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JUNE 14, 2021

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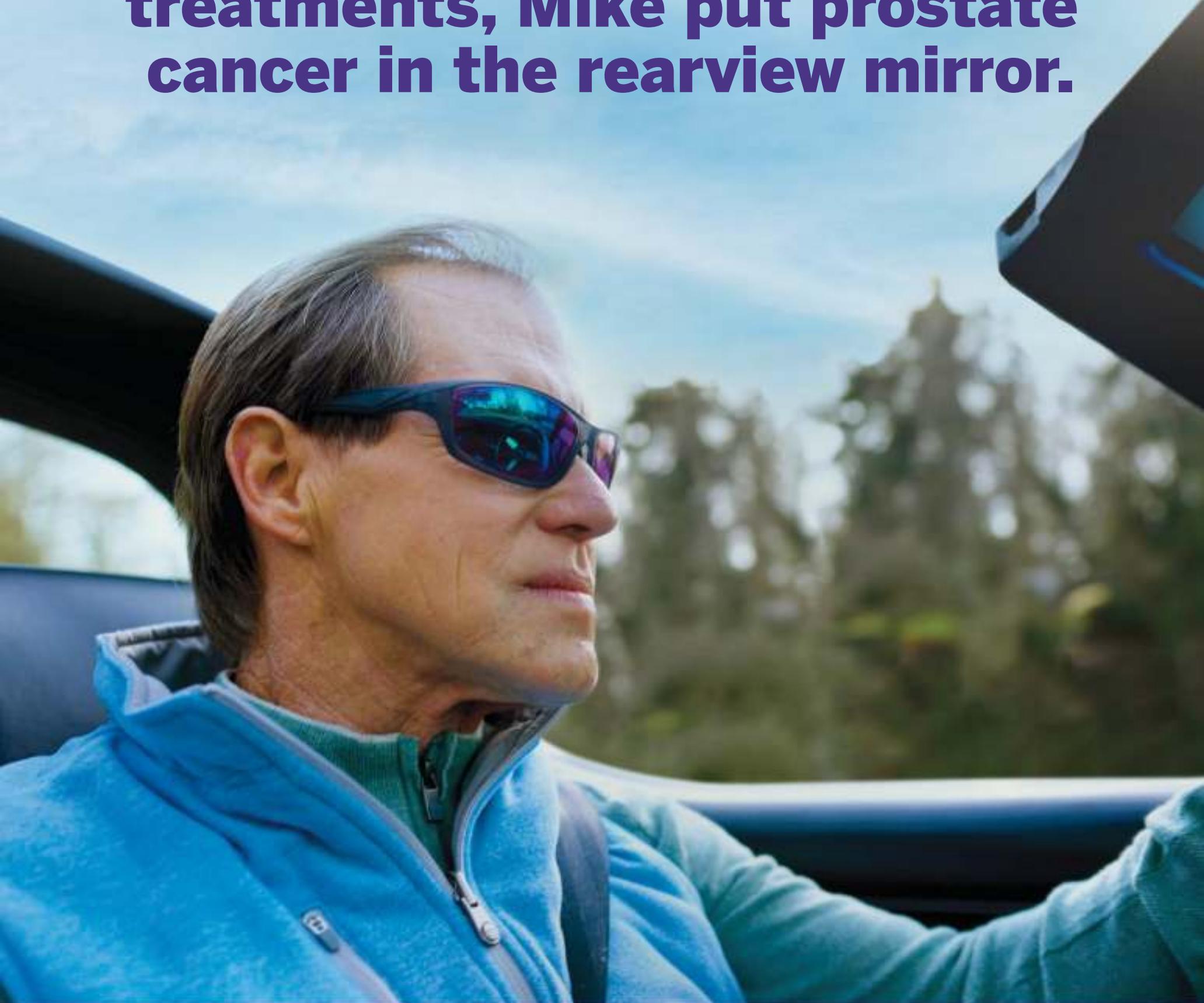
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DRAWINGS Amy Kurzweil, Benjamin Schwartz, Roz Chast, Liza Donnelly, Lars Kenseth, Maggie Larson, Hartley Lin, Brendan Loper, Carolita Johnson, Patrick McKelvie, Joe Dator, Dan Rosen SPOTS Sergiy Maidukov

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## CONTRIBUTORS

**Jon Lee Anderson** (*An Act of God*, p. 34), a staff writer, began contributing to *The New Yorker* in 1998. He has written several books, including *“Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life.”*

**Rebecca Mead** (*How Nasty Was Nero?*, p. 30) became a staff writer in 1997. *“My Life in Middlemarch”* is her most recent book.

**Adam Gopnik** (*Sitting with Strangers*, p. 46), a staff writer, is the author of *“A Thousand Small Sanities: The Moral Adventure of Liberalism.”*

**Jiordan Castle** (*Poem*, p. 38) will publish *“Disappearing Act,”* a memoir in verse, in 2023.

**Michael Specter** (*Books*, p. 62), a staff writer since 1998, is an adjunct professor of bioengineering at Stanford University. His audiobook *“Fauci”* came out last year.

**Sue Halpern** (*Comment*, p. 13), a staff writer, is a scholar-in-residence at Middlebury College.

**Amanda Petrusich** (*Another Country*, p. 22) is a staff writer and the author of *“Do Not Sell at Any Price: The Wild, Obsessive Hunt for the World’s Rarest 78 rpm Records.”*

**Bryan Washington** (*Fiction*, p. 54) has published the story collection *“Lot”* and the novel *“Memorial.”*

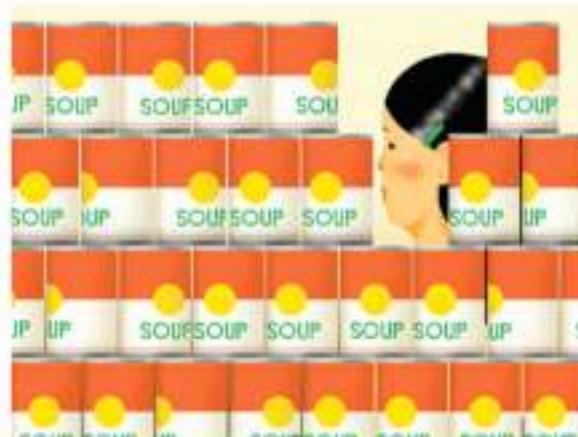
**Adrian Tomine** (*Cover*), a cartoonist and an illustrator, has been contributing to the magazine since 1999. His latest graphic novel is *“The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Cartoonist.”*

**Doreen St. Félix** (*On Television*, p. 76), a staff writer since 2017, is *The New Yorker’s* television critic.

**D. Nurkse** (*Poem*, p. 59) is the author of, most recently, *“Love in the Last Days.”* His volume of new and selected poems, *“A Country of Strangers,”* will be published in 2022.

**Patrick Berry** (*Puzzles & Games Dept.*), a puzzle constructor since 1993, lives in Athens, Georgia.

### THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



#### DEPT. OF RETURNS

Anna Russell on the anxiety of returning to normal life in the age of reopening.



#### PHOTO BOOTH

Elinor Carucci’s portraits of women who let their hair go gray during the pandemic.

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## THE MAIL

### FEELING FRIED

In Jill Lepore's piece about burnout, she notes that the condition "is generally said to date to 1973" ("It's Just Too Much," May 24th). One earlier reference is Graham Greene's 1960 novel, "A Burnt-Out Case." The main character, Querry, is a famous architect who has come to hate everything about his life. He escapes to a leper colony in the Congo, where a doctor declares him the mental analogue to a "burnt-out case"; the term is one used to describe members of the colony who have progressed through several stages of leprosy. These characters seem to understand the concept much as we do today.

*Jerry Monaco  
Astoria, N.Y.*

I was the chair of the American Psychiatric Association task force charged with revising the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* for the fourth edition (*DSM-IV*). From my perspective, today's conception of burnout has the same symptoms as yesterday's neurasthenia, a diagnosis that became wildly popular after it was introduced by the neurologist George Beard and the physician Silas Weir Mitchell, in 1869. Beard and Mitchell attributed the sudden widespread occurrence of neurasthenia to the struggle that workers had in adjusting to new technologies—an explanation that some might think rings equally true now. But one must consider the fact that the history of psychiatry is filled with fad diagnoses that lead to fake epidemics: while human nature is remarkably stable, the ways of labelling emotional distress are changeable and subject to fashion. We rejected the inclusion of burnout in *DSM-IV*, because it is inherent to the human condition, not a psychiatric disorder.

*Allen Frances  
Professor and Chair Emeritus  
Duke University  
Coronado, Calif.*

Lepore writes that the phrase "a worthless, burnt-out coward" in Robert Fagles's translation of the *Iliad* is "need-

less to say . . . not in Homer's original Greek." In fact, it is possible that Fagles came upon an elegant, literal rendering of the ancient text. The Greek adjective that Fagles translates in part as "burnt-out" can be Romanized as "*outidanos*." A poetic derivation for the word could draw it from "*danos*," which is derived in turn from the verb "*daio*." Richard Cunliffe's book "Lexicon of the Homeric Dialect" states that the primary definition of "*daio*" is "to set on fire, kindle." Homer is famously difficult to translate, yet he nevertheless captured human emotions that remain comprehensible across time and space.

*John M. Leovy  
Ellicott City, Md.*

Lepore's insights stirred memories of my mother, who was born in 1908 and worked every day from the time she was eleven years old. When she was middle-aged, her mantra became "I'm tired of the whole bit." But she would revive herself and keep working. Sadly, burnout remains widespread, especially among women trying to balance careers and family. If it hadn't been for my mother's example, I might never have got out of my high-stress, fast-paced former career. I returned to college for an advanced degree in what I loved, and forged a new path. I make less money now, but am also less stressed.

*Lynn Moss Holley  
Hollywood, Calif.*

Lepore makes a good case for burnout as a combat metaphor, but a synonym—feeling "fried"—better captures the demands of the digital age, particularly the supposed homology between our brains and our computers. Overloaded circuits are fried; we burn out when our own circuits become overloaded.

*Russell Frank  
State College, Penn.*

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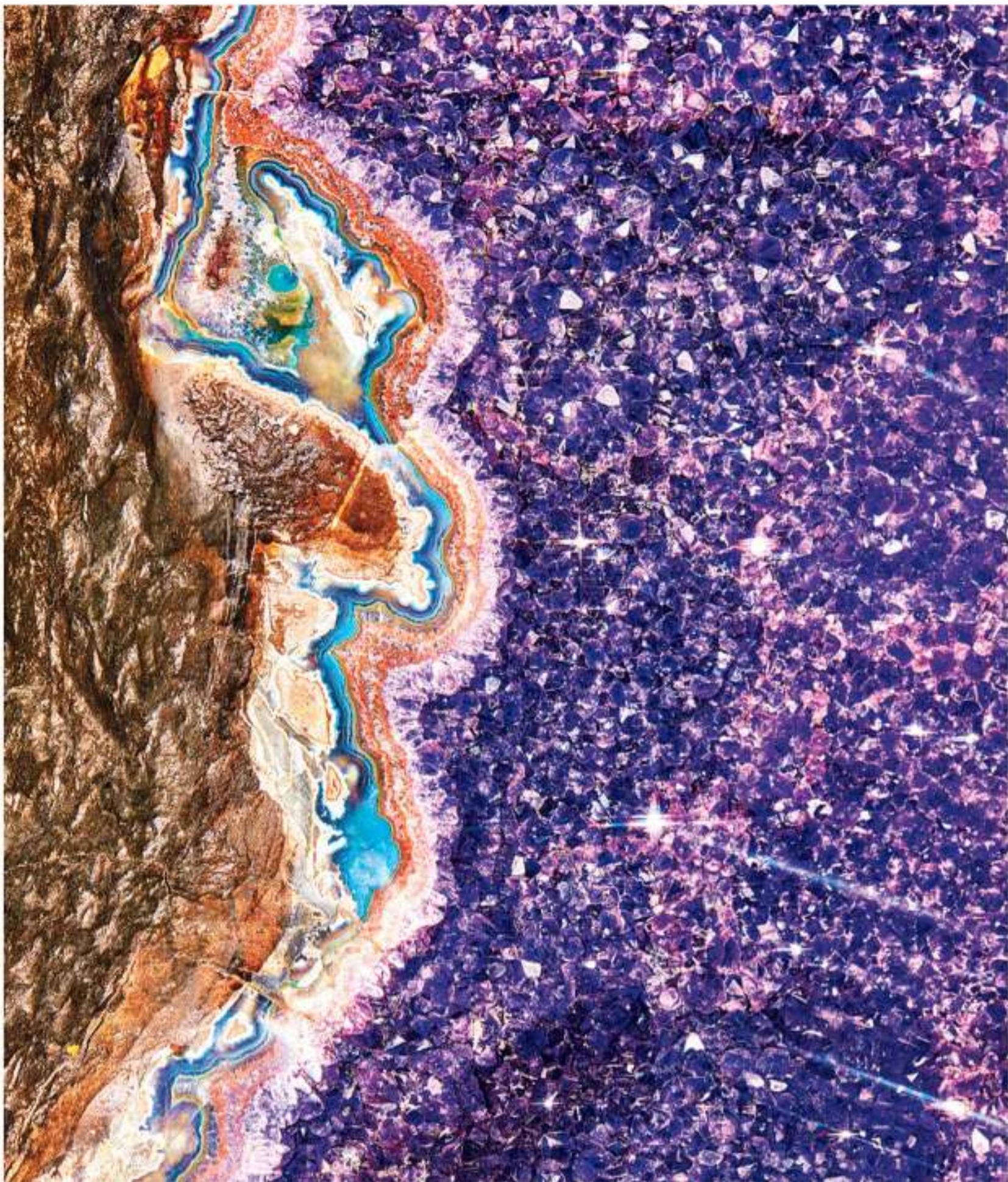
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*In an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, many New York City venues are closed. Here's a selection of culture to be found around town, as well as online and streaming; as ever, it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.*

JUNE 9 – 15, 2021



# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



Millions of years ago, in present-day Uruguay, gas bubbles became trapped in magma as it hardened to rock; over time, these cavities morphed into amethyst-quartz-lined geodes. A dazzling twelve-foot-tall example (pictured, in detail, above) greets visitors to the American Museum of Natural History's newly redesigned **Mignone Halls of Gems and Minerals**, a showcase of some five thousand specimens from ninety-five countries, which opens on June 12. Advance tickets to the museum, via [amnh.org](http://amnh.org), are required.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BALARAMA HELLER

## MUSIC

### Tim Berne: "Broken Shadows"

**JAZZ** A recording like "Broken Shadows" reminds us that the free-jazz revolution initiated by Ornette Coleman may have loosened the bonds of harmony and rhythm, but it didn't throw the baby out with the bathwater when it came to melody. This new album unites the saxophonists and longtime compatriots Tim Berne and Chris Speed with the bassist Reid Anderson and the drummer Dave King (the rhythm team of the Bad Plus) to reconsider compositions originally offered up by such first- and second-generation masters of open improvisation as Coleman, Charlie Haden, Julius Hemphill, and Dewey Redman. The structured beauty of the written themes coaxes powerful and concise improvisations from the horn men, and charging yet always supportive work from King and Anderson. Throwing light on tunes that rejoice in their tunefulness despite their revolutionary provenance, "Broken Shadows" is an act of high-order musical custodianship.—Steve Futterman

### Boston Lyric Opera

**OPERA** Eight different sets of composers and screenwriters take turns creating episodes for Boston Lyric Opera's "desert in," a streaming miniseries about a mysterious motel that enables guests to reconnect with lost loved ones. The first episode, composed by the project's co-creator Ellen Reid, introduces the Desert Inn's seemingly kind lesbian proprietors (played by Isabel Leonard and Talise Trevigne, both in lovely voice) and outlines the spiritual, exploitative, and vaguely menacing aspects of these much sought-after supernatural reunions. The second episode, composed by Nathalie Joachim, expands on the venal nature of the inn's services when its resident lounge singer (the superbly witty cabaret star Justin Vivian Bond) presides over a tawdry television commercial. It remains to be seen how the series' team of directors will piece together this promising mosaic of styles and intentions.—Oussama Zahr (Fridays through June 25; [operabox.tv](#))

### George Cables: "Too Close for Comfort"

**JAZZ** Whether leading his own solid recordings or working for more illustrious jazz performers, the seventy-six-year-old pianist George Cables has spent the past six decades perfecting a forthright, unpretentious style that seems to swing of its own accord. His new trio album, "Too Close for Comfort," holds few surprises, but you don't go to a trusted craftsman like him for novelty or innovation. Cables traffics in the pleasures of musical security: the knowledge that he'll pull off every gambit that he aims for. His second-sight connection with the bassist Essiet Essiet and the veteran drummer Victor Lewis allows Cables to exhibit his polished mainstream chops cocooned in an assured unity of purpose. The standards gleam; the dexterous originals invite repeated listenings. Experience—the gift that keeps on giving—wins out again.—S.F.

### Can: "Live in Stuttgart 1975"

**EXPERIMENTAL** Unlike most rock bands of the sixties and seventies, the German collective Can

dedicated itself to extended improvisation—in concert, its players would occasionally quote their recordings, but only after they'd headed for the hinterlands. The all-instrumental "Live in Stuttgart 1975," Can's second live album, demonstrates both the strengths and the drawbacks of that approach. The first selection chases its own tail for twenty minutes, but later the band's drummer, Jaki Liebezeit, and bassist, Holger Czukay, deftly charge their simple grooves with hairpin tempo shifts, while the keyboardist, Irwin Schmidt, and guitarist, Michael Karoli, conjure desert landscapes and deep space, often at the same time.—Michaelangelo Matos

in Central Park. An appealing five-concert season begins on Tuesday, when the charismatic violinist Gil Shaham joins the Brooklyn orchestra the Knights in Beethoven's Violin Concerto, presented alongside works by George Walker and Aoife O'Donovan. Pre-registration, through the Naumburg's Web site, is required. The Knights open another summer series on June 19, bringing a suitably breezy bill of fare to Governors Island for the tenth Rite of Summer Music Festival.—Steve Smith (June 15 at 7:30; [naumburgconcerts.org](#).)

## ART

### Deborah Remington

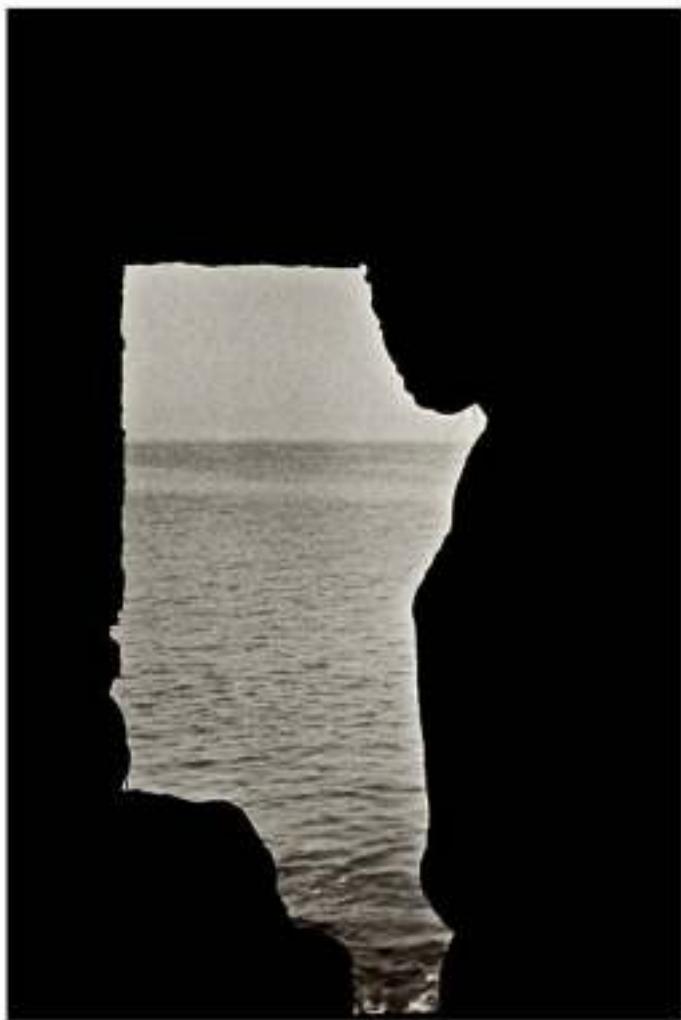
In the early nineteen-sixties, this American painter did something almost unheard of: she applied realist principles (illusionistic space, glowing light, shadows) to her adamantly abstract work. She also honed a unique palette, uniting grisaille with smoky reds, greens, blues, and the very occasional orange. The pictures that Remington made for the next half century—she died of cancer in 2010—are exquisitely rendered, indelibly weird, and, in their overlapping rapport with virtual and physical worlds, somehow cybernetic. She wasn't unknown in her lifetime: a student of Clyfford Still in San Francisco, she hung out with the Beats and co-founded the space where Allen Ginsberg first performed "Howl." In the sixties and seventies, after a move to New York, she showed with the prestigious Bykert gallery. Remington's uncompromising pictures are now attracting a flurry of renewed interest, including two current shows in Manhattan. (It's always bittersweet when an artist's star rises posthumously and it's worth noting how often it happens to women.) A stellar selection of early drawings is on view

## FOLK



The Toronto-based artist Mustafa Ahmed has been a promising observational poet since he was a boy. When he was twelve, the *Toronto Star* noted the power of his poems about the poverty in his neighborhood, which brought white adults to tears. As he became a musician, his writing continued to dovetail with his activism, and, in 2016, he was appointed to a youth advisory council by Canada's Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau. Ahmed's début, "**When Smoke Rises**," follows that same progression; the project is an homage to fallen friends and a plea to living ones. Full of "Pink Moon"-esque folk guitar and hushed piano chords, the record marries his heartbreak poetry with gorgeous, numbed melodies that seem to struggle for air. He is far from hopeless, but he's aware of the limitations of his medium. As he sings on "Ali," "There were no words to stop the bullets."—Sheldon Pearce

## AT THE GALLERIES



A striking installation of vintage, mostly black-and-white photographs by **Ming Smith** inaugurates the Nicola Vassell gallery, in Chelsea, revealing the artist's seductive ability to incorporate painterly moments of near-abstraction into images as varied as celebrity portraits, street scenes, and landscapes. After graduating from Howard University, in 1973, Smith became the first female member of the Kamoinge Workshop, a New York collective of Black photographers, formed in 1963, that was recently the subject of a revelatory exhibition at the Whitney. Her work, though distinctive, reflects the group's concern with Black representation—of both people and movements—and with formal invention in an era of cultural upheaval. A sublime image of Grace Jones at Studio 54, from the seventies, hinges not on the contrast of light and dark but, rather, on the textural differences among an array of blacks: the inky void at the composition's center versus the glittering, glistening, and velvety shapes around it. In the starkly beautiful "Prelude to Middle Passage (Île de Gorée, Senegal)," from 1972 (seen above), figures in deep shadow frame a bright view of the ocean. "Evidence," as the show is titled, is a very auspicious launch for this new gallery.—*Johanna Fateman*

uptown, at the Craig F. Starr gallery (through July 30), and a condensed but nonetheless sweeping career survey, focussed on paintings, is installed at the Bortolami gallery, in Tribeca, through June 12.—*Andrea K. Scott* ([bortolamigallery.com](http://bortolamigallery.com); [craigstarr.com](http://craigstarr.com))

## Wendy White

In "Mark and Phil," this New York artist's first exhibition at the Denny Dimin gallery, in Tribeca, the digital and the analog overlap in a hallucinatory, cartoony world. Sculptures reminiscent of gloomy emojis (black rainbows, clouds, teardrops) are paired with trompe-l'oeil paintings, at once grand and scrappy, depicting

plywood carved with graffiti. The show's centerpiece is a large, low-hanging mobile of black enamel rods and chains—you might call its style "playground goth"—whose dangling shapes include an L.E.D. light in the jagged shape of a pixelated heart, a bright spot that recalls an Instagram sticker. The social-media-inflected mood of the sculptures is both matched and expanded on in White's paintings, whose faux-wood surfaces inevitably evoke boarded-up windows. Bubble letters spell out expressions of love ("Shaz + Joanne") as well as ennui ("IM BORED"), merging the graphic aesthetic of Tik-Tok with the tradition of handmade marks, from school-desk doodles to the painted caves of Lascaux.—*Johanna Fateman* ([dennydiningallery.com](http://dennydiningallery.com))

## DANCE

### Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre

Jamar Roberts, the Ailey company's resident choreographer, is on a roll with beautiful, subtle, musically sophisticated works that speak to the moment. On June 10 (and on demand through Sept. 8), as part of a virtual program presented by Cal Performances, at U.C. Berkeley, Roberts offers a première called "Holding Space," about a search for healing. The program also includes excerpts of "Revelations Reimagined"—a choppy 2020 film juxtaposing historical footage of the company's signature work with a performance shot at Wave Hill, in the Bronx—and a newly filmed section of "Cry," Ailey's 1971 female solo dedicated to his mother.—*Brian Seibert* ([calperformances.org](http://calperformances.org))

### Ballez

Led by Katy Pyle, this company is dedicated to making a place in ballet for the queer dancers who have often been excluded—and for their stories and perspectives, too—with queer versions of staples like "Firebird" and "Sleeping Beauty." Now it takes on "Giselle." In "Giselle of Loneliness" (streamed live from the Joyce Theatre on June 10, and available on demand through June 23), seven dancers audition for the title role of the nineteenth-century ballet, testing how much of their twenty-first-century identities they are willing to sacrifice. The audience on June 10 gets to vote on who should win the role.—B.S. ([joyce.org](http://joyce.org))

### four/four presents

Last year, this presenter emerged to offer digital works while theatres were closed. It created "Tethered," a series of films that smartly played matchmaker for collaborations between musicians and choreographers. Now four/four is breaking into the live, outdoor realm with a new series, "Open Air." It kicks off on June 9, at the Jackie Robinson Park bandshell, in Harlem, with performances by the musician Madison McFerrin and the blooming dancer-choreographers Samantha Figgins and Jessica Amber Pinkett, of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre.—B.S. ([four-fourpresents.com](http://four-fourpresents.com))

### Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival

Live dance returns to the Berkshires festival, if only outdoors, on June 30. But first, on June 12, comes "Global Pillow," a virtual gala featuring a stellar lineup of companies from around the world: Companhia Urbana de Dança (Brazil), Black Grace (New Zealand), Nrityagram Dance Ensemble (India), plus Nederlands Dans Theatre, the Paris Opera Ballet, and more. The free program (donations are requested), featuring a première by the as yet unannounced recipient of this year's Jacob's Pillow Dance Award, is available on demand until June 19.—B.S. ([jacobs-pillow.org](http://jacobs-pillow.org))

### Mark Morris Dance Group

In 2001, Mark Morris opened his Dance Center in Brooklyn, where it has become a

vibrant hub of activity, with dance classes and workshops for people of all ages and abilities. On the weekend of June 11–13, both Morris's fabulous dance company and the Dance Center will offer outdoor performances and classes on the plaza across the street from the Center (300 Ashland Place). On Friday and Saturday, at 6 p.m., the company presents a program of repertory works, including "Fugue," "Greek to Me," and "Offertorium." Children and teens from the Center's student company perform on Saturday; online registration is recommended for jazz, modern, and ballet classes on Saturday and Sunday.—*Marina Harss (mmdg.org/ontheplaza)*

## "Trisha Brown: In Plain Site"

Trisha Brown's laid-back, open-structured works are particularly suited to outdoor settings; in fact, many of her first dances were designed to be performed outside, often in downtown New York. After a year of feeling trapped inside, it's a wonderful time to discover places around the city one hasn't visited before—which makes these performances by the Trisha Brown Dance Company, at the Bronx's beautiful Wave Hill gardens, along the Hudson, particularly appealing. The program of excerpts from Brown's long career includes "Leaning Duets" (in which the dancers negotiate their partner's weight in order to maintain balance as they lean away from each other) and "Accumulation" (in which a dancer executes an ever-increasing series of gestures in sequence).—M.H. (June 8–9 at 6:30; [wavehill.org](http://wavehill.org))

## TELEVISION

### Halston

Ryan Murphy's five-part series on Netflix charts the fashion designer Halston's dizzying rise—from a sad farm boy growing up gay in the Midwest to an internationally beloved couturier—and his eventual fall. It's the late seventies, and Roy Halston Frowick (Ewan McGregor) is the most famous fashion designer in the United States, creating luxurious, clean-lined dresses and hawking everything from perfume to luggage to carpeting. He arrives at Studio 54 with an entourage, including Liza Minnelli (Krysta Rodriguez); he hosts an orgy in his Upper East Side town house; he impulse-buys a beachside compound in Montauk. All of this is scored not just to a driving disco beat but to the repetitive whoosh of cocaine vanishing up Halston's nostrils. The series is propulsive and vivid and over the top, with quick shifts between melodrama and farce, and McGregor tears into the character's self-absorbed cattiness with relish. Focussing on the shape and the look of things, rather than mining their depth, makes a lot of sense for a bio-pic about a man who seems to have lived for the superficial. But Murphy keeps such a tight rein on the designer's world that Halston is unable to breathe as a subject.—*Naomi Fry (Reviewed in our issue of 5/31/21.)*

### Tuca & Bertie

In the summer of 2019, a new animated show, full of compassion and sly wit, débuted on

Netflix to great acclaim: "Tuca & Bertie," the tale of anthropomorphic, B.F.F. birds (Tuca, voiced by Tiffany Haddish, is a toco toucan; Bertie, voiced by Ali Wong, is a song thrush) who support each other through the trials of being females in their thirties. The show's creator, the animator Lisa Hanawalt, already had a cult following, owing to her groundbreaking work on "BoJack Horseman," and her solo voyage was met with instant adoration. Shockingly, Netflix cancelled the show less than three months after its release. (Hanawalt, in a recent interview, said that she "definitely felt blindsided.") Fans revolted, campaigns ensued, and, finally, the cable network Adult Swim stepped in. The second season is here at last, and the show has only improved. The jokes are wackier, the visual puns are sillier, and, most important, the two friends have strengthened their unbreakable bond, beaks and all.—*Rachel Syme*

## MOVIES

### Beach Rats

Eliza Hittman's second feature, from 2017, like her débüt, "It Felt Like Love," is set in southern Brooklyn, centered on an adolescent's sexual conflicts, and directed with a vigorous and tremulous intimacy. This time, the landscape is broader, the action rowdier. Frankie (Harris Dickinson), a brash and smart-mouthed Sheep-head Bay teen-ager, is dissipating the summer with drugs, handball, and vaping, mostly in the company of three cronies he won't deign to call friends. He gets picked up at Coney Island by a girl named Simone (Madeline Weinstein), but he pursues the relationship with a callous half-heartedness. Frankie is secretly gay; he connects with men online, sneaks off to desolate places for furtive encounters, and considers drastic and ugly action to keep his secret. Hittman, working

## ON TELEVISION



The British comedy "**Timewasters**," which aired for two seasons, 2017–19, might have remained a hidden gem were it not getting a splashy American remake. Lauren Ashley Smith (the head writer of "A Black Lady Sketch Show") has announced that she is adapting the U.K. import, which follows a shambling South London jazz band that stumbles upon a time machine. In the first season of the original series, created by and starring Daniel Lawrence Taylor, four friends (Taylor, Samson Kayo, Kadiff Kirwan, and Adelayo Adedayo) are transported back to nineteen-twenties London, where they manage to blend in as purveyors of hot jazz, but quickly find the past to be a treacherous place. In Season 2, they travel to the nineteen-fifties, where they are keen to meet their musical idols but yet again clash with the period. "Why are we never taken to a decade when Black people are liked?" Taylor's character asks; Adedayo's character quips back, "What decade would that be?" Smith's Stateside version will reportedly take place in New York, where a group of friends will step back into the Harlem Renaissance and canoodle with the uptown literati. Meanwhile, the British episodes are streaming in the U.S., starting on June 11, via IMDb TV.—*Rachel Syme*

with the cinematographer Hélène Louvart, conjures a palpable sense of heat, both physical and emotional, pressing close to faces and bodies in brazen sunlight, humid shadows, and neon haze. Her vision of a homogeneous enclave's crushing insularity is as richly textured as her tactile sense of the allure and the danger of youthful energy.—Richard Brody (*Streaming on Amazon, YouTube, and other services.*)

## The Big Lebowski

In 1998, after the Gulf War filled the airwaves with such Orwellian obscenities as "collateral damage," the Coen brothers, Joel and Ethan, tuned into the jingoistic mood and rummaged through political and personal history for the underpinnings of this Los Angeles caper, sending up, with rueful astonishment, the American way of war. The story opens with the Dude (Jeff Bridges), an iconic laid-back, philosophical slacker-stoner, receiving an enhanced interrogation by a pair of thugs. Goaded to seek justice by Walter Sobchak (John Goodman)—his overwrought, over-armed bowling buddy, a survivor

of martial and marital conflict and the most unorthodox of Orthodox Jews—he gets drawn into an internecine struggle that's none of his business. The physical and mental wounds that the Coens' characters bear from the Korean and Vietnam Wars are in the foreground, and the Dude himself—in an exalted scene featuring Julianne Moore—tells a surprising tale of sixties radicalism gone to seed. Yet, in the Dude's dubious battle, as in the Coens' wildly visionary playfulness, that era's spirit nonetheless sprouts through the cracks.—R.B. (*Streaming on Netflix.*)

## The French

Filming the 1981 French Open, in Paris, behind the scenes and at center court, William Klein offers a documentary portrait of some of the period's greatest tennis players and of the administrative muscle on which the Grand Slam tournament runs. The film moves chronologically, following both the women's and (at greater length) the men's singles brackets from the earliest rounds to the finals, and observing the competition with a blend of aesthetic

delight and analytical curiosity. Three celebrated personalities grab the spotlight: John McEnroe, whose temperamental displays here reveal an element of principle; Ilie Nastase, with his ebullient and self-deprecating humor; and Björn Borg, whose cool reserve masks a ferociously competitive will. There's also a fascinating sketch of the former champion Virginia Ruzici, as she compares her own game to that of more dominant players. The weather is a main character, too—organizers keep matches going in the rain, prioritizing business over players' well-being. Though the film doesn't quite capture the extremes of athletic action, psychology, or sociology, it points at them alluringly. Released in 1982.—R.B. (*Streaming at Metrograph.*)

## Mister Foe

David Mackenzie's 2008 film is never less than twisted and involved. Set largely in Edinburgh, it stars Jamie Bell as a troubled teenager named Hallam Foe; his troubles began when his mother committed suicide, and the movie shows him not so much coming to terms with her death as immersing himself in her memory and, disastrously, finding some way to revive her. That means wearing her clothes and makeup and spying on a colleague from work (Sophia Myles) who resembles her—all of which feels disarmingly credible, although viewers may lose patience as the look-alike takes Hallam into her bed. The incestuous air of the tale spreads beyond the sexual, as when we see the kid burgling his own home or driving a wedge between his father, Julius (Ciarán Hinds), and Verity (Claire Forlani), the woman who is stealing Julius's heart. The film is shifty and restless to the eye, almost adolescently keen to strip its characters bare, and we feel Hallam's exasperation as Bell tries to stomp the rage out of his system.—Anthony Lane (*Reviewed in our issue of 9/8/08.*) (*Streaming on Amazon, Kanopy, and other services.*)

## What Now? Remind Me

In this intimate and finely wrought self-portrait, from 2013, the Portuguese filmmaker Joaquim Pinto depicts his struggles with H.I.V. with incisive visual imagination and takes his situation as a springboard for free flights of memory. Pinto and his husband, Nuno Leonel, do the filming as part of their daily lives, and the pressure of circumstances lends their images a melancholy avidity. His demanding treatments have held the disease's worst ravages at bay, but bring complications ranging from fatigue to hallucinations. The camera desperately embraces faces, landscapes, flowers, and even more ordinary things; a dirty windshield seems as much a wonder as the lush fields that it frames. The mind itself is Pinto's subject; double exposures and other effects suggest fantasy and derangement, and the soundtrack's classical music seems to surge forth spontaneously from the depths of his unconscious. Revelling in the art of movies, evoking the inspiration of Lana Turner and "Imitation of Life," recalling the Portuguese revolution of 1974 and the cinematic blossoming that followed, Pinto turns the pleasures of looking, thinking, remembering—and filming—into reasons for living. In Portuguese.—R.B. (*Streaming on Vudu, Kanopy, and other services.*)

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## WHAT TO STREAM



**Bill Gunn**, one of the most wide-ranging talents in the movie business, was kept on its margins throughout his career; now the vast spectrum of his largely overlooked achievements is on display in a multimedia series at Artists Space, running through Aug. 15. Gunn, who died in 1989, acted, wrote plays, screenplays, and novels, and directed three features. The first, "Stop!," from 1970, about a couple becoming swingers, is the second studio film ever made by a Black filmmaker and has never been released. "Ganja & Hess," from 1973, an erotic vampire tale that joins the tensions of the Black bourgeoisie with the mythopoetic power of classical African art, is an enduring masterwork (though it was recut and largely neglected at the time of its release); "Personal Problems," from 1980, a teeming story of Black families and working lives in New York, was written by Ishmael Reed. Artists Space offers an in-person exhibition of archival materials along with a virtual performance of Gunn's play "Black Picture Show," a live discussion with Reed, and online screenings of Gunn's two released films and Kathleen Collins's recently rediscovered "Losing Ground" (pictured above), in which Gunn co-stars.—Richard Brody



## TABLES FOR TWO

**Dr. Clark**  
104 Bayard St.

If there are any number of obvious sites that could be named “most iconically New York City,” I’d like to make an atypical nomination: the intersection of Bayard and Baxter Streets, in Chinatown. As I approached it one recent evening, strolling by Forlini’s, the red-sauce joint and attorney haunt (as seen on “Law & Order”); the Vietnamese restaurant Nha Trang One; and ABC Bail Bonds (“Large or small we write them all”), police officers were escorting a man in handcuffs into the building that houses the New York County Criminal Court as well as Manhattan’s Central Booking.

To the south, in Columbus Park, a sprawling group huddled around several lively games of cards and checkers, masks pulled down to smoke and to spit out seeds from orange segments. Beyond them, pickup basketball and soccer players flitted across Astroturf and pavement. It’s the ultimate collision of civic and civilian life, cops, lawyers, and criminal suspects alongside Chinese dentists and grocers, dumpling-seeking tour-

ists, and artists and other creative types drawn by cheap-for-downtown rent.

I was en route to dinner at Dr. Clark, a Japanese restaurant whose address, just past the intersection’s northeast corner, has always especially attracted the last set; it was previously home to Winnie’s, a beloved karaoke dive bar, and then to Lalito, a highly underrated canteen opened by the brilliant young chef Gerardo Gonzalez. Just before Dr. Clark’s début, in March of last year, the interior (which was recently reopened to diners) got a chic makeover, featuring coffee-stained lauan-wood wainscoting, pegboard walls, and aluminum sconces. The backlit bar was inspired by the one in Stanley Kubrick’s “The Shining”; the staff uniforms, featuring boxy, hand-embroidered jackets, were designed by the local darling Emily Adams Bode. The owners—who also run Nowadays, in Ridgewood, and the Izakaya, in the East Village—have revived both Winnie’s 4 A.M. liquor license and its karaoke tradition.

Even outside, there’s no shortage of atmosphere. The other night, a pair of hiply dressed smokers discussed recent hauls from a favorite vintage store. A man bounding toward the front door declared, passionately, “There has to be a middle road. You can’t kill people! You can never kill people.” I slid into one of the booths built onto the street, which feature low tables that are set up as *kotatsu* in winter, when each is dressed in a heavy cloth that doubles as a blanket, cocooning guests’ legs and

trapping the heat coming from a radiator under the table.

Dr. Clark’s menu is inspired by Hokkaido, the northernmost of Japan’s main islands, known for hot springs and skiing—Dr. William Clark, an American professor of chemistry, was hired by the Japanese government to establish an agricultural college there in 1876—and it’s particularly suited to cold weather. One of the banner dishes is a Hokkaido specialty known as *jīngisukan* (“Genghis Khan”), for which thinly sliced, marinated lamb is cooked, with onions, bean sprouts, and chives, on very hot tabletop grills said to resemble the Mongolian warlord’s helmet.

