the former roommates talked about the past.

“Those of us who grew up in the countryside had no *guanxi*,” Anry said. “Nobody in the city helped us. Everything depended on ourselves.”

With their chopsticks, the men fished delicacies out of the pot—golden-needle mushrooms, rolls of thin-sliced beef—and the conversation turned to food.

“When I was five or six, that’s when we were the poorest,” North said. “We never had enough to eat.”

“I can remember people eating leaves,” Anry said. “They used to boil them in a soup. My family didn’t do that, but our neighbors did. They ate from the five-leaved chaste trees.”

“We had meat once every half month,” North said. “And we had it at the Spring Festival.”

After the meal, they wanted to see the old site of the college, and we climbed into Youngsea's black Mercedes S-350. A year earlier, he had bought the car, which was manufactured in Germany, for more than a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. As he drove, he pointed out the site of his original cell-phone shop. He still owned the business, but long ago he had handed over management to his younger brother. Youngsea's firm has expanded into manufacturing, advertising, and bridge and road construction. He now owns more than twenty huge billboards, about half of them digital, in downtown Chongqing.

The Mercedes cruised east, crossing a new bridge above the Wu River, and then Youngsea parked at the site of the old campus. In 2005, the college was moved to a new location, ten miles away, because it had been upgraded to a four-year institution, and enrollment had increased tenfold. Since then, sections of the old campus have been sold off to developers, who have built blocks of high-rise apartments that are being marketed to middle-class buyers.

The campus gardens were overgrown with weeds, and the doors of the old library were chained shut. We walked past some buildings that were awaiting demolition. They still bore the propaganda signs of another era, when slogans promoted urbanization:

Build a Civilized City for the Whole Country and a National Hygienic Area

I am Aware, I Participate, I Support, I am Satisfied

We came to the six-story structure where I once lived. It used to be the best building on campus, home to the college's Communist Party secretary; I had been placed there because of my status as one of the city's first American teachers. Now the building had crumbling concrete walls, and some of the windows were broken.

"It's hard to believe that this was where the highest officials lived," Anry said. "It seemed so nice to us in those days."

Before heading back to the Mercedes, North pointed out the stairwell's exterior wall. He said, "You could put an elevator there." ♦

## Musical Events

- [Claire Chase Taps the Primal Power of the Flute](#)

A monumental project to expand the flute repertory will continue until 2036.

By [Alex Ross](#)

The flute is the oldest of instruments, its recoverable history going back some forty thousand years. Prehistoric humans fashioned flutes, pipes, and whistles from the bones of birds and other animals. There is no way of knowing what this music sounded like or what purpose it served. Did it speak of love? Tribe? Nature? God? One unsettling bit of evidence is that the first known flutes were made from the remains of creatures that had been hunted and killed. Pascal Quignard, in his haunting book “[The Hatred of Music](#),” summons a plausible scene: “The small packs of humans who hunted, painted, and modelled animal forms would hum short phrases, execute music with the help of birdcalls, resonators, and flutes made from marrowbones, and dance their secret stories while wearing masks of prey as savage as themselves.”

Over the millennia, the flute has come to be seen as delicate, decorous, ethereal. [Claire Chase](#), perhaps the instrument’s most imaginative living advocate, is bent on tapping its primal power. Since 2013, she has been commissioning scores for a monumental project called “[Density 2036](#)”; when it comes to completion, in the designated year, it will have added as many as a hundred pieces to the flute repertory. In the latest installment of the series, which had three performances at the Kitchen, in December, Chase was a solitary figure in an audiovisual storm, holding her own against roiling electronic textures and a barrage of video images. She made heavy use of her contrabass flute, which she has nicknamed Big Bertha; more than six feet tall, it emits tones of unearthly, breathy depth, suitable for an audience of whales.

What must have caught the attention of prehistoric bone flutists was the sorcery of giving voice to a no longer animate object. Chase’s events, likewise, often have the feeling of a séance, an esoteric happening. [Liza Lim](#)’s “Sex Magic,” a sprawling ritual for contrabass flute, electronics, and kinetic percussion which Chase presented online in 2020, explores what the composer calls “the sacred erotic in women’s history,” gesturing toward the Pythia, at Delphi, and the Hindu rage goddess Kali. At one unnerving moment, Chase blows on an Aztec death whistle—a ceramic resonator that can evoke a roaring wind or a screaming crowd. Lim’s creation, though, is

less an enactment of violence than an exorcism of it. “Sex Magic” ends with music of mysterious tenderness, with Tennyson cited in the score: “The long day wanes; the slow moon climbs. . . . Come, my friends, / ’ Tis not too late to seek a newer world.”

Chase, who is forty-three, grew up in a musical home in Leucadia, California, a seaside community north of San Diego. She became fixated on the flute in childhood, and at the age of thirteen she had a life-altering encounter with “Density 21.5,” Edgard Varèse’s 1936 soliloquy for flute, after which her series is named. Short in duration, cosmic in scope, “Density 21.5” transforms the flute into a luminous vessel of abstraction. Chase has written of the score, “There was no need to make anything pretty, homogenous, uniform. Beauty here was about peeling off the mask and letting the fire beneath each breath contact the metal in its own raw, unaffected way.” She tried to program the work at her junior-high-school graduation but was obliged to play “Danny Boy” instead.

Ever since, Chase has followed an affably messianic urge to bring modern music to a wider audience. Her first conduit was the International Contemporary Ensemble, which she founded in 2001. Within a decade, it had become one of America’s dominant new-music groups, and so it remains, although Chase stepped away from the ensemble in 2017 to focus on a solo career. She had launched “Density 2036” four years earlier, committing herself to a quarter-century journey that has little precedent.

The first five years of the project are summarized in a four-disk, eighteen-work compilation that Meyer Sound Laboratories produced in 2020. Faithful to the Varèsian point of departure, Chase appears to favor composers who have links, in one way or another, to the modernist tradition; neo-Romantic strains and minimalist arpeggiation are largely absent. At the same time, she is attracted to vivid colors, extravagant gestures, experimentalism with a visceral streak. A defining early offering was Mario Diaz de León’s “[Luciform](#),” in which the flute executes quick, spidery moves over a death-metal-ish backing track. A great many “Density 2036” commissions employ electronics, as if to pit the ancient against the modern.

[The Kitchen concert](#) included three new scores, an excerpt from “Sex Magic,” and a reprise of “Density 21.5.” The first première, “Aftertouch,”

was by [Wang Lu](#), who has won notice for exuberantly overloaded music that mimics the delirium of digital life. Her piece begins with field recordings of city noise, punchy electronic beats, and jittery flurries of activity on the flute. A sequence of repeating units—times three, times four, times six—suggests machines or humans caught in a loop. But a section marked “Aeolian Sound,” for bass flute, shifts into melancholy introspection, with hints of folklike motifs emerging. Accompanying the music was a mesmerizing video by Polly Applebaum, showing ceramic bowls spinning on a podium.

Next on the program was the Irish composer Ann Cleare, whose music often brings to mind amorphous forms moving through thick mist. Her piece “anfa,” its title derived from the Irish word for storm, pairs the contrabass flute with two experimental films by the artist Ailbhe Ní Bhriain. In one, a shot of a hillside is gradually effaced as the film stock is immersed in bleach, and in the other a lakeside scene is obscured by tendrils of ink. Shimmering upper harmonics and washes of trills are set against groaning Bertha tones, with a synth pedal further blurring the sonic picture. From time to time, a whisper of an arpeggiated chord or an angular motif emerges, only to dissolve back into the fog. The indication “Austere, Deep-Time, Light-seeking” in the score captures the dark, rapt mood.

Divine chaos returned in the third première, “Auricular Hearsay,” an improvisatory pandemonium conceived by the composer and mixed-media artist Matana Roberts. The score presents the performer with a checkerboard of possible pitches alongside an array of word clouds that propose both technical options (“glissando,” “vibrato,” “diminuendo”) and interpretive ones (“free,” “spacious,” “burning”). The player is also invited to react to the visual component—psychedelic videos that Roberts extracted from scans of their own brain activity. At the first of the Kitchen concerts, Chase was joined by the sound artist Senem Pirler, who manipulated a table of live electronics. At times, Chase and Pirler engaged in a friendly duel or competitive dance, jabbing back and forth with bursts of figuration and slivers of noise.

In the bad old days on the new-music circuit, an event like this would have entailed tedious pauses while equipment was nudged around. Chase, who has long campaigned for a more professional approach to production values

in classical music, played without a break, with her stage manager, Kelly Levy, imposing the seamlessness of a tight Off Broadway show. The lighting and production designer Nicholas Houfek created minimalist theatre from pools of brightness and darkness; Levy Lorenzo's sound design was as potent as it was clear; Monica Duncan handled the projections, which swirled at Chase's feet and on the screen behind her.

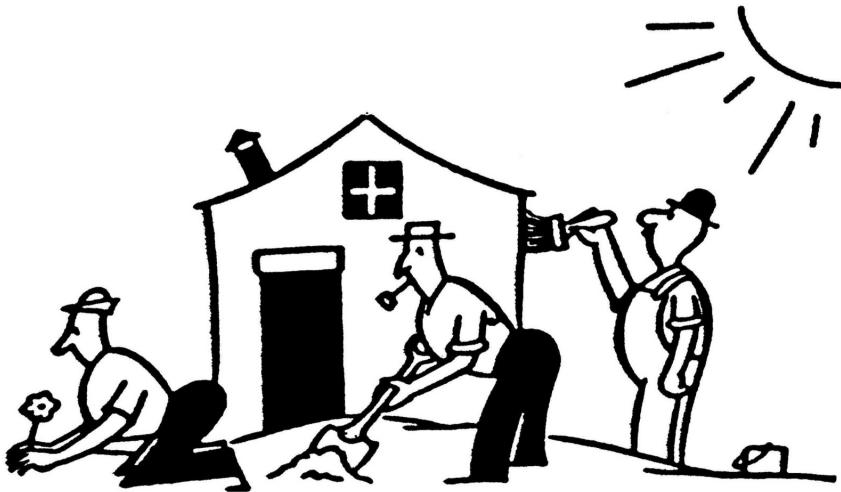
The fact that women dominated the evening seemed no accident—although it easily could have been, given the staggering inventiveness of female composers in the early twenty-first century. Lim's “Sex Magic” set the tone with its call for an “alternative cultural logic of women’s power.” At the end of the night, in a pleasing reversal of stereotypical roles, the macho-modernist Varèse fell into a kind of handmaiden role, calming frayed nerves with the crystalline structures of “Density 21.5.” Given what had come before, Chase might as well have been playing “Danny Boy.” ♦

# New Orleans Postcard

- [The Lost Bayou Ramblers Get Lit](#)

By [Jeanie Riess](#)

When the Cajun punk rocker Louis Michot was seventeen, he decided to learn French. Michot's great-grandfather had spoken the language, but refused to teach it to the younger generations. (Louisiana banned French in schools in the nineteen-twenties, forcing Cajuns to assimilate and to drop the language that had followed them from Canada to the swamp when they were exiled by the British, in the eighteenth century.)



The Lost Bayou Ramblers, the band that Michot formed with his brother, Andre, in 1999, sings in Cajun French, in the hope of keeping the culture alive. But you can't save Louisiana French if there's no Louisiana. "To make a generational break in the language is also to make a break in the knowledge," Michot said recently, behind the Broadside Theatre, in New Orleans, before a benefit concert at the Louisiana Sunshine Festival.

"There's always a word you didn't know," he said. "Any culture needs to rely on its traditional knowledge and keep up with the modern technology." Michot was wearing a camouflage jumpsuit, one of a dozen jumpsuits that he has collected since he lost his grandfather, Louis Michot, Jr., whose father had been the one to spurn French. "He wore them fishing, to church, to fix the truck," he said. "Different jumpsuits for different occasions."

Michot, who is forty-two, and has played with Scarlett Johansson, Dr. John, and the Violent Femmes, got a certification in solar installation about twenty years ago. He built his house, in Prairie des Femmes, with his own hands, using the Cajun method *bousillage*, in which a mixture of Spanish moss and mud is packed between timbers to form walls. His recording studio is solar powered. After Hurricane Ida devastated much of the coastline, in August, he launched the Louisiana Solar Fund, to help install solar power in bayou communities, some of which are still waiting to be reconnected by Entergy, the Fortune 500 company that controls much of the South's electrical grid.

For the festival in New Orleans, Michot had driven the Solar Roller, a sixteen-by-seven-foot solar-powered stage, a hundred and thirty-five miles from Lafayette. He erected the stage—a welded metal frame and a solar-panel roof—on a flatbed trailer that he'd used to haul dirt and equipment when building his house. “We had to take off the top of the door of the venue to get the trailer in,” he said. Bands would perform on it all afternoon and evening. Michot was standing in a skate park outside the venue, drinking a beer, while the Ramblers were tuning and Amigos do Samba played. A guy on a bicycle rode up to the venue. Michot asked, “You got a ticket, or you need the back door?” The cyclist replied, “I’ll buy a ticket. It’s a good cause!”

In Louisiana, not everyone thinks so; climate change can be as controversial now as Cajun French was then. For years, Michot trod carefully when speaking about alternative energy. No more. “It’s just not worth it to censor yourself on these issues,” he said. “Musicians have the license, and almost the obligation, to talk about these things.”

Amigos do Samba finished, and the Ramblers took the stage with a raucous version of the swamp anthem “Sabine Turnaround.” A woman in front shouted, “Louis has a new jumpsuit!” People streamed from tents serving gumbo and beer as Michot sang, “*O tu connais que moi / Je serai tout le temps là pour toi!*”

During a set break, Devin De Wulf, a local artist and activist, addressed the crowd. Michot dreamed up the Solar Festival with De Wulf, who is raising money for a project called Get Lit, Stay Lit, which would put solar panels on one restaurant in every New Orleans neighborhood. “So, basically, the

hurricane comes, does its thing, then the next day the sun comes out and the restaurant will be fully powered,” De Wulf said. “Then they don’t throw away all of the food in their walk-in cooler, and instead they feed it to their neighbors. And they have ice machines, so they can give ice to their neighbors. And they can become a cooling center for their neighbors. And they can be a phone-charging station.”

Michot joined De Wulf onstage and told the crowd that the Solar Fund had already started installing deep freezers in bayou communities. “If you mention ‘deep freezer’ to anyone down the bayou, their eyes light up, right?” The crowd cheered. De Wulf added, “Nobody cares about us but us, so we have to make our state and our city as resilient as possible, and really make it so that we’re self-reliant.” The Solar Roller, Michot said, did not have a single wire connecting it to anything else. “Entergy does not get a penny!” someone else roared. ♦

# **Onward and Upward with the Arts**

- [BrIDGET Everett Is Larger Than Life](#)

The comedian survived waitressing, karaoke, and the alternative-cabaret circuit before creating and starring in “Somebody Somewhere,” her autobiographical coming-of-middle-age series, on HBO.

By [Michael Schulman](#)

## Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

One June day in Romeoville, Illinois, a small town outside Chicago, an HBO crew ran into an unexpected obstacle: smoke billowing from a crematorium. The new series “Somebody Somewhere” was shooting at a funeral home, and the fumes had flustered a lighting guy. After a few takes, another combustive force entered the room. “No. 1 is here,” the assistant director announced. “Everybody be on your best behavior.” No. 1 on the call sheet was Bridget Everett, the forty-nine-year-old comedian, vocalist, and, as she likes to describe herself, “regionally recognized cabaret singer.” Everett is the star of “Somebody Somewhere,” which premières this month and is largely based on her life and her home town of Manhattan, Kansas.

Everett is not known for staying on her best behavior, or even her better behavior. In her live shows, which she and her band, the Tender Moments, perform regularly at Joe’s Pub, the cabaret arm of the Public Theatre, she prowls the audience in skimpy, outrageous outfits, guzzling Chardonnay from a bottle and burying spectators’ faces in her bosom. Traditionally, she ends the show by picking a man out of the crowd and sitting on his face.

Everything about Everett is large: her pipes (she studied operatic voice in college), her libido, her stage presence, and her body, which she uses as gelignite to spark a crowd into a willing frenzy. In a signature song, she belts, “What I gotta do to get that dick in my mouth?” and then makes everyone sing along. She talks about sloppy sex, having abortions after sloppy sex, getting blackout drunk, the many varieties of “titties,” her genitalia, her parents’ genitalia, her audience members’ genitalia—but it’s all too joyful to feel especially transgressive. Her blowsy sexuality is less a weapon than an invitation to feel as uninhibited as she does. Years ago, during a phone interview—she called me from a nude beach, where she was hanging out with Amy Schumer—she described her stage persona as “a

crazy maniac who doesn't get laid enough, so I have to put my sexual energy somewhere." In her 2015 Comedy Central special, "Gynecological Wonder," Everett lurches into the audience, trickles a glass of water over a spectator's bald head, then thrusts her fingers into his mouth, singing, "I'm coming for you."

