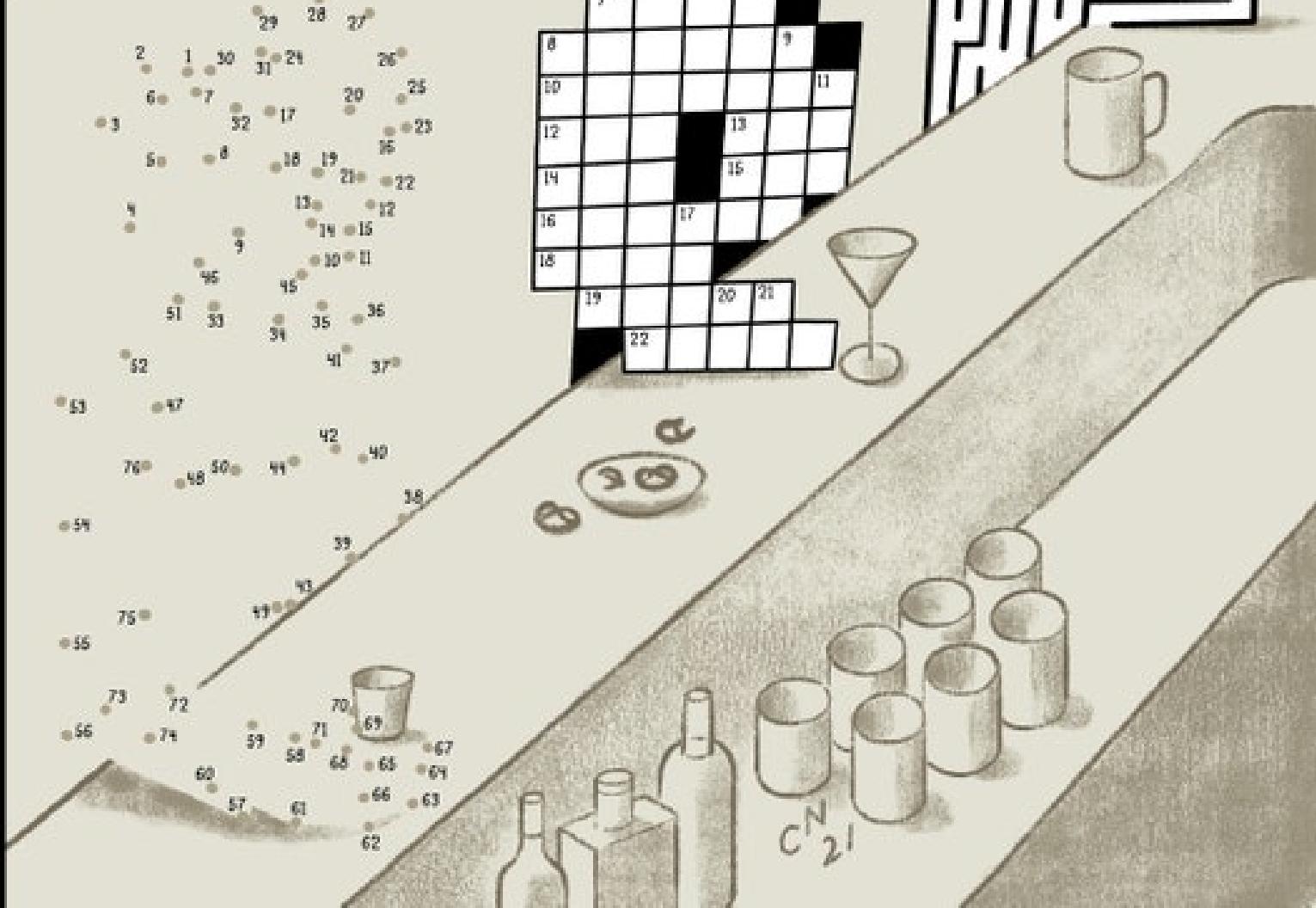
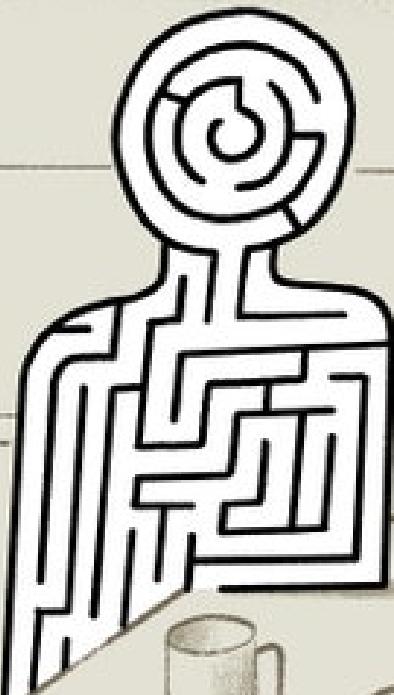
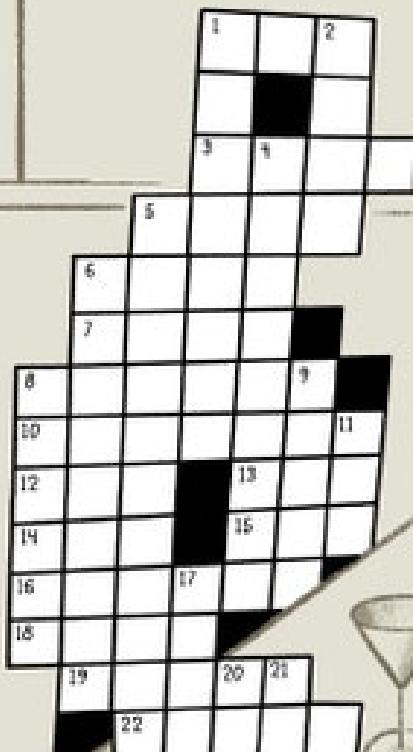
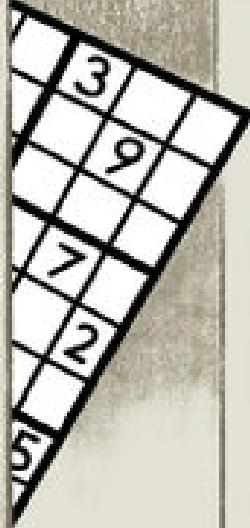


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Above & Beyond

- [A Majestic Holiday Tree in Washington Square Park](#)

The towering Norway spruce installed at Rockefeller Center is the tallest holiday tree in New York City, but it isn't the only evergreen game in town. Forty blocks south, the Stanford White-designed arch in **Washington Square Park**, one of Manhattan's liveliest landmarks, is home to a majestic forty-six-foot-tall fir (pictured above). At 5 p.m. on Dec. 24, carollers are invited to Greenwich Village to gather around the Beaux-Arts arch for a sing-along that will likely include a rendition of the classic "O Tannenbaum."

Annals of War

- [The Afghans America Left Behind](#)

The U.S. promised protection to the locals it relied on during the war. When it withdrew, it abandoned thousands to the Taliban.

By [Eliza Griswold](#)

Content

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

In July, 2001, Zarmina Faqeer, a sixteen-year-old Afghan refugee living in the Pakistani border town of Peshawar, learned that the BBC radio soap opera “New House, New Life” was seeking an actress for one of its lead roles. Faqeer, who was compact and scrappy, had little interest in fame. “It wasn’t about the glamour,” she told me recently. “It was the salary.” Her family had fled Afghanistan on foot in 1985, when she was six months old, during the Soviet occupation; her father, a wheat farmer, carried her over the snowy Hindu Kush mountains to safety. He found work in Peshawar as a security guard, and his wife had five more children. He died in 1995, and the family moved into a single room in the children’s school. Now, six years later, Faqeer had got a job as a middle-school teacher to support her family, earning about five dollars a month. An actress, she thought, had to make more than that.

On the day of the BBC’s open auditions, she took a bus across town. Eight women and girls sat waiting to try out, all of them poised and evidently experienced. Faqeer read her lines, but kept shrinking away from the microphone, and the director threatened to kick her out unless she stopped moving. Afterward, Faqeer cried as she walked back to the bus stop, cursing herself for wasting rupees on the fare. She didn’t have a mobile phone, so she’d given the director the number of the school’s crackly landline. A couple of weeks later, the principal summoned her to his office: the BBC was on the phone, and said she’d got the part.

Faqeer was offered a salary of a hundred dollars a month, and, that August, she started recording the show. Her character, Ghotai, was a struggling mother who’d recently returned to Afghanistan from Iran and was trying to start a small business to help her family, defying her father-in-law, who thought women shouldn’t work. “New House, New Life”—which became the most popular radio program in Afghanistan, with seven million listeners

—was a well-meaning soap opera. Its story lines paired secret love affairs with messages encouraging women's empowerment and participation in vaccination campaigns. "Everyone listened," Faqeer told me. "Even the Taliban listened. They had nothing else to do." Fans often wrote in to congratulate characters on their successes or to offer condolences when favorites died. "People thought our characters were real," Faqeer said. "They believed that we lived in a village, and asked to visit." Faqeer used the money to enroll in English-language and computer-literacy courses. She rented her family a house, paid her siblings' school fees, purchased their first TV, and bought matching purple outfits for herself and her sister, Mina, who was twelve. "I loved those suits," Mina told me. "They were a sign that our lives were getting better."

In October, 2001, the United States invaded Afghanistan. The streets of Peshawar grew choked with donkey carts and refugees arriving from across the border. But the fall of the Taliban opened new possibilities in Afghanistan. The BBC studio, which had moved from Kabul to Peshawar during the Taliban's rise, returned the next year; a few years later, Faqeer moved her family back, too. She helped Mina get a part on "New House, New Life" as a young girl fighting with her father for the right to go to school. "My sister convinced me that I had to be brave," Mina told me. Faqeer knew that, in their home village, in the rural province of Kunduz, there were questions about how she was supporting her family. When their cousins came to visit, the sisters kept their roles on the radio a secret. They attempted to ignore how the visitors eyed the quality of their carpets and their heaping trays of rice and meat. "Men in the village were in a tough situation," Faqeer said. "Maybe I was doing something wrong to be making that money."

"Something wrong" was a euphemism for working with the Americans. Billions of dollars in foreign-aid money were pouring into Afghanistan to promote "democracy-building" and other U.S. projects. Young women in Kabul could make hundreds of U.S. dollars a day from an array of new civil-society jobs; the city seemed to be thronged with trendy Kabulis hopping into Toyota Corollas and blaring Bollywood music. Under the surface, though, resentments simmered. U.S. soldiers launched night raids on family homes; air strikes mistakenly struck weddings, killing civilians. "Everyone

thought bad things about the women who were working in N.G.O.s,” Faqeer said.



Faqeer's sister Mina was stuck in Afghanistan when the Taliban took over, and needed to flee.

In 2005, Faqeer took a side job translating for Torrie Cobb, a police officer from Little Rock, Arkansas, who was training Afghan policewomen. Cobb was struck by Faqeer’s enthusiasm. “She was so excited to be part of a new movement in her country,” Cobb said. The job paid four hundred and fifty dollars a month, but it was dangerous. The U.S. compound where they worked was frequently attacked by suicide bombers, who also targeted the buses that the employees rode to work. “Every day, I got on that bus thinking I would die,” Faqeer told me. Once, she witnessed a bombing that left the body of a young guard entangled in power lines. Faqeer’s co-workers encouraged her to join the Afghan police, but she politely declined. She overheard Afghans talking about the women who enlisted. “They were saying they were having sex with their commanders,” she told me.

Faqeer attended fancy lunches with colleagues and shopped at high-priced boutiques. “It feels so good when you’re independent,” she said. She ignored the men who jostled her in the street. One afternoon, in 2005, when she took Mina and one of their brothers to the bank, she noticed a group of men in white following them. She pulled her siblings along, then ducked inside the bank. She tried to hide her fear, but Mina knew what was happening. “If my

sister was under threat, we all were,” she told me. Faqeer called a colleague at the radio station, who sent a car to bring her to work, and she bundled her siblings out the back door, telling them to go straight home. That evening, the men were gone. She put the incident out of her mind.

Sometimes men claiming to be Taliban called in to a talk show she had begun hosting for the BBC. They threatened her and others, saying that it was against Islamic law for women to be on the radio. But often, she said, they ended up telling her how much they loved the talk show, or her voice. She learned to end the discussions by asking if they had a song request, and they usually did. “Not everyone was as hard line as the leaders,” she told me. Eventually, a distant cousin recognized her on the radio, and told another cousin that he was going to kill her. She travelled to the village to confront him, shaming him for his “sinister plots,” and he seemed to back down. “I didn’t think anything could harm me,” she said.

To its allies, America has often proved a dangerous friend. Shifting foreign-policy objectives have frequently led the U.S. to abandon the civilian populations it previously vowed to protect. Amitai Etzioni, a professor of international affairs at George Washington University, traced this pattern to the early Cold War, when the United States promised to support civilians who rose up against the Soviet Union. In 1956, Polish and Hungarian dissidents took to the streets. The U.S.—which had indicated that it would back them, but feared starting a war—left them to face Soviet tanks on their own. After the U.S. withdrew from Vietnam, in the seventies, an estimated one million suspected collaborators were sent to prison camps. In 2011, when the U.S. pulled out of Iraq, local civilians who had worked with the military were still living on its bases for their protection. “We had clients who were escorted to the gates and no one even got them a taxi,” Becca Heller, the executive director of the International Refugee Assistance Project, told me. “Then they faced a multiyear wait for a U.S. Special Immigrant Visa with nowhere to hide.”

The pattern repeated itself in Afghanistan. In 1979, when the Soviets invaded the country, the U.S. supported the mujahideen rebels and funnelled millions of dollars to civilians displaced by the war. But, after the Soviet Union withdrew, the money stopped, and the country faced famine and mass migration. Helena Malickyar, a political analyst and a former Afghan

Ambassador to Italy, told me, “The U.S. abandoned Afghanistan once it thought it had achieved its goals.” In the resulting chaos, the Taliban—founded by former mujahideen—rose to power. When the U.S. invaded, in 2001, it relied on Afghans to work as interpreters, police officers, and military personnel. It promised protection in return, but its visa programs moved slowly, and some locals faced retribution. In 2013, when American troops began to withdraw from the town of Sangin, the Taliban launched a campaign of reprisals, killing hundreds of Afghan police officers and soldiers. Heller told me, “We say, ‘Come work with us. We know it’s risky and puts a target on your back, but we got you.’ In fact, we don’t got you.”

I met Faqeer, in Kabul, in 2012, when I was collaborating with Seamus Murphy, a photographer and filmmaker, on a project for *Poetry* magazine inspired by the work of Sayd Majrouh, an Afghan intellectual. Majrouh had travelled to Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan during the Soviet occupation to collect poems by women, which he published in a book called “Songs of Love and War,” a searing record of women’s voices raised against the constraints of their private lives and the pressures of perpetual war. Murphy and I wanted to do the same for women living through the American invasion. We travelled around Afghanistan collecting folk poems called *landays*, which are traditionally narrated from a woman’s perspective and offered in song. One begins, “When sisters sit together they always praise their brothers / When brothers sit together, they sell their sisters to others.” In our travels, we noticed how decades of occupation had seeped into the country’s poetry. Women sang of falling in love with British, Russian, and American soldiers, and then being betrayed by them. They recited poetry about drones—in Pashto, *bipilot*—and described Hamid Karzai, the Afghan President, whose clothes were “made of dollars.” In a poem that was popular on Facebook, an aggrieved woman says to her lover, “My darling, you are just like America! / You are guilty. I apologize.”

I worked with female translators and fixers and grew used to high levels of intimacy. I visited their fathers to vouch for their safety, and slept next to them on floors, or in locked cars, when we were on the front line surrounded by soldiers and there was no other way to protect their honor. When I first arrived in Afghanistan to collect poems, I worked with a translator named Asma Safi, who followed strict purdah, refusing to sit near Murphy in a vehicle and wearing black gloves to cover her hands. As we grew closer, she

explained that her choice of clothing was an armor of sorts: a way to display a set of conservative values that made other Afghans leave her alone. One night, Safi confided that she had a heart condition and needed to undergo surgery that wasn't available in Afghanistan and that cost tens of thousands of dollars. She didn't ask for my help, and I rationalized that it wasn't my responsibility to raise the money; we were colleagues. Six months later, Safi's heart stopped, and she died in a taxi on her way to the hospital.

Soon afterward, I began working with Faqeer. She was lighthearted and relentlessly chatty; during long drives, Murphy took to leaning his head out of the car window in a futile search for silence. She spent hours at the Deh Afghanan market, in Kabul, sifting through piles of gold nose rings and necklaces. I feared that, when the Americans were gone, and she lost her steady flow of cash, she would regret her shopping sprees. Outside the capital, walking through muddy warrens, she seemed out of place wearing makeup and high heels. She teased that my running shoes hardly helped me blend in. I was pregnant at the time, and Faqeer taught me to say "*Zma mashoom halek day*," which means, in Pashto, "I'm having a boy." This caused jubilation among the women, but in places where sonograms were unknown, some furtively asked Faqeer if I was a witch.



"Send it back if it's not what you ordered."
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

Among groups of rural women, Faqeer sometimes whispered, “I’m Ghotai, from ‘New House, New Life,’ ” and even those who’d been reluctant to speak to us would freak out and offer us cushions and tea. Many had sons who’d died fighting with the Taliban, and their poems reflected their rage at the U.S. But they also chafed at the strictures of their families, which they said precluded them from taking small jobs that would have helped them support their children. In the afternoons, Faqeer and I translated poems over bowls of green tea and dried mulberries. I could read as much Pashto as a five-year-old, and she made fun of how I puzzled the sounds out aloud. She invited me over to her house for dinner, where I met Mina, her pale-eyed little sister, who was then twenty-three. Mina seemed to regard Faqeer as a parent as much as a sister, and Faqeer bossed her around in a tender way, insisting that she practice her English. “Hello, how are you?” Mina asked, giggling.

In the weeks after I left Afghanistan, Faqeer, sensing that she was being followed again, dressed more conservatively. But one morning, in July of 2013, the Taliban posted a letter on her gate, on letterhead from “The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.” “We have been following you for the last eight years that you have been working with the Americans,” the letter began. It cited her work with me: “Because you have been seen with an American woman . . . now you will see the punishment for your actions.” She had been sentenced to death. “We are informing you that, if you are seen outside your house, you will be killed, according to Islamic law. You will not be excused anymore.”

Faqeer called me in a panic. To keep her family from worrying, she told no one else about the letter. “I could tell that something was wrong, but I didn’t know what,” Mina said. The quickest way out of Afghanistan was to go on hajj, and Faqeer had always wanted to make the pilgrimage. While she was in Saudi Arabia, I paced around my studio apartment in New York City, fretting over the nature of my responsibility to her. News organizations have protocols for protecting local journalists and fixers; *Poetry* magazine did not. I contacted friends at the Committee to Protect Journalists, and we scraped together enough money to send her to India and help her start a new life with one of her brothers, who was studying in Pune. She left dressed as a bride, wearing the gold she’d been quietly buying for years in anticipation of

this moment. The bangles and necklaces that I had judged frivolous proved to be just the opposite: they were her mobile bank.

Faqeer hated India; she couldn't find a job and feared that, without her salary, her family would slip back into poverty. Within a few months, without telling me, she had gone back to Kabul to live with Mina, who was now married, and who eventually had three sons and a daughter. Faqeer hid inside and cared for her sister's children. On the Internet, she met a man named Nazir, and he soon sent his mother to ask for her hand. "I clicked on his face because he looked nice and I didn't think he'd hurt me," she told me. "I didn't realize I was clicking on the rest of my life." She got married and moved to his home town, Mazar-i-Sharif, where she knew no one and where she hoped no one knew her. She found a job with the United Nations, and applied for a Special Immigrant Visa, which allowed Afghan nationals who had done work for U.S. interests to come to this country. The process was lengthy, and, after Donald Trump was elected President, and enacted his Muslim ban, I was concerned that she wouldn't be allowed in. But in the spring of 2017 Faqeer, her husband, and their one-and-a-half-year-old daughter were granted visas. They arrived in Richmond, Virginia, that May, and Faqeer adapted so effortlessly that the International Rescue Committee hired her to help others do the same. Nazir got a job as a data analyst at a pharmaceutical company. They saved their money and bought a house in the suburbs.

Even so, when we met in Washington, D.C., at Thanksgiving, 2017, she looked drawn and anxious. She worried about her siblings and her mother back in Kabul. Mina still worked as an actress on "New House, New Life," and was also running U.S.-funded education programs for the Ministry of Women's Affairs. Her husband, Zahir, managed interpreters for a U.S. military contractor. Mina had been followed home many nights by strangers in cars, and she and Zahir had applied for S.I.V.s.

In February, 2020, when the Trump Administration struck a peace deal with the Taliban called the Doha agreement, Faqeer despaired. The deal, negotiated without the participation of the Afghan government, called for the complete withdrawal of *NATO* forces the following year. Mina's final interview at the U.S. Embassy was scheduled for August 31, 2021, and she hoped that, when Joe Biden took office, he would delay the withdrawal to

insure Afghans like her a safe way out of the country. Instead, he set a withdrawal deadline of September 11th. “Biden was every Afghan’s hope,” Faqeer wrote to me. “I am sure all Afghan American citizens voted for him, but he did worse than Trump. I am sorry to say this :(.” On August 13th, she wrote, “We are so depressed no one counts afghans as humans their blood is even not valuable than water.”

The speed of the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan startled even seasoned observers. In the months before the U.S. withdrawal, the Taliban had been negotiating agreements with provincial governors, who surrendered their forces. “It was like watching a Category 5 hurricane approaching, but the sky’s still blue,” Ioannis Koskinas, a former military officer who was living in Kabul at the time, told me. “It was a total façade of normalcy.” U.S. intelligence experts had predicted that it would take eighteen months for Kabul to fall and the government to collapse. Instead, in the course of a weekend, the Taliban took over the capital. At the time, there were still thousands of U.S. citizens in the country, as well as tens of thousands of green-card and S.I.V. holders, and hundreds of thousands of other Afghans who had worked with the U.S. and might face retribution.

This past spring, in the leadup to the U.S. withdrawal, the State Department processed more than five thousand S.I.V.s—more than at any point in history, but not enough to address the logjam. It eventually launched an aggressive calling campaign to reach U.S. citizens in Afghanistan. “We gave bloodcurdling warnings for people to leave,” Ross Wilson, the chargé d’affaires in Afghanistan, told me. “There were repeated attempts to make voice-to-voice contact to ask, ‘Are you O.K.? Do you want to leave? How do we make that possible?’ ” The State Department organized flights to speed departures of S.I.V. holders and, later, to evacuate U.S. citizens.



"Remember to leave room for an extraordinarily heavy book you won't read."
Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

Yet the U.S. government had few plans in place to get large numbers of Afghans to safety. Senator Richard Blumenthal, Democrat of Connecticut, told me, “We went to the White House in May and urged in emphatic terms that the evacuations begin then and there. It was frustrating beyond words to hear about these Afghan allies desperately trying to leave the country without any American presence to provide help.” The U.S. was reluctant to organize a large-scale exodus, which it feared would cause a panic and weaken the Afghan state. When Kabul fell, the Americans hadn’t succeeded in organizing asylum agreements with third-party countries, which balked at receiving large numbers of Afghans, and hadn’t created sustainable humanitarian corridors to allow refugees safe passage out. The only option was to fly them to the U.S., or to military bases in the region. But officials worried that Al Qaeda or the Islamic State would embed sleeper agents in the flights. “You felt like you were in a race against time,” Suzy George, the chief of staff to the Secretary of State, told me. “There were some times where we just got it right, and we got people through the gate, and there were lots of times where it was just so much more complicated.” Until this past summer, the State Department had a nascent mechanism, the Contingency and Crisis Response Bureau, that was to be charged with organizing such complex operations. But in July the Biden Administration abandoned the project, a move that some advocates have argued hobbled the

effort. (A State Department spokesperson denied that this move hindered evacuations.) There was no single entity or senior U.S. official charged with overseeing the process. “We should have assumed that there was going to be a rush of Afghans who worked with us who wanted to get out,” Representative Elissa Slotkin, Democrat of Michigan and a former C.I.A. official, told me. “Instead, all systems were overwhelmed and blinking red.” For most Afghans, there was no official path for escape. “The trouble is that in this crisis to evacuate American citizens, some of our Afghan allies were left behind,” Slotkin said.

Women who had worked with the U.S. were at particular risk. Local clerics gave speeches on the radio urging that they be kidnapped and married off to Taliban fighters. An employee at a health N.G.O. funded by the United States Agency for International Development wrote that she had sewn a pocket into her nightdress so that she could take her phone if she was abducted. N.P.R. reported that a female gynecologist who’d given a contraceptive injection to the thirteen-year-old wife of a Taliban commander had received a phone call from the commander, who said that Taliban forces would soon come for her. A poet who had helped me translate *landays*, and who requested anonymity out of fear for his family, was threatened by Islamic State fighters. In 2016, ISIS militiamen had murdered his father. They were imprisoned at Bagram Air Base, but, when Kabul fell, they escaped and contacted him to say that they were coming for his brothers, in punishment for speaking out.

In the absence of an adequate official response, thousands of volunteers banded together to help get Afghans out of the country. “America is throwing them to the wolves,” Yasmine Delawari Johnson, an Afghan American advocate, told me. Military veterans formed groups to save the lives of people they had worked with in the field. Tim Flynn, a retired rear admiral in the U.S. Navy who volunteered in the evacuations, watched footage of chaotic scenes unfolding in Kabul. “I started to realize that the U.S. military was not going to be able to get people out,” he said. Aid workers, journalists, and former officials created encrypted chats and crowdsourced how to charter flights and secure landing rights. The efforts pulled in hundreds of people with deep experience in Afghanistan, including my colleagues Jon Lee Anderson, Anand Gopal, Luke Mogelson, and David Rohde. But, Flynn said, “it’s not sustainable to run government-scale

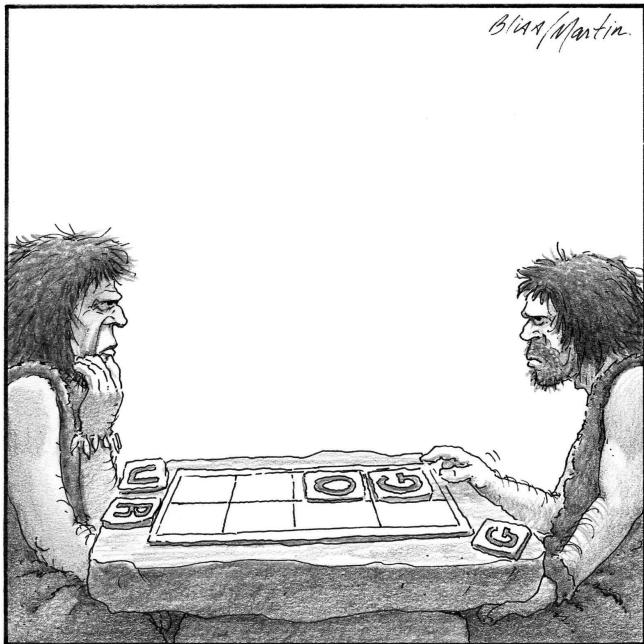
evacuations with volunteers and donations. The biggest frustration is all of this is really best handled by our State Department and Department of Defense. And they appeared to be sitting on their hands.” Some groups proved effective; others did not. “Once you do this once, you get a million people reaching out, sending crying emojis, saying, ‘Why can’t you help me,’ ” Kim Barker, a journalist who joined the efforts, told me. “Why isn’t the State Department getting crying emojis?”