But there’s plenty that’s perfect for warmer temperatures: frosty mugs of crisp Sapporo; tart shochu sours, featuring the rice-based liquor mixed with lemon juice or ume. The “addictive cabbage” is exactly as advertised—cool and crunchy, slicked with mayo and dusted in shichimi togarashi—and the same simple formula works beautifully on cold noodles in a ramen salad. Summery seafood offerings include sashimi, charred fillets of horse mackerel wrapped around asparagus, and an exceptionally buttery scallop risotto, served appealingly on the pearly half shell. Tall rings of squid, battered and fried to a honeyed hue, pair nicely with French fries bearing the same color and crunch plus a gloss of anchovy cream sauce: fish and chips by way of Hokkaido by way of Baxter and Bayard, iconically New York. (*Dishes \$5-\$48.*)

—Hannah Goldfield

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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT ANTI-DEMOCRATIC

A few hours after Michael Flynn, the retired three-star general and former national-security adviser and convicted felon, told a group of QAnon conspiracists who met in Dallas over Memorial Day weekend that the Biden Administration should be overthrown by force, Democratic legislators in the Texas statehouse, two hundred miles away in Austin, did something remarkable: they stopped their Republican colleagues from passing one of the most restrictive voting bills in the country. Flynn's pronouncement and the Republicans' efforts rely on repeating the same untruth: that the Presidency was stolen from Donald Trump by a cabal of Democrats, election officials, and poll workers who perpetrated election fraud. No matter that this claim has been litigated, relitigated, and debunked. Based on data collected by the conservative Heritage Foundation, the incidence of voter fraud in the two decades before last year's election was about 0.00006 per cent of total ballots cast. It was negligible in 2020, too, as Trump's Attorney General, William Barr, acknowledged at the time.

Senate Bill 7 was stymied at the last minute, when Democrats in the Texas House walked out, depriving Republicans of a quorum. The legislation is full of what are becoming standard suppression tactics—most of which burden people of color, who in 2020 overwhelmingly voted Democratic—and includes measures that would, for example, allow a judge to overturn an election result sim-

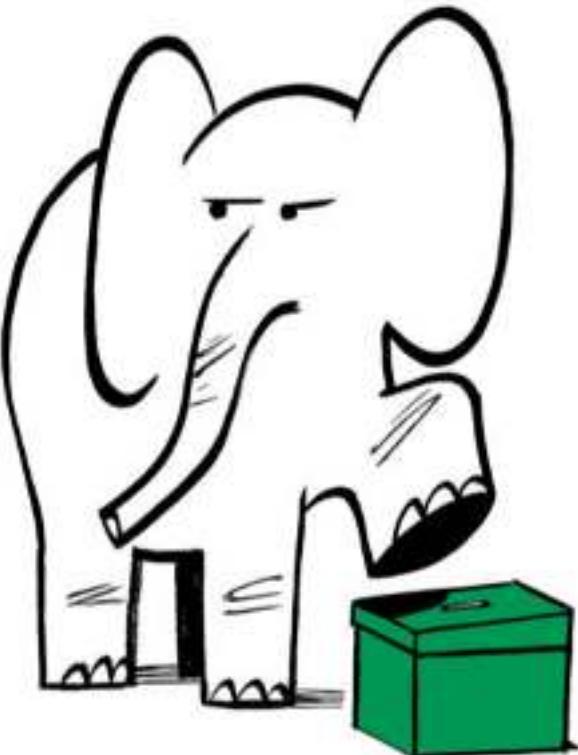
ply if a challenger claimed, without any proof, that fraudulent votes changed the outcome. Sarah Labowitz, of the A.C.L.U. of Texas, called the bill "ruthless." Texas was already the most difficult state in which to cast a ballot, according to a recent study by Northern Illinois University. In 2020, voter turnout there was among the lowest in the nation. Even so, with nonwhites making up more than sixty per cent of the population under twenty, Texas is on its way to becoming a swing state. S.B. 7 is intended to insure that it doesn't. Governor Greg Abbott has promised to call a special session of the legislature to reintroduce it.

Since January, Republican lawmakers in forty-eight states have introduced nearly four hundred restrictive voting bills. What distinguishes these efforts is that they target not only voters but also poll workers and election officials. The

Texas bill makes it a criminal offense for an election official to obstruct the view of poll watchers, who are typically partisan volunteers, and grants those observers the right to record videos of voters at polling places. In Iowa, officials could be fined ten thousand dollars for "technical infractions," such as failing to sufficiently purge voters from the rolls. In Florida, workers who leave drop boxes unattended, however briefly, can be fined twenty-five thousand dollars. In Georgia, poll watchers can challenge the eligibility of an unlimited number of voters.

Even before the pandemic, sixty-five per cent of jurisdictions in the country were having trouble attracting poll workers. The threat of sizable fines and criminal prosecution will only make that task harder, and that's clearly the point. Polls can't operate without poll workers. Voters can't vote if there are no polling places, or if they can't stand in hours-long lines at the sites that are open—not to mention if other means of casting a ballot, such as by mail, have been outlawed.

What began as thinly veiled attempts to keep Democrats from voting has become a movement to undermine confidence in our democracy itself. How else to understand the "recount" under way in Maricopa County, Arizona (which gave Joe Biden the state), six months after the election was certified? Despite an audit in February that showed no malfeasance, Republicans in the Arizona Senate took possession of the county's more than two million ballots and turned them over to a private Florida-based company, Cyber Ninjas, which has no election-audit experience. The firm's



C.E.O. had reportedly tweeted that he was “tired of hearing people say there was no fraud.” It’s unclear who is paying for the recount, which was supposed to have concluded last month. According to the *Arizona Republic*, recruiters for the project were “reaching out to traditionally conservative groups.” At least one of the recounters was at the January 6th Stop the Steal rally outside the U.S. Capitol. Some have been examining ballots for bamboo fibres, which would purportedly prove that counterfeit ballots for Biden were sent from South Korea. The official chain of custody has been broken for the voting machines, too, which could enable actual fraud, and may force the county to replace them.

It’s easy to joke about conspiracy hunters searching for bits of bamboo. But the fact is that more than half of Republicans still believe that Trump won, and a quarter of all Americans think that the

election was rigged. Republicans in at least four other states—New Hampshire, Michigan, Georgia, and Pennsylvania—are now considering recounts. Soon, Trump will begin to hold rallies again and will use them to amplify his Big Lie lie; he has reportedly suggested that he could be back in the White House in August, after the recounts are completed. The real, and imminent, danger is that all the noise will make it easier for a cohort of Americans to welcome the dissolution of the political system, which appears to be the ultimate goal of the current Republican efforts.

Last Tuesday, in a speech commemorating the hundredth anniversary of the Tulsa massacre, Biden vowed to “fight like heck” to preserve voting rights, and he deputized Vice-President Kamala Harris to lead the charge. Chuck Schumer, the Senate Majority Leader, said that he would bring the For the People Act to a vote this month. Among other provi-

sions, the act mandates automatic voter registration, prohibits voter intimidation, and reduces the influence of dark money in elections. If it became law, and survived the inevitable legal challenges, it could stop much of the Republican pillage, and perhaps prove the most pivotal piece of legislation in a generation.

Nearly seventy per cent of Americans favor measures in the bill, but it’s unlikely to gain the support of Senator Joe Manchin, the conservative West Virginia Democrat, let alone of enough Republicans to clear the sixty-vote hurdle imposed by the filibuster. So far, to Biden’s evident annoyance, Manchin and another Democratic senator, Kyrsten Sinema, of Arizona, oppose eliminating the filibuster. It’s up to Democratic leaders to impress upon their colleagues that their legacies, and that of their party, are now entwined with the survival of American democracy.

—Sue Halpern

## GEORGIA POSTCARD TAKING ON GREENE



Democrats hoping to represent Georgia’s Fourteenth Congressional District face long odds, which they’ve occasionally lengthened. A former nudist-camp director with a suspended medical license got a D.U.I. during his 2018 campaign and told the arresting officer, “I hate this county.” He lost by fifty-three points. An I.T. specialist dropped out weeks before Election Day last fall. His wife had served him divorce papers. He lost to Marjorie Taylor Greene by forty-nine points.

“We don’t even have a Party chair in Haralson County,” Marcus Flowers said the other day from his house, an hour west of Atlanta. A bearded Black man in his mid-forties, with a scar over one eye, Flowers is an Army veteran and a former military contractor. “A compliance guy,” he said. “Not Blackwater.” He was in his unfinished “basement-gym-office-storage-future-in-law suite,” from which he has raised more than a million dollars in his quest to unseat Greene.

CNN was muted on a big screen. The drywall was covered with Post-it notes bearing the names of prominent Georgia Democrats, as well as words such as “Taxes” and “Israel.” Flowers smoked Marlboros while noting all the ways that Greene has “led good people astray”—from “Jewish space lasers” to election-fraud lies. He showed off his tattoos. “I got this one at Mardi Gras,” he said of a Native American design on his biceps. He wore a big belt buckle, and a black cowboy hat hung on a peg. “My style is a little more West Texas than West Georgia,” he said.

Flowers calls himself moderate. “I might have voted for Bush the first time,” he said. “But I can’t remember.” He met John McCain in 2006 and told him that he’d vote for him if he ever could. “That was before I knew who Obama was,” he added. Flowers’s campaign manager, Chase Goodwin—a veteran of the ill-fated Matt Lieberman Senate campaign—sat staring at his phone. He’d just seen a new tweet from Greene. This one was about “left-wing extremism infiltrating our military,” he reported.

“Laughable,” Flowers replied. “She’s with the January 6th guys.”

They got in Flowers’s truck and drove north to Dalton. It was a “recon mission,” Flowers said. Their target: the third installment of Greene and Con-

gressman Matt Gaetz’s “America First” tour, which had already made its way through Florida and Arizona.

Outside the Dalton Convention Center, Flowers said that, given an opportunity during the rally, he would call for Greene to resign from Congress “for propagating the Big Lie, among other things.” A campaign camera guy and a bodyguard followed as he got in line. Flowers hummed a country tune.

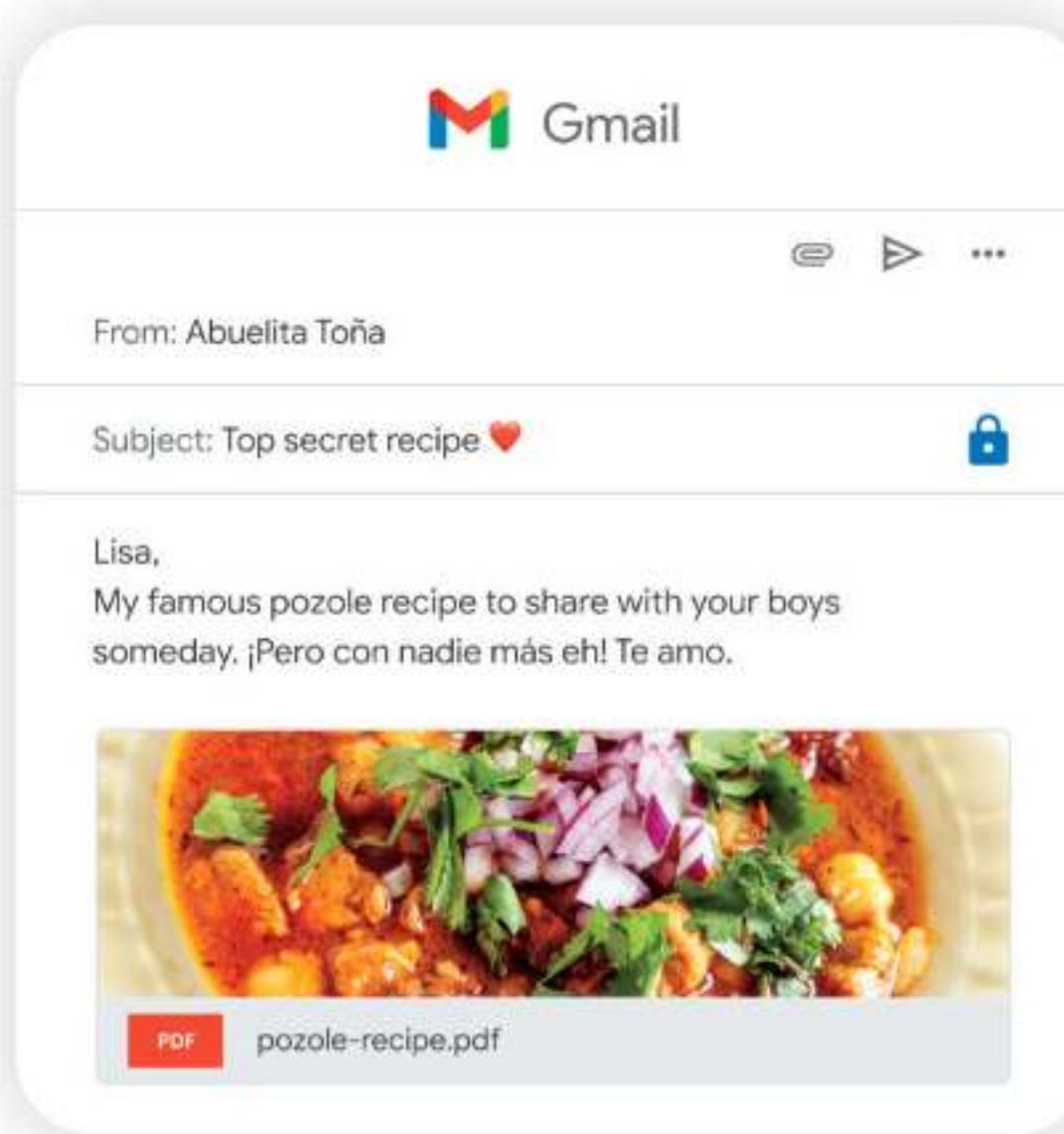
A bearded young man wearing a “SAVE AMERICA, STOP SOCIALISM” T-shirt and



Marcus Flowers



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a “2A” hat was selling merchandise at a table. He recognized Flowers.

“Marcus!” he said. “Can I get a picture?” Flowers obliged, but not before turning down an “AMERICA FIRST” tee.

“You know that was a K.K.K. slogan, right?” he said.

Inside, a few hundred mostly elderly white people milled around. “Tiny Dancer” played. A large blond event-security guy soon approached Flowers at a concession stand. The man wore a shirt—a few sizes too small—emblazoned with the words “VIKING EXECUTIVE PROTECTION.” “I’m asking you to leave,” the security guy said, “because the party of Marjorie Greene recognizes you.” He paused. “Like, we recognize you as somebody that will cause problems here.” He continued, “My job is to assess a threat.”

Flowers, sipping a blue Gatorade, remained relaxed. He wanted to hear his congresswoman speak, he said, and to talk to her if possible. The security guy admitted that he liked Flowers’s style. Then he called the police.

“Y’all are welcome to stand outside,” a cop told Flowers, who tipped his hat and turned to his cameraman. “Congresswoman Greene is apparently afraid to talk to me,” he said. “Yet she chased Congresswoman Cortez down the halls of Congress and screamed at her. All right.”

Back outside, the young man in the 2A hat who’d asked for a photo introduced himself as Brady Day. “I’ve been working for Marjorie for over a year,” he said. Had Day tipped off security? “Yeah,” he said. “I texted the manager.”

“You ratted me out!” Flowers said.

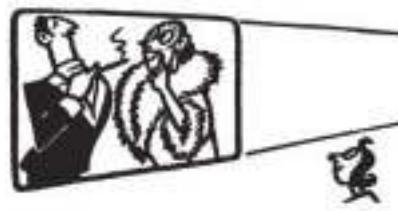
“I have one question for you,” Day said. “What is your stance on abortion?”

Flowers replied that he is pro-choice, then questioned Day about the wisdom of “government-mandated pregnancies.” Day went back to selling merch. The next morning, Day’s Facebook profile picture had been changed to one of him with Flowers standing behind an “I’M TEAM GREENE” banner.

Flowers, meanwhile, had prepared a new fund-raising e-mail, describing his ejection from the rally. “We all know the real threat to this country is Marjorie Taylor Greene and her fellow-insurrectionists,” it read. “Can you donate \$5?”

—Charles Bethina

## MULTI-CAM DEPT. ABOUT-FACE



When the cast of “Kevin Can F\*\*K Himself” assembled to shoot outside Boston, last year, after months of pandemic-related delays, one of the first questions to be resolved was that of the show’s asterisked title. Annie Murphy, who stars as Allison, recalled the uncertainty on a recent Zoom call from her home in Toronto. Her hair was pulled into a loose bun, and she wore a hoodie with sleeves rolled up to the elbows, exposing a forearm tattoo of Jimmy Stewart. “We were all, like, ‘We say it, right?’” Murphy, best known for her role as Alexis



Annie Murphy

Rose on “Schitt’s Creek,” said with a grin. “So, I’ve graduated from ‘shit’ to ‘fuck’! Where am I gonna go next?”

Kevin is the schlubby husband of Murphy’s Allison, an archetypally put-upon wife. Whenever he’s onscreen, the show is an oversaturated sitcom, complete with laugh track. When he’s not, it becomes a drama, darker in both style and substance. “In the multi-cam world, everyone’s a little bit more cartoony,” Murphy said. Her character, by design, has only “to be the butt of a joke, or the one who comes in, nags at the guys, and then walks out.” As the camera shifts, Allison tacks from broad one-liners to a more compli-

cated array of emotions. She fulfills her duties and fantasizes about a change—in her circumstances, in her loser spouse—until a neighbor forces her to confront reality. Allison’s life with Kevin, the neighbor tells her, has been “hard to watch.”

Murphy, who is thirty-four, uses her whole body when she tells a story, striking poses and pulling faces. She started performing as a kid in Ottawa (“I’m told I excelled as Hyena No. 2”), and her final high-school role, as Joan of Arc in Jean Anouilh’s “The Lark,” left her determined to act. “My parents—Lord love them, and what is the matter with them?—were nothing but encouraging,” Murphy said. She studied theatre in Montreal, settled in Toronto, and, in her early twenties, began making reluctant pilot-season pilgrimages to L.A. In 2013, after a period of “really questioning if I was doing the right thing with my life,” she was cast in “Schitt’s Creek,” a Canadian comedy series about a rich family bankrupted by an embezzlement scheme. The show achieved mainstream success after it was picked up by Netflix, and Murphy’s Emmy-winning turn as the ex-celebutante Alexis colored the offers she received at the end of its run last year. “A lot of people were very excited for me to do more Alexis, and play the blond socialitey character,” she said. The formal conceit of “Kevin” proved more appealing. “Allison couldn’t be further from Alexis. She’s a very working-class, very unfashionable, very angry human being. I was, like, O.K., I think this is the one-eighty that I was looking for.”

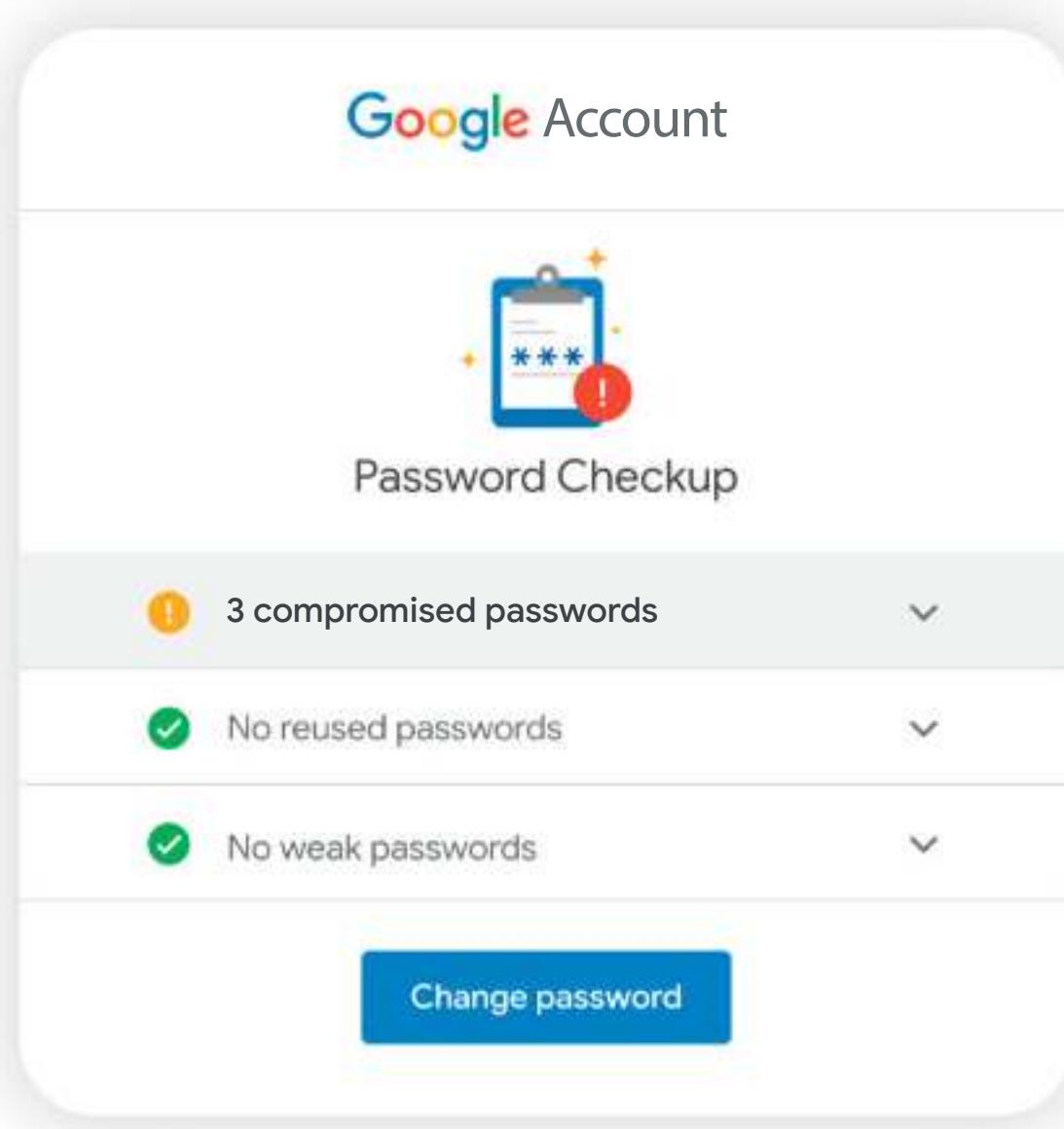
Murphy prepared by watching the types of family sitcoms that Valerie Armstrong, the creator of “Kevin,” had set out to subvert (“The King of Queens,” “Kevin Can Wait”) and working with a dialect coach, trading Alexis’s signature vocal fry for a Boston brogue. “I’m still terrified that we’re going to be run out of Massachusetts,” she said. “It’s such a tricky accent! Because it’s not there, not there, not there—and then it just comes and, like, punches you in the eardrum.”

Despite COVID constraints, there was real camaraderie on set. “I have friends on the crew whose faces I don’t know,” she said, placing a hand across her mouth to pantomime a mask. As an actor, she said, “it’s hard to be told, ‘Go stand over there and don’t interact.’”

This spring, Murphy joined the cast of “Russian Doll” and spent a month filming



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with Natasha Lyonne in Manhattan just as the city was beginning to reopen. “I got to drive an Alfa Romeo down the cobblestone streets of SoHo!” she said. “I got to shoot in this beautiful old brownstone on the Upper West Side! I’d never worked in New York before. I felt like a real working actress.” Bars and restaurants in Toronto were still closed when she returned home, but the warm weather had elicited some signs of life. “I sat in a park and drank wine this weekend,” she said. (She received both doses of the Pfizer vaccine in the U.S.) “I really do feel like we’re going to come out of this thing a little bit nicer, because the people were just in a *good* mood.” She paused. “Albeit, they might have all been just *very* shit-faced.”

—Alex Barasch

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## GLASS CEILINGS SELF-NOMINATED



Akanksha, a thirty-four-year-old United Nations financial auditor who is running for Secretary-General of the U.N., forgot her Zoom password the other day. “It’s not the best timing,” she said, frantically trying to log in to a diplomatic meeting. “I absolutely

don’t want to be late for this!” By 11:01 A.M., she had logged in, then accidentally ended the meeting for everyone. “Ah, fuck! Fu-u-u-uck!” At 11:03, a well-known ambassador to the United States appeared on Akanksha’s screen.

“*Salaam alaikum,*” Akanksha, a native of India, said, composing herself. The ambassador smiled: “It’s such a pleasure to meet you. It’s always energizing for me to meet women who dare to stand up. I know it takes a lot of courage.” She went on, “But I would like to say that I do not want this call to be publicized.” She added, “In terms of support for your nomination”—for Secretary-General—“the best route to go is through our Ambassador to the United Nations.” Akanksha sighed.

For the U.N.’s first seventy years, the contest for Secretary-General was held behind closed doors—the Security Council recommended a candidate, and the General Assembly elected him. (No woman has ever held the role.) In 2015, the G.A. passed a resolution opening up the process; the following year, thirteen candidates competed in an election that officials celebrated as transparent, inclusive, and fair. This year, the incumbent Secretary-General, António Guterres, is the only candidate on the ballot, despite ten others having declared their intention to run.

“The Western world didn’t even take

a meeting,” Akanksha said. Custom dictates that official candidates for Secretary-General be endorsed by a member state; according to a U.N. official who did not wish to be named, anyone else is just a “self-nominated candidate.” In February, Guterres, who is a seventy-two-year-old Portuguese statesman and the former U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, received Portugal’s nomination, securing his spot on the ballot. Akanksha (employee I.D.: 10059308) hasn’t yet found a sponsor: “These so-called developed countries, the ones who promote democracy, none of them took a meeting! Canada only took one because I’m a citizen.” Canada declined to nominate Akanksha. (So did Myanmar, Kenya, Seychelles, Equatorial Guinea, North Macedonia, Kuwait, Namibia, Uganda, and Pakistan.)

“A Pakistani diplomat asked me, ‘Why should you be on the ballot?’” she said. “I mentioned representation—‘My gender has not been represented at the U.N., and, in a man’s world, it’s important for women to be given a position at the top.’” His response: “‘This is not a man’s world. Women are given equal power. Actually, women play a very important role in the household. We should not underestimate the important role women play there,’” she recalled. “At this point, I’ve learned to laugh at it.”

Around noon, Akanksha locked her laptop in a filing cabinet—“I don’t trust anyone at the U.N. anymore! They’re totally out for me”—and headed out to campaign. As she left, a security guard offered a reassuring smile. There were only a few days left before the Security Council was expected to recommend Guterres for another five-year term.

Akanksha’s first stop was a glass office building near the U.N.’s main campus, where she met an ambassador who represents an island nation in the Pacific. He wore a boxy suit, a KN95 mask, and a tie woven from pandanus-palm fibres; a model of a wooden canoe sat on his desk. He motioned for Akanksha to have a seat.

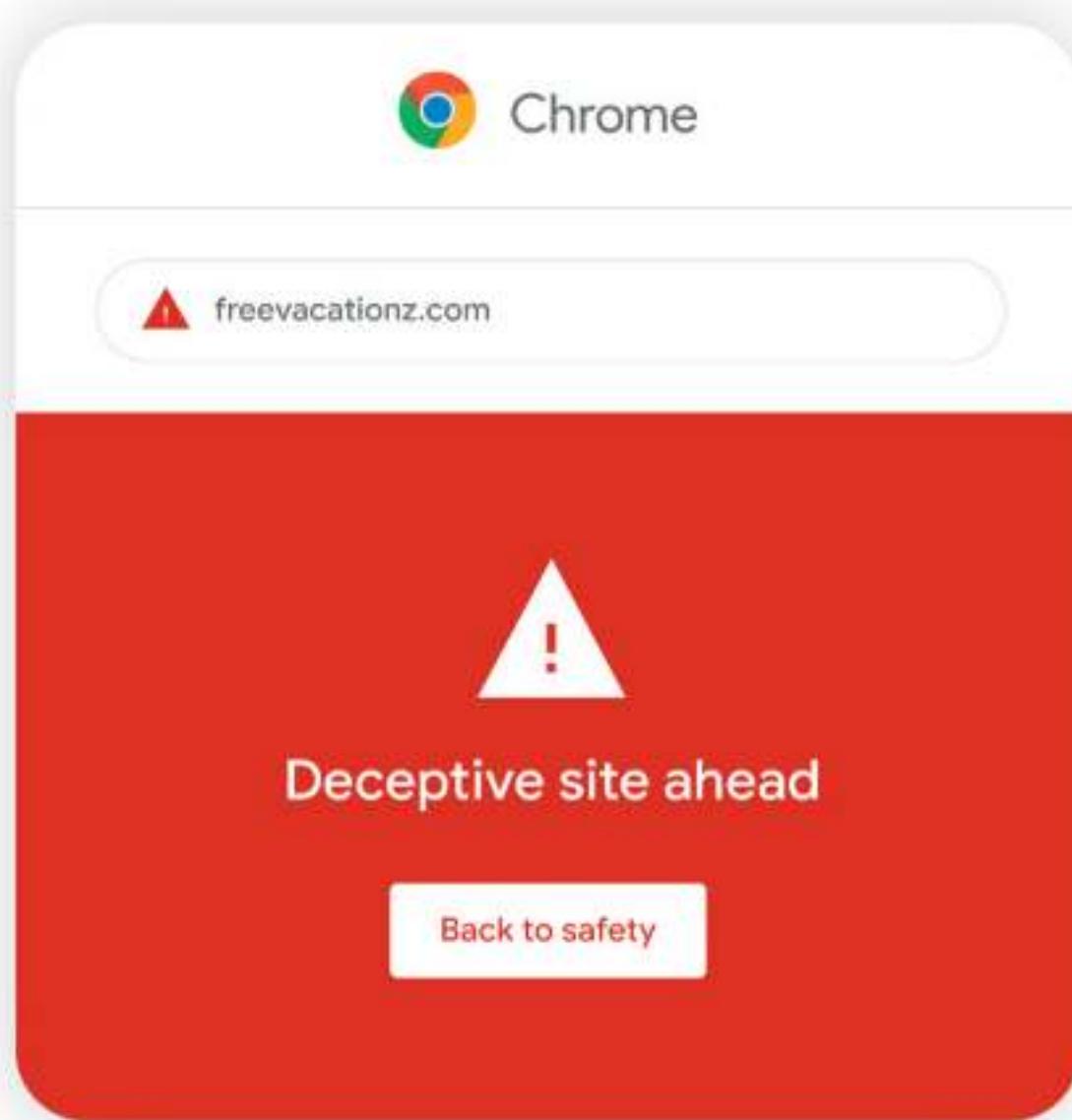
“You aspire to take leadership of the biggest organization on the planet,” he said. “You’ve never been a leader of a country. That’s a little shocking to me.” Akanksha laughed. He went on, “But I always render support for any idea which is good for the world. I’m always scanning the forest and the jungle, and I’m always keen



THE VERY STRESSED CATERPILLAR



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to see something nice and beautiful that can be valuable for humanity." Akanksha's eyes lit up. "To use my island language, magic is magic! You seem to have magic!" He sighed. "Of course, there is always a challenge—when you're a small country, there's a self-consciousness. You don't want to talk too big, or too loud." He could not nominate Akanksha, he said, although he wished otherwise. "I'm in a job," he said. "I'm here to take orders."

Akanksha said a polite goodbye and walked down a long hallway, past the diplomatic offices of several other island nations. The doors were all locked. "It's a working day!" she shouted. Finally, she found an open office: "Would it be possible to get a meeting with the ambassador to discuss my candidacy?"

"Yes, but you have to follow the procedures in terms of requesting a meeting," a receptionist replied. That would take weeks. Akanksha left some campaign materials and headed outside.

An approaching thunderstorm had darkened the sky. At 1:57, Akanksha rang the bell at the office of a landlocked African nation. A crackly voice came through the intercom: "Hello?"

"Hello! Hi! Yes, so my name is Arora Akanksha. I'm here to—"

Bzzzzzzz. Bzzzzzzz.

Inside, a glass case displayed hand-woven baskets. A young diplomat wearing jeans and a Calvin Klein hoodie asked if she had an appointment.

"I e-mailed—"

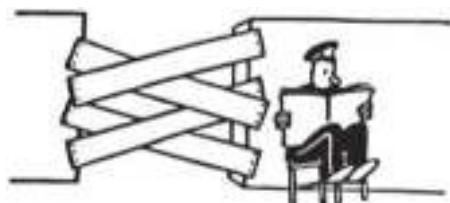
"Was there a confirmation?"

"No, I was just in the neighborhood."

Back outside, Akanksha bought a ninety-nine-cent slice. "I'm on leave without pay," she said. "I can go back, but will I go back? Absolutely not. What's there to go back to now?"

—Adam Iscoe

## THE OTHER COAST STANDOFF



Burbank is a bit of a Western town. "High Noon" and "3:10 to Yuma" were filmed there, at the old Columbia Ranch. Also "Blazing Saddles." Equestrian zoning allows some residents to

stable horses. And at one local watering hole, there's a standoff.

Late last year, amid a surge in COVID cases, California's governor, Gavin Newsom, banned all in-person dining in restaurants. Baret Lepejian, the owner of Tinhorn Flats, a joint with swinging saloon doors, refused to follow the order. "It's pure tyranny," he told the conservative commentator Mike Slater. "This is right up there with organized crime."

When L.A. went back into lockdown, Tinhorn kept its patio open. Pork chops on Thursday, steak on Friday, N.F.L. on Sunday. The county health department sent inspectors, who, stationed across the street, photographed lines of risk-tolerant patrons slipping through a side door. When an inspection team went inside, a customer shouted, "I am surprised one of your health inspectors hasn't been murdered yet!"

The situation escalated. Tinhorn was sued by the city, cited by the county, fined, and red-tagged. Its health permit was revoked. The griddles stayed hot—until the city shut off its electricity. Lepejian's son, Lucas, brought in a generator. In March, the city padlocked the doors. Lucas sawed off the latch. On Instagram, Baret wrote, "We open at 12 noon.... Happy St. Patrick's Day!!" The elder Lepejian, who currently lives in Thailand, supports his son. "I'm a peace-and-harmony guy," he said, by telephone, from a beach south of Bangkok. "But they're trying to take my business away. Honestly, if the rules came straight from God, I wouldn't do it."

Weeks passed, and neither side blinked. The city nailed plywood over Tinhorn's door frames. Lucas sawed those off, too. Baret posted a photograph of the Tiananmen Square tank man with the caption "WE WILL NOT COMPLY." The next day, Lucas was arrested. Then he was arrested again, for continuing to violate a court order, and again, for removing sandbags that the city had stacked in front of the door. On April 10th, at the city's behest, a local contractor—one who has serviced zoos and airports—drilled holes in the sidewalk and installed a chain-link fence, encircling the restaurant. The Lepejians' attorney told the *L.A. Times*, "It basically looks like the siege of Fallujah."

The outlaws dug in. Forcing the city

to close their business was a way of doing business. On GoFundMe, the Lepejians have raised nearly a hundred thousand dollars. On their Web site, shirts printed with Lucas's mug shot go for twenty-seven bucks. Weekly rallies, featuring "freedom burgers" served on the sidewalk, attract protesters, gawkers, and live-streamers to the fenced-off Flats. Holly Cleeland attends the rallies (she calls them "flag waves") even though she wasn't a Tinhorn regular. "It's a dude's place," she said. "But we're standing up for liberty, freedom, the Constitution." Her girlfriends, she said, go down to Newport Beach to party, "because you don't have to wear a mask or anything." She went on, "That's not for me. If you don't stand up and fight, they're going to steamroll us!"

On a recent evening, a resident walking his dog nearby paused to reflect on the embattled establishment. "Some of the demonstrations get pretty big, pretty noisy, with bullhorns, all kinds of nonsense," he said. On the corner, a strolling couple chimed in. "A lot of these protesters, they're from out of town," the woman said. In a front yard, two new parents agreed: after the first weeks, the Tinhorn regulars weren't showing up as much. They were replaced by a different class of agitators, with their own priorities. "You can hear them say, 'Oh, Beverly Hills is here, San Diego is here!'" the mother said, her hand on a stroller. "Like a roll call."

Night was falling. Across the street, outside Handy Market, where Tinhorn used to buy its beef, an employee was taking a break. He wore an N95 and blue nitrile gloves. The protesters—recently, around a hundred and fifty of them—had made life difficult. "A few would come in here, buy beer, cause a ruckus, tell our customers to take off their masks and stuff," he said. "Weird mix of people. I avoid it."

"It's crazy, too," he went on. "If they just followed the rules, they could be open!" The ban on outdoor dining had been lifted in January, and indoor dining has been allowed since March. Tinhorn was looking like a battlefield without a battle. "It's pretty quiet now," the employee said. "They'll be back, though." A tumbleweed might've blown down Magnolia Boulevard.

—Micah Hauser

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# ANOTHER COUNTRY

*Mickey Guyton takes on the genre's overwhelming whiteness.*

BY AMANDA PETRUSICH



In early June, 2020, a week after the murder of George Floyd, the country singer Mickey Guyton released “Black Like Me,” a tender piano ballad about deep and relentless racial alienation. Her voice is velvety and propulsive, and when she leans into a big note it can feel cool and bracing, like sticking your head out the window of a moving car. She wrote “Black Like Me” in 2019. “The common response from people in Nashville was ‘I need to sit with this for a minute,’” Guyton, who is thirty-seven, told me recently. “It made people uncomfortable. Nobody was really writing songs like that

in the country format.” When Guyton signed with Universal Music Group, in 2011, she was the only Black woman under contract with a major country-music label.

Guyton was pregnant with her son when she first saw the video of Floyd gasping for breath, calling for his mother. “This was after Botham Jean was murdered in his apartment, this was after Philando Castile was murdered in his car,” she said. “I’m thinking to myself, My baby. One day he’s gonna be a threat to somebody, and not because he’s threatening but because some people will view him as

*Commercially successful Black, female artists are startlingly rare in Nashville.*

threatening.” Her voice caught. Guyton said that her husband, Grant Savoy—a Los Angeles-based attorney who specializes in complex civil litigation—had been accosted by officers from the Ventura County Sheriff’s Office outside their home a few years ago, on the Fourth of July. She and Savoy, who is Black, Japanese, and Portuguese, had set off six fireworks in their back yard: “The next thing you know, we have the cops at our door. My husband answered, and he’s getting dragged out and thrown to the ground. They’re saying, ‘You’re not a lawyer, that’s not your car parked out front.’ They took him to jail. They called him the N-word. They called him Osama, because he looks Middle Eastern.” Guyton sighed. “That happened around the time I was on tour with Brad Paisley, singing in front of Confederate flags. This was my normal.” (A spokesman from the sheriff’s office disputed this story, saying that “the over-all circumstances differed significantly.”)

Guyton wrote “Black Like Me” with Nathan Chapman, Fraser Churchill, and Emma Davidson Dillon, at a writing retreat hosted by Warner Chappell Music. The song was more channelled than composed. “If you think we live in the land of the free, you should try to be Black like me”—that was what we started with,” she recalled. “The song just fell out. The vocal that you hear is the original vocal from that day. Nathan turned around and said, ‘I think we wrote the most important song of your career, and it’s gonna make a lot of people very angry.’”

Getting “Black Like Me” released—getting anything released—was a struggle for Guyton. It’s not uncommon for country singers to sign with a major label and then find themselves in a holding pattern; Guyton had released two EPs but no proper début album. She started to doubt whether it would ever happen. “I wasn’t the new girl in town anymore, you know?” she recalled.

In January, 2020, at a Grammys after-party, she and her manager approached an executive in the music industry. “It was this white man dressed in this velvet suit, drinking what I’m sure was a really expensive Scotch,” she said. “He had his hair freshly done, the whole thing. I perked up and batted my eye-

lashes. ‘Black Like Me’ meant so much to me on an emotional level, on a mental level, as a civil movement. I remember walking away from that feeling so ashamed of myself, because I felt like it wasn’t enough.” The night left her exhausted. “I did my own hair, I did my own makeup,” she remembered. “I went on this red carpet and felt, like, Nobody knows me—what am I doing? I felt stupid for being there.” “Black Like Me” didn’t seem any closer to finding an audience. Guyton later co-wrote a heavy, devastating ballad, “What Are You Gonna Tell Her?,” about grappling with her disillusionment:

Do you just let her pretend  
That she could be the president?  
Would it help us get there any faster?  
Do you let her think the deck’s not stacked?  
And gay or straight or white or black  
You just dream and anything can happen?