The alternative-cabaret scene is not a typical route to stardom, but Everett has plenty of influential admirers. Patti LuPone once stood up mid-show at Joe's Pub and yelled, "There is *no one* like you." She later invited Everett to duet with her at Carnegie Hall, and the two are now developing a Broadway double act called "Knockouts." Schumer featured Everett on her sketch show "Inside Amy Schumer" and took her on comedy tours, not as an opening act but as a closing one. "I could not follow her," Schumer told me. Onstage, Everett drifts from meandering, half-melancholy tales about her dysfunctional childhood (her mother is a recovering alcoholic, and her father was largely absent) into sensuous power ballads. She's a hot mess who has utter control over a room.

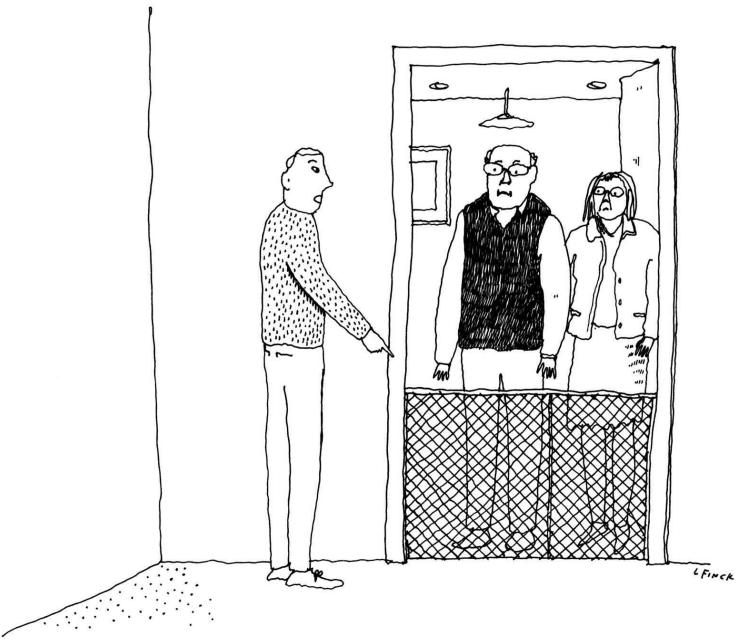
"Somebody Somewhere" has required Everett to close Pandora's box, only to open it again by degrees. She plays a more withdrawn version of herself named Sam, a would-be diva trapped in small-town America. She had come to the funeral-home set in her capacity as an executive producer. A crew guy asked her to choose between two baggies of fake pot gummies, one orange and red and the other green and yellow. The next day, she would film a scene in which her friends meet for poker and edibles. "I lean toward these," she said, choosing the orange and red. When a showrunner told her about the crematorium delay, she let out a hoot. "Oh, my God," she said. "Just a day in the life."

After watching a few takes, she introduced me to the cinematographer, a woman. "Back in the old days, you'd say, 'I like having that pussy power behind the camera,' but now you'd just say, 'I like having that feminine energy,'" Everett said with a laugh, then headed out to the parking lot. She wore a black tank top with a hoodie tied around her waist. The hoodie was printed with a big lightning bolt, to match her lightning-bolt necklace and tote bag. The emblem, she told me, was inspired by the self-help slogan "Dreams don't have deadlines," popularized by LL Cool J. "It's a reminder to fuckin' seize it, make it count," she said. "Real fuckin' cheesy." Another

necklace had “No. 1” spelled out in pavé diamonds. “It’s not every network that’s calling up a perimenopausal woman who sings cabaret to do a TV show,” she said. “You gotta celebrate the moments.”

Everett directed her driver to a weed dispensary in Naperville, for some actual edibles to get her through the shoot. Since the real Kansas doesn’t have much filmmaking infrastructure, the producers had found the area closest to Chicago that looked most like Kansas, and we drove past cornfields, strip malls, and gas stations. But Everett had brought a chunk of the New York avant-garde with her. The showrunners, Hannah Bos and Paul Thureen, are co-founders of the Brooklyn-based theatre company the Debate Society, and Sam’s friend Fred Rococo is played by the drag king Murray Hill, who dresses like a dandyish used-car salesman and bills himself as “the hardest-working middle-aged man in show business.” Everett and a few co-stars were staying at a rented house that they called the Ding Dong Dorm.

Inside the dispensary, which was lit up with neon signs, smooth jazz played. A guy reading a Hunter S. Thompson book checked Everett’s I.D. and pointed her toward a row of touch-screen menus. She scrolled through flavors: black cherry, pumpkin pie. “Brunch?” she read. “Fuck no.” She chose two packets of “sparkling white grape” gummies (“We just did them the other night, and it was *so* fun”) and a flavor called Snoozzeberry, to help her sleep.



"Mom, Dad, I'm not a baby anymore, and I can open this gate!"  
Cartoon by Liana Finck

On the drive back, Everett asked to stop at an Indian supermarket for a “spice check.” She roamed the aisles, inhaling the aromas. “What am I gonna do with a handful of Thai chiles?” she wondered aloud. “Nothing, right?” Moving on, she held up something called a snake gourd, which had a suggestive shape and firmness. “What do you do with one of these?” she said, with a hint of Mae West. “I know it’s been a long, lonely winter. But aren’t they all?”

“Somebody Somewhere,” which its executive producer Carolyn Strauss calls a “coming-of-middle-age story,” is an alternate history: What if Everett had never left Manhattan, Kansas, for Manhattan, New York? (Strauss, an HBO veteran, previously worked on “Game of Thrones.”) Everett said, “So this is like a lateral move for her, to this very tiny show about this plus-size woman in her forties.” Her character, Sam, is a repressed dead-ender who works grading standardized tests, sleeps on her couch, and, as Everett put it, is “not really taking life by the tits.” Sam’s modes of self-expression—singing rock anthems and writing dirty song lyrics—have been buried, until a new crowd lures her to “choir practice” at a local church, which turns out to be a secret party and open-mike night for the town misfits.

“She’s terrified of singing, because of everything that singing is going to bring up in her,” Everett told me, of her alter ego. In an early episode, Sam

sings Janis Joplin's "Piece of My Heart" and surprises herself by ripping her shirt open to reveal a black bra—much as Everett used to do at karaoke nights in her twenties, when she was waiting tables in New York City. The independent filmmaker Jay Duplass, who directed episodes of the show, and is a producer along with his brother, Mark, told me, "The character is in the process of becoming Bridget Everett." Like a comic-book hero discovering a superpower, she's unleashing the wild thing within.

One day this fall, I met Everett at her apartment, on the Upper West Side. The décor was retro glam: a hot-pink daybed, B-movie posters, and a neon flamingo by the door to a wraparound terrace, from which she sometimes spies Michael Moore on a terrace across the street. ("I see him out at night, doing his steps.") Everett, in her lightning-bolt hoodie and tie-dye pants, sat in an armchair, clutching a throw pillow in the shape of a breast. She was mourning her Pomeranian, Poppy Louise, whose remains sat in an urn on the coffee table. "You're basically in a pet cemetery," she said.

On my way up, the doorman had asked me to deliver a bag from a jewelry store—a gift from Jessica Seinfeld, to thank Everett for performing at a fund-raiser at the Seinfelds' house in the Hamptons. Otherwise, Everett had not performed live in two years, and she was glum. "Once you get the fucking animal out of the cage, I'm going to feel a whole lot better," she said, becoming teary. "The show is my outlet. So everything that's happened in the past couple years is all just still right fucking here"—she tapped her chest—"and I just need to get it out so I can go back to being alive again."

On the wall was an old poster that read "*VOTE FOR DONN EVERETT*." Her father, who died in 2007, was a lawyer and a Republican state senator in Kansas, but he quit, she said, in order to "spend more time with his family," a cliché that made her laugh ruefully, "because he was never there." Her mother, Freddie, is a retired music teacher, and their house had a music room where the kids, who all took piano lessons, would gather to sing; Freddie's big number was "Hello, Dolly!" Before she stopped drinking, in the nineties, Freddie would command her children to freshen her cocktails, with the instructions "Make it like you'd make it for yourself" or "Fill it to the rim, Roger." Eventually, she'd black out in her chair, and one of the children helped her to bed.

Onstage, Everett presents her family stories with debauched irony—you can't quite tell if she's making them up—but the reality was unsettling. Her brother Brock recalled walking in on their father punching their mother. "I stepped out of the shadows, and he looked up at me and said, 'I'm sorry you have to see this,'" he said. Another time, Brock asked Freddie how she was going to explain a black eye to her friends, and she said, "I'm going to tell them I got hit by a tennis ball." Bridget, though young, heard everything. "I was in this middle bedroom that everybody had to go through to get where they were going, so I had absolutely no privacy," she told me. Her parents divorced when she was eight. Freddie would have the kids accompany her on car trips to their father's apartment to stake it out for girlfriends—another tale of dysfunction that Everett spins into boozy comedy.

Everett is the youngest of six: Brinton, Brad, Alice, Brian, Brock, and Bridget. The eldest, Brinton, died of cancer, in 2008. "If she laughed really hard, she would wet her pants," Everett recalled. "So we would go to church and my brothers would spend the whole time just trying to make her wet her pants. She would have to excuse herself, and she'd get up and there'd be this tiny little puddle in the pew." (In "Somebody Somewhere," Sam is also mourning a sister, the only family member who understood her.) Growing up, the siblings had brutal nicknames for one another, like Wart and Scab; Bridget's was Fang, because she spent several years with a single front tooth. After she joined the swim team and developed broad shoulders, they called her Lurch, a taunt that played on her insecurities. Her wildness blossomed. She worshipped Debbie Harry and Freddie Mercury and told filthy jokes. Teachers would chastise her for being "too much." "It kept me from getting the big parts in the musicals and all that shit," she said. (She's still bitter over losing the lead in "42nd Street.") As a teen-ager, she partied hard. "I remember going down to Aggieville—I believe it was Brothers Tavern," Brock recalled. "She was underage, or it might have been on the cusp. I said, 'Where's Bridget?' Someone pointed over to a pile of coats, and there were Bridget's feet sticking out."

Her antics made her popular enough that she was named homecoming queen. Nevertheless, she felt like an outsider in her conservative town. She wanted to go to Arizona State University, in part because it was known as a party school, and she knew that her ticket was her mezzo-soprano: "I had a really big voice, but it was a little wild. Kind of like me, I guess." She

auditioned with Italian art songs and got into the classical-voice program. When she arrived at school, though, she realized that maintaining her instrument meant no drinking or smoking. “I was, like, I don’t want to live life like a nun,” she said. “Instead of being an A student and excelling, I was just, like, a B student and having fun. But I still didn’t really know how to sing in a way that I connected to.”

After graduation, she stuck around the Phoenix area and worked as a waitress at the original P. F. Chang’s. The restaurant was a hangout for Charles Barkley and other pro athletes, and Everett got gigs singing the national anthem at baseball games. But she knew that her operatic voice wasn’t strong enough for a career. “I was, like, Well, I guess I’m just going to be a waitress,” she said. “I hope that you like being on your feet, Bridget, because this is it.” Occasionally, she would go out to karaoke bars, where she’d jump on the bar and rip off her shirt. “Because I didn’t have the money notes, I had to do something else,” she said. “And that’s where the tits came in.”

Everett moved to New York in 1997, at twenty-six, with no plan, no money, and no prospects. She got her Equity card doing a bus-and-truck children’s-theatre tour of “Hansel and Gretel,” but she was miserable: “I was, like, I moved to New York to sing for second graders in fucking Mississippi, getting them to tell Hansel to jump over the river, which was, like, a piece of cardboard with some blue taffeta?” She’d been raised Republican (“Meanwhile, I was, like, ‘Give me all the abortions I can have’ ”) but quickly became a Democrat. She waited tables at Ruby Foo’s. Auditioning terrified her to the point of indigestion, so she did little of it, while her roommate Zach Shaffer landed parts on Broadway. Shaffer recalled, “She was lost.”

Then Shaffer introduced her to the downtown cabaret scene, notably Kiki and Herb, the deranged lounge act performed by Justin Vivian Bond and Kenny Mellman. The duo were central to a burgeoning alt-cabaret movement, which defied the decorum of the Carlyle and other staid venues. Everett became a front-row groupie, and Mellman, the accompanist, invited her to perform at a variety night where he was playing. But her main outlet was karaoke, which she and a group of friends performed every Sunday night at the Parlour, a pub on West Eighty-sixth Street. Everett’s go-to

numbers were “Piece of My Heart” and Alanis Morissette’s “You Oughta Know.” “We drank a lot there, because the bartender was our friend,” Shaffer said. “I think we all had sex with people in the bathroom.” Everett’s numbers would crescendo with her crawling across the bar with a Big Gulp-size vodka-soda. “Progressively, the karaoke at the Parlour became more of a show for her,” Shaffer said.

By 2006, Shaffer was dating Jason Eagan, a producer at the Hell’s Kitchen performance space Ars Nova, where he is now the artistic director, and Shaffer took him to one of his karaoke nights with Everett. “We walked into the Parlour, and she was standing on the bar barefoot singing ‘What’s Up,’ the 4 Non Blondes song,” Eagan recalled. “The performance she was giving was so much bigger than the room that it was happening in. I was gobsmacked.” He decided that whatever she was doing belonged on a stage.

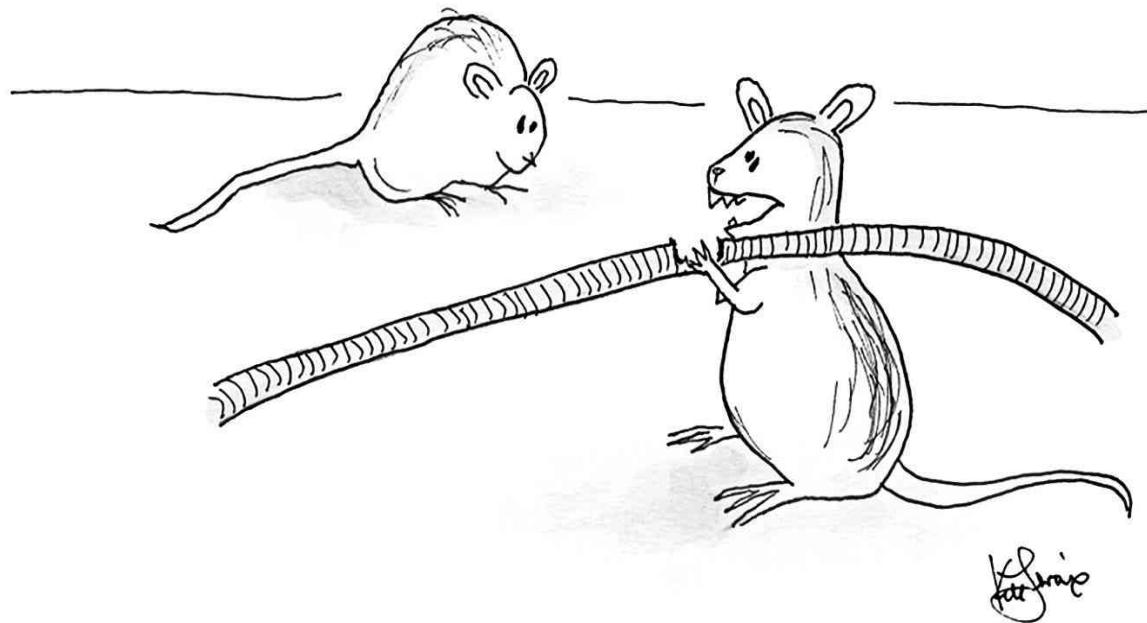
Not long afterward, Michael Patrick King, an executive producer of “Sex and the City,” got a call from Jon Steingart, one of the owners of Ars Nova. King was about to attend a comedy festival in Aspen, where Everett had landed a late-night set. Steingart told him that she’d been workshopping material at Ars Nova, and urged him to check her out. Everett performed a raunchy original song called “Canhole” to an audience of industry people and fancy local women wearing cowboy hats. “Half the audience left, and the half that stayed gave her a standing ovation,” King said. “I thought, Well, there’s a star. Nobody knows what they’re seeing.”

Ars Nova corralled King into developing and directing a stage show for Everett, called “At Least It’s Pink.” The title, besides being a vagina joke, referred to a waitressing story that Everett told onstage, about a businessman who sent back an overcooked steak. “It was burned on the outside but on the inside it was pink, and that was our analogy for Bridget,” King said. She and Mellman replaced her karaoke covers with original songs, while King, like an Olympic coach, taught her how to stand still and how to polish an anecdote. Everett nicknamed him Hollywood. He likened his job to creating a ring to fit a diamond. “My goal was to make the people that left in Aspen not leave,” he said.