For many Afghans, the best way to leave the country was through Hamid Karzai International Airport, which was surrounded by Taliban checkpoints. Inside, American military and intelligence operatives faced the impossible task of allowing a select few to enter. There was an overwhelming sense of urgency, since the airport might close at any time. Lieutenant Colonel Jason Hock helped to oversee operations there. Hock is also an Osprey pilot who formerly dropped teams riding A.T.V.s into war zones. He’d helped to form the Multi-National Coordination cell, which fielded requests from government and private groups. If groups assisting those in danger could charter a plane, get refugees to the airport, and gain government approval, Hock could usher the refugees through the gates.

The most critical members of the evacuation teams were Afghans, some of whom led operations on the ground. One volunteer, who asked that his name not be used, to protect his family, told me that, even once his relatives were safely inside the airport, he continued to leave the gates to retrieve others in danger. “I thought of it like fishing,” he told me. “The families were just like mine, and I wanted to rescue as many as I could.” Finally, an American at the gate put his hand on his shoulder, saying, “Are you trying to get yourself killed?” Wazhma Sadat, an Afghan attorney, missed a flight in Los Angeles, hunkered down in the terminal, and spent the night on the phone helping those waiting outside the Kabul airport secure permission to get in. “I heard a little boy asking his father why his life was not a priority,” she told me. “I still struggle to understand how this supposedly preplanned, negotiated, and inevitable withdrawal ended the way it did.” Rina Amiri, a former U.S. official involved in the efforts, said, “These are people many of us have known intimately. It is immensely painful and difficult to only be able to help a few. It feels so much like living ‘Schindler’s List.’ ”

When the Taliban took Kabul, Mina was waiting in line at the bank, trying to renew her credit card, and heard gunfire. Through the window, she saw Taliban fighters arriving in the street. The bank suddenly emptied. As Mina ran, she passed a unit of Afghan soldiers in retreat. “I couldn’t believe how much they have sacrificed for the rest of us, only to be abandoned,” she told me. When she reached home, she called Faqeer and told her, “It’s like a zombie city.” Mina’s husband, Zahir, now had a senior position at the government’s Ministry of Agriculture. The next morning, the Taliban showed up at their driver’s home, seized the car, and asked where the family lived. It was clear that they had to leave immediately, but, Faqeer wrote to me, “Taliban are now at every single checkpoint. To be honest I don’t have any idea how to help them getting to the airport.”

A close friend put me in touch with Ashley Bommer Singh, a longtime aide to Richard Holbrooke, who had been the U.S. Special Representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2009 and 2010. Ashley’s husband, Vikram Singh, a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense under President Obama, now worked for a government-funded think tank that had dozens of Afghan staff members with families at risk. To help get them and others out, the couple teamed up with Bancroft Global Development, a humanitarian nonprofit that has run emergency evacuations in places like Somalia, Yemen, and Mali. I joined their effort and, in several days, we raised the one and a half million dollars necessary to charter an Airbus A340. (Condé Nast, which owns *The New Yorker*, contributed, as did dozens of individuals, media organizations, and nonprofits.) The easiest part was filling the seats: we were flooded with requests from Afghans at extreme risk, including several who had already survived assassination attempts. The final manifest included women’s-rights advocates, journalists, high-profile government employees, judges being hunted by the Taliban fighters they’d convicted, female doctors, and the stars of the film adaptation of Khaled Hosseini’s novel “The Kite Runner.” It was daunting to work on such sensitive operations. But sometimes strangers appeared in encrypted chats, using code names like Mike or Matt, and giving reassurance about having “eyes” on the convoys or offering “handshakes” at the gate. We realized that there were current and former intelligence officers and other government officials working behind the scenes to insure the safety of the refugees.



Cartoon by Harry Bliss and Steve Martin

Most, like Faqeer's family, were afraid to leave their homes. Mina sat up all night watching the door, waiting for the Taliban. "I wasn't so worried for me and my husband," she told me. "It was for our four children and my mother." Her mother had dropped her passport off at the Turkish Embassy, for a visa, when the Taliban took over, and she now had no government I.D. They decided that they would huddle together at the airport, and hope that she was overlooked in the chaos. Habib Zahori, an Afghan TV writer in Canada, ran phone trees for the refugees and organized muster points for buses to pick them up, one of which was outside Mina's house. On August 22nd, Mina packed some clothes and, under each sleeve, slipped a stack of gold bangles that her sister had instructed her to buy. When families began to arrive at her home, the men stood in the street, and the women and children waited inside. It was crowded and noisy, and she warned them to be quiet: "If our neighbors hear so many people here, they will report us to the Taliban." The bus was late, and Taliban officials asked the men outside where they were headed. "We're going to a wedding," a passenger said. This wedding ruse soon became commonplace, and Vikram joked, "How many weddings does the Taliban think there could possibly be?"

Around seven-thirty that evening, Mina's family boarded the bus, and by nine it had crawled through more than a dozen Taliban checkpoints and was approaching the north side of the airport. A Taliban spokesperson had issued

a new mandate that Afghan citizens were no longer allowed to leave the country, and it wasn't yet clear what the regime would do to enforce it. As the bus stopped near a final Taliban checkpoint, the guards started firing indiscriminately. The driver got down to speak to the commander, who struck him in the face with the butt of his automatic weapon. "I thought for sure they would kill him and then kill the rest of us," Mina told me. He stumbled back onto the bus, and continued to the airport. They ended up idling at a gas station across from the gate, waiting for permission to enter. Soon, sporadic shooting started from several directions. Mina turned to Zahir. "We're all going to die," she said.

The Singhs reached out to their network of contacts. My *New Yorker* colleague Dexter Filkins, who helped lead the effort, texted that the refugees were "sitting ducks out there." Ashley dictated a note to a White House aide, who promised to get it to officials in the Situation Room. "Tell them the 'Kite Runner' stars are sitting outside the airport gate and could be killed," she said. All of us scrambled, pleading our case to anyone who would listen. Soon, my phone pinged with a text from Hock: "Just got a cryptic call a second ago about a 'white house' level mission. Is this it?" He added, "I just grabbed our seal team guys. They are on their way there." The Navy *Seals* couldn't reach the convoy of buses through the crowd. Instead, they told Mina and the others to get out and run. "Better move before anyone sees this gate open," Hock wrote. Mina had her three older children hold hands and instructed them to run as fast as they could. "We are right behind you," she said. The family slipped through the gate, which closed after them. Mina sent her sister a voice message saying, "We are inside the airport and we are safe now."

When the families reached the tarmac, they were blocked from boarding the Airbus A340. Afghan intelligence operatives backed by the C.I.A. had pushed their way onto the plane and refused to get off. (A C.I.A. spokesperson told me that the agency evacuated "numerous locally employed staff" and "partners who were at particular risk of retribution.") Most of the convoy's passengers were loaded onto a C-17 and flown to Al Udeid, a U.S. base in Doha, Qatar. But Mina and her family had got lost in the airport and missed the flight. Soon, Mina heard the roar of a nearby plane. "Just get on," Faqeer told her. "It doesn't matter where it's going."

About four hours later, they landed at Al Udeid, and joined three thousand Afghans huddled in the airplane hangar.

In early October, I visited Faqeer at her home near Richmond. Although I was the only guest, she had cooked enough for twelve, and stuffed me with homemade kebabs and dumplings. Her three daughters played on the carpet beneath the dining table. The six-year-old, Hadia, had a doll she'd named Ghotai, after her mother's radio character. Nazir scrolled through YouTube videos of a Taliban victory parade, which included pickup trucks outfitted for use by suicide bombers. Winter was coming, and the Taliban, struggling to feed its citizens, had asked the U.S. for aid money. "These same people have been killing us for twenty years for being friends with America," Faqeer said. "Now they come to America to beg for help." Nazir had been nine when the Taliban first took power, and he remembered walking through the street among the bodies of people they'd assassinated. Since then, he'd had a recurring nightmare that the Taliban had retaken Afghanistan. For years, Faqeer had reassured him that it would never happen. "Now it's become a reality," she told me.

Once word got out that Faqeer's family had been safely evacuated, her phone was inundated with pleas from former colleagues. "Everyone thinks I work at the White House now," she grumbled. The family was shuttled through the system of "lily pads," travelling from one military base to another. They had gone from Doha to Germany, then to D.C., sixty miles from Faqeer's home, then, inexplicably, to Holloman Air Force Base, in New Mexico, where they spent seven weeks living in a tent. "We kept wondering when we would get to the real America," Mina said. An Afghan American medical professional working with refugees told me, "It's like a screwed-up Ellis Island." During our lunch, Mina FaceTimed Faqeer, pointed to a long line of people waiting to pick up airplane tickets, and said that she would soon be on her way to Richmond. "Prison break!" Faqeer said. Mina started to cry, and Faqeer tried to cheer her up. "Why do your eyebrows look so good?" she asked. "Is there a beauty parlor in camp?" Faqeer turned to me and said, "If we didn't laugh, we'd be dead by now."

A few days after Mina's family escaped, a suicide bomber outside the Kabul airport killed thirteen U.S. service members and a hundred and seventy Afghans. Our group was still running convoys, but, five days later, U.S.

troops left the country. “I apologize. I am hopping on a plane out of here soon,” Hock texted me. After that, evacuations became nearly impossible. Faqeer’s husband, Nazir, had thirty-five family members who remained trapped in the country, including an uncle who had coördinated *NATO* air strikes. They were now living in hiding. Most nights, around midnight, the Taliban went door-to-door in their neighborhood, interrogating people and sometimes kidnapping them. Nazir’s family eventually made it out, but the slowing bureaucracy had brutal consequences. In Mazar, Taliban soldiers detained two people who managed safe houses, then raided a safe house and threw a man out of a window. In Kabul, they killed a nine-year-old girl whose father worked with an international aid organization and was on our next manifest. They arrested a government bodyguard and held him in a basement, chained him to a chair, poured freezing water over him, shaved part of his head, and forced an unknown substance into his mouth. “They said I could tell them where the ministers were and work with them as a brother,” he told me later.

In the past three and a half months, the U.S. government has evacuated only three thousand or so people. Passengers are now required to carry passports, but requesting them from the Taliban is dangerous for dissidents; those with newborns who haven’t yet received identification are effectively banned from flying. Recently, a senior Administration official told me that, due to ongoing logistical disputes at the airport, flights were stopped entirely. Biden has touted the effort as “one of the largest, most difficult airlifts in history”; the U.S. has helped more than a hundred and twenty thousand people flee. Still, the government has acknowledged that, as of this month, a handful of U.S. citizens remained in the country, along with fourteen thousand green-card holders, thirty thousand Afghans with vetted S.I.V.s, and thirty thousand who have applied. “With their immediate families, this could easily be over a hundred and fifty thousand people,” Vikram told me. An untold number of Afghans endangered by their work also remain, including human-rights advocates, journalists, former members of the Afghan military, and judges. “Their only way out is through U.S. bases,” Vikram said.

The U.S. plans to take in an additional twenty thousand Afghans by the end of next summer. Senator Blumenthal recently called on President Biden to appoint an evacuations czar to handle the crisis. “I have trouble discerning any system here,” Blumenthal told me. Helena Malickyar, the political

analyst, argued, “By carrying out this withdrawal the way it happened, the Biden Administration not only betrayed the Afghan people but did a huge amount of damage to the U.S. reputation around the world, by presenting itself as an ally one shouldn’t rely on.” Blumenthal asked, “If we break our promises now, will we have the cred if we’re in similar situations?”

In late October, Faqeer’s family was finally released from military custody. I went with her to meet them at the Richmond airport. Through the plate-glass doors, we could see that the baggage-claim area was nearly empty except for a masked family of seven wearing hip-looking sneakers and toting only carry-on luggage. Faqeer was suddenly rooted in place. “I can’t move,” she told me, studying them. “I think I’m in happy shock.” Then Mina glimpsed her sister through the window, and she and her four children bounded through the automatic doors. Faqeer shouted, “Welcome to our country, you refugees!” Then she handed them two takeout pizzas, bundled them into a borrowed minivan, and drove them to her brick Colonial. ♦

(This is the second story in a two-part series.)

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Arachnid Dept.

- [Marisa Tomei Gets Morbid](#)

By [Zach Helfand](#)

A chilly afternoon in Industry City, on the Brooklyn waterfront. Downstairs: food stalls, the smell of Korean cooking. Upstairs: the smell of formaldehyde. The source: the Morbid Anatomy Library, a collection devoted to oblivion and the occult—books, art, creatures suspended in various states of decay. The movie star Marisa Tomei was about to pay a visit. She had her hair in braided pigtails and wore a quilted-cotton jumpsuit and sequinned boots. Fifty-seven years old, very much not decayed. Suddenly craving bulgogi.



Marisa Tomei illustration by João Fazenda

A staffer named Thomas Burgess led her into the museum. “Wow-wee!” she said. Wooden cabinets held jars of pickled slugs, octopuses, and rodents. Tomei picked up a big book. “Let’s see what this is,” she said. “‘*Femina Libido Sexualis*.’” She flipped through, landing on a full-page diagram of the *feminina organa genitalia*. “Guess I should have expected that!” She browsed a shelf of glass containers and paused: “What are these feet, and why are they there?”

Tomei had met the library’s creator, Joanna Ebenstein, a few weeks earlier, at a dinner party. She’d already taken a couple of Ebenstein’s matriarchal-studies courses, whose topics included Kali, the Hindu goddess of death and time. (She’d heard good things about Morbid Anatomy’s death meditations.)

Tomei got into death years ago. “I’d helped a few people birth their babies at home,” she said. “I really liked it! You’re so one hundred thousand per cent focussed. You’re in that liminal space.” Child-bearing friends, however, are a limited resource, and, when Tomei ran out, she missed the intensity of the experience. She explained that, about seven years ago, at a dance class in Los Angeles, “a woman came in and goes, ‘Sorry I’m late. I had someone on the runway.’ Afterward, I asked, ‘What does that mean?’ She said, ‘Well, I help people to pass away.’ That’s how she referred to it. She didn’t know when it was gonna come, so she couldn’t come to class on time. Just like with a baby!” The woman was a death doula, and Tomei became fascinated with the practice. “The birthing and the deathing, the connection between people is just so deep,” she said. “It’s like being in love.” She began developing a television series about at-home funerals, which she’s now trying to get made: “It’s supposed to be funny!”

Tomei’s recent roles deal more with the time between the birthing and the deathing. She’d just returned from Atlanta, where she was shooting a film with Peter Dinklage. “I flew in at three-thirty last night, so I’m a little loopy,” she said. “It was a scene with an orangutan, but you can’t have a real orangutan anymore, so this wonderful woman named Devin plays the orangutan. She’s massaging my feet, and I’m reading her a story.” For Marvel’s Spider-Man movies—the third installment, “No Way Home,” came out this week—she and the director, Jon Watts, decided that her character, Aunt May, needed a rich inner life. They concocted a backstory in which May was a community organizer working at a feminist press. Tomei drew on Native American arachnid folklore for the role: “The female is associated with the spider and how everything is connected.”

She jiggled the handle of a spooky-looking drawer: “What will happen if I open this?” She pulled, then gasped. “Extension cords!” She sat on a table, cross-legged, with a book about ritual dances. “That’s the other thing with spiders—the Tarantella,” she said. “It was sanctioned by the Church in order to bring women who were losing their minds back into their bodies. I learned it when I did ‘Salome’ on Broadway with Pacino, and I had to do the Dance of the Seven Veils.” She turned to Burgess. “Do you mind if I go on your floor?” She lay on her back and began thrashing her limbs. “You’re writhing. Like a spider! And other women have these ribbons around you—

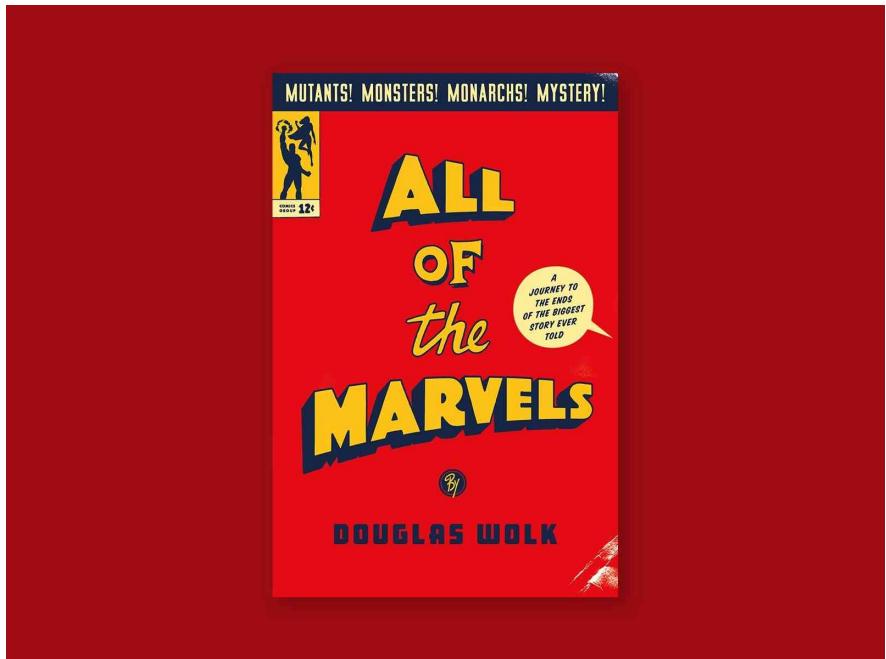
it's very shamanistic. Tom Holland is a dancer. We tried to get that into Spider-Man.”

She went on, “I’m gonna sound like a goth. I’m really not.” She grew up in Midwood, Brooklyn, in a century-old Victorian. “But my parents were more, like, riding the wave of Freudian intellectualism.” Summers were spent upstate, in a collective founded by Jewish workers: “It was kind of utopian. Not Oneida, with that sexual bent. We had a lake that they dug out themselves, and these four dirt roads, a little barn. In the barn, we had folk dancing on Friday nights. And we had people speak on their special topics on Thursday nights. You were barefoot all summer.” Communal dwelling suits her; she now shares a home in Alphabet City with a makeup-artist friend and his family. “They have a town house, and I live on the top floor,” she said.

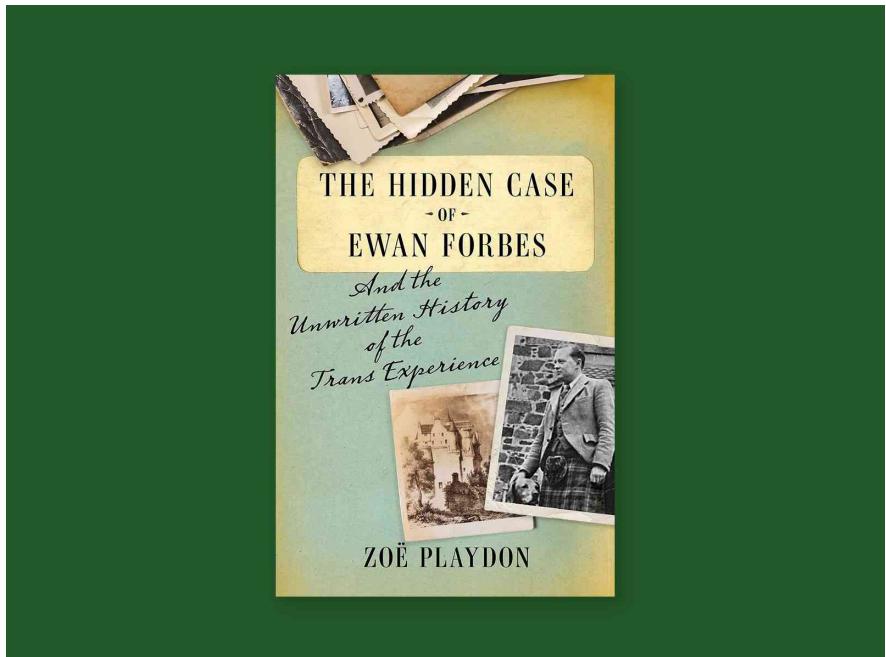
She wandered toward a vitrine, in which a full human skeleton lay in repose. A fist-size chunk of glass had shattered and was missing. A liminal space? “It says ‘*DO NOT TOUCH*,’ but you have this very convenient little . . . ,” Tomei murmured. “It does make me want to pet you.” She reached her hand through and stroked. ♦

Books

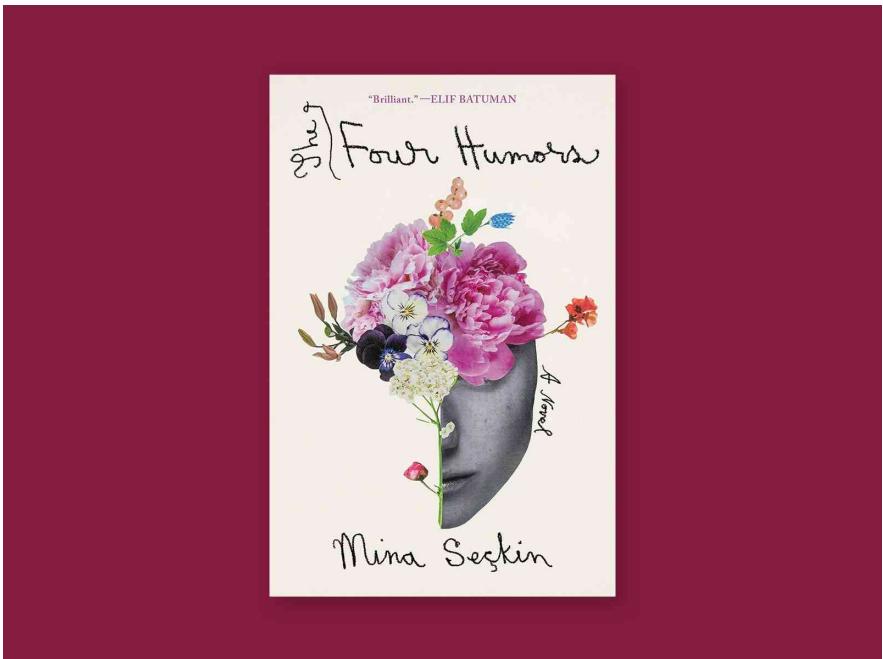
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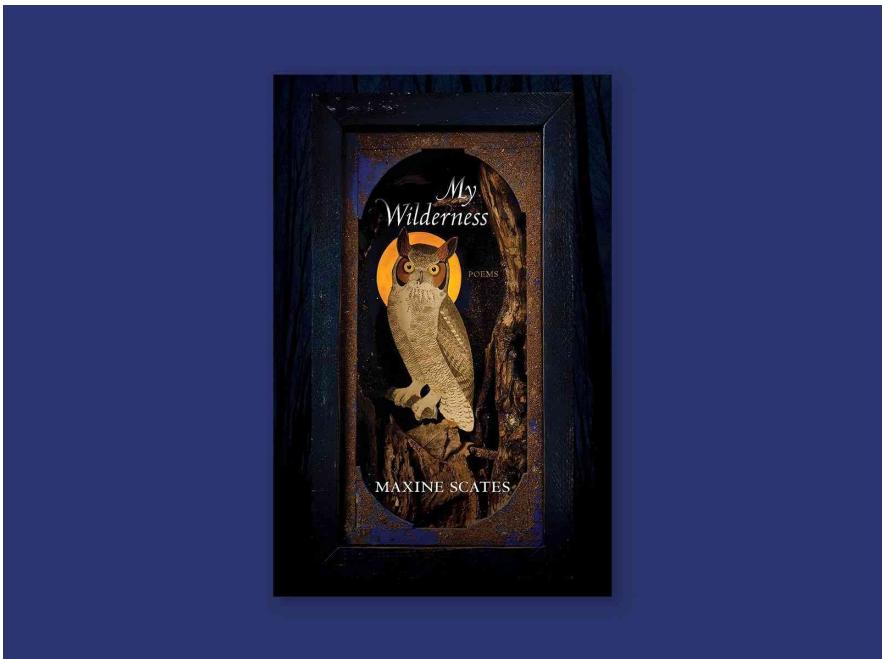
All of the Marvels, by *Douglas Wolk* (Penguin Press). This guide to the world of Marvel Comics encompasses the entirety of the franchise's twenty-seven-thousand-issue corpus, which Wolk describes as “the longest continuous, self-contained work of fiction ever created.” Alternating between short, catalogue-like entries and longer essays, Wolk alights on such topics as the founding triumvirate of Steve Ditko, Jack Kirby, and Stan Lee; changes in how East Asian characters are depicted; and the stop-and-start process of bringing Marvel-superhero movies to the big screen. As Wolk explores Marvel’s visual, narrative, and commercial innovations, he argues that its products offer a “funhouse-mirror history of the past sixty years of American life.”



The Hidden Case of Ewan Forbes, by Zoë Playdon (Scribner). In the nineteen-sixties, a legal battle took place, in secret, over the claim of a Scottish transgender man, Ewan Forbes, to a baronetcy title whose succession was determined by male primogeniture. Forbes was a doctor and an avid outdoorsman, and was known to travel through rugged conditions to see patients, sometimes on skis or a borrowed Clydesdale. When, by challenging Forbes's maleness, a cousin attempted to take the title, Forbes became embroiled in a long, humiliating, and invasive struggle to defend himself. Although he won the case, it was not without damage to his career and his finances, and Playdon's vivid retelling of his life and the trial—whose records were concealed from the public until her investigation—shows the sacrifices required for incremental progress.



The Four Humors, by Mina Seçkin (*Catapult*). This novel's protagonist, a Turkish American would-be medical student, travels to Istanbul with her white boyfriend to spend the summer with her grandmother, who is ill. As she walks the city, she wonders if the guilt and grief she feels as a result of her father's recent death can be explained by medieval theories of medicine, like bile and choler. Meanwhile, members of her extended family start revealing secrets, which unfold amid Turkey's political turmoil and increased conservatism. Stuck between identities, the protagonist wonders if she will be buried with her parents, in Turkey, or with her possible future children, in America. She muses, "We are going to have to unearth the people we will become, slowly, carefully, but with a dedicated and calm labor."



My Wilderness, by Maxine Scates (Pittsburgh). In this searching, plainspoken poetry collection, the natural world—infinitely more mysterious in the volatile era of advanced climate destruction—provides a potent metaphor for the mark left by grief. With frank detail and philosophical clarity, Scates addresses parental loss, the passage of time, and the pain of childhood abuse. The book is driven by sorrow, but it is also devotional, guided by a determination to comprehend the elusive presences of other people, beauty, life. “And when I said words / were just words, I meant that they can never entirely / say no matter how hard we try,” Scates writes. “They are / the reason we keep trying.”