“I give Mickey a lot of credit for not giving up after years of hearing no,” the country star Carrie Underwood told me. “The world needs more voices like Mickey’s—not only the world of country music.” In the immediate aftermath of Floyd’s murder, plenty of iconography—yard signs, protest signs, T-shirts—surrounded Black Lives Matter, but the movement hadn’t quite found a musical center. “I called my management that Friday and said, ‘I don’t care what people think or may not think, we need to talk about releasing ‘Black Like Me,’” Guyton said. The following Monday, programmers at Spotify told Guyton and her team that they wanted to put the song at the top of the Hot Country playlist on Blackout Tuesday, a day of anti-racism and anti-police-brutality action within the entertainment industry.

“Black Like Me” went to No. 4 on *Billboard*’s Digital Country Song Sales chart and was later nominated for a Best Country Solo Performance Grammy, making Guyton the only Black woman ever to receive a nomination in that category.

When I first spoke with Guyton, in April, she and Savoy were staying in an Airbnb in East Nashville, while she prepared to co-host the Academy of Country Music Awards with Keith Urban. Guyton would be the first Black person to m.c. the A.C.M. Awards since 1984, when Charley Pride co-hosted

with Crystal Gayle and Mac Davis. Back then, the show took place at Knott’s Berry Farm, in Southern California; this year’s program would be broadcast from around Nashville, with Guyton and Urban at the Ryman Auditorium and the Grand Ole Opry, where they’d address sparse in-person audiences of masked health-care workers. Guyton was feeling both excited and bewildered. “I have no idea what I’m doing,” she said, laughing. “Hosting? I don’t know how to do that! They asked me and I said yes before I could even really think.”

Guyton had her laptop set up in front of a dark-gray wall with posters for the Black Keys and Jack White. She was wearing a tan spaghetti-strap dress, a gold bracelet, and no makeup. Guyton has deep-brown, wide-set eyes and an easy, open smile. In conversation, she is affable and attentive. Midway through our talk, Savoy brought their two-month-old son, Grayson, into the room. Guyton picked him up from his stroller and sniffed his diaper.

“I think he might have pooped,” she said to Savoy.

“Did he?”

Guyton took another whiff and briefly pondered the results. “He might have just farted.”

I told her that they made parenthood look sweet, almost peaceful. “Well, when you’re both helping—” she started.

“Or when you have Superdad, who is also Supernanny,” Savoy cut in.

Guyton laughed. “He’s calling himself Supernanny!”

A dinner conversation with Savoy a few years earlier had helped Guyton clarify her creative vision: “I remember asking, ‘Why do you think country music isn’t working for me?’ And he said, ‘Because you’re running away from everything that makes you different. Why aren’t you writing country songs from the perspective of a Black woman? Not from the perspective of what you think country music looks like for other people, but what country music is for you?’ That just blew my mind.”

There is no pristine road to stardom—mainstream success is nearly always dependent on capitulating to the whims of the marketplace—but Guyton’s rise has been convenient for Nashville, temporarily obfuscating the overwhelming whiteness and maleness within

the country-music scene. Guyton is a skillful performer by any metric—her work is imbued with benevolence, grace, and power—but I nonetheless wondered if she worried that her music was being embraced and leveraged for other reasons. “One hundred per cent,” Guyton said. “I look back in my career, and I was a token in so many different ways. I remember there would be corporate events where—in order to make the company look good—who did they have front and center as one of the artists they’re excited about?”

Guyton is not the first Black person to sing country music (she is preceded by dozens—if not hundreds—of remarkable prewar performers, including DeFord Bailey, the Mississippi Sheiks, and the Tennessee Chocolate Drops), nor is she the only contemporary artist of color to appear on the country charts. But commercially successful Black, female performers are startlingly rare in Nashville. In 2020, when Maren Morris, accepting the Country Music Association’s award for Female Vocalist of the Year, cited six Black women for their recent contributions to the genre—Guyton, Linda Martell, Yola, Rissi Palmer, Brittney Spencer, and Rhiannon Giddens—the list felt comprehensive.

When Guyton and I had our initial conversation, she was a new mother, and I was seven months pregnant with my first child. It did not take long for me to abandon my professional obligations and ask her several thousand questions about childbirth. “Every mother is different, but, I’m telling you, you’re gonna know exactly what to do,” Guyton said. She often began our conversations with recommendations for the daunting amount of gear (tiny pacifiers, wipes, a curious substance called gripe water) that newborns seem to require. Sometimes, after our interviews, I felt so relieved that I wanted to sob. By our third Zoom, I was referring to Guyton as my birth coach. “If you need me, you can text me,” she said, laughing.

At the 2020 A.C.M. Awards, Guyton had been visibly pregnant. Near the end of a performance of “What Are You Gonna Tell Her?,” she placed her palm on her baby bump and swallowed, as if pushing down tears. (The dress

she wore that night, ivory-colored and sleeveless, was recently included in an exhibit at the Country Music Hall of Fame titled “American Currents,” which this year considers the tumult and the social reckonings of 2020.) “When I found out I was pregnant, honestly, I was, like, ‘This is going to ruin my career,’” she told me. “But I’m determined to show working mothers that they can do this. Yes, it’s hard. But I always try to normalize it: I’m in this interview, I’m holding my baby. I have writing sessions where I say, ‘Sorry, guys, my baby’s gonna be here, and you’re gonna have to deal with it.’”

Guyton was born in Arlington, Texas, on June 17, 1983. Her father worked as an engineer and a district manager for the company that became Oncor Electric Delivery, which meant that her family—she has two younger sisters and an older brother—moved every three to five years. “My life centered around the church,” Guyton said. “That’s where I learned how to sing and how to harmonize. It wasn’t like I had a love for music—our parents *made* us sing in the choir, so we did.” Guyton recalled getting dressed each Sunday—“Stockings, little dress, and the bows in your hair”—and growing restless in the pews. “Oh, my God, church was so long,” she recalled, laughing. “In Black churches, we like to be in church all day. I don’t personally understand it—give me an hour Mass, yes, Lord, praise Him! On Sun-

days, my dad would make us oatmeal, because, in his mind, oatmeal would fill us up and keep us sustained.”

When Guyton was nine, and her family was living in Crawford, Texas, her church attended a Texas Rangers baseball game: “We were way up in the nosebleed section, and the announcer said, ‘Please rise while ten-year-old LeAnn Rimes sings the national anthem.’” Guyton had heard country music before (“When I went to see my grandma, I’d watch all of the Dolly Parton and Kenny Rogers VHS tapes hanging on the back of her door,” she remembered), but Rimes made her dream of being a country singer: “Seeing someone who was young like me sound like a grown woman—I was, like, ‘I can do that!’ And I really could.”

Guyton’s parents enrolled her in a small private school in nearby Waco. The family had experienced racism within their community—Guyton’s mother recalled hearing racial slurs yelled out the window of a bus from the public school—and worried that the lack of Black students might make Guyton and her siblings feel conspicuous and unsafe. “This was not in the eighties,” Guyton said. “This was not in the seventies, not in the sixties—this was in the nineties. My parents couldn’t afford private school. So my mom became a substitute teacher for the elementary school and my dad coached the seventh- and eighth-grade basketball

teams. That’s how we were all able to go.”

After Guyton graduated, she moved to Los Angeles, to attend Santa Monica College. “I just felt so stuck in the South,” she said. She started taking business classes and got a job at a cigar club in L.A. “That was a whole ‘nother ballgame of sexual harassment and disgustingness,” she said. “But I was a hostess making thirteen dollars an hour, and I was, like, ‘Oh, my God, I’m really making it!’”

She was briefly a contestant on “American Idol”—she made the Top Fifty—but she was struggling to find a path into country music. “I had such a love for country,” she said. “It was something about that sound—with a good country ballad, there’s just something so *beautiful* about it.” She went on, “While everybody else was bumping whatever, I was bumping Rascal Flatts. But I didn’t know how to get to Nashville, and that’s where I felt I really needed to be.”

One afternoon, she was out shopping for a fiftieth-birthday present for her mother. “I ran into this d.j. I knew, DJ D-Wrek, who was Nick Cannon’s d.j. for ‘Wild ’n Out.’ He was, like, ‘You do music, right? What kind of music do you sing?’ And I was, like, ‘I sing country.’ It was the first time I’d said it. I was thinking I’d keep moving and that’d be it,” she said. “But a hip-hop guy got me in contact with a country guy.” D-Wrek ultimately introduced Guyton to a producer and songwriter named Julian Raymond, who connected her to her current management. In 2011, she moved to Nashville.

This year, the Academy of Country Music nominated four Black artists, the most ever, for major awards. They included Guyton, Kane Brown, John Legend (for a collaboration with Carrie Underwood), and Jimmie Allen; two won. (Allen became the first Black performer to win the A.C.M. New Artist award, and Brown became the first Black solo artist to win Video of the Year.)

Guyton took the stage in a feathered, one-shoulder white dress and matching boots festooned with what appeared to be hundreds of tiny crystals. She and Urban bantered cheerfully. “She’s a real artist, and she writes



*“The prophecy!”*

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from real experience,” Urban told me later. “That’s a process for every artist, but I think we’re starting to see a connection taking place between her and her audience. The portals are starting to open up.”

At the beginning of the telecast, Urban took a moment to recount Guyton’s recent accomplishments: “It’s been a year of firsts for you. You had, let’s see—Grammy nominations, you got to play on the Grammys for the first time, first time hosting A.C.M.s. And you also—there’s one other thing I’m missing.... Oh, you had a baby for the first time.” Guyton beamed.

A few days after the awards aired, someone called Guyton a racial slur on Twitter. This was not an especially unusual occurrence. The user was responding to a tweet from the Academy of Country Music’s official account—a celebration of some of Guyton’s outfits from the broadcast. “Fuckin’ N-word,” the person wrote. Perhaps this sort of unabashed bigotry should not be surprising—particularly online, particularly on Twitter—but it nonetheless made me gasp. Guyton saw it as an opportunity to expose and amplify the vitriol she has long been subject to in private. She retweeted the comment and wrote, “There are no words.”

“I’ve been called the N-word enough that it just kind of rolls off,” she said. “But when I do get racial slurs coming at me, I post them. My thinking is, if somebody wants to spew hate at me, I’ll gladly give them the platform to do it. You were brave enough to search out my name, say these words, send me that message—and now I have receipts.” Even before she saw the tweet, Guyton had been feeling vaguely melancholy. “When I got back from Nashville to L.A., I had a moment of sadness,” she said. “I know that sounds really weird. I’m getting ready to release an album, which is something I’ve anticipated for a very long time. But things like this bring me back to a space of ‘I’m not good enough, I’m not what those people want.’”

For the past year, country music has been entangled in a complex racial reckoning. The most high-profile examples have involved artists’ attempting to reconfigure their relationships

to potentially hurtful language: the Dixie Chicks rebranded as the Chicks; Lady Antebellum became Lady A. Some listeners have been horrified by the notion that leftist, finger-wagging culture may be infecting a genre that has long been an ideological haven for conservative listeners. This panic—that country music could be forced to compromise or even denounce its right-wing bona fides—was on international display back in 2003, when, at a concert in London, Natalie Maines, the front woman for the Chicks, publicly criticized President George W. Bush and the invasion of Iraq. The band was subsequently blacklisted by country radio, and the members received death threats so credible that the F.B.I. advised them to cancel a show in Dallas.

This February, the country singer Morgan Wallen was filmed getting out of an S.U.V. outside his house, in Nashville. Wallen, who is twenty-eight, has two and a half million followers on Instagram, where he routinely celebrates the rituals of rural Southern living; in one post, he’s wearing a sleeveless flannel shirt and camo pants, his hair in his signature mullet, holding an AR-15 in one hand and a dead boar in the other, and grinning deliriously.

That night, Wallen, referring to a friend, demanded that someone in his entourage “take care of this pussy-ass” N-word. He appeared drunk, and the slur sounded round and easy coming

The sort of generosity that Wallen was met with—he had already been rebooked as the musical guest on “Saturday Night Live” after blatantly flouting COVID protocols at a bar in Tuscaloosa, which resulted in the cancellation of his first scheduled appearance—is, of course, not available to everyone. Guyton told me she feels empathy for Wallen: “Living in Nashville would turn even the most sober person into an alcoholic if you let your guard down and don’t pay attention. It’s a drinking town.” (She and Savoy recently decided to get sober together. “There was so much clarity,” she said. “That inner voice telling me how horrible I am was so loud when I was drinking.”)

The N-word video was released by TMZ, and the Academy of Country Music announced that Wallen would not be eligible for any nominations or awards. The Country Music Association removed all digital content related to Wallen from its various platforms, promising to “continue to examine our industry’s inclusivity efforts.” Many people gathered protectively around Wallen, citing his drunkenness, his youth, his contrition, his self-reproach. Guyton reacted on Twitter. “The hate runs deep,” she wrote. “Promises to do better don’t mean sh\*t.” Wallen’s fans launched a brutal counterattack. Guyton told me, “What was most appalling to me was not even him saying the word—that was wrong, it sickened me, it grossed me out—but the way some of the fans came after me for calling out racism. I’ve never been on the receiving end of that much hate before.”

I remarked on her resilience, weathering that kind of onslaught while nine months pregnant. Guyton told me, “I don’t like my mom to see me upset, because I don’t want to worry her, but she held me in bed, and I wept outward, open sobs. Over and over and over and over again. I was trying to not say anything, not to complain about it. But it got so bad. And then I started showing her the messages.” The next day, Guyton went into labor.

In April, when Guyton arrived in Nashville to begin rehearsals for the A.C.M. Awards, there were, she said, “all these Morgan Wallen billboards, fan-bought billboards, saying, ‘HIS FANS’ CHOICE ENTERTAINER OF THE YEAR,’



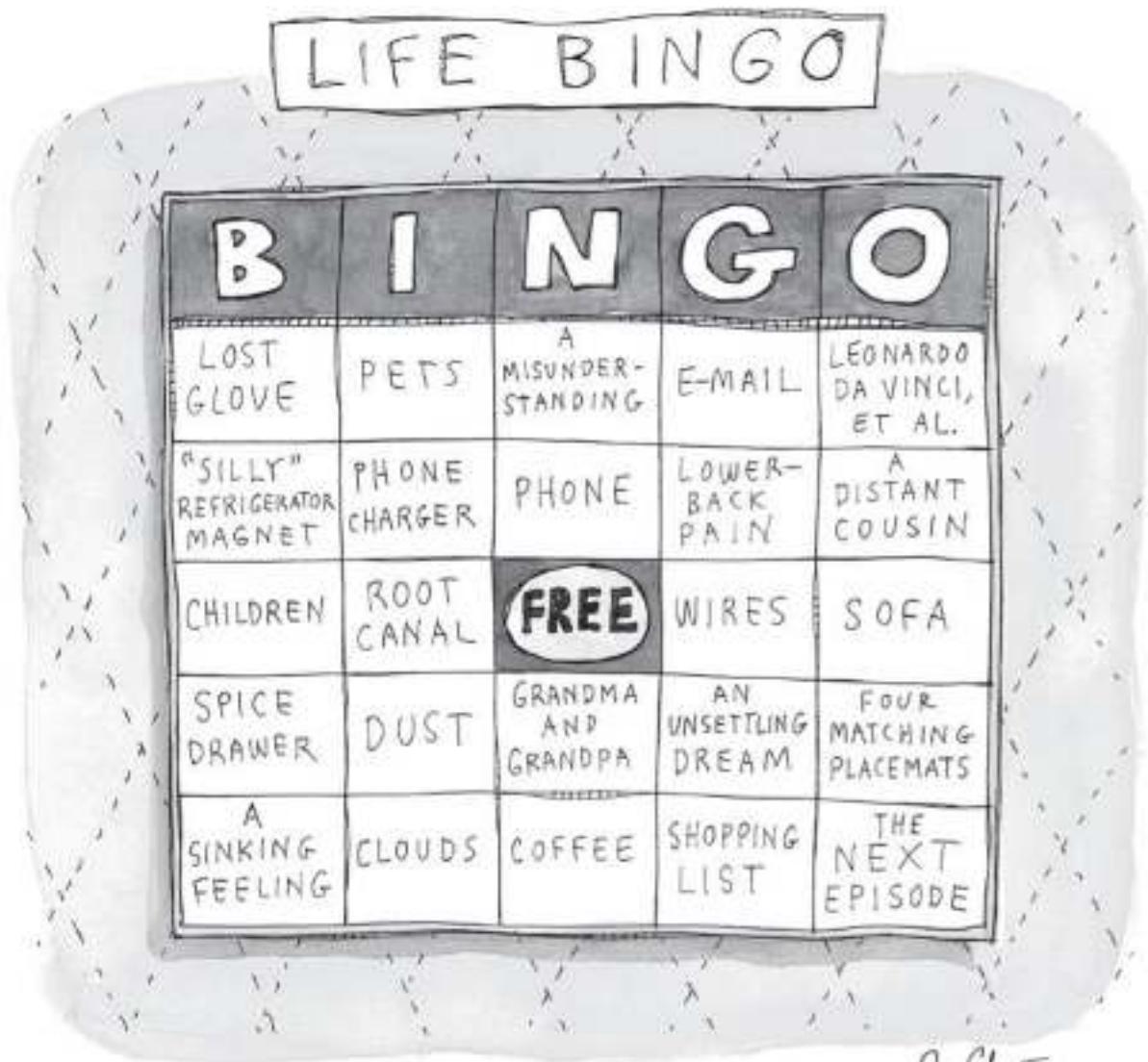
out of his mouth. Was it Wallen’s first time trying out this language? I don’t know. In an apology he posted on YouTube, he described the moment as hour seventy-two of a seventy-two-hour bender, and said that he was now nine days sober. He appeared genuinely remorseful, but he still deployed the grammar of victimhood: “The people I hurt, they had every right to step on my neck while I was down, to not show me any grace. But they did the exact opposite.”

with a Bible verse at the bottom.” Wallen had asked his followers to stop advocating on his behalf. “I appreciate those who still see something in me and have defended me, but for today please don’t,” he said. Still, since the incident, digital sales of his music had risen more than a thousand per cent.

**I**t’s not arcane knowledge that country music is fundamentally indebted to Black innovation; even the most oblivious accountings of the genre’s origins allow that its most formative players (A. P. Carter, Jimmie Rodgers, Hank Williams, Bill Monroe) relied on the contributions of Black artists. More recently, scholars and critics have begun to acknowledge that these Black musicians weren’t merely influential—they pioneered the genre.

There are a few ways to make sense of contemporary country’s whiteness. The simplest is to consider the earliest days of the commercial recording industry, when executives marketed “race records” (usually by Black blues or gospel artists) to Black communities, and most everything else (including country and hillbilly artists) to white listeners. But country music itself has since come to perpetuate (if not establish) a racial divide. Its songs are often predicated on feelings of nostalgia for an imagined rural past, in which life moved more slowly and the continuation of tradition was paramount. This sort of longing for a bygone era is rarely a Black experience, in part because the myth of the “good old days” tends to predate the civil-rights movement.

In 2008, Geoff Mann, a professor of geography at Simon Fraser University, published a paper titled “Why Does Country Music Sound White?” He suggested that the overtly nostalgic lyrics to most country songs, in which white Southerners are invited to think of themselves as both innocent and perpetually in crisis, have come to define modern whiteness: “For if country sounds white, it is perhaps worth considering the possibility that something claiming the status of ‘white culture,’ something like a purportedly American whiteness—however historically baseless—is not reflected in country music, but is, rather, partially *produced* by it.” Perhaps country music isn’t



simply reflecting the reality of what it means to be white and American; perhaps it is actively (and repeatedly) inventing it.

Mann believes that country music began pushing a particular vision of whiteness in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, an era that, he told me recently, “marked a fundamental rupture in the self-understanding of white Americans. Desegregation, Communism, the civil-rights movement, Vietnam, the economic rise of Japan and Germany and the declining relative competitiveness of the American economy—all of these forces seemed to belie the promises upon which so much of the post-World War II U.S. was supposed to be based.” He went on, “In the South, especially, from Brown v. Board of Education on, the whole kit and caboodle of American history appeared to be a story of increasingly besieged ‘average’ white folks and their families.”

In Mann’s view, country music shifted from mirroring white anxieties to seeding them. “It pretty quickly became a situation in which the music didn’t describe how white people felt, but instead

described how whiteness felt,” he said. “And, in that sense, it is, or at least often is, a big cultural-reproduction machine, not only narrating the ongoing siege of simple, innocent white folks—this is why nostalgia is so absolutely central to the whole genre—but also performing a resistance to this siege in the experience of a supposedly simple, unrepentant white ‘normal’ that’s basically a big ‘fuck you’ to anyone who celebrates the forces behind that siege.” Mann sees a future in which country music challenges some of its own mythologies—he cites such younger artists as Sturgill Simpson, Jason Isbell, and Maren Morris—but it is difficult to imagine that sort of change without the direct involvement of more Black artists.

Though Black artists remain scarce, Black music and Black culture are increasingly shaping the future of country. Florida Georgia Line, a duo of Tyler Hubbard and Brian Kelley, who are both white, has had extraordinary success pairing trap beats—a production style engineered by Black rappers from the South—with hypermasculine back-country narratives and a bit of twang,

resulting in a subgenre often called bro-country. The hero of most bro-country songs is devout, proud, and deeply earnest; he is equally preoccupied by his grief and his desire, by his piousness and his intense need to party. Florida Georgia Line's 2012 single "Cruise" was the first country song to receive a Diamond certification by the Recording Industry Association of America, having racked up more than ten million sales and streams. "This Is How We Roll," another of the group's singles, opens with a declaration: "The mixtape's got a little Hank, a little Drake, a little something bumping, thump-thumping on the wheel ride." In the music video, Hubbard and Kelley wear jewelry and tight pants and stand atop an eighteen-wheeler as it inches down a bucolic country lane.

The pickup truck—long considered a utilitarian, humble work vehicle—has been omnipresent in country music for decades, but the flashier and significantly more expensive versions of it that tend to pop up in bro-country videos do not seem designed for the fields. (The semi truck featured in the "This Is How We Roll" video is not hauling cargo but hosting a dance club in the back.) Yet, in the past decade or so, if anything has guaranteed that a country single will sell, it is the image of the pickup, and its attendant concerns—how to get one, how to keep one, how to entice women to climb on board. The narrator of many bro-country songs is enthralled by his truck, often to a degree that might seem romantic. Riley Green's "If It Wasn't for Trucks," one of the top-selling country songs of last year, is nearly Keatsian in its fervency and devotion:

Where was I supposed to cry that July day  
Granddaddy died?  
Or haul that deer, drink that beer  
Fell in and out of love  
If it wasn't for trucks  
If it wasn't for trucks

The question of which musical or contextual signifiers mark the boundaries of country music is constantly in flux. Since at least the nineteen-fifties, there have been duelling factions: irascible outlaw country versus the polite and pop-influenced Nashville sound; rough and rowdy Bakersfield versus smooth and supple countrypol-

itan; what happens in honky-tonks versus what happens in gilded concert halls. Yet figuring out how women and artists of color fit into the genre's schema has remained fraught. The rise of bro-country, currently the genre's highest-selling subcategory, has made that point of entry feel even more narrow.

After Guyton arrived in Nashville, she was repeatedly told to "be more country," but she was never able to ascertain what, exactly, that might entail. "Everybody kept telling me, 'Whatever songs you write, they need to be super country, because people are gonna think that you're not genuine,'" she said. "I wanted this opportunity so badly that I was ready to do whatever it took. But every time I turned something in—'No, that sounds too pop.'" She paused. "I was trying to figure it out. You want me to put a fiddle on this song? Twang it out more? What do you want? Meanwhile, I'm watching the whole industry put out records that had all these R. & B. cadences, these R. & B. phrases." She continued, "I was frustrated, and not just by my own story. But God forbid anyone say anything, because, if you say something, then country radio is gonna cancel you, they're not gonna play your stuff, and you'll be Dixie Chick-ed." She paused again. "Well, now, Chick-ed."

Keith Urban told me that he thinks the genre is slowly moving in "a more embracing direction," and that outmoded and nonsensical ideas about purity have long been a liability for country music. "The only time the genre ever gets into trouble is when it's trying to be one thing," he said. "Because it has expanded and contracted so consistently over decades, it's remained a very strong, resilient, hugely popular genre of music." He continued, "You can apply that to somebody like Mickey, or you can apply it to a rock-country or a pop-country or an E.D.M.-country artist. We're all in the same boat—we're trying to make music that's true to us, and not be confined by somebody else's limitations on the genre."

Darius Rucker—who was for years one of the only Black country singers with any mainstream visibility—believes that Guyton is creating real opportunity. "Mickey's voice is so powerful," he told me. "I'm so happy for her

to be having the success she is, as it means other young women of color can see themselves as belonging in country music, too."

Guyton also remains optimistic that a shift is imminent. "I know that the town is starting to embrace other Black female artists," she said. "That's so important. It's not enough for just one to make it here and there—it needs to be a sea of Black women, a sea of Latina women, a sea of L.B.G.T.Q. artists. If we don't see that, then it's just gonna be the same white guy in a pickup truck with a ball cap, maybe some sneakers," she said. "Maybe a flat-billed hat like Black dudes wear."

This fall, Guyton will finally release her début album, "Remember Her Name." Several of its songs explicitly address the racism and the sexism that she's lived through, but mostly it feels like a broader statement on finding peace. "This is a little dramatic, but I feel like it's a 'Becoming,' like Michelle Obama," she said. "It's every experience that I went through during the ten years that I was in Nashville. It's a closing of this chapter of my life."

Guyton's advocacy is so vigorous that it sometimes risks overshadowing her artistry. Country is perhaps not known for its subtleties—there's joy in its plumpness, its oversized expressions, its dumb, comforting platitudes—but Guyton brings a depth and an instinct to her work that make it feel uncommonly rich.

The record is loaded with sounds and images that feel traditionally country—pedal steel, Guyton's Texas drawl, recollections of church pews and dance floors and Friday-night football—but it is also firmly rooted in her particular point of view. On "Love My Hair," she sings, "If I could go back to twelve/I would tell myself / Straight up or down/Baby, that's your crown." On "All American," she sings of solidarity and concord: "We got the same stars, same stripes." The line feels like a reminder of some essential, immovable, and inherently shared vulnerability; it is, like many things Guyton sings, reassuring. "I want people to feel good enough around me," she said. "I want them to feel wanted and loved. That's how I want to feel." ♦

## SHOUTS &amp; MURMURS



## TWO PLUS TWO

BY IAN FRAZIER

**Alabama:** 5  
**Alaska:** Leaning 4  
**Arizona:** T.B.D.  
**Arkansas:** 3-something  
**California:** 4.000001  
**Colorado:** About 4?  
**Connecticut:** \$4.4 billion  
**Delaware:** Ordinary 4  
**Florida:** Commonsense 5  
**Georgia:** 11,476 to go  
**Hawaii:** 4-point-oh  
**Idaho:** .40 cal.  
**Illinois:** Make offer.  
**Indiana:** Ask again later.  
**Iowa:** 2,024  
**Kansas:** 4 / not 4  
**Kentucky:** Nonnegotiable 5  
**Louisiana:** Boo-coo 3  
**Maine:** 5 but looking  
**Maryland:** 4 and holding  
**Massachusetts:** As 4 as it gets  
**Michigan:** Crossed-out-tattoo 4  
**Minnesota:** 4, if that's O.K.?  
**Mississippi:** 6 and falling  
**Missouri:** 3, 4, or 5—give or take

**Montana:** At least 5  
**Nebraska:** 5-ish 4  
**Nevada:** 3, and the over  
**New Hampshire:** 4 for now  
**New Jersey:** 5, and the under  
**New Mexico:** 5, please  
**New York:** "5?" Please.  
**North Carolina:** Turning 4  
**North Dakota:** 5 below  
**Ohio:** The 4 that is a 5  
**Oklahoma:** Never 4  
**Oregon:** 3.999999  
**Pennsylvania:** "n" = the Unknown  
**Rhode Island:** Fried calamari!  
**South Carolina:** Future 4  
**South Dakota:** Tentative 7  
**Tennessee:** Trending 3  
**Texas:** 5 lone stars  
**Utah:** Computers down  
**Vermont:** Nonnegotiable 4  
**Virginia:** 4, né 5  
**Washington:** Fine with 4  
**West Virginia:** Damn sure 6  
**Wisconsin:** Conflicted 4  
**Wyoming:** 4 the hard way ♦

THE  
REAL  
ACTION  
IS  
OFF THE  
FIELD.

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# HOW NASTY WAS NERO?

*The notorious emperor appears to have been the subject of a smear campaign.*

BY REBECCA MEAD



Nero, who was enthroned in Rome in 54 A.D., at the age of sixteen, and went on to rule for nearly a decade and a half, developed a reputation for tyranny, murderous cruelty, and decadence that has survived for nearly two thousand years. According to various Roman historians, he commissioned the assassination of Agrippina the Younger—his mother and sometime lover. He sought to poison her, then to have her crushed by a falling ceiling or drowned in a self-sinking boat, before ultimately having her murder disguised as a suicide. Nero was betrothed at eleven and married at fifteen, to his adoptive stepsister, Claudia Octavia, the daughter of the em-

peror Claudius. At the age of twenty-four, Nero divorced her, banished her, ordered her bound with her wrists slit, and had her suffocated in a steam bath. He received her decapitated head when it was delivered to his court. He also murdered his second wife, the noblewoman Poppaea Sabina, by kicking her in the belly while she was pregnant.

Nero's profligacy went beyond slaughtering his nearest and dearest. He spent a fortune building an ornate palace, only to have it burn down, along with the rest of the city of Rome, in a conflagration that lasted for more than a week. Nero watched the destruction from a safe elevation, singing of the decimation

of Troy. He was famous for never wearing the same garment twice. He sought out sexual thrills like a hog snuffling for truffles. He had a favored freedman, Sporus, castrated, then married him in a ceremony in which Sporus was dressed in the traditional garb of a bride and Nero played the groom. Later, Nero repeated the ceremony with another of his freedmen playing the groom while he adopted the role of bride, sans castration; the pseudo-nuptials were consummated on a couch in full view of guests at a banquet. He was attention-seeking, petulant, arbitrary. He had the senator Publius Clodius Thrasea Paetus murdered on the ground that his expressions were overly melancholic.

No wonder Nero's name became a byword for degeneracy. "Let not ever / The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom," Hamlet reminds himself as he prepares to confront Gertrude over her marriage to Claudius, resolving to "speak daggers to her but use none." In the twentieth century, Nero was memorialized by the lurid, Academy Award-nominated performance of Peter Ustinov in the 1951 Hollywood epic "Quo Vadis," in which Ustinov wore purple robes, kicked servants at will, and plummily insisted that Seneca, his tutor turned adviser, acknowledge his omnipotence. In a more recent popular depiction, a TV movie directed by the late Paul Marcus, Nero is represented as a pretty-boy prince traumatized by having witnessed his father being murdered by the emperor Caligula; Nero starts his reign with good intentions before embarking upon his own program of Caligula-style excesses. His popular reputation even features in that comprehensive catalogue of humanity "The Simpsons," in an episode in which Homer takes his evangelical neighbor, Ned Flanders, to Las Vegas for an experiment in depravity. After a night of boozing at the tables, they wake to find that each has married a cocktail waitress from the hotel casino where they are staying: Nero's Palace.

All of this, according to some recent scholars, is at best an exaggeration and at worst a fabrication: a narrative derived from biased histories, written decades after Nero died, that relied on dubious sources. Nero was the last of the Julio-Claudian emperors, and these posthumous accounts were calculated in part to denigrate this dynastic line and bur-

*A show at the British Museum offers a less sensationalist account of Nero's reign.*

nish the reputations of its successors. Depictions of Nero as notorious are “based on a source narrative that is partisan,” Thorsten Opper, a curator in the Greek and Roman division of the British Museum, told me recently. The museum has just opened an exhibition that, if not quite aiming to rehabilitate Nero, challenges his grotesque reputation. “Anything you think you know about Nero is based on manipulation and lies that are two thousand years old,” Opper, the show’s lead curator, said. Indeed, some of the stories told about Nero, such as the saying that he “fiddled while Rome burned,” are patently absurd: violins weren’t invented until the sixteenth century.

**M**ost of what has been passed down about Nero comes from three historians: Tacitus, who portrays him as having “polluted himself by every lawful or lawless indulgence”; Cassius Dio, who describes Nero skulking incognito through Rome at night while “insulting women,” “practicing lewdness on boys,” and “beating, wounding, and murdering” others; and Suetonius, who claims that Nero, having run through the usual roster of vices, invented a perversion of his own at public games that he hosted, in which he would put on an animal skin and “assail with violence the private parts both of men and women, while they were bound to stakes.”

Modern scholars have determined that many of the tropes used to characterize Nero’s depravities bear a remarkable similarity to literary accounts of mythical events. Opper said, “The whole thing is based on literary techniques that were taught in Roman rhetorical schools.” Tacitus’ and Dio’s accounts of the Great Fire of Rome, in 64 A.D., in their detailed evocations of citizens wailing and mothers grabbing their children, closely echo earlier accounts of attacks on cities, especially the siege of Troy. Nero wasn’t even in Rome when the fire started. Moreover, much of what was destroyed was slum housing constructed by exploitative landlords. During the fire, Nero “led the relief effort,” in Opper’s words, and afterward instituted a new building code.

Descriptions of Nero as unhinged and licentious belong to a rhetorical tradition of personal attack that flourished in the Roman courtroom. Opper told me, “They had a term for it—*vituperatio*, or ‘vitu-

peration,’ which meant that you could say anything about your opponent. You can really invent all manner of things just to malign that character. And that is exactly the kind of language and stereotypes we find in the source accounts.” The scholar Kirk Freudenburg, writing in “The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Nero” (2017), argues that the lurid account of the collapsing ship—Nero is said to have sent Agrippina off with a grand display of affection, only to have his plot foiled when she swam to safety—“begs to be taken as apocryphal, a contraption of the historians’ own clever design.” Cassius Dio’s history of ancient Rome suggests that Nero was inspired to build a trick vessel after seeing a play in which a prop boat suddenly opened up, but Opper argues that the historian himself likely borrowed the idea from the play. Similarly, when Tacitus writes that Agrippina’s final gesture was to offer her womb up to an assassin’s blade, his words mirror a passage from Seneca’s “Oedipus” in which Jocasta seeks to be stabbed in the womb “which bore my husband and my sons.” Seneca wrote the play around the time of Nero’s rule, and it’s possible that his retelling of the mythic story was inspired by the actual manner of Agrippina’s death. But it’s more probable that Seneca engaged in a dramatic invention, and that, as Opper suggests, it colored Tacitus’ later account of how Agrippina died.

Some of the current revisionism can seem tendentious. In the 2019 book “Nero: Emperor and Court,” the British classicist John F. Drinkwater addresses the even more heinous death of Poppaea. He accepts the historical sources that describe an argument between Nero and his wife—Suetonius says that she was angry with him for coming home late from chariot racing—but proposes that the blow to Poppaea’s belly may have been merely the climax of a “matrimonial row that got out of hand,” adding, “If so Nero was at worst guilty of manslaughter.” Opper sees no need to downplay domestic abuse; rather, he contends that the over-all account of the marital argument conforms to an established pattern in earlier histories of powerful leaders. For a tyrant, “killing your pregnant wife is a *topos*,” he told me. “It’s applied in Roman and Greek history. It’s just such an evil deed—how much worse

can someone be?” Opper said that Nero was deeply in love with Poppaea, and desperate for an heir; the couple’s only other child, a daughter, had died recently. In ancient Rome, pregnancy was a hazardous affair, and could prove fatal even without an assault. Opper told me, “You can’t prove it either way, but the evidence, I think, isn’t at all strong to say that he was to blame for it.”

**T**he British Museum seeks to build a less sensationalist account of Nero through the placement and elucidation of objects: statues, busts, coins, inscriptions, graffiti. A portrait emerges of a young, untested leader at the helm of an unwieldy empire that is under enormous stress. The show’s tenor is established by the first object on display: a statue of Nero as a boy of twelve or thirteen. The statue, on loan from the Louvre, depicts Nero on the cusp of manhood, his status indicated by what would at the time have been legible symbols: a bulla, an amulet worn like a locket, confirms that he is a freeborn boy who has not yet come of age. The occasion for the statue’s manufacture might have been the marriage of Nero’s mother to his grandfather Claudius, then the emperor, in 49 A.D., eight years after the death of Nero’s father, Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus. More likely, the object commemorates Claudius’ adoption of Nero as his heir in 50 A.D., the year Nero turned thirteen. The statue would originally have been displayed on a high plinth, but at the museum it is presented at ground level, so that the viewer is eye to eye with a child. The lighting design casts a long shadow: an imperial giant looms.

By the time Nero became emperor, in 54 A.D., the empire’s grip had long been weakening, and the senatorial and knightly classes of Rome often challenged the authority of the emperor, who was only the *princeps*—the leading member of their class—rather than a hereditary ruler. In this light, Nero’s construction of the Domus Aurea—a lavish palace that he built after the Great Fire, with three hundred rooms decorated with frescoes and gold leaf—can be seen less as the expression of a luxurious appetite than as a necessary investment in the perpetual entertainment of senators and knights. (That said, the Domus *was* a bit much; according to Suetonius, the



*"Besides the umbrella, give me one good reason to stay together."*

building's ceilings had secret compartments from which flower petals or drops of scented unguents were released onto guests' heads.)

Material evidence in the exhibition indicates that when Nero ascended the throne he initially garnered the support of the Senate. Claudius had minted coins in which his portrait was paired with an image of the Praetorian Guard's barracks—a daunting display of military domination. Nero asserted his legitimacy by inscribing the coins made for his accession with images of an oak wreath, which was traditionally bestowed as an honor by the Senate.

One of the most striking aspects of Nero's early rule was the elevated role of his mother, Agrippina. Gold coins issued shortly after Nero became emperor show him in profile, nose to nose, with his mother, whose titles are given: "Wife of the Deified Claudius, Mother of Nero Caesar." On a large marble relief that was created after Nero's elevation, Agrippina is shown placing a crown on Nero's head, as if she were responsible for his ascent. In the year after his accession, a gold coin was minted depicting mother and son in parallel. To the conservative

historians who later gave accounts of this period, Agrippina's prominence underscored the unnatural quality of Nero's reign. Tacitus scorned Nero for being "ruled by a woman." The alleged incest between mother and son was, in this telling, part of Agrippina's desperate effort to retain power after her husband's death. Tacitus writes that, when Nero was "flushed with wine and feasting," Agrippina "presented herself attractively attired to her half intoxicated son and offered him her person."

In the museum's catalogue, Opper writes that "there seems little reason now to take any of this seriously, beyond what it reveals about the authors involved." In the British Museum's presentation, Agrippina's securing of power is portrayed as evidence of her intelligence and her remarkable political abilities, particularly given the constraints of a patriarchal society. The coinage from Nero's reign also documents her eclipse. A few years after his accession, Nero is depicted alone. By 59 A.D. Agrippina was dead, at the age of forty-three, and though her demise probably did not involve self-sinking vessels at sea, Nero does seem to have been responsible for having her stabbed

to death. Opper suggests that Nero appears to have "sacrificed" her to appease Rome's senatorial élite, who resented her interventions in public affairs. Although matricide was generally regarded as a terrible crime by the ancient Romans, Opper points out that other inconvenient women of the period also met harsh fates: Julia, the only child of the emperor Augustus, was banished by her father and died in exile. "Mothers obviously have a special status, but it is a mistake to look at Nero in isolation," Opper told me. "You lose sight of the past patterns, and what they tell us about the values of this strange society."

Nero's demonic reputation also clashes with evidence that he was beloved by the Roman people. Alongside official portraits of the Emperor—the busts and statues—the British Museum includes a digitized reproduction of a graffito scratched into a building on the Palatine Hill. The image, which matches depictions of Nero on surviving coinage, shows him bearded and full-faced, with an ample double chin, and a hint of a smile on pursed lips. Opper takes the portrait to be admiring, rather than satirical, noting that no graffitied slogan suggests otherwise. Nero, he reports, was widely seen by the Roman public as youthful and vigorous. Suetonius notes that Nero, after becoming emperor, permitted members of the public to watch him exercise, demonstrating a physical prowess that was in marked contrast to Claudius, who had been ill and frail.

Nero enacted tax and currency reforms, steps that may have been unpopular with the wealthy but were welcomed by the broader public. The emperor Trajan, who came to power thirty years after Nero died, is said to have spoken of the "quinquennium Neronis"—the five good years of Nero's fourteen-year rule. Trajan did not cite a specific period, but as emperor Nero took various measures that were approved of and, tellingly, retained or built on by later leaders. He erected a new marketplace and a spectacular complex of public baths, which allowed ordinary citizens to indulge ablutionary pleasures previously reserved for the wealthy. At the end of the first century, the satirical poet Martial quipped, "Who was ever worse than Nero? Yet what can be better than Nero's warm baths?"