The show opened at Ars Nova in early 2007. Barely contained in a faux-snakeskin bustier, Everett was part Samantha Jones, part Cookie Monster.

“Just this afternoon, I slept with Man No. 2,569,” she told the audience. “And, fellas, one of you could be next!” The *Times* critic Charles Isherwood wrote that the show “recalls the sexual insouciance and joyous exhibitionism of early Bette Midler.” Everett had the freshness of a plucked-from-karaoke-night Everywoman, but efforts to transfer the show Off Broadway for a longer run stalled. King gave her a small part in the “Sex and the City” movie, as a drunk woman who interviews to be Carrie’s assistant, but even he couldn’t land her a breakout role. “Development executives would say, ‘We think Bridget’s the next Roseanne,’ ” he recalled. “And I thought, Bridget’s the next Bridget!”

Everett was too rock and roll for Broadway, too bawdy for concert halls, and too musical for standup comedy. She recalled singing at a comedy night at Pianos, on the Lower East Side, after which John Mulaney came onstage and said, “What was *that*?” She met Schumer on a flight to Montreal’s Just for Laughs festival, where both were performing. “At those kinds of things, I used to just hang out in my room and drink wine and watch porn or documentaries,” Everett said. “Amy was, like, ‘Come down, let’s talk to some people and mingle!’ And we just became really fast friends. We both love Chardonnay.”



*“He who controls the Internet controls the world.”*  
Cartoon by Ken Levine

Schumer became her champion. “Just to see a woman up there owning her own body and sharing what she wants of it, engaging in such a hypersexual way on her own terms, is thrilling,” Schumer told me. But, in contrast to her own act, she doesn’t see Everett’s as politically pointed. “Her show is such an escape,” she went on. “I definitely think I wouldn’t have felt empowered to lift up my dress and show my pregnant belly without her influence.” A bewildered Larry King once asked Everett during an interview, “You have a lot of body confidence, right?” But Everett doesn’t grandstand about self-esteem or standards of beauty, as many of her contemporaries do; her ease in her own skin is liberation enough.

In 2008, Everett, Mellman, and the performance artist Neal Medlyn started “Our Hit Parade,” a monthly live series at Joe’s Pub, in which the trio and guest performers reinterpreted Top Forty songs. The co-hosts would lead ribald games like “What’s in My Diaper?” Everett would usually close out the night with a tipsy showstopper. The series helped launch such downtown performers as Cole Escola, Erin Markey, and Molly Pope. By 2012, though, the three co-hosts were squabbling. “We weren’t really getting along, and it just wasn’t fun anymore,” Everett said. She had formed her own band, the Tender Moments, and felt that she had earned her own spotlight. In 2014, she returned to Joe’s Pub, in “Rock Bottom,” which featured songs co-written with the “Hairspray” team—Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman—the musician Matt Ray, and the Beastie Boys’ Adam Horovitz, with an appearance by Escola, as a fetus pleading not to be aborted.

In her forties by then, Everett was a smash downtown while still waitressing uptown; she took jobs on the Upper West Side, where fewer customers would recognize her, and, when they did, she’d feel so embarrassed that sometimes she’d secretly comp their meals. Midway through the run of “Rock Bottom,” she called her manager to put in a shift request, and the woman said, “Are you sure you want to come back in?” That night, Everett announced onstage that she had quit waitressing, and she got a huge standing ovation. She told me, choking up, “It was so exciting to finally be taking a chance on myself.”

Her talents, though, were still difficult to translate to the screen. She had a bit part as a makeup artist in “*Girls*,” and in 2017 she played the hard-living mother of an aspiring rapper in the Sundance hit “*Patti Cake\$*.” Michael

Patrick King, who was still trying to land her a star vehicle in Hollywood, finally got her an Amazon pilot, “Love You More.” Everett, who was a co-executive producer, played a woman who parties by night and works with people with Down syndrome by day. The pilot opened with a sex scene between Everett and a very short man with a very large penis. Amazon released the first episode, to good reviews, but declined to pick it up. “I have never pleaded harder than I did to those Amazon executives,” King said. “I remember them telling me that ‘men didn’t respond to her,’ ” although women’s responses were “‘through the roof.’ I said, ‘If you give me one more episode, all those men will love her, because she’ll be the person they want to go drinking with.’ ” But they were hung up on the demographic data and wouldn’t budge. Everett recalled, “I was, like, Well, there was my one chance to make a TV show, and it’s gone.”

On the last night of November, Everett was in her dressing room at Joe’s Pub, two bottles of Chardonnay in ice buckets at her feet. The previous evening, she had given her first public performance since before the pandemic. “I was schoolgirl-nervous all day long,” she said, sitting in front of a mirror and patting concealer under her eyes. When she made her entrance, she recalled, she’d felt unsteady. “I’ve spent a lifetime trying to really become a larger-than-life person onstage. And then to be away from that for so long, you’re just, like, Where did she go? For the first song, I was trying to find her.” By the second song, “Titties,” she had.

Having wrapped the first season of “Somebody Somewhere,” Everett was hovering between her old life and what might be a new kind of fame. She had spent much of the intervening months hiding out in her apartment. News of the Omicron variant had popped up days earlier, but no cases had yet been detected in the United States. Everett is a reach-out-and-touch-someone kind of performer, and she wondered how her act would work in the age of social distancing and tightened sexual boundaries. “The craziest thing is really just that I got through it, trying to navigate how to do audience interaction with the state of the world right now—and I mean that in a thousand different ways,” she said. She twirled a curling iron around her hair and contoured her cheeks, “to separate the quadrants on my face,” she said. “I like to give the appearance that I tried.”

Two hours later, Everett emerged onstage in a bedazzled gold toga, clutching a wine bottle in a paper bag. “My name is Bridget Everett,” she bellowed over an electric-guitar riff. “Some people may not know me, but you will Not. Fucking. Forget me.” She tore off the toga to reveal a silk minidress the color of Velveeta cheese. “Let me explain a couple quick things,” she told the crowd. “‘Bridget, you wearing a bra?’ Nope, don’t need one. Next question?”

Before long, she was roaming through the audience, motorboating people’s faces in her cleavage. She scanned the room and picked out a bearded man in a flannel shirt, whom she called Sharky. After telling a long-winded tale about a guy on the street who offered her five hundred dollars if she’d let him suck on her foot (answer: “You know I got two feet, right?”), she lay on the lip of the stage, sprayed one leg with a trail of whipped cream, and gave Sharky a come-hither look. He ran up and lapped it off on cue. (His real name was Thor, and he was a gay retired banker. “I’m actually a pretty inhibited person,” he said afterward.) Then she sat on a stool and took the mood down to a simmer. “You remember when you were little, and your mommy used to sit in her blue chair getting shit-faced, listening to Manilow?” Everett said, summoning a Kansas memory. Her mother had called her one day, she remembered, informing her that her father had thirty days to live. “She was so . . . happy,” Everett said, in a mock-wistful stage whisper. The story is true.

During the final number, she blew bubbles into the crowd and lifted a male audience member onto her back, bringing the house down. I thought about how, during the pandemic, even handshakes have felt perilous. Everett was like a dishevelled Dionysus, giving the crowd (and herself) a long-awaited release, making touch celebratory again. As an encore, she sat at a piano and played an ode to Poppy, her dead dog. “I appreciate all of you buying your tickets and coming out here,” she said, “knowing that this could be the thing that kills us all.” ♦

# **Podcast Dept.**

- [Does Wisdom Really Come from Experience?](#)

In “70 Over 70,” we learn what binds—and separates—the old and the young.

By [Rachel Syme](#)

In March of 1995, Mitch Albom, a sportswriter for the Detroit *Free Press*, was up late channel surfing when he saw a familiar face on the screen. Morris (Morrie) Schwartz, his Brandeis sociology professor, was suffering from A.L.S., and talking sagely on “Nightline” about his impending death. Albom, who had promised Schwartz that he would keep in touch but hadn’t written to him in sixteen years, saw this as a cosmic sign—or a journalistic opportunity—and visited Schwartz more than a dozen times in the next few months. He recorded their conversations about life and love, hoping to sell the transcript and pay off Schwartz’s medical bills, but he struggled to find a buyer, and Schwartz died a few weeks after Doubleday agreed to take the project. The rest is the stuff of book-business legend: “Tuesdays with Morrie,” which came out in 1997, became one of the best-selling memoirs of all time, moving more than fifteen million copies in more than forty-one languages.

What made the thoughts of this seventy-eight-year-old so popular? Schwartz’s axioms—such as “Love each other or perish” and “Money is not a substitute for tenderness”—were not particularly revelatory. It was his proximity to death, and his nearly eight decades of experience, that turned his platitudes into a pop-cultural phenomenon. Eager not to waste our lives, we tend to devour lessons from people approaching the end of theirs. There’s something macabre about this appetite, the way it turns an aging mind into a consumable product. It can feel especially rapacious given the otherwise blithe dismissal of the elderly in the U.S., where millions of people are aging without savings, safety nets, or affordable care options. When it comes to senior citizens, most people are happy to engage with a seasoned mind; it is the body, breaking down and beginning to wither, that becomes inconvenient.

I’ve wondered, then, how the genre of old-people wisdom might translate to podcasting, a form that specializes in the disembodied voice. A few shows have tried to capture the “Morrie” magic over the years, but none has done so more thoroughly—or more successfully—than “70 Over 70,” a Pineapple Street Studios series, hosted by Max Linsky and produced by Jess Hackel.

The show began in May, with the aim, as its name implies, of featuring seventy people who had passed their seventieth birthday. Most episodes are divided into two parts: a monologue from an elderly person who isn't famous, and Linsky's conversation with one who is. The final installment, featuring Linsky's eighty-one-year-old father, aired earlier this month.

Linsky is a warm and gifted interviewer. For the past decade, he's been one of the hosts of the "Longform" podcast, which features dense, process-heavy talks with authors and journalists about their craft. (I was a guest on the podcast in 2015, though I spoke with Linsky's co-host Aaron Lammer.) But "70 Over 70," which Linsky developed after visiting his father in the hospital, following a heart surgery, is a very different show, one that requires unique interlocutory verve. Linsky shines on "Longform" because he's as wonky as his subjects, obsessed with journalistic ethics, backroom media lore, and magazine gossip. In "70 Over 70," he has to be more of a generalist, one whose animating questions are necessarily broad: How do you live well? or How well are you prepared to die? Such questions can yield illuminating answers, but their vagueness risks playing into the old-people-must-be-enlightened trap. It's a fine line, and Linsky wobbles on top of it like a tightrope artist.

As with any interview show, the strength of each episode depends on the guest. It's not enough that someone is simply long in the tooth; he or she must also be self-aware about what being "old" means, attuned to the delicate interplay between aging and regret, mortality and joy, irrelevance and freedom. The long-distance swimmer Diana Nyad, who is seventy-two, is remarkably frank about physical decline. "You don't know this yet, because you're so young," she says, but time "actually speeds up as you get older. It speeds up exponentially every month, every day, every hour." Dolores Huerta, the ninety-one-year-old activist who worked with Cesar Chavez, recounts organizing the fruit boycott for farmworkers' rights in the sixties: "The American public gave up eating grapes, and that is what brought the growers to the table. One simple little thing: Don't eat grapes." And the news anchor Dan Rather, now ninety years old, talks about how his wife, Jean, pushed him toward humility. "Several times," he says, she "just took me aside and said, 'Dan, you are becoming a version of the sun-powered, perpetual-motion, all-American bullshit machine.' "

Perhaps the strongest episode features André De Shields, the veteran Broadway actor who won his first Tony Award in 2019, at the age of seventy-three, for playing the messenger god Hermes in “Hadestown.” De Shields discusses his viral acceptance speech for the award, in which he offered up three pieces of advice to live by, describing them, a bit sarcastically, as his “wisdom bomb.” (“Surround yourself with people whose eyes light up when they see you coming”; “Slowly is the fastest way to get to where you want to be”; “The top of one mountain is the bottom of the next, so keep climbing.”) At first, Linsky seems to want De Shields to be a font of such aphorisms, and he asks the actor when he last listened to the speech. “I spoke it,” De Shields says in a gravelly tone. “I know what it *was*. You think I sit at home and eat chocolates and listen to myself?” When Linsky asks De Shields how he has gained “clarity about living with purpose,” you can hear the sigh in De Shields’s response. “I’ve always been a Black man,” he says. “Come on, let’s tell the truth. I come to this thing called life from a different perspective.” De Shields insists on being comprehended without the gauzy scrim of reverence or fame, and he keeps asserting that he’s a vessel, not an oracle. “The ego is a virus, and there is no inoculation against it,” he says. “However, it does have an opponent that can take it down. And that is the small voice that lives at the core of our being. There is a small voice that lives there. And, by small, I don’t mean ineffectual.”

About ten minutes into each interview, Linsky and his subjects tend to loosen up, relieved of the burden of representing their respective generations. Linsky starts to treat his company less like museum curios, and the guests begin to trust that they have something to offer beyond comforting mantras from the edge of existence. When the conversations reach escape velocity, it’s not because the guests start spouting wisdom; it’s because they’re being, for lack of a more eloquent term, total weirdos, or endearingly awkward. The singer-songwriter David Crosby calls himself “one of the luckiest motherfuckers alive” after gingerly asking if he can swear on a podcast. Nyad emphatically declares, “I am an atheist, and I don’t even have hopes of going to Heaven!” The children’s entertainer Raffi staunchly refuses to fall into cynicism about how many times he’s had to sing “Baby Beluga,” his big hit. “You don’t know the feeling onstage when two thousand people join you,” he says, in a moony reverie. “You launch

into it and there's just such a strong feeling of love, joy, delight, and there you are, immersed in it. How *beautiful*."

Such moments conjure up a remarkable portrait, with the elderly appearing just as petty, reckless, lusty, zealous, difficult, vulnerable, and, perhaps most of all, scared to grow up as anyone else. (In fact, they have *more* of these feelings to draw on, deeper chasms of hurt and strangeness and wild enthusiasm.) And yet age remains a cultural threshold. It changes how people are seen, and what they have to do in order to remain visible. In an episode featuring the seventy-two-year-old illustrator Maira Kalman, who drew the show's logo and who often contributes to this magazine, Linsky suggests that aging is like being moved from the dance floor of life to the balcony. Kalman agrees: "You can be so out of it. You can feel so excluded. . . . You're not just on the balcony, you're on the roof. You're in a different building completely." If there's a whiff of "Morrie" to the show, it's because these conversations, despite their intentions, can never be fully equitable. One person is young, and one is old, and each needs something from the other. In focussing on aging voices—and, tacitly, on the idea that if you hear enough of them you might be transformed—"70 Over 70" subtly reëmphasizes the gaps between the young and the elderly, even as it strains to ignore or invert them.

Listening to the show, I found myself thinking of another podcast, now in its second season, called "The Last Bohemians," in which the British journalist Kate Hutchinson speaks to women who've lived chaotic lives: band groupies, outsider artists, club mavens, psychedelic activists, erotic novelists. There's little risk of these subjects being milked for maxims; the women refuse to look back or summarize, or even to make sense. In one episode, Molly Parkin, an eighty-seven-year-old Welsh painter and fashion editor, explains how she had "three constant lovers" through the years, but learned to masturbate only after they died, when she read an article about how a woman's clitoris remains sensitive until her death. "For a chapel girl, you know, to touch what's inside your knickers was absolutely out of order," she says. Now, we're told, her orgasms have a "spiritual quality." She's not telling us how to live—most listeners, we can assume, aren't chapel girls—but she is telling us that we're all works in progress, up to the very last moment. That, in the end, may be what we really want to hear. ♦

# Poems

- “Bouquet”
- “Wage”

By [Tadeusz Dąbrowski](#)

## Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

*Audio: Read by the author.*

Paulina, the gardener's daughter, cares  
about flowers doomed to die.

If I bring her a bouquet, she frees it  
from the ribbons and gently places it in the hospice

of a vase. When the flowers weaken, she trims their stems  
and plucks off their wilting leaves. She takes

the dead ones to the compost, from the rest  
she forms a new bouquet. Thus disappear in turn:

poppies, anemones, carnations, damnations and  
forget-me-nots, until finally all that's left are

gypsophila and Judas' pennies. Paulina,  
the gardener's daughter, sees a bouquet in the vase

even when it's not there anymore.