In her short, tumultuous life, Mary Butts produced work admired by Bryher, Marianne Moore, and John Ashbery. Why isn't she better known?

By [Merve Emre](#)

Content

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Many people in England think of Dorset as Thomas Hardy country. They have been to Dorchester or Weymouth, have driven through the woodland villages and seen the mist shrouding the hills, and tend to believe that this is a pleasantly rustic corner of the island. But if they venture inland, to the henges and hill forts of prehistoric Britain, they find that all is not sunlit and grass-colored. Hard winds scream across the ruins. The clouds cast strange forms over the valleys. There are no creatures in sight, only holes burrowed in the ground. This is a realm of brute, timeless magic.

That magic looms over the Iron Age hill fort of Badbury Rings—or the Rings, as the bewitched modernist writer Mary Butts called these three huge walls of turf, one cupped inside another, that rise like waves on the downs. As a child, she had walked the chalk paths that ran along their crests and had imagined the grass trampled through the ages by Druid priests and their doomed animals. She had stood on the soundless barrows and wondered whose bones were rotting under her feet. Celts? Romans? “It is said of this place that in the time of Arthur, the legendary king of Britain, Morgan le Fay, an enchantress of the period, had dealings of an inconceivable nature there,” Butts wrote at the beginning of “Ashe of Rings,” her first novel. “Today the country people will not approach it at night, not even the hardiest shepherd.”

For Butts, born in 1890 to a retired Army officer and his girlish second wife, the Rings “furnished the chief experience of my life,” she wrote in her journal. Its magic rippled southward, through the woods and the white-grass marshes, and toward her family estate, Salterns, bringing the great stone house and its treasures to life. It sailed down to Poole Harbor; fluttered over the ruined towers of Corfe Castle, “sitting like a black crown on a bright hill”; and traced the “lion-gold curve of the coast,” before plunging into the sea.

Between the Rings and the sea lies Mary Butts country, though people would look at you with bewilderment if you called it that today. Her work was immediately forgotten after she died, in 1937, at the age of forty-six, following years of hard living. Yet she left behind a vast trove of writing, some of it, as Marianne Moore claimed, “quite startling in impact and untrammeled diction.” In the early nineteen-twenties, Butts was hailed as “the English Chekhov” for her elliptical short stories. Her legacy includes five novels, three story collections, several cautionary pamphlets (“Warning to Hikers,” “Traps for Unbelievers”), a novella, a memoir, and more than a hundred reviews and occasional pieces, now gathered, for the first time, in “The Collected Essays of Mary Butts” (McPherson). None of this was enough to secure her the acclaim that her champions passionately insisted she was owed. “She was from the start one of the few who matter, a builder of English,” the poet Bryher wrote. “I have never doubted since I read her first story that she belonged to the immortals.”

There have been promises of a Mary Butts revival for the past thirty years. Every aspect of her writing seems primed to catch the light of the present. The recent fascination with placing genre fiction under the spell of a high-modernist sensibility gives a new lustre to her sinister romances, freakish fables, and ghost stories. So, too, do the spontaneous sexual fluidity of her characters, her earnest belief in enchantment, and her love of the land. (Her biographer, Nathalie Blondel, pronounces her an “early ecologist and conservationist.”) “The very features of her writing that taxed earlier readers,” John Ashbery wrote in his preface to “The Complete Stories of Mary Butts” (2014), “make her seem our contemporary.” Why, then, has the revival failed to take?

Mary Butts believed that she had been born with a rare capacity to “grasp the souls of old things.” Although she felt that she belonged to the “war-ruined generation”—“those years lie like a fog on my spirit,” she lamented—her restless vision seems constantly on the verge of slipping out of time altogether. Her work is a strong tincture of periods and movements: ancient, medieval, Romantic, Victorian, and modernist. Linear time was her enemy. “It is this splitting up of events into an irregular, inconvenient, positively demented time sequence that bitches things up,” she complained in her journal. “Why can’t the relative things happen together, simultaneously or in close sequence?”

To see Butts as she would want us to, with her “ambidextrous time sense,” is to see her dissolve into her great-grandfather Thomas Butts, a civil servant who was William Blake’s greatest patron. In 1808, after he stumbled in on Blake and his wife at home, nude and reciting lines from “Paradise Lost,” he commissioned twelve vividly colorful paintings to accompany Milton’s poem. For nearly a century, the paintings occupied the Blake Room at Salterns, where Mary’s father gave her lessons in observation. Her vision was trained by Blake’s angels and demons, in paintings suffused with the mute power of flesh and fire, wind and light. “The ancient poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses,” Blake had written. Mary Butts grew up to claim this animism for herself. “Grown-up people say that children like to pretend the things they love are alive,” she wrote. “That is nonsense—they *are* alive.”

Salterns was a possessed and possessing place, the ideal childhood home for Butts, who found that the beauty and terror of material existence affected her “both unconsciously and profoundly.” In her posthumously published memoir, “The Crystal Cabinet”—it takes its title from a poem of Blake’s—she described the moors and beaches and marble-veined quarries of her estate, its “silver and musical instruments and little old pictures of battles on copper, and brass polished the colour of pale gold, and miniatures and seals and snuffboxes, and thirteen grandfather clocks and swords.” Everywhere she turned, she found “the potency that lives in the kind of earth-stuff that is hard and coloured and cold, yet is alive and full of secrets, with a sap and a pulse and a being all to itself.” Her memoir approaches these secrets by layering smell, color, texture, and substance onto objects, lending to their names the weight of the earth itself.

The birth of her brother, Tony, marked the end of her childhood Eden. Her father died not long after, in 1905, and it was “as if a strong, small, gold sun had set.” Her mother sold the Blakes to pay the death duties on the estate and got remarried, to a man whom Mary named Tiger-Tiger. Mary was cast out of Salterns, sent to a boarding school in the hinterlands of Scotland and then to Westfield College, in London, from which she was expelled for sneaking out to go to the Epsom Derby to see the horses. “A mad idiot,” the headmistress called her. When she arrived back home, her mother accused her of harboring incestuous desires, first for her stepfather, then for her

brother. A small annuity from her father gave her barely enough to live on and just enough to be taken advantage of.

The outbreak of the First World War found her in London, volunteering for the Children's Care Committee and living "a sapphic life" with a woman named Eleanor Rogers. The sorrows of her life would prove impossible for her to separate from those of the war, which seemed a repetition "on a world-scale of certain qualities I had already met of prejudice, injustice, cruelty, the dishonour of the mind." Battles and bombings would emerge as the objective correlative of her disillusionment. She was "half-dead from want of being cared for," she claimed.

Her journal, which she started in 1916, documents her growing freedom as an artist, although it also chronicles her impulsive quest for someone to care for her. On each of the lovers who pass through its pages, she bestowed a mythological counterpart. Rogers, in the final months of their relationship, seemed "a kind of new Medusa whose naked inhumanity turned people to stone." She was saved from the Medusa's gaze by a man she wrote of as Cupid to her Psyche: the poet John Rodker, a conscientious objector who was in hiding from the authorities. Through him, she came to know artists and writers of the day, and, in 1918, the couple married. Two years later, while pregnant with their daughter, Camilla, Butts started seeing Cecil Maitland, a red-faced, monocle-wearing ex-infantryman. After she gave birth, they began an affair fuelled by opium and the occult, slashing crosses into each other's wrists and drinking the blood, making a pilgrimage to Aleister Crowley's Abbey of Thelema, where they fell "in love with the 4th dimension." Rodker finally found out about the affair by reading her journal. He took the most tedious and mortifying form of revenge: he annotated the entries concerning him. "You had a unicorn in your menagerie, but you have sent it away," he wrote. Their marriage limped on—"discomfort," she scrawled in the journal, knowing that he would see it—for a couple more years.

In the years after the Armistice, as Butts's writing took shape, the "months spent in hard living" sharpened her Blakean powers. The short stories collected in her first book, "Speed the Plow" (1923)—about shell-shocked veterans, ghosts of old families, and daughters driven out of their Edenic homes—try to compensate for the savagery of modern civilization through

her intense aestheticism. Her landscapes and houses are violently, crushingly alive. She builds her characters from inhuman things. Open the door to a house, in her story “In Bayswater,” and you will meet its caretaker, “a woman made of dirt-stiffened rags.” Loiter with a wounded soldier on the streets of London, in the title story, and you will witness this apparition:

A woman came out of the inn. She wore white furs swathed over deep blue. Her feet flashed in their glossy boots. She wore a god in green jade and rose. Her gloves were rich and thick, like molded ivory.

What begins as a distant sighting is transformed, sentence by sentence, into a sensual uproar. White and blue and green and rose; fur and jade and molded ivory; soft and hard and bright and dark—until we are as paralyzed as the man who watches her. Who is she? It hardly matters. Her shape casts “the shadow of some unseen power,” as Shelley wrote—one of the poets whose verses Butts copied into her journals and later scattered throughout her novels.

“Only in Homer have I found impersonal consolation—a life where I am unsexed or bisexed, or completely myself,” Butts wrote in one of her earliest journal entries. Among modernists of the twenties, she was hardly alone in her preoccupation with antiquity; Eliot was laying claim to the Holy Grail, and Joyce was making the *Odyssey* new, by bringing it down to earth. Butts was, however, unique in how slavishly she hewed to ancient ideals. She vowed to sing of arms and men in the trenches of France, of the quests of the Lost Generation, of women cloaked in the heroic temperament *sôphrosyne*, which she had read about in Gilbert Murray’s “The Rise of the Greek Epic” and adopted as a “yard-stick for all conduct.” Murray defined *sôphrosyne* as “Temperance, Gentleness, Mercy,” to which Butts added “good form, fine breeding, humour, a sense of shapeliness.” The *sophron* was the shape she longed to assume, a figure who strove to master her vehement passions by practicing “the tempering of dominant emotion by gentler thought.” Only then could she attain “freedom, perfect freedom.” “I sometimes wonder if I shall have to die young because of these preoccupations of mine,” she wrote.

Imagining herself a war-shattered wanderer, like her beloved Odysseus, Butts spent the decade reeling from London to Paris—wherever there was an experience to be had or a person to love. If not beautiful, she was striking,

the kind of woman who moved others to indulgent, painterly descriptions of her face and figure. On smoke-veiled evenings at the *Boeuf sur le Toit*, she was “easily recognized by the tangled mass of flaming gold-orange hair that refused to remain tidy,” the artist Robert Medley recalled. When the writer Glenway Wescott met her, at a party in London, she was draped in “a great Velasquez dress, silver and apple-green, beautiful and abundant, candid but remote, her hair the color of Villa, her exquisite Tudor face.” Her arms were loudly bangled; her laugh was a catching giggle. Her faithful companion was her opium pipe, which she smoked with an addict’s ferocity and an artist’s excuses. “The use of our dopes is more ancient than I had supposed,” she wrote in her journal, marvelling at the “psychic auras” that decorated the churches and shops of Paris, after her seventh pipe.

Her assessments of the company she kept were less rapturous, and tinged with envy. They betrayed her desire to stand at the center of modernism’s Continental party, when she was doomed to wander its periphery, high as a kite. In her journals, she gossiped brightly and cruelly about everyone who was anyone. “T. S. Eliot, with his ear on some stops of English speech which have not been used before, the only writer of my quality, dislikes me & my work,” she complained. He kept trespassing on her ideas and nicking her titles; she had intended to call one of her novels “*The Sacred Wood*,” she claimed. Ezra Pound made a passable first impression as “a competent, sometimes witty critic” but quickly exposed himself as “dull, all dull, he & his set, dull because they have nothing to say.” Gertrude Stein was a bore, possibly a force of evil, with a style easy to ape: “‘Sex is swell.’ ‘Nature is grand.’ ‘Opium is appetizing.’ ‘Life is lovely.’ ‘Food is fine’—etc. etc.” Her highest praise was reserved for Wyndham Lewis: “The first man I have met whose vitality equals, probably surpasses mine. A pleasure to be raped by him. Yes, that’s true.”



"Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein"

It was Joyce's method of mythmaking, however, that exerted the greatest influence on her next work, the novel "Ashe of Rings," published in 1925. "I was tight on Joyce at the time, as we all were," she recalled in her journal. "Ashe of Rings" was her attempt to reproduce the "half-conscious thinking" of "Ulysses," but to do so in the genre of a "fairy story, a War fairy-tale." The Ashe family is not unlike Butts's own. Living in a distinguished house on the English coast, near the hill fort of the Rings, they are the descendants of an ancient witch who is the site's protector. Her blood runs through Anthony Ashe and his daughter, Vanna, who read Homer together and guard the Rings. After the father dies and his adulterous, insipid wife, Melitta, gives birth to a boy of uncertain parentage named Valentine, Vanna must draw on her powers as a *sophron* to preserve her family and their hold over the land. Ownership of the house and the legacy of the Rings are threatened by the grasping claims of Judy, a journalist, and Peter, a soldier, who are not characters so much as symbols of modernity and its evils. "The individual state bred the general state that bred the catastrophe," Vanna rages. "People like Judy live on the fact of it and get spirit nourishing food out of the ruin of so much life."

The presence of evil corrupts absolutely, degrading matter and spirit and speech. Melitta is a "vigorous, flesh-eating Saxon woman" with a "pale

maggot of an intellect.” Peter is a “shell-shocked lump of carrion.” Serge, a Russian émigré torn between loving Vanna or Judy, is “made of wax,” “the fat of dead men, melted and poured.” These rotting cadavers speak to one another of love and war in strange, syncopated rhythms, like a thought skipping a beat or two. Their vague and pattering speech—the voices merge—encircles the novel’s heaving descriptions of the land, a place “where the word is made flesh”:

In the summer the house swooned, in winter slept like a bear. Through the afternoons it could be heard, sucking in its sleep, milky draughts, bubbles of quiet, drunk against the future when it should become a wrath. On spring nights there became imminent the fantasy of Rings; when, on the screaming wind, the Rings went sailing, and hovered over the house and swooped and fanned, and skimmed away in the dark, a cap between the roofs and the blazing stars.

In the novel’s fairy-tale ending, Vanna vanquishes Peter and Judy by lying naked on the Rings—a perfect communion between woman and nature, past and present. She is the last in a line of mythmakers, an oracle who hints at the secrets of the land. The animism of the land is the subject of properly heroic art—the art of the *sophron*.

Literary revivals require charismatic characters, artists who appeared quixotic in their time but come to seem prescient in ours. If the revival of Mary Butts has faltered, it may be because she has an unappealing side. At a distance, she glitters. Up close, she has all the charm of someone else’s grubby, careless child. “She does so give me the creeps,” Ford Maddox Ford confessed, after she’d asked him to press “Ashe of Rings” onto his editor. (He declined.) “Malignant Mary,” Virginia Woolf called her, and she rejected “Ashe of Rings” for Hogarth Press, judging it “an indecent book, about the Greeks and the downs.” Several years later, Woolf recorded in her diary Tony Butts’s comments about his sister: “She is a bad woman—pretentious—I can see no merit in her work—pretentious.”

Mary Butts likely would have agreed with them to a point. She was dissatisfied enough with her life in the nineteen-twenties to deem herself “an unsuccessful writer, lover, dubious mother.” She was nomadic and usually penniless, and whatever money she did have she spent on drugs and dresses.

“There were mutterings because Miss Butts displayed an expensive wardrobe obtained from the best couturiers in Paris and before other ladies who had loaned her money for that poor lamb of a child,” the publisher Robert McAlmon reported. Lest the poor lamb tread on her mother’s Lanvin or Chanel, Camilla was deposited in one pension after another, until eventually she was entrusted to her grandmother, back in Dorset. “Motherhood was not Mary Butts’s forte,” Camilla concluded some years after her mother’s death. The impassivity of her tone is more jarring than overt anger would be. Anger suggests an expectation that has been disappointed. But it was impossible to have any expectations of Mary Butts, who, as Peggy Guggenheim complained, “was always up in the clouds.” This was after a weekend at Guggenheim’s villa in Pramousquier, when Butts ran out of opium, swallowed a bottle of aspirin, and fell unconscious, leaving the other guests to entertain her daughter.

There’s little point in moralizing about such behavior today. Yet the casual inhumanity of Butts’s life parallels inhuman aspects of her fiction. Although her writing can be assuredly gorgeous, it can also be mannered, high-flying, chilly, and cryptic. The heart does not warm to her characters or to the sensibility that motivates them, suspecting that behind the work’s stylishness looms a terrible abyss—an amazing egotism doing battle with an equally amazing drive toward self-annihilation. Yet it is mesmerizing to watch the battle play out on the page with such agonized intensity. In Butts’s struggle to communicate her mythic vision, we feel that something grave is at stake.

The same year that “Ashe of Rings” was published, Butts left Cecil Maitland and arrived on the Mediterranean scene. She made landfall in the ancient fishing village of Villefranche-sur-Mer. “Greeks and Phoenicians have unloaded on its stones; Moors and Genoese cut each other’s throats on them,” she fantasized in an essay. On the harbor’s edge stood the “sea-washed, fly-blown” Hotel Welcome, with its gleaming iron balustrades and pale-orange walls overlooking Cap Ferrat. She was greeted by the hotel’s most famous resident, Jean Cocteau, who became her confidant. Artists of all nationalities and kinds—Paul Robeson, Isadora Duncan, Cedric Morris, Glenway Wescott—poured merrily into the lobby. She was entranced by the idea that each came bearing his own “race legend”: “English: She wanted so / very much to be married that / & she married the wrong man. French: Isn’t it hell to be found out? (Adultery and escroquerie.) Russian: Why can’t

we all go mad?" She admired the questing spirit of the expatriate American, of whom she wrote, "The seeker shall not rest till he finds that which he seeks but when he has found it, he shall wonder, & when he has wondered, he shall be master."

The Hotel Welcome was full of art and cosmopolitan chatter. It was also full of lovers—mostly men—smoking, quarrelling, running off to Montparnasse to betray one another, then slinking down to the coast in regret and shame to do it all over again. It was all “‘rather queer’ or ‘rather beastly,’ ” Butts observed. “The pæderast world my choice for milieu.” Her short stories from that time, many of which feature men carelessly swapping lovers, reflect Cocteau’s insistence to her that the decadent modernist experiment would culminate in “a literature of hate.” Looking at her life, he had good reason to make this claim: her tempestuous love affair with the closeted American composer Virgil Thomson; the gay Russian gigolo Sergey Maslenikof, who promised to make love to her, took what money she could offer him, and ran. “How tired I am of this fruitless homosexuality,” she complained, in 1928. Yet she resisted Cocteau’s cynicism. “Most of the things we do are not wrong, it is our way of doing them,” she insisted. “They are very good things—pæderasty & jazz & opium & research.” Her task was to weave a new myth that held out hope of redeeming these very good things.

It was at the Hotel Welcome that she came up with the idea for her second novel, “Armed with Madness,” published in 1928. “I know all it is to be about; no plot,” she sketched in her journal. “I think it shall begin with the ‘boys and girls’ finding the Grail Cup.” The “boys and girls,” in their twenties or thirties, are the five characters around whom the action turns. Dudley Carston, an American, journeys from Paris to the South of England to visit the Taverner siblings, Scylla and her brother, Felix, at their country estate. Between the siblings is a strange and unspoken attraction. (“Jean said, of recent incest cases: ‘C’est la néoclassicisme sexuel,’ ” Butts noted in her journal.) Carston is attracted to Scylla, but so is her neighbor Picus, who betrays his lover, Clarence, with her. Each love triangle is made to touch the borders of the others. All the boys and girls are smothered in despair and mystery, and the narrative, which spasms from third person to first person, from sumptuous details to lunatic theories of time and space, is unwilling to clarify what, precisely, ails them. “There was something wrong with all of

them, or with their world,” Scylla thinks. “A moment missed, a moment to come. Or not coming. Or either or both.”

Into this force field of desires, Picus thrusts the Holy Grail, a jade cup that he claims to have fished out of the Taverners’ well. Is it really the Grail? No one can say. But the characters yearn for it to impart meaning to the “disease” of their lives. Their longing for magic makes it magic, and in the second half of the novel they each set out to redeem the fallen world—some through delirious sex with strangers, others through violence, some through the accumulation of property, others through art. As one character puts it:

The cup may have been an ash tray in a Cairo club. But it seems to me that you are having something like a ritual. A find, illumination, doubt, and division, collective and then dispersed. A land enchanted and disenchanted with the rapidity of cinema. . . . Our virtues we keep to serve these emergencies. Our virtue to induce them.

“The grail knights are gathering,” the Taverners announce at the end, when all five come together again. But they bear no treasure, have no sovereign whose command anchors them to the Round Table. Nothing is resolved. “The whole Grail story, the saga story par excellence had never come off, or found its form or poet,” Scylla thinks. In toying with the Grail myth, “Armed with Madness” casts modernism’s relentlessly fragmented, disenchanting, and morally ambiguous narratives as a quest without end.

For her life’s final act, Mary Butts returned to the British coast. In 1932, she settled in Sennen Cove, in Cornwall, with the painter Gabriel Atkin: “a slender, archaic Apollo,” according to her; a bitter drunk and “the toast of British sodom,” according to Quentin Bell. They married and moved into a bungalow, which they named Tebel Vos—Cornish for “house of magic.” For a time, things were peaceful. “The weather & the flowers & this land. The books,” she wrote in her journal. “Health & work & our marriage.” But Atkin sulked and raged and slept with men. The marriage turned into a dirty streak of “bad days. Bad days that are over,” she lamented. “If only next time, I could remember.”

The most wrenching aspect of her last years is the command that began to repeat in her journals after Atkin finally left, in 1935: “Remember.”

“Remember: Why does one forget?” she asked. Her mind and her memory were paying the price for her years of ruinous living. She must have sensed that a final reckoning was near. What she wanted to remember now was the Celtic Sea, whose harsh and dazzling glare greeted her when she stepped outside Tebel Vos. Her best work in these years was neither her essays nor her plodding historical novels, “The Macedonian” and “Scenes from the Life of Cleopatra.” It was in the impressions that she committed to her journal of the sea and the sky and their many changeable moods:

Remember: the evening light—something I have never seen before, not to such an extent. The whole world, sea & moor & hill, *dipped in turquoise*, like a day, ‘laking’ in levels, of a brilliant exquisiteness beyond belief—a physical rapture.

Remember: What frightened me, looking down as I hurried into the bay, was the dreadful whiteness of the surf. . . . Broken over acres in arcs & fragments of arcs, torn & ravelled & of that dreadful whiteness. White against ink-purple & ink-indigo & ink slate. A dreadfulness.

remember—Waxing moon, dead calm, open sky with horizon cloud ranks. . . . What one cannot say, & in part what one had better not say.

What one hears in these entries is not the self-forgetfulness of the visionary, or the reserve of the *sophron*, or the valor of the knight. It is a desperate plea for beauty to keep oblivion at bay. If only she could catch the spirit of the sea with words, then perhaps time would spare her. There is pathos in the fact that she failed—that she was, in the end, merely mortal. No amount of bargaining in the language of moon and cloud made a difference. She died in pain, alone, unprotected, and destitute. Years later, Camilla added an epitaph from Blake’s “The Crystal Cabinet” to her mother’s sunken tombstone in the Sennen Church cemetery: “I strove to seize the inmost form.”

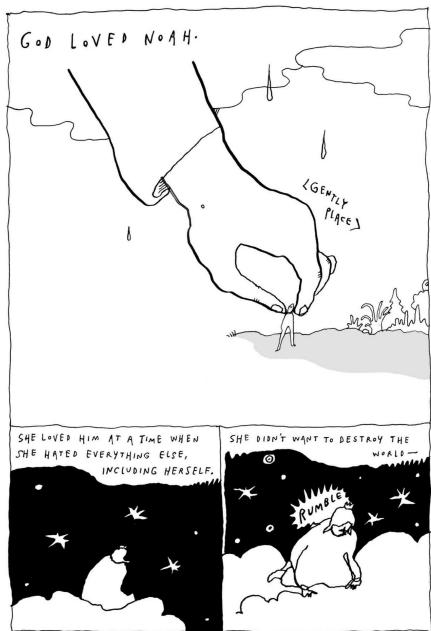
To walk the coast of Cornwall or Dorset today is to yearn to see the sea through Mary Butts’s eyes. “Thirteen ways of looking at a piece of jade,” she wrote. One searches for her alloyed colors in the break of the waves, the line of the horizon. But the air is hazed by cars and tour buses waiting for a ferry that will take them across the harbor, and the water lapping the sand smells of oil and waste. People—ordinary, unromantic people—are littered

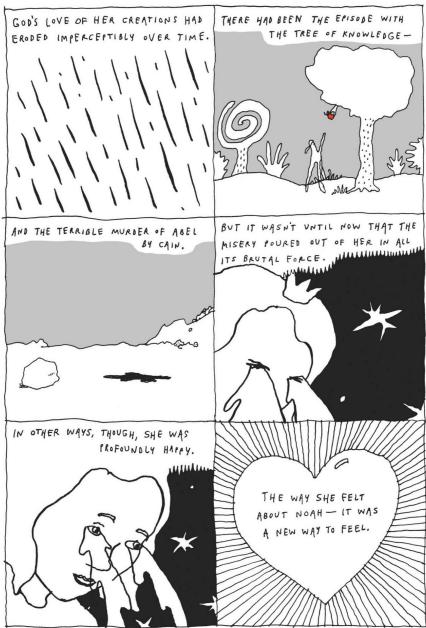
everywhere, sagging into plastic beach chairs, trampling the heather trails with their sluggish dogs and slovenly children. More generous novelists would covet these characters. Mary Butts would have had no use for them. But she is gone, the party is over, the Grail is lost, and the gods are dead. ♦

Comic Strip

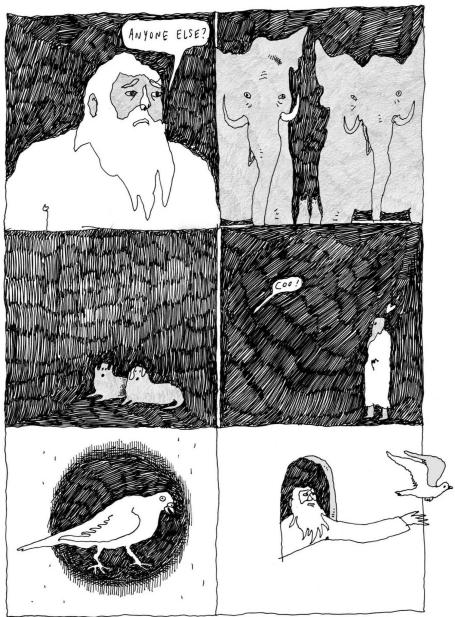
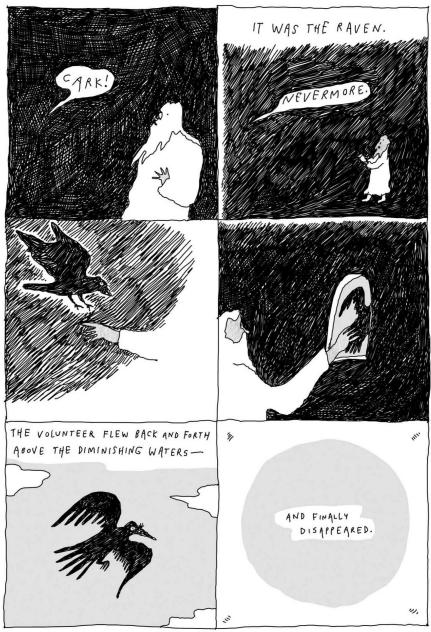
- [The Story of Noah's Ark, Retold](#)

By [Liana Finck](#)

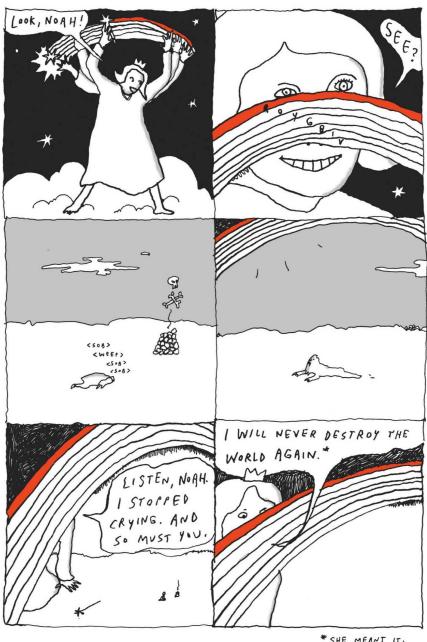












This is drawn from “[Let There Be Light: The Real Story of Her Creation.](#)”

Comment

- [Mark Meadows and the Republican Response to the January 6th Investigation](#)

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)

“Yesterday was a terrible day,” a legislator wrote in a text to Mark Meadows, Donald Trump’s chief of staff, on January 7, 2021. “We tried everything we could in our objection to the 6 states. I’m sorry nothing worked.” That text was released last week by the House select committee investigating the events of January 6th, namely, the assault on the Capitol by a mob that was trying to disrupt the tally of electoral votes. The text itself, though, was referring to a parallel attempt by members of the House to engineer the rejection of the votes of six states (Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin) that Joe Biden had won. Neither effort succeeded—and that failure, extraordinarily enough, seems to have been a cause of regret for the apology-texting legislator.