The Roman public also admired an aspect of Nero's character that was much criticized by his later judges: his love of theatricality, the arts, and spectacle. Nero enjoyed singing, and Suetonius writes that he "frequently declaimed in public, and recited verses of his own composing, not only at home, but in the theatre." These performances were "so much to the joy of all the people" that "the verses which had been publicly read, were, after being written in gold letters, consecrated to Jupiter Capitolinus." Nero's provision of public games and other entertainments further contributed to his popularity. The British Museum's show features a terra-cotta figurine showing two gladiators in combat, of the sort that were mass-produced as souvenirs. At the contests, violence sometimes spilled out of the arena. During one gladiatorial match in Pompeii, in 59 A.D., fighting broke out among supporters of rival combatants, resulting in such a disturbance that the Roman Senate placed a ten-year ban on such events. Nero intervened to have the ban reduced, which surely added to his public support.

Nero's championing of fun and games, however, was insufficient to secure his position at the top of Roman society, especially after the Great Fire. "Rome Is Burning," a recent book by the classicist Anthony A. Barrett, argues that wealthy citizens were adversely affected by the inadequacy of fire services during the conflagration, and angered when Nero attempted to build his palatial grounds over the ruins of their ravaged properties. But Opper points out that members of the élite had already come to dislike Nero. An uprising in Britain so threatened Roman power that Nero had to reinforce troops in the province; though the insurrection was defeated, the tumult weakened his reputation. Aristocratic families who had for generations nurtured their own aspirations to imperial control maintained that Nero wasn't up to the job, and tried to assassinate him. (When the plotters were caught, many were forced to commit suicide.)

The museum's exhibit emphasizes that Nero was struggling to hold together an empire that extended from Britain to Armenia. Among the most arresting items in the exhibition is a bronze head of Nero, which was discovered in the River Alde, in Suffolk, England, just over

a century ago. There is a dent on the left side of the figure's neck, which some scholars have read as a gesture of contempt: someone apparently decided to batter the art work with a heavy implement. Nero clearly "needed to reach out" to constituents who came from the empire's distant outposts, Opper suggests, but certain Roman senators behaved as if they were still running a city-state. A rebellion broke out in Gaul, followed by a more serious challenge to Nero's power from Servius Sulpicius Galba, the Roman governor of Spain. The Senate turned against Nero, who fled to a country estate and killed himself, at the age of thirty. Galba was soon declared emperor.

Despite Nero's downfall, not everyone was disenchanted with him. The show at the British Museum reminds visitors of occasional appearances, in the coming decades, of "false Neros" in the eastern part of the empire. These pretenders to the imperial throne—whose appeal must have depended on an enduring affection for Nero—included one who bore a remarkable physical resemblance to him, and even shared his predilection for music.

**M**ounting a museum show dedicated to revising the reputation of one of history's most infamous rulers is a provocative gesture at a time when world leaders have been exhibiting Nero-nian gestures of their own. While the museum's staff was installing the exhi-



bition, the British newspapers were filled with accounts of the alleged profligacy of Prime Minister Boris Johnson in renovating the apartment that he shares with his wife, Carrie Symonds. The expenses reportedly soared to a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars, and a wealthy donor allegedly covered most of them. (Johnson insists that he has paid for the work himself.) According to a headline in the *Daily Mail*, the new décor includes "gold wallpaper," suggesting a

Domus Aurea on Downing Street. In the United States, the decadent tastes of former President Donald Trump and his family were on display for four years. He spent as much time as he could at his gilded private residences; on the rare occasions that Melania Trump wore the same outfit twice, it made headlines. Even before Trump's Presidency began, the publication of the Steele dossier spread rumors of sexual behavior so theatrically perverse that Nero himself might have tipped his oak wreath in respect. Recent historical experience has reminded us that political popularity need not be at odds with ineffective or even criminally negligent leadership. In the spring of 2020, with the COVID-19 crisis igniting, Trump retweeted a photograph of himself playing the fiddle—an act of Nero-nian trolling.

Opper's purpose is not to burnish Nero's reputation but to show how it was constructed, and to what end. "Who controls the narrative?" he asked me. "It's the people in power. If you only subscribe to one person, and read their tweets, you get a very one-sided story." The story of Nero that emerges in the British Museum's reconsideration is more complex and less salacious than the familiar narrative, though Opper acknowledged, "I don't know if he was *good*. He certainly wasn't bad in the ways that he was depicted. He was a spoiled young aristocrat. But he wasn't a monster."

It was almost inevitable that Nero's reputation was crudely remade after his death, since those who replaced the Augustan line needed to secure their own claims to power. The exhibition includes a sculpture of a male figure that illustrates the ruthless logic of imperial succession. The sculpture, excavated in Carthage, Tunisia, evokes the graffitied sketch of Nero found on the Palatine Hill: the figure has the familiar contours of Nero's jowly face and forward-brushed hair. But the man's face has evidently been altered, with the addition of wrinkles and creases, to transform it into the face of a much older man: Vespasian, who came to power in 69 A.D., at the age of sixty. He established his own dynasty, the Flavians, who held power for the next three decades before themselves succumbing. Not for the last time, the celebration of a new emperor entailed the disfiguring of Nero. ♦

# AN ACT OF GOD

*Flordelis became famous in Brazil as a gospel singer, a pastor, and a politician. Then her husband was killed.*

BY JON LEE ANDERSON

Late on the evening of June 15, 2019, Flordelis dos Santos de Souza and her husband, Anderson do Carmo, left for a night out in Rio de Janeiro. They had been looking forward to a break, after an exhausting few months. Flordelis was a celebrity in Brazil: a gospel singer and the pastor of her own Pentecostal ministry, the Ministério Flordelis, with six churches and thousands of followers. Born in the favelas, she had become famous for adopting troubled kids left behind by the drug wars, and her life story, an archetypal Brazilian redemption tale, had been made into a movie starring some of the country's best-known actors. That February, she had taken office as a new member of the National Congress. Anderson was busy, too. He managed the ministry's affairs and Flordelis's political career, and also oversaw their home: a compound with four separate structures, to accommodate their family. The couple had fifty-five children, mostly adopted; twenty-two of them, ranging in age from three to forty, still lived at home. Flordelis was fifty-eight, Anderson forty-two. They had been together for twenty-six years, an inspiration to their followers.

From their house in Niterói, a sprawling port city across Guanabara Bay from Rio, they headed for the beach at Copacabana, an hour's drive away. At the beachfront promenade, they strolled through the late-evening crowds, stopping at a sidewalk café for a snack of fried fish. Later, in a burst of romantic feeling, Anderson climbed on a chair and called out, "Te amo! Te amo!"

Around two o'clock in the morning, they realized that church services would begin in just a few hours, and they headed home, with Anderson driving and Flordelis playing Pet Rescue on her phone. The streets were deserted as they came off the expressway. To her alarm, Flordelis recalled later, two people on a motorcycle drew alongside them, and

then appeared again a few blocks farther on. Niterói had become more dangerous in recent years, after a drug-trafficking gang known as Red Command moved in from Rio. The neighborhood where Flordelis and Anderson lived was middle class, but much of the surrounding area was run-down, and a rough favela covered a nearby hillside.

When the couple pulled up to their house, at the dead end of the street, no one was around. Inside a set of wooden gates at the driveway entrance, Flordelis slipped off her heels to climb the stairs, while Anderson stayed in the car, e-mailing last-minute instructions to employees for the day ahead. From the stairs, Flordelis called out to remind him to close the gates behind him.

Before bed, Flordelis habitually checked on all the kids. As she made her rounds, she saw light under the door of a son's room and went in to talk with him. Not long afterward, she was startled by what sounded like gunshots, followed by screams. She recognized the voice of a daughter calling out, "*Mi papa, mi papa!*" Outside, a couple of her sons placed Anderson's bloodied body in the car and rushed him to a hospital. Flordelis followed, but by the time she arrived Anderson was dead. In the autopsy, coroners found thirty bullet holes in his body, with many concentrated around his groin.

The tragedy was major news in Brazil: a celebrity's husband had been brutally killed. Amid an outpouring of sympathy, Flordelis and her family held an overnight vigil in the largest of her churches, where Anderson's body was displayed in an open casket, according to local custom. Flordelis appeared overwhelmed with grief, nearly fainting alongside the bier. The next morning, at a cemetery on the outskirts of Niterói, Flordelis and several of her daughters clutched one another at graveside, singing together as his coffin was lowered into the ground.

But the public's concern for Flordelis was quickly overtaken by suspicion. By the time the funeral was over, police had arrested two of her sons. Within twenty-four hours, one of them confessed to buying the murder weapon, while the other admitted shooting Anderson. In the next few days, six more siblings were arrested.

That August, the police issued an indictment against Flordelis, charging her with involvement in the killing. There was an immediate uproar. Her political party suspended her. Actors who had appeared in the film about her life expressed regret for promoting her story. Five of her six churches closed; parishioners had already stripped her name from the last one, calling it the City of Fire Ministry. Throughout, Flordelis insisted that she was innocent, the victim of a conspiracy among "powerful interests." She was fitted with an electronic anklet that tracked her movements, but when I arrived in Brazil, last December, she was still free, and determined to clear her name.

As Flordelis came to prominence, evangelical Christianity was booming in Brazil. In a country riven by poverty, corruption, and violent crime, evangelicalism holds a potent appeal: people with difficult lives can come to church and, with a few words, be converted and redeemed. A third of Brazil's citizens have embraced Pentecostalism in recent decades; the number of evangelical parliamentarians has doubled. Evangelicals have been a major pillar of support for President Jair Bolsonaro. A former Army captain with severe right-wing views, Bolsonaro won office, in 2018, with an anticorruption agenda and a promise to fight "gender ideology," a capacious term that includes same-sex marriage and other progressive causes. Though raised as a Catholic, he travelled to Israel in 2016 to be baptized in the Jordan River.

One of Bolsonaro's main backers was Edir Macedo, a self-styled bishop of the



*Flordelis dos Santos de Souza belongs to a movement that is reshaping Brazil, by fusing politics, religion, and entertainment.*

Universal Life Church of the Kingdom of God, which has hundreds of branches around the world. Macedo is one of the wealthiest people in Brazil, and his influence has helped him escape prosecution for charges that include tax evasion, fraud, trafficking adopted children, and embezzling billions of dollars in donations.

Macedo is also a media entrepreneur, and his main outlet, RecordTV, is the country's second most watched channel. During the 2018 election campaign, Bolsonaro boycotted a debate on Brazil's largest television network, Globo, to give an interview on RecordTV. Bolsonaro's slogan was "Brazil above everything, God above all," and, in the end, more than sixty per cent of the country's evangelicals voted for him. Flordelis won her seat in the same election, with close to a hundred and ninety-seven thousand votes, one of the largest totals for any female candidate in the country.

Bolsonaro appointed the evangelical pastor Damares Alves to be his minister for women, the family, and human rights. Known for her opposition to same-sex marriage, Alves was quickly embroiled in a scandal, involving an Amazonian indigenous girl whom she had raised as her daughter. In a report by *Época* magazine, Kamayurá tribal elders accused Alves of taking the child from her parents as a toddler, under false pretenses. She denied the charge, but suggested that she had saved the girl from "certain malnutrition and possible infanticide," while conceding that she had been unable to formalize her adoption because of Brazil's onerous laws.

In May, 2019, not long after Flordelis took office, she appeared with Alves at a forum in Brasília, where they advocated on behalf of Brazil's orphans; there were an estimated forty-seven thousand of them, languishing in orphanages while prospective parents waited as long as a decade. Flordelis spoke emotionally of her own experience as an adoptive mother, and called for a process that would take no longer than a pregnancy.

At the event, Flordelis was hailed by Arolde de Oliveira, a former military officer and an evangelical senator. "Flordelis made her passion, love, and deter-

mination reach dozens of children," he said. "Each adoption she and her husband have made is a story that can be used to write a reference book about what love is." A month later, Anderson was dead.

The highway that Flordelis and Anderson took home from Rio that night winds past battered port facilities and gang-tagged buildings; one is entirely covered with fistlike black emblems and the message "The government is the vandal." The bridge to Niterói crosses a blue expanse of bay, littered with rusting, half-sunken ships. On the other side is a welter of docks, cranes, favelas, and apartment blocks, marked with more gang tags and festering with uncollected garbage.

Flordelis's home is built into a hillside, protected by the gates at the street. One afternoon in December, I rang the bell at a security door, and after a moment it unlocked. Inside, just past the spot where Anderson was killed, concrete stairs led up to a jumble of yellow-painted structures with terra-cotta roofs. On a terrace outside the main house, a tiny, ancient woman with long black hair and an expressionless face silently watched me pass. Workmen were banging away inside; everything was covered in plastic sheeting and dust. A young woman emerged and explained that they were in the midst of renovations. She promised to summon Flordelis and disappeared.

While I waited, a heavyset, goateed man wearing a black suit and a garish tie was buzzed in and plodded up the stairs. When I introduced myself, he laughed and said, "Watch out. She's got a thing for men named Anderson." He was Flordelis's lawyer, Anderson Rollemberg. Before long, we were joined by a fortyish man with a military buzz cut—a recently hired bodyguard named Anderson Mello Vilela.

As we talked, Flordelis appeared in the doorway. A petite, dark-skinned woman, she wore a bold-patterned dress and a leather belt, and her hair swept down one shoulder in a ponytail. With a wide smile, she moved languidly from man to man, imparting kisses and coquettish looks. At her urging, we went from the crowded terrace and into her bedroom.

Flordelis had a king-size bed, with a white leatherette headboard and a scarlet spread embroidered with satin ribbons. She climbed on and propped herself up next to a large white Teddy bear, while her bodyguard sat protectively on a child's bed nearby. Behind her hung a print by the popular Brazilian artist Romero Britto, depicting a cartoonish boy and girl holding a heart between them. On a dresser was a pencil drawing of Flordelis and Anderson do Carmo, next to a framed picture of Santa Claus. With the exception of Rollemberg, who interrupted to caution Flordelis not to spoil their hopes for a Netflix show about her, everyone fell silent as she proceeded, for the next two and a half hours, to tell her life story.

She had grown up in Jacarezinho—Little Crocodile—a favela on the Guanabara shoreline with a fearsome reputation. (I had passed it on the way to Niterói but had not driven through; the neighborhood is controlled by a drug gang that does not welcome outsiders.) The fourth of five children, she was born in 1961. When my translator learned her age, she exclaimed, "Fifty-nine! What's the name of your plastic surgeon?" Flordelis laughed magnanimously; she'd heard this one before.

Her parents had been members of the Assembly of God, Brazil's largest evangelical church. Her father, an artist, had painted angels on church ceilings, and she had felt the pull of God from an early age. As a teen-ager, she helped lead prayer sessions, and, when she saw "youngsters as young as eight working for the *traficantes*," she told them to "come and pray," she said.

At one point, Flordelis told me, she had rescued a young man from a "death wall," where drug gangs torture and often kill people they suspect of betrayal. "A mother came to me to pray for her kid," she recalled. "But I decided to go after him, because I knew he was still alive. I went to the place of execution. The *traficantes* recognized me from the work I did with the ministers, and they let me pass." The boy had been tied up and badly beaten, she said. She asked for his release, and so the men brought her to speak to their chief at his home. "I traded my life for the boy," she told me. "I said, 'If he does something wrong, then you can come after me and kill



me.' He accepted the challenge and released the boy—and I took him home."

Another day, she had gone to proselytize at Central Station, a stately Art Deco edifice that has become a hangout for addicts, criminals, and the homeless. "I met a girl who had just left her baby in a vacant lot," she said. "That was Rayane, the first baby I took home. I left my address with the baby's mother." Not long afterward, there was a massacre of street children, and Rayane's mother gathered up the survivors and brought them to Flordelis. "In a blink of an eye, I had thirty-seven children," she said. "Fourteen of them were babies. I was thirty-three at the time."

Since Anderson's murder, many details of Flordelis's story had been challenged, by critics who argued that her rescues were less dramatic than she made them sound. There was indeed a massacre around that time: the police killed a group of children who slept outside the eighteenth-century Candelária church, not far from Central Station. But no one could be sure whether Flordelis's adoptees were survivors of that episode or just kids from the neighborhood. Public records in Brazil are chaotic, particularly among the poor and the disenfranchised.

Flordelis narrated her life as an epic, omitting obtrusive details. It was only later that I learned that the old woman on the terrace was her mother. Nor did she mention that, before Anderson do Carmo, she'd had another partner, with whom she had had three children. When I asked people around the house what had happened to him, they generally told me, with a disinterested shrug, that he had gone to northern Brazil.

In our conversation, Flordelis never said Anderson's name, referring to him only as "my husband." When I asked how they met, she said, "He came to know me because of the evangelism I did in the favelas." He was one of the first kids she took in—an efficient, ambitious boy of about sixteen, who left his family to join hers. It remained unclear when their intimate relationship began, but Flordelis insists that it wasn't until he was eighteen. She would have been thirty-four at the time. "He started by having a great admiration for me, and then it became love," she explained. "And then we got married. Three months later, I gave him thirty-seven children." She

laughed; it was a practiced punch line. "I told him, 'I will stay with the children, and I will understand if you leave. But my choice now is to stay with them, because they have already received a lot of no's in life. And then he looked at me and said, 'When I married you, I married your crazy things, too. So I will stay.'"

Flordelis didn't formalize the early adoptions she made, and the Brazilian courts accused her of illegally harboring underage children. Initially, she kept her family in a tiny two-bedroom home in Jacarezinho, but after a judge ordered her to give up custody she fled. For a time, she claimed, they lived on the street, until a young man offered them the use of his modest apartment, where they stayed hidden for four months. She next found refuge in a favela controlled by a drug gang, but, after discovering that the newspapers were referring to her as "an abductor of children," she decided to seek help.

She arranged a meeting with a United Nations official, who worked on youth issues, and with the head of a children's advocacy group, who had lobbied the police to hunt her down. As Flordelis told it, the officials were so moved by her story that they decided to take her side. With help from the children's ad-

vocate, she legalized her custody, creating the Flordelis Family Home Association as an umbrella group.

The meeting was an event: journalists came, and Flordelis recalled with a smile how they had fired questions at her. Afterward, two businessmen brothers heard of her work and agreed to rent a home for her, providing furniture, a washing machine, and groceries every week. Flordelis and her family were finally secure. Photographs from those days, published in newspapers and magazines, show her lying on a bed, with children arrayed around her like living toys.

Life was difficult, though. The family eventually moved from the house that the businessmen had rented for them, she said, because she felt embarrassed by their generosity. Four more places followed. Flordelis took on work to bring in extra money: cooking lunches for local security companies, stitching patches for military uniforms. She repeatedly fell ill, she said, "because of the stress I felt, having to give a bottle of milk to the babies every three hours, changing their diapers, and taking them to doctors' appointments. My older children helped me. And my husband—my husband gave up his dream of pursuing a career at the



*"Um, maybe we need to get you out of the house . . ."*

Bank of Brazil in order to help me. In fact, from the beginning, my husband gave up his dreams to live my dreams.”

The Ministerio Flordelis began in the garage of one of their temporary homes, where Flordelis and Anderson held prayer sessions for the family. Neighbors started coming, and her businessman sponsors sent friends to hear her sing. As word spread, neighbors erected a stage where she gave weekly performances. She sang mostly about love, she told me, and demonstrated by crooning a song: “Love is a bonfire—it is a fire that lights the lamp of the heart.”

Flordelis and Anderson got a car with a loudspeaker, and drove it into tough neighborhoods, playing her songs, which combined popular rhythms with the northeastern-Brazilian sound of *forró*. “We entered the favelas through music, to evangelize, to attract traffickers, addicts, boys and girls from the drug trade,” she explained. “The idea was to try to rescue them through music.” They held monthly vigils—music-and-prayer events—which grew into an annual jamboree called the International Missions Congress.

In 2002, Flordelis and her brood appeared on one of Brazil’s top-rated talk shows, and the host, a buoyant former model and singer named Xuxa, lauded her as “the mother of the nation.” (Learning that Flordelis was forty-one years old, Xuxa told the audience, “See? Helping others is better than plastic surgery!”) The appearance made Flordelis famous. In 2006, a prominent Brazilian director proposed making a movie about her life. Twenty-seven actors took part in the production, and all waived their fees. The première of the movie, “Just One Word to Change,” thrilled Flordelis: “They dressed me in designer clothes, and there was a makeup artist and everything!”

The movie didn’t make much money, but it changed her life. Brazil’s biggest gospel label, MK, signed her to a recording contract. Money began coming in. “I was able to give my children a better life,” Flordelis said. She recorded albums, and travelled to Europe and to the United States, singing in “Boston, Miami, New Jersey, New York, and other states I don’t remember the names of.” By 2018, Flordelis said, “I had already conquered almost all my dreams as a singer. I just needed to be nominated for a Grammy.”

## THE SURREALIST

Magritte is said  
to have said that  
everything we see  
  
hides another thing, that  
we always want to see  
what is hidden  
  
by what we see,  
& in his second painting  
of the lovers,  
  
with their mouths  
seemingly  
pressed against  
  
each other’s through  
thick white veils,  
I don’t know what is  
  
meant to be hidden  
from me,  
except perhaps  
  
Magritte’s dead mother, who died  
by drowning—  
a suicide,  
  
her body pulled  
from the water,  
nightgown  
  
wrapped around  
her face. I admire  
Magritte’s defense

Then she had another dream, this one sent by God. She was alone on a road, when a profound voice told her to walk across a sheaf of papers that lay at her feet. “A strong wind blew from my back, and those papers flew around,” she said. “And then I saw my picture with four numbers.” In the elections for Brazil’s Congress, each candidate is identified by four numbers. “I woke up my husband and said to him, ‘I’m going to be a politician.’” Anderson gave his unstinting support.

The couple had become close to Arrolde de Oliveira, the owner of Flordelis’s record label—a prominent evangelical who was also a nine-term federal deputy. Oliveira, who then belonged to the Social Democratic Party, encouraged

Flordelis’s political ambitions. But he was planning to run for his seat again, so the Party asked Flordelis to run for the local legislature instead. It was a quandary, Flordelis said: “In the dream, I wasn’t a state deputy. I was a federal deputy.” The day before candidates were required to register, her phone rang. “It was the P.S.D. people, saying that Arrolde had decided to run for the Senate, so I would be the candidate for federal deputy,” she said. “This was God saying, ‘It was me who gave you that dream.’”

By custom, federal-deputy candidates finance their own campaigns, and also subsidize the campaigns of local candidates they seek as allies. With Flordelis, things worked the other way around.

& disgust—  
the idea that  
her death had any place

in his paintings, *no*,  
the obscured faces,  
their opaque longing,

*no.* He is said  
to have said that  
his paintings conceal

nothing, that they  
evoke mystery  
& that the answer

to the question  
*What does it mean?* is  
nothing, because

mystery means  
nothing, because  
mystery is unknowable.

Sometimes  
a veil is just a veil &  
sometimes a veil is

everything  
we uncloak  
in order to see clearly.

—*Jiordan Castle*

“God started bringing state deputies who wanted me as a partner, so they financed my entire campaign,” she said. “I had thirty-six state-deputy candidates campaigning for me.”

For her campaign, Flordelis recorded a jingle, which became a huge hit. She sang it from her bed, with the ebullient bounce of samba. “Who will prevent the act of God?” she sang. “What has happened is over. No more crying. I’m going to go over the top!”

As Flordelis entered politics, Carly Machado, an anthropologist at Rio’s Federal Rural University, took notice. For several years, Machado had been studying the rise of evangelicalism, which

provided a refuge for people living at the edges of society. “In Brazil, it’s all about the frontiers, the gray areas,” Machado explained. “These churches are the only ones operating on the periphery, and their potency derives from their being the open door to the rest of society. It gives protection for people living in these very dangerous situations. Pentecostalism opens doors some of us may not even want to be opened. It’s ambiguous, like life in the favelas, where moral choices are more complicated.”

Machado had followed along as prominent evangelicals endured a succession of scandals. In 2013, Marcos Pereira, the head of the Assembly of God of the Latter-Day, was convicted of serially raping women

in his congregation in Rio. Pereira’s method was to tell his victims, some of them as young as fourteen, that they were possessed by Satan and could be exorcised only through sex with a holy man. (When I visited his church in 2009, Pereira summoned a group of teen-age girls, all wearing golden frocks, to sing for me. A few days later, I was in a favela controlled by the Red Command gang, and Pereira appeared in an S.U.V. with the gang’s boss. “Pastor Marcos,” as he was known, did not seem pleased to see me.) Police also suspected Pereira of involvement in drug trafficking, murder, and money laundering, but he evaded those charges and obtained an early release from prison. He has since reopened his church.

To Machado, Pereira represented “the masculine face” of Pentecostalism in Brazil. Flordelis had attracted her “because she was a woman, and because her emphasis was on family and the youth.” She had attended several of Flordelis’s International Missions Congress events and been fascinated by their combustible atmosphere. The audiences were in the thousands, with people bused in from all over Rio. The events lasted for several days, headlined by as many as twenty pastors, politicians, and singers. Flordelis often performed, reaching out toward her followers from the stage.

Machado said that Flordelis’s ministry appealed to Brazilians who didn’t feel represented by the traditionally rural Assembly of God or by the increasingly middle-class Universal Life Church. Something else seemed to be happening, too. At Flordelis’s events, Machado noted the presence of Marcos Feliciano, a São Paulo pastor who had become an influential congressman. She also saw Arolde de Oliveira, the czar of Brazil’s gospel-music business—an evangelical money machine. She realized that she was witnessing a fusion of politics, religion, and entertainment that was reshaping Brazil.

After the news broke of Anderson’s killing, Machado was curious enough to attend the funeral. At the Niterói cemetery, she noticed that Oliveira had come to pay his respects. Flordelis came late, and made “quite an entrance,” Machado recalled, arriving with an entourage, glamorously dressed and with sunglasses covering her eyes.

A human corridor, as long as a soccer



*"If you stay very still and don't shift your weight at all, it's really quite relaxing."*

field, formed to convey Flordelis from her parking spot to the grave site. "She was crying, but didn't act desperate," Machado told me. "When the time came to lower the coffin into the grave, she cried louder for a moment." Throughout the ceremony, Flordelis's son Flávio stood next to her protectively. Her family kept a distance from Anderson's, and she left as soon as the proceedings were over, while Anderson's mother lingered by the grave.

On the way out, Machado was stuck in a procession of cars leaving the cemetery. "I saw some police officers blocking the exit," she said. "I assumed that they were directing traffic." As she pulled away, she saw "strange movements" in her rear-view mirror. She found out later that it was the police pulling over Flordelis's car so that they could arrest her son.

The arrest was ordered by Reinaldo Leal, an investigator for the Niterói police homicide department. Forty-seven, with flame-red hair and a gym rat's physique, Leal is a career detective. On the side, he is the lead singer of a

heavy-metal band and has dabbled in acting, with a cameo in a 2017 telenovela based on his team's pursuit of a Rio drug boss. When Leal started the investigation, he had never heard of Anderson, but he had a vague notion of who Flordelis was, having seen her once on television during her political campaign.

He'd arrived at Flordelis's house about eight hours after the murder. Officers had gone to the scene to collect forensic evidence, and were still interviewing and identifying everyone who lived there. "From the start, it wasn't a normal investigation," Leal said. "The police had to figure out who the hell was who and go through twenty years of history, trying to figure out everyone's names and the relationships between them." Family members suggested that Anderson had been the victim of a bungled robbery attempt, but no one admitted to witnessing the attack. The mood in the house was unwelcoming. When Leal met Flordelis, he recalled, "I began to feel something was weird."

As police ran background checks, an outstanding warrant on an old drug

charge popped up for Lucas, one of Flordelis's adopted sons, and they arrested him. Leal examined video footage from a security camera mounted on the entrance gates. The camera faced into the street, away from the place where Anderson had been killed, but it revealed that, about twenty minutes before the murder, an Uber had dropped off Lucas, waited a while, and then driven off with him inside.

In custody, Lucas told the police that his arrival that night was just a coincidence. He'd moved out of Flordelis's place months earlier, but he had happened to be nearby that day, selling drugs in a favela. After work, he planned to go to an all-night dance party, a *baile funk*, and so he decided to drop his unsold inventory at the compound for safekeeping.

The police, suspecting that Lucas knew more, attempted an audacious bluff: they told him that they had apprehended the driver of the Uber who brought him to the compound. "We tricked him by telling him the driver was talking," Leal said. The ploy worked. Lucas admitted that the same driver had taken him to a favela a few weeks earlier, to buy a gun. But he didn't know that it would be used to commit murder, he said. He had bought it as a favor to Flávio, one of Flordelis's two biological sons.

Leal looked at Flávio's records and found that he, too, had an outstanding warrant, for domestic violence. On Monday morning, thirty-six hours after the murder, Leal sent officers to the funeral to arrest him.

In custody, Flávio quickly confessed to taking part in the killing. But the confessions didn't end the investigation. "As a cop," Leal explained, "I collect pieces to eliminate coincidences," and many coincidences were still unexplained. For one thing, cell phones belonging to Anderson and Flávio were missing. "No one could tell us where they were," Leal said. On June 19th, officers went to the compound to search for the phones. They didn't find them. Instead, on the dresser in Flávio's room, they found the gun that he had used to kill Anderson. It was a 9-millimetre Bersa, an Argentine-made semi-automatic. There were no fingerprints on the gun, but there was a pubic hair, which

forensics traced to Flávio. “We knew it wasn’t a robbery now,” Leal said. “But we still couldn’t see the end of the road.”

From her bed, Flordelis told stories, sang, laughed, and cried. When she grew bored, she tapped at her phone, and gave orders to her children and to her bodyguard, who came and went with bottles of juice and a book about her life and a DVD of her movie, both of which she autographed for me. It was only after an hour or so, during which she recounted her upbringing, the adoptions, the movie, and her careers in music and in politics, that she finally came to Anderson’s murder, “the event that turned my life upside down in 2019.”

As Flordelis spoke, her lawyer began playing with his phone, and her bodyguard dropped his gaze and started rubbing his leg. The killing had nothing to do with her, she said. The children had planned the whole thing. As she told it, in early 2019 she discovered ominous text messages on her phone. The messages weren’t meant for her, she explained; everyone in the house used her phone, because she wasn’t possessive about material things. In the texts, a daughter and a son had discussed plans to kill Anderson.

When I asked why, Flordelis replied vaguely. “It was a disagreement . . . between children at home, with him,” she said. “When I saw the message, I showed it to my husband. So . . . but my husband didn’t take it too seriously. He thought he was going to solve it, because he was the type of guy who could solve everything, right? If we went to a police station, which was what I wanted him to do, our name would be exposed in the media. And then—imagine the media talking about a plot, a murder. He didn’t want that.” In March, Anderson discovered another threatening message, on his iPad. “And in June,” she said, “my husband was murdered.”

She recalled that she had gone out on errands that day, culminating with her big weekly grocery shopping. She reached onto her side table to retrieve a paper receipt as evidence. When she unfurled it, the receipt extended to the floor, three feet below. At nine that night, she had decided to cook for Anderson, who had spent the day doing administrative work and watching sports on TV.

“In the kitchen, he turned to me and said, ‘Love, shall we go out?’” Flordelis was tired, but she said yes. “I was embarrassed to say no to him,” she told me. “I borrowed a dress from my daughter Isabel—a little floral dress with straps, you know. I didn’t need to dress up, because we were just going for a walk.”

At Copacabana, they’d flirted like young lovers. “He yelled, ‘I love you!’” she recalled. “I pretended I didn’t hear, then he yelled it very loudly. Then he sat me on the hood of the car, and we talked about our life. About our trips. We had travelled to Brussels, and I liked Brussels.”

There was a catch in Flordelis’s voice. “My husband was . . . was . . . romantic.” She paused. “We talked about our projects, our political project, too. You know, he was very excited that I had won with the number of votes that I’d won. We had this game of slapping hands and saying that we were an unbeatable pair.” Her voice broke again. “And that night we did, too, right? We played. Then there was a moment when I ran, he ran after me, I threatened to throw sand at him, then he stopped. And then I remembered the hour, and I said, ‘Love, we have worship today.’ It was already dawn. We got in the car and left.”

At home, the gate control had a glitch, so Anderson got out to hit it and make it open. As Flordelis climbed the stairs, heels in hand, she saw that he had lagged behind to peck at his cell phone. “I looked at him and said, ‘Darling, don’t forget to

After Flordelis finished talking about the murder, the mood brightened quickly, and she took me on a tour of the compound. She seemed to want to show me that this was a happy, harmonious place. The children’s rooms were simple but tidy, with good hardwood floors; a bathroom had been freshly tiled. In one bedroom, a pair of girls froze in embarrassment as Flordelis opened the door and encouraged me to poke my head in. Back outside, Flordelis waved to two smaller houses just up the hill and explained that her older kids lived there. A woman leaned out a window and shouted a greeting. Flordelis waved and said, “You’re getting married soon, aren’t you? What’s the date?”

Up a flight of exterior stairs was an open-air kitchen, where two teen-age girls were cooking: feijoada, rice, and fried yucca. Flordelis stirred the pots for a moment and declared lunch ready. On a terrace next to the kitchen, kids were filling a small swimming pool with a hose; they said that they had drained it when their golden retriever became sick after swimming in the water. As I sat down to lunch and they went back to squirting one another with the hose, it felt like I was visiting with a normal family, as if no murder had occurred just down the front walk.

A few miles from Flordelis’s house, I visited Allan Duarte Lacerda, the homicide chief of the São Gonçalo and Niterói police. When I said that Flordelis had presented herself as an uncomprehending victim, Lacerda—an athletic, lightly bearded man of forty—shook his head. “She’s no altruist,” he said. “She is cold, calculating, and ambitious, capable of anything, and I have no doubt whatsoever that she ordered Anderson to be killed.”

The police’s suspicion of Flordelis was spurred by testimony from her adopted son Misael. One morning, I met him and his wife, Luana, at her parents’ home, in an upscale neighborhood overlooking the Niterói coastline. Misael, a boyish-looking forty-two-year-old, told me that he had left his family to live with Flordelis when he was twelve years old and spent much of his subsequent life in her orbit.

Misael explained that he was born in Jacarezinho, Flordelis’s old neighborhood. When he met her, he was overwhelmed by her presence, and by the



close the gate,’ ” she said. “It was the last time I saw him alive.” When she heard the gunshots, she had wanted to run to him, but, she maintained, some of her children surrounded her and held her back. Flordelis fell silent, and when she spoke again her voice was small and strangled. “I didn’t know it was going to happen. If I knew, for sure I wouldn’t have left him. Because we had . . . we had the dream of dying together. We thought we would die together on the roads of life.”

permissive atmosphere of her house. She allowed him to play video games whenever he wanted; when he lost interest in school, she told him that he didn't have to go anymore. He and a number of other adopted boys formed a tight clique around her. She told them that she had died and been reincarnated as an angel, and that they had been sent by God to protect her. She had given them Biblical names to show their status; Wagner became Misael. "What I felt for her was something like idolatry," he said. Misael had eventually cut himself off from his relatives. "My biological mother tried to call me, but I wouldn't receive her," he said regretfully. "Flordelis told me I didn't need that family anymore."

In the compound, children referred to Flordelis and Anderson as their mother and father, but these terms didn't entirely capture their roles. She was the charismatic central figure, and he was the all-seeing gatekeeper. As the family expanded, Flordelis instituted a kind of cell structure, in which newly arrived children were "given" to older ones for care. Some felt the lack of parenting keenly. One daughter recalled that Flordelis had never acted like a "real mother"—never showed her love or talked about intimate things. When she had her first period, her appointed "brother" had explained what to do.

Misael told me that he'd never had much time to think about how the house was run. He'd been busy looking after the younger children and raising money for the family; older children went out to work, and gave Flordelis and Anderson a portion of their earnings. His twenties and thirties had slipped by, he told me. If he hadn't met Luana, he'd probably still be with Flordelis. Smiling at his wife, he said, "She saved me."

He had met Luana through the family church—she was a young parishioner there—and they were married with Flordelis's blessing. They had moved out of the compound a few years ago, but had worked for Flordelis until the day of Anderson's murder. Luana had been close to Flordelis, serving as her driver and then her personal secretary, but she had only gradually discovered the extent of her psychological control of the family. "I once found a dagger in Misael's closet," she said. "When I asked what it was, he said that Flordelis had given it to him

to kill the Beast." (Flordelis denies this, calling it "crazy talk.")

Misael recalled that prayer sessions with Flordelis were tinged with occult practices. "Whenever we prayed, it was for a purpose," he said. "If you wanted to have control over someone, we put melon, honey, and crystal sugar in a pot, then left your name in the honey with the name of the person, with an engagement ring. And then we lit a candle and we all prayed together for seven days. If anyone asked why those rituals weren't in the Bible, she would say that they had been professed by Christ in the past but been lost to history." Once, Misael said, Flordelis had locked him in a room for twenty-one days to pray. "They only knocked on the door to deliver food, because according to her I needed to be purified."

The night of the murder, Luana and Misael were asleep at home when her phone rang. It was Pastor Luciano, an adopted son who serves as one of Flordelis's top political aides. "He said, 'Anderson was shot, in a robbery attempt,'" Luana told me. "I woke up and said to Misael, 'They did it. They killed your father.'"

The next call was from Daniel, another adopted son. He sounded panicked. Luana and Misael told him to take Anderson to the hospital, and then set out to meet him. "Forty minutes after we got there, Flor showed up, well dressed, saying, 'Tell me my husband is alive,'"



Luana recalled. "But, when you know someone, you know when she is pretending. She looked at me, faking tears. She knew he was dead."

Two days after the murder, Misael and Daniel went to the police and named several family members whom they suspected of involvement. Leal decided to bring everyone into the station to be interrogated. "We wanted them all there, so they couldn't compare notes," he told me. Within a week, the police had gath-

ered enough evidence to arrest six more suspects, and they began to build a theory of the case.

According to the narrative that the police assembled, the family had been trying to kill Anderson since at least 2018. One Sunday that March, several of the children had arranged for a hit man to ambush him as he drove away from church after services—but Anderson eluded him by leaving in a borrowed car. Afterward, the conspirators had begun lacing Anderson's food with arsenic, sending him to the hospital six times. Luana, Misael's wife, recalled that Anderson had vomited during meetings, and that Flordelis had said, "Anderson is going to die, because he's in God's way."

Several family members later discussed the poisonings in testimony. Roberta, twenty-six years old, said that Cristiana, her "mother" in the house, had drunk some of Anderson's juice and become so ill that she had to go to the hospital. An adopted daughter named Diana recalled that another daughter had put powder in Anderson's drink, saying, "I'll do anything for Mama." The unsuccessful poisoning attempts bred frustration. According to a family rumor, one daughter complained that Anderson was "so rotten he wouldn't die," and Flordelis told her, "If you want to kill him, it will have to be bullets." (Flordelis denies this.)

As evidence came in, the police theorized a more specific plot. A daughter named Marzy, they determined, had asked Lucas to arrange the killing and make it look like a bungled robbery; in exchange, she promised him five thousand reais, about eight hundred and fifty dollars, and Anderson's collection of wristwatches. Flávio did the shooting; others helped with logistics and distracted potential witnesses. (Marzy, Lucas, and Flávio could not be reached for comment.) The police began to believe that the conspiracy spread through the family. The relationships were complex, but they all revolved around one person. "Once we understood the family dynamic, we began to suspect Flordelis," Leal said.

Why would Flordelis have wanted Anderson dead? The investigation suggested that the motive originated in disputes within the family. There were conflicts over money, competition for the parents' affection, and, especially, resent-

ment of Anderson's growing influence.

When the police couldn't find Anderson's cell phone, they asked the service provider for a chip linked to his number; after they cracked his password, they were able to download the entirety of his records from the cloud. "We understood a lot after that," Leal said. "It was clear that he organized everything. He orchestrated everything, even her political meetings. We could see the power conflict."

Flordelis and Anderson seemed caught in a marriage that, as the leaders of a prominent church, they couldn't dissolve. She was the public face and the elected official; he controlled the money and seemed to be the driving intelligence behind her political career. Leal recalled an e-mail in which Anderson complained that Flordelis wasn't giving him enough credit for his work. Other communications, he said, suggested a growing complicity between her and Pastor Luciano—the political aide who had called Luana to break the news. "It was possible to see she was planning to replace Anderson with Luciano," Leal said. "She was able to manipulate the kids into killing Anderson, because of her great psychological power over them," he added. "She knew how to exploit the fragility of each kid."