*(Translated, from the Polish, by Antonia Lloyd-Jones.)*

By [Amy Woolard](#)

## Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

*Audio: Read by the author.*

One by one as they burned out we  
Triaged the light bulbs to priority slots

Around the house. The bedroom still  
Held a candle for us. The walls stayed

Rented white. I can take almost  
Anything at this point. The waking

Wince of morning, which is afternoon, which  
Is like someone holding tightly your hand

While you're wearing a ring. The kitchen litigates  
Our unreturned dishes. The birds have not yet

Learned to mimic our phones, but coolly master  
Car alarms & the dog's longing. Baby, paradise

Will be a house without linoleum floors, edges  
Puckered up like an open carton of milk,

Its origami lip. All I need to know is  
The time of day & the names of

The regulars. Not their names, but what  
They drank: *old-fashioned, car bomb, purple rain, dirty*

*Skyy.* Showing up is a full-time job where the  
Paycheck is a paper ghost tendering the wrong

Kind of zeros. It was the year of the drought.  
Our stacked cash never laid flat. We pulled

One bright twenty & kept it rolled like  
A rumor. A season fleshed out by what fell:

Ice into a glass, a dress onto a floor, a girl  
Into a grind. Once, a boy off a fourth-story roof.

*What you get is to be changed.* Nothing  
From the sky for weeks & then—; I poured

Everyone & myself a drink. All of us were taken  
With leaving town. By which I mean:

We were taken with not leaving. The town took  
As fact we'd be back. It'd all be here waiting

To step into, like a dress, or a downpour: the house,  
The glass, the time of day. Even the boy, come

Back as a bird, thin beak tilting at every  
Wind-felled scrap: *what-was-That, what-was-That.*

The night downtown blacked out, we walked  
Out of the bars, unbanked, as if it were the first

Snow, arms raised to catch—what—on our skin. I felt it  
Melt into me anyway. I've trained my wrists to carry more

Than I can carry. A malfunction of lightning bugs, the tight  
Fists of peonies demanding their rights, the delinquent

Quiet, the lip-bitten memory of when we first learned  
To lie, brick by brick. What was the time. That hour

Slipping itself up under my shirt. I can take anything.  
Our currency is we stood outside of everyone else.

I open all the windows & doors because I do, in fact,  
Want to air-condition the whole neighborhood. I want

To bring it all down a dozen degrees until even the churches  
Of our enfolded hands are cooled & congregationless & still

Possible. My sleep put each next day on layaway until  
The once-too-many: I came back & you did not.

How could I even touch it. Your love like  
An orange wedge breaking apart in my mouth.

The sky touches the birds & the birds keep  
Their distance, faking thirst & emergency.

It's no stretch for us to see how anybody—in the right  
Light—surely will confess to something they didn't do.

# **Postscript**

- [What Joan Didion Saw](#)

Her writing and thinking captured momentous change in American life—and in her own.

By [Nathan Heller](#)

When Joan Didion died, on Thursday, at eighty-seven, she left behind sixteen books, seven films, one play, and an impulse to make sense of what remained. It was tempting to note that, like her husband, the writer John Gregory Dunne, whose passing shaped “[The Year of Magical Thinking](#)” (2005), she died during the Christmas holiday. It was easy to see, as she did in her daughter’s lethal illness that same season, larger gears at work. Didion was a pattern-seeker—a writer with an uncanny ability to scan a text, a folder of clippings, or an entire society and, like a genius eying figures, find the markers pointing out how the whole worked. Through her efforts, the craft of journalism changed. She helped expand the landscape of what matters on the page.

Though Didion spent half her life in New York (first as a junior editor at *Vogue*, then, in a later stint, as a short-statured lioness of letters), much of her best-known work was done in California, where she’d grown up in mid-century Sacramento. Her ominous, valley-flat style channelled the Pacific terrain, with its beauty and severity and restless turns. “This is the country in which a belief in the literal interpretation of Genesis has slipped imperceptibly into a belief in the literal interpretation of *Double Indemnity*, the country of the teased hair and the Capris and the girls for whom all life’s promise comes down to a waltz-length white wedding dress and the birth of a Kimberly or a Sherry or a Debbi and a Tijuana divorce and a return to hairdressers’ school,” she wrote in “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream,” the essay that opened her first collection, “[Slouching Towards Bethlehem](#)” (1968). That book announced her subject—the long, crazed shadow of the frontier mentality—and her style, which carried across five [novels](#) and several screenplays, not least “A Star Is Born” (1976), which she co-wrote with Dunne. Today, readers know what’s meant by “Didionesque.”

Like most strong stylists, though, Didion worked up her craft as a sensitive reader of other masters. She had been an English student, at Berkeley, in the nineteen-fifties, a high point for the New Criticism and its close reading, and the approach became part of her lifelong methodology, applied equally to language she encountered as a reporter and to literary work. In a [New Yorker](#)

[essay about Hemingway](#), her early influence, she performed an unmatched reading of the beginning of “[A Farewell to Arms](#),” noting how the sudden, pattern-breaking absence of a “the” before the third appearance of “leaves” casts “exactly what it was meant to cast, a chill, a premonition.” It was characteristic of Didion to work this way, in the danger zone between sensibility and objectivity: to be receptive to a passing feeling, a change in cast, and then to bear down, with unsparing rigor, in the work of understanding why.

What she came to understand was the vastest change that American society had seen in fifty years. Like many writers, Didion was on the spot in the late sixties, as the social fabric, the ideal of common institutions and of a shared society, came apart. Unlike many, she saw the long-term stakes of this rupture at a moment when most observers were fretting over whether to don love beads or to follow draft cards. Didion [reported](#) on the hippies—they’re the subject of the title essay of “[Slouching Towards Bethlehem](#),” which created a technique, later germane to her fiction, of telling a story through jagged juxtapositions that she called “flash cuts”—but recognized that what she saw in the Haight-Ashbury was less about them than about an “atomization” of communication and connection across America. It was a curiously durable insight for the period; it remains vivid and pressing today.

Didion often gets identified, along with [Norman Mailer](#), [Gay Talese](#), [Tom Wolfe](#), and other snappy dressers, as part of the New Journalism, by which people usually mean long narrative reporting imprinted with a writer’s style and point of view. But her goal, in the best work, was never sensibility or affect. Early on, and again at the end of her life, Didion was known for her first-person writing, and subjective perception was always at the heart of her impulses as a reporter and as an essayist. (“Something about a situation will bother me, so I will write a piece to find out what it is that bothers me,” she once explained, in an interview with Hilton Als.)

Subjectivity was paramount, yet her thinking, as it developed in the pages of *The New York Review of Books*, was basically systemic: in “[Miami](#)” (1987), about the Cold War dialogue between the U.S. and the atomized powers of Latin America; in “[Sentimental Journeys](#)” (1991), about the Central Park jogger case, and the mythologies that eroded New York’s civil and economic structure; in “[Where I Was From](#)” (2003), about the governmental policies

supporting California’s frontier image of itself. Her target was what she called sentimentality: the prefabricated story lines, or fairy tales, that spread within a culture and that cause society to rip apart. Didion started out a Goldwater Republican and ended up one of her cohort’s keenest champions of the social pact. She came to see that the way stories were told—an individualized project—had deep stakes for the societal whole.

Famous styles often make fossils of their practitioners. Didion’s work will last because it was the product of a restless mind. “In retrospect, we know how to write when we begin,” she once said. “What we learn from doing it is what writing was *for*.” How to put together a paragraph, whether to add a “the” or not: by the time you’re thirty, the sound of your best writing is already in your mind’s ear, and the hardest part is listening. What to do with those sentences, how to turn the craft of storytelling away from shared delusion, is the effort of a life. Many—most—writers never make it the full distance. Didion did. Her work was her own answer to the question of what writing and living are for. It ought to be ours, too.

# Profiles

- [Dan Bongino and the Big Business of Returning Trump to Power](#)

The Secret Service agent turned radio host is furious at liberals—so he's trying to build a right-wing media infrastructure in time for 2024.

By [Evan Osnos](#)

## Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Dan Bongino, one of America's most popular conservative commentators, lives in the seaside city of Stuart, Florida, less than an hour from Mar-a-Lago, where his friend Donald Trump bridles against a forced retirement. Every weekday from noon to three—the coveted time slot once held by the late Rush Limbaugh—"The Dan Bongino Show" goes live across the United States, beginning with an announcer's voice over the sound of hard-rock guitars: "From the N.Y.P.D. to the Secret Service to behind the microphone, taking the fight to the radical left and the putrid swamp."

One day this fall, minutes before Bongino went on the air, he learned of an unfolding drama that offered prime material: in New York, a live interview with Vice-President Kamala Harris had been disrupted because two hosts of "The View" tested positive for breakthrough cases of *COVID-19*. Bongino, who rails against vaccine mandates and calls masks "face diapers," announced to his audience, "None of those seem to work on 'The View.' " But, he said pointedly, he wasn't gloating—"unlike insane leftists, who wish death on me and everyone else from *COVID*, because they're legitimately crazy satanic demon people."

Bongino draws an estimated 8.5 million radio listeners a week, making him the fourth most listened to host in America, ahead of Mark Levin, Glenn Beck, and other big names, according to *Talkers* magazine, which covers the industry. Though he came to broadcasting only after three unsuccessful runs for Congress, he now commands a Fox News program on Saturday nights, a podcast that has ranked No. 1 on iTunes, and a Web site that repackages stories into some of the most highly trafficked items on social media. In recent months, according to Facebook data, his page has attracted more engagement than those of the *Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal* combined.

The history of broadcasting is replete with figures who play a combative character on the air but shed the pose when they leave the studio. Bongino is not among them. “For the fifteen-thousandth time, if you want to wear a mask, knock yourself out, daddy-o,” he told me recently, after finishing his taping for the day. “Whatever. You do you. This is what infuriates me: if you dare say anything like ‘Hey, do those things actually work?’ people are, like, ‘What the fuck? You lunatic, heretic, you flat-earth son of a bitch! Kill this guy!’ ”

Bongino records at a desk adorned with a boxing bell, a judge’s gavel, and a carved stone nameplate with the message “Be Strong Like a Rock!!!” His aesthetics, visually and editorially, bespeak his political moment. Limbaugh, the dominant conservative pundit for three decades, was a dedicated indoorsman, with a physique that celebrated sybaritic contentment. Bongino, at forty-seven, is six feet tall and muscle-bound, with a martial buzz cut and a trim goatee. Like others in his cohort—including the podcaster Joe Rogan and the Infowars host Alex Jones—he favors a wardrobe of tight T-shirts. He displays a tattoo on his left biceps, and he often broadcasts with a facial expression that resembles the angry emoji. Asked by a fan what he would do if he were not a political commentator, Bongino said that he would compete in mixed martial arts.

After exhausting the Kamala Harris riff, Bongino turned to his main interest of the day: “rigged” elections. For years, he has claimed that “deep state” plotters and foreign entities sought to sabotage Trump in 2016, infiltrating his campaign and leaking allegations about his dealings with Russia. (He parlayed that theory into a book, “Spygate,” one of four briskly generated volumes that bore Bongino’s name during Trump’s Presidency.) These days, his story line has expanded to encompass President Joe Biden—a “disgraceful, disgusting, grotesque bag of bones”—as well as his son Hunter. “The F.B.I. and the C.I.A., members of it, unquestionably tried to rig both the 2016 and 2020 election,” Bongino told his audience. In the latter, he explained, “they didn’t put out bad information on someone—they hid information about Joe Biden and his corrupt son.”



Cartoon by Farley Katz

In Bongino's world, it matters little that Trump's claims of rampant fraud were dismissed by his own top appointees at the Departments of Justice and Homeland Security, as well as by federal and state judges. To the true believer, the lack of solid evidence simply confirms how well hidden the rigging was. In the study of conspiracy theories (a description Bongino rejects), this is known as "self-sealing": the theory mends holes in its own logic. "A corrupted intelligence community, in conjunction with a corrupt media, will eat this country like a cancer from the inside out," Bongino told his audience, as he built to a takeaway. "This is why I'm really hoping Donald Trump runs in 2024," he said. "He's the best candidate suited to clean house. Because if we don't clean house the Republic is gone."

Spend several months immersed in American talk radio and you'll come away with the sense that the violence of January 6th was not the end of something but the beginning. A year after Trump supporters laid siege to the U.S. Capitol, some of his most influential champions are preparing the ground for his return, and they dominate a media terrain that attracts little attention from their opponents. As liberals argue over the algorithm at Facebook and ponder the disruptive influence of TikTok, radio remains a colossus; for every hour that Americans listened to podcasts in 2021, they listened to six and a half hours of AM/FM radio, according to Edison Research, a market-research and polling firm. Talk radio has often provided

more reliable hints of the political future than think tanks and elected officials have. In 2007, even as the Republican leaders George W. Bush and John McCain were trying to rebrand themselves as immigration reformers, Limbaugh was advocating laws that would deny immigrants access to government services and force them to speak English.

Seven out of ten Republicans want Trump to run again, according to a recent [poll](#) by Politico and Morning Consult. Senior Party leaders perpetuate his fraudulent claims about the 2020 election; in a Fox News interview, Representative Steve Scalise, the No. 2 House Republican, refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the result. Trump associates have risked jail time in order to thwart a congressional inquiry into the attempt to overturn the vote. At the state level, an unprecedented effort is sidelining Trump's opponents and rewriting laws to give partisans control over the administration of elections. On America's balkanized airwaves, his supporters are using their platforms to spread disinformation, undermine faith in governance, and inflame his followers.

No one in American media has profited more from the Trump era and its aftermath than Bongino. Since 2015, he has gone from hosting a fledgling podcast in his basement to addressing audiences of millions. Pete Hegseth, a fellow Fox News host who served in the National Guard, told me, "I carried a rifle in the military, and now I get to serve in information warfare." Bongino, he added, "is one of our generals." This vision of cultural combat is prominent in Trumpworld. Alex Jones, who named his conspiratorial media brand Infowars, uses the motto "There's a war on for your mind!"

Trump has fostered a crop of broadcasters who owe their power to him, men like Sebastian Gorka, the former White House aide, and Charlie Kirk, the founder of Turning Point USA. Brian Rosenwald, the author of the history "Talk Radio's America," has noted the triumph of ideology over experience. "Bongino is speaking to the people who believe Trump's press releases, who see the world caving in and Biden as a raging socialist," he told me. Rosenwald likens Bongino's ascent to that of Marjorie Taylor Greene, of Georgia, who reached Congress in 2021, despite having voiced belief in a "global cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles" and other delusions associated with QAnon. "Back in the day, Marjorie Taylor Greene would

have been consigned to the worst committees, buried by the leadership,” he said. “But the old rules of how you gain stature are out the door.”

Angelo Carusone, the president of Media Matters, a nonprofit group that tracks and criticizes the conservative press, said that the field is changing for the first time since the nineteen-nineties, when Limbaugh, Fox News, and the blogger Matt Drudge established dominance. “They created the guidelines that people walked along for decades,” Carusone said. But Limbaugh is gone, and Drudge and Fox face more radical competitors. “The new information ecosystem is taking shape over the next year or two, and whatever shakes out is going to set the path for years to come.”

In the long run, Bongino’s most significant impact may not come from what he says on his broadcasts. “My goal is for my content to be the least interesting thing I did,” he told me. He has used his money and his influence to foster technology startups, such as Parler, Rumble, and AlignPay, that are friendly to right-wing views. These companies are intended to withstand traditional pressure campaigns, including advertising boycotts like the one that Media Matters prompted in 2019, based on old radio interviews in which the Fox host Tucker Carlson described women as “extremely primitive” and Iraqis as “monkeys.” Carusone said, “What scares me about Bongino is that this guy could end up owning or controlling or directly building the infrastructure that operationalizes a whole range of extremism.” He continued, “There used to be lines. You could say, ‘O.K., PayPal, don’t let the January 6th people recruit money to pay for buses.’ This new alternative infrastructure is not going to stop that.” If another uprising organizes online, he said, “there will be a whiplash effect. Everyone will say, ‘How did that happen?’ Well, it’s *been* happening.”

After Bongino’s monologue about the intelligence community, he moved on to another case for skepticism of American elections. In Arizona, he informed his audience, a “forensic audit,” launched by Trump supporters who were certain that his loss there was fraudulent, had delivered bad news: Biden received even more votes than originally counted. Bongino urged his listeners to remain doubtful. “The numbers may be correct, but who was behind the numbers?” he asked.

Encouraging this way of thinking is a reliable business bet; suspicion is an appetite that is never fully sated. And, as any gun-shop owner knows, certain enterprises thrive when customers feel vulnerable. “The liberals are the Man,” Bongino told his audience in August. “They run big corporations. They run YouTube. They run Facebook. They run the government. We’re the real misfits, we’re the real rebels now.”