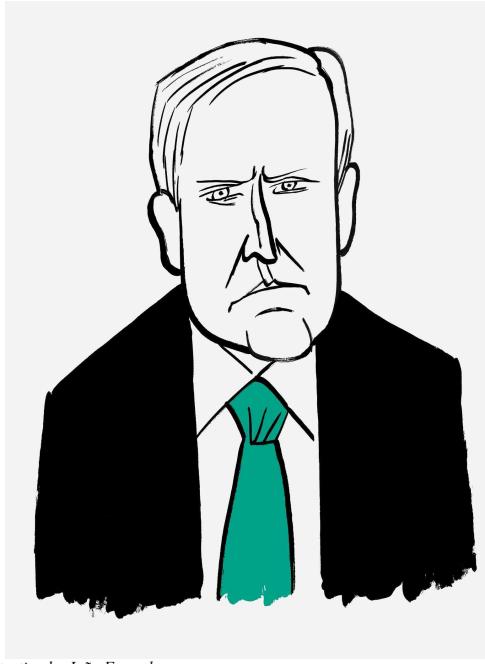


Illustration by João Fazenda

The text was released as the committee was recommending that Meadows be charged with criminal contempt for defying its subpoena to appear, and the identity of its author was not made public. The same is true of the identity of the House member who, on November 4th, the day after the election, texted Meadows to suggest an aggressive strategy: “Why can’t the states of GA NC PENN and other R controlled state houses declare this is BS (where conflicts and election not called that night) and just send their own electors to vote and have it go to the SCOTUS.” It’s interesting to think about what might be packed into the phrase “declare this is BS”—“this” could refer to

the votes in those particular states, the democratic process itself, or really anything that wouldn't result in Trump's running the country.

At this point, it's no surprise that Republican members of both the House and the Senate shared the underlying goals of the angry crowd; Representatives Mo Brooks and Madison Cawthorn spoke at the Trump rally that preceded the assault. A hundred and thirty-nine representatives and eight senators voted to reject the electors of at least one state. But there is more to be learned about the level of coördination between Trump's aides and his allies in Congress and the various Trump-aligned groups that helped with the logistics for the rally. What, in short, was the relation between the House members and the mob?

Meadows's contempt referral is an important development for several reasons. As chief of staff, he served as a point of connection, notably in efforts to pressure officials in the Justice Department and at the state level to pursue fake election-fraud cases. (Meadows was on the line when Trump called Brad Raffensperger, Georgia's secretary of state, and suggested that he could face criminal prosecution if he didn't "find" more votes for him.) He was in direct contact with Trump on January 6th; he might be able to shed light on an apparent delay in deploying the National Guard to safeguard the Capitol and on why he sent an e-mail the day before saying that the role of the Guard would be to "protect pro Trump people." Representative Jim Jordan, of Ohio, forwarded a text to him which made the argument that Vice-President Mike Pence could throw out electoral votes. At a hearing last week, Representative Liz Cheney, of Wyoming, read aloud texts to Meadows from Donald Trump, Jr., who told him in the midst of the assault that the actions had "gone too far and gotten out of hand," and from Fox News figures, including Laura Ingraham, who wrote, "Mark, the president needs to tell people in the Capitol to go home. This is hurting all of us." (Ingraham said that her text had been used misleadingly by "regime media.")

But Meadows's case is also significant because of how he and his party responded to the subpoena. He had initially agreed to coöperate with the committee and was slated to testify; indeed, the texts were among the material he handed over ahead of his planned appearance. Now he is suing Nancy Pelosi in order to quash the subpoena. Meadows has explained his change of heart by saying that Trump asserted "executive privilege," but, as

Representative Jamie Raskin, a member of the committee, put it, an ex-President can't just "wave a magic wand" to exempt an ex-aide from appearing at all. (Steve Bannon, Trump's former chief strategist, made a similar spurious claim, and he has now been charged with criminal contempt.) A key factor seems to be that Trump got mad.

When the committee's recommendation that Meadows be referred for charges reached the House floor, though, the Republican members who rose to debate it barely bothered to engage with the legalities. Several used their time to urge the passage of the Finish the Wall Act. "You know who doesn't show up for court orders?" Representative August Pfluger, of Texas, asked. "Ninety-nine point nine per cent of the illegal immigrants who are served those papers." Members spoke about fentanyl, Hunter Biden, mask mandates, "empty shelves at Christmas," and the unjust treatment of parents who object to "some crazy curriculum," as if the response to any criticism of Trump is to hopscotch from one of the former President's obsessions to another.

When the Republican members did address the matter at hand, it was in startlingly vitriolic terms. Representative Mary Miller, of Illinois, said that the committee's work is "evil and un-American." Yvette Herrell, of New Mexico, said that it is setting the country "on its way to tyranny." Jordan called the committee an expression of the Democrats' "lust for power." And, inevitably, Marjorie Taylor Greene, of Georgia, said that its proceedings prove that "communists" are in charge of the House. It's tempting to dismiss such rhetoric as overblown, but Congress has become an ever more uneasy place. Last week, Steny Hoyer, the House Majority Leader, sent the Capitol Police Board a letter asking for clarification on the rules about where representatives can carry weapons in the Capitol.

On Tuesday, Cheney said that the decision about how to deal with the legacy of January 6th is "the moral test of our generation." A fear is that a growing sector of the Republican side of the aisle is engaged in another sort of test: a probing of just how Trumpist representatives are, and, by implication, how far they might go if a situation akin to what took place on January 6th occurs again. Last time, the violence at the Capitol elicited enough shock that some Fox News anchors and leading Republicans texted Meadows, asking

for Trump to calm the mob. If there is a next time, the texts to whoever plays Meadows's role might have a different, and more dangerous, message. ♦

Cryptic Crossword

- [The Cryptic Crossword: Sunday, December 19, 2021](#)

By [Joshua Kosman](#) and [Henri Picciotto](#)

Fiction

- “A Lot of Things Have Happened”

By [Adam Levin](#)

Content

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

Audio: Adam Levin reads.

PLUNGER

As Sara bunched up her nightshirt, she clocked a disturbance. Some movement or sound. Scraping? Paddling? Exhalations? It happened so fast, she said, she couldn't be sure, but a rat in the toilet, submerged to the neck, was definitely trying to scale the bowl, and the next thing she knew she was standing in the bathtub, hollering for Darren.

Next thing Darren knew, he was brandishing a plunger and yelling at the rat, hoping to scare it back down the toilet.

Then nudging it toward the outlet with the plunger.

[Adam Levin reads this story aloud.](#)

Then driving it below the surface with the plunger.

But soon he was afraid he was making a mistake. Were the rat to escape the toilet through the outlet, it could drown along the path to freedom. Clog the line expensively.

And so he changed course.

He angled the plunger to block the outlet while pinning the rat till the haunch that protruded from under the plunger cup no longer thrashed.

By then he was traumatized, he said, don't laugh. Or, well, go ahead and laugh, he said, but he was beside himself. Or wasn't himself. Could hardly, in any case, recognize himself. He was angry at the rat for having made him a killer, and he did something senseless. He did something ugly. He pushed on the plunger and the cup went flat and the rat's back snapped, and then he did the same again a couple more times.

“Couple dozen more times, more like,” Sara said. “You were at it forever, Don Corleone.”

“I was at it awhile,” Darren admitted. “I was sweating a little. I was somewhere else.”

“That rat was a mess. That rat was a Frisbee. Tell our newlyweds here what you said once you stopped.”

“I really don’t remember saying anything, Sara.”

“Claims he doesn’t remember because he’s ashamed. I try and tell him—”

Darren stood up. “You want another beer?” he said to Josette. “You want another whiskey?” he said to me. “You get nothing,” he said to Sara.

He gathered empties and left for the kitchen, shutting the sliding glass door behind him. The thermos-shaped speaker on the table, stammering, severed its Bluetooth connection with his phone. A few minutes later, he’d return with the drinks: a beer, two bourbons, a Negroni for his wife.

“So, a Frisbee,” I said, once he’d gone inside.

“A *Frisbee*,” Sara said. She grabbed us each by a wrist. “I can see it from the tub. Completely disgusting. That’s the least of my worries, though, O.K.? Darren—his *face*. Oh God. Contorted. Frozen on the bottom, frowning like a fish. Jumping all over the place on top. Scariest part is his shoulders keep moving. Up and down, up and down. He isn’t holding on to the plunger anymore—his hands are at his sides—but these shoulder movements, they’re close enough to when he was using the thing that maybe he thinks he’s *still* using it? Like, maybe he’s having a seizure? A *stroke*? Something medical. That’s what I’m thinking. Something major. Something’s really wrong. The good times are over. Everything’s gonna be hard from now on. I go, ‘Darren? Baby? Darren? You there?’

“He nods at the toilet. . . . ‘Look how they massacred my boy,’ he says.”

CHAIR

The first conversation I had with Hattie Grant was near the end of September, 2001, a month or so into my first year of grad school. I asked her how her teaching assignment was going, and she said that a freshman had turned in an essay about self-esteem in which “self-esteem” was spelled “self of steam,” but that wasn’t the punch line. This was the punch line: the essay was plagiarized.

My sisters would like this woman, I thought.

I’d had that thought only three times before, and each instance had predicted a relatively long-term monogamous relationship. The M.F.A. program we attended was small, though, and the friends we had in common were the only friends we had in the entire Northeast, so our flirting was timid. Much of the time, I thought I might be imagining its being reciprocal. I wasn’t sure I could distinguish signal from noise, call from response, abiding politeness from receptivity. There’d be a lingering smile or a hug good night—maybe. Or at the dive we’d all meet at a few times a week, I’d buy a round for the group, and Hattie would help me bring it back to the table. Or we’d both “need” the single-user unisex bathroom—or actually need it—when the line got long.

A season of that. A touch more than a season. A whole semester and a winter break.

•

One January night, first week back in classes, we snorted some crushed Dilaudid and fucked.

In the morning, while I was cooking breakfast, a mouse blurred out from under the broiler and squeezed itself between the wall and the fridge. Next thing I knew, I was standing on a chair across the table from Hattie, hugging myself and breathing loudly, watching liquid omelette crawl the crooked floor.

I pushed out some laugh sounds, dismounted the chair. Hattie helped me clean up and walked home.

•

That evening, I arrived late to the bar, Hattie wasn't there, and I started to worry that she wouldn't show up: that I'd disappointed her, become a regret. A wilting indoorsman who lived amid filth.

I got wasted fast, inadvertently. In fact I had, to *prevent* my getting wasted, substituted, at Darren's suggestion, lower-A.B.V. Amaretto sours for my usual bonded Old Grand-Dad-and-waters, but it was difficult to drink those sours slowly, and my liver, I guess, was still cleaning out Dilaudid.

When Hattie appeared—at last, at last—I was stupid with joy and I kissed her on the mouth, right in front of all our friends.

She pushed me, hard, and made a terrible gagging sound. Rushed out the back.

•

Our friends were livid. Scorning me all the way through the door. "Hell's wrong with you, Levin?" "The fuck are you thinking?" "You can't just *do* that."

Outside, Hattie was catching her breath, bent over a snowbank onto which she kept spitting. The five of us encircled her. I said her name. She waved me off, said, "Back. Get back."

"Hit the bricks, man." "You heard her." "Take. A hike."

I turned to go. She grabbed my sleeve.

"No," she said. "Just . . . don't watch me do this."

We back-stepped, waited. Hattie spit some more, straightened, and asked for gum. Darren gave her a stick. "Him, too," she said. Darren gave me a stick. Then everyone else.

We stood on the salted parking lot, chewing.

“Did one of you tell Adam, ‘*Take a hike*’?” Hattie said.

“That was me,” Darren said. “Except only after Peter told him, ‘Hit the bricks,’ though.”

“I thought he was cruisin’ for a bruisin’,” Peter said.

“Oh yeah. Me, too. I was ready to feed him a sandwich,” Darren said. “A real knuckle sandwich.”

Peter shoved me at Tim. Tim shoved me at Darren. “Get bent,” I said, and everything was fine. I walked Hattie home.

•

This is what I learned while I walked Hattie home:

Palmetto bugs are colossal roaches that thrive in hot climates and smell like Amaretto. They prefer the outdoors, but sometimes get lost and turn up in your house. If, as a five-year-old girl in Gainesville, Florida, you step into a steaming, oddly redolent shower, feel a light tap way up on your thigh, reflexively grab whatever just tapped you, find in your fist a roach with the heft of an operable pencil stub, fling it away, find a sharply bent leg affixed by its barbs to your middle finger’s meaty bottom phalange, repeatedly try to shake the leg off, repeatedly fail to shake the leg off, then sit in the tub and cry and cry, you’ll become a lyric poet, and your stomach will, from that day forward, repeatedly try to empty itself whenever you catch the scent of Amaretto.

So, gum or no gum, no kiss good night.

We dated nine months.

•

I never encountered the mouse again. Before the end of the week, I’d forfeited my whole security deposit—two months’ rent; an eighth of what my fellowship paid me that year—and moved into a smaller, more expensive apartment.

PHONE

Josette and I were married by a judge in Chicago on Wednesday, August 15, 2012, and then we got lunch. Our witness snapped a photo, which I posted on Facebook.

Hattie called some hours later. We were on good terms—“Happy Birthday”—text terms—but we hadn’t spoken in long enough that we’d have had to catch up, and I wasn’t in the mood. I’d been taking calls from closer friends and family all day.

In her voice mail, she said that she and her husband had just bought a house, that if Josette and I ever came through Vancouver we could stay in their guest room as long as we wanted, and I wasn’t surprised not to doubt her sincerity.

•

The following summer, we visited Darren and Sara in Brooklyn and they told us about the rat and the plunger, which caused me to recall the mouse and the chair, and it wasn’t till then that I remembered Hattie’s voice mail.

•

I thought I’d call her in a couple of days, when we returned to Chicago. The next afternoon, though, alone in the kitchen—Darren was grading papers upstairs, our wives were swimming at the Red Hook pool—I looked at her Facebook, which was filled with condolences. Her sister had died. It wasn’t clear how.

I’d never met the sister, didn’t think I knew her name, but I seemed to remember that she’d had a hard time. Mental illness or credit cards, perhaps violent boyfriends.

Hattie’s most recent post, from six months earlier, was a childhood photo of the two of them hugging. Above it were the words “I can’t believe that she’s gone.”

The post preceding that one was a link to a video that compiled every instance in which the word “pishadoo” was used on “The Sopranos.”

•

Darren came down to refill his coffee, and I paused the “pishadoo” video and up-scrolled. Showed him my screen. Asked if he’d known.

He said that he hadn’t and wished I hadn’t shown him. This was the No. 1 reason that he’d closed all his social-media accounts. He didn’t want to have to think about whether or how he should respond to news of illness and loss that the bearer of the news hadn’t borne to him directly. Do people, he wondered, post such news to save themselves the inconvenience of calling those from whom they seek comfort? Or is it more like they do it to save themselves the strain of having to perform being comforted by those who’d offer comfort by phone? If he knew it was the former, he’d know to call. If he knew it was the latter, he’d know *not* to call and would post a condolence.

“So what’ll you do?”

“Well, since I’m not on Facebook,” he said, “it’s either call or don’t call. . . . Six months after the loss? Hattie? We’re not that close. Haven’t spoken in at least five years. I’m going with don’t call.”

“You’ll pretend you don’t know.”

“I won’t pretend shit. I’m just not gonna call.”

“O.K.”

“Faux pas?” he said.

“No idea. No one close to me’s ever died.”

“Me, neither. But, I mean . . . I don’t think that I’d want Hattie calling me six months after someone I loved died just to offer condolences,” Darren said. “What if I’m in the middle of a happy day? *Or* a real depressing one, for that matter? I’m gonna want to think about my dead loved one being dead? Go through that whole script for the zillionth time? Odds are not high. I think

next time I talk to her, if that even ever happens, I'll say something in passing if it feels appropriate. Something like 'By the way, I heard about your sister. I'm sorry for your loss.' Yeah. That's the move."

"Makes sense," I said. "Thanks."

"I'm not talking about you, man. You dated her a year. And you're on social media."

"Nine months," I said. "More than ten years ago. Plus I barely check Facebook. Obviously. I just found out right now about her sister."

"Still."

"So I should call, then."

"I'm not saying that, either," Darren said. "I have no idea what you should do. But you can't go by what I do. Even if we stood in identical relation to Hattie, I've got a more relaxed, friendlier demeanor than you. People have a far easier time believing that my interpersonal blunders owe to innocent mistakes or absent-mindedness. Everything you do is presumed deliberate. Probably that owes to your mean fuckin' face."

"Well, that's unfair."

"Meow meow, meow meow. At thirty everyone has the face he deserves."

"That's not . . . It's '*at fifty*.' I'm barely thirty-six."

"Yeah, still. The look you're giving me right now—"

"I'm not giving you a look."

"It's like you want to stamp on my face—forever."

E-MAIL

Five years later, it was 2018, and Josette got hired to teach in Florida. We bought a house here in Gainesville, our first.

The day after the movers delivered our things, I encountered, while I was unpacking art books, a cockroach the length of my thumb, in the living room.

I dropped the lid of a banker's box over it.

Josette came running in, panicked, from the kitchen. I told her what I'd seen, what was under the lid. She got a little angry: I'd shouted "Oh!" multiple times, she said, and she'd thought I'd been injured or was having a stroke.

I hadn't been aware that I'd shouted anything. I said I was sorry and offered her my cigarette.

She hadn't smoked in a week, she said. She was trying to quit. Had I failed to notice?

I might have failed to notice. If I hadn't failed to notice, I'd forgotten that I'd noticed.

Both accounts were bad, we agreed, but we argued a bit about which one was worse. I don't remember who argued which side, just that mine was the loser, and before I got to say as much Josette's back stiffened and some "Oh!"s ripped through me.

The roach had escaped.

It must have climbed through one of the punch-out handles. Now it was atop the lid, approaching us.

The approach was slow enough to seem considered: like, maybe the roach, though curious about us, wasn't convinced the feeling was mutual and knew that it needed to exercise caution. But probably the roach was perplexed and fatigued, caught between competing neurochemical directives: *Flee from danger!* vs. *Suspend animation when overly cold!*

Our A.C. was cranked.

•

“It’s too big,” Josette whispered, exhaling smoke.

“Too big,” I whispered back.



What we meant by “too big” was “too big to kill,” by which we meant the roach was big enough to (1) suffer pain visibly, perhaps even audibly, and (2) survive being stamped on once.

“But it’s not like a spider. We can’t just ignore it.”

“It’s nothing like a spider. Something has to be done.”

Our parrot, atop his cage in the corner (when we’re home and awake, we leave the cage open), emitted a series of sibilant fricatives, mimicking our whispering. These were some of our favorite sounds that he made, sounds that we wanted him to make more frequently, so we looked his way and whispered, “Good *bird!*”

Our plan developed rapidly.

•

The previous evening, hoping to still a twitch of buyer's remorse, we'd tested the reputedly unmatched power of our brand-new bagless hand vac's suck on the contents remaining at the bottom of a box marked "*DRAWER JUNK, OFFICE.*"

The suck had proved impressive, the twitch had been stilled, and we'd mounted the charger on the wall by the birdcage.

Our plan was this: Josette would watch the roach while I tiptoed over to the corner for the vacuum, then I'd zap the roach up and free it out in the yard.

I still believe the plan would have been a success had I thought to first empty the junk from the cannister. The roach, however, died in the cyclone, battered and punctured by drachmas and pushpins.

We threw it away.

•

I hadn't smelled Amaretto, and neither had Josette, so that night I didn't sleep a lot. I kept waking up to search the Internet, more and more afraid that the roach we'd killed hadn't been a palmetto bug; that it had been the kind of roach that prefers the indoors; that it was one of hundreds or maybe even thousands breeding in the hollows of our unfamiliar house.

My fear was unreasonable. Unscientific. Other than a palmetto bug, no roach endemic to North America could grow to the size of the one we'd killed. But between my insomnia, the conflicting information Wikipedia offered, the scores of (mis?)labelled photos I reluctantly maximized, and the pseudo-calming copy on pest-control sites, I got pretty worked up and started doubting my experience. Perhaps the same mechanism that had pushed the involuntary "Oh!"s from my mouth had doused my optic nerves with something potent that had caused them to exaggerate.

•

In the morning, I e-mailed Hattie. I'd been planning to anyway, had thought it would be almost inconsiderate not to. After all, we'd just moved to the not so big city where she had grown up.

The letter was long. I covered tons of ground: the spookiness of falling asleep in a house after decades in apartments; musings on where she might have gone, as a kid, to see gators, play soccer, eat ice cream; the lucky feeling of living blocks from a bar where smoking was allowed and popcorn was free; the pleasure of learning that this bar used to be the favorite haunt of Harry Crews, whose early novels we both held in high regard; the ready availability of high-end bourbon that would, in Chicago, if and when you were able to find it, cost five times as much; the mysterious power, especially at dusk, of the cloud-plumped sky, which, although it looked little like the sky of my childhood, triggered memories of that childhood so rich and high-def that I was able to observe them from multiple angles—all the rooms and landscapes and faces they contained—just by shifting my gaze.

Nearly six hundred words of that kind of thing.

Then three hundred more on the roach in our living room. I tried really hard to be funny in that part, was self-effacing about my state of alarm, recalled for her the time with the mouse in my kitchen, admitted that I'd lost a night of sleep and was seeking reassurance.

The letter closed as follows:

Hattie Grant! It's been forever. How's Vancouver? How's poetry? How's the whole thing? Is it possible the roach could have been a palmetto bug even though neither of us smelled Amaretto?

Yours, Adam

At 11:37 P.M. E.S.T., Hattie sent her response:

Palmetto bugs smell like Amaretto.

A lot of things have happened. Like my sister died and I didn't hear from you.

•

I was surprised to learn she'd been holding that against me. I hadn't imagined my failure to condole could have hurt her so much. I hadn't

imagined it would hurt her at all. Nor can I say that I understood—or, for that matter, that I understand today—why it *should have* hurt her.

But that didn't mean she didn't deserve an apology, or that I wasn't apologetic. She did. I was.

Whether what I'd done, or hadn't, should have caused Hattie pain didn't matter. I knew that.

Know that.

But here was a problem: she didn't *mention* pain, so for me to bring her pain up in the course of an apology could be presumptuous. For me to talk about having hurt her could be self-aggrandizing *and* presumptuous. Yet if I talked about the pain that *I* felt upon learning that I'd hurt her—or even about simply *fearing* that I'd hurt her—I'd be guilty of making the apology about me, and I was supposed to be humbling myself before her. Wasn't that what people wanted from apologies? For the apologizer to humble himself?

Or maybe it wasn't?

I tried to think of apologies I'd gotten from others that had satisfied me. I had little to draw on. I don't demand, let alone receive, many.

There was only one I was able to think of.

•

I had a true-blue dickhead in a workshop I taught once; a terrible piece of shit of a person.

Another student in the workshop had turned in a story in which the protagonist struggled with bulimia. A very badly written story, to be sure. Confessional melodrama with oblivious mother, saintly doctor, selfish father, and child abuse. A story that had clearly been written for the deadliest pair of sub-literary reasons (*to process a trauma and to educate readers*), and this annoyed everyone, of course it did.

But it was also an autobiographical story. The protagonist's name and the author's rhymed, both enjoyed knitting, had the same tattoo (though on opposite limbs), the same "ironic" crush on Dwayne (the Rock) Johnson, and came from the same small town in Wisconsin.

I run a fairly conventional workshop. The authors stay quiet while the rest of the class discusses their work, and then, at the end of the discussion, the authors are free to ask questions or make clarifications.

Most of them decline to say anything but "Thank you."

This one spoke.

"So I guess . . ." she said. "Well. It sounds like none of you thought that my protagonist was likable or empathetic?"

And the dickhead student, who before then hadn't said a word about the story—had only sneered and shaken his head—said, "Put it like this. The only real thought I had about her at all was Kill yourself, fat girl."

So I kicked him out.

•

But you can't really do that. Kick them out. Not where I was teaching. You're just not allowed. They pay too much tuition. The dickhead knew that, but also he didn't. When he e-mailed to say that I couldn't kick him out for "simply stating [his] opinion," I told him he was incorrect, that I *could* kick him out, and that I could, furthermore, fail him for missing the classes that he'd miss now that I *had* kicked him out. I said that, if he wanted to get back in to class, he had to write three heartfelt, deeply reflective letters of apology: one to the author of the story, one to the class, and one to me.

So he did. And it was great. For me, at least.

It was great not because I got to help some twenty-two-year-old dickhead grow into a kinder, better young man—that is *not* what happened; he remained a dickhead, albeit a somewhat quieter one while in my workshop—but because I knew that he, like all of us (and maybe even more so than

some of us), couldn't help judging his own value by his relative power, and it gave me great pleasure to witness him witness himself overpowered, forced to lie about himself: to attest to beliefs he didn't hold, to profess possessing feelings he didn't have.

It was a pleasure to humiliate him, I'm saying. To watch him *act* humble. And I believe I enjoyed it far more than I would have if he had actually *been* humble.