In a series of court appearances this past winter, Flordelis did her best to confound the prosecution's case. On December 18th, during my visit, she arrived looking like an Amish housewife, in an ankle-length print dress with her hair in a chaste bun. There was a buzz of excitement as she was shown to a wooden chair in the defendants' gallery. While she sat demurely, guards led in her ten co-defendants, their manacled wrists held in front of them like penitents. Flávio, the son who had confessed to carrying out the shooting, was a short, bespectacled man in his thirties. He stared at the ground, until the detainees were led away. Cameramen crowded in for pictures and were shooed out again. When they were gone, the judge, Nearis dos Santos Carvalho Arce, read out the charges. Santos said that Flordelis had led a conspiracy to murder Anderson, "who was shot cruelly with many bullets in his genital area, causing him pain before he died."

In previous testimony, several of Flordelis's children had said that they believed she was behind the killing. Ro-



*"I do think it would speed things up if you followed my social media."*

• •

Berta recalled that, when she heard the news, her first thought was "It was her—Flordelis." Diana said, "The only person I felt could be involved in this was my mother." But, when Santos asked Flordelis if she had taken part in a plot, she denied it. "To do so would be to destroy myself," she said, in a forlorn voice. "After God himself, he was the most important thing in the world to me."

This was Flordelis's fourth appearance in court, and the judge seemed to be losing patience with her. Not long before, she had revoked Flordelis's right to visit her arrested children, suspecting that they were concocting an alibi. In court, she openly challenged the veracity of many of her statements. During testimony, Flordelis narrated the fatal night in dramatic detail, but, when she reached the point where Anderson declared his love for her, Santos interrupted: "So what then? You went home?" Undeterred, Flordelis went on, remembering how she left him toying with his cell phone in the car. She broke down,

as she had with me, when she spoke of the last time she had seen him alive.

Santos, pushing for specifics, noted that Flordelis's family had two dogs, but that they didn't bark on the night of the murder. Had they been drugged? One of them, she observed, had been put down a month later.

Flordelis demurred, and the judge asked her directly, "Did you poison your husband?"

"Never," Flordelis replied.

The children accused of taking part in the plot didn't dispute the poisoning attempts. But they maintained that Anderson's killing had been an act of revenge, driven by a daughter named Simone. I'd seen her in court: a pale, dark-haired woman in her late thirties who stayed close to her mother.

In Simone's telling, Anderson had sexually assaulted her for years, even as she suffered from cancer. She said that she had endured the assaults only because he had paid for her medical treatment. A lawyer for Anderson's family contradicted

this assertion, producing a document showing that the treatment was paid for by insurance. The police say that they found no evidence of sexual abuse, and also point out that Simone had dated Anderson before he married Flordelis—a relationship that Simone says amounted to nothing more than a few kisses.

Simone admitted to authorities that she had supplied money to buy the murder weapon. But, she said, she had lost track of the plot afterward, and had been away from the compound the night of the killing, meeting a lover at a motel. She also denied taking part in the poisoning attempts, even though the police found records on her phone of Google searches for “someone bad ass,” “where to find killers,” and “easy-to-buy lethal poison to kill a person.” She maintains that a friend’s dog was sick, and she hoped to put him out of his misery.

In court, Flordelis denied knowing anything about sexual abuse. In a subsequent TV interview, though, she claimed that abuse had driven Simone to mastermind the killing. “She carried it alone, in silence, these harassments, these rapes,” she said, then hastened to add, “I’m not defending her, because I

don’t agree with what she did. I disagree a hundred per cent.”

The witnesses who spoke on Flordelis’s behalf furiously proclaimed her innocence. The daughter named Christiana disputed claims of a conspiracy; when Santos asked if there was a “law of silence” in their house, she called the story “an invention.” But the supporters’ testimony often led to more confusion. Another daughter, a twenty-one-year-old named Gabriela, spoke in an almost inaudible monotone, saying no to every question that Santos asked. As she contradicted earlier testimony, which had implicated Flordelis, people on the bench exchanged glances. Santos asked Gabriela if she had “taken something.” She said no, in the same flat voice. “You don’t seem normal,” Santos told her. Flordelis told me later that Gabriela had epilepsy, and had taken medicine for it before appearing in court. “I wanted the judge to see that her testimony couldn’t be relied upon,” she said.

For the time being, Flordelis couldn’t be prosecuted; Brazilian lawmakers are granted immunity to criminal charges. But members of her party had called for her immunity to be revoked, and her case

was pending before an ethics committee.

A few days after our first meeting, Flordelis flew to Brasilia, to seek support from the head of the women’s congressional caucus. A legislator had launched a petition to have her case expedited, citing the grave charges. Flordelis argued that the urgency around her case was sexist: hundreds of Brazilian legislators have faced charges, ranging from graft and money laundering to slavery.

In Congress, we walked through empty hallways to the chamber where the legislature was in session. Flordelis went in and returned a few moments later with her party’s leader, Diego Andrade. As he scrutinized me, Flordelis introduced me as “an important journalist from the United States.”

While Andrade spoke, Flordelis’s eyes flitted from him to me. He offered politely that, after “the tragedy” of Anderson’s murder, Flordelis’s Party membership had been suspended until her name was cleared. He excused himself quickly, explaining that he was debating a budget bill. Politicians from other parties seemed equally reluctant to associate with Flordelis. A few minutes later, Rodrigo Maia, the speaker of the lower house, strode from the chamber, accompanied by aides. Flordelis called out and pushed me toward him. Maia shook my hand and then hustled off, too.

The next day, in Brasília, I went to see Damares Alves, the minister for women, the family, and human rights—Flordelis’s former ally. “Her life story was very beautiful,” Alves said. But now she felt deceived. Flordelis had taken advantage of the innocent hearts of millions of God-fearing Brazilians, Alves said, adding that she hoped that she would be sentenced to a “long time” in prison.

Flordelis was aware that she was being abandoned. Two months earlier, she had lost her political mentor, Arolde de Oliveira, who had died of COVID-19 after arguing against its risks. Brazil’s tabloids were portraying her as a scheming murderer, and as a cult leader who held orgies with her own children. When we spoke in her bedroom, she railed against Misael, the first of her children to turn on her in public. “My husband was buried on Monday, and on Tuesday my adopted son went to the police station,” she said. “He said I had my husband killed for power and money.”



*“Please—outside of work I’m not your boss. I’m just Dave with the nicer car, bigger house, and three-hundred-dollar haircut.”*

And even today I ask, What power is that, what money is that? Because . . . I was the federal deputy, the renowned singer, we had the same powers in the church.” Misael had behaved suspiciously, she said. On the day of the funeral, he had gone to the ministry’s offices and removed the computers. “How cold is that?” she asked. “To lose someone you love and then worry about taking some computers?” Misael had helped manage the ministry’s finances, and she said that she had found papers suggesting that money was missing from the accounts. She had taken the papers to the police, she said, but they had ignored her. (Misael denies misusing funds, and says that the police removed the computers, which the police confirmed.)

“I couldn’t believe it,” she told me. “I was indicted without any evidence, just for messages on my cell phone.” Now, on top of everything else, politicians were taking action against her. “They’ve asked for my impeachment,” she complained. “But that’s unconstitutional, because I did not break any parliamentary decorum.” She went on, “I’m all alone—with my lawyer Rollemburg, with my work team, my advisers, my children. I have six children in prison, all because they knew about the message of my husband’s murder. But then I ask: And the others who also knew? Why aren’t they in jail? Of course, I wouldn’t want to see any of my children in jail. But the prosecutor’s office alleges that it arrested some because they knew and did nothing to prevent it. The whole family knew. Even my husband knew.

“It’s clear they want to arrest me at any cost. They want to make me the mastermind of this murder. That’s why I’m asking for help outside Brazil—I’m begging for help.” Flordelis crawled across her bed and handed me her phone. On the screen was an advertisement for “Deadly Recall,” an American television show hosted by Pat Postiglione, a celebrity detective with a purportedly photographic memory. “This is who I want to help me,” Flordelis said. “I found him on the Discovery Channel.”

One Sunday during my visit, Flordelis led morning services at her last remaining church, a hulking warehouse in São Gonçalo. Flordelis arrived in a black Toyota, with Simone’s hus-

band driving and Anderson Mello Vilela, the bodyguard, next to him. When they pulled up, Anderson jumped out to open Flordelis’s door and help her from the back seat.

Flordelis was glamorous again, in sunglasses and a long white dress decorated with blue flowers. A group of older women were waiting near the car to greet her deferentially. As she bestowed hugs and kisses, Anderson gestured toward the empty parking lot and whispered to me that, in the old days, there would have been more than fifteen hundred people there. Through the church doorway, I saw barely a dozen.

Carly Machado, the anthropologist, has tracked Flordelis’s case closely. She noted that many followers had abandoned her, but very few seemed to have abandoned Pentecostalism altogether. Most had simply switched churches, and some had even remained with the Ministério Flordelis. “Evangelicals don’t expect their leaders to be saints,” she told me. The Bible, she noted, is filled with stories of God’s followers falling prey to the Devil’s work. “God is there, waiting for the return of the lost sheep,” she said. “It doesn’t mean that each person will believe and follow the pastor, specifically Flordelis, again. But the final judgment is in God’s hands.”

Flordelis led me through the interior of the church: a shuttered nursery, an administrative office, and a café and gift shop selling Flordelis CDs and DVDs. In a sitting room upstairs, her disciples brought us coffee and cake. Flordelis spoke about the trial. “It’s a long road, but I feel that it’s coming to an end,” she said. “All things come to an end.”

We walked down to the sanctuary. The vast space had a white tiled floor and high gray walls and a large elevated stage, with “Jesus” painted on one wall and “Feliz Natal” on another. There were now about thirty people in the room, standing in front of socially distanced plastic chairs. They called out to Flordelis as she made her way toward the stage, where a man and a couple of young women were singing hymns, accompanied by electric guitars and drums.

In front of the stage were a pair of chairs decorated to look like thrones; one was hers, and the other had been Anderson’s. Flordelis knelt before them and prayed. Then she mounted the stage, set her cell phone on top of an arched golden lectern, picked up a microphone with a diamanté handle, and began to sing. On a huge screen behind her were

images of blue sky and crosses, and the lyrics of her songs scrolled down, as in a karaoke club. To a samba beat, she crooned, “I am going to cross over,” while images of hellfire flashed onscreen. Between songs, she gripped the microphone and growled, “I am a soldier of Christ.” Her

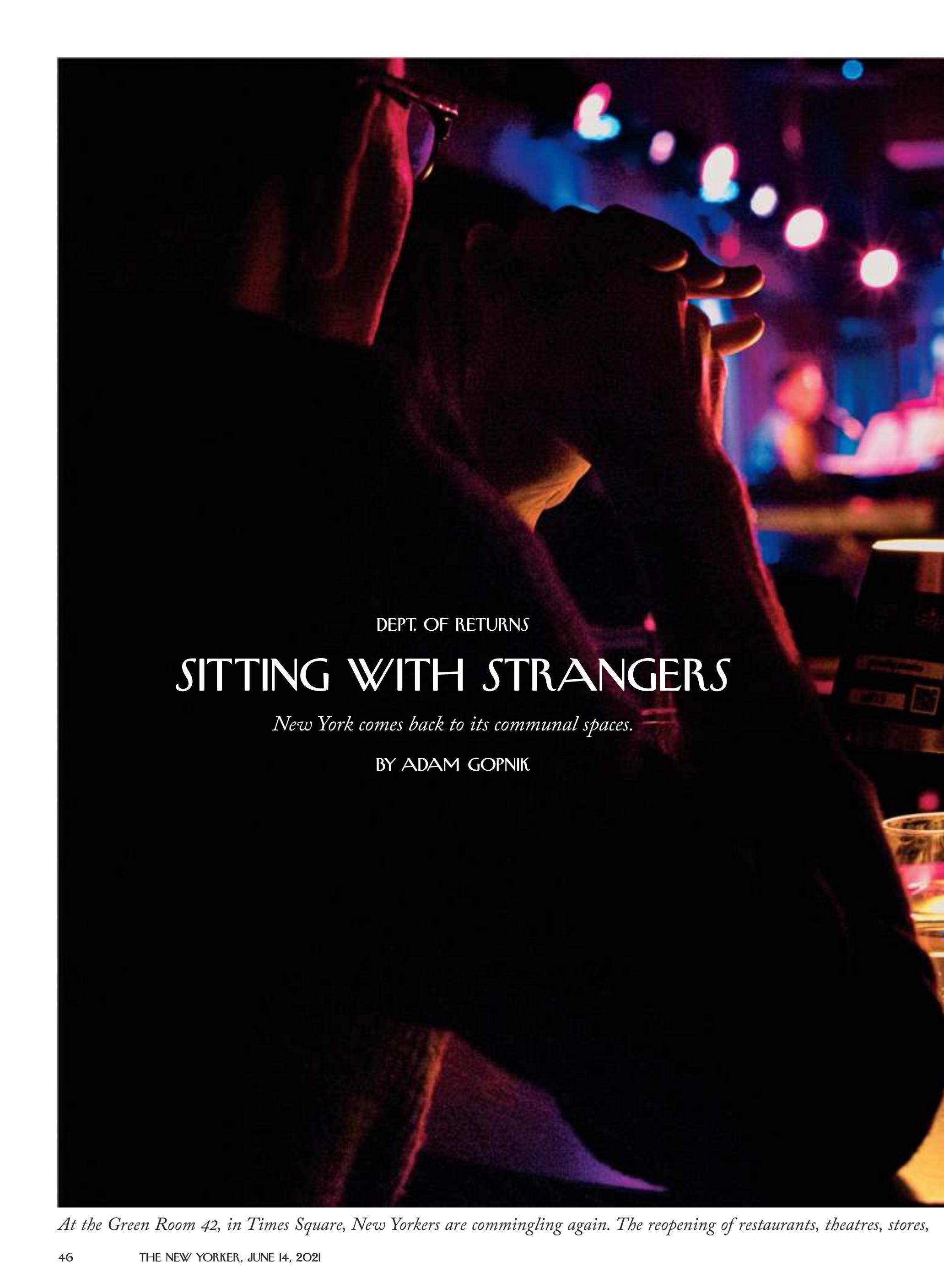
parishioners held their arms in the air, closed their eyes, and swayed in prayer.

After a half-dozen songs, Flordelis left the stage and sat in her throne. As she checked her phone, a man onstage asked for donations, calling, “God doesn’t want to feel your wallet, he wants to feel your heart.” Congregants lined up to place money in a donation box, or to hand over their credit cards to church employees with card readers.

Afterward, parishioners gathered onstage to present evidence of miracles. As the music swelled, a white-haired woman held up a sign that read “I’ve beaten COVID-19.” A pastor told a story about a woman who had undergone an abortion, but the child had lived anyway. As the pastor worked herself into a frenzy, Flordelis returned to the stage, where she was surrounded by women holding a red sheet. While the pastor shouted about the clash between good and evil, Flordelis collapsed to her knees, and the women covered her with the cloth. At last, the pastor’s voice softened, and Flordelis was helped back to her feet, smiling. She had been saved. God had beaten the Devil.

Flordelis sang her last song as a clip from the Hollywood film “David and Goliath” played behind her. As the song rose to a climax, and the shepherd slew the giant, Flordelis repeated the refrain: “The dream hasn’t died, the mourning will end.” ♦





DEPT. OF RETURNS

# SITTING WITH STRANGERS

*New York comes back to its communal spaces.*

BY ADAM GOPNIK

*At the Green Room 42, in Times Square, New Yorkers are commingling again. The reopening of restaurants, theatres, stores,*



*and concert venues requires relearning the steps of social and public life which once seemed second nature.*

**W**hen the city shut down more than a year ago, a walker within it could track the oncoming withdrawal and hibernation, block by block, and even—as people walking dogs moved farther away from each other—tautening leash by tautening leash. Birdland Jazz Club, open on a mid-March Monday night, with a singer nervously bathing his hands in Purell, had closed a week later. Grand Central Terminal, still busy as that weekend began, was nearly empty by the following Tuesday. Much of what was taken for granted then—the breezy confidence that life would be normal again by, well, maybe June?—has faded from memory. Adjusting to the unprecedented, we have instant amnesia for the unimaginable. So much that seemed impossible has happened, and yet as each thing happened it registered as merely the next thing happening. Broadway had *never* before closed for a year, not even during the 1918 pandemic; the mask mandates, even then, were not so extensive. No schools, no clubs, no gyms, no “indoor dining” (a term that, like “unsafe sex” and “analog watch,” turned an age-old default into a special condition)—we accepted it and went on. The shutdown was like the closing iris at the end of a Chaplin film, less and less of the outside world peeking out through the aperture of sight each day.

The reopening, promoted by falling COVID case numbers and rising vaccination rates, seemed to have happened over a similar weekend, in May. But it felt less like an iris closing and more like a flower blooming in time-lapse photography. The same time span felt faster, like an explosion rather than like a decension. Emergence may or may not be a stronger natural force than entropy, but we favor it emotionally. We mourn for the thing coming down, and root for the one going up.

Much of the emotion is like what must be felt at the end of a tsunami: the great wave came, washed over everything, and now has pulled back and we can inspect the beach. What has survived and what has not? Many familiar things have shuttered: a Persian restaurant here, a much loved stationery store there. We can wonder which temporary closings will truly be re-

versed. Will the Oyster Bar in Grand Central ever open again? What about the Tenth Street Russian & Turkish Baths, an institution apparently dating back to the nineteenth century? Even the most thoroughly vaccinated New Yorkers may not soon want to test their immunity in the conditions of thigh-to-thigh contact with heavily sweating, seventy-something men.

Walking through the Lower East Side, one sees that Economy Candy, in operation since 1937, remains closed for browsing, with candy available for pickup and delivery only. But a block away, at Orchard Corset—in place for the past century—the owner sits inside, as he has for as long as anyone can remember, as though waiting for the ghost of a chorus girl fresh from the Ziegfeld Follies to walk in and demand a bone-ribbed corset and camiknickers. (Orchard Corset, with its unchanging display of lingerie, has one of the two most hallucinatorily persistent window displays in town, the other being that of Wankel’s Hardware, on upper Third Avenue, where a variety of rotating fans and dehumidifiers are placed in the window bedecked and beribboned like prize show dogs. Wankel’s survived the tsunami, too.) Katz’s Deli still sports the same slogan, “Send a Salami to your boy in the army,” long after the original salamis and boys in the Army have passed.

Other places feel weirdly reanimated. The “Twilight Zone” quality that many observed in Times Square at the height of the pandemic has shifted into something more like—well, a “Twilight Zone” episode in which everyone, aside from one B-actor, forgets that a pandemic just killed tens of thousands of people and shut down the city for a year. (“Am I the only one who remembers?” William Shatner would shout, in closeup.) Madison Avenue in midtown, the most emotively inert part of the city, now almost elicits our compassion. Up and down the avenue, once the swanky street for high-end headquarters, one “Entire Premises for Rent” sign after another clamors for attention.

As a walker slows and settles, scene by scene, into specific places, the new stirrings often seem much like the old stirrings. “All our reflections turn

about,” Auden wrote at a moment of similar trauma and reflection, in 1940. “A common meditative norm. / Retrenchment, Sacrifice, Reform.” Retrenchment, sacrifice, and reform didn’t happen then, and seem unlikely to happen on a grand scale now. But smaller significant struggles take place, and one is to begin commingling again with other people—finding ways, after more than a year when the rule was to minimize human contact, to return to common spaces. What we call culture is basically the act of sharing air with strangers. Restaurants, theatres, small stores and large ones, concert venues—all are reopening, and, like victims of a traumatic injury relearning the steps that once seemed second nature, we are remembering how to dance.

**O**utside Johnson’s BBQ, on East 163rd Street, in the Bronx, two innocent strangers approached Dwayne Johnson, the owner of the famous soul-food kitchen. “You’re waking up an old man—making him work!” he pretended to complain, but then he got behind the counter and began to make up enormous containers of collard greens and yams and what many agree are the best ribs in the city, or at least the borough.

East 163rd Street is an almost perfect picture of a typical New York street as those streets actually exist now: a Chinese restaurant, already closed at 6 P.M.; a bodega, advertising lotto tickets on the awning; a dry cleaner; several locals in chairs taking the air; and trash bags—one of the great unspoken issues in the mayoral election—piled on the street corner.

Johnson’s BBQ, takeout only, has been in place and in the family since 1954, when it was opened by James and Pauline Johnson. The son took a brief detour to work at I.B.M. after playing basketball at Lee College, in Texas, but thought better of it. Now, at sixty-three, his hair frosted with white, he is thinking of handing the place over to the next generation. He covered huge platters of ribs with his patented mustard sauce, a bright, vibrant, tangy liquid. (“You can put it on anything. Fish, chicken, whatever. Order someone else’s food and put it on, and you’re eating Johnson’s.”)

Johnson’s is a small hangout with a



*Johnson's BBQ*, in the Bronx, stayed open through the pandemic. "Life changes, but we remain," Dwayne Johnson said.

big reputation—"Every rapper in the Bronx has eaten here"—and fills up with locals throughout the day. Johnson's father and mother opened the restaurant together, but "it was my mother really pushed this business," he explained. "Always cooked in here, dealt with the help. My father owned the building, but everybody that grew up here thought—well, they *knew*—who the founder was." At one point, he said, the Johnsons had three restaurants. "Here, then one on Prospect, and one on Morris Avenue. We served fish and oxtail and pigs' feet and ham hocks on Morris Avenue. The one on Prospect Avenue—that had sit-down, fifteen to twenty seats."

These days, Johnson concentrates on pork ribs and fried chicken; his secret is to season the ribs after they've marinated in vinegar, and then apply his special mustard sauce, which he hopes to put on the retail market soon. He is proud of his sides: "Rice and black-eyed peas, collard greens, candied yams, and potato salad. Sauce and juice in there, and the juice from the

ribs." Famously loquacious—"People I know, I like to welcome them"—he has to keep his daughter and his nephew by the counter on most days when there's a line. He hopes to leave the restaurant to both of them within the next couple of years.

In summer months, the line outside can be long, and over the years the Johnson family has funnelled the line outside on the street into the store. This made social-distancing adjustments for takeout during the pandemic tricky. Even as the line stretched down 163rd Street, the Johnsons tried to keep people moving. Now customers, while still socially distanced, are creeping together—"Inch by inch," Johnson said, "they're getting closer." There is often someone inside holding forth on general topics: today, a Latino singer had a long, complex story to tell about playing with Miles Davis once upon a time in another place.

The restaurant not only stayed open right through the pandemic; in Johnson's view, the pandemic was one more flood that tried to drown him out and

failed. "We never closed," he said. "We never came *near* closing. In fact, business has been good. Business has been great. Business could not be *better*. Life changes, but we remain."

The city's soul feeds on more than food, though, and for many nothing has been more apprehensively anticipated than the return of what might be called the spraying arts. The local specialty of standup comedy, in particular, depends on truly intimate address, performers acting as a human fountain of saliva: if the cone of aerosols could be filmed in raking light, we would see an audience put into contact with whatever was being sprayed.

On a recent Monday night in Gowanus, Brooklyn standup was coming back to life in a show at Littlefield, a former warehouse on Sackett Street. It's not quite a comedy club in the old-fashioned Seinfeldian sense, but more like a rock venue where self-produced shows go on, in this case under the direction of Jeremy Levenbach, who

brings in a local lineup of rising comics.

Sabrina Wu, a standup herself, was on her way to Littlefield to welcome the return of Brooklyn comedy, and struggling to explain to a newcomer the specifics of Brooklyn standup style, which either is or is not—or is sort of but not really—distinct from the Manhattan kind. Often, she said, “the punch line isn’t literally the words being said but about a point of view. It’s about the beat after the joke.”

Wu—“Obviously Asian, also gay, so everyone just thinks I come from California,” though she hails from Michigan—has, at twenty-three, already landed an agent and a seat in a writing room. But her life lies in standup, where she has a lot to say about the triangular complications of being Asian, American, and gay. In high school, in Ann Arbor, she explains in one of her standup bits, she was a surprisingly successful basketball star, and was entered in a newspaper contest for the outstanding player. “To get the greatest number of votes, my mom took that article and posted it on WeChat,” Wu recounted. “I went viral in China. ‘There’s a Chinese girl who’s good at basketball in America!’ I won, but they were suspicious: the second-place girl had six hundred votes, and I had two hundred thousand votes.”

Heading down Fifth Avenue in Park Slope toward Littlefield, Wu mused about the challenges of making it in standup: “The ladder has more first rungs than before, but a much less direct climb upwards, I think.” Where a West Harlem kid like George Carlin could, half a century ago, consciously plot a standup career, from night clubs to talk shows and sitcom appearances, the ascendant path is now more open in the first steps—open-mike shows abound, and TikTok and YouTube and Twitter build reputations—while the higher steps are clouded in mist. One performer at Littlefield that evening, Ian Lara, a thirty-year-old self-described Afro-Latino comic (“We’re, like, the next big thing”), recalled a 2019 appearance that he made on the “*Tonight Show*. ” “People tell me that if I had done what I did on the ‘*Tonight Show*’ twenty years ago my career would have exploded. Now it just kind of leaked out onto YouTube,” he said.

The proliferation of comedy shows and platforms even amid the pandemic means that most of the younger standups, who might once have been introduced as “having just come back from the Comic Strip in Columbus, Ohio,” are tonight more often introduced as *writers*—for “*Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*” or a Comedy Central series. Yet the customs of New York standup turn out to be oddly constant, in and out of pandemics, boroughs, and decades. There is a stool on the stage, a microphone on a stand—standups still don’t use lapel mikes. They still wear sneakers. There is still the obvious difference in delivery when the comic moves from repeating What Worked Before to What I’m Trying Out Now. These performers hibernated through the past fourteen months, and here they are.

The audience members seemed more uncertain than the comics about what their role ought to be. Outside the entrance, on an industrial Brooklyn street two blocks from the notoriously foul Gowanus Canal, the now familiar rituals of temperature-taking and vaccine avowal had already taken place. Once inside, seated not at tables but in neat, slightly distanced rows of chairs, about half the audience kept their masks on, and about half didn’t. Later, the pair of host comics muttered something about everyone being vaccinated, and this seemed probable, but a slight air of un-

The performers’ jokes were pandemic-inflected rather than pandemic-centered. The comedian Natasha Vaynblat talked about getting back on the subway: “The subway is not an overpriced, unreliable mode of transportation. What the subway actually is is an incredibly affordable, year-round haunted hayride.” The everyday experience looked different now. “Randomly, you’ll find yourself stalled in pitch-black darkness. Performers will lunge at you from every corner. You’ll find yourself sitting in a mysterious substance. You’re, like, what is that?” Vaynblat also worried about the potential embarrassment of bringing pandemic-lockdown habits to the office: “While working from home, as soon as my brain says it’s time to go to the bathroom I immediately start taking off my pants. . . . At home, that’s efficient. At the office, that’s indecent exposure.”

There were many jokes born of the months of isolation. “The most exciting thing that’s happened to me in the past year is that a friend texted me that she had a sexy dream that I appeared in,” the sweetly nebbishy comic Josh Gondelman said. “It felt good to get out of the house, even if it was in someone else’s mind.” But there was little comedy about the more immediate experience of the pandemic—about fear, or illness, or exhaustion, or even masking and distancing protocols. What happened during the months of shutdown, it seemed, was less incubation than hibernation—less new ideas and attitudes germinating than pent-up energies and habits preparing to rear back. Here was the simple mechanics of a jack-in-the-box—hold down the lid long enough and, no matter when you let it go, the toy springs right up.



ease still ruffled the cautious crowd. Loud laughter seemed permissible; the wild release of a normal comedy show, not. And the customary piccolo tremolo that used to run above the crowd noise of every comedy club—the excess laughter of the one drunk and slightly hysterical patron—had no purchase or possibility here. The laughter was more tentative than confident. It is easier to thaw out as a performer than it is to thaw out as an audience.

Ian Lara, in Wu’s judgment, was one of the standouts of the evening. Working with an easy, intelligent street style that recalls the young Chris Rock, he was born and bred in Brooklyn, and sat out the pandemic in Queens; he even wore a Mets cap while he performed.

After his set, Lara reflected that there were few good or fresh takes left about the pandemic: “And, yeah, I know the pandemic just ended. See, I don’t

have a story to tell that you don't know. You'd think, Well, that makes it 'universal,' or whatever. But not really. If I'm talking about a breakup, maybe five people in the audience have just had a breakup, and the other people are curious about breakups. I have *news*. But nobody wants to hear about the pandemic. They feel they know it. The shelf life is very short."

Still, Lara said, "some things work. A simple, silly one that I've been opening with is finding out about red wine during the pandemic. I turned thirty during the pandemic, and I've always heard people, women, speak about red wine: 'I wanna go home and have a glass of red wine.' See, I was never home, worked at night, and advertising about having a glass of wine going home aren't usually directed to Black men. When the pandemic broke and I was home, I had to try this out . . . and I became a red-wine drinker. My Friday night was, take a bath and have a glass of red wine. I'm late to the game. But it made me think I don't understand why rappers promote alcohol but not red wine. That's the alley it took me down. Rappers always promote alcohol like tequila and vodka. But if you listen to their lyrics they're very *emotional*. That doesn't sound like a tequila drunk. It sounds like a red-wine drunk. So I have to ask, Have you guys really been drinking Malbec?" He paused. "Rappers on red wine. That's one of the few pandemic jokes that works."

Lara had a hard pandemic. Many members of his family fell ill and an uncle died. But he never doubted the city's resilience. "It doesn't even seem there was a transition—it's like a switch flipped and New York was open again, from one night to the next," he said. "What I don't get is people saying New Yorkers are rude and arrogant. When the pandemic hit, we stood in our little one-bedroom apartments and didn't go out. We did it for society. It's funny, I had some road work during the pandemic, and, when I travelled in the cities that have these huge homes with land and pools, they're, like, 'We can't stay indoors!' New Yorkers sat in one-bedroom apartments for a year and just said, 'O.K.' We got hit the hardest, and I kept hearing, 'New York



"You may now begin venting about each other's wedding-prep behavior."

• •

is dead.' I was just, like, 'Of course New York will bounce back.' This is not like some . . . pop-up city that's just becoming trendy."

**O**f all the arts, singing is perhaps the most ominous to an epidemiologist. In that imaginary diagram of aerosolization, a comic would be expelling dribble, but a fine, full-out singer would be a toxic fountain, misting the virus deep into the tenth row. (One of the first documented superspreading events in this country involved a choir rehearsal.) Singers wondered for a desolate year if they would ever return to work. Plexiglas shields and distanced audiences have been tried, but the real cabaret night-club experience—the singer there, turning emotion into vocalese; you here, receiving the fluttering air and translat-

ing it back into emotion—had been denied.

The experiment was at last being tried on a Saturday night at a previously obscure club, the Green Room 42, hidden away on top of a Times Square hotel. Alice Ripley, the Tony-winning star of "Next to Normal," was coming back to sing with a small, Carole King-style band of piano and acoustic guitar. It was not exactly a return to tradition, however. Where once at the Copacabana or the El Morocco there were ashtrays and de-facto dress codes, with Walter Winchell making mordant notes and cancelling careers, the crowd tonight, mostly in the new uniform of shorts and T-shirts and baseball caps, was ushered in two by two, all masked, and placed in strict semicircles around naked tables. There would be no water, no drinks, and no food; the masks were



*The unease of the pandemic still hangs over certain audiences. Others have shed precautions eagerly.*

to stay on all the time. (A few rebels in the back lowered theirs.)

And then the air-conditioning collapsed, defeated by the late-spring humidity: the people packed inside and facing the musicians in front were not merely perspiring but in many cases gasping for water, or relief. The experience had less the feeling of a New York cabaret than of a life raft with night-club tables on it, set adrift on the ocean, with the suffering audience waving ripped shirts at distant ships.

Yet when Alice Ripley came out and began to sing, with her big, belting voice, the atmosphere altered. Ripley, dressed in a pink gown and sneakers, was perspiring and making jokes about it. But within five minutes her devotees were *en extase*, applauding, cheering, living again.

Ripley is the kind of performer who violates the basic premises of her craft with such authenticity that you start to doubt the premises, not the violations. Instead of singing familiar chanteuse numbers, Gershwin and Kern, she sings pop power ballads of the eight-

ies and nineties—Phil Collins songs, Foreigner songs—which she treats as though they were by Harold Arlen. Hearing “I Wanna Know What Love Is” sung as though it might be “Last Night When We Were Young” is an education in creative transformation. Ripley turned James Taylor’s “Your Smiling Face”—“Whenever I see your smiling face / I have to smile myself”—into a kind of tribute to what she expected to be the unmasked moment, which she saw, looking out, hadn’t quite arrived.

All the same, nobody ducked or avoided her as she sang. People seemed to bathe in the common sweat and spit. Where the comedy audience felt still halfway in the unease of the pandemic, the cabaret audience, despite the pandemic precautions weighing on their pleasures, was just *done* with it. They were an audience kept from being an audience, dreaming of being an audience again. When Ripley performed, phones flared on, hands were clasped, tears fell, applause greeted even the bridges of songs. Couples who had never

met before had been placed alongside one another, in the thrifty New York way, and forced—still masked and without the small protective armor of a glass with a drink in it—to acknowledge their too-present presence. But the music brought everyone together, on one beat, and tables danced—the upper bodies danced, at least—in unison. Often, it seemed as if every couple at every table were watching the show through their iPhone cameras, listening to Alice even as they kept Alice for later, for good.

“It used to bother me,” she said afterward. “Now I just hope that when they put it on YouTube I look O.K.” Ripley regarded this night in the spirit of a preview, rather than an opening. “I guess I’m still singing to masks,” she said. “Soon, the air-conditioner will be working. Soon, you will be allowed to drink water. We’ve come a long way, with theatre. But it’s been so strange, this weekend, the way everything just hatched. All these people! It’s as if they all just popped out of little cocoons.” (Since her performance, the Green

Room 42 has begun serving food and drinks, and vaccinated concertgoers can go maskless.)

Ripley described the experience of walking through Times Square when the city was largely shut down: "It was a cardboard cutout, a piece of scenery. We lost an ice-cream place—I felt that it's my personal duty to eat as much ice cream as I could. People asked, Why are we trying to save a restaurant? But it's not a restaurant—it's kind of like a church." The gospel of resilience was very much on her mind. "The one good thing we singers all learned is that we have to make our own music," she went on. "We were so dependent before! Waiting for bookings, for someone to smile. For a year, we sang for each other on StreamYard"—Zoom for performers, basically—"and we learned, hey, we can always book ourselves."

At the end of the evening, the audience filed out, masks still on, eyes alight with elation at having finally heard a show. Outside, on Tenth Avenue, from Forty-second Street right up to Fifty-seventh, every seat in every outdoor dining shed seemed taken, an uninterrupted vista of bare faces feeding.

A discarded mask looks eerily like a dead rat—at least if it is black and has long ties and has been thrown aside on the paths of a park. The city bicyclist, racing around the Central Park loop, closed to car traffic now for years, sees a cast-off mask ahead and swerves. The road is suddenly filled with these discarded masks, as though people, having been told that they were not absolutely essential, made a chorus-line gesture of tossing them extravagantly aside, in some common ecstatic striptease of relief. The repopulation of the parks by raccoons and other, less romantic rodents was an easily overlooked story of the pandemic, though it seemed rare for any New Yorker, in any borough, not to report an alarmingly close encounter with a budget-sized creature roaming through bonus-sized trash bags, apparently brought about by the combination of more trash and fewer people on the streets. This made the confusion of abandoned masks with run-over rodents worryingly plausible.

The "great bike boom" was a happier feature of the pandemic year; the

count of bicycle usage (and rentals, and sales, and thefts) multiplied. It wasn't just a bike boom, though: the Central Park circuit got crowded with e-bikes and motorized scooters, not to mention those weird balance-beam motorized unicycles. The pandemic seemed to double the self-propelled traffic in the Park, and has brought to mind Winslow Homer's Civil War-era woodblock prints of mobs of New Yorkers on skates tripping over other New Yorkers.

We're reminded that the city got turned inside out during the past year, in the specific sense that sidewalk dining and parkgoing became central to urban life; the outdoors became indoors, and the indoors outdoors. This may have extended past recreation into the more hazily poetic sense that the first became last and the last first—with an altered sense of who was and was not an essential worker, and what was and was not essential work. It is hard to turn a city inside out without turning its citizens' consciousness around, too. We did not change our lives, but the hope persists that, by redefining our space, we may yet remake our essence.

And yet the ebbing pandemic leaves in its wake a curious absence of exultation. "Absence of Exultation" could indeed be as much the motto of the reopening as "Abundance of Caution" was of the closing. The end of plagues in great cities has sometimes been celebrated by erecting buildings—as with the most beautiful Baroque church in the world, the Santa Maria della Salute, in Venice. In New York, no one would expect Baroque exuberance in architectural form, but we might seek more in behavior.

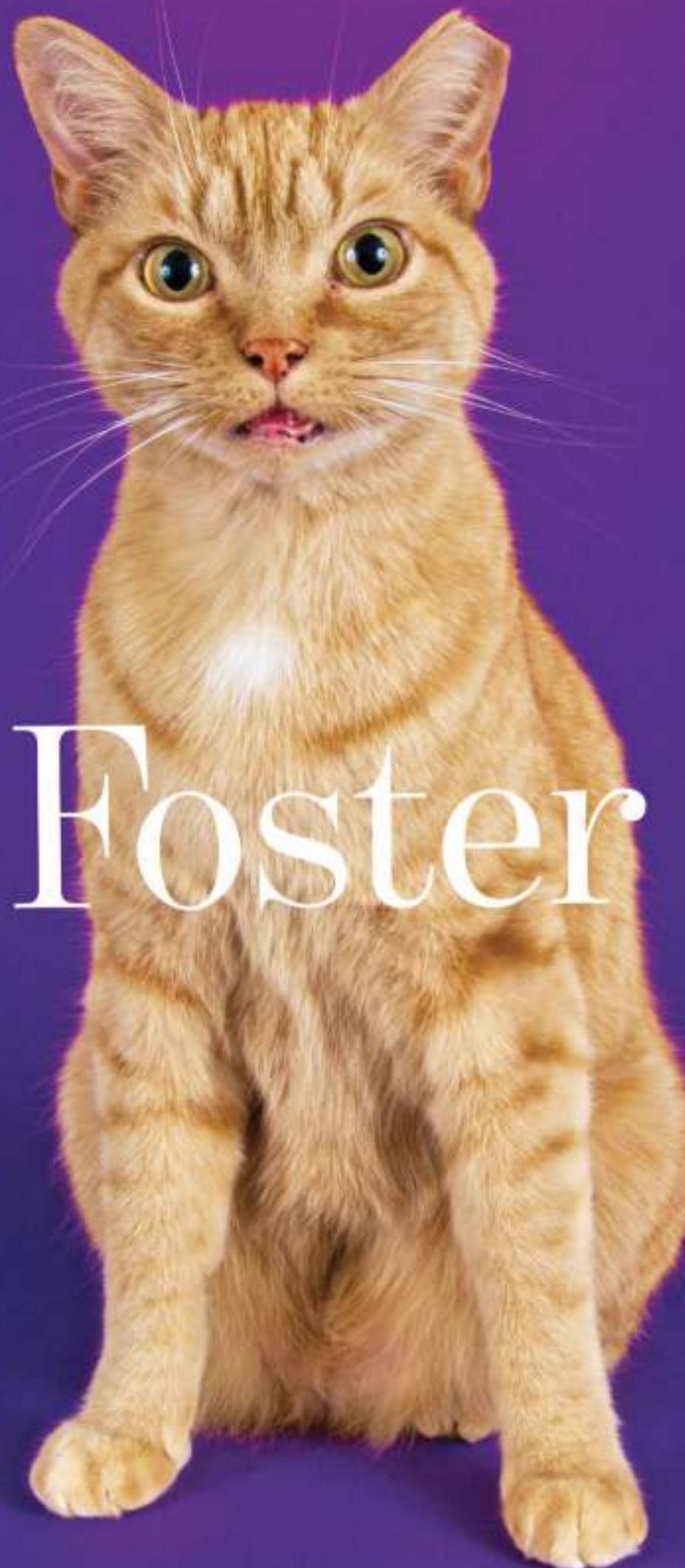
Yet the overcharge of information that governs our time—the knowledge of variants and mutations that previous generations who suffered worse plagues than ours were unaware of—has left us with the permanent jumps. And so our deliverance feels merely like a detour. Exultation in our time is a private emotion, shared at most with a room full of perspiring cabaret enthusiasts. "Glad to be alive" is perhaps the loudest form it can decently take, and surreptitiously throwing aside a mask in the park may be the one satisfying ritual that the ending offers.