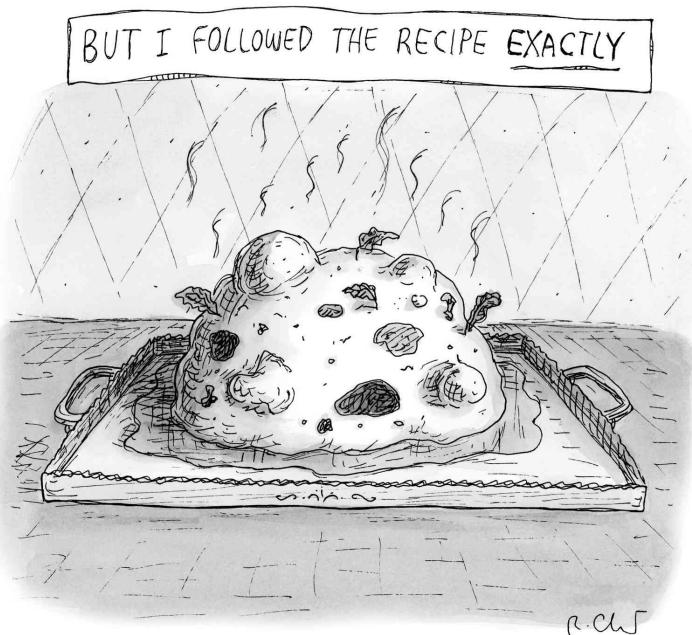
On any given afternoon, Bongino might read advertisements for survivalist food rations (“Act now, and your order will be shipped quickly and discreetly to your door in unmarked boxes”) and shotguns and massage chairs and filet mignon and holsters—“custom-molded to fit your exact firearm for a quick, smooth draw.” In between, he supplies listeners with a tight rotation of political hits—a jab at the “*PINO*” (“President in name only”), followed by a savaging of the press (“Don’t ever call me a journalist, that’s an insult”—interspersed with dispatches from the culture wars (a ruckus over the use of “*JEDI*” as an acronym for “justice, equality, diversity, and inclusion,” which prompted Bongino to cry, “They can’t cancel ‘Star Wars’!”). The effect is a meandering tour through politics and combat and commerce, led by a combustible guide. Brian Murphy, a former gubernatorial candidate in Maryland who advised Bongino’s first campaign for Congress, in 2012, said that Bongino had a “bare-knuckle style.” He added, half in jest, “Dan will debate you, and then he’ll go rip a phone book in half.”

While Trump thunders and plots from Palm Beach, Bongino does the daily work of sustaining the faithful. On a show this fall, he read a listener’s question: “In the event that Trump does get reëlected in 2024, what has he learned from his first go-round of draining the swamp?” Bongino had a ready answer. “They tried to take kind of a ‘Team of Rivals’ Lincoln approach,” by appointing Republicans who had not been among Trump’s original supporters, he said. “That was clearly a mistake. They backstabbed him. The John Boltons and others.” That wouldn’t happen again, he vowed.

Expanding on the idea days later, Bongino told his audience, “The key to understanding Trumpworld is understanding who the loyalists are and getting the grifters out. And, sadly, there are a lot of grifters who pretend to like the President, because there’s a check in it for them.” (The late Representative Steve LaTourette, an Ohio Republican, described how this

impulse arose in the G.O.P. in an essay from 2014: “The grifting wing of the party promises that you can have ideological purity—that you don’t have to compromise—and, of course, all you have to do is send them money to make it happen.”) Bongino discourages any doubt about whether he likes President Trump. During a Fox News segment in December, when his colleague Geraldo Rivera described the events of January 6th as “a riot that was unleashed, incited, and inspired by the President,” Bongino accused him of disloyalty, saying, “The backstabbing of the President you’re engaging in is really disgusting.”

Jennifer Mercieca, a professor of rhetoric at Texas A. & M., analyzed the information warfare of the Trump era in her book “Demagogue for President,” and catalogued some of the ascendant patterns of communication. There was “paralipsis,” emphasizing something by professing to say little of it (“I’m not going to call Jeb Bush ‘low energy’”), and the *ad populum* appeal, flattering a crowd by praising its wisdom (“The people, my people, are so smart”). When possible, Trump turned to the power of “reification,” applying nonhuman sobriquets to his opponents (“disgusting animals,” “anchor babies,” “pigs”). Aldous Huxley recognized that tactic as long ago as 1936, writing, “The propagandist’s purpose is to make one set of people forget that certain other sets of people are human.”



Cartoon by Roz Chast

Mercieca describes Bongino as “an important node in the amplification of propaganda.” She told me, “Propaganda used to be primarily vertical, in the sense that it came from the state or some authority, and it was distributed down to everyone through one-way channels of communication. But, in the current moment, propaganda has become horizontal, too.”

Life in the wilderness has imposed certain rhetorical adaptations on the Trump movement. Bongino, like other prominent supporters, seems to put increasing stock in what researchers refer to as “blue lies,” the kinds of claims that pull believers together and drive skeptics away. (“There were *known* issues with the election,” he said in December, adding, “We get that.”) Bongino is also adept at the “accusation in a mirror” approach—co-opting the language and strategies of his opponents. (He often endorses “defunding components of the F.B.I.” and maintains that “misinformation comes almost exclusively from the left.”)

Nothing, though, has proved more potent than the constant regeneration of fear. The day after Bongino riffed about the Arizona audit, he told podcast listeners that liberals are happy when conservative vaccine skeptics get sick. “These people want you dead,” he said, and offered a call to action. “The activism has to be dialled up times ten. These people are crazy. More in a minute, but first . . .” His baritone shifted into commercial mode. “Science tells us the best way to achieve and maintain consistent, quality deep sleep is by lowering core body temperature.” After sharing a few words about the makers of a luxury cool-mesh mattress topper, he advised Americans to “head on over to chilisleep.com/Bongino.”

For as long as broadcasters have had access to radio waves, they have tested their extraordinary power to unite and divide. In the nineteen-thirties, as President Franklin Roosevelt was boosting his popularity through the intimacy of fireside chats, the nativist Charles Coughlin was reaching as much as a quarter of the American populace with tirades against “godless capitalists, the Jews, Communists, international bankers and plutocrats.”

But it took a revolution, of sorts, to establish many of the techniques we see today. At first, according to “Something in the Air,” Marc Fisher’s history of radio, stations emphasized variety, and avoided playing the same song twice in twenty-four hours. Then, in 1950, a young station owner in Nebraska

named Todd Storz started to study listener preferences, perusing research by the University of Omaha and, as the story goes, staking out the jukebox at a local diner. He discovered that, even if people claimed to want variety, they tended to choose the same songs over and over. In 1951, Storz introduced a two-hour hit parade—a finite, repeated list of songs—and by the end of the year his station's market share had grown tenfold. Storz's method became known as Top Forty, though d.j.s discovered that they did not need forty songs to keep listeners engaged. “If they quietly cut their lists down to thirty or even twenty-five songs, the audience numbers responded immediately,” Fisher writes.

Repetition, as every cheerleader and every dictator learns, trains the neural networks to make some thoughts more durable than others. “The more we hear something, the more ‘sticky’ it becomes,” Mercieca said. “If we see something a lot, then it feels true.” Until the eighties, though, radio stations were forced to avoid too much repetition in political coverage; the Federal Communications Commission had a “fairness doctrine” that required equal airtime for competing views on major public issues. In 1987, during the Reagan Administration, the F.C.C. stopped enforcing the doctrine. The next year, a college dropout and former Top Forty d.j. named Rush Hudson Limbaugh III introduced his talk show to a national audience.

New technologies provided an ambitious host with unprecedeted reach: satellite transmission allowed a single broadcaster access to hundreds of stations, and toll-free calling let listeners across the country hear their own voice on air. Limbaugh’s show became the cultural standard-bearer of American conservatism. William F. Buckley, Jr., an early mentor, effectively ceded the floor in 1993, when his magazine *National Review* hailed Limbaugh on the cover as “The Leader of the Opposition.” Talk radio made Limbaugh wealthy—at his peak, he earned about eighty-five million dollars a year—and he didn’t obscure the fact that his strongest motivation was financial. When the biographer Zev Chafets visited him at his manse in Florida (twenty-four thousand square feet, with a salon decorated to resemble Versailles), Limbaugh told him, “Conservatism didn’t buy this house. First and foremost I’m a businessman. My first goal is to attract the largest possible audience so I can charge confiscatory ad rates.”

Other d.j.s, including Don Imus, Howard Stern, and Glenn Beck, migrated from music broadcasts to talk radio, bringing with them a pop sensibility. At *Talkers* magazine, the editor, Michael Harrison, created a weekly list of hot topics—a hit parade of politics. “The similarity between Top Forty and commercial talk radio has been profound,” he told me. “Certain topics get the phones to ring. Certain topics are boring but important, so they stay away from them.” Even though Limbaugh saw himself as an agent of commerce, his political identity proved so profitable that it left a permanent imprint on the industry. The new generation of radio conservatives—Sean Hannity, Mike Pence, Mark Levin—devoted more attention to ideology than to show biz. “They still want to be entertaining, but entertainment is not as big a deal,” Harrison said. “These are people who are doing political content on broadcasting platforms, as opposed to doing broadcasting with a political aspect.”

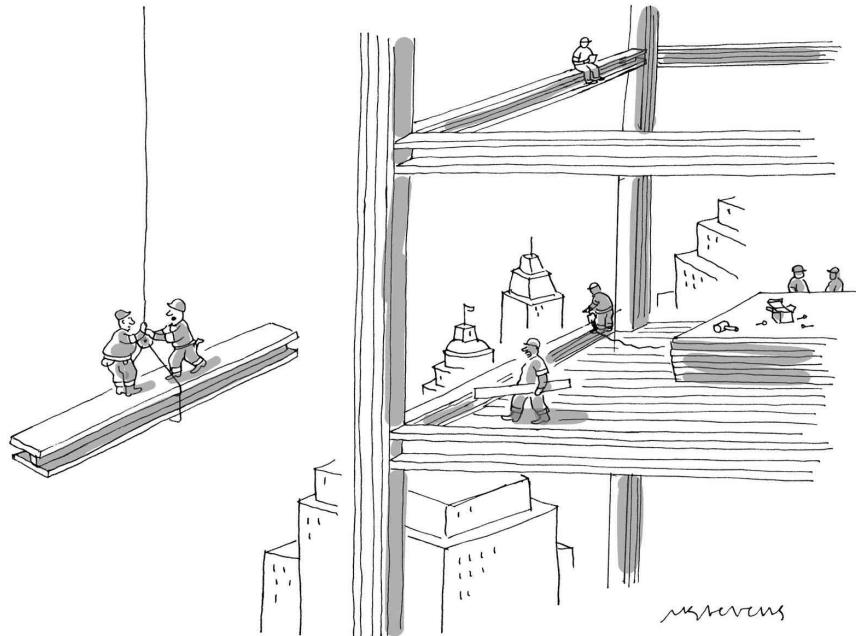
Broadcasters no longer need to cater to what Limbaugh called the “largest possible audience.” Thanks to social media, they can thrive with a narrow, deep gully of fans, who follow everything that comes out. “The ad agencies are looking to get the best bang for their buck, and with social media you can more specifically target your buys,” Harrison said. One of the ads on Bongino’s show is for the Hidden Wealth Solution, a service that offers to help “boomers and retirees” learn “how to protect your retirement from Socialism.”

With little incentive to widen his appeal beyond avowed loyalists, Bongino sees limited value in traditional media. When I first contacted him for this article, he agreed to phone conversations but declined to meet in person; because I’m a contributor to CNN, he assumed that our interviews were a zero-sum proposition. In one of our calls, I asked why he was bothering to talk to me at all. “I at least get my say in there,” he said. “The reality is, I’ve got a bigger footprint than you guys by tenfold, if not twentyfold. I don’t want to be an asshole about it, but there’s nothing you can write that I can’t write back even worse. It’s asymmetric warfare. You’ll never win.”

Later, when *The New Yorker* sent Bongino a memo to confirm facts for this article, he responded that it contained “obviously false material,” but declined to identify specifics. On his podcast the next day, he complained that I was portraying him as a hatemonger. “Maybe have a little bit of

personal dignity,” he suggested, “you ass-kissing-Biden, surgically-attaching-your-lips-to-the-ass-of-the-Administration piece of garbage.”

In 1971, in the prehistoric age of talk radio, the novelist Stanley Elkin published “The Dick Gibson Show,” which conjured the powers of an ambitious, protean host. The fictional Gibson conducted his audiences through crescendos of outrage and grief and paranoid self-pity, drawing in callers from across the country—“wild visionaries” who “believed in the Loch Ness Monster, the Abominable Snowman and the Communist Conspiracy.” The persona that made Gibson effective, Elkin wrote, was the “sum of private frequencies and personal resonances.”



*“Can’t we just do this online?”*  
Cartoon by Mick Stevens

In the stories that Bongino reveals about himself, there are some of the usual private frequencies: status, grit, yearning, humiliation. But nothing rings louder than his awareness of fear—how it arises and subsides, what it does to the body and the mind. In his punditry, Bongino talks about fear all the time. “Fear has always been the Democrats’ coin of the realm,” he told podcast listeners in June. “How else are they going to coax you into delivering them your civil liberties and freedom? They do it through things like coronavirus.” In a mock orator’s voice, he said, “Give up your right to assemble!”

When Bongino talks about his early life, he also lingers on fear. He grew up in Queens and Long Island, with two brothers. His father, John, was a plumber and a building inspector; his mother, Judy, worked at a grocery store. (For a time, Bongino wanted to be a doctor. “Remember Charlie Brown encyclopedias?” he asked me. “My favorite one was the biology one. It showed the muscle and heart, and I must’ve read that, seriously, twenty times.”) He went on, “I know a lot of lefties who read this will probably laugh, because they all think we’re cretins.”) When he was about nine, his parents split, and Judy began a relationship with a man known as Big Mike, a dockworker and a former boxer, who Bongino says would drink and assault him and his brother Joseph. “The abuse became a familiar routine,” he wrote, in “Life Inside the Bubble,” a memoir from 2013. “Joseph and I never discussed it. No one did. We all just pretended it didn’t happen and the world was happy to acquiesce.” (Big Mike could not be reached for comment.)

When I asked about Big Mike, Bongino said, “The only thing that scared this guy was the cops.” He took to restraining the abuse by calling the police. “It became almost Pavlovian in its association to me. Where you’d go from this point of maximum trauma in your life, I mean *maximum* trauma, pupils dilated, heart racing, fear. I’m not talking about fear like you’re watching a horror movie. I mean, when you’re a kid you can’t process fear. You think you’re next. That’s not the kind of thing you have the adult faculties to deal with. It’s traumatizing. And it changes you forever,” he said. “To go from that to ‘O.K., everything’s good now,’ I can’t even describe to you the elation. It’s literally indescribable. I just remember the feeling being like a light switch: the fear turned off. I thought, I want to do that. I want that kid to look at me like that.”

In 1995, he entered a cadet program for aspiring police officers, while studying psychology at Queens College. He became a cop, and also earned a master’s degree in psychology. Soon, though, he was craving “something bigger.” In 1999, he entered the U.S. Secret Service, and when Hillary Clinton ran for the Senate that year Bongino was assigned to help protect her. He received, as he put it later, “a Ph.D.-level course in campaign management.” In particular, he appreciated the canny efforts of Clinton’s aides to insure that she was photographed travelling in a frumpy brown van, which the Secret Service agents nicknamed Scooby-Doo. (He invoked that

lesson years later when he was running for office, telling his staff that campaigns come down to “sound bites and snapshots.”) Among colleagues, he was known as a skillful agent—well liked by both peers and superiors, and quick to venture out in the middle of the night if asked for help. An agent who worked with him recalled, “Nobody knew his politics at all. He never talked politics.”

In 2001, Bongino met Paula Martinez, a Web developer at the Securities Industry Association, and they got married a couple of years later. (Today, they have two daughters, and Paula oversees much of Bongino’s business operation.) In 2006, having moved to Maryland, he joined the Secret Service detail that guarded George W. Bush and his family, and learned the byways of Presidential service. (One rule: Never initiate a conversation with the President.) After Obama was elected, Bongino drew the high-stakes job of organizing his protection during the walking portion of the Inaugural parade, and worked for him for about two years. In 2011, Bongino said of Obama, “From what I saw, he was a wonderful father and a wonderful man, and he was very, very nice and very kind to me.”