•

Hopefully, I'm not the kindest guy you'll ever meet.

Probably I'm even worse than my face.

•

But I do love my friends, and I did feel miserable for having hurt Hattie, and perhaps especially because I'd done so unintentionally. And so I spent some hours writing an apology that—despite how sincerely humbled I was by the realization that my negligence had caused a friend of mine pain—must have been insufficient because she, for all my efforts, humiliated me by way of never responding, which I guess I deserved, and even, it would seem, continue to deserve.

MASK

A day or two after the shootings in Kenosha, we discovered that our Publix sold prosciutto di Parma in vacuum-sealed packages. The price was an insult: near double what we used to pay in Chicago to have the same amount sliced off the leg. To buy it would have made us feel defeated by Florida.

Then a couple-three Sundays prior to the election, a colleague of Josette's was coming over with his wife to drink on our porch. We'd forgotten they were coming till they texted at noon to confirm for six o'clock. Six meant *apéro*—all parties involved were French except me—and we wanted to serve them some good, small food that they could rest assured we hadn't handled.

Here we saw our opportunity to buy the prosciutto without losing face. Along with their very own unopened package, each couple would, at their end of the table, have an uncut cantaloupe, a plastic box of shaved Grana Padano, and a brand-new bag of these crispy imported saltines we like.

We had to go to Publix anyway. We hadn't been shopping since the previous weekend.

•

When the list is long, I'm in charge of the produce, not because I have a special talent for choosing it but because I take twice as much time as Josette to find things on shelves. If I finish before her, I go to the dairy case. The eggs, at least, are always where you think they'll be. Ditto the butters.

So I went to the produce, where a sweaty, luminescently heat-rashed family in tank tops and Crocs were crowding the melons. By the time they dispersed, I'd found everything else: onions, potatoes, tomatoes, and apples.

There were dozens of cantaloupes from which to select. I knew that, unimpeded, ripe melon smells rotten, and overripe melon more rotten than that, so it stood to reason that overripe melon, through the barrier of a mask, should smell like ripe melon, whereas ripe melon shouldn't smell at all.

Except *unripe* melon wouldn't smell at all, either.

I slouched before the cantaloupes, perplexed and fatigued, stubbornly and incorrectly convinced that a sane, alternative way to choose was only one simple insight away.

Between the operability of my intellect and the amount of time that I've been wearing a mask, the correlation is negative.

Having worn the mask for about nine minutes, I was in a kind of sweet spot: punchy enough to consider lowering the mask to engage in naked sniffing, yet astute enough to see that (1) to do so would be reckless, and (2) I wouldn't remain that astute for much longer.

I walked away without any cantaloupes.

•

Josette found me trying to locate mozzarella. She said, “You’re gonna start eating yogurt again?”

“They hide the mozzarella.”

She pointed it out. I put a couple in my cart. She frowned at the cart.

“Yeah, no cantaloupe for us,” I said. “It’s impossible.”

“I thought I saw a stack of them.”

“I know,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

Then a man at the nearest snack-cake endcap sang, full throated, the chorus to Otis Redding’s worst song, but with different lyrics: “He’s sorry for the cantaloupe, bae!”

I’d normally have appreciated that kind of thing, and Josette would have, too, but this genius was wearing his mask on his wrist.

“This fucking guy,” Josette said. “I hate this fucking guy.”

“Fuck you, guy,” I said.

“He’d like to *do* me in the dock of my bay!” the guy sang, even louder, right as one of the pimpled, inbred simps who’d crowded the melons was passing between us, her cart full of Slim Jims and Flamin’ Hot Cheetos, the top of her mask folded under her nose. She paused beside the singer and told him she thought he had a beautiful voice.

“We lose,” Josette said.

“Not if they die soon, we don’t,” someone else said—an elderly woman standing behind me, reaching out over her basket for cream.

I cheered up a lot.

•

The prosciutto was a hit. No one seemed to miss the melons. We decided to drink more and order a pizza.

While I placed the order, Manon used our bathroom. When she came back outside, she told me our parrot was screaming my name.

“Levin?” Josette asked.

“No,” Manon said, laughing, “Adam.”

“He was doing this while I was in there, too!” Luc said.

Under the table, Josette kicked my ankle. She thought I should go in and tend to our parrot. I was comfortable, though, and we were entertaining guests, so I pretended I hadn’t noticed the kick. When she kicked me a second time, I crossed my legs.

•

I don’t teach our parrot words. He just picks them up, and only very occasionally. Mostly he whistles and beeps and shrieks.

“Levin,” like “Hello,” as well as most of the other words that he knows, means something like “I’m here with you,” or “Tell me you’re here with me,” or “Here we both are.” He’d been saying and screaming it for fifteen years.

“Adam,” however, he’d learned only after Josette moved in with us. It means he wants to be scratched at the base of his skull where neither his beak nor his claws can reach.

Rather, it means he wants *me* to scratch him there; anyone else who tries, he’ll bite.

•

In the delivery app, I'd added instructions for the driver to bring the pizzas round back, but fifty minutes later I received a text:

We did it! Success! Your no-contact delivery is at your front door!

So I raced through the house to collect the pizza before an anole or a roach breached the box.

•

Our parrot was perching on the rope-covered branch attached to his cage top, and not saying anything, let alone my name. In fact, he ignored me in favor of his wing, the left, which his head was tucked under, and which he seemed to be preening with above-average vigor but was actually harming, though I couldn't have imagined that was what he was doing, because I'm too stupid or coldly optimistic or willfully blind.

Passing by him again, now bearing the pizza, I said, "Hey there, man," and he gave no response. An all-time first. That made me nervous.

"Hey!" I said.

Again: no response.

Then a number of times—maybe fewer than you'd think; surely more, however, than I'd like to admit—I shouted his name, until at last he stopped doing the thing that he'd been doing, which was plucking at the root of his left wing's longest, bluest feather.

That is: I shouted his name until he'd plucked out his left wing's longest, bluest feather.

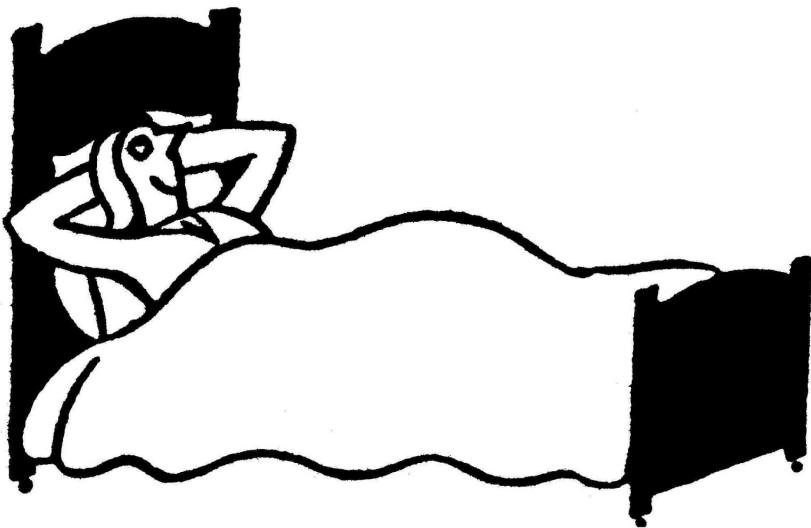
At which point he faced me, stood on one foot, then removed with the raised foot the feather from his beak, leaned forward a little, inclining his head, and, while he scratched at his skull with the quill's bloody end, said, "Adam Levin." ♦

Ladies Dept.

- [The Oura Ring Courts Female Finger-Space](#)

By [Sheila Yasmin Marikar](#)

If health is wealth, the Oura ring endeavors to be the trust fund that you wear around your finger. A band of titanium that costs two hundred and ninety-nine dollars (more if you want it in gold), Oura (sounds like “aura”) tracks body temperature and movement to measure the quality of your sleep. The ring synchs with an app and, each morning, delivers personalized sleep and “readiness” scores of between zero and a hundred. Factors considered include: Tossing and turning. Trips to the bathroom. Staying up past what Oura decrees is your ideal bedtime on any given night (sometimes 7 P.M.), blue-light exposure (bad), and alcohol consumption (worse, so much worse).



“I’ve never gotten a hundred,” Harpreet Singh Rai, the departing C.E.O. of Oura, said the other day, via a video call. He wore a black sweater, a turban, and two Oura rings. (Some employees wear as many as ten. “We try to eat our own dog food—test the latest software,” Rai said.) Behind him: a framed copy of *Time*’s 100 Best Inventions of 2020 issue, with Oura on the cover.

Oura was actually invented in 2013, in Finland; Rai, who was then working at a Manhattan hedge fund, was an early Kickstarter backer. “It was the first wearable that I kept wearing consistently, without missing a day, for more than three weeks,” he said. One day, in line at Whole Foods, Rai’s girlfriend noticed a guy wearing an Oura T-shirt. “Turns out, he’s one of the co-

founders, and he's in town for a conference," Rai said. "He looks at my ring and goes, 'That's the first one I've seen outside the office.'" Rai became Oura's C.E.O. in 2018 and stepped down in December.

These days, the people vying for A's from their Ouras include Kim Kardashian and Gwyneth Paltrow, who have posted their report cards to Instagram. (After Kardashian posted a readiness score of ninety-five, Paltrow shared her own "lame ass score" of eighty-one, along with a recommendation from the app: "Your body temperature is slightly elevated, but your readiness is at a nice level. How about making time for one fun thing today to boost your energy?") Other Oura adherents: the N.B.A., which offered its players rings for the league's quarantine bubble; corporations intent on spotting potential illness and luring workers back into the office; and the "Succession" character Kendall Roy ("almost too on the nose," a viewer commented on Twitter).

Oura is eager to win over women. Caroline Kryder, who leads science communications for the company, recently held a Zoom meeting to discuss how to insure that women don't think of the ring only as a sleep tracker, when, in fact, it has "all these women's-health applications." For instance, Oura can help a woman predict her next period based on body-temperature fluctuations. A slide on the screen read "Bust the 28 day myth!"

"Is it primarily temperature?" Samir Sheth, the vice-president of content and digital partnerships, asked. "Or are there other biomarkers?"

There were: heart-rate variability, respiratory rate, and resting heart rate. Kryder mentioned a pregnancy study that Oura conducted with the University of California, San Diego. The use of such antiquated technologies as oral thermometers was derided.

"I'm thinking back on my own pregnancies, and how, every day, it's a question of, 'Am I normal?'" Neta Gotlieb, an Oura research scientist, said. "There are lots of apps saying, 'This week, your baby is the size of a lemon.' What about the person carrying the baby?"

More studies, more graphs, more discussion about how to make users care about changes in body temperature, even if they're of the Kendall Roy

persuasion. Kristina Masalin, a product manager, said, “Body-temperature changes can be a sign of strain, and it may be harder for you to reach peak performances, especially physical ones, on days when your temperature is above your baseline.”

Karina Kogan, Oura’s chief marketing officer, commented, “It’s not just about, like, ‘Do you have a tampon in your handbag?’” She offered a personal example. “I’m always cold,” she said. “I didn’t realize until recently, in part because of Oura, that estrogen reduces blood flow to your extremities. So, if you have a high level of estrogen, you will be cold.” She went on, “People are, like, ‘Why are you wearing eighty-six layers?’ The answer is: ‘I have a lot of estrogen.’”

“Weather forecast,” Gotlieb said. “Estrogen is high today.”

“It would be amazing if you got a little notification,” Kryder said. “‘Here’s this wool blend that we suggest for you today, based on your estrogen.’”

A participant asked why Oura’s temperature graphs are sometimes rendered in green, rather than in the traditional red. “Green is obviously going to make you feel like it’s not negative,” Sheth said. “It’s another form of tonality.” ♦

On Television

- [Deconstruction and Delusion on HBO's "Landscapers"](#)

Susan and Chris Edwards (Olivia Colman and David Thewlis), the subjects of this true-crime love story, are not so much on the run as on a long walk.

By [Doreen St. Félix](#)

“Landscapers” opens with a magic trick. It’s nighttime, and a town square in England is mostly still. A voice declares, “Action! Rain!,” and immediately the area begins to experience weather. We presume that the voice belongs to Will Sharpe, the director and co-creator of this HBO miniseries, which is based on the true story of Susan and Chris Edwards, an English couple who, in 2013, were arrested for murdering Susan’s parents—and burying the bodies in their back yard—fifteen years earlier.

“Scenes from a Marriage,” another recent HBO miniseries centered on a relationship, similarly had the figure of the director spill into the frame. But the move felt superficial, like a postmodern garnish rather than like a narrative device. In “Landscapers,” Sharpe and his fellow-creator, Ed Sinclair, who wrote the script, fully integrate the breaking of the fourth wall into their haunting study of marriage, victimhood, and role-play. The show is all about deconstruction—the manipulations required to make art, and the imagination needed to create a sense of self. “Landscapers” does not hand down any real-world judgments. It establishes the facts of the crime quickly, on a title card, and then proceeds to tell a story that, in its dreaminess, can be watched as a doleful fable.

But you can, and should, watch it primarily as a love story, albeit a depressing one. Susan (Olivia Colman, who is married to Sinclair) and Chris (David Thewlis) are middle-aged, and a bit awkward. Since the killings, they have been living in France, where fugitive life is uneventful. Susan, a cinephile, blows through ludicrous amounts of money on rare movie posters and film memorabilia, while Chris tries and fails to find a job to support her life style. Their conversations follow a certain tempo: Chris coaxes Susan to acknowledge their financial precarity, Susan resists, and then Chris relents, unable to disturb the *mise-en-scène* in his wife’s mind. Their outlaw life is endearingly simple, a trifle boring. They are not so much on the run as on a long walk.

Couples create their own weird cultures, and for the subjects of “Landscapers” movies fill a void that might otherwise be satisfied by sex or

church. “How about a film?” Chris asks Susan. “Would you like to watch a film?” When he turns on “High Noon,” her narcotic, the projections of Gary Cooper and Grace Kelly form a moving skin on her giddy body, a visual motif about surfaces and reflection. Cinema as proxy reality, storytelling as the process through which ugly little facts are transubstantiated into grand, emotional truths—these are not new concepts. And yet Sharpe and Sinclair find dazzling ways to explore them, although at the expense of the human tragedy lurking under the surface.

Susan and Chris’s romantic universe may revolve around works of fiction, but their relationship isn’t fake. Chris, who has the tighter grip on reality, wills himself to live in Susan’s fantasy world as a romantic gesture. The one thrill in their lives is a seeming pen-pal correspondence with Gérard Depardieu, the French film star, and the object of their shared admiration. When Chris reads from Depardieu’s letters, in which the actor rhapsodizes on the beauty of stories, it’s Susan’s voice that he hears, a flicker of erotic doubling. But Chris’s commitment to Susan and her fantasies has a cost: after she spends all their money on collectibles, Chris calls his stepmother, begging for a loan, and that leads to the couple’s eventual arrest.

Sinclair got the cinephilia detail from the real-life Edwardses, who had only film memorabilia on their persons when they surrendered to the English police, in 2013. It would be easy to condescend here, to make them seem daffy. What Sharpe does instead is fully commit to Susan and Chris’s realm. During separate police interrogations, Susan and Chris unspool their stories as if telling genre tales. Sharpe, in masterly fashion, gives a landscape to two fractured mindscapes. Susan’s recollection of her first date with Chris, which, naturally, was at a movie theatre—to see “The Last Metro,” starring Depardieu—is rendered in black-and-white, with Susan melting into soft focus, à la thirties screen siren, as she gazes into her paramour’s eyes. By force of Susan’s imagination, her parents’ crime scene becomes an actual scene, with her mother and father, crazed and abusive, drenched in blood-red light, as if staged by Hitchcock or maybe even Bergman.

If there is a check on the Edwardses’ reality, then it should be the perspective of the detectives investigating the murders. But what is the police system if not an elaborate storytelling apparatus? D.C. Lancing (Kate O’ Flynn) is a director of sorts; she transforms the interrogation room into

the crime scene, stage directing Susan's parents, now *her* actors, in accordance with her understanding of the crime.

Lancing believes the act to have been mercenary. Following the murders, Susan and Chris began emptying her parents' pension accounts, and, for many years, pretended that they were still alive, forging letters in their name. Susan confesses that she was molested by her father when she was young, and then claims that he was murdered by her mother, who, no longer able to live with the brute who abused their child, killed him in a climactic act of rage. Susan, fearful for her own life, then killed her mother in self-defense, and Chris, her protector, buried the bodies. What's compelling about "Landscapers" is that it's indifferent to which of these stories is true. The show wants to excavate the tension between fabulists and pragmatists, in order to suggest that pragmatists are just as blinkered, too insensitive to the experiences that cause others to abandon the rational world.

"Landscapers" is the most formally interesting show of the year. With its revolving stages, it can feel like a theatre piece, and the visual storytelling keeps us locked in. This is true even when the writing verges on the prosaic, as is the risk of any project that self-consciously reproduces the tropes of Westerns, romances, and thrillers. I lost count of how many times "fragile" had been used to describe Susan. Chris first uses it when speaking with his stepmother, as a way to explain his wife's mental state. Later, the cops alight on the word, picking apart its connotations. "I know what 'fragile' fucking means," Lancing says. "It means you're in charge." She is explicating what Sinclair's script shies away from: the contradictions in Susan's character.

The script has a moralizing bent, romanticizing Susan. It's as if the writing, deferential to the abuse that the character suffered as a child, were afraid of exploring the possibility of her violence. Chris insists to the police that Susan could never have committed premeditated murder, because she is afraid of guns, and we, the audience, concur, given what we've been told about her fragility.

At the couple's trial, where the court treats Susan like a laughingstock, she counters that she is not fragile but broken. It's tricky playing the distressed damsel, the character who fancies herself a character, but in this scene

Colman complicates Susan's two-dimensionality. The tragedies of Susan's life have robbed her of the ability to authentically relate to another person. Regardless of whether she is guilty of murder, she is guilty of exploiting Chris, who lives to be exploited. "I ruined your life," she tells him, to which he responds, "You are my life."

Sinclair's script does better by Thewlis, who plays a masculinized wreck. Chris thinks he has the situation under control, but we can see that he is naïve: he does not understand that he has been made pathetic by the couple's circumstances, so fixated is he on protecting Susan, the woman he was not able to save when she was a child. He is her emotional submissive, sitting on an unprocessed rage—we learn at the trial that Chris is a master marksman but that he has given up the hobby for his wife.

There's a devastating tension to Thewlis's seamless switching between the mild-mannered, attenuated husband and the Gary Cooper surrogate of Susan's dreams. The most revelatory aspect of Thewlis's performance is that he does not allow the character to curdle into a pitiable figure. Beneath his wiry gait, Chris has an edge. In one scene, the cops disabuse him of the notion that Susan's collection of film memorabilia is valuable. He flares in disbelief, ever so briefly, but then he grows indignant at the police, who would dare to disturb the sanctity of the couple's mutual truth. ♦

Personal History

- [Escaping Into the Crossword Puzzle](#)

If, by the dumb logic of my eating disorder, I was losing something special about myself by gaining weight, I was bolstering my self-esteem by creating crosswords, something I knew to be difficult, precocious, and exceptional.

By [Anna Shechtman](#)

Content

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

A grid has a matter-of-fact magic, as mundane as it is marvellous. From sidewalks to spreadsheets to after-hours skyscrapers projecting geometric light against a night sky, the grid creates both order and expanse. In 1979, the art critic and historian Rosalind Krauss wrote about the ubiquity of the grid in modern art, citing the even-panelled windowpanes of Caspar David Friedrich and the abstract paintings of Agnes Martin. “The grid’s mythic power is that it makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science, or logic) while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (or illusion or fiction),” Krauss wrote. It was this paradox—the promise of control and transcendence—which first drew me to the prototypically modern grid: the crossword puzzle.

I began writing crosswords when I was fourteen, which is also when I began starving myself. The connection between these impulses felt intuitive: they both stemmed from a desire to control my image and to nurture a fledgling sense of self. I read in a health-class textbook that high-achieving, affluent young white women were the population most likely to succumb to anorexia. I found in the common identifiers of the disease—extreme thinness, perfectionism, a penchant for self-punishment—a rigid template on which to trace my pubescent identity. It was a distorted fantasy of success that ignored the actual demographic reach of eating disorders and betrayed the stony limits of my teen-aged imagination. Diagnoses for mental illness are notoriously reductive, and I wanted to be reduced.

“Crossword-puzzle constructor,” I found, was an uncannily compatible identity-container. She must be disciplined, I imagined people thinking. A little obsessive, maybe—but the cultural residue of female hysteria, a century later, might have you convinced that this simply meant “adorable.” And, without a doubt, she must be smart. As I tried harder to escape the

trappings of my body—to become a boundless mind—I plunged deeper into a material world of doctors, therapists, scales, and blood samples. I filled notebooks with calorie counts and clues, meal plans and puzzle themes. My first crossword puzzles reflected my high-school preoccupations: an early grid was “midterms”-themed, featuring words with “term” in their middle: *DETERMINED*, *MASTERMIND*, *WATERMELON*.

Most of what I knew about crossword construction came from the 2006 documentary “Wordplay,” in which Merl Reagle, the late syndicated puzzle-maker, walks the viewer through the mechanics of designing a crossword. Reagle’s cameo is distinctly unglamorous: we see him in a midsize sedan, driving by Florida’s strip malls, riffing on the roadside signage. “Dunkin’ Donuts—put the ‘D’ at the end, you get ‘Unkind Donuts,’ which I’ve had a few of in my day,” he says. Later, when coming across the phrase “Noah’s Ark”: “Switch the ‘S’ and the ‘H’ around. That’s ‘No, a Shark’ !” His house is full of crossword paraphernalia: black-and-white ties, mugs, and a crossword mural in his living room.

The hard-core kitsch aesthetics of Reagle’s life were not exactly what drew me in. But with his simple puns he seemed to be accessing something foundational about language—a code that could be rearranged and manipulated through sheer brainpower. When he plotted out a “Wordplay”-themed crossword onscreen, using grid paper and pencil, I internalized the puzzle’s protocols: perfect one-hundred-and-eighty-degree symmetry, elegantly interlocking words, a minimum of black squares, no jargon or linguistic waste, only “good words.”

What makes for a good word, in the eyes of a crossword-puzzle constructor? The language of aesthetic judgment is gustatory—one has good taste or feels something in one’s gut—but crosswords are meant to transcend physical sensations. Fans of the *Times* crossword may have heard of the “Sunday-morning breakfast test”: the paper’s requirement that its puzzle not turn the stomach of a morning solver. (“*URINE* would bail me out of a corner a million times a year,” Reagle says, in “Wordplay.” “Same with *ENEMA*,” he adds. “Talk about great letters. But you gotta keep those words out of puzzles.”) This was one of many rules instituted by the architect of the contemporary puzzle, Margaret Farrar, the *Times*’ first crossword editor. She believed that a crossword should activate your mind, not your body.

Perhaps, then, it is of little surprise that crossword constructors have imported the language of pure math into their process. A good word might be a term with a high vowel-to-consonant ratio (*AREA*, *ERIE*, *OREO*) or extreme anagrammability (*LIVE*, *EVIL*, *VEIL*, *VILE*). It could also be something more capricious. Why was it so rewarding to watch solvers, in “Wordplay,” fill in the squares for 1-Across (“Stark and richly detailed, as writing”) with *ZOLAESQUE*? Was it the unlikely combination of “Z” and “Q”? The word’s improbable specificity? Its rolling sound off the tongue?

Ascribing arbitrary but absolute value to words and letters came to me naturally. Anorexics, like crossword constructors, are predisposed to black-and-white thinking, and although some of my ideas about food were widely accepted in a fat-phobic culture—high-caloric snacks are “bad”; weight loss is “good”—many of the behaviors and food rituals I adopted, sacrosanct in my imagination, were unintelligible to an outsider. I wouldn’t allow myself a teaspoon of ice cream, but I could eat a pint of frozen yogurt. I could have a full stack of chocolate-chip pancakes—as many chips as the diner’s cook would load into the batter—but not a drop of syrup.

I spent only a few months in public denial, hiding my disorder from my family and friends. But, by the winter of tenth grade, it was obvious that I had become stuck in a rigid pattern of behavior; I couldn’t simply go back to another way of thinking or eating. Eventually, doctors and parents—and my own fear instincts—intervened. I would have to gain weight to stay in school and avoid hospitalization. I decided that I would gain the weight but retain control: I would do it by eating “good” foods, not “bad” ones. I would eat four large meals a day, and between each one I would write a crossword puzzle. My war with my body at a temporary ceasefire, I escaped into an abstract matrix of letters and words. The simple fifteen-by-fifteen-square grid gave order to my racing thoughts and offered a replacement high for that of starvation. If, by the dumb logic of my eating disorder, I was losing something special about myself by gaining weight, I was bolstering my self-esteem by creating crosswords, something I knew to be difficult, precocious, and exceptional.

The anorexic girl is a victim of improper consumption. A prevailing cultural logic assumes that the desire to fast is triggered by the overly literal intake of commercial images—in magazines, on Instagram—of stick-thin

supermodels and celebrities. In other words, the feminist critic Abigail Bray writes, many people believe that anorexia is both an eating disorder and a “reading disorder.” Bray rejects this etiology of the disease, which implies that the anorexic, like so many Madame Bovaries before her, suffers simply from an inability to distinguish fact from fiction. The anorexic does flirt with literalism—*The culture tells me to be thin; here you go, I’ve done it!*—but she is just as likely to practice a highly creative misreading of cultural cues, as I did when I took my textbook’s cautionary tale as aspirational.

The puzzle of anorexic reading habits was made more apparent to me when, at age nineteen, I left college and checked in to a treatment center for women with eating disorders, in the infelicitously named town of Paradise, Utah. For the previous five years, I’d been stuck in a pernicious cycle of weight loss and doctor-mandated weight gain. I was never not anorexic in that time, maintaining a choke hold on my food intake, even if I had concocted a way to appease doctors in the short term. I needed—and even felt some relief upon accepting—the behavioral interventions of in-patient treatment.

I didn’t write crosswords in rehab. I have never liked to work with other people watching: the supervisory gaze interrupts the escapist conceit that I exist only in a virtual space of moving letters on a page. And everything in Paradise—eating, sleeping, shitting, reading—was highly supervised. A budding English major, I brought more books than clothes with me, hoping a self-guided course in American literature would suit my convalescence. My favorites were the works of Saul Bellow and Philip Roth: their bawdy wit was a welcome antidote to the facility’s earnest mix of Mormonism and group therapy.

I learned that my books were being monitored when my therapist banned Roth’s “Anatomy Lesson.” The title suggested to him some perverted relation to the medicalized body, and, to be fair, he wasn’t entirely wrong. When I asked what books, in particular, were banned from Paradise, I was told that it was ultimately left to the therapist’s discretion, but that they tended to belong to one of two genres: books promoting dieting, and those detailing the conditions of Holocaust internment. Each, I was told, might be perilously read as instructional.