"We note the signs of better times, slyly, as a mother notes the progress of a child," E. B. White wrote cautiously in another turnaround summer, that of 1934. "We see cafés overflowing, hotels gay again." And he added, "Essentially, the American depression was not a plague, scourging and chastening the people, but a problem in bookkeeping, irritating and unbalancing them. Its most notable effect was the election of a President who would be glad to redistribute wealth if there were any way, constitutionally." Our great change, the pandemic, was a problem not in bookkeeping but in public health, which could be resolved by a solution in public health, and produced its own kind of unexpected politics, which may or may not be sustained.

**O**n East 163rd Street, Dwayne Johnson packed another Styrofoam box of ribs and greens, added mustard sauce, and then placed it inside a black plastic bag. Like many small food merchants, he is dealing with a sudden rise in the cost of wholesale goods. "Three months ago, it was two dollars and five cents for a pound of ribs—today, three dollars and forty-five cents," he said. "When the pandemic started, it went from one-eighty-nine, to two-twenty-five, then it came back down to two-oh-five. It's supply and demand. Eventually, when things come down, it will come round."

What hasn't changed is his hours. "I'm always here from 8 A.M. to nine-thirty at night. It's my choice to hang around. I love this neighborhood. It took care of me and my family for sixty-seven years. I have the responsibility to show the young people you have choices." He added, "My father gave me the building, not just the business. You have to do that in the city, own the building to keep the business."

On a whiteboard near the cash register, his daughter Stacia likes to write timely maxims and aphorisms, which she changes every day. A typical one might read, "Detachment is power: release all things and people that no longer serve you." Highest and seemingly most recent on the current list is "The good always outweighs the bad," and then, beside it, almost as an afterthought, a small salute: "Thank God." ♦



**H**e isn't any kind of cat that I've ever seen. The paws look like something out of a storybook. And his fur shines an IKEA-bag blue. Some Googling tells me this means he's a shorthair, maybe—but my older brother's letter just called him a stray.

You have that in common, my brother wrote.

It'll give you two something to talk about, he wrote.

So that's what I think of him as: a fucking stray.

•

A woman I can't responsibly call my brother's girlfriend dropped the cat off at my apartment in Montrose. Literally tossed him on the sidewalk. She didn't wait for me to stumble outside before she drove off. There was a crumpled note, along with a food dispenser, and then this cat in his box. I let him stew there while I hauled everything into my place, folding myself into the sofa to squint at my brother's cursive.

We were born four years apart. Hadn't spoken in six. He'd been in prison for three. He'd killed someone, accidentally, in a hit-and-run. But he'd shot another person before he was caught for that.

•

My brother's instructions were simple: feed the cat twice a day, and give him plenty of water. Keep him away from open doors. The cat could be left on his own for an infinite amount of time. The cat had three siblings, apparently, and they'd been given suitable homes elsewhere, but at the very last minute the fourth home had fallen through. Which made me the cat's final resort.

If he had thumbs, my brother wrote, we wouldn't need you.

•

Calling us estranged gives our relationship more formality than I prefer—like most of my family, my brother and I simply don't talk. And then, homicide. Every first of the month, I send some cash from my shitty assistant's stipend at the university. For months, I didn't know if my brother actually received it.

Then, one time, I sent the money a

few days late. My mom called to ask me what the fucking holdup was.

•

The cat looms from the corner of my apartment. He prances on his toes. He arches his back. The cat leaps onto the kitchenette counter, across the dried-up flour and the takeout chopsticks and the loose tea bags, scattering my shit every which way. My brother's cat could be four years old, or four hundred and sixty-seven.

Sometimes he makes a face, as if to smile—except I know that it isn't a smile.

Which makes it something far more sinister.

And then he laughs.

•

Owen reminds me that the cat doesn't have a name. This is after he makes it back to my apartment from the gig at his father's dental practice, but before a bout of fucking in which neither of us manages to come.

It's been happening for a while. Or not happening. We'd cycled through our usual positions, moving from room to room, in and out of socks, on and off appliances. Then, eventually, after we settled onto the couch, Owen sighed loudly, smiling and patting me on the head, and called the cat out from the closet he'd hidden in.

My brother's cat still hasn't said much to me. But he meows and the rest with Owen. They lie together on the couch, while the cat massages Owen's belly. I'd forgotten to give him water, and he punished me with a screech.

Tough crowd, Owen says. But he's a cutie.

You've never called me that, I say.

You're more handsome. Mr. Masc.

I'd rather be cute.

Well, Owen says, squeezing the cat's ears.

It's been a few days since we've seen each other. Between my job at the university and Owen's out in Pearland, we barely manage a routine beyond weekends and the occasional midnight quickie. A few weeks back, Owen broached the subject of his moving in—once, and then once again. I made the appropriate grunt, which he told me wouldn't hold up on a lease.

But I made him a copy of my key anyway.

He lost it a few days later.

Now Owen pedals his legs in the air, with his ass on my ear, and the cat reaches for his thighs, ignoring me entirely.

So you've just been calling him cat, Owen says.

Mr. Cat, I say. Excuse you.

Monsieur Chat, Owen says.

Herr Katze.

Señor Gato.

Cat-san.

Your big brother didn't think to tell you his beloved's title?

He can be a little careless, I say. But it doesn't matter. This is temporary.

These cheeks aren't temporary, Owen says, holding the cat in front of my face.

Don't get attached, I say.

So Owen sighs, and the cat on his belly sighs, too.

•

We met online. That Web site no longer exists. The first thing Owen told me, before he penetrated me, after we'd eaten entirely too much pasta and paid far too much for it, was that we'd never get married. He'd tried that already. The day after he'd graduated from dentistry school, his parents paired him off with another dentist's daughter. They'd stuck it out for a year and change, but it hadn't worked, for the obvious reason.

Owen's ex-wife didn't hold it against him, though. She was queer, too. Their families had been strategic. Both of them needed an heir, preferably with a dick, and Owen swore that he'd never live down the shame of failing to provide one.

This was where I came in.

We'd form our own sort of family.

When Owen asked if I'd be up for that, at first I didn't say much.

Then I said, Fuck it. Why not.

•

But here is the truth: sometimes family doesn't last.

Owen knows this as well as I do.

If he can crash into my life, then he might, eventually, run out.

And I don't need that.

It's one thing to be alone, and another to be thrust back into loneliness.

•

The next morning, before work, Owen and I try fucking again.

I slip myself between him, and he

rolls on top of me, nearly flipping us. After rocking back and forth for a minute or two, Owen sighs, and I do, too.

Any luck, he asks.

Maybe next time, I say.

We capsize onto the rug.

Afterward, in the shower, I scrub his back.

You should name him, Owen says.

Who, I say.

Really?

I'm kidding, I say. But it's not my place. Then ask your brother for his blessing. We don't really talk.

Is that your fault or his?

Doesn't matter, because there's nothing there anyway. No honesty.

Seems like he trusts you a shit ton, Owen says, spinning around, draping his towel around my neck, sticking a finger inside me until I yelp and pull it out.

My brother's cat paws at the bathroom door beside us. It sounds like knocking, low and insistent. Determined.

Fine, I say. We'll call him Taku.

That's incredibly specific, Owen says. I knew a Taku and he was kind to me. An ex, Owen says.

I squeeze my wet towel above him, soaking his shoulders. He wipes soap from his eyes, flicking it into mine.

Whatever, Owen says. I'd have named him Bean.

Too late, I say.

This is why you aren't cute, Owen says, pinching my nose—and then the

two of us jump at a clattering beside us. Taku stands on the other side of the shower glass. He's rammed his way into the bathroom. And now my brother's cat knocks on the shower door, wailing at the two of us.

If I'm honest, it sounds a little bit like a warning.

•

One year, when we were teens, I taught my brother how to drive our mother's stick shift. He'd never bothered to learn, and then his Corolla had been rear-ended. After our mom attempted to instruct him for a solid week, the same way she'd taught me, she called it quits, so I sat with him on a nothing evening to try figuring it out.

We parked in this strip mall in Alief, beside a sex shop and a day care and a bún-bò-Hué restaurant. My brother tensed his fists as the engine spasmed beneath us.

Stop rushing, I said.

Nobody's fucking rushing, my brother said.

Then why are we stalling? This isn't that fucking hard.

Clearly. If *you* know how to do it.

But here we are.

Maybe you and Mom are shit instructors.

Most folks minded their business, but white passersby stared as we inched through the parking lot. I always waved at them. My brother just scowled.

Eventually, we switched places. I took the two of us to a drive-through for dinner. And my brother told me, in between mouthfuls of Whataburger and fries, that he didn't want to learn after all; he would rather be driven.

It's too much, he said. Kids. Cops. These fucking cracker parents that suddenly appear in the street.

I told him that was fine. But knowing was better than not knowing.

My brother cocked his head at me, frowning.

Not always, he said.

Then he split the rest of his burger in half, offering it up.

•

Now I want to tell my brother that he was right: maybe it isn't always better to know.

I spend thirty minutes looking for a pen.

Taku watches me write the letter, snarling from the doorway. I add a few lines about him.

I put the letter in an envelope and stick the envelope in a book under the bed.

Then I stick that book inside another, larger book, and shove it even farther back, against the wall, brushing up against every other letter I've never sent.

•

The university I work at stands a few miles from midtown, in the Third Ward, a neighborhood that has all but refused to be gentrified. Instead of flipping the houses lining its dorms, the college constructed a light rail. It cuts right through the subdivisions. My brother manned the register at a pawnshop in the neighborhood, but for the three years he was employed there we managed not to run into each other.

I work as an assistant, along with Angel, another assistant, for a white woman who never sets foot on campus. She's always touring for a self-help book on how not to be racist that sold like two million copies. As her assistants, we spend most of the day answering her e-mails, declining shit she's been invited to or haggling over her rates.

In the middle of drafting an answer to one of those e-mails, I tell Angel that I've gotten a cat. She looks up at me for the first time that day, wincing.



You look more like a gerbil man, she says.

What the fuck does that mean, I say.

That you're fucking unreliable, Angel says, reaching across me for the stapler.

Angel speaks five languages fluently. She served in the Peace Corps. She worked for a congressman for a while, and then a senator, and then the mayor. I have a degree in Japanese that I extracted from the university. But, after a year abroad when I'd failed to produce any research, my supervisor told me, gently, that this was the only job available if I wanted to keep my insurance.

My husband had a cat for a while, Angel says.

I thought you were done with men, I say.

That hasn't changed.

Most people would say "ex-husband." There's more mystery in "had."

Did the cat die, I ask.

No, Angel says. Even better. He ran away. Must've seen trouble before I did.

Did it make you sad?

The cat or the sperm donor?

Whichever you mourned the longest, I say.

Barry was a good listening buddy, Angel says. Always knew what to say.

I ask if that's the man or the cat, and Angel simply smiles.

Then I sneeze a bit. Angel gives me a look, before she tosses the tissue box at my face, and, when she asks for my cat's name, I tell her.

Mm, Angel says, squinting. But do me a favor.

Yeah?

Your fucking job, Angel says, turning back to her desk.

Taku adjusts quickly to his new arrangement. I live in a one-bedroom, but I can never seem to find him. I look up once and he's smelling some plant. I look up again and he's disappeared.

My biggest worry is Taku's escaping. It was the one thing my brother warned me about.

One night, after I accidentally leave the window open, Taku sleeps directly in front of it.

Another evening, Taku throws himself against the door. I jump up to see if he'll do it again, but he does not.

One day, I trip over Taku, and he

yells like a grown fucking man. Then he sighs, shaking his head, turning on his tail and leaping away.

One day, Taku boxes his food bowl across the floor, staring me in the face—and so begin the days of Taku knocking things over. Taku knocks saltshakers across the kitchen counter. He knocks dictionaries off the bookshelf. He knocks phone chargers off my nightstand. Whenever I snatch him up, he hisses, only to launch himself across another surface two minutes later.

One day, I spot him hovering by the toilet, leering, but then never again.

Mostly, he nestles himself in piles of clothes, hiding under Owen's hoodies and socks and boxers.

He suns under the windows in the living room.

He creeps beneath the sink.

Taku tries to make a bed out of my mattress, but after I shoo him off he folds himself under the bed frame.

I can't reach him there. And Taku knows that. My brother's cat watches me straining, flexing my fingers toward his fur.

A week later, I ask Owen if pets pick up shitty habits from their owners. We've just finished fucking—or at least trying to—and now he's grinding coffee by the counter while I fill up a bong.

The day before, Owen's father prostrated himself before his son, for the third time in a year, begging him to take a wife. Everything would be forgiven. Owen tells me this as he stirs cream into his cup, sipping from it, squinting.

Too sweet, he says.

You're the one that made it, I say.

Anyway, Owen says. I guess it's like living with a kid, after a while.

But he's a cat.

So you're a cat dad.

He's my brother's, I say. And my brother couldn't stand kids.

People change, Owen says.

I've never seen someone change their mind about that.

I did, Owen says. But maybe we're overthinking it. Maybe you're just a new source of food and shelter.

I don't think Maslow's hierarchy applies to Taku.

You're really never going to tell me why you named him that, Owen says.

I pass him the bong. Owen leans across the kitchen counter, trading me coffee. We're both naked, perched on our toes, and Taku dawdles on the floor by his food bowl, eying us.

Then he jumps onto the counter. He glares at me, tilting his head. But Owen scoops him into his arms, taking care to blow the smoke above his head, cradling Taku and cooing his name, like a son he hasn't seen in years.

The next morning, the coughing starts.

It wakes me up first, and then Owen. Taku creaks from his corner, slowly, and then loudly. His body shakes every time. We watch him, waiting for it to end.

Is this normal, I ask.

Does that shit sound normal to you, Owen says.

You're a fucking doctor.

For teeth.

The coughing continues. Taku jolts every time. Eventually, Owen steps over and cradles him on the mattress, between the two of us.

When I put my hand on Taku's back, he stiffens. But not before shaking, just as violently, again.

Owen has an in with a vet in the Heights. We show up to her office, with Taku in his crate, and find ourselves waiting beside a woman and her two parrots, both of whom are whispering, Bitch.

A white dude with a puppy stands in line with his daughter. The man keeps telling his dog to sit, and the daughter keeps saying that their dog doesn't know how to do that. The puppy follows their argument, whipping his head from speaker to speaker.

Eventually, he settles his gaze on us. Taku hisses at him. And the vet, Mia, appears, waving us in.

She massages Taku, checking his heartbeat and his temperature. She opens his mouth. Closes it. Flat on the table, Taku looks less exhausted than annoyed.

What's his birthday again, Mia asks Owen.

Oh, Owen says. I'm not the owner. I don't know, I say.

Phenomenal, Mia says. Do you have contact with the actual owner?

Not really.

So you're fostering?

Yeah, I say. You could say that.

Well, Mia says, meeting my eyes. Good for you.

It could be something mild, she says, but he's getting up there. So we'll have to keep an eye on it.

She takes out her card, and scribbles a number on the side of it.

They'll set you up with meds out front, Mia says. Call if it gets worse.

We will, Owen says.

I meant him, Mia says, pointing at me.

•  
Another memory of my brother: we're on a trip to Kemah. Our mother's driving us, with a friend, and their voices are hushed the entire ride from Houston. No one has a good answer for where our father is. I ask once, and then once again, before my mom asks me to please shut the fuck up.

My brother makes the face he pulls when he's about to punch a hole in the wall. Our mother's friend gives us a look, turning around from the passenger seat. Like she feels sorry for us.

We go to a restaurant hawking five-dollar shrimp sandwiches. My mother leaves my brother and me at a table by the pier, taking her friend inside to order. When they don't come back, I tell my brother that I'm leaving, for just a moment, and he nods, staring out at the bay. But when I step inside I spot them at the bar: they're leaning on each other, drinking and sobbing.

When a waitress asks if I need help, I don't say anything. I just nod.

When I start walking back to the table, my brother's still sitting there. Still staring. I wonder what he sees, and why.

Before I can figure it out, his eyes find mine. He waves.

•  
Owen and I rarely go out. And we aren't much for gay bars. We've both, to varying degrees, exhausted the scope of local possibilities. Owen likes to say that it feels like he's fucked every kind of person, and seen every kind of come face, and snorted all of the drugs, so he'd rather just stay home.

I've always wanted to ask him whose home he meant.

But I never do.

Now we're lying on the sofa, covered

with a blanket, our feet entangled, eating takeout jjajangmyeon with Taku lying on the rug underneath us. An hour ago, after thirty minutes of pumping and winding on the mattress, the two of us finally managed to climax. Afterward, Owen guffawed, asking if this meant we'd reached a landmark, and I told him to calm down—except, honestly, I wondered, too.

The cat still coughs in spurts, wincing. But he seems less surprised by the tremors. He looks even older, if anything.

He seems a bit better, Owen says.

Maybe, I say. But I'm hardly here during the day. It could ebb and flow.

We'll do the best we can, then, Owen says. I can check in on him, if that makes things easier.

I don't think it's that serious.

Maybe that's the problem.

You say that like we're some kind of family, I say.

Don't do that, Owen says, propping himself up on his shoulder.

I'm just saying. It's not like we're married.

This makes Owen quiet. Then he stands up, launching the blanket, and paces.

What, I say.

You're a dick, Owen says.

And you're being fucking unreasonable, I say. Fucking overreacting.

Right. Says the one who ghosts at the slightest inconvenience.

If you want a family that badly, I say, then maybe you should listen to your dad.

I regret it the moment the words come out of my mouth.

But Owen nods. Then he grins.

He walks to the other end of the apartment, and then down the hallway, dragging a gym bag. As the front door slams behind him, Taku jumps again and glares at me.

•  
A joke my brother sent me after his first month upstate: how long did the judge sentence Goldilocks for stealing from the three bears?

I wrote down an answer and put it in an envelope.

Then I tore up that envelope and wrote another answer.

Then I threw away that answer. I put a new answer on a sticky note.

The next week, the sticky note sat

on my fridge. It sat there for a year before I threw it away.

•  
At work, I tell Angel that Taku's sick. We're sorting through piles of the white woman's invoices.

So that's what has you glum, Angel says.

It's that obvious?

No, Angel says. You never talk about how you're doing.

I watch her fold sheets of paper in front of me, creasing them seamlessly, checking everything twice.

I think I may have fucked something up, I say. A good thing.

Yeah?

Yeah. Someone was only trying to be kind to me. And I hurt them.

Because you were scared of getting hurt yourself, Angel says.

What an innovative observation.

Fuck you, guy.

You're right, I say. Sorry.

It's fine, Angel says. But there are only so many reasons. That sounds like yours.

We sit, crossing our legs. I pass another sheet to Angel, and she logs it in her ledger, sorting the documents into piles.

That's a foolish way to live, though, she says. You might not get hurt. But you'll waste time. That's something I learned the hard way.

From your ex?

Shit, no. God forbid I learn anything from a nigga.

Sorry.

*This time you should be,* Angel says. But I'm not wrong.

I believe you, I say.

You better, Angel says, tossing a set of papers in my face.

•  
One night, about a decade ago, I came out to my brother. He'd brought me to a bar by his place that didn't check for I.D.s. We sat on the patio, under an awning, and it drizzled softly enough above us that we could pick out each tiny patter. My brother took a sip from his bottle, and then he looked at the sky.

I don't get it, he said.

What, I said.

That. The gay thing. It's fine, I guess. But I don't understand it.

There's nothing to understand.

But here you are, trying to explain it.

## A CLEARING ON RUTH ISLAND

The child sees the firefly far off in the tall pines. It's very late. I did not expect another summer, another child, so much darkness. She trots away to catch it. Possibly nine minutes later, she lopes back, barely winded. There is the light in her cupped hands. She shows it off: look how it pulses. She will pass it to me. I can feel the little wind and the adamant wing against my palms. My life is almost over. I pass it back. She waves it up dramatically. We watch for a greenish spark. If the night is clear and we can stare up for a full minute, we are guaranteed to see a satellite, a star whose name I know—there are only five—a glittering meteor, a comet, or the glint of a plane headed to the Arctic.

Those towering ghostly shapes must be the huge unmoving cumulus of late summer, the clouds Jesus referred to when he said "in my father's house there are many mansions." These close low humpbacked shapes must be the fishermen's boats, hauled high and tarped.

No lamps on the island. What light there is seems to come from under our sneakers. Now the fireflies are flashing in phase—you could parse it out, like the meter of a fugue.

The plan is obvious: earth will become more and more beautiful until I can't stand it. Then I will vanish. It will be in my mind that the skiffs are hauled up, safe from the wild tide; in my mind that the silly sleepless accordion plays "Sweet Lorraine," over-sweet across deep water.

I can't see the child but she takes my pinkie, almost angrily. She will lead me back to Scoffield, counting our steps on the stony path. When we come to a million, we will be home.

—D. Nurkse

That's not what I'm doing, I said. It's just a thing that is. This is me trusting you. Well, my brother said. It's your life.

I didn't know what to say after that. So I said nothing. My brother stood up for another beer. When he came back, he started talking about something else entirely.

When I left him that evening, I opened an app, and messaged twenty different boxes across the grid. Four of them responded. I went to their places, and we fucked, and I left them one after another. We didn't use protection. The last guy, in the middle of it, asked why I was crying, and I told him nothing was wrong, that everything was perfectly fine, that him being there was more than good enough.

•

Owen doesn't come back the next night. Or the next one. A few nights later, Taku starts sleep-

ing on my chest. He creeps up slowly, inching a paw toward me. When I finally lift him, he makes a face. But he doesn't resist, splaying across me and shutting his eyes.

So I tell the cat, with my hand on his back, about where his name came from.

I'd been working in Kyoto as an exchange research assistant. I lived with a host family, or I lived in their home, because the day after I landed in Japan they packed up for Fukuoka. Which left me alone, in a new apartment, in a new country. But they had a neighbor who lived by himself, and we started seeing each other walk home in the evenings.

He'd wave, and I'd wave. Sometimes we stopped to talk. One evening, we spotted each other at the train station, and realized that we took the same route. He asked if I wanted to grab a beer, and I didn't have a reason to say no.

After that, we got dinner together

every few days. And then drinks every other night. I spoke to him in my choppy Japanese, and he told jokes in perfect English. He was an office worker, a year older than me, and his big hobby was photography—on weekends, I tagged along on his trips around Kansai, where he took photos of shrines all over the region. He never visited my host family's home, and I never set foot in his. He never asked if I had a wife, or a girlfriend, and I never saw him with a woman. We spoke about the future in vague terms, never quite alluding to our prospects concretely. But it seemed like I could live this way indefinitely. One night, walking back from a convenience store, he said I'd become the person he spent the most time with, and I told him that couldn't be true, and he smiled but he didn't reply.

Another weekend, he asked if I'd ever stayed in a ryokan, and the next afternoon we checked in to a tiny building just across the city. The staff looked at us before shrugging and leading us to our room, which was centuries old. We spent the evening alternating between the bath and a sitting room beside it, eating soba in the empty common area before collapsing on the futon in our room for bed. Taku had, inevitably, drunk too much: half awake, hiccupping, he asked where I'd been all his life. It wasn't long before he began to snore, and I lay beside him while he did that, tracing lines on the mattress between us. The next morning, I woke up to him smiling in my face. He asked if I knew that I snored like a pig.

The very next week, I was informed that my position at the university was being eliminated. My supervisor told me this with a frown, throwing up his hands. There wasn't anything he could do about it. If I wasn't working or studying in the country, then I couldn't stay. The department booked me a ticket back to Texas, and gave me a few days to pack.

I remember the face that Taku made when I told him. We were drinking at our usual bar. It stood just off the tourist route, and it was almost always empty except for the bartender, an older woman who Taku swore made the best fried tofu I'd ever have in my life. Neither of us said anything for a while.

Eventually, Taku shrugged. He said that it was what it was.

Then he asked if I wanted to see

something, and he stood up, throwing bills down for the tab.

We walked for what felt like hours, drinking beer after beer from vending machines, until I followed Taku to the roof of a building and he showed me a stash of fireworks.

Boxes sat stacked on boxes. He'd been collecting them for years. I told him it was pretty fucking strange, and Taku agreed, and we laughed all over each other, grabbing at the railing to steady ourselves.

We lit the fireworks one by one, watching them explode above us.

He asked if he could take my picture, and I said that was fine. My eyes were shut in the one he showed me. When I offered to let him take another, he told me he loved this one.

Mia calls the next morning. Taku's ears flutter, just a bit, when I answer the phone.

What's new, she asks.

We're both still here, I say.

Good. Then the worst should've passed. Yeah?

Yeah. An owner knows their pets best, though, so keep an eye on him.

I start to remind her that I'm not the owner. But I just thank her instead.

Please, Mia says. I'm getting paid for this.

And besides, she says, you three look cute together.

A while back, my brother was closing up at the pawnshop when a white guy walked in and pulled out a gun. The man was a regular at the business. He was friendly with the staff. The area was no stranger to robberies, but my brother's co-workers usually brushed this guy off, making small talk and sending him home, since he was simply too high.

But this time the white guy was irate. He waved the gun at my brother. My brother raised his hands to calm the mood between them, but then this man pointed his gun. My brother reached in the drawer by the register, for the shop's handgun, and the white guy shot at my brother and he missed but my brother shot back and he did not miss and this white man clutched his chest while he bled out on the floor and he cried a little bit before he died.

The first thing my brother did was call our mother. She told him to call the police from the shop. The next thing my brother did was call his manager, who told him that the shop was the last place he needed to be.

My brother grabbed his keys. He walked to his car, pulling out of the lot. He was only a few blocks from his apartment when he hit a white kid crossing the road on his way home from band practice.

In a letter he sent me later, my brother wrote, You're not just who you think you are, but you're who everyone else sees, too.

You're all of those things, my brother wrote. At the same time. Forever.

I wake up on the sofa around five in the morning, and Taku's snoring on the floor beside me. His breath rattles, just a bit, but it's steady. So I take the letters I've written my brother and I walk them to the mailbox a few blocks away.

Traffic's already started up on Westheimer. The construction workers are on the job, and when a few of them nod my way I nod back. There's a mist that settles over Montrose, but I know where I'm walking, even if I can't see. That's hardly true most of the time.

Walking home, a few blocks from the complex, I see my apartment door standing wide open.

I must not have locked it.

And then I'm sprinting, for the first time in years.

I stumble through the doorway, and the first thing I see is Owen, on the sofa. On his bare thigh, Taku nestles his head. The cat's body rises and falls, and Owen wraps his arm around him.

Oh, I say. You found your key.

Seems like I did, Owen says.

You could've called.

Taku doesn't have a cell.

Listen, I say.

You don't need to apologize now, Owen says.

But—

I said "now," Owen says. Don't worry, it'll happen. But the story will be the same after we get some sleep.

I can't fucking imagine sleeping now, I say.

Why not, Owen says, and I look at him, and I think about this.

I really don't have a reason.

Or maybe those reasons were just excuses. And the excuses have changed. Sometimes they do that.

So I sit beside the two of them. I put my head on Owen's shoulder, looking down at the cat.

Taku peeks at us, before he closes his eyes, snorting.

But then he opens them again. And he purrs.

The last time I saw my brother was the night before I left for Kyoto: he met me at a tiny diner downtown for waffles. He was coming from his job, and I waited for him on the curb. The sky bled purple above me. There weren't many cars on the road.

When my brother finally arrived, he smelled like liquor. I asked what had happened, and he shrugged me off, smiling. He told me that sometimes things just come up. I said that I knew what he meant.

I ordered for the two of us. My brother told me that he was happy to see me, it'd been so long. And when the waiter brought our food my brother suddenly nodded off. Just like that.

I sat there eating while he slept in front of me. Snoring over his plate. And I told my brother about my day. I told him about my fears for the trip. I told my brother that I didn't know why I was going. And I told him I didn't know when I'd be coming back.

Eventually, our waiter dropped by the table. My brother blinked himself awake. He asked how I was doing, and I told him I was fine.

Outside, on the curb, my brother asked if I wanted a cigarette. It'd started to rain. He started laughing, calling our dinner the best meal he'd had in months.

It was the warmest I'd ever seen my brother. But it felt like I was the older one, like I was the oldest person who'd ever lived.

Then my brother asked if I wanted to meet him for dinner again next week.

I blinked at him a few times.

And I told him that was fine. I said I'd see him wherever. I asked him to let me know what day worked best for him. ♦

*Foreword by*  
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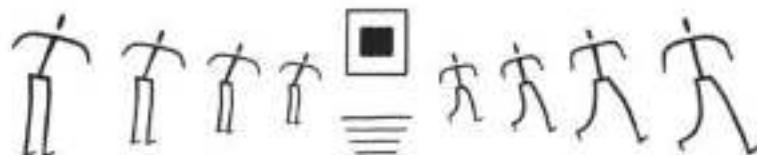
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# THE CRITICS



BOOKS

## IN THE MIDNIGHT HOUR

*How ACT UP changed America.*

BY MICHAEL SPECTER

One day in June, 1990, at the height of the AIDS epidemic, I sat in the auditorium of San Francisco's Moscone Center and watched as hundreds of activists pelted Louis W. Sullivan, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, with condoms. Sullivan had been attempting to deliver the closing address at the 6th International AIDS Conference. The protesters, from the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, or ACT UP, were there to stop him. Shouts of "shame, shame, shame" were accompanied by whistles and air horns. Like many people who were in the audience that day—I was there as a *Washington Post* reporter—I remember everything about the speech except what Sullivan said. Which was exactly what ACT UP wanted. The group had been formed to force a negligent government to take AIDS seriously. Not every federal official came under attack that day. Just an hour earlier, Anthony S. Fauci, the country's chief AIDS scientist, had received a standing ovation after he essentially endorsed the protesters' agenda, warning his colleagues that they "cannot and should not dismiss activists merely on the basis of the fact that they are not trained scientists."

It was a triumphant moment for ACT UP, which had become known for its outrageous stunts. Behind what seemed like radical unity, however, the organization had already begun to split into two distinct camps. One believed that the best way to advance the cause was to continue to protest—loudly. The other did not reject public actions but didn't focus on them; it was known as

the Science Club, and had formed a kind of academy within ACT UP.

In "Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987-1993" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), Sarah Schulman, a novelist, journalist, and activist, chronicles the early years of a vigorously oppositional group that was itself riven by discord and factionalism. Any history of a movement presents an argument about its identity—about which internal tendencies most faithfully represent its mission and which betray it. Schulman has strong views on this subject. On one point, though, there can be little disagreement. When ACT UP began, its founders could not have guessed how high the group would soar; they would have been even more surprised by the particular conflicts that brought it down to earth.

By the time ACT UP was born, in 1987, tens of thousands of Americans—mostly gay men—had died of AIDS, and more were dying every day, even as the government remained largely indifferent. Early that March, Larry Kramer, the writer and activist who had helped found the Gay Men's Health Crisis, delivered a speech at New York's Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center, on West Thirteenth Street. "O.K., I want this half of the room to stand up," he later recalled saying. "I looked around at those kids and I said to the people standing up, 'You are all going to be dead in five years. Every one of you fuckers.' I was livid. I said, 'How about doing something about it? Why just line up for the cattle cars?'"

The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power was formed two days later. Its members met at the Center on Monday nights. They came to plan actions and to socialize but also to get answers. More than anything, it was a safe place for people who had nowhere else to turn. They were, Schulman writes, "a despised group of people, with no rights, facing a terminal disease for which there were no treatments. Abandoned by their families, government, and society." The New York membership expanded from an initial hardcore cadre of several dozen to several thousand, including many people who were neither infected with H.I.V. nor at much risk of becoming so. Although plenty of other cities started their own chapters, ACT UP NY was always at the center of the movement.

ACT UP members lived by a creed set out by Ann Northrop, one of the organization's more media-savvy leaders: "Actions are always, always, always planned to be dramatic enough to capture public attention." The activists delivered. They wrapped the home of the North Carolina senator Jesse Helms in a giant yellow condom; invaded St. Patrick's Cathedral during Mass; laid siege to the Food and Drug Administration ("Hey, hey, F.D.A., how many people have you killed today?"); and dumped the ashes of comrades who had died of AIDS on the White House lawn. These and many other high-profile interventions raised awareness about AIDS. But the group's most important accomplishments were not as easily captured in headlines. Because so many people with AIDS were forced



*In 1988, protesters laid siege to the F.D.A. for a day, one of many interventions designed to capture public attention.*



to live on the streets, ACT UP members founded a philanthropy that evolved into Housing Works, which directed resources (including money raised by a chain of thrift shops) toward AIDS services and homelessness. ACT UP helped establish the first successful needle-exchange programs in New York City. It also took on insurance practices like the exclusion of single men who lived in predominantly gay neighborhoods.

Nothing the organization did had a more lasting impact, however, than the work of the Science Club, whose members served on ACT UP's Treatment and Data Committee. They would congregate each week at the East Village apartment of Mark Harrington, who, though he had no formal scientific training, eventually won a MacArthur "genius" grant for his work on AIDS. Harrington, a wiry man with reddish-blond hair, seemed both constantly in motion and unusually deliberate. As Schulman recounts, the gatherings in his apartment were like a "doctor's weekly rounds," where attendees discussed a particular problem and "assigned themselves immunology and virology textbooks."

Harrington was hardly averse to public demonstrations: he helped organize ACT UP's "Seize Control of the F.D.A." protest, in 1988, and its "Storm the N.I.H." event, in 1990. But he believed that anger had to be allied with exper-

tise. He and other members of the Science Club came to know the arcane rules and the impenetrable bureaucracy of the F.D.A. better than most of the officials who worked there. They prepared a detailed assessment of N.I.H.-sponsored clinical trials, and argued that people facing almost certain death should have access to experimental drugs that had been shown to be reasonably safe, even if they had not yet demonstrated efficacy. By 1990, the F.D.A. had adopted this approach (known as the "parallel track"), which would make selected drugs available to H.I.V.-positive patients. The slogan "Drugs Into Bodies" moved from placards to policy: ACT UP had forced a fundamental change in the way clinical trials are conducted in the United States. Today, drug candidates for life-threatening conditions are frequently put on a parallel track for "expanded access."

Eventually, in what Schulman refers to as ACT UP's period of "distress and desperation," the Science Club broke away from the organization, and, led by Harrington, it formed the Treatment Action Group, to focus on accelerating the pace of research. Although the TAG defection involved fewer than two dozen people, it was a painful divorce, with unexpected repercussions. ACT UP's ferocity concealed a genuine fragility. The group fearlessly hurled itself against the medical bureaucracy,

the Catholic Church, even the White House; what proved much harder to weather was its own crisis of identity.

Although "Let the Record Show" bills itself as a history, Schulman maintains that "a chronological history would be impossible and inaccurate." She does hope to offer contemporary activists "general principles and takeaway ideas," but her book is best approached as a sort of modified oral history, a curated archive of nearly two hundred interviews conducted over the course of two decades. One can open this seven-hundred-page book at random and find something interesting to read: a mini-biography, firsthand recollections of major events, contentious perspectives on the goals of different groups within ACT UP. (The interviews—which Schulman did along with the filmmaker Jim Hubbard—are available online, as the ACT UP Oral History Project.) Schulman draws, too, on her five years as an ACT UP member, but largely eschews other people's research, and the book provides scant interstitial narrative; some readers may struggle to put these passages into context. Still, her labors will provide an invaluable resource for the social history of the movement that remains to be written.

That's not to say that the book lacks a thesis. Schulman is intent on widening our understanding of what it meant to be part of ACT UP. Instead of a colossus run largely by a small cohort of white men, she argues, it was more of a loose confederation of affinity groups. Although ACT UP is often remembered for its extreme measures, it never committed an act of violence (despite enduring many). When we think of ACT UP, Schulman wants us to think of the fight for universal health care, racial justice, and radical democracy—and to recognize that "a few committed activists, when focused on being effective, can accomplish a lot."

Early in the epidemic, people with AIDS were routinely described in the press as "victims." (In the nineteen-eighties, I was as guilty of this sin as other reporters.) Schulman dispels that portrait of passivity. She spoke at length to a number of ACT UP's leaders, at least those who survived into this century. But her most inspiring interviews were with rank-and-file members like Amer

Candelario, who was born in Puerto Rico and graduated from the Bronx High School of Science. In 1976, as a teenager, Candelario was riding the No. 6 train when he had a “revelation” that he was not bisexual but gay. “Being a practical person,” Schulman tells us, he searched the phone book and found something called the Gay Switchboard. Candelario dialled the number and asked if there was a group for teen-agers. There was, and he attended one meeting, then another, and for the next five years he led a gay youth group.

Vito Russo, another ACT UP stalwart, is best known for “The Celluloid Closet,” his 1981 book about homosexuality and homophobia in film. In 1988, Russo delivered a spellbinding speech, in Albany, called “Why We Fight.” (You can, and should, watch it on YouTube.) As Russo told a crowd, he had AIDS, but that wasn’t what was killing him:

If I’m dying from anything, I am dying from homophobia. If I am dying from anything, I am dying from racism. If I’m dying from anything, it’s from indifference and red tape, because these are the things that are preventing an end to this crisis. If I’m dying from anything, I’m dying from Jesse Helms. If I’m dying from anything, I’m dying from the President of the United States. And, especially, if I’m dying from anything, I’m dying from the sensationalism of newspapers and magazines and television shows, which are interested in me as a human-interest story—only as long as I’m willing to be a helpless victim, but not if I’m fighting for my life.

The politics of AIDS—“gay-related immune deficiency,” or GRID, was an early designation, as if a medical condition might have a sexual orientation—was inevitably a confrontation with homophobia. In March, 1986, William F. Buckley, Jr., wrote, in a syndicated column, “Everyone detected with AIDS should be tattooed in the upper forearm, to protect common-needle users, and on the buttocks, to prevent the victimization of other homosexuals.” That same year, by a vote of 5–4, the Supreme Court upheld a Georgia sodomy statute, in a case involving two men having sex in a private home. Several years into a harrowing epidemic, gay Americans were told that an act of consensual sex could not only infect them with a fatal disease; it could also, at the will of a state, send them to prison. The fears of internment were not easily dismissed as hysteria.

In a section of the book titled “When an Image Leads a Movement,” Schulman shows how such threats led to what became ACT UP’s most arresting symbol. Around the time of Buckley’s tattoo column, an art director named Avram Finkelstein read something in the newspaper about the silence of a community being deafening. He and some friends had been tossing around ideas for a poster. As Finkelstein told Schulman, one day he said, “What about *Gay Silence Is Deafening?*” A colleague responded, “What about *Silence Is Death?*” Another person said, “Oh, no, it should be *Silence Equals Death*.” Another offered, “We should use an equal sign.” Finkelstein recalled, “It was literally that fast. It was four comments.”

They also discussed the graphics that would accompany the slogan. “We talked about the rainbow flag,” Finkelstein said, but “it was too friendly and, I’m not going to lie, just too ugly.” They hated the pink triangle, too, for its suggestion of victimhood, “but it seemed like it might have the most chance of being clear enough to the lesbian and gay community, more clear than the other images we were discussing that were abstract, and graphic enough to be intriguing, interesting, compelling to people outside of the community who didn’t know what it was.”

The group decided to turn the pink triangle upside down, “thereby permanently connecting the AIDS crisis visually to the legacy of the Holocaust,” Schulman writes. During the late eight-

women, many of whom came out of the reproductive-rights movement of the seventies. Some, like Maxine Wolfe, who was a psychology professor and a central figure in ACT UP, had a long history of feminist and lesbian activism.

And many of ACT UP’s campaigns were created for the particular benefit of women. In the late eighties and the early nineties, it became common to hear the ACT UP slogan “Women don’t get AIDS; they just die from it.” That was because the original list of the conditions that the C.D.C. used to define AIDS—a definition with implications for what insurers would cover and who might receive disability payments—did not include chronic infections that were specific to women. This kind of neglect should hardly come as a shock. Women have rarely been given equal consideration or representation in medical research. (The map of the human genome—the foundational blueprint of modern biological research—was initially based largely on the genetic sequence of an anonymous man from Buffalo.)