Even in the prime postings of the Secret Service, Bongino was restless. He invented a product for martial-arts practitioners—a sock with a sticky sole, which he called the GrappleSock—and he and Paula sold it online. Reviving his childhood ambitions, he crammed for the *MCAT* and applied to medical school at the University of Oklahoma. Because his brother-in-law had worked there, he said, “I thought I stood a good shot.” He was rejected. Instead, he enrolled in an M.B.A. program at Penn State and completed it in his off-hours.

By then, Bongino had started paying attention to the cable-news channels that played constantly in the office. He asked a colleague, “What do you listen to on the way home, the Sports Junkies?” The colleague said, “No, I listen to this guy Mark Levin.” Bongino began tuning in and was captivated. “I was, like, ‘Man, this guy’s speaking my language. He’s as furious about things as I am.’”

In 2011, Bongino quit the Secret Service, sick of the travel and what he called the “‘cocktail party’ managerial class.” He entered an uphill race against the U.S. senator Ben Cardin, a longtime Maryland Democrat. During

the campaign, Bongino's brother Joseph, who had also joined the Secret Service, was implicated in a scandal in which several agents hired prostitutes while on a Presidential visit to Colombia. According to the *Washington Post*, Joseph Bongino had a one-night stand, but kept his job because he did not pay for sex. (Joseph declined to comment for this article.) In Dan Bongino's view, the case was bound up with matters of class and status. "I assure you, if the same level of investigative scrutiny was applied to the White House staff members conducting advance work as was applied to the Secret Service, the results would not be flattering," he wrote in his memoir.

The race ended badly for Bongino—he lost by nearly thirty points—but it cemented his contact with powerful Republicans, including Sarah Palin, who had endorsed him. Within months, he had become a frequent guest on Infowars. For Alex Jones, it was a perfect pairing: he could present Bongino as a defector from the White House ("They're so scared of him and what he knows"), and Bongino could play the role of a reluctant but brave truth-teller. In appearances, he said that the American public was being "manipulated" by a "tyrannical group of insiders." Over time, Bongino's estimation of Obama changed from "a wonderful man" to "the most corrupt president in U.S. history." To the Secret Service agent who had worked with him, he seemed transformed by the business that he had entered: "It's the tale of two Dan Bonginos—the agent and the politico."

Bongino was honing an ethos that would serve him well: as he put it, "Everybody loves behind-the-scenes stories." He rarely finishes a show without touting a revelation from behind the scenes—any scenes. Publicizing his book in 2013, he described himself to ABC News as being "in the room during some of the most important conversations"—even though Secret Service agents told ABC that they do not sit in on high-level meetings. In a *Washington Post* column, Ed Rogers, a veteran of the Reagan and George H. W. Bush Administrations, derided Bongino for capitalizing on his duty in the Presidential detail. "Gag me," Rogers wrote. "The author should ask for forgiveness, go live in a monastery for a few years and then permanently drop out of sight."

Instead, Bongino found his way to a more defiant corner of the Republican world, aided by Virginia Thomas, the wife of the Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. A prominent Tea Party activist, Ginni Thomas ran a

government-affairs firm, Liberty Consulting, and described her work as a “fight for our country’s life.” In 2013, she and a number of prominent conservatives, who believed that they were losing a messaging war against progressives, started meeting to develop talking points. The group, which included congressional staff and reporters at right-leaning publications, was called Groundswell. Members maintained a Google Group, where they swapped proposed phrases. After they workshopped an attack on Obama for putting “politics over public safety,” the phrase became the theme of articles published by the *Washington Times*, RedState.com, and Breitbart, the last of which Bongino promoted with a tweet: “Politics over public safety?”

Bongino told me that Thomas is a “good friend,” who has encouraged him toward more intense activism: “She says all the time, ‘Dan, we’re the leaders we’ve been waiting for.’ Everybody is waiting for this white knight to come and save the day, but it’s not going to happen. We’re the ones.” For a while, though, he seemed uncertain how to effect the changes he wanted to see. In 2015, after narrowly losing another run for Congress, Bongino fashioned a podcasting studio out of moving blankets at his home in suburban Maryland. He was appearing occasionally on larger conservative shows, which helped build his audience. But he wasn’t yet done trying for public office. That summer, he and Paula bought a house in Florida, not far from where her mother lived, and Bongino launched a third run for Congress. This time, he failed to make it out of the Republican primary, and was noticed mostly for a conflict with a Politico reporter, which became public when a telephone interview was leaked. As the reporter pressed him on campaign donations and on his motives for running, Bongino exploded. He called him a “fucking coward,” speculated that he got beat up a lot as a kid, and threatened to “expose your fucking ass.”



*"I don't think he has properly adjusted to his new circumstances."*  
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

Later, looking back on his electoral career, Bongino acknowledged that he “got smoked,” but said that it was “probably the best thing that ever happened to me.” He was better off behind the scenes—as a broadcaster who could help the right candidate win office. In the summer of 2016, Trump was the Republican nominee for President. Bongino, a proud fellow-product of Queens, appreciated his sensibility. “Queens kids never had money like the Manhattan kids,” he told a local magazine in Florida. “But there’s always puffery. Everything’s huge, magnificent—even if it’s not and your car’s 10 years old.” In 2018, Bongino landed a show on NRATV, an online video channel run by the National Rifle Association, on which he often echoed Trump’s complaints about a “witch hunt” and the “biggest scandal in American history.” Trump, recognizing a reliable supporter, began promoting Bongino’s endeavors on Twitter. (“Thank you Dan and good luck with the book!”) In September, 2018, as political leaders were gathering for John McCain’s funeral, Trump was tweeting about Bongino’s latest appearance on Fox.

NRATV closed down in 2019, but Bongino had found his most effective register: existential showdown. In a segment about the confirmation battle over the Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, Bongino called it “pure

unadulterated evil, what they did to this guy.” He announced a new sense of vocation: “My entire life right now is about owning the libs.”

In broadcasting, one marker of status is the ability to do your job without leaving home. Hannity often does television from his house on Long Island; Carlson has a studio in Maine, where his family has summered for decades, and another near his house in Florida. When Bongino spoke at the Conservative Political Action Conference last February, he said, “I don’t get out of my house much.”

For a promotional event in 2018, Bongino and his wife signed in from a couch at their home in Florida. He spent an hour autographing books to send to fans, while Paula—a composed presence in a black dress and chunky glasses—read questions that supporters had submitted. “How do you handle the frustrations you encounter daily?” she asked. Bongino replied, “Who said I handle them?” He barked a laugh and turned to the camera: “You’re not aware of my notoriously horrible temper and disposition?”

Bongino credits his wife with fine-tuning what he calls “the product.” When Bill from New Jersey asked, “Have you always been this competitive and passionate?,” Bongino explained that Paula keeps track of which topics inspire the greatest surges in engagement. “She’ll be, like, ‘Dude, you are slaying it today,’ ” he said. “Because she has these metrics on the Excel spreadsheet.”

Social-media algorithms rely on the principle that Internet momentum is self-justifying: if something is popular, it deserves to be more popular. Bongino has learned to capitalize on this tendency. Across his shows and Web sites, a small staff of editors and producers—he declined to say how many—help him trawl right-wing sites and accounts for videos and sound bites and news items that will furnish the ingredients of social-media arousal.

In December, 2019, he started a business to maximize that power: the Bongino Report, a news aggregator designed to lure Trump supporters away from the Drudge Report. Matt Drudge had soured on Trump, and Bongino seized the opportunity. “Drudge has abandoned you. I NEVER will,” he tweeted.

The Bongino Report completed what Carusone, of Media Matters, described as an “engagement machine”—a suite of businesses across broadcast and mobile technology that introduce large audiences to themes that were previously obscure. “Bongino understood that if you’re connected to the fever swamps you can pull together raw material that differentiates you and gets high engagement,” he said. “He takes the right kernel of highly charged, emotional content, with the right headline, and reaches a large enough platform.”

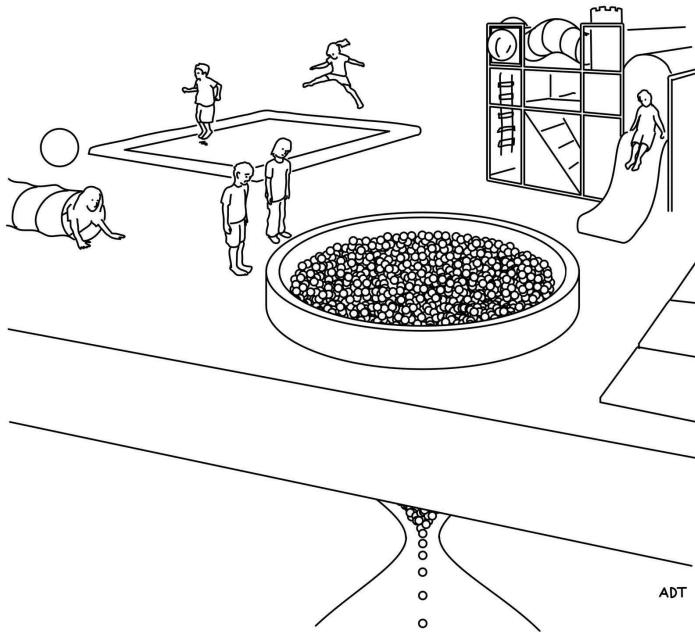
The process is a kind of “narrative laundering,” Jennifer Mercieca said. “You start with a story from a tainted source, like Alex Jones, and then you process it through something that is more trusted. People may not have trusted Alex Jones and his information in 2015, but, when they heard a Republican nominee or a President say it, then it sounded way more legit.” It benefits the launderer, too, she added; when heavy Internet users hear him refer to the latest trend, they feel “dialled in to the cusp of the information wars.”

The growth of Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 gave Bongino a chance to tout his background in law enforcement. (“I spent four years with the N.Y.P.D. and twelve years with the Secret Service. I didn’t have one civilian complaint.”) Between April and October, engagement with his posts on Facebook rose nearly six hundred per cent, according to an analysis by Yunkang Yang, a researcher at the George Washington University’s Institute for Data, Democracy & Politics. The most striking increase, Yang said, came just after the killing of George Floyd. A post from Bongino.com amplified content from a smaller right-wing site called the National Pulse, which showed footage of a Black man at a rally in Washington, saying that he was ready to put “police in the fucking grave.” Bongino’s team added a brief commentary, suggesting that the sentiment was widespread: “This is what the Left is. . . . They personify hatred and embody divisiveness. We can never let these people anywhere near power.” The post generated more than a hundred and forty thousand likes and comments.

Before long, Bongino’s posts were consistently in the top ten on Facebook. His competitor Ben Shapiro reportedly achieves big numbers by running a network of pages that disseminates his content—the social-media equivalent

of buying your own book to get on the best-seller list—but Bongino denies employing such tricks.

His fans follow him closely. In the fall of 2020, an oncology nurse and admirer spotted a lump on Bongino’s neck during a video appearance and encouraged him to get it checked. He was diagnosed as having Hodgkin’s lymphoma. Doctors removed a seven-centimetre tumor, and he underwent chemotherapy and radiation. In March, he was pronounced cancer-free, a development that generated fervent engagement on Facebook.



*"It's kinda fun, but only for, like, a minute."*  
Cartoon by Adam Douglas Thompson

Because Bongino has emerged so fast, and because so much of his activity occurs away from mainstream media, few Democrats have noticed that he exists. Carusone notes that there is an entire realm of influential figures who are effectively invisible from the outside. “They’re no longer the fringe,” he said. He points to Steven Crowder, a thirty-four-year-old YouTuber who often broadcasts wearing a gun in a shoulder holster. YouTube has cited Crowder for “egregious” violations of its policies on disinformation and cyberbullying; last spring, it suspended his ad sales, and reportedly penalized him for “reveling in or mocking” the police killing of a Black teen-ager in Ohio. (He disputed the accusation.) In October, 2020, as the election approached, his YouTube channel had more viewers than CNN’s did.

In the days following the election, conservative hosts jockeyed for attention, but Bongino outperformed his peers. A headline in Politico declared, “Dan Bongino Leads the *MAGA* Field in Stolen-Election Messaging.” Like others, he often charged toward a red line—incitement, libel, bullying—and then veered away. On November 9th, in a podcast episode titled “Resist,” he said, “I’ve never been more fired up. We need a rally and we need the President at it.” Then it was time to hedge. “There will be no riots at that rally,” he went on. “The safest place on earth for police officers is at a Trump rally.” That day, Bongino’s podcast became No. 1 on iTunes.

In tweets, there was less room to hedge. On November 11th, he wrote that conservatives were being “put on targeting lists” and that his opponents were “tyrants, nothing more.” Less than a week later, he wrote, “The mask is off. They’re not hiding anymore.” One of the people reading, according to an analysis by National Public Radio, was Ashli Babbitt, a devoted Trump fan from Southern California. On January 6th, she was killed by police while trying to storm the Capitol. In the last year of her life, Babbitt retweeted Bongino at least fifty times.

In the months since the siege, Bongino has condemned the violence but has taken to warning conservatives of a new risk: political profiling. “I’m not suggesting to you we shouldn’t investigate, to the moon, attacks on police officers,” he told his audience in June. But he mapped out a dark hypothetical: “A certain candidate runs for office they don’t like—all of a sudden the F.B.I. is investigating ‘white supremacy.’ ‘He talked to a guy who knew a guy who talked to a guy who was on Capitol Hill January 6th.’ ‘White supremacy’! You see where this can go?”

In May, he started the radio show in Limbaugh’s old slot. It was not a simple inheritance; some local stations opted to fill the slot with other aspiring heirs. There was the duo of Clay Travis and Buck Sexton, a sportswriter and a former C.I.A. officer; there was also Erick Erickson, an evangelical Christian who once called the Supreme Court Justice David Souter a “goat-fucking child molester,” and was now being positioned as the calm, mature option.

But Bongino had an advantage: Trump, who agreed to be his first guest. Bongino asked if he would run in 2024, saying, “We need you.” Trump

basked in the question. “Well, I’ll tell you what,” he said. “We are going to make you very happy, and we’re going to do what’s right.”

During the summer, Bongino added a new topic to his rotation. After months of fanning listeners’ distrust about the election of 2020, he began prepping them to doubt the integrity of an election that was still more than a year away. “They’re hiding information from you now about what happened in Arizona and Georgia,” he said in July, in a riff about Silicon Valley. “They disrupted the 2020 election. And they want to do it in 2022.”

When Trump was in office, his media allies played the role of interpreters, defending his actions and his non-actions and distributing blame to enemies—the press, China, Anthony Fauci. Under Biden, they no longer have to play defense; these days, it’s offense all the time. By the fall of 2021, as the Biden Administration sought to force companies to mandate *COVID* vaccines or weekly testing, Bongino was forthrightly calling for “mass civil disobedience.”

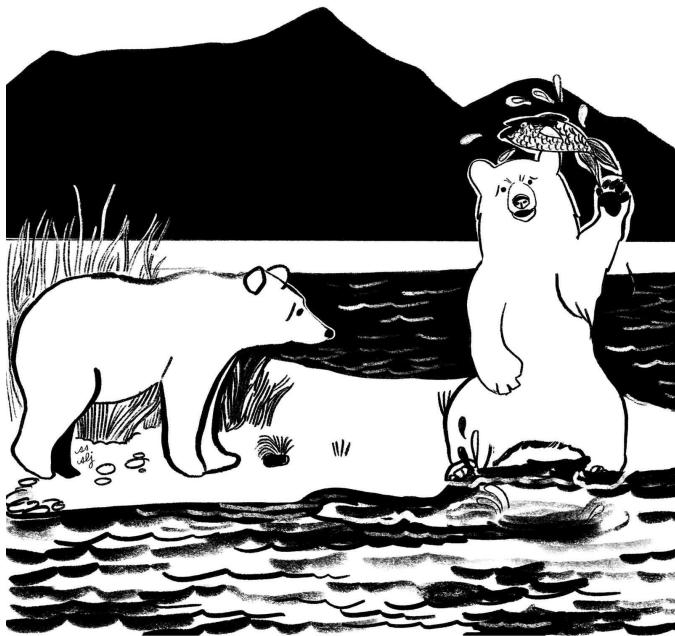
On October 18th, Bongino issued a public ultimatum to Cumulus Media, the owner of the network that syndicates his program, threatening to part ways with the company if it continued to require employees to get vaccinated. “I don’t believe this is based on any science,” he said on his show. He called it “antithetical to everything I believe in.”

For Bongino, the policies of the pandemic—mandates for masks and vaccines, admonitions against experimental treatments—have always rested on a dubious expectation of trust. When I asked him why he challenged the science, he cut in: “Time out.” He fed my words back to me: “ ‘You challenge the science.’ No, that’s not the way science works! Science is a process of challenges.” He went on, “What are you, a lemming? Just because people tell you to do things doesn’t mean you should automatically do it. Pregnant women took thalidomide for morning sickness. That was the consensus of the time. Look how that worked out.”