The anorexic's attraction to the stories of Holocaust victims could be seen as yet another symptom of her "reading disorder"—consuming descriptive texts as prescriptive. But it actually reveals a more structural condition of the starving mind: one that is rooted in obsessive fixation and decontextualization, allowing a single feature of the human body to stand in for the totality of one's self-worth, like a synecdoche. Or one that lets the signs of starvation, in Auschwitz or Utah, stand in for one another, like a metonymy.

This kind of substitutive logic appears in early case histories of anorexia. In 1919, Ellen West, an anorexic and bulimic patient of the psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger, wrote out her thought pattern as an equation: "Eating = being fertilized = pregnant = getting fat." Such symbolic displacement is the bread and butter of Freudian psychoanalysis; it should also be familiar to the average solver of a crossword puzzle. The clue and the answer in a crossword must be perfect substitutions for each other. The clue can be straightforward: three letters for "Consume" (Answer: *EAT*), or it can play on linguistic misdirection: three letters for "Not fast" (Answer: *EAT*). The potential for words to mean so much with so little context is the puzzler's great pleasure.

Before I entered rehab, I wanted to treat my eating disorder as a puzzle to be solved. My body had become a glaring symbol that was at once obvious to others and totally inscrutable to me. I was a walking sign of misery and virtue, slow death and supremacy (over my appetite, over other women), self-erasure and self-display. I felt an almost melancholic disappointment in my inability to produce the key (some repressed trauma, some psychosexual dilemma) that I could use to cure myself.

In case histories of anorexics from the first half of the twentieth century, the patient, who is nearly always a woman, becomes a puzzle for her psychiatrist, who is nearly always a man. The "key" to solving the puzzle usually lay in the equation of food and sexuality: two common solutions were the fear of pregnancy, as with Ellen West, and the repressed desire for fellatio. In 1942, the psychiatrist Ruth Moulton suggested that the anorexic rejects slimy foods because they remind her of semen, or because she wants to be force-fed to satisfy a fantasy for oral sex. The former is sexually timid; the latter demonstrates sexual aggression. At once too frigid and too

promiscuous within the terms of early psychoanalysis, the anorexic girl's appetites—for sex, for food, for ambition—were a threat to the cultural order.



"I'm rethinking the cat raft."
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

In the same period that anorexic women became a source of medical suspicion, the crossword puzzle became an object of cultural hysteria. Newspapers and magazines from the nineteen-twenties and thirties warned of a “crossword craze” gripping the country’s minds. Hotels considered placing a dictionary next to the Bible in every room; telephone companies tracked increased usage, as solvers phoned friends when stuck on a particularly inscrutable clue; baseball teams feared that America’s pastime would be usurped, the grid to replace the diamond. The passion for crosswords was described as an “epidemic,” a “virulent plague,” and a “national menace.”

Much of the outcry focussed on the puzzle’s trivializing waste of brainpower. In 1925, Arthur Brisbane wrote, in his syndicated column, “Young people who want to increase their vocabulary should not deceive themselves with crosswords. Let them read Shakespeare.” Others feared that the puzzle was a threat to the family unit. A host of divorces in Ohio were said to have been caused by the daily crossword, with the manager of one legal-aid association claiming to have received an average of “ten letters a

day from wives who have to remain at home these evenings just because their husbands are suffering from ‘crossword puzzleitis.’” Like an emotional affair, the crossword seemed to be siphoning off energy and intimacy from married life.

This “square vice,” as the *Daily Princetonian* called it, became a locus for anxiety about a movement that was explicitly changing American gender relations—first-wave feminism. The earliest innovators of the puzzle’s form were women: in 1914, the first crossword puzzle published under a byline was created by Mrs. M. B. Wood; in 1929, Mildred Jaklon, the founding puzzle editor of the Chicago *Tribune*, pioneered the “crossword contest”; and, in 1934, Mrs. Elizabeth S. Kingsley invented the Double-Crostic puzzle (or the acrostic, as it’s now called). In books, comics, and postcards from the time, the New Woman and the crossword puzzle became linked as flouters of Victorian gender conventions. Flora Annie Steel’s novel “The Curse of Eve,” published in 1929, is about two antiheroines who are “making a living out of the craze for crossword puzzles.” One is a fashionable beer heiress, with more bite and better business instincts than her brothers; the other is a cash-strapped dancer, who sees marriage as another form of prostitution. Both are depicted as simultaneously desexed (“in the fullness of her bodily and mental powers she sits free of sex”) and oversexed (with an “unconscious desire to attract, unconscious desire to appropriate”). Both are too great a puzzle for the modern man to grasp.

The dangerous fantasy of the puzzle woman is perhaps most famously registered in the 1925 novelty song “Crossword Mama.” A “puzzling woman,” she devotes herself to the crossword as a proxy for other fashions of the time. Like the flapper, she is liberated from the corsets and the customs of the Victorian age. A double-crosser, she is not to be trusted: “You call me ‘honey’—that means ‘bee’! / Looks like I’ll be stung no doubt.” The conceit extends across nine verses: “I heard you mention ‘butcher’—that means ‘meat’! / Who you gonna ‘meet’ tonight?” But, like the Sphinx before her, the Crossword Mama solicits a solution: “Crossword Mama, you puzzle me,” the chorus concludes. “But Papa’s gonna figure you out.”

There are hundreds of other Jazz Age relics that conflate the flapper and the crossword as icons of the Zeitgeist. In these images, the puzzle represents the enigma of female desire and fuels the intimacy between men and women

in an otherwise chaste culture of heterosexual courtship. It allows verbal and physical taboos to be breached, as members of the opposite sex say four-letter words to each other, cuddling around the newspaper page. “You naughty boy—it couldn’t be that word!” reads the caption on a postcard featuring two young solvers, a blushing man and a woman clutching her breast. By the dual logic of the crossword craze, the woman is the puzzle, and the puzzle brings solvers closer to their desire. The puzzle, in other words, is a sex object.

A few months before I left for rehab, in 2010, my boyfriend persuaded me to start submitting my crosswords to the *Times*. Will Shortz, the newspaper’s longtime crossword editor, encouraged the submissions: if I was quick with my revisions, he said, I could be the youngest woman to publish a crossword in the paper’s history. (I wasn’t that quick; I became the second youngest.) At the time, I didn’t understand that I was an outlier in what has come to be known as the CrossWorld, a highly devoted, pun-loving set of mostly male, mostly STEM-educated speed-solvers and constructors.

My second puzzle appeared in the *Times* when I was in Paradise. (The staff drove to Logan, Utah, the nearest big city, to buy a copy of the print edition but couldn’t find one.) The puzzle’s theme was “It’s all Greek to me,” and its answers included words with Greek letters nested inside them. My inspiration came from the discovery that Freud’s “oral phase” contained the Greek letter “alpha”; that answer was the puzzle’s 1-Down.

I would remain in Paradise for another three months. The occasionally punishing, often surreal conditions of rehab suited me. Food and body-image “challenges” that I was given—meant to simulate life after treatment—became more tolerable and even amusing to me by the end of my stay: “Surprise! Doughnuts for breakfast today”; “Group therapy will be done in bikinis today”; “No makeup today” (easy for me); “No hair-straightening today” (harder, for a Jewish girl). When I checked out of the facility, after spending the better half of a year there, and returned home to New York City, my recovery was precarious but hard-won. I was learning to trust my body’s hunger cues and to reimagine my days in terms of opportunities and responsibilities—not willfully overdetermined by food rules and restrictions.

That fall, I returned to college, and during intractable periods of body dysmorphia, I retreated into the grid. Constructing crosswords remained a primary source of solace, but something had changed: I was beginning to be recognized for my work by the audience I had ambivalently courted in the pages of the *Times*. Other outlets, looking to diversify their bylines, solicited my puzzles. I was known not just as a constructor but as a woman constructor.

When I graduated, in 2013, Shortz offered to hire me as his assistant. I was reluctant to accept the post: resolutely committed to my newly stable recovery, I worried that giving my time over so fully to crosswords would somehow prove symptomatic of relapse. But I uncrossed the wires—puzzles ≠ disembodiment ≠ anorexia ≠ relapse—and took the job. Four days a week, I rode the Metro-North train from the city to Pleasantville, New York, to join Shortz at his home office, a room flooded with crossword ephemera and walled with reference books, holdovers from his pre-Google editing days. I knew that I was benefitting from a kind of CrossWorld affirmative action: there were many young men creating crosswords, more prolific than I, a handful of whom even expressly wanted to be “the next Will Shortz.” But, if my appointment at the *Times* was political, so, too, was my output.

Shortz is known for editing up to ninety per cent of the clues in a crossword submission, tailoring its references to suit a desired level of difficulty and an imagined audience—one that could be as broad or as narrow as Shortz wanted it to be. We tangled, mostly amicably, over this question of audience. We had markedly different frames of reference—he was a sixty-two-year-old who had grown up on a horse farm in Indiana, and I was a twenty-three-year-old who grew up in Tribeca—and the collision of our backgrounds made for good conversation and better crosswords. One of my proudest moments was getting him to rewrite the clue for *BRO* (traditionally, “Sister’s sib” or “Sibling for sis”) as “Preppy, party-loving, egotistical male, in modern lingo.” But, when I constructed a puzzle that prominently featured the term *MALE GAZE* in the grid, he insisted that the phrase wouldn’t be in the average *Times* solver’s lexicon; it wasn’t “puzzle-worthy.” (Although I lost that battle in 2014, the term appeared three years later, under his editorship.)

During my time with Shortz, I received both credit and flak for modulating the voice behind the puzzle's clues: for including words and idioms from my generation and perspective. In 2014, I became the youngest woman to create a puzzle for the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament, a weekend-long speed-solving competition. I was not on a mission to draw attention to my difference from the other constructors, but my crossword, the sixth puzzle in the tournament, did that work for me. In the grid's southeast corner, *JESSA* (48-Across: "One of the girls on 'Girls'") intersected with *JANSPORT* (48-Down: "Backpack brand"). I thought both were "gettable" answers. ("Girls"-talk was, after all, abundant in 2014.) But apparently the *JESSA / JANSPORT* crossing had damaged some contestants' scores and sunk their tournament rankings. I had created what in crossword jargon is called a Natick, an unjustified intersection of two obscure answers, leaving the solver with no hope but to guess at the solution: *TESSA / TANSPORT?* *NESSA / NANSPORT?*

The term "Natick," coined by the puzzle blogger Rex Parker, stems from a 2008 *Times* puzzle in which *NC WYETH* (1-Down: "'Treasure Island' illustrator, 1911") intersected with *NATICK* (1-Across: "Town at the eighth mile of the Boston Marathon")—crossword esoterica, to be sure. But to think of my puzzle crossing as a Natick was to confess to never having watched the hit HBO show (no sin there), or to never having bought school supplies or gone to child-care dropoff (more damning, perhaps). You might even say it was to confess to being a man.

As my relationship to the puzzle shifted—from a private to a public activity; from a coping mechanism to a political tool—I began to see myself filling one box in the public imagination and then another. Part of the appeal of a young woman crossword constructor is that she is focussing her intelligence on a frivolity; she is making her smarts unthreatening and benign. Of course, nothing about my story, neither its reflection of cultural misogyny nor its origins in my willful self-destruction, is benign. Surely this is not what the mothers who approached me at the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament had in mind when they tried to set me up with their doctor or lawyer sons.

The crossword has long served me as a retreat from the material world, but it is little more than a reflection of it: an index of the preoccupations, obsessions, and tics of common usage. I am part of a macro generation of

constructors and editors who are diversifying the puzzle and expanding the crossword lexicon beyond the doldrums of arcana: we are men, women, and nonbinary constructors who know that what makes for a “good crossword word” is recognition, the pleasure of finding something you know fit neatly into the cramped corners of a newspaper grid. To see increasingly more of the world reflected in this admittedly specialized leisure-class activity is not just satisfying; it’s political.

Will Shortz likes to say that when human beings see an empty square they feel the need to fill it. A manifest destiny of the mind. For me, the puzzle’s delights continue to reside in the contradictions of the grid, holding the limitless signifying power of language in temporary abeyance. The crossword is a game of associations: to write a clue, a constructor needs to rack her brain for all possible words and idioms associated with a desired “answer.” Like Freudian analysis, or a linguistic Rorschach test, the puzzle creates meaning out of the chance encounters between words and images, proper and sometimes improper nouns, and acts as a window into our fantasies, tastes, and unyielding fixations. Perhaps this is why the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan advised his young analysts-in-training, “*Faites des mots croisés.*” (“Do crossword puzzles.”) Of course, if you’re looking to plumb the collective unconscious, you could also just read Shakespeare. ♦

Poems

- “[Greetings, Friends!](#)”
- “[Dark](#)”

By [Ian Frazier](#)

The days grow short, the sun declines,
And once again, in cobbled rhymes,
We greet you all! “Dear all,” we say
(The standard form, that is, today),
“Et cetera”—a long quotation,
Which we’ll omit in salutation,
The freight of which is: Yay! You’re here!
We’ve made it through another year
Together, somehow, bless us all.
Now let’s adjourn to our Great Hall,
Whose walls, we’re told, are well bedecked, ’n’
Punch bowls checked for ivermectin.
The stars arrive, both nat. and local:
Both Bidens, natch, and our Gov. Hochul.
Jill, Joe, and Kathy, sit ye down
Around the blazing Christmas noun
Beside Saul Griffith, whom we’re tight with
(Someone Joe should talk all night with),
And lean in close to Rachel Cusk,
Barbara Kingsolver, Elon Musk,
Harry Styles, Lisa Yuskavage,
Jorge Ramos, Adam Savage,
Olympic champ Sunisa Lee,
And Dr. Annie Onishi.
We wish pure bliss to Allie Brosh
As she enjoys a Yuletide nosh,
And happiness without surcease
To all the U.S. Capitol Police,
Who’ve honored us by stopping by.
There’s Omar Sy—Yo, Omar, hi!
He must meet Lucas Hnath, the playwright,
It sounds like “nayth”—that’s how you say right—
Plus, film director Hwang Dong-hyuk
Might cast him on the spot. What luck!
Now, let us be completely clear:
We’re nuts for Tara VanDerveer,

The Stanford women's b-ball coach;
That's ditto for Ukweli Roach,
Vaccine wizard Lexi Walls,
Our buds from Cuyahoga Falls,
Sam Swope, Lil Yachty, Sarah Snook,
Daniel Kaluuya, King Mel Brooks,
U.C.L.A.'s Johnny Juzang,
Bony Ramirez, Bowen Yang . . .
The vibes are changing. Something mutters,
Flutters in the flung-back shutters;
Then Christmas spirits, à la Dickens,
Fill the air as gladness quickens
Everyone within their range!
Bo Burnham doesn't find this strange.
Meanwhile, Adar Poonawalla
(Philanthrope and pharma-wallah),



Blitz Bazawule, David Spade.
Kind Mrs. Wise, from seventh grade,
Mr. Gurnah, lit. Nobel-er,
Zaila Avant-garde, top speller,
Mary Beard, Aisling Chin-Yee,

Researcher Adi Utarini,
Fintan O'Toole, and Lil Nas X
Feel joy way past what one expects.
Our rafter-mounted jumbotron
Displays the mixing going on:
Xander Bogaerts, ace infielder,
Jaap van Zweden, baton-wielder,
Mike Lupica, his mom and dad
(A clan that makes us really glad),
Jason Sudeikis, and Tom Scott
Are chatting in a festive spot,
Adjacent to the Santa chair
Hard by the boar's head (medium rare),
As on a couple hundred plates
Fruitcake flambé illuminates
Confabs involving Sasha Lane,
New York's A.G. Letitia James,
Edward Enninful, style maven,
Senior golfer Corey Pavin,
Eric Adams, our next mayor,
Bishop Dietsche, a major prayer,
Sturgeon macher Gary Greengrass,
Wrestling co-capt. Michael Elsass,
Flula Borg, the cool comedian,
And lawyer Mitchell Garabedian,
Who all erupt in welcoming song
For June King Erskine and Isla Shawn,
Excellent and wondrous babies,
Sans disclaimers, ifs, or maybes!
Dear friends, this year was not as bad
As 'twenty was, or quite as sad,
Admittedly a fine distinction
On our glide path to extinction.
Hey, bite your tongue! Walk that thought back.
Unseemly gloom is really wack.
Light shines, the darkness did not end it;
Nor could the darkness comprehend it.

A future's ours to win or lose it,
Hope still awaits us if we choose it.
May the dread Omicron spare us
(One more thing to wrack and scare us);
May every forest soon be rid
Of the woolly adelgid,
And peace and blessings light the way
For all of us this Christmas Day! ♦

By [Elly Bookman](#)

Content

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

Audio: Read by the author.

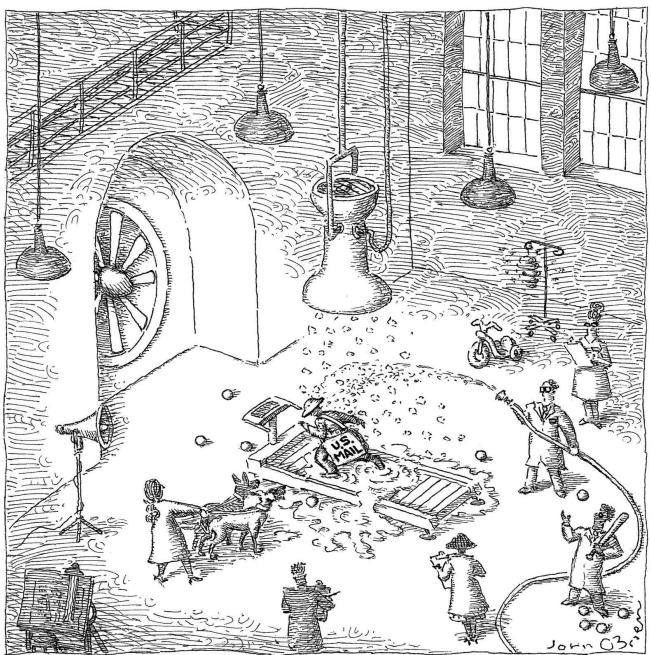
Schools gone dark. On the last day
we told the children to take everything
home, supervised as they emptied dark
lockers of books, loose pages, mirrors.
I don't drive past the dark windows and
halls, missing it. I make dark the living
room and fill it back up with the light of
a movie. Something about creatures who
stalk in the dark, thrive on its blankness.
But I go to bed before the end, when
dark returns to the screen with its list
of names. I sleep in dark, but shove
voices in my ears that belong to bodies
who sat in lit rooms a good while ago
to discuss science, loss. Even sunrises—
I sleep through them now, can't stand
that semi-dark slide into the worsened
day. Dark soil in the garden beds, in
the houseplants, spilled on the kitchen
floor. The dark fur of the dog so soft
I'd skin her to make myself a coat if I
didn't love the rest of her so desperately.
Dark thoughts like that in my head
all day. Dark mode so the screens are
gentler on the eyes. Not that they feel
any strain—no dark itch in the pupil.
If anything I feel so much the same—
no new humid night sets its dark down
in my swallow (the sickness), nor does
any heart-wound turn rotten and raw.
I am the dark's pale rider, indifferent

and slow. By the time schools reopen,
dark won't be anything on which to
remark. A girl will open her locker and
out dark will pour and she'll think how
she's learned it. Dark homework. Dark
that has spent all these days staring
into a left-behind mirror at itself, stirred
to cloud at last, to a downpour about
to make the day cool and blue, make all
this a yesterday. Her shadowy backpack.

Portfolio

- [Some Wintry Funnies](#)

By [The New Yorker](#)



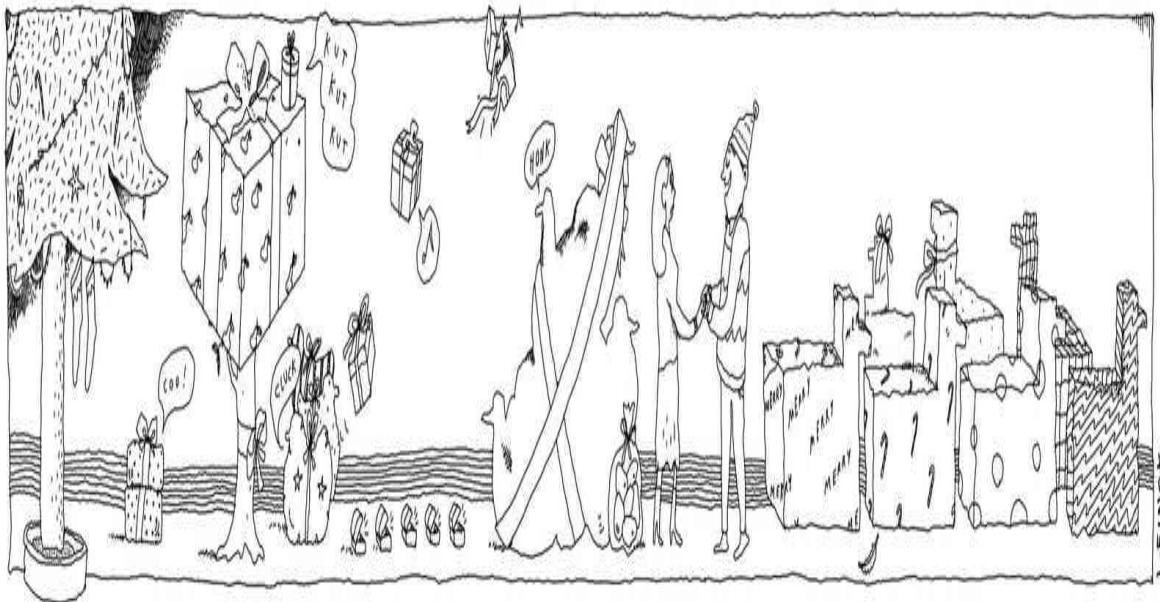
Cartoon by John O'Brien



Cartoon by Paul Noth



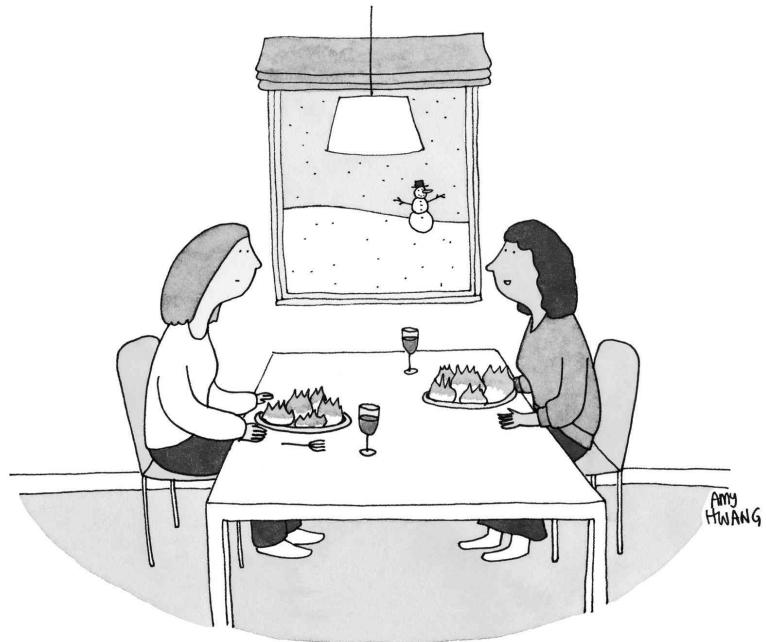
"Instead of a weighted blanket, she sleeps under the suffocating weight of her responsibilities."
Cartoon by Aranza Peña Popo



"Just wait till you see what I got you for the eighth, ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth days of Christmas!"
Cartoon by Liana Finck



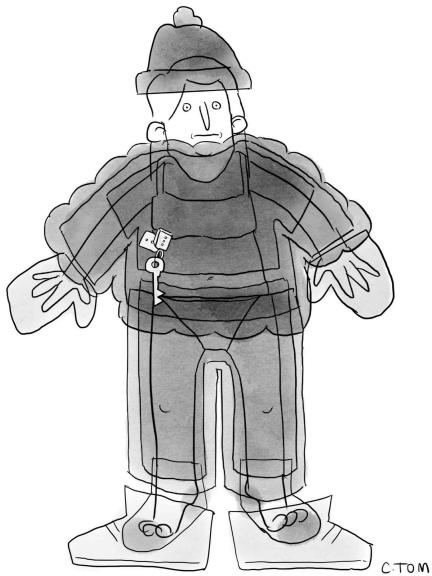
"Do you have all those things in stock?"
Cartoon by Kaamran Hafeez and Al Batt



"When it's extremely cold out, I prefer flambés to winter stews."
Cartoon by Amy Hwang



"If I hear that song one more time, I'm gonna rum-pum-pum-pummel someone."
Cartoon by Matthew Diffee



THE PRINCESS AND THE KEY

Cartoon by Colin Tom



"I'm the Ghost of Christmas Past and Future, because time has no meaning anymore."
Cartoon by Brendan Loper

Postscript

- [The Power of bell hooks's Gaze](#)

By [Eli Reed](#)

Puzzles & Games Dept.

- [The Cover Crossword](#)
- [We've Lost Eustace](#)
- [Going Too Far](#)
- [Abstract New York](#)
- [Acrostic](#)
- [Drawn and Quartered](#)
- [In the Doggerel House](#)
- [The Impossible Crossword](#)
- [Answer Key](#)

By [Andy Kravis](#)

This crossword puzzle appears on Christoph Niemann's "[Give Us a Clue](#)," the cover of the December 27, 2021, issue.

By [Tomi Um](#)

It's that time of year again, when the grim graybeards of *The New Yorker* cede their control of the magazine to the lighthearted loonies and let them run the esteemed asylum for a change. What does this mean for you, the reader? Laughs and games and gags and goofs! And don't grumble too much —we'll be back to our regularly programmed coverage of the apocalypse next week.

Stumped? Take a peek at the [Answer Key](#).