Yet there were reasons for ACT UP’s prevailing image. A 1989 survey of the New York chapter showed that more than three-quarters of participants were younger than thirty-five and that eighty per cent were white gay men. Many were well educated, even well-off. Larry Kramer, who died last year at the age of eighty-four, certainly fit that bill. Recalling his early attempts to enlist help from public officials, he told Schulman, “You learn very fast that you’re a faggot, and it doesn’t make any difference that you went to Yale and were assistant to presidents of a couple of film companies, and that you had money.” The early ACT UP firebrands never forgot that Ronald Reagan hadn’t so much as uttered the word “AIDS” in public until September, 1985, just a couple of weeks before it killed his friend Rock Hudson.

Kramer made it clear that the unexpected pain of spurned entitlement helped fuel the movement. “We were mostly white and privileged, and there was a lot of flak against us in the community because of that,” he told Schulman. As one would expect, this account doesn’t sit well with her.

“ACT UP was predominantly white and male,” she acknowledges. “But its history has been whitened in ways that



ies, countless T-shirts bore the logo, and “Silence = Death” stickers could be found on what seemed like every newspaper box or wall in New York City. In a blindered era, signage was significant, and merchandise mattered.

“Let the Record Show” argues that ACT UP’s success arose from its genuine diversity, and its truly democratic approach to making decisions. The book highlights the contributions of

obstruct the complexity.” Kramer, she thinks, “never really understood the wide range of people who were in ACT UP, where we were coming from, and what we were doing.” She is angered by the attention that has been lavished on him. “It is remarkable how many people in high places, of all ages, in multiple spaces, think that Larry was ‘the leader of ACT UP.’” In fact, as she concedes, Kramer never pretended to be the leader of ACT UP. He was its sharpest spear, though, and spears are needed in times of war.

Schulman’s trouble with Kramer reflects a deeper fissure within the organization. ACT UP certainly contained affinity groups, including the Majority Action Committee, for people of color, and the Women’s Caucus. But did members who were white and male have an advantage in swaying a bureaucracy that was also overwhelmingly white and male? That’s what Kramer implied, and, though Schulman doesn’t dispute the point, she thinks that the group’s true power lay in a concerted display of strength through diversity.

ACT UP’s biggest problem, in her opinion, was to be found not in the movement but in media depictions of it that played largely to a straight and white middle-class audience. She assails David France, whom she accuses of using her research to “nefarious ends” in his powerful documentary “How to Survive a Plague.” It won mainstream approval, she thinks, precisely because it promotes a “heroic white male individual model” of activism, in contrast with the “diverse grassroots movements” revealed in the less celebrated documentary “United in Anger,” which she produced with its director, Jim Hubbard.

Schulman’s indictment of how AIDS and AIDS activism have been portrayed extends to the Oscar-winning film “Philadelphia.” It errs, she says, because it depicts a gay man with AIDS (Tom Hanks) being helped by a homophobic straight lawyer (Denzel Washington) who overcomes his prejudice, rather than by the man’s own community. More surprisingly, she lambastes the Pulitzer Prize-winning play “Angels in America,” which came to Broadway in 1993 and was, she maintains, yet another work “that made straight people into the heroes of the crisis.” Tony Kushner’s dra-

matic diptych “is strangely disconnected from the reality of people with AIDS, relying on the conventional trope of a cowardly gay person who abandons his lover.” It’s a curious interpretation, requiring the erasure of Jeffrey Wright’s role as Belize, a gay nurse and the play’s centering sensibility. (The performance won Wright a Tony.)

That’s not the only erasure in Schulman’s book. For her, setting the record straight means emphasizing ACT UP’s broad vista of coalition politics. Yet of the nearly two hundred interviews that she draws upon for the book, only a few are with Black people. The voices of important activists of color who didn’t survive the plague are absent, owing to her reluctance to use archives other than her own. Even in a chapter describing the plight of H.I.V.-positive Haitians interned in Guantánamo, all her interview subjects are white. Early in the book, she says that her subjects spoke with her openly because, as New Yorkers, “they were used to telling their thoughts and feelings to a middle-aged Jewish woman.” In the context of her argument, the shrink joke, with its caste and class presuppositions, cuts a little close to the bone.

“ACT UP is a racist organization,” the late Keith Cylar, a prominent member of the group, told *Spin* in 1990. He wasn’t condemning ACT UP; he was saying that racism was an inevitable feature in a mostly white organization, and required vigilance. The sociologist (and ACT UP veteran) Deborah B. Gould, subtly probing the group’s racial politics, has written about a “scarcity mentality” fuelled by desperation. When people of color raised issues of particular concern to them, they routinely met the rejoinder “What does this have to do with AIDS?” or were told, “We don’t have time.” But Schulman hurries past such conversations, more concerned with scrutinizing the group’s media image than its complicated reality.

In the end, what Schulman calls ACT UP’s “tragic split” was precipitated more by dissension over research than by disagreements over race. Any list of the most important medical trials of modern times would have to include the AIDS Clinical Trials Group Protocol 076 study, which was launched

in 1991. That study was designed to determine whether the antiretroviral AZT, administered during advanced pregnancy, would prevent H.I.V. transmission from mother to infant. And it led to a decisive rift between those in ACT UP, like Harrington, who argued for the study’s critical importance and those, like Maxine Wolfe, who wanted it stopped at all costs.

AZT was the first antiretroviral that received F.D.A. authorization to treat H.I.V. For a while, it would bring down a patient’s viral load, but H.I.V. is a fast-mutating virus, and the drug, when used on its own, as a “monotherapy,” typically lost efficacy within months. For a woman about to give birth, however, a temporary drop in viral load could be enough to reduce the risk of transmission. At the time of the study, between a quarter and a third of infants delivered to women with H.I.V. were born infected, and most died. Would the therapy help?

The A.C.T.G. 076 study—which enrolled nearly five hundred pregnant women—demonstrated that a brief regimen of AZT administered to a mother before and during delivery, along with a small dose for the newborn, decreased the perinatal transmission rate by nearly seventy per cent.

That trial, and others that followed, helped doctors throughout the world prevent the deaths of millions of children, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where infection rates were exceptionally high. Still, AZT was a poison that had to be used wisely, and the trial raised thorny ethical questions. Was it fair to give poor women drugs that could cause resistance later and, in theory, hinder subsequent treatment? Or did the immediate threat to all the children who might be born with H.I.V. take precedence? Was it ethical to use a placebo group? Many women in ACT UP wanted to shut the trial down, or substantially alter it. The Science Club fought forcefully for the trial. (So did many Black women, who knew that it could be particularly helpful to hard-hit communities of color.)

Wolfe, who brought Schulman into the group, and who emerges as a major opponent of Harrington and his approach, considered the trial too dangerous. She has never swerved from her

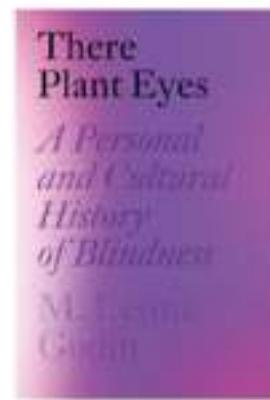
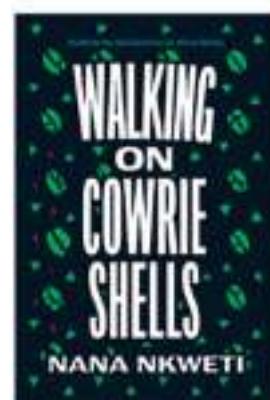
conviction that it was immoral. “I regret that we couldn’t stop 076,” she told Schulman. “To this day, I think it was a big mistake.” Schulman—who uncritically presents Wolfe’s false assertion that the risk of viral transmission to infants was “minuscule”—condemns the trials as privileging the “imagined future” over the present; unborn babies over their mothers. She implies that some of the mothers later died because they were “rendered resistant to some subsequent classes of new medications.”

Yet, since trial subjects almost invariably received a higher “standard of care” than would have been available to them otherwise, participation could save *their* lives, not just the lives of their offspring. And Schulman’s concern that these mothers wouldn’t benefit from new classes of medicine has long since been laid to rest. Newer antivirals—notably protease inhibitors, which won F.D.A. approval a year after the trial results were published—became part of an updated standard of care. These regimens proved widely effective for people who had previously taken AZT.

It’s nearly impossible to assess the value of a medical trial without at least exploring the consequences of not carrying it out. I travelled to Africa to write about this issue nearly twenty years ago. I could hardly find an African physician or researcher who didn’t consider the A.C.T.G. 076 study to be of immense value. I found none who thought it should have been stopped. White feminists like Schulman and Wolfe, who understandably saw the study through the lens of reproductive politics—and the way anti-abortion advocates have elevated the welfare of a fetus over that of its mother—failed to grasp what these trials meant to vulnerable communities around the world. Almost three decades later, Schulman refuses to acknowledge that, on a deeply contentious issue, the Science Club was right.

Inevitably, personalities as well as principles played a role in ACT UP’s subsequent split. As Schulman observes, Maxine Wolfe and Mark Harrington deserve a great deal of credit for the group’s successes; the two were equally responsible, she contends, for what she calls its “self-defeat.” Although Wolfe is at pains to distance herself from the

## BRIEFLY NOTED



**Phase Six**, by Jim Shepard (*Knopf*). Set in a post-COVID-19 world, this ingenious novel imagines the ramifications of an even more lethal pandemic. The focus switches between an eleven-year-old in Greenland, where the virus originates; an Algerian epidemiologist working for the C.D.C.; and an I.C.U. doctor tending to a patient in upstate New York. Told in short chapters with a dispassionate, clinical style, the story is at once gripping and difficult to bear. As the world gives way to panic, the epidemiologist wonders, “What were all those dystopias she’d had to read about in high school, concerning the individual trampled by the state, talking about? Why hadn’t anyone imagined the chaos of *no* one in charge?”

**Walking on Cowrie Shells**, by Nana Nkweti (*Graywolf*). This débüt collection of stories revels in variety—of character, style, and even genre. In one story, a “fixer” who specializes in concealing the misdeeds of corporations must smooth over the existence of zombies created by illicit weapons testing. In another, a teen-age girl adapts to a nocturnal life as a club-bathroom attendant in New York after a suicide bombing in Cameroons kills her mother. Nkweti, who is Cameroonian-American, explores the complexities of African immigrant life in the U.S., of being “Halfrican” in Africa, and of being a young woman struggling against oppressive parental expectations. Lively and fast-paced, funny and tragic, these stories refuse a singular African experience in favor of a vivid plurality.

**The House of Fragile Things**, by James McAuley (*Yale*). This group portrait re-creates the milieu of fin-de-siècle French Jewish dynasties like the Rothschilds and the Camondos through the art collections they amassed and the major bequests they left to the French state. For these families, collecting was both an aesthetic compulsion and a way of reaffirming a French identity amid a surge of anti-Semitism. Covering the period between the Dreyfus Affair and the Second World War, McAuley chronicles how many of his central figures were deported by the Vichy government and describes the fate of their collections. A study of “obsessions with objects” becomes a darker tale about “obsessions with an image of a nation that turned out to be an illusion.”

**There Plant Eyes**, by M. Leona Godin (*Pantheon*). “The dual aspects of blindness—that it is a tragic horror on the one hand and a powerful gift from the gods on the other—remain stubbornly fixed in our cultural imaginations,” Godin, a blind writer and performer, asserts in this thought-provoking mixture of criticism, memoir, and advocacy. Drawing on works including the *Odyssey*, “*Oedipus Rex*,” “*King Lear*,” and “*Paradise Lost*,” she traces two ideas: that being unable to see brings deep insight and that the blind can show how little the sighted truly see. Godin counters these stereotypes with her own experiences and with surprising details from the lives of blind activists such as Helen Keller, to argue that “there are as many ways of being blind as there are of being sighted.”

antagonism that arose toward the Science Club, people within that group had their own perspective. The estimable Garance Franke-Ruta, who joined ACT UP as a teen-ager, and followed Harrington to the Treatment Action Group, spoke bluntly to Schulman: Wolfe, she said, “was awful to me.”

The grievance that Wolfe and her allies had with the Science Club went beyond the battle over a single drug trial. They were concerned that the Club’s members had increasingly pursued the “inside strategy”—working with pharmaceutical researchers, N.I.H. administrators, and other public officials. This meant that, as Wolfe put it, they “were meeting with the very people who we were fighting against.” Her allies discussed a moratorium on letting anyone in ACT UP meet with government officials, and the prospect deepened the sense within the Science Club that ACT UP no longer valued its agenda. Although ACT UP didn’t collapse after the schism, it was badly damaged, and it never recovered its centrality. When the inside-outside strategy was largely reduced to an outside strategy, the organization became far less consequential.

In retrospect, one can ask whether ACT UP’s victories on the research front pushed the F.D.A. too far. The drugs-into-bodies approach to fast-tracking—the use of “surrogate endpoints” (like T-cell counts or viral load), for example, rather than clinical benefits in actual people—can be valuable, especially for patients who are facing death and have no good alternatives. This approach at least offers desperate patients a chance, while allowing scientists to gather meaningful data. But, today, a number of drugs, for everything from asthma to periodontitis, have won approval before benefits in human patients were established, and critics argue that drug approval is too often based solely on benefits shown in biomarkers rather than in bodies. “Right to try” legislation, meanwhile, enables the sale of drug candidates without even involving the F.D.A. When restrictions are weakened, experimental drugs—many of which end up proving useless or worse—become harder to distinguish from effective medicine.

Today, Franke-Ruta is a journalist,

and she spoke to Schulman about the wider implications of some of ACT UP’s success. “I don’t think that we realized at the time that this was part of the broader gutting of the FDA that we’ve seen since; that there was a lot of political agendas that we just happened to be in sync,” she said. After President Donald Trump touted the promise of hydroxychloroquine as a treatment for COVID-19, the F.D.A. issued an emergency-use authorization for the drug, which was shown to be useless for the purpose. (The agency withdrew the authorization three months later.) “Sometimes it seems like it’s gone too far in the other direction,” Franke-Ruta went on. “But there’s a really strong pharmaceutical lobby against the FDA as well that I don’t think we were aware of.”

ACT UP’s legacy is hardly restricted to the realm of research. “The movement for Black lives would look very different if its thought leaders—many of whom are self-identified Black queer people—hadn’t been able to draw on the example of ACT UP,” the legal scholar Kendall Thomas, who joined the group in 1987, has observed. “Black activists and their allies now understand that the struggle for Black freedom has to make connections across many different constituencies and concerns that used to be seen as different and disconnected.” At the same time, Schulman implicitly reprimands many contemporary social-justice movements and their emphasis on allyship and “accomplices” (who must take direction from a marginalized community) over coalitions of shared interests and values. She plainly considers call-out culture a distraction. ACT UP members who were women or people of color, she says, directed resources to projects that were specifically of concern to them. They “did not stop the drive toward action to correct or control language or to call out bias,” she adds pointedly. “The language and behavior of racist and sexist ACT UPers was not the focus.”

There are lessons in ACT UP’s failures, of course, as well as in its successes. If the group were the richly coalitional grassroots organization that Schulman describes, how could the de-

parture of two dozen people—Harrington’s TAG team—have derailed it? Her institutional analysis is rather cryptic. The way ACT UP dealt with the differences among its members “was to practice a kind of radical democracy,” she says. “Subverting this range of difference and trying to channel it through open and hidden moves was ultimately its downfall.”

One notably disaffected voice in “Let the Record Show” is that of Charles King, who (with his partner, Keith Cylar) helped start Housing Works. King told Schulman that ACT UP was, at its heart, “gay men and their allies fighting for their lives.” By the mid- to late nineties, the demographics of death were changing: “It was now a Black disease, not their disease.”

Schulman promptly dismisses King’s unsettling critique: “True to the ACT UP tradition of alienation, Charles was defining ‘ACT UP’ by the people he disagreed with, not by himself and his allies.” Her insistence on ACT UP’s diversity is important and correct. Still, the group’s most famous image—the inverted pink triangle of the “Silence = Death” logo—didn’t just link AIDS and the Holocaust; it was also an assertion of a gay identity, as not incidental but integral.

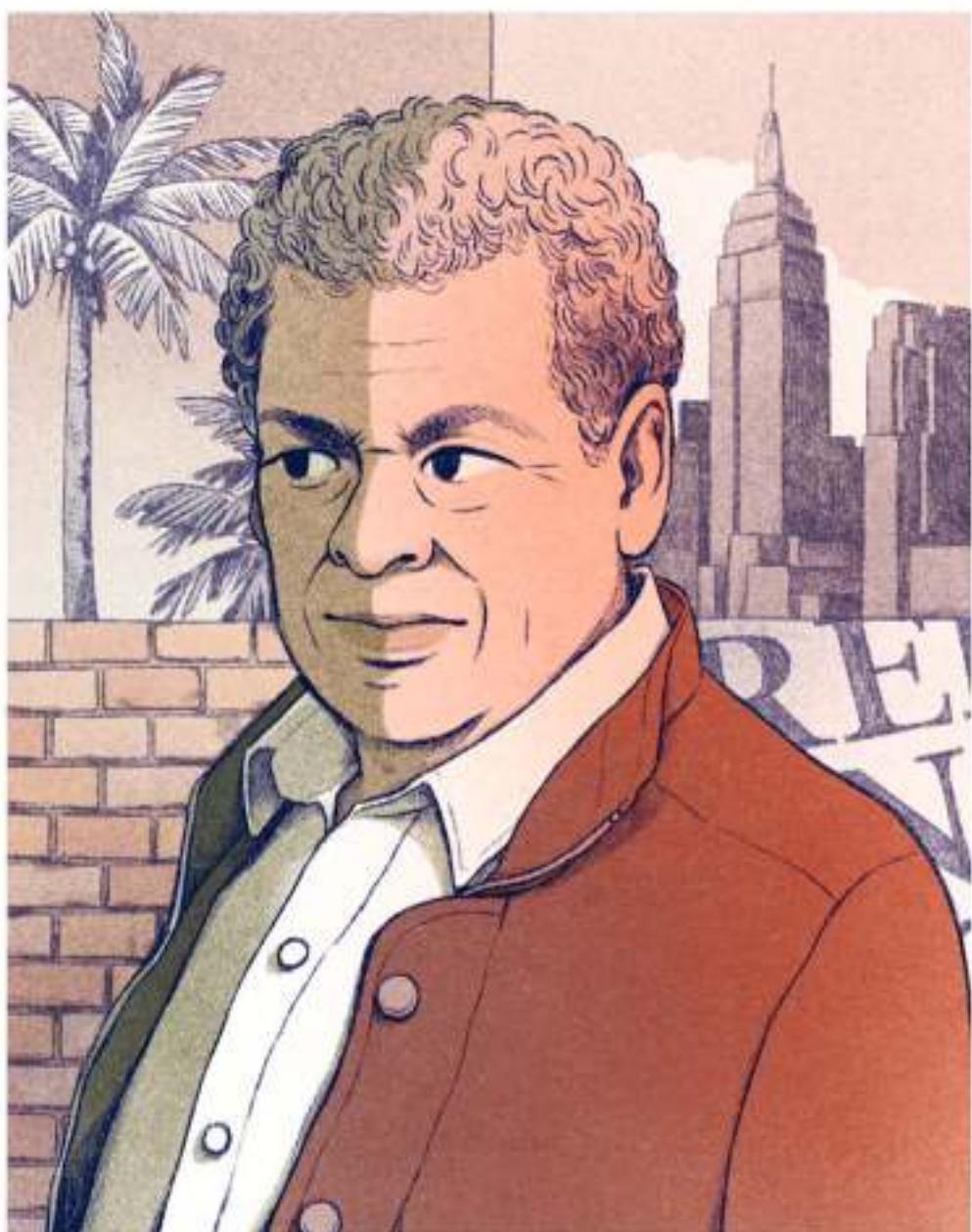
King suggests that an easing of desperation within the gay community may have caused ACT UP’s undoing. As long as the core cadre felt that they were fighting for their own lives, ACT UP could accommodate vigorous internal disagreement, even as the group secured advances for women, people of color, and the homeless. After medical advances meant that, for most H.I.V.-positive Americans, the infection was no longer a death sentence but a chronic condition, the forces of fragmentation could no longer be managed.

ACT UP was always argumentative, though, and “Let the Record Show” remains faithful to that spirit. If Schulman’s record-keeping sometimes projects her own ideals and aspirations, she never fails to make one truth eloquently clear: “how brutal debates within the AIDS community could be, how high the emotional and literal stakes were, how desperate people were, how little anyone else was listening, and how truly destructive the pain and frustration could become.” ♦

# WHERE I'M COMING FROM

*The past pulls hard in Francisco Goldman's novel "Monkey Boy."*

BY JAMES WOOD



Before autofiction, there was autobiographical fiction, and before autobiographical fiction there was nothing very much. There's no whole cloth in fiction; the novelistic floor is littered with our private scraps and remnants. Invented stories are also inventories of the self: dressed facts; felt, remembered tales. When Cervantes came to write the second part—the sequel—of “Don Quixote,” he incorporated into his novel a real rival writer, Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda, who had already published a knockoff “Quixote” sequel of his own. Tolstoy borrowed so much from his own life, and so directly, that he once remarked that he lacked any imagina-

tion. Kafka edited his harrowing allegory “A Hunger Artist” on his deathbed, while suffering from starvation brought on by tuberculosis.

Francisco Goldman's new novel, “Monkey Boy” (Grove Press), looks like a nicely impertinent example of autofiction. A middle-aged writer named Francisco (Frankie) Goldberg, like Goldman the offspring of a Jewish-American father and a Guatemalan mother, takes a train from New York to Boston to visit his ailing mother, who is in a nursing home outside the city. Like Goldman, Francisco Goldberg, who narrates this book, was raised in a small suburban community outside Boston; like Gold-

*Goldman's autobiographical immersion answers the urgent cry of memory.*

man, our narrator is a novelist who has spent much of his adult life in Mexico and Guatemala working as a journalist, and is the author of a recent book of reportage about the infamous assassination of a leading Guatemalan bishop and human-rights advocate. (Goldman's book, from 2007, is called “The Art of Political Murder”; Goldberg's more flippan title, “Death Comes for the Bishop,” is perhaps the one Goldman wanted but knew he couldn't have.) There are countless such correspondences between Goldberg's fictional existence and Goldman's real one, and these, in turn, enable autofiction's apparently randomized freedom: essayistic riffs; a return to the dark material of “The Art of Political Murder”; considerations of the U.S. involvement in Central American political violence; a memory of first reading, in the summer before college, “One Hundred Years of Solitude” on Boston Common; and so on. As with Valeria Luiselli's recent novel “Lost Children Archive,” the contents of a whole life and mind are being assayed; the formal analogue for this project, as with Luiselli's, might well be a box or an archive of many different texts, beginning with the author's own diary or notebook.

But “Monkey Boy” is also a memory book, a novel that reads like an autobiographical immersion, a story that travels relentlessly between a difficult present and an unfinished past. In this guise, Goldman's book recalls older, if not necessarily less experimental, works of fiction. The great novelistic autobiographers Proust and Bellow, both mentioned in this novel, sponsor Goldman's story. In “Monkey Boy,” a middle-aged male writer and witness, like Moses Herzog, or like Charlie Citrine, of “Humboldt's Gift,” is dealing with some tricky contemporary business (here, as in Bellow, often amorous). The contemporary business is lightly, even haphazardly, plotted, because the real pressure, the storied onrush, comes from the past—from inescapable memory. Indeed, the protagonist may struggle to reconcile the demands of the present with the more urgent cry of memory.

In this case, bringing together the child and the seasoned adult may involve a kind of spiritual revolution, a casting off of the past by a reliving of it, a turn in the middle years toward a different

way of being. Francisco Goldberg, unmarried and childless, has recently met a younger woman, a Mexican immigrant named Lulú López. They encountered each other at a “learning sanctuary for immigrant kids in Bushwick,” where Frankie runs “a Wednesday evening story-writing workshop.” (This is the novel’s version of Stephen Haff’s Bushwick schoolroom project, Still Waters in a Storm, which also makes an appearance in “Lost Children Archive.”) Lulú appears one evening to collect one of the kids, who is a cousin. Frankie falls in love, perhaps truly for the first time in his life. But that life is strewn with the shards of unsuccessful relationships, and he has a long history of solitary travel and work. If the question he has about Lulú is how much she really loves him—an anxiety that runs through the book—the question he must have for himself is how well he can really love Lulú: he must change his life. “Proust wrote in his novel that a man, during the second half of his life, might become the reverse of who he was in the first,” our narrator tells us. “When I first read that a few years ago I liked the line so much I wrote it down on a

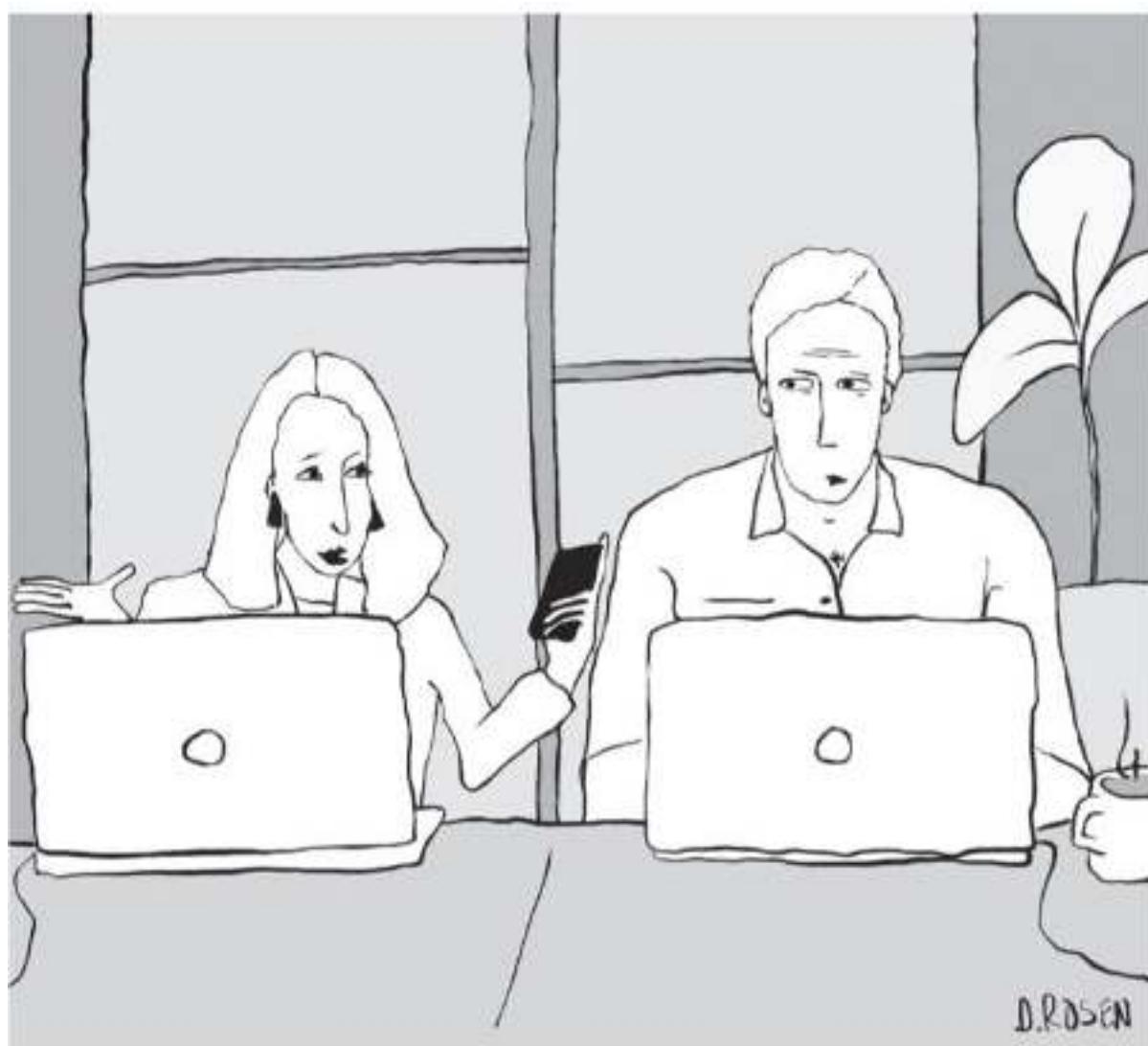
piece of paper and put it into my wallet.” This novel is that wallet.

As Frankie gets closer to Boston, his memories quicken into life, rich and painful at once. The most acute concern is his late father, Bert Goldberg, who was a wall of rage and malcontent. Anti-Semitic quotas kept Bert from Harvard, and the Depression kept him from studying medicine at Johns Hopkins, since his family needed his salary. And so “Grandpa Moe made him stay home and go to work as a locksmith so that he could help support the family.” He then studied chemical engineering at Boston University, “eventually leading to his long career in false teeth”—Frankie’s mordant way of summarizing Bert’s job as a chemist at the Potashnik Tooth Company. The narrator likens his abusive childhood to a war story. He returns again and again to his angry father, and the violence he meted out on his sickly and academically disappointing son. In one talismanic scene, Frankie fights back, and knocks his father to the ground; the memory seems, in equal measure, to thrill and to horrify our narrator. The parents’ marriage was largely loveless. Francisco “never

once in my life saw my parents kiss, never saw one lightly caress the other in a loving or even passingly sensuous way.” While Bert physically attacked Frankie, “with my mother and sister, it was insults, bullying, berating, derision.” Meanwhile, at school, Frankie—“monkey boy” to his bullies—had to dodge racist classmates like Gary Sacco, scion of the Sacco family, who built the subdivision the Goldbergs lived in, and who had a road named for them. To be beaten up by Gary Sacco and his gang on Sacco Road must have felt like being definitively put in one’s place.

Yet Frankie’s account is full of rebellious comedy and vitality. Goldman is a natural storyteller—funny, intimate, sarcastic, all-noticing. At Penn Station, Frankie, about to board the train to Boston, takes what he calls his “Louis Kahn memorial pee” in the men’s room where the great architect died of a heart attack: “I always picture his final collapse onto the floor like *Nude Descending a Staircase*, a paroxysmal grandeur but with a short, elderly Jewish man clutching his chest and falling.” The prose is loose-jointed, hybrid, elastic. Goldman describes the gentrifying area of Brooklyn where he meets Lulú thus: “Corner tiendas where neighbors like to gather to chat and gossip are being replaced with coffee bars where bearded blanquitos in eyeglasses sit on stools behind laptop computers at long front windows staring out at the street. . . . Staring out from behind their eyeglasses at the street that one day will be all theirs.” And, more lyrically, there is this lovely portrait of a snowstorm on Clinton Street, where Frankie and Lulú go walking: “Clinton Street in the snow looked like a long, straight logging road through a frozen forest, snow-piled branches, blanketed parked cars and trash cans, the occasional taxi rumbling past like a Red Army tank.”

Tellingly, in a book so shadowed by a violent father, the sources of vitality, laughter, and resistance tend to be female. Francisco admires Lulú’s academic ambition. He recalls an old girlfriend from his days in Mexico City, a photographer named Gisela, who was a talented shoplifter: “To this day the best kitchen knife I own is a Wüsthof that she stole for my birthday from the Palacio de Hierro on Avenida Durango . . . whenever I move, I take it with me.” His ear-



*“Sometimes I take a break from working on my computer and work from my phone.”*

liest memories involve his grandparents' house in Guatemala City, where he went to live with his mother when his parents split up for a few years—a house of dark rooms, heavy furniture, caged finches and canaries.

An extended recollection from this period of Frankie's life demonstrates the hospitable rhythms of the prose:

The memory of sitting in my bedroom's window seat and passing my toy truck out through the bars to an Indian woman who took her baby boy out of her rebozo and set him down on the patterned old paving stones of the sidewalk so that he could play with the truck and my astonishment that he was naked. A memory like the broken-off half of a mysterious amulet that can only be made whole if that now-grown little boy remembers it, too, and we can somehow meet and put our pieces together. I don't even remember if I let him keep the truck or not, though I like to think I did. Not all that likely that he's even still alive, considering what the war years were like for young Maya men of our generation. Who knows, maybe he's up here somewhere and even has children who were born here.

The density of the memory, the playing over present and past, the essayistic space made for an ongoing political dimension, along with an insistent optimism—all these are characteristic of the novel as a whole, and of Goldman's feel for a kind of narrative phrasing that allows an ideally sauntering and shifting perspective.

**A**t the heart of the novel's own tenacity and optimism is Frankie's mother, his *mamita*, Yolanda Montejo. Yolanda, an immigrant who never became an American citizen, harnessed to Bert's misery and "trapped in a gringo suburb with this alien family . . . in a two-road, mainly working-class neighborhood overlooked by a cemetery, amid rocky field and cold forest," would seem to have ample cause for complaint. A mark of how successfully she repressed her own misery is that Frankie tells us he became aware of his mother's unhappiness the year that he left for college. Instead, he recalls her gaiety and crooked, defiant spirit. Mother and son were told by his school to speak only English at home. But, on weekends, Mamita would take Frankie to a Boston church to watch movies starring the Mexican comedian Cantinflas: "We spoke Spanish on those Sunday afternoons in Boston and I loved how that

made me feel so close to Mamita, like we were alone in a foreign city."

When Frankie's first novel is short-listed for a prize (Goldman's first novel, published in 1992, "The Long Night of White Chickens," was short-listed for the PEN/Faulkner Award), Yolanda is both proud and disappointed, because she doesn't like the book's portrait of the mother. Like all wayward literary sons before him, Frankie tells her, of course, that she isn't anything like the mother in his novel—quite the opposite, in fact. "I made her the opposite of you so that you couldn't say I'd written about you," he says.

Unappeased, Mamita photocopies, enlarges, and frames the disclaimer from the novel's copyright page, which asserts that "any resemblances to any actual person is entirely coincidental," and hangs it next to the front door. Such tenacity doubtless propelled Yolanda out of the "gringo suburb" to her parents' house in Guatemala when Frankie was a baby, and to a fifteen-year career as a teacher of Spanish at the Berklee College of Music. Old now, with failing memory, she is still full of temperament, her hair dyed "a soft maroon with a slight orange tinge, a sort of cranberry-orange English marmalade color."

"Monkey Boy" steadily becomes a moving and tender elegy for a woman who seems to have spent most of her life suspended warily between visceral love of her birthplace and learned gratitude for her adopted home. Mother and son make each other laugh. At the nursing home, Frankie teases her that she was a "distinguished professor of marimba" at Berklee. They play Scrabble, she permitted to use English and Spanish, he restricted to Spanish. The implication is that Bert's recent death enables such pleasures. Frankie's newfound intimacy with his mother represents, of course, a blow against the grim memory of Bert, but also, perhaps, a way of beginning that moral revolution, proposed by Proust, which had so struck our narrator. He admits that he has been, until recently, a poor, distant son and brother. To the careless eye, he might seem, in middle age, the very image of productive self-sufficiency, the writer who needs no one, who has purified his life for the purity of his work. But there is something else, too, in this new proximity to Yolanda. Francisco

has managed to live much of his adult life outside America, consumed by his journalistic work on the American-backed violence that wrecked Guatemala and other Central American countries in the nineteen-eighties. Although Yolanda spent most of her life in America, and her son has spent most of his life outside it, they somehow share a certain way of not belonging in this country. As Francisco puts it, he has instinctively followed his mother's path, "willfully divesting" in order to join her in self-division. To return to his mother, to the Boston of his childhood, and to do mental battle with the memory of his father finally seem a way of ending one phase of his life and starting another. In this regard, the novel ends optimistically: Lulú is texting from Brooklyn; the young relationship may hold.

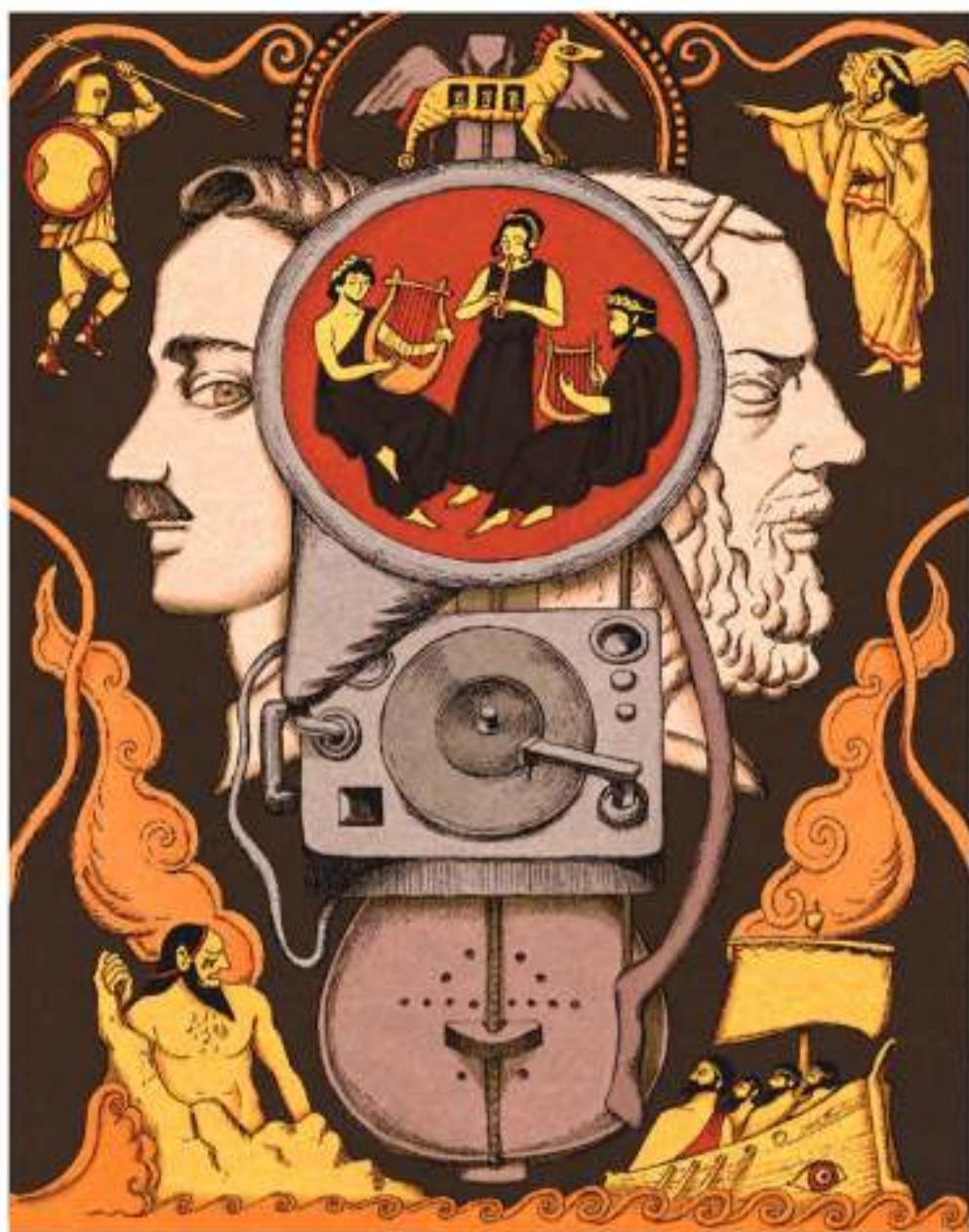
"Monkey Boy" creates a circle with "The Long Night of White Chickens." The two novels share a great deal of autobiographical material—a half-Jewish American, half-Guatemalan narrator (named Roger Graetz in the first book), the same childhood outside Boston, complete with the same local bullies and racists. Both books move insistently between the comparative peace (albeit with neighborhood menaces) of a remembered American childhood and the murderous turbulence in Guatemala. But "Monkey Boy," impatient with conventional novelistic structuring, bolder in some respects than Goldman's first novel, is desperate to seek a reckoning that, if it does not exactly lie beyond fiction, may sit uneasily within it.