Bongino does not dispute the lethality of *COVID*. Before I could ask whether he was vaccinated, he volunteered that he was. Citing his treatment for lymphoma, he said, “I have a wiped-out immune system. My doctor told me, ‘This, for you, is probably a good idea.’ ” He saw no conflict between

his need for a vaccine and his tirades against mandates. “I go on my show and say, ‘Hey, I took it. But I really think you all should talk to your doctor first.’” In fact, some of his on-air rhetoric was considerably more forceful. “The reason the left is doubled- and tripled-down on vaccine mandates—it’s not by accident—is because the left has a totalitarian bent,” he told listeners. “They don’t want you to have control over any sphere of your life.”

Once Bongino picked the fight with Cumulus, his show went on hiatus. It did not go as he had hoped. Another right-wing Cumulus host, Dale Jackson, mocked him for “virtue signalling”; local stations griped about having to play reruns; the trade press quoted speculation that Bongino was using the fracas as a ploy to sweeten his contract or sign with a new network. (Bongino denied the speculation, attributing it to “jealous” fellow-hosts.) After a week and a half, he declared a “stalemate” and returned to the airwaves, promising to put two hundred and fifty thousand dollars of his own money into a fund for Cumulus employees who had lost jobs for refusing to be vaccinated.



*I swear I'm usually good at this—I must've put on too much lotion earlier.*  
Cartoon by Sophie Lucido Johnson and Sammi Skolmoski

But his failure to make his network comply fortified his argument that conservatives needed their own platforms, to protect against liberal antagonists. “If they can’t get a bank to cancel you, they’ll go to the payment processor, Stripe,” he told me. “If they can’t get Stripe to cancel you, they’ll

go to PayPal.” He added, “I said to my audience years ago, ‘We have to find every single link in that chain and create an alternate company that believes in free speech.’”

As a first step, he had invested in Parler, a social network funded by the Republican megadonor Rebekah Mercer. Founded in 2018, Parler prohibited criminal activity and bots but otherwise pledged not to “censor ideas, political parties or ideologies.” Anti-Semitic material abounded, including hashtags such as #HitlerWasRight, but the platform nevertheless attracted official accounts from many prominent Republicans, including Senator Ted Cruz, of Texas. In June, 2020, Bongino and others involved in the company visited Mar-a-Lago to meet with Brad Parscale, Trump’s campaign manager. According to a participant, the goal was to discuss the prospect of the President adopting Parler in exchange for partial ownership. During the meeting, Jeffrey Wernick, who was a Parler consultant and is Bongino’s partner in other ventures, grew suspicious that Parscale was there mostly on his own behalf. “I sat there. I listened,” Wernick told me. “All I’m hearing is a guy hyping himself.” The talks were soon ended, after the White House counsel’s office registered concerns that such a deal with a sitting President could violate ethics laws.

In the days after the siege of the Capitol, as Trump and his allies were ejected from mainstream social media, Parler became the most downloaded item in Apple’s App Store. It didn’t last; Apple and Google stopped offering the app, and the company faded into a scrum of litigation among founders and investors. But Bongino saw that flash of success as proof of demand. He conceived of projects to create conservative alternatives to GoFundMe and Eventbrite, and promoted the video site Rumble, in which he is an investor. I asked him what boundaries Rumble imposes on users, and he said, “If you’re not violating our terms of service, and you’re abiding by the law, it’s not my business.”

Since the fall of 2020, Rumble’s traffic has grown more than twentyfold, to an average of thirty-six million users a month. Bongino, in promotional mode, told me that it was the “first viable video-platform contender to YouTube that’s exploding in traffic.” It’s “through the roof,” he said. Still, Rumble’s traffic represents less than two per cent of YouTube’s in a typical month. The tech giants that Bongino resents succeeded by promoting

conflict and scale. But, if conservatives evacuate the center rings of American technology, they will lose an essential part of any matchup: the heel. You could still own the libs at a distance, but it would no longer be a contact sport. It's akin to changing the channel from Ultimate Fighting Championship to the Sports Junkies.

At times, in our conversations, Bongino seemed to be straining to make the case that his alternative technologies pose a meaningful challenge to the behemoths. "There's a lot happening behind the scenes," he said. "I don't think the left and the media and the Big Tech tyrants out there have any idea what's coming. Believe me. There's a consortium of people who've had enough, and they've got the money, the assets, and the time." I asked him to mention one other entrepreneur who was working behind the scenes. He balked. "I'm hesitant to give that up," he said. "Leftists will cancel them."

In any event, the biggest entrepreneur came pre-cancelled. Trump announced in October that the Trump Media & Technology Group was developing an alternative to Twitter, called Truth Social. To finance its growth, the firm would merge with a publicly traded blank-check company (the fashionable Wall Street innovation known as a "special-purpose acquisition company," or *SPAC*), giving the former President access to hundreds of millions of dollars. To Trump's critics, the deal sounded like a grift to end all grifts. Within weeks, it was under investigation by the Securities and Exchange Commission and the Financial Industry Regulatory Authority. But, if Trump can hold it together, it may provide his largest step yet toward regaining a political voice in the lead-up to the 2024 election.

Several weeks after Trump's announcement, Rumble declared that it, too, planned to merge with a *SPAC*. Then the companies announced a partnership: Bongino's favored platform would stream the video for Trump's app. If conservatives wanted to get out of the wilderness, Bongino told listeners, they needed to build their own "parallel information economy." Act now. "We decide who comes in," he said. "It's the only way to win."

Even if the technology proves rickety, ventures by Trump and Bongino would give their fans new power to turn zeal into action—a crucial element of what Edward Bernays, one of the founding fathers of public relations, called the "simple machinery of group leadership." For Bernays, who in his

long career persuaded Americans to buy more Ivory soap, to eat more bananas, and to support the First World War, the goal was to cultivate customers so devoted that they take matters into their own hands. “As if actuated by the pressure of a button,” he wrote, “people began working for the client.”

A fanatically loyal audience can be very profitable—and, at times, very dangerous. During a public event in Idaho in October, the pro-Trump commentator Charlie Kirk was asked by a fan, “When do we get to use the guns?” The crowd tittered, and the fan continued, “I mean, literally, where’s the line? How many elections are they going to steal before we kill these people?” Kirk, who seemed to sense how poorly the moment was going to play on YouTube, interrupted him. “I’m going to denounce that,” he said. “We have to be the ones that do not play into the violent aims and ambitions of the other side.” Instead, he said, Idaho should ban vaccine mandates, eject some federal agencies, and “pick and choose” what federal laws it considers constitutional. When the man asked again when violence was required, Kirk urged him to be wary of abetting his opponents’ conspiracy: “They’re trying to get you to do something that then justifies what they actually want to do.”

The moment captured the perils of living in a nation beset by information warfare: if January 6th made anything clear, it was that some number of Americans will eventually abandon a distinction between rhetorical battle and the real thing. Bongino’s business thrives in that borderland, the realm of thinking where the best way to stay safe is to buy the shotguns and holsters that he advertises on his show.

One morning in November, he posted to Facebook a video of himself in an especially grave mood. He wore a bright-red T-shirt from a sponsor: Bravo Company, a manufacturer of military-style rifles and accessories, which promotes itself with a Latin motto that translates as “If you wish for peace, prepare for war.” Hunched over the microphone, Bongino stared into the camera. “We are descending at an increasingly rapid rate into fascism,” he said. “*Chaos*. You’re seeing the evaporation of civil liberties in live time, the Bill of Rights being used like toilet paper, the Constitution being thrown out, the rapid spread of insane deadly ideas, like the defunding of the police and the abolition of our military.”

The monologue, a snippet of a podcast episode first released in April, centered on his usual complaints about Silicon Valley—YouTube had removed a video of scholars who advised children not to wear masks—but Bongino had elevated it to a larger showdown with opponents whom he called “pieces of human filth.”

“There’s a lot going on behind the scenes,” he said. “There are people now openly silencing and attacking conservatives, trying to have them jailed, trying to have them sanctioned, bankrupted financially, fired from their jobs. This is all happening right now! And it’s all happening because of the Democrat Party and the liberals.” He was shouting now, waving a hand in front of the lens. “They are fascists! That’s not in dispute!”

He seemed to catch himself. “My apologies,” he said. “I don’t mean this to sound rambling.” But, he explained, his experience with cancer had heightened his sense of the stakes. It “put horse blinders on me to see what really matters,” he said. “The fight is all that matters, and it’s all that should matter to you.”

He reached what he presented as an encouraging conclusion: “The only good news about the rapid descent is we’re going to hit a bottom soon. And I promise you. . . .” He squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his fists. “*I promise* you! I know it—the Lord will not let this country go down like that.” He stared into the camera again. “There will be an ascent just as fast, where freedom and liberty will reëmerge, and these people on the other side of it, the Big Tech tyrant totalitarian fascists, their liberal buddies, the Biden Administration, they will all—all—have to answer for this.”

In the next three weeks, Bongino’s video was watched on Facebook nearly six million times. It attracted comments from fans around the country, who heard in his words a case for belief and an argument to take action. A woman from Texas—whom Facebook had rewarded with a “Top Fan” badge, identifying her as one of Bongino’s most active supporters—wrote, “I wonder when we will put our phones down and get out, face to face and shoulder to shoulder to stand against this?” Another follower celebrated the campaign against vaccine mandates and gloried in the prospect of vindication. “Seeing a rise in people turning to NOT getting so many jabs,

quitting jobs, and telling govt. to screw off is the first sign of a revolt," she wrote, and added, "Let the revolt happen." ♦

# **Shouts & Murmurs**

- [The First Constitutional Crisis](#)

By [Teddy Wayne](#)

I ask'd Dr. Franklin, upon his departure from the Constitutional Convention, whether the newly form'd United States of America was a Republick or a Monarchy.

“A Republick, Madam,” He answer'd. “If You can keep it.”

He chortl'd, then with alacrity remov'd from his pocket a quill, inkwell & parchment, on which He had inscrib'd “Aphorisms for My Almanack,” & jott'd down his words with a pleas'd countenance behind his bifocals.

“Wait, what?” I queri'd. “*If You can keep it?*”

“Indeed, You may not be able to preserve this Republick,” He said with an impish smile.

“But, Dr. Franklin, whyfor?”

Now He appear'd less jolly. “I suppose Tyrants could exploit the loopholes We put in the Constitution.”

“Why did You not omit the loopholes?”

“Well, by the time We notic'd Them, We'd already finish'd, & it would have requir'd starting the entire thing over with a fresh scroll,” He said. “& 'twas getting really late, so We were, like—” He shrugg'd & upturn'd his palms.

“& why did the perishing of the Republick strike You as comickal?”

He said, “Mayhap I thought it funny in a morbid way, but not funny guffaw-guffaw.”

He stood in contemplation. “O, shit,” He said to Himself. “Fuck Me.” He look'd at Me with alarm. “I just envision'd the whole ‘People can have as many guns as They want’ thing Madison plans to tack on coming back to bite Us upon the Buttocks.”

“You proclaim'd 'twas a Republick ‘if You can keep it,’ ” I said. “Did You mean *Me*, personally? Will Women hold elect'd office?”

He burst into laughter. Upon seeing that I did not share his mirth, He affect'd a more solemn mien.

“O, You were serious,” He said. “ ’Twas more like a general ‘You.’ But not Women, obviously. Or, to be fair, Men who aren’t White. Or White Men who don’t own property.”

“How is any of that fair?”

“Figure of speech, Madam. I guess ’tis not ‘fair’ according to Webster’s definition. He said so the other night during tavern trivia. You know Noah Webster? Good Guy.”

“But We can all at least vote for our leaders, correct?”

“Um.” He clench’d his teeth & inhal’d loudly whilst wincing, as if to demonstrate that the topick was causing Him physickal distress. “I was pushing like Hell for it, but some of the delegates said that if We allow’d, say, Women to vote, it meant a Woman should sign the Constitution, which would screw up the name ‘Founding Fathers,’ which They’re really into. I maintain’d that this was a triviality compar’d to endowing all People with a voice in a flourishing Democracy. & They were, like, ‘Let Us not & say, rather, that We did.’ ”

Dr. Franklin add’d, “Sorry,” tho’ He pronounc’d it *sah-wee*.

“Which brings up another problem,” He said. “There is no polite way to say this to a Lady, but a lot of the Guys in this Country are, well . . .”

My eyes implor’d Dr. Franklin to conclude his doubtless brilliant insight.

“They’re Dicks,” He said. “& They will propagate yet more Dicks, & someday there shall be a profusion of Dicks, perchance nearly a majority, who, in a tragick irony, cite their purport’d reverence of the Constitution to conceal their Tyranny of Dickishness.”

“You said ‘nearly a majority,’ ” I rejoin’d. “Surely perspicacious minds like yours would not create a Constitution that permitt’d a minority of Dicks to wield federal power over the non-Dick majority.”

“Mm-hmm,” Dr. Franklin said, as his eyes shift’d rapidly hither & thither.

“How does One identify these Dicks?” I ask’d.

“Not every Dick simply wears a tricorne hat with ‘*MAKE AMERICA*’ calligraph’d on it,” He explain’d. “Many cultivate full, unkempt beards, for instance, whilst others grow hair only on their chins in the unseemly manner of a goat. But one common element is that They buy their spectacles from the optician Thomas Oakley, who has pioneer’d a technique to tint the lenses dark, & to elongate the frames such that They cover a wide expanse of the face.”

“Is *every* Gentleman who wears his spectacles in this fashion a Dick?”

“A Total Dick,” He said.

“So,” I said, “You have draft’d a Constitution full of loopholes for a Republick found’d upon inequality & teeming with Dicks who wear Oakley’s spectacles that wrap around their faces.”

“Don’t forget the guns. O, & guess who loves guns? The Dicks.”

“I should not think this a worthy Republick,” I said.

“ ’Tis America, Madam.” He look’d defensive. “Love it or leave it.”

Dr. Franklin’s eyes lit up. He wrote this phrase on his parchment & chuckl’d as He recit’d it several times.

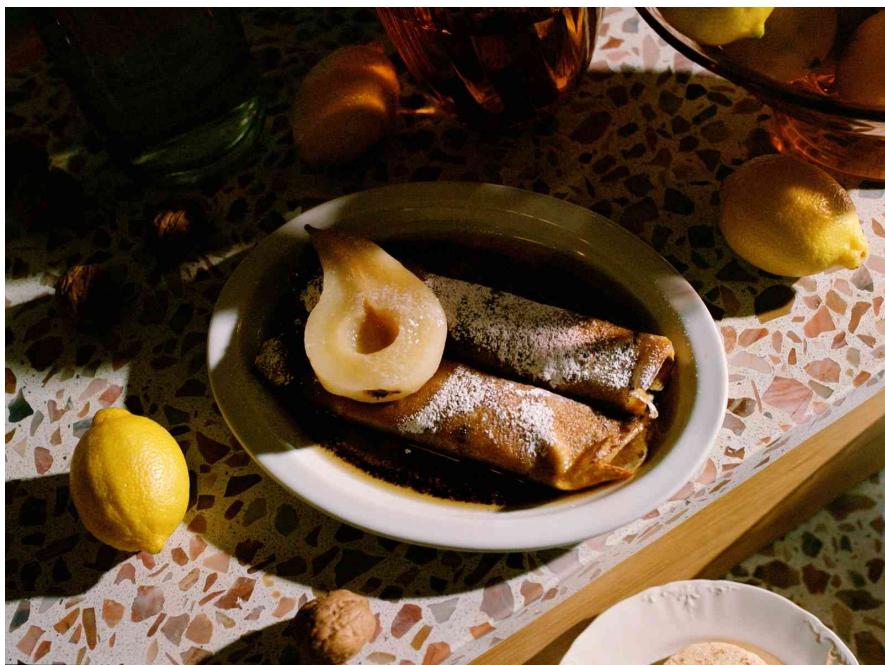
“Most amusing,” He murmur’d giddily. “A capital riot!” ♦

# Tables for Two

- [The Hungarian Roots of Agi's Counter](#)

By [Shauna Lyon](#)

Some of the best things in life are not sought out but thrust upon us. Hungary, for instance, was introduced to coffee by way of its occupation by the Ottoman Empire. At Agi's Counter, in Crown Heights, the chef Jeremy Salamon's childhood memories of his grandmother sparked the creation of the first thing you notice about his Nosh Plate: huge crackers that undulate like Frank Gehry wall shards. "Growing up, my mom's mom belonged to a country club, so she would always be eating these very large crackers—like, huge," Salamon told me. "And she would just be buttering them, and I always thought it was just so comical. It was a sign of bouginess, for some reason: I have this large cracker. So I was, like, I think everybody deserves large crackers."