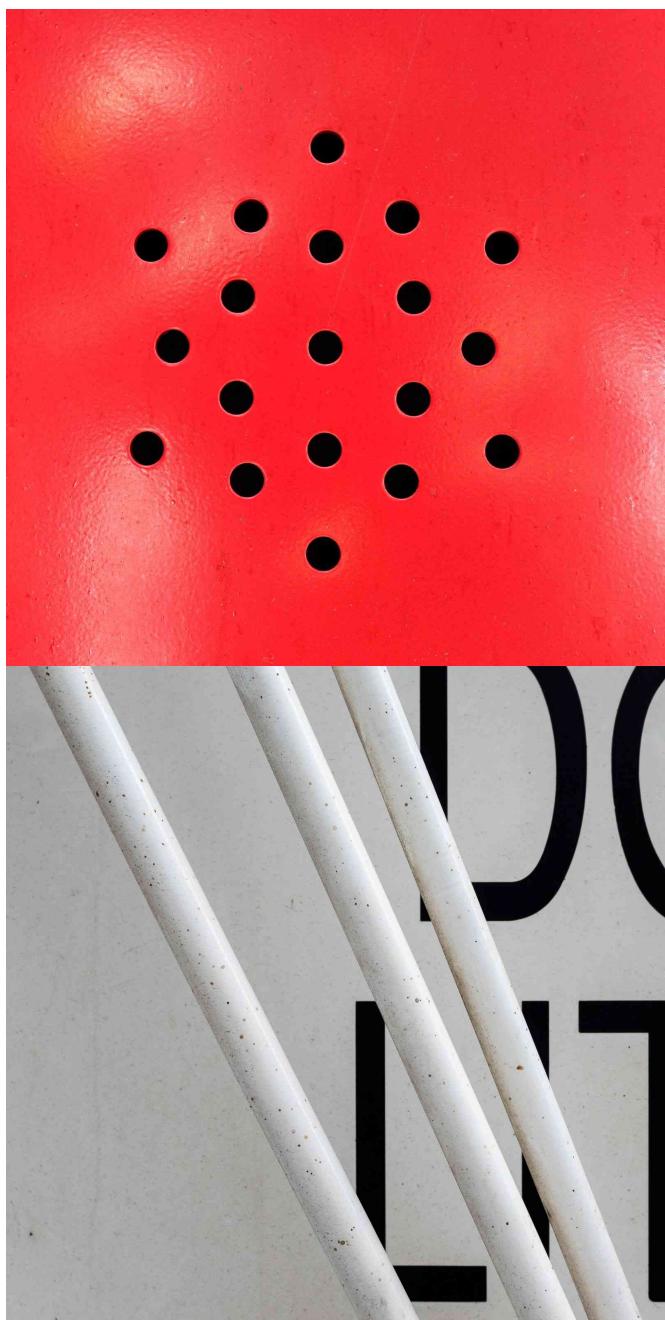
By [Patrick Berry](#)

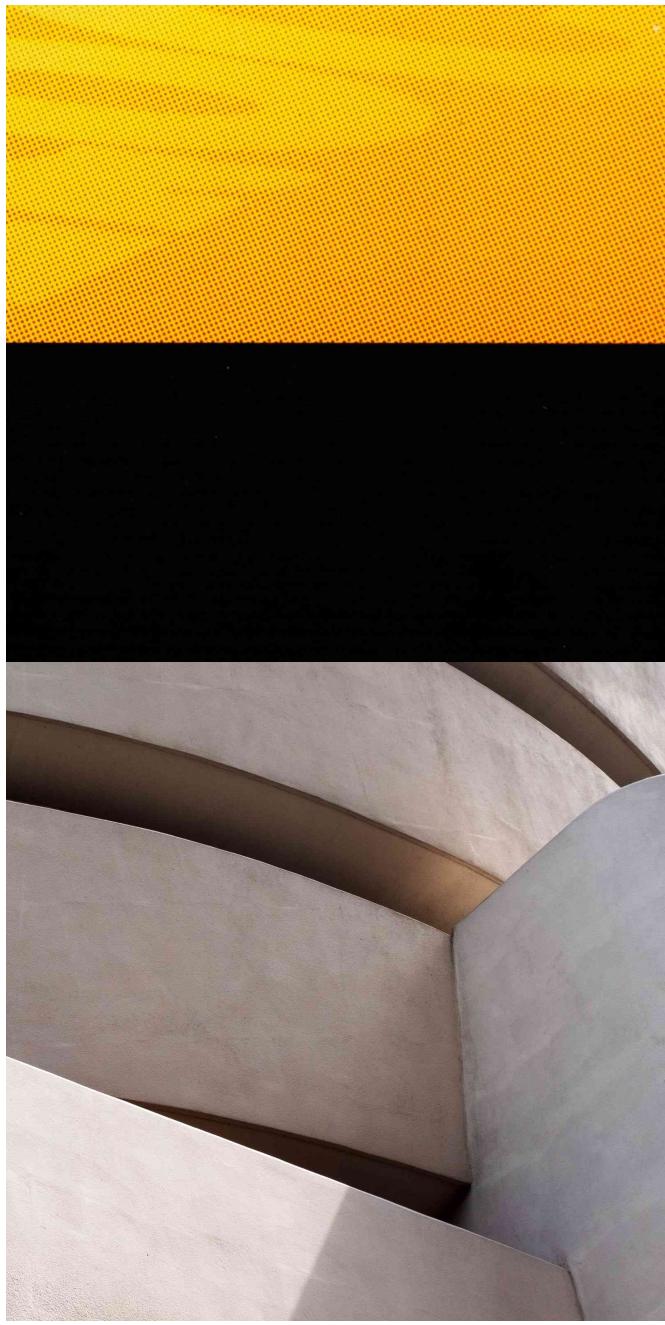
Once you've finished solving this crossword, the letters contained in the gray squares, when read from left to right and top to bottom, will spell out the first clue in a meta-puzzle hidden throughout the [December 27, 2021, issue](#). (For the best meta-puzzle-solving experience, grab a copy of the print edition.) The final step of the meta-puzzle will reveal the four-word caption missing from [this cartoon](#).

By [Jason Fulford](#) and [Tamara Shopsin](#)



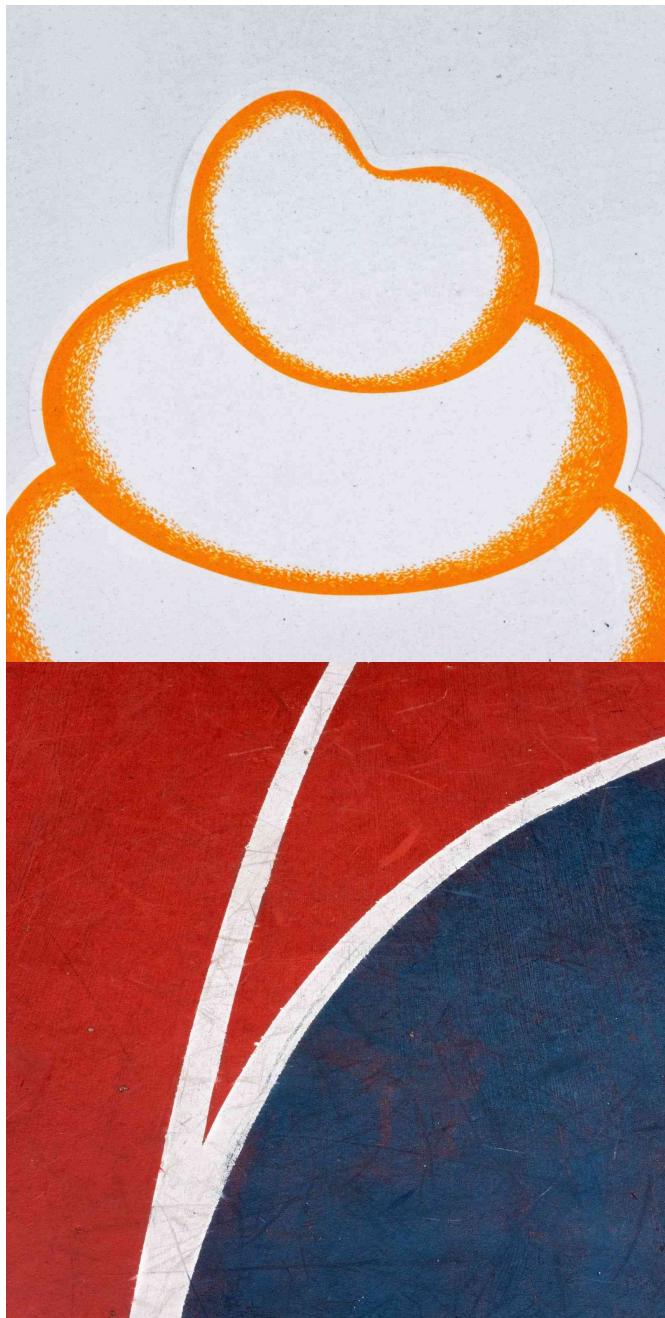








Photographs by Jason Fulford

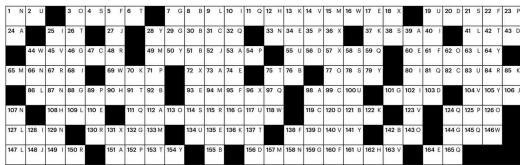


Stumped? Take a peek at the [Answer Key](#).

By [Emily Cox](#) and [Henry Rathvon](#)

For a printer-friendly version, [click here](#).

Use the answers to the clues below to fill in the grid. When you're done, the grid will spell out a quote, and the first letters of the answers to the clues will spell out the author's name and the title of the piece from which the quote is excerpted.



- a. Fictional ensemble with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame
39 73 112 131 53 98 24
- b. Cloak-and-dagger dealings
155 76 121 8 142 92 30 51
- c. Sound from a hay
31 47 119 82 99
- d. Comedic style of Aubrey Plaza or Tig Notaro
103 56 156 43 20 139 120
- e. Seinfeldian "et cetera" (2 wds.)
74 93 164 34 60 135 110 17
- f. Dunder Mifflin employee Kelly
5 160 138 81 95 22
- g. Unthinking state
132 159 144 29 7 116 88 101 46
- h. Animated sax player
162 90 12 108
- i. Bound to fail, as many a soap-opera romance (hyph.)
115 48 84 67 130 150
- j. Service branch that might give you the blues?
148 27 52 106
- k. Doesn't text back, say
37 70 122 138 85 42
- l. Hanna-Barbera production
127 41 63 86 147 9 109
- m. Point of a game
15 94 65 49 157 133
- n. The X-Men, e.g.
32 66 1 87 129 158 107
- o. Zinger during a roast, say
113 126 143 62 3 77
- p. Clutterphobe
54 71 152 23 30 125 89
- q. Oxymoronic term for a temporary m.c. (2 wds.)
32 81 11 59 97 145 165 111 124

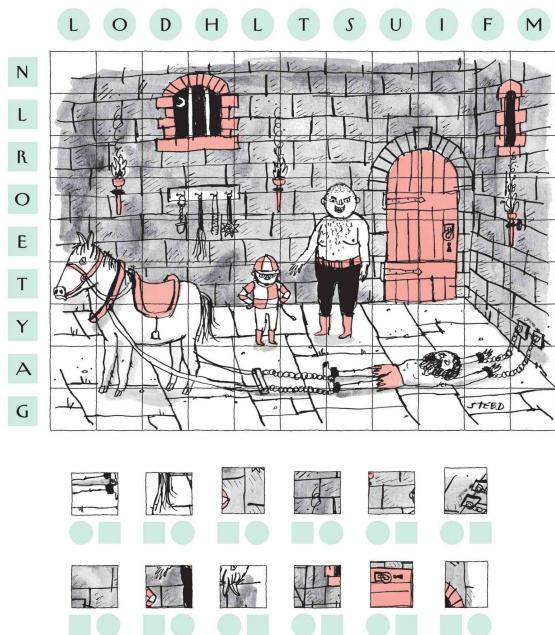
- r. Dependable, as a sidekick
25 102 149 10 128 68 40 60
- s. Contents of a windbag? (2 wds.)
78 21 114 30 4 58
- t. Extras on the set of "Scrubs" or "ER"
75 91 137 6 153 42 26
- u. Frowzy
19 161 83 2 100 117 134 55
- v. What God is frequently thanked for
45 140 14 164 123 163
- w. Proxy for a performer
44 118 146 16 69
- x. Makeup of certain tracks
18 57 96 72 131 36
- y. Set of baby clothes
30 105 26 61 124 241 79

Stumped? Take a peek at the [Answer Key](#).

By Edward Steed

For a printer-friendly version, [click here](#).

Each tile at the bottom of the page appears somewhere in the cartoon; some tiles have been rotated. Once you find the location of a tile, note the row and the column in which it appears, and write the corresponding letters in the blank circles (for columns) and squares (for rows). When you're done, the letters will spell out the caption for this cartoon.



Puzzle idea by Puzzability

Stumped? Take a peek at the Answer Key.

By [Andy Kravis](#) and [Liz Maynes-Aminzade](#)

For a printer-friendly version, [click here](#).



Illustrations by Suerynn Lee

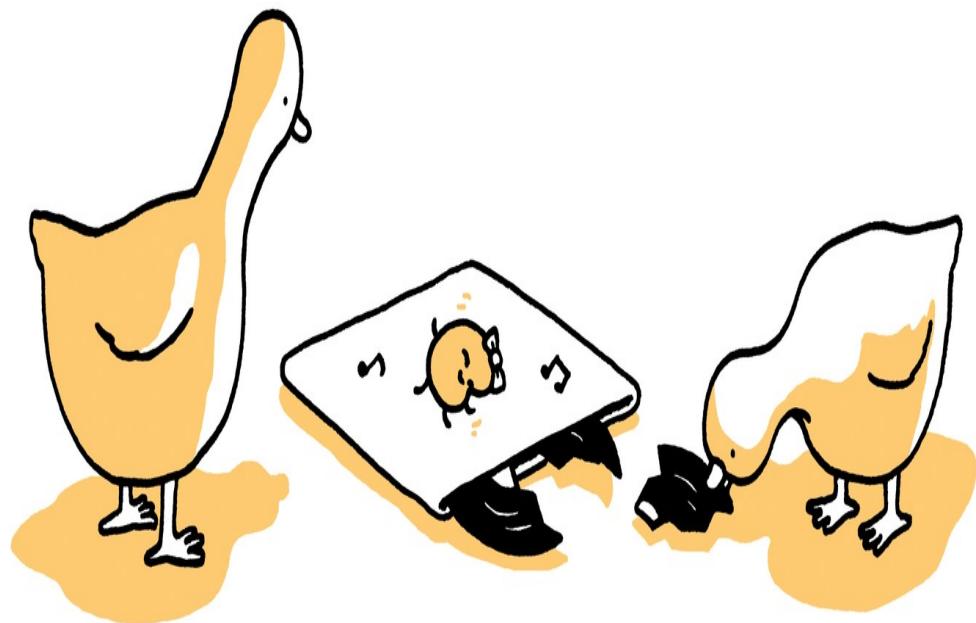
1.

What thing destroyed their ship? A freakish maelstrom?
An iceberg, or some unexpected swell?
Alas, it was an unpigmented whale from
The depths of the Atlantic—or of Hell.



2.

His clients—Colonel Ross, whose racehorse flees,
Or Violet Hunter, seen at Baker Street,
Who crops her locks of hair—would all agree,
This haughty, hawkeyed Brit's a bit offbeat.



3.

This teen—who lies to family and cronies,
Who gets expelled from Pencey Prep’s facilities,
Drinks alcohol, denounces fakes and phonies,
And smokes—offends my gentle sensibilities!



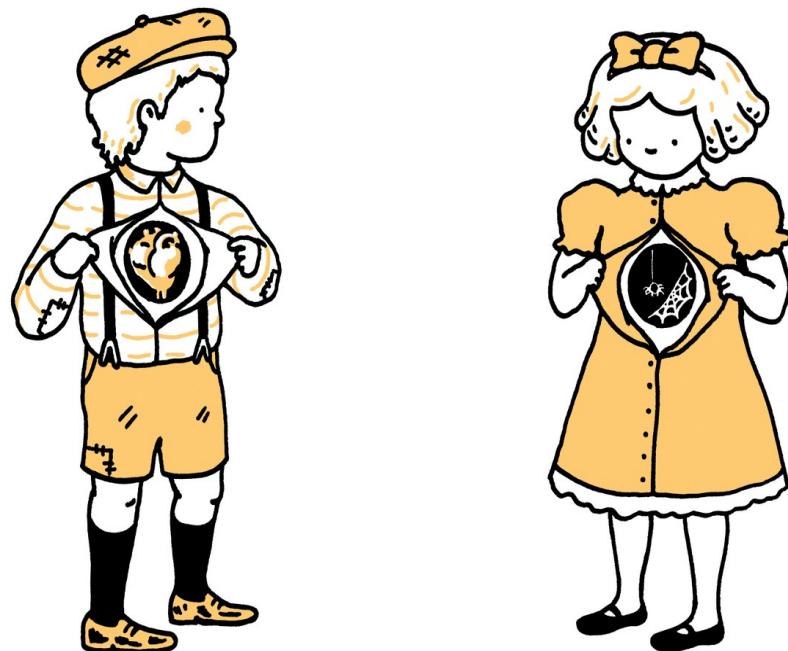
4.

A pent-up ex who burned his house to embers: at
A glance, a huge red flag. Is Jane so very dim,
Or did she simply opt to misremember that
Detail, so she could say, “Reader, I married him”?



5.

The sundry suitors whom we meet within
This Brahmpur saga, one after another,
All fail to fully please our heroine—
Or fail, at any rate, to please her mother.



6.

Sing, Muses: tell a tale of self-made chaps,
Of Wemmicks, Wopsles, clerks, aspiring actors,
And orphans pulled up by their own bootstraps
(Granted, with help from crooked benefactors).



7.

Olivia's enchanted with Cesario;
Meanwhile, a duke is trying to entangle her.
Viola loves the duke, who's no Lothario:
What errors in our heroes' love triang'lar!

Stumped? Take a peek at the [Answer Key](#).

By [Megan Amram](#) and [Paolo Pasco](#)

By [The New Yorker](#)

For a printer-friendly version, [click here](#).

WHERE'S EUSTACE?
page 50



COVER CROSSWORD
page 39



ABSTRACT NEW YORK
page 53



GOING TOO FAR
page 52



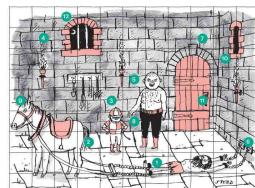
ACROSTIC
page 54

- ▲ Murper, n. Intrigue, c. Neigh,
- ▲ Doudou, c. Yala yala, Kapoor,
- ▲ Autopilot, n. Liss, i. Ill-fated,
- ▲ Navy, x. Ghosts, i. Cartoon,
- ▲ Object, n. Mutants, o. Insult,
- ▲ Neutriks, o. Guest host,
- ▲ Trusty, & Hot air, t. Interns,
- ▲ Slovenly, v. Frosty, w. Agent,
- ▲ Laughs, v. Layette

"TV, like professional sports, is a young man's game, and after eleven years you're just the guy in the dugout talking about the old days and splitting into two can. That last part is the only part I actually do."

—Mindy Kaling, "Coming This Fall"

DRAWN AND QUARTERED
page 55



"Say hello to my little friend."

IN THE DOGGEREL HOUSE
page 56

- ▲ "Moby-Dick," Ishmael (*breakfast much room*)
- ▲ Sherlock Holmes stories, Sherlock (*copy her locks*)
- ▲ "The Catcher in the Rye," Holden (*abused, denounces*)
- ▲ "Jane Eyre," Bertha (*miremucker thief*)
- ▲ "A Suitable Boy," Lata (*full of wry*)
- ▲ "Great Expectations," Estella (*Mugger tell'd*)
- ▲ "Twelfth Night," Orsino (*erger in sur*)

CRYPTIC CROSSWORD
page 57

- ACROSS
- 1 TEA(MWOR)K (term anag.)
 - 2 PINEAPPLE (long anag.)
 - 3 MISS (2 defns.)
 - 4 INFO (first letters of *institute never function on*)
 - 5 C + C = ST
 - 6 SIT(ACK)
 - 7 T-AXIS (pun)
 - 8 SWOG (long rev.)
 - 9 TWILIN (anag.)
 - 10 CURE (anag.)
 - 11 (HEATERS)
 - 12 SWIM + TEST (Rame rev.)

THE IMPOSSIBLE CROSSWORD
page 58



TREASURE HUNT

Clue 1: CAPITAL LETTERS OF A FAKE PLAY LISTING (page 52); Clue 2: PASTRY CASE MORSE (capitals in the listing for "Title-Case Yule," on page 7); Solution: A WIN FOR ME (spelled out in Morse code by the doughnut and éclairs in the "Where's Eustace?" pastry case, on page 50).

Shouts & Murmurs

- [Yelp Reviews of Christmas](#)

By [David Sedaris](#)

Devon K., Silver Spring, Md.

★

I like Christmas, except it has too many nuts in it and I'm allergic. There are nuts in the cookies—not all, but some—and even in the songs! I don't think this is fair to people such as myself. Christmas needs to be more inclusive.

Larry L., Chicago

★★

Christmas is too loud. I live next to a Unitarian church and all day bells toll and it gives me a headache. I tried talking to them about it but totally got the brushoff. The priest is a woman with a crewcut. She never wears a dress except when it's a priest dress and doesn't own any makeup, or so she says on her Facebook page. I used to like Christmas, but now, like everything else, it's turned gay. So two stars.

Linda S., Harmony, Pa.

★★★★★

I give Christmas five stars, on account of the llama my husband gave me. Butterscotch, her name is, and, if you think it was easy for him to keep her a secret, think again! Three days she lived in our guest room—a llama! Oh, she pooped on everything, but it's not like dog poop. This you can just pick up with your fingers. You'll want to wash your hands afterward, but only if you're preparing the sort of food that needs to be touched.

The way it played out was that Christmas arrived, and on that morning I opened a few meagre presents—a handprint plaque from my daughter Avery, for example. As a mother, you're supposed to be over the moon about things like this, but, really, all she did was press her hand into a little slab of clay. It was then painted gold, but how hard was that? "Do you like it?" she asked.

"Yes, Mommy loves it," I said, knowing full well what was coming next.

"But do you *like* it?"

My husband gave me dish towels and one of those bras I wanted, for people who are still breast-feeding even though their child is six—not my idea, you can bet on that, but it beats putting up with the tantrums Avery throws when

I don't breast-feed her. I got the rain boots I'd asked for, and these little candies that taste like tears. (They're not marketed that way; they just do.)

Pete said there was one more present for me, but that he'd left it in the guest room. So I go and open the door. And there's this full-grown rescue llama staring at me and chewing sideways the way they do. You could have knocked me out! I was screaming with joy when Avery runs up from behind me and actually *does* get knocked out. Butterscotch kicked her right in the head! So then comes the ambulance, and the E.M.T.s all go, "Oh, my God, is that a llama?"

I let Pete ride to the hospital with Avery, who's going to be fine, probably. I said to the doctor, "Well, can you keep her a few days, just to make sure? I mean, a week? Can you keep her two weeks?"

My breasts are like new again, and Butterscotch is an absolute joy—even when she spits in my face it doesn't matter, because that's what llamas do! It's their way of saying, "Hello there, human friend! I can't wait until next Christmas, when I possibly get a brother or sister." The two of them together, oh, what a holiday kick they'll deliver!

Stephen K., Gates Mills, Ohio



As a kid, I loved Christmas. Now I want to apologize for the role I've played in preserving it. The trees, the food, the presents: it's all about privilege. Sure, *my* family can hang stockings from the mantel, but what about people—the housing insecure, for example—who don't *have* fireplaces?

I brought this up to my mother, who said, "Well, sweetie, people in Florida don't have fireplaces, either."

She'll do anything to keep her blinders on, my mother. "I'm talking about *systemic* fireplaces," I told her. "*Internalized* fireplaces, about the 'white Christmas' we're all supposed to dream of." I asked, "What color was Frosty?"

She said, "That little lesbian girl from your high school who was convicted for selling drugs?"

I said, “No, the snowman.”

She said, “All snowmen are white.”

I said, “Exactly. And what color were the Three Wise Men?”

She said she was pretty sure that one of them was Black, at least down at St. Timothy’s.

“So the power structure of the Catholic Church is essentially saying that only one of three wise people is Black.”

“They don’t *mean* it that way,” she said. “It’s not a statement, and, if it was, two would be Asians, because, really, don’t they have the upper hand in that department? They sure do at the school we’re paying an arm and a leg for you to attend, the one teaching you all this nonsense. It’s like when you called the Easter Bunny a neocolonialist. All this anger, when he’s a made-up character. He and Santa and the Tooth Fairy—none of them are real!”

And I was, like, “You’re telling me this *now*? ”

I give Christmas one star. I give my racist, deceitful mother none. ♦

Sketchbook

- [The Evening Stroll](#)

By [George Booth](#)



Sketchpad

- Tips for a More Sustainable Holiday

By [Emily Flake](#)

TIPS FOR A MORE SUSTAINABLE HOLIDAY

SAVE ELECTRICITY BY
FESTOONING THE OUTSIDE OF
YOUR HOME WITH CANDLES!



GIFTS ARE EXPENSIVE,
BUT FAMILY SECRETS
ARE INVALUABLE!

I DIDN'T GET YOU AN
IPAD, BUT I WILL TELL
YOU WHO YOUR REAL
GRANDPA IS.



INSTEAD OF BRINGING A
TREE TO YOUR LIVING ROOM,
WHY NOT BRING YOUR
LIVING ROOM TO A TREE?



NOT VEGETARIAN?
MAKE SURE YOUR HOLIDAY
DINNER COMES FROM
A FREE-RANGE SOURCE!



Tables for Two

- [The Irony of British-Inspired Tea Parlors in New York City](#)

By [David Kortava](#)

It is an irony of history, if not an instance of cosmic feminist karma, that the best British-inspired tea parlors in New York City—among them Tea & Sympathy, Lady Mendl’s, and Brooklyn High Low—are women-owned establishments. From 1657, when tea first became available in London’s coffeehouses, to the early seventeen-hundreds, when women were invited in, recreational tea drinking was the preserve of rumbustious gentlemen. A contemporaneous broadsheet celebrated the drink’s power to “maketh the body active and lusty.” In the course of the next two centuries, the musk of patriarchy lifted from this risqué pastime, and, by 1889, *The Ladies’ Home Journal* could report that “the five o’clock tea has become an institution of society” where “ladies are generally in the majority.”



At Lady Mendl’s, the finger sandwiches range from classic to daringly unconventional, including a crostini topped with butternut-squash purée and Boursin cheese.

In the nineteen-eighties, for a New York University workshop, a London expat named Nicola Perry drafted a business plan for “an English-style tea room, designed to introduce an American clientele to the delights of a great British tradition.” She wrote, “The atmosphere and decor will be cosy and comfortable,” with “old china and silverware, chintz tablecloths and lace curtains.” In 1990, two days before Christmas, Perry held her first afternoon tea at Tea & Sympathy (108 Greenwich Ave.; tea service from \$40): a two-tiered platter of finger sandwiches, scones with jam and clotted cream, vanilla sponge cake, and hot black tea served in the daintiest of cups. Today,

the popular West Village tea shop can take on the atmosphere of a pub, and Perry has had to institute some house rules, which she's printed on the menu. No. 5: "Be pleasant to the waitresses."



Brooklyn High Low offers twenty-nine tea varieties, including one infused with whole butterfly-pea flowers that turn the liquid a psychedelic indigo.

Lady Mendl's (56 Irving Pl.; tea service \$65), in Gramercy Park, is named for a socialite and a pioneering interior decorator who once lived in the neighborhood. The resplendent salon, tucked inside an 1834 Georgian brownstone, is easy to miss, but once found this little jewel box reveals treasures. The five-course afternoon tea commences with a pumpkin-apple soup, with crème fraîche, pomegranate seeds, and toasted pepitas, in a Moroccan tea glass. The finger sandwiches range from classic (egg salad, smoked salmon, cucumber and butter) to daringly unconventional, including a crostini topped with butternut-squash purée, Boursin cheese, arugula, and balsamic glaze. After miniature scones and twenty-one-layer vanilla-cream crêpe cake come pistachio macarons and chocolate-dipped strawberries. Each course is paired with one of six black, green, or herbal teas. A spokesperson said that the proprietress, soon to be ninety, is "comically wealthy and prefers to not have her name in print."