That reckoning would seem to be deeply personal, for it involves Goldman in assessing himself and his parents as honestly as possible. In "The Long Night of White Chickens," the narrator's father is portrayed as genial and sweet-natured, a truly good man. With terminal ferocity, "Monkey Boy" sets that record straight, bringing both parents out of fictional camouflage and into something that feels like the transparency of memoir. One suspects that Goldman's mother would still not care for the project, but that this time neither mother nor author could credibly claim that "any resemblances to any actual person is entirely coincidental." We will never know, alas. "Monkey Boy" is dedicated to the memory of Francisco Goldman's mother. ♦

# THE ECHOING SONG

*The classicist who killed Homer.*

BY ADAM KIRSCH



The Western tradition has never been more appealingly portrayed than in Rembrandt's 1653 painting "Aristotle with a Bust of Homer." Whether you stand in front of it at the Metropolitan Museum or look at it online, the painting turns you into a link in a chain that goes back three thousand years. Here you are in the twenty-first century, contemplating a painting made in Amsterdam in the seventeenth century, which portrays a philosopher who lived in Athens in the fourth century B.C., looking at a poet thought to have lived in the eighth century B.C. Tradition abolishes time, making us all contemporaries.

Yet the painting hints that Homer

doesn't quite belong in the same dimension of reality occupied by you, Aristotle, and Rembrandt. Aristotle is portrayed realistically in the dress of Rembrandt's time—sumptuous white shirt, simple black apron, and broad-brimmed hat. (It wasn't until the twentieth century that art historians determined that the figure was Aristotle; earlier identifications included a contemporary of Rembrandt's, the writer Pieter Cornelisz Hooft.) In other words, Aristotle is a human being like us, albeit an extraordinary one. Homer, however, is a white marble bust—a work of art within a work of art.

It's a reminder that, even for Aristotle, Homer was more a legend than a

man. In his *Poetics*, the philosopher credits the poet with inventing epic, drama, and comedy. "It is Homer who has chiefly taught other poets the art of telling lies skillfully," he writes with evident ambivalence. Herodotus, known as the first historian, saw Homer, along with the poet Hesiod, as having invented Greek mythology, calling them the first to "give the gods their epithets, to allot them their several offices and occupations, and describe their forms."

When it comes to things like when and where Homer lived, however, the earliest sources are already unreliable. According to tradition, the poet was blind and was born on the island of Chios, where a guild of *rhapsodes*—reciters of epic poetry—later became known as the Homeridae, "children of Homer," and claimed to be his direct descendants. But there is no evidence for any of these assertions, and some ancient biographies of Homer are obviously fanciful.

Herodotus writes that Homer lived "four hundred years before my time," which would put him in the ninth century B.C., but adds that this is "my own opinion," with no real proof behind it. Other ancient sources give dates from 1100 to 800 B.C., placing Homer in what historians now call Greece's Dark Ages, when the kingdoms we read about in the Iliad had collapsed and city-states like Athens and Sparta had not yet arisen. This was long before the development of the literate, urban civilization we think of as "ancient Greece." There are no written records of this period, a fact that suggests the Greeks of Homer's time were illiterate. Ultimately, the only evidence that such a person as Homer ever lived is the existence of the Iliad and the Odyssey themselves. Surely someone had to have written them, and, as far back as we can see, that person was called Homer.

But in the nineteenth century classicists began to subject the Iliad and the Odyssey to the same kind of critical analysis that was casting new light on the historical origins of the Bible. Tradition held that the five books of Moses were written by their namesake, but research was suggesting that they were a composite of several sources stitched together long after the time they were ostensibly written. A similar debate—known as the Homeric Question—roiled classical scholarship. Were the

*Recording Yugoslav bards, Milman Parry established epic's oral origins.*

Iliad and the Odyssey really written by a historical individual named Homer, or were they composites of shorter poems by various people, woven together to form the epics we know? So-called “unitarians” argued that only a single author, with a powerfully imaginative mind, could have produced such monumental poems. “Analysts,” on the other hand, worked on separating the epics into their supposed original components by closely scrutinizing the language and the narrative.

Among those who waded into the debate was William Gladstone, the four-time Prime Minister of Britain, who published his three-volume “Studies on Homer and the Homeric Age” in 1858, during a brief stint out of office. Gladstone believed that the Homeric Question had been conclusively settled in favor of the traditional, unitarian view. The poems, he wrote, were “genuine gifts not only of a remote antiquity but of a designing mind.” And Homer, “to whom that mind belonged, has been justly declared by the verdict of all ages to be the patriarch of poets.” As it turned out, the verdict was premature.

We may not know when Homer was born, but we can say for certain that he ceased to exist in the early nineteen-thirties, when a young Harvard professor named Milman Parry published two papers, in the journal *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, with the seemingly innocuous title “Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making.” Parry’s thesis was simple but momentous: “It is my own view, as those who have read my studies on Homeric style know, that the nature of Homeric poetry can be grasped only when one has seen that it is composed in a diction which is oral, and so formulaic, and so traditional.” In other words, the Iliad and the Odyssey weren’t written by Homer, because they weren’t written at all. They were products of an oral tradition, performed by generations of anonymous Greek bards who gradually shaped them into the epics we know today. Earlier scholars had advanced this as a hypothesis, but it was Parry who demonstrated it beyond a reasonable doubt.

When he published his landmark papers, Parry was just thirty years old. Born in Oakland, California, where his

father ran an unsuccessful drugstore, he visited Greece only once, for two months. But, as Robert Kanigel shows in the new biography “Hearing Homer’s Song” (Knopf), Parry, as an undergraduate at Berkeley, had been seized by Homer, in much the same way that the deities in the Iliad seize their favorite humans. In that era of American public education, even someone from Parry’s background could master Latin in high school and Greek in college, where the language “became his deep and abiding love,” his sister later recalled. “I think it was the sheer beauty and grandeur of spoken Greek—and the great delight the Greeks found in simply being alive—that attracted him.”

Parry’s career as a classicist lasted about fifteen years, from the first Greek courses he took until his sudden death, in 1935, at the age of thirty-three. He published no books and only a few papers. His most important research, undertaken in the last years of his life, involved travelling to remote areas of Yugoslavia to make recordings of local singers, whose improvised songs offered clues about how the Homeric epics might have been performed millennia earlier. These recordings revolutionized the understanding of oral literature, but when Parry died no one had yet listened to them; they were just a pile of thirty-five hundred aluminum disks sitting in a Harvard storage room.

The significance of Parry’s work might never have become widely known if it weren’t for another scholar, Albert Lord, who accompanied Parry to Yugoslavia as a research assistant. Lord devoted the rest of his life to preserving and building on his teacher’s research, above all in his classic book on oral poetry, “The Singer of Tales” (1960). As Kanigel writes, for classicists, Parry and Lord are as indivisible as Watson and Crick, the scientists who discovered the structure of DNA.

Parry was an unlikely candidate for the task of abolishing Homer, who had been revered as the West’s first great poet for almost three thousand years. But, as great as Parry’s accomplishment was, it’s not obvious that biography is the best genre for taking stock of it. Because he died almost a century ago, there is no one alive for Kanigel to interview, no new sources to unearth. To compensate,

he leans on descriptions of the places Parry lived—Oakland at the turn of the century, or Paris in the nineteen-twenties, when he studied for his doctorate at the Sorbonne. Kanigel also devotes much attention to Parry’s marriage, helped by an interview that his widow, Marian, recorded in 1981. The only revelation here, though, is that the Parrys weren’t very close; they married only because Marian got pregnant, when she was twenty-four and Milman twenty-one. “That’s the beginning of the baby and the end of me,” she remembered him saying. They had a son and a daughter.

The Parrys’ marriage is primarily of interest because of the manner of Milman’s death. Late in 1935, he took a sudden leave of absence from Harvard to go to California, where Marian was helping her mother deal with a financial crisis. After spending time in the Bay Area, the Parrys headed south to visit Milman’s sister, in San Diego. They were staying overnight in a hotel in downtown Los Angeles when Milman, rummaging through his suitcase, discharged a loaded pistol he had packed, shooting himself in the heart.

Naturally, such a shocking death provoked rumor and conjecture about suicide or murder, which Kanigel duly reviews. But nothing in Milman’s life suggested that he was suicidal or that Marian had a motive for killing him. The policemen called to the scene didn’t hesitate to declare the death accidental, and the Parrys’ children later wrote that, given “Milman Parry’s character and the specific circumstances of his death,” an accident was the only reasonable explanation.

Certainly Parry doesn’t seem to have been the kind of man to inspire murderous passions. One of his Harvard colleagues recalled, “He had no enemies so far as I know and few friends. Not that he rejected friendship; he did not need it. He had had his idea and he had deliberately prepared himself to follow it up, and this was his life.” It is Parry’s consuming idea that is the real subject of “Hearing Homer’s Song.”

Even in antiquity, there were some clues that the authorship of the Iliad and the Odyssey might be a complicated affair. The Greek historian Plutarch, who lived in the first century A.D., wrote

that the epics owed their existence as complete poems to Lycurgus, an early ruler of Sparta, who encountered them during his travels in Asia Minor:

When he saw that the political and disciplinary lessons contained in them were worthy of no less serious attention than the incentives to pleasure and license which they supplied, he eagerly copied and compiled them in order to take them home with him. For these epics already had a certain faint reputation among the Greeks, and a few were in possession of certain portions of them, as the poems were carried here and there by chance; but Lycurgus was the very first to make them really known.

Lycurgus was renowned in antiquity for creating the harsh institutions that made Sparta Spartan, such as military training for boys and common mess halls for adult men. Little of this is certain, however. The classicist Gregory Nagy has written, in his book “*Homeric Questions*” (1996), that “it was a common practice to attribute any major achievement of society, even if this achievement may have been realized only through a lengthy period of social evolution, to the episodic and personal accomplishment of a culture hero.” In other words, a Spartan way of life that gradually took shape was retroactively attributed to a single lawgiver, whose name gave it an almost divine authority. But it’s entirely possible that no such person as Lycurgus ever existed.

Could the same be true of Homer? The story about Lycurgus implies that until he came along the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* existed only as fragmentary tales told in various parts of the Hellenic world. In Athens, a similar feat of reconstruction was attributed to a different ruler, Peisistratus, a well-attested historical figure who lived in the sixth century B.C. He was said to be “the first person ever to arrange the books of Homer, previously scattered about, in the order that we have today.” He also instituted a quadrennial competition, the Great Panathenaea, in which the epics were recited in their entirety by a relay of *rhapsodes*.

Nagy observes that many cultures tell stories about an ancient text reduced to scattered fragments, then gathered together to reconstitute the lost original. The national epic of Persia, the *Shahnameh* (“Book of Kings”), is known to have been written by the poet Ferdowsi, at the end of the tenth century

A.D. But in the text Ferdowsi claims that the story was once lost and then reassembled out of fragments by a group of wise men. A story like this, Nagy argues, should be seen not as a literal account of historical events but “as a myth that happens to account for a historical process”: a cluster of tales told in various ways in various places is collected and edited into a single, authoritative version, which is then projected back into the distant past.

In 1795, the German philologist Friedrich August Wolf published a book, “*Prolegomena to Homer*,” arguing that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* could not have been composed all at once in the form we know them now. “I find it impossible to accept the belief to which we have become accustomed: that these two works of a single genius burst forth suddenly from the darkness in all their brilliance, just as they are, with both the splendor of their parts and the many great virtues of the connected whole,” he wrote. He believed that the epics were edited together out of shorter poems that were composed and transmitted orally during the centuries before literacy came to Greece. In the poems themselves, Wolf noted, no one ever reads or writes.

This argument appealed to the new spirit of nationalism in Germany, where a generation of thinkers reacted against the triumphal universalism of the French Revolution by stressing the differences that make nations and cultures unique. If Homer never existed, then the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* could be read as direct expressions of the Greek spirit.

Because there’s no reliable external evidence about how the Homeric epics were composed, the text itself had to be coaxed into telling its story. The same is true of the Hebrew Bible, but in that case it’s clear that we are dealing with a collection of books by different authors: they narrate events that took place centuries apart and are written in a wide range of styles, from dry chronicle to visionary verse. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, in contrast, *could* plausibly be the work of a single poet. They use the same verse form throughout—dactylic hexameter, in which every line contains six groups of syllables. One of the most prominent features of Homeric poetry is the use of epithets, fixed descriptions

that are applied to people and things again and again: “white-armed Hera,” “swift-footed Achilles,” “wine-dark sea.” This gives the effect of a single poetic style sustained at great length—the *Iliad* is almost sixteen thousand lines, the *Odyssey* more than twelve thousand. And, though the epics contain many episodes and characters, each employs a highly focussed narrative framework: the *Iliad* concentrates on the final year of the Trojan War, and the *Odyssey* tells of one man’s journey home after the war ends.

Still, a close reading of each epic reveals inconsistencies that would be hard to explain if either or both had been written by a single author. Robert Fagles observes, in the introduction to his 1990 translation of the *Iliad*, that the poem’s Greeks and Trojans fight with weapons made of bronze, the alloy of copper and tin used in the Near East until about 1200 B.C. The Iron Age is evidently only just beginning, since iron is rare and precious: in the funeral games that Achilles stages for his friend Patroclus, in Book XXIII, he offers as a prize “an ingot big enough to keep the winner in iron / for five wheeling years.” Yet in Book IV the Trojan archer Pandarus is described as using iron arrowheads. As Fagles notes, “Arrowheads are not things you expect to get back once you have shot them.” The detail suggests that this part of the epic comes from a time when iron had become so common that archers could afford to throw it away.

Another sign, apparent to experts like Fagles and Parry, though invisible to those of us who read Homer in translation, is that Homer’s Greek is an amalgam of dialects from various regions and eras. It includes words and grammatical forms that were already puzzling Athenians in the fifth century B.C., when students had to read Homer in school. As Fagles puts it, Homer’s Greek “is not a language that anyone ever spoke.” So how did the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* come to be written in it?

Parry’s stroke of genius was to realize that the answer to this question was hidden in plain sight, in the two most obvious features of Homeric poetry—the meter and the epithets. In his doctoral thesis, Parry showed that these

features were directly connected, in a way no one had noticed in millennia of reading. His argument rests on the fact that Greek, unlike English, is an inflected language, where the forms of words and names vary according to their grammatical function: Achilles is *Achilleus* when he's the subject of a verb, *Achillea* when he's the direct object. These forms have different metrical values, meaning that when they appear in a line of poetry the syllables around them have to be different, too, in order to preserve the pattern of the hexameter.

Parry, Kanigel writes, showed that "for each hero, god, or goddess, in each grammatical case, in each position in the hexametric line, there was normally only a single epithet that went with it." Homer didn't call the Achaeans "strong-greaved" in one place and "hairy-headed" in another because he thought those adjectives were particularly apt at that moment in the story. Rather, he had a supply of ready-made epithets in different metrical patterns that could be slotted in depending on the needs of the verse, like Tetris blocks. As Parry wrote in one of his papers, "The Homeric language is the work of the Homeric verse," not the other way around.

In his doctoral thesis, Parry demonstrated these patterns with extensive tables and charts. He wasn't yet ready to take the step of explaining why the epics were composed this way. But, to anyone steeped in the academic wrangling over the Homeric Question, the implications were clear. In a review of Parry's work, his thesis adviser, the French linguist Antoine Meillet, wrote that "these poems were intended to be recited and that they were based on ancient oral semi-improvisations."

After all, if Homer was a writer sitting at a desk with a reed pen and a piece of papyrus, there was no reason that he had to make his lines from pre-fabricated elements. He could have filled out the verses any way he liked. But, if the epic was being improvised on the spot by an oral performer, the epithets would have been indispensable, allowing the singer to keep the meter going while he thought about what to say next. This was especially true if the singer could not read or write, and so had no original text to consult and memorize. As Parry wrote, "In a society where there

is no reading and writing, the poet, as we know from the study of such peoples in our own time, always makes his verse out of formulas. He can do it in no other way."

It was this theory that took Parry to Yugoslavia, where a living tradition of oral poetry still existed. Kanigel's chapters on his two trips—a short, unsatisfying one in 1933, followed by a long and fruitful one in 1934–35—form the most absorbing part of "Hearing Homer's Song," just as the trips were the most interesting experience of Parry's life. With the help of an interpreter, Nikola Vujnović, Parry would go from village to village and inquire at the tavern about the best local

*guslar*—a bard who accompanied his recitation with a *gusle*, a single-stringed instrument made of maple wood, horse-hair, and sheep or rabbit skin.

Using a purpose-built recording machine with two turntables, Parry could record continuously for hours as the *guslar* went through his repertoire of tales. These usually had to do with the adventures of legendary Balkan heroes who would not have seemed out of place among Achilles and Hector. "The Captivity of Dulić Ibrahim," which Parry recorded in several versions by different singers, tells of a Muslim hero, Dulić Ibrahim, whose true love is betrothed to another while he is imprisoned by a Christian prince. When the prince, impressed by the depth of Dulić's grief, frees him, Dulić makes his way home to win the woman back. As Kanigel points out, the story has some remarkable parallels with the *Odyssey*, though there is no suggestion of direct influence. When Dulić returns, he defeats "thirty captains and . . . twenty dukes" in combat, much as Odysseus slays the hundred and eight suitors who have been plaguing his abandoned wife, Penelope. Dulić is recognized by his beloved horse, just as Odysseus is recognized by his faithful dog, Argos.

No wonder Parry believed that in Yugoslavia he had made contact with the wellspring of epic. Some of the recordings he made, and others made later by Lord, are available for

streaming on the Harvard Library Web site. It's not just the scratchiness that makes them sound ancient; the drone of the *gusle* and the minor-key speak-singing feel primeval, from a time before poetry and music diverged. "I like to think," Lord wrote, that in these songs "one is hearing the *Odyssey*, or ancient songs like it, still alive on the lips of men, ever new, yet ever the same."

Parry's research showed that, in an oral-performance tradition, it makes no sense to speak of a poem as having an authentic, original text. He found that, when he asked a *guslar* to perform the same poem on consecutive days, the transcripts could be dramatically dif-

ferent, with lines and whole episodes appearing or disappearing. With the *guslar* he considered the most gifted, a man in his sixties named Avdo Mededović, Parry tried an experiment: he had Mededović listen to a tale he'd never heard before, performed by a singer from another village, and then asked him to repeat it. After one hearing, Mededović not only could retell the whole thing but made it three times longer, and, in Lord's recollection, much better: "The ornamentation and richness accumulated, and the human touches of character imparted a depth of feeling that had been missing."

Since Wolf, the Homeric Question had posed a choice between opposites: an individual poet of genius or a series of anonymous folksingers. Through close textual analysis, Parry settled the debate in favor of the latter. In discovering Mededović, however, he glimpsed how the binary might be overcome. Among the generations of ancient Greek bards who told stories about the Trojan War and the adventures of Odysseus, there must have been one or a few who were geniuses themselves—who could hear the formulaic old stories and transform them into epics so vivid and dramatic that people would keep them alive for thousands of years. We don't know anything about those great storytellers, just as we don't know the names of most of the architects and masons who created the Gothic cathedrals. But we might as well call them Homer. ♦



# REMEMBER WHEN?

*"Hacks," on HBO Max, and "Girls5eva," on Peacock.*

BY DOREEN ST. FÉLIX



**H**acks," on HBO Max, is a comedy about comedy—a chilling proposition, in 2021. There is a loud species of comic who has no muse but grievance politics, who makes the stage a bully pulpit. One even nabbed the Presidency. The pilot episode of "Hacks" gets its source material from the culture war. When we meet Ava (Hannah Einbinder), a bisexual television writer in Los Angeles, she is pouting intensely. She has landed herself in hot water by tweeting a rude joke about a right-wing politician and his gay son; it's a setup so familiar that no one even needs to use the term "cancelled." Ava's a hot shot in her twenties with a mortgage,

so the blow to her ego and her wallet is a kind of hell. Her agent, Jimmy (Paul W. Downs), concocts a purgatory: Ava will help modernize the act of another client of his, Deborah Vance (Jean Smart, who, given her recent roles in "Watchmen" and "Mare of Easttown," is running HBO), a Las Vegas standup legend, whose longtime gig at the Palmetto is threatened by a new guard of E.D.M. d.j.s and a-cappella groups. Ava is skeptical, but she agrees to a preliminary meeting.

"Hacks" was created by Jen Statsky, Lucia Aniello, and Downs, all writers on "Broad City." The show plays as a minor-key coda to that rowdy feminist

*Jean Smart plays a Joan Rivers-esque comic who battles with a Gen Z upstart.*

comedy, which shed some of its yas-girl stoner politicking after Hillary Clinton lost the election. With "Hacks," the angst is up front, right there in the title: here is a society where women are alone, and where they lose even when they win.

When Ava and Deborah meet, they instantly hate each other. Deborah is put off by Ava's bland niceties, and Ava, growing impatient with Deborah's curt entitlement, snaps, "I'd rather sling Bang-Bang Chicken and Shrimp all day than work here!" Intrigued by her gall, Deborah hires her, and at this point "Hacks" opens up into something more than an indulgent inquiry into the state of comedy. It's a look at the soul of the artist: what truths she is able to speak, and what she forces herself to repress.

The symmetries between Ava and Deborah are neat. They both have strained relationships with their families, a history of failed romances, and a propensity for judgment and cruelty. And so the generational war between the Zoomer and the Boomer is heated by mutual recognition. These two ideologues have wildly different visions of what comedy can sound like and achieve. Ava is the newbie dadaist, arguing that punch lines are vestiges of a traditional joke structure that is "very male." She's partial to the arch and hostile Mitch Hedberg-style one-liner (e.g., "I had a horrible nightmare that I got a voice mail"). Deborah, like Freud, believes in jokes as discrete architectural objects, daggers that poke at the collective subconscious. Ava digs at Deborah for making wisecracks with mass appeal—jokes for the "Panera people." Deborah replies, "So you're telling me that, if a lot of people think something is funny, it's not."

The dialogue, in these early episodes, can be too niche, too meta-referential, too obsessed with the trade. "Hacks" is not a joke machine; the later episodes are downright melancholic. You laugh, but not hysterically. The scenes of Deborah's standup routine at the Palmetto have a surreal quality. They exist not to amuse but to catch a woman in the paradoxical situation of exposure and opacity, control and vulnerability. Ava's laughter tends to be mocking, until she starts cataloguing Deborah's archive, which includes an unaired pilot for a nighttime talk show, shot decades earlier. We see a youthful Deborah as the

host, digitally de-aged, in what is maybe the first use of that technology that feels soulful. Back then, Deborah was a newcomer, a feminist trailblazer in a male-dominated form.

“Hacks” subtly recasts the past half century of American comedy as a warped matriarchy, through which we can chart the evolution of the “woman’s voice.” Before Ava started working for Deborah, her knowledge of the older comedian had been passing, uninterrogated. Ava knew her as the brassy broad with a QVC deal, a paragon of shamelessness who notoriously burned down the house of her ex-husband, another well-known comic. It’s Deborah’s most famous joke, and it has also cast a shadow over her career. When Deborah offhandedly reveals to Ava that the house actually burned down in an accident, Ava balks. Deborah’s explanation? When she experimented with the joke at a gig, “it killed,” she says, her eyes brightening. If it killed something else inside her, then that was a price she was willing to pay.

Ava grows enamored of her boss. She pushes Deborah to embrace a more confessional style of standup, and to showcase her suffering, which she’d hidden in a persona. This is the hook of “Hacks”—how Smart inhabits a character who does not want to be known. The blond bouffant, the sinuous caftans, and the acid tongue are a tribute to Joan Rivers, and certain plot points are virtually identical to details from Rivers’s life. The scenes of Deborah at a spa, recovering from a routine nip and tuck, brought to mind Phyllis Diller, who was revolutionarily transparent about her own cosmetic procedures. We can also intuit Lily Tomlin and other giants in Smart’s

performance, a haunting, confrontational portrait of the twentieth-century woman who had to scrounge for liberation on her own terms. Ava, on the other hand, hasn’t been given a real history. Clunking around in a Carhartt jacket and Doc Martens, alienating her careerist peers and her sweet Midwestern parents, her character comes across as an extended satire of the Zillennial bourgeoisie. It’s not convincing that this person would force an awakening in someone like Deborah. But Einbinder works hard to match Smart, and, at moments, seeing them get into grooves of compassion, I felt myself flush.

The rest of the cast, by the way, also kills. Christopher McDonald is perfect as Marty, the operator of the Palmetto, a handsome sleaze who makes Deborah lose her composure. And Carl Clemons-Hopkins, who plays Marcus, Deborah’s consigliere, gives solidity to the questions of race and wealth that inevitably arise when a gay Black man devotes himself to an older white woman. Then again, anyone would glow in Smart’s presence. She generates her own light.

Like “Hacks,” “Girls5eva,” on Peacock, rubbernecks at a bygone phenomenon: nineties pop stardom. The members of a one-hit-wonder girl group are roused from dormancy when a rapper named Lil Stinker samples their signature track. After this second brush with fame, the ladies decide to reunite, abandoning their dissatisfying lives in order to write the perfect hit. Created by Meredith Scardino, a writer for “Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt,” and executive-produced by Tina Fey, “Girls5eva” is spawned from the Fey model: accessibly

absurdist, riddled with clever zingers, thick with critique. The cast makes this a fun binge. Renée Elise Goldsberry brings Broadway largesse to the character of Wickie, the defeated diva with the unbowed voice. Her foil is Dawn (Sara Bareilles), the Liz Lemon of the operation—a mom from Queens eager to prove herself as a songwriter. Paula Pell blesses us with Gloria, a lovesick lesbian dentist, and Busy Philipps does her best as Summer, the simple-minded Christian wife. We’ve also got a Swedish Svengali, a debased manager, and a boy-band martyr, in performances by Stephen Colbert, Jonathan Hadary, and Andrew Rannells.

You stick through the stumbles of “Hacks” because it’s energizing to watch the show’s creators pay tribute to a form that they revere. “Girls5eva” doesn’t think too highly of pop; the series does a good job of reckoning with the turn-of-the-century misogyny that fuelled Y2K pop music, but it’s not so interested in exploring what made this music transcendent. If “TRL” was poison, then why did a generation drink it up? What “Girls5eva” truly pines for is the reign of prime-time Fey. In the flashbacks to the short-lived heyday of the group, there is a pompous atonality to the satirical lyrics. (“Love watchin’ standup, but not by women,” they sing, in a tune called “Dream Girlfriends.”) And then there is the character of Summer. She is the Britney Spears analogue, the sweet and stunted adult—which means she should be the heart of the story, right? Not so. “Free Britney,” the singers pledge, in one scene, right before Summer leads them in practicing their “Britney scales.” They launch into a parody of the sexy-robot-baby voice. It’s a cheap laugh. ♦

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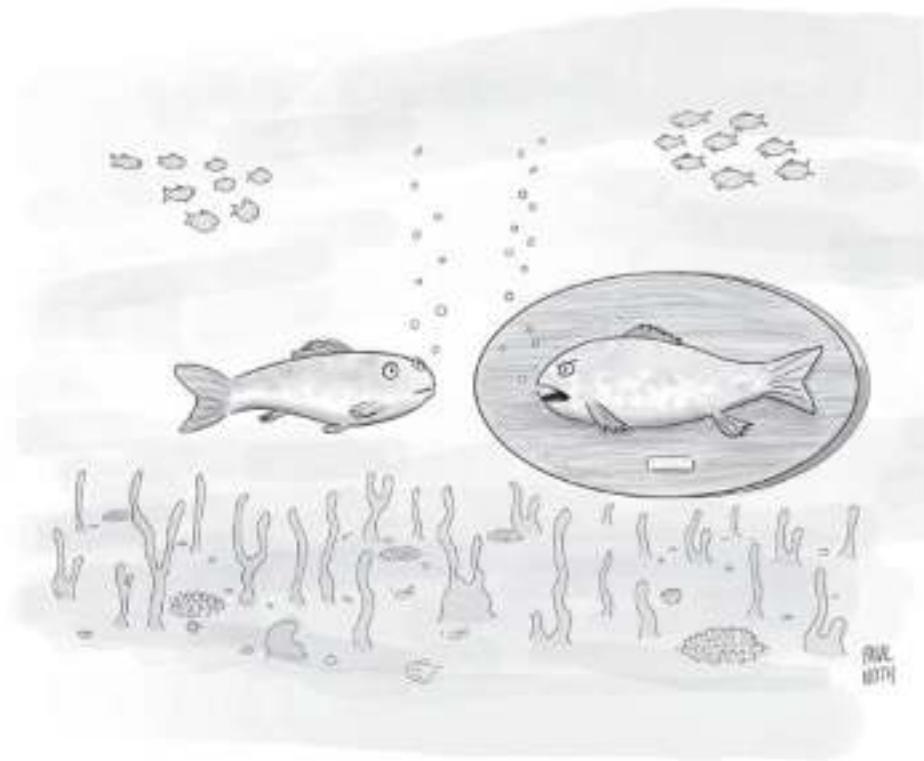
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## CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Paul Noth, must be received by Sunday, June 13th. The finalists in the May 31st contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the June 28th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit [contest.newyorker.com](http://contest.newyorker.com).

### THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



" " .....

### THE FINALISTS



*"Apparently, climate change is getting more serious."*  
Douglas Kahn, Raleigh, N.C.

*"I think the weather's turning on us."*  
Steve Wyatt, New York City

*"Don't worry, it's just a front."*  
Brandon D. Lawniczak, Mill Valley, Calif.

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*"If you're so civilized, why don't you use a coaster?"*  
Andrew K. Shaffer, Cupertino, Calif.

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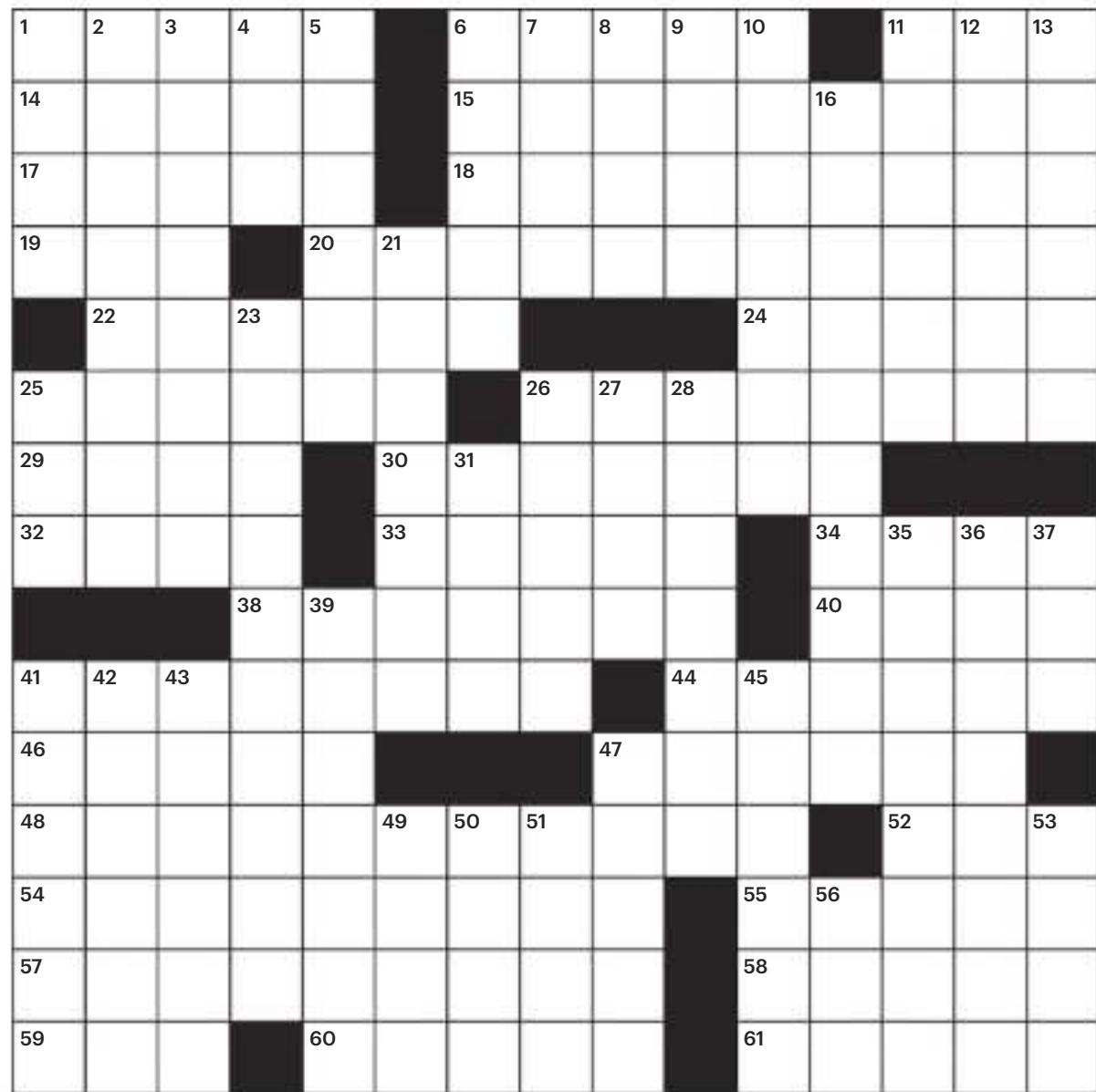
# THE CROSSWORD

*A moderately challenging puzzle.*

BY PATRICK BERRY

## ACROSS

- 1 Puts a thin coat on
- 6 Up in a stadium, say
- 11 Environment for growing cranberries
- 14 Strike force?
- 15 Perpetual drama
- 17 Org. whose founder exchanged acrimonious letters with P. T. Barnum
- 18 Go dark
- 19 Crowd closely around
- 20 "No, wait, hear me out!"
- 22 Oscar winner who has performed at three Super Bowls
- 24 Singer whose 2013 début album was titled "Pure Heroine"
- 25 Recruiting-poster word
- 26 Awkward sleeping spot
- 29 Portray
- 30 Get rid of, as a law
- 32 Lickety-split
- 33 Word trademarked by Lucasfilm in 2008
- 34 Long-range weapon, for short
- 38 Two-character David Mamet play set in a professor's office
- 40 Carla's portrayer on "Cheers"
- 41 Gems whose internal flaws are known as *jardin*
- 44 In the past few days
- 46 Infrequent partygoer
- 47 Strands on a tree
- 48 Body of water whose surface temperature remains roughly twenty-eight degrees Fahrenheit year-round
- 52 "America's Test Kitchen" network
- 54 Main character's protection from being killed off, facetiously
- 55 Dumbbell
- 57 Neurotransmitter that helps regulate mood and appetite
- 58 Nation represented by the track star David Rudisha at the 2012 and 2016 Olympics
- 59 \_\_\_ of Providence (symbol on a one-dollar bill)
- 60 Does damage control, in a way
- 61 Midlife-crisis symptom



## DOWN

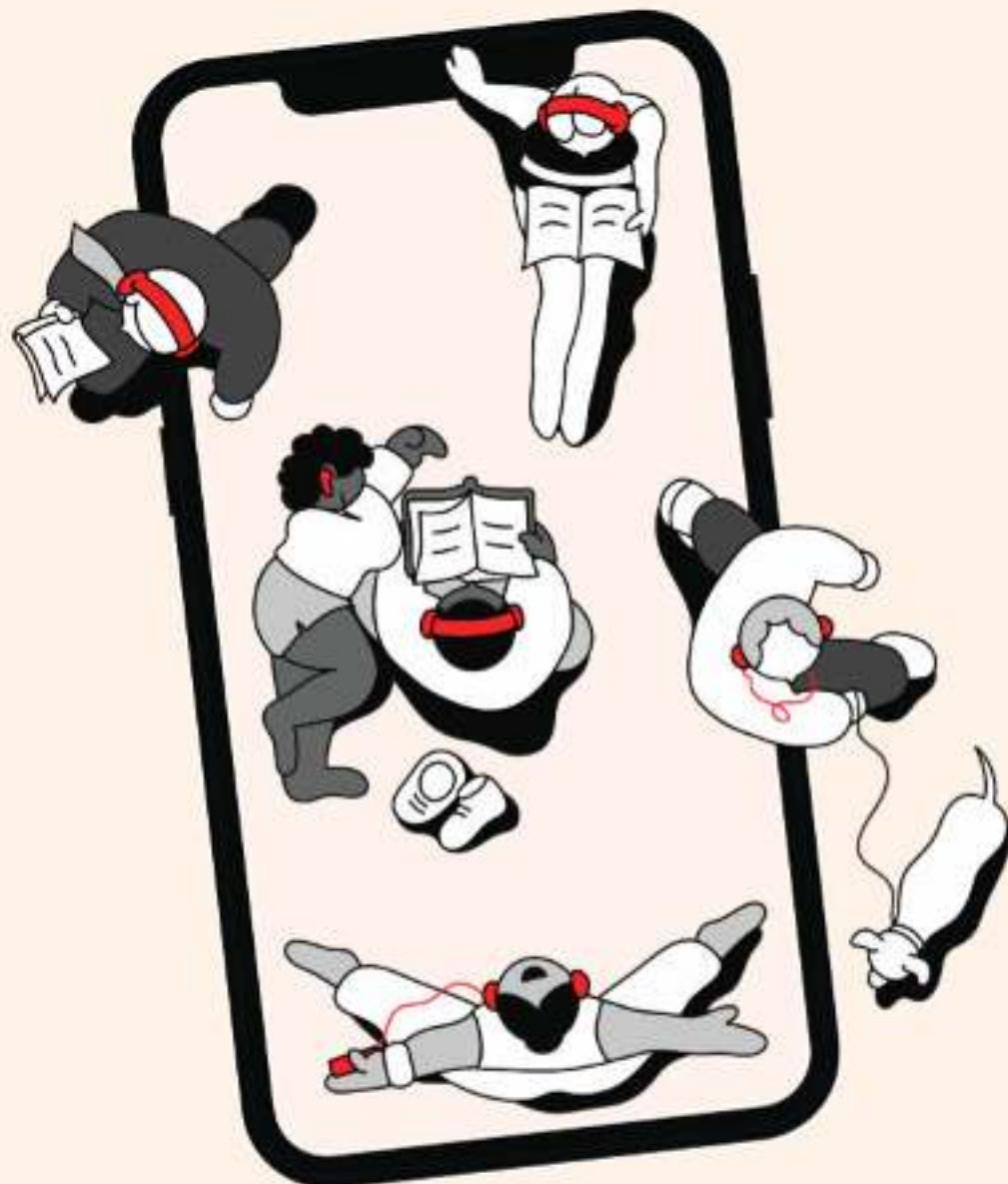
- 1 Island that's home to most of the world's native Chamorro speakers
- 2 Inability to crash?
- 3 Blistex offerings
- 4 Nickname of longtime Mets pitcher Dwight Gooden
- 5 Apiculture : bees :: heliciculture : \_\_
- 6 Resurrected character in "The Chronicles of Narnia"
- 7 Bugs Bunny or Jessica Rabbit, e.g.
- 8 Bottom
- 9 Top
- 10 Succumbs to instability
- 11 What *cave* means in Latin mottoes
- 12 Frozen-food brand named for two U.S. states
- 13 Deep shade of red
- 16 Clothing items that (despite the name) were originally designed for tennis
- 21 Fortress
- 23 Sixteenth-century Venetian painter whose name literally means "little dyer"
- 25 Small factory worker
- 26 Birds whose gray eyes turn red in summer
- 27 Lena of "The Unbearable Lightness of Being"
- 28 \_\_\_ onion (Georgia's state vegetable)
- 31 Slender nail
- 35 Singing like a baby bird
- 36 Bag men?
- 37 The shortest month?
- 39 Trick roper's props
- 41 Pass by
- 42 Safer reporting?
- 43 Possible result of loud cheers
- 45 Sörenstam of golf
- 47 Gull look-alikes
- 49 Photoshop command
- 50 Hotel chain based in Dallas
- 51 Accidental activator of airport metal detectors, often
- 53 Fantasy-football factoid
- 56 Retreat

*Solution to the previous puzzle:*

F	U	J	I	F	I	L	M		M	E	S	C	A	L
O	P	E	R	A	T	O	R		A	T	T	U	N	E
O	B	S	E	S	S	E	S		S	H	A	R	K	S
D	R	U		T	U	B		W	H	E	R	E	A	S
B	A	S	H	E	S		H	E	A	R	D			
L	I	P	I	D		T	A	G	N	O	R			
O	D	I	E		F	I	N	E	B	E	M	A	D	
G	E	E	K	I	N	G	T	U	T		I	A	M	
D	C	C	I	R	C	U	I	T		I	S	L	E	
E	A	T			A	P	T		O	D	E	L	L	
F	E	R	N	S					A	C	A	D	I	A
I	M	P	E	T	U	S		N	I	T		F	A	N
T	O	U	C	A	N		B	A	D	A	B	I	N	G
S	P	R	A	I	N		E	V	A	N	E	S	C	E
Y	E	A	R	L	Y		D	I	N	E	T	T	E	S

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