*Palacsinta, or crêpes, are filled with sweet cheese and smothered in brown butter.*

Made of spelt flour, water, olive oil, and sea salt, the crackers are speared into silky chicken-liver mousse. Salamon could have stopped there, but surrounding this bounty are a pile of pickled vegetables, a soft-boiled egg crowned with whipped devilled-egg filling, and a ramekin of körözött, a kicky Hungarian pimento cheese.

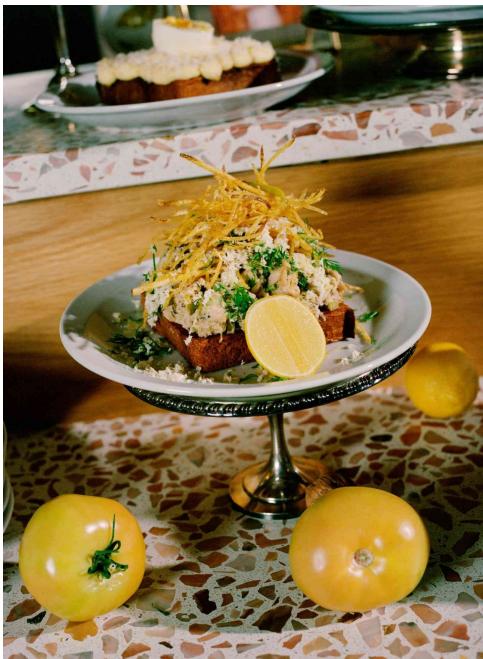
Salamon's other, paternal grandmother, however, is the namesake of this genial counter-service spot: Agi, ninety-four, Hungarian, and now living, after many lifetimes, in Boca Raton. "She came to America when she fled

Hungary in '56, during the revolution," Salamon, who has cooked at Via Carota and the Eddy, said. "So she has a very different idea of Hungarian cuisine than I think it's like now. She would cook a mish-mosh of stuff—goulash next to eggplant Parmesan, or steak Diane next to paprikash."



*Renee Hudson creates an impeccable seasonal array of pastries, such as a delicate Gerbeaud cake (top left), after that of the Café Gerbeaud, in Budapest, and the Ferdinand bun (top center).*

Currently, none of these are available at Agi's Counter, which opened in November and serves an exceptionally thoughtful menu of Hungarian-inspired breakfast and lunch dishes. (Dinner, featuring a Hungarian wine list, is planned for late spring.) The décor evokes a diner meets a millennial's apartment, decked with heirlooms—blond wood, terrazzo counters, open shelves displaying Depression glass and vintage floral china, faux-Victorian wallpaper.



The open-faced sandwiches include the Jammy Egg Mousse (top) and the Confit Tuna (bottom).

On a recent morning, breakfast included the hearty Leberkase, in which a thick slab of spongy pork pâté is sandwiched, with fried egg and pear mostarda, between even thicker slabs of Pullman-style bread. But it was the tender herb-flecked biscuit—dill aroma meeting your nose as you lean in to bite, spread with mayo and stacked with a soft fried egg and assertive Alpine Cheddar—that made for the perfect morning snack.

At lunch, open-faced sandwiches included the Confit Tuna, topped with fried shoestring potatoes, pickled pepper, and a shower of shaved horseradish, and the Jammy Egg Mousse, which sets oozy egg halves atop bread piped with more of that devilled-egg filling. Sweet-cheese-filled, brown-butter-smothered *palacsinta*, or crêpes, are well paired with Thumpers, sodas of house-made syrups, such as the lemon verbena and fennel—spritzed via oldfangled glass bottles, by the fourth-generation family-run Brooklyn Seltzer Boys.



*On Sundays, Agi's offers doughnuts—until they sell out.*

One defining element of Hungarian cuisine is its pastry tradition, and here the pastry chef Renee Hudson creates an impeccable seasonal array. A recent selection included a delicate Gerbeaud cake (after that of Café Gerbeaud, in Budapest, layered with walnuts and apricot jam and topped with fruity chocolate and flaky salt), a warmed Ferdinand bun (beautifully swirled on top and redolent of cardamom), and a shortbread cookie with the satisfying crumb of a caraway sandie.

On Sundays and Sundays only, Agi's offers doughnuts—until they sell out. “In Hungarian, doughnuts are called *fánk*. We’ve made countless jokes about it. We’ve got the *fánk*,” Salamon said. “Fánkytown.” He described what makes them unique: “They have this cotton-candy-like texture. They’re super fluffy. When you pull it apart, it’s very wispy.” The doughnuts I had were speckled with lemon zest, filled with pear-vanilla-bean jam, dusted with a flurry of powdered sugar, and light as air. Perhaps you, too, should head down to Fánkytown, and get the *fánk*. (*Pastries \$3-\$10, dishes \$5-\$18.*) ♦

# The Boards

- Losing It All, on Broadway

By [Sheelah Kolhatkar](#)

Most attempts to translate the 2008 financial crisis to stage or screen, such as “The Big Short,” “Margin Call” and “The Lehman Trilogy,” have focussed on the shenanigans inside Manhattan skyscrapers, where men in suits concoct financial grenades with acronyms like C.D.O. (collateralized debt obligation) and M.B.S. (mortgage-backed security). “Skeleton Crew,” a play written by Dominique Morisseau that is scheduled to open on Broadway in January, takes a different view, showing what happened to a group of Black auto-plant workers after the grenades exploded.



*Joshua Boone* Illustration by João Fazenda

On a recent morning, the cast of “Skeleton Crew” took a field trip to the Samuel J. Friedman Theatre, on West Forty-seventh Street, to see the set. “It’s our first time. I’m nervous,” said Joshua Boone, who plays Dez, a Detroit assembly-line worker described in Morisseau’s script as a “young hustler, playful, street-savvy and flirtatious.”

The play follows Dez; two other workers, Faye (“Tough and a lifetime of dirt beneath her nails”) and Shanita (“Pretty but not ruled by it. . . . Also, pregnant”); and Reggie (“White collar man. Studious. Dedicated. Compassionate”) as rumors of a shutdown fly around their auto plant. The action all takes place in a break room.

Morrisseau, who won a MacArthur Fellowship in 2018, arrived with her infant son in a stroller. The play's director, Ruben Santiago-Hudson, rushed to greet her. "Hey! The little warrior is in the house!"

The actors, wearing masks and winter coats, walked the perimeter of the stage and peered around. Adesola Osakalumi, who choreographed the show and dances in it, strode back and forth through a hidden door, glided to the center of the stage, and curtsied. Metal lockers lined one wall.

"As we start tricking out the set, I want you guys to start thinking about what you would have hanging in your lockers," Santiago-Hudson told them. "What do you want to see every day? A blank wall? Or do you want to see pictures of family? Or do you want to see a car? Is there a team that you're rooting for? Is there a boxer that you like? I implore you all to have something personal."

Phylicia Rashad, who plays Faye, stood at her locker and cocked her head. Santiago-Hudson opened the metal door and furrowed his brow. "We got some big-ass coats," he said. "I don't know how you're gonna get a big coat in there."

"I don't, either," Rashad said.

Downstage, Boone was opening and closing his locker. Click! Slam! "My boot won't fit," he said, trying to wedge his sneaker onto the bottom shelf.

Later, the cast members gathered at the studio on West Forty-third Street where they'd been rehearsing. Brandon J. Dirden, who plays Reggie, a worker who's moved up to a management job, said that he'd once appeared in a play about Enron, the energy-trading company that collapsed in 2001, after an accounting scandal. "I remember, during previews, stepping outside and someone walked by and said, 'You couldn't pay me to watch a play about how we lost all our money,'" he said. "People don't want to see these man-made crises."

"Skeleton Crew" is one of three plays that Morrisseau has written about Detroit, where she grew up. In 2008, she recalled, she watched the city change as a wave of foreclosures swept across the country. "That's when I

said, ‘Something’s going on.’ That was the first time I ever heard about predatory lending.”

Chanté Adams, who plays Shanita, is from Detroit, too. “I was just starting high school,” she said. “I remember the sadness that washed over the city. Family gatherings stopped. All of a sudden, houses started to get boarded up. And people started squatting in those houses.”

Boone said he hoped that Broadway audiences (mostly wealthy, mostly white) would come away with a new empathy for the workers who make the things they use every day, who pick up trash and build cars. “I believe there’s a direct correlation between the increase in the amount of money we attain and the decrease in morality,” he said. Does making lots of money, he asked, “change something inside of you that separates you from the person next to you?”

He sat up in his chair. “I ain’t got time for no more surface,” he said. “Like, coming through this pandemic, it beat some people *up*.” *COVID* had devastated many and empowered others, he added, and the latter group had an obligation to help.

“Yeah, come get this surgery, come get this work, don’t put a Band-Aid on it,” he went on. “Don’t run from it. Don’t look for the fun thing to escape and lighten up. Go deeper, go darker into it. And come out with more light.” He exhaled. “That’s it, I’m done.” ♦

# The Current Cinema

- Cradles and Graves in Pedro Almodóvar's "Parallel Mothers"

By [Anthony Lane](#)

Is there a better time traveller than [Pedro Almodóvar](#)? Who offers a smoother ride? His new film, “Parallel Mothers,” starts with a photographer, Janis (Penélope Cruz), snapping pictures of a fellow named Arturo (Israel Elejalde). Afterward, over a bottle of wine, they talk. Jump ahead a little, and we hear him calling to arrange another meeting. Jump again, and we see the white curtains of her apartment, in Madrid, billowing like sails in the breeze: a rapturous image, which tells us, with mysterious clarity, that love is being made inside the room. One last jump takes us to Janis, in a hospital, preparing to have Arturo’s child. The movie is eight minutes old, and already months have passed, two lives have been turned upside down, and a third life is about to begin. The whole thing, lovely leaps and all, has been achieved without a hint of haste. We could be leafing idly through a book.

The title of the film becomes clear when Ana (Milena Smit), also heavily pregnant, enters the scene. She and Janis share a room at the hospital; as the movie unfolds, they will share a great deal more. Janis is nearing forty and was named for Janis Joplin. (Later, on the soundtrack, we hear “Summertime” sung by Joplin, for whom the living was never easy.) Ana is less than half Janis’s age. This being one of Almodóvar’s gynocentric sagas, our heroines bring forth daughters: Janis gives birth to Cecilia, and Ana to Anita. The babies, though safely delivered, are placed under observation before being returned to their mothers. It is at this point that the director’s regular fans, drilled in melodrama, will brace themselves for a twist.

As if guessing what happens next isn’t tricky enough, we also have to work out, as the plot expands, where its center of gravity lies. In the hospital, Ana is visited by her mother, the suave Teresa (Aitana Sánchez-Gijón), an actress by profession. Having been, as she admits, “the worst mother in the world,” she now proves to be equally unreliable as a grandmother; presented with a plum role, in a play by Lorca, she grabs it and goes on tour, just when her daughter needs her. As we watch Teresa in rehearsal, staring at the camera (“She really overacts,” Ana says), we wonder if the movie might be swaying toward her and away from the younger generations. Plot and subplot keep switching around. Given that Janis’s bright-red iPhone matches her fruit bowl *and* her baby carrier, is it any surprise that Almodóvar, a master colorist, should arrange for his herrings to be redder than anyone else’s?

For those of us who deify Penélope Cruz, the new film is a case of *déjà vu*. In Almodóvar's "Live Flesh" (1997), she played a young Madrileña who gave birth on a bus. (A friend had to cut the umbilical cord with her teeth.) But there was a clinging helplessness to that character, whereas Janis, in "Parallel Mothers," is—or, for a while, appears to be—in mature command of her fate. Deeming Arturo to be surplus to requirements, she raises Cecilia on her own. Circumstances, though, conspire against her, and she winds up employing Ana as a nanny. "I'll teach you how to run a house and cook," Janis says, kicking things off with a lesson in peeling potatoes. Here is Cruz at her least showy and yet her most adventurous, allowing a storm of confusion to sweep across her face as she sits at a café table, and guiding us through the stages of one woman's self-possession: having it, losing it almost completely, and then reclaiming it.

What's fascinating is that the rediscovery is achieved not so much by strength of will as by reaching back into the past. Not only Janis's own past, either, but that of her forebears and their native land. In an early conversation with Arturo, who is a forensic anthropologist, she asks about the possibility of excavating the grave of her great-grandfather, who was killed during the rule of General Franco. She knows more or less where the grave lies, and her elderly relatives may be useful in the quest; but Arturo (having all but vanished from the movie, only to slip back in again) is the one person who can collate the evidence and examine what she hopes, or fears, will be the location of the discarded dead. Why call it a resting place, when nobody was ever laid to rest?

In a book of interviews, published in 2006, Almodóvar said:

Twenty years ago, my revenge against Franco was to not even recognize his existence, his memory; to make my films as if he had never existed. Today I think it fitting that we don't forget that period, and remember that it wasn't so long ago.

That progression of personal feeling is, you might say, a mirror of a larger transformation in Spanish attitudes. In the wake of Franco's death, in 1975, came the *pacto del olvido*, or pact of oblivion—a determination, enshrined in the Amnesty Law of 1977, to brush away the vestiges of former crimes and hence to move onward with a guiltless transition to democracy. As any

shrink could tell you: Good luck with that. It's hard enough for a family to stash one skeleton in the cupboard, so what chance is there for an entire nation, with the cupboard bursting and the skeletons tens of thousands strong?

Pushback against the pact acquired legal force in 2007, with what was commonly known as the Law of Historical Memory. Among other things, it issued a formal condemnation of the Franco regime and—mindful of those who had been executed and interred in that ruinous period, often in mass graves—provided for the tracing and identifying of corpses. (The remains of Lorca, for example, have yet to be found.) Only thus could they be decently reburied. In “Parallel Mothers,” we learn that Arturo is employed by the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory—a real organization, whose job is to gather testimony about the missing and to assist in exhumation. Arturo complains that the government has stopped subsidizing such projects, but the movie, I’m glad to report, has been overtaken by events; under the administration of Pedro Sánchez, elected in 2018, funding has resumed.

Almodóvar was an executive producer on “The Silence of Others” (2018), a documentary about the missing victims of the Franco era, and, presumably, one of the roots of “Parallel Mothers.” In fiction, however, the larger and more distant the monstrosity, the tougher it is to dramatize, and Almodóvar’s solution, here, is to home in on the particular—on one man, and one dreadful death. Janis, returning to the town where she was born, learns that her great-grandfather was taken from his house and made to dig his own grave. The following night, he was shot and dumped in it, having spent a final day with his loved ones. Now, in the present, a patch of ground is dug up to reveal a bundle of bones. We get a closeup of a glass eye, dusted with dirt, which still fits the socket of a skull.

But what of other fits? How do far-off horrors lock into the troubles of two single mothers in modern-day Spain? One answer would be that “Parallel Mothers” is a parable of repression, in the individual as in the state. Janis wants to know the truth about her child, and, having acquired that truth, she hastens to tamp it down and to hide it away. Though quick to love, and incapable of cruelty, she is nonetheless drawing on deep wells of cultural

denial, forging her own private *pacto del olvido*, until conscience impels her to bring the facts to light.

One sign of a strong film is that it won't hold steady in your sights. Your mind is made up and then changed, and changed again. Initially, for instance, the construction of "Parallel Mothers" struck me as too pat for its own good, and some of the joins seemed rougher than you'd expect from Almodóvar. "It's time you knew what country you're living in," Janis says to Ana, launching into an impromptu history lesson in the kitchen. The scene grated on me, and only on a second viewing did I catch the irony: the older woman is in no position, morally, to lecture her junior. Ana, even as a parent, has a child's innocence, and she may not be the smartest of souls. Yet her awareness of right and wrong is instinctively keen, and, in Milena Smit's fine performance, you *see* what it means to be wronged. Her eyes brim with tears, and her features flush with pain.

"Parallel Mothers" is graced by slow fades into darkness—at one point, the camera dives into a cup of black coffee—and the score, by Alberto Iglesias, could be that of a sad whodunnit. The prevailing mood is both beautifully forgiving and ruthlessly forgetful, concluding in quiet magnificence: we see people from Janis's town, most of them female, processing with a steady purpose down a country road, on their way to inspect an open grave. Think of them as a squadron of Antigones. No disrespect to Arturo, but Almodóvar leaves us with an overwhelming sense that the pursuit of justice, by right, is women's work. That is why the movie ends with Cecilia, now a little girl, at a graveside. Welcomed to life as the story begins, she brings it to fruition by gazing down at the dead. ♦

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