Honey Moon Udarbe was raised by hippie parents in Northern California. On top of running Brooklyn High Low (611 Vanderbilt Ave.; tea service from \$48), in Prospect Heights, she also operates a nearby vintage shop and

cleans out the estates of dead rich folks. She does not part with anything if it can be repurposed; broken teacups are given new life as components of a gorgeously funky chandelier. If Lady Mendl's takes liberties with the conventions of afternoon tea, Brooklyn High Low detonates the paradigm. Pastrami and Dijon mustard on rye? Guava and blue cheese on gluten-free bread? Twenty-nine tea varieties, including one infused with whole butterfly-pea flowers that turn the liquid a psychedelic indigo?

In the tea community, there is a narrow spectrum of permissible opinion as to whether, to a scone, one should first apply the cream or the jam. At both Tea & Sympathy and Lady Mendl's, I was instructed, with some solemnity, to apply the cream first. At Brooklyn High Low, the server said, "I like to just use my fork and kind of dip in different things." What?! Occasionally, the waitstaff there hear unaccountable creaking, or an item falls off a shelf, or a light flickers. "The building is fairly new, so the ghost probably came in with one of the tea sets," Udarbe says. "I think she's an old lady who's just happy people are still using her teacups." ♦

The Art World

- [When Pop Culture Raids Art—and the Reverse](#)

By [Peter Schjeldahl](#)

What explains the lasting wonderment of French rococo, the theatrically frivolous, flauntingly costly mode in art, ceramics, furniture, décor, and fashion that flourished in mid-eighteenth-century aristocratic circles before, having gradually given way to sober neoclassicism, being squelched utterly by the Revolution of 1789? And why did that bedazzling visual repertoire recur in twentieth-century America as a species of imitation art—kitsch, in a word, although managed with undoubtable genius—in animated films branded by Walt Disney? “Inspiring Walt Disney: The Animation of French Decorative Arts,” a fun show at the Metropolitan Museum, answers the question by conjoining the pleasures of authentically froufrou historical objects, mostly from the museum’s collection, with their style’s application in production drawings and video clips from Disney movies. The films include an early short, from 1934, called “The China Shop,” in which porcelain figurines have come to life and are prettily dancing minuets; two classics of the nineteen-fifties, “Cinderella,” released at the beginning of the decade, and “Sleeping Beauty,” which came out at the end of it; and, forming the pièce de résistance, an extravaganza in which atavistic pottery and candlesticks and clocks athletically celebrate a romance for their owner in “Beauty and the Beast,” from 1991.

Walt Disney himself had admired the look from early on—as witness amateur footage in the show of him with his family prowling Versailles in 1935—and he came, shrewdly, to grasp its viability for his coming revolution in popular culture. At the age of twenty, in 1922, Disney had founded a studio called Laugh-O-Gram Films, in Kansas City, with aid from the artist Ub Iwerks. It soon went bankrupt. Within a year, he started up again in Los Angeles. Brief comic animations that came to star Mickey Mouse, who first appeared in 1928, and the growing cast of the amiable rodent’s animal pals delighted moviegoers worldwide. But Disney aspired beyond that rudimentary success and began to produce feature-length narratives of folklore provenance, often with grippingly sinister elements. I believe that his breakthrough in this regard, “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” (1937), was the first movie I ever saw. I was told that I screamed at the first appearance of the witch-queen and kept it up until my removal from the theatre. (And don’t get me started on the trauma, shared with other former tykes of my generation, of the killed-off mother in “Bambi,” from

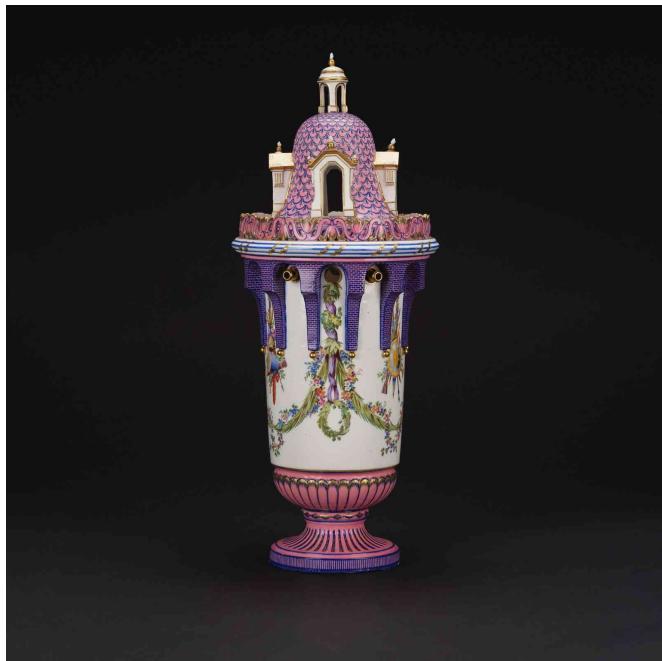
my birth year of 1942.) The Germanic source and pictured artifacts of “Snow White” would eventually be displaced by more reassuring enchantments of French origin, with an instinct that was sagely politic.



A Sèvres elephant-head vase by Jean-Claude Duplessis, circa 1758. Art work courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Disney steered his studio to exploit rococo’s gratuitous swank, emulating the feckless hedonism of the court of Louis XV while chastely suppressing its frequent eroticism. The language of antic curlicues, increasingly abstracted from film to film, blended smoothly into the insouciance of Disney’s fairyland fantasies: escapist worlds, complete in themselves. Though thoroughly secular, like his nostalgic evocations of circa-1900 America, the pastiche has something churchy about it. Under the pretense of entertaining children (if childless, borrow one), I have enjoyed visits to the consummately engineered Disneyland and Walt Disney World while noting a peculiar solemnity in their transports of innocence. The impunity of a justly doomed French regime (not our problem!) translated perfectly to fabricated realms that are carefully alien to anyone’s troubling reality. Cinderella’s castle, at Disney World, is modelled on Versailles, among other French châteaux. Centering Disneyland is a materialization of a related, crowning folly, the mad German king Ludwig II’s fantastical Neuschwanstein Castle (1868-92), which Disney adopted as the template for his studio’s logo. Nightly, Tinker Bell descends on a wire from its peak.

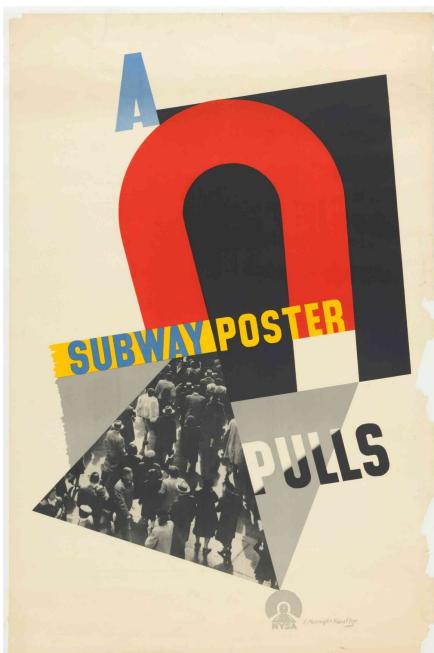
The Met show is replete with demonstrations of wizardly animation techniques, pre-digitally antique now, that take a viewer from sketch to cel to excerpted film. Notably transfixing is a pencilled sequence of the Beast's physical transformation—airborne, cyclonic, a claw becoming a hand—into a dashing prince in the 1991 movie. But the keynote is industrial. A few eccentricities briefly beguiled Disney, such as gloomily stylized settings for "Sleeping Beauty," by one Eyvind Earle, which distressed some fellow-animators with backgrounds that distracted from their characters. More typically, Disney subsumed the talents of his crews within uniformly anodyne schemas, where they register, if at all, like bumps under a blanket.



A covered vase in the form of a tower, from the Sèvres Manufactory, circa 1762. Art work courtesy the Huntington Art Museum

The sameness of calculation wearies after a while. This redounds to the comparative advantage of such juxtaposed French authenticities as a Sèvres vase, made in 1758, with handles in the shape of elephant heads. Sconces make a very big deal of hoisting candles aloft, and furniture hardware ennobles the act of opening drawers. In no milieu before or since have accoutrements of daily life, for those who could glory in affording them, been so systemically saturated with beauty. Rococo design complemented figurative, architectural, and vegetal allusions with gorgeously lapidary patterning, slipping between representation and abstraction in ways that, as we experience them, are a joy forever.

Stylistic excess, wretched or otherwise, comes and goes in art history, almost always in periods of complacent political stability. This is no paradox. Worldly crisis tends to foster disciplined expression. Relative tranquillity tasks artists with reminding people, for their amusement, if not as a moral caution, of the ineluctable chaos of human nature. The show, as organized by Wolf Burchard, who oversees British decorative art at the museum, adduces prior examples of determinedly over-the-top seductiveness as old as an early-sixteenth-century, amorous tapestry, “Shepherd and Shepherdess Making Music,” that was probably designed in France and woven in the southern Netherlands. Disney and his staff funnelled centuries of serious artistic precedent into their rote stylings. Flowing out, the results were—and remain—fleetingly delectable mush.



"A Subway Poster Pulls," by E. McKnight Kauffer, from 1947. Art work © Smithsonian Institution

Before seeing the show, I'd had misgivings about the august Met's hosting of what boded to be cynically corny corporate artifice. These faded, so engaging is the installation—and far be it from me to snoot a dreamy concept rendering, by the designer Mary Blair, of Cinderella's pumpkin carriage—but the qualms reinfected me in the end. While we have grown used to crossovers of “high” and “low” in contemporary taste, the difference isn’t meaningless when any use of the past not only sterilizes its original import but makes a fetish of doing so. The payoff is diverting and may seem funny. But it lacks fundamental humor, which can’t do without at least a

whisper of irony. We aren't party to the Disney creative sorcery but only passive consumers of it. More humanly complex long-form animation arrived with the ongoing triumphs of Pixar, which the Walt Disney Company had the timely wit, in 2006, to acquire from Steve Jobs as a subsidiary.

How come I had never before now heard of the commercial poster designer E. McKnight Kauffer, the subject of a startlingly spectacular show, "Underground Modernist," at the Cooper Hewitt, the Smithsonian Design Museum? I guess it's because I'm used to tracking raids by art on popular culture but less so the other way around. Kauffer, who died in 1954, was a magus of boundless resourcefulness in the nineteen-twenties and thirties. With assistance from his second wife, Marion V. Dorn, a master of fabric design who survived him by ten years, he mined—and evangelized for—adventurous aesthetics to change the street-level look of cities, invigorate book-cover design, and inflect theatre sets and interior decoration. He insisted on working directly with clients, intent on persuading them to take risks in far-out geometric and surreally contorted imagery. His influence proved so infectious that it was swallowed up by successive generations in a profession whose manufacture is inherently ephemeral.

Starting as a restless lad from Montana, where he was born, in 1890, the then named Edward Kauffer spent his childhood in Evansville, Indiana. He dropped out of school at twelve or thirteen with aspirations to paint and, while still a teen-ager, went West, working odd jobs—bouncing from a travelling theatre company to a fruit ranch. Then, in San Francisco, he began an education in advanced art while working at a bookstore. His work caught the attention of a regular customer, Joseph E. McKnight, who so believed in Kauffer's abilities that he offered to sponsor the young artist's studies in Paris. Kauffer altered his name in homage to his benefactor. He furthered his schooling in Chicago (where he was exposed to the avant-garde marvels of the 1913 Armory Show, after its New York unveiling), and then Munich, before arriving in Paris. Based in England from 1915 to 1940, he became a live-wire cosmopolitan. A vast chart spanning a wall of the Cooper Hewitt show amounts to a name-drop constellation, with lines of association that radiate from a portrayal of his handsome face to the likes of, among other starry personages, Alfred Hitchcock, T. S. Eliot, Aldous Huxley, Wyndham Lewis, Virginia Woolf, Langston Hughes, Man Ray, and Sir Kenneth Clark.

Another factor obscuring Kauffer's reputation is his practically exotic integrity, public-spirited in service to civic and political causes and holding that a proper designer "must remain an artist." Working mainly with small agencies, though winning commissions including the creation of some hundred and twenty-five posters for the London Underground, he denounced, in a lecture at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1948, the recourse of the dominant firms to the "usual methods of appeal through sex, snobbism, fear and corruptive sentimentality." Never settling on a signature style, he said that his criteria for posters were "attraction, interest, and stimulation," deeming "no means too arbitrary or too classical"—Apollonian values.

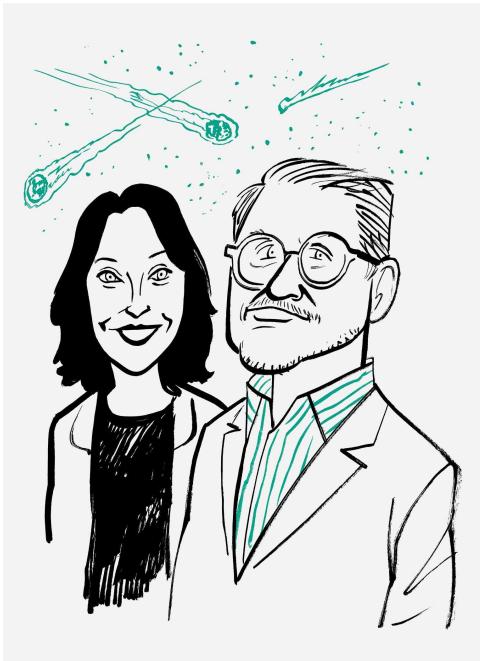
Moving with Dorn to New York in 1940, he had intermittent success with campaigns for such businesses as American Airlines and with distinctive cover designs for modern classics published by Alfred A. Knopf, Random House, and Pantheon, including James Joyce's "Ulysses" (the fat white "U" and the skinny blue "l," both radically elongated, seize attention) and Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man" (a shadowed face crossed by white lines and granted one staring eye). But he suffered declines in both his health and his productiveness. He never felt at home in his native land, he said. Sorely missing his overseas friends, estranged from Dorn, and alcoholic, he came to a sad end. Even then, his prestige among colleagues who had known his work lived on long afterward. You will see why if you attend this show. ♦

The Pictures

- [How to Design a World-Killing Comet](#)

By [Michael Schulman](#)

In 2002, Amy Mainzer was finishing her doctorate in astronomy at U.C.L.A. when an astronomer colleague discovered an asteroid. A few years later, she got a nice surprise: he had named it after her. Asteroid nomenclature is regulated by the International Astronomical Union, based in Paris, and vanity naming, Mainzer said recently, is “one of the perks” of her field. The asteroid, 234750 Amymainzer, is about seven and a half kilometres in diameter. Were it to crash into Earth, she said, it would cause an “extinction-level event.”



Amy Mainzer and Adam McKay Illustration by João Fazenda

On her laptop, she called up Caltech’s Infrared Science Archive and found it: a tiny red dot on what resembled a square of colorful sandpaper. “Fortunately for the world, I am safely locked in orbit in the main asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter, so the world is safe from me,” she concluded. Mainzer is an expert in asteroid detection and planetary defense. She is the principal investigator for NASA’s Near-Earth Object Wide-field Infrared Survey Explorer mission (*NEOWISE*), which NASA calls “the largest space-based asteroid-hunting project in history,” and teaches at the University of Arizona. At the moment, she was in Los Angeles, in connection with her latest mission: consulting for the Netflix end-of-the-world comedy “*Don’t Look Up.*”

In the movie, directed by Adam McKay (“Vice”), a punky Ph.D. student, Kate Dibiasky (Jennifer Lawrence), discovers a comet, christened Comet Dibiasky, which she and her professor Dr. Mindy (Leonardo DiCaprio) calculate will hit Earth in six months and fourteen days. What happens next is eerily familiar. The President (Meryl Streep), a venal nincompoop, worries about her poll numbers. Dr. Mindy becomes a nerdy sex symbol. (McKay conceived the film pre-pandemic, before Brad Pitt played Dr. Fauci on “Saturday Night Live.”) A denialist movement springs up. Although the film is an allegory for our inability to face crises—climate change, *COVID*—without descending into lunacy, the astronomy had to add up. “A movie that’s supporting science should honor science,” McKay said. “So I wanted to make sure all the math is correct.” He was joining Mainzer on Zoom, from his home office in L.A., where he was sprawled on a couch (he has an essential tremor) in a T-shirt. Mainzer, in a leather jacket, was at a nearby hotel. That week, they had hosted a screening for scientists. “It was good to hear that our science was pretty accurate,” McKay said. Many attendees were relieved that the professor and the student didn’t have a romantic subplot.

McKay and Mainzer first connected two years ago, when McKay was writing the screenplay. One issue was Comet Dibiasky’s size, which McKay had imagined at thirty-two kilometres in diameter. “I said, ‘No, no—if it’s too big, people just throw up their hands,’ ” Mainzer recalled. They settled on nine kilometres: big enough to wipe out humanity, but small enough that there was a chance of stopping it. Mainzer had pushed for a longer interval between discovery and impact, since you’d want four or five years to build a comet-busting spacecraft, but, for dramaturgical reasons, McKay stuck with six months. “It would be like doing ‘Jaws’ where the shark attacks take place over a fourteen-year period,” he said. “Which, by the way, is much more likely for the occurrence of shark attacks.”



"You talkin' to me? You talkin' to me? It's been a little while since I read a social cue."
Cartoon by Maddie Dai

Mainzer also walked McKay through official protocol should a hazardous space object be detected. First, you'd contact the I.A.U.'s Minor Planet Center, in Cambridge. "Then the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, at Caltech"—where Mainzer worked for sixteen years—"would calculate the impact trajectories," she said. If things looked "not good, shall we say," NASA's Planetary Defense Coordination Office would be alerted. In the event of oncoming doom, she said, "you would throw every bit of explosive power you could at it."

Mainzer consulted during the film's production, recommending a colleague from M.I.T. to act as DiCaprio's hand double when Dr. Mindy writes equations on a whiteboard. She briefed Lawrence on what it was like to be the only woman in the room during grad school. In one scene, Dr. Mindy, frustrated by denialism and inaction, loses it on live TV. ("I'm just telling you *the fucking truth.*") Mainzer urged DiCaprio, "You have to speak for us. Sing it, Leo!" On the Zoom, she shared a PowerPoint that she had shown to the effects team, with apocalypse do's and don'ts. ("This is a little bit depressing, so, apologies.") One slide was labelled "Proper Level of Explosive Power." A large comet would not, as McKay had written in the original script, break off pieces of the planet, but it would cause enough flaming debris, wildfires, and tsunamis to wipe out most species on Earth.

How likely is any of this to happen? “Really, really, really unlikely,” Mainzer promised. “You don’t have to buy asteroid insurance.” She added, “There are plenty of people out there who watch the skies, so that nobody else has to worry about it.” ♦

The Theatre

- [The Bad Trip of “Flying Over Sunset”](#)

James Lapine's new musical, at the Vivian Beaumont, sets the LSD hallucinations of three nineteen-fifties celebrities to song.

By [Vinson Cunningham](#)

As I watched James Lapine's new musical, "Flying Over Sunset," at the Vivian Beaumont, trying to summon some empathy with its subject matter, I started thinking through my own quite limited history with hallucinogens. "Sunset"—directed by Lapine, who also wrote the book, with music by Tom Kitt, lyrics by Michael Korie, and choreography by Michelle Dorrance—is the fictionalized story of three celebrities dropping LSD in the nineteen-fifties, searching for God knows what: tie-dyed enlightenment, perhaps, or an eased and possibly clarified relationship with the past, or maybe just simple fun. The writer Aldous Huxley (Harry Hadden-Paton), the actor-dancer Cary Grant (Tony Yazbeck), and the polymathic diplomat Clare Boothe Luce (Carmen Cusack) get together (there's no reason to believe that they did this in real life) and trip their extraordinary lives away (this, apparently, they all did), letting the audience see, often in fervent color and off-kilter motion, the troubled consciousnesses that vibrate beneath their well-maintained personas.

A long time ago, I munched on a few handfuls of fetid mushrooms and brought on personal crises of my own design. There weren't many bright colors, but some theretofore unnoticed textural quirks—on clothes, on faces—went wild with deep, scrutinizing, photographic detail. For many hours after those visual effects had faded, I haunted the hallways of my mind, regretting how many memories I'd retained and neuroses I'd cultivated. Mostly, I regretted eating the things at all. Nothing happened that I'd want to put onstage; certainly, nobody sang.

While watching "Sunset," I wondered whether its creative team had subjected themselves to some first-person experiential research when it came to LSD. (Lincoln Center Theatre's in-house magazine features testimonials by the writers Deborah Kass, Francine Prose, and Gregory Botts on trips past; Lapine has spoken in interviews about his own youthful experiments.) Some of the production's other sources are made clear. In a composite scene early on, Aldous delivers a speech against the banning of his book "Brave New World." Cary gives a press conference announcing his retirement from show biz, and defends Charlie Chaplin against charges that

he's a Communist. Clare, Dwight D. Eisenhower's nominee for Ambassador to Brazil, undergoes a rough confirmation hearing.

Part of the play's premise—or maybe it's just what I wish it had managed to tease out—is that LSD leads its users to a softer kind of questioning. Aldous and Clare are close friends of Gerald Heard (Robert Sella), a practitioner of the Hindu Vedanta philosophy and a forerunner of the “consciousness” movement, who serves as their “guide” while on the drug, always nudging them to sit cross-legged and chant as its effects gradually set in. Cary first hears about LSD from his wife, who's using it in her sessions with a Freudian analyst. In one scene, we see Cary bargain his way into the analyst's sedate office, employing flattery, charm, and, before long, flat-out yelling, to get his hands on this stuff he's heard so much about.

Those two initial settings—spiritual and clinical—open up two ways of thinking not only about the effects of LSD but also about the reasons that a desperate celebrity, rich but lost, might turn to it for answers. In “*Flying Over Sunset*,” though, all roads lead back to rote biography. Aldous's wife is sick and soon dies. Clare's daughter has been killed in a car crash. Cary's impending divorce has him ruminating on his tough childhood. As the characters trip onstage, these episodes and their central personae—the wife, the daughter, Cary's young self—reappear over and over, with variations so slight that, often, they might as well not exist.

The presence of Gerald Heard made me think of J. D. Salinger's God-obsessed Glasses, whose interest in the ancient Indian Vedas and Upanishads, and in Christ, made them vibrate with the kind of unself-conscious talk of higher things that might have done the likes of Aldous, Clare, and Cary—a morose bunch here—a bit of good. But, instead of engaging one another in earnest conversation, the characters spend the majority of the show inside their own heads.

In recent years, Lincoln Center Theatre has presented two plays about the rocky terrain and the stubborn mysteries of the spiritual life: Tom Stoppard's “*The Hard Problem*,” about consciousness and religious devotion; and Chris Urch's “*The Rolling Stone*,” about homophobic violence in a religious milieu in Uganda. “*Flying Over Sunset*” might have completed a kind of

trilogy, but its insistence on one-to-one biographical causality—this drug for that problem—desiccates its surface-level allusions to spirituality.

Perhaps that's why the show feels so earthbound despite its many references to flight. "Sunset" has a fairly formulaic approach to music: every dose gets its own song. The pattern is established from the start, when Aldous is in a drugstore with Gerald, sweating through the beginnings of a high that will continue through a mountain hike with his ailing wife. He gets fixated on a picture in a book: Botticelli's "The Return of Judith to Bethulia." The scenic design—by Beowulf Boritt, perhaps the most consistently excellent part of the show—shifts and the painting comes to life. Here comes Judith accompanied by her handmaiden, with the head of Holofernes in tow. That ecstatic visual idea gives way to a pretty but mostly conventional bel-canto number, through which we get the point that we keep on getting: Aldous is excited by what he can see under the influence, but haunted by the changing circumstances of his life.

Hadden-Paton is sympathetic as the nebbishy, intense Aldous, and Yazbeck's tap-dance numbers with a young version of Cary (Atticus Ware) are the highlight of Dorrance's choreography, which otherwise uses tap's rudiments—footsteps and their attendant natural rhythms, implicitly connected to the motions of the heart—to establish a theme that never really makes it through the noise. Cusack sings well, but the effort is wasted on songs that sound like tropes.

One thing that I found mystifying was how un-weird the score is—here, as in few other musicals, there was a chance to dabble in abstraction and, even, atonality. Instead, the songs are fairly standard-sounding, give or take a fractured chord or two. If a drug musical can't sometimes sound weird or off-putting, which can? The closest "Flying Over Sunset" gets to true surrealism is when Cary, a guy with mommy issues who is consumed with masculinity and its meanings, dons a body stocking and a cap and flails around, having become a facsimile of the phallus that possesses so much of his thought and his posture. The moment is brief, and the altogether too long two hours and forty minutes of the show roll on.

In an interview, Allen Ginsberg—over whose work and person the idea of drug-induced inspiration has always hovered—denied the notion that there

was any special relationship, positive or negative, between tripping and excellence in art. “I think the myth put forward by the police that no creative work can be done under drugs is folly,” he said. “The myth that anybody who takes drugs’ll produce something interesting is equal folly.” He did admit to having written the runic, nature-obsessed poem “Wales Visitation” under the influence of LSD:

What did I notice? Particulars! The
vision of the great One is myriad—
smoke curls upward from ashtray,
house fire burned low
The night, still wet & moody black heaven
starless
upward in motion with wet wind.

The intensity that “Flying Over Sunset” tries to illustrate with its always capable and sometimes spectacular sets is seldom found in its dialogue or its songs. The play is based on a groovy idea, but it indulges in the myth that Ginsberg warned against: drugs alone don’t make for interest. To reach across the gulf between stage and seat, inner experience—addled, enhanced, or otherwise—needs more upward motion, more of the stark feeling of “wet wind.” More “particulars!” ♦

The Wayward Press

- [Florida Woman Bites Camel](#)

By [Calvin Trillin](#)

It's said that when James Thurber, as a young newspaper reporter, was told by an editor that his story's first paragraph, what newspaper people might refer to as his lede, suffered from wordiness, he handed in a rewrite whose opening paragraph was, in its entirety, "Dead."

There followed a second paragraph: "That's what the man was when they found him with a knife in his back at 4pm in front of Riley's saloon at the corner of 52nd and 12th streets."

Like that editor, I admire those short, punchy ledes often employed by crime reporters, my longtime favorite being what Edna Buchanan wrote in the *Miami Herald* about an ex-con who became violent in the Church's fried-chicken line and was shot dead by a security guard: "Gary Robinson died hungry."

But I also admire the ambition of those long ledes which you sometimes see in the obituaries that appear in the *New York Times*—ledes whose first sentence manages to stuff the highlights of an entire lifetime in a clause between the decedent's name and the fact that he has expired. For instance: "Thomas S. Monson, who as president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints since 2008 enlarged the ranks of female missionaries but rebuffed demands to ordain women as priests and refused to alter church opposition to same-sex marriage, died on Tuesday at his home in Salt Lake City. He was 90."

You might say that I'm a collector of ledes. I assume that's why my friend James Edmunds, who lives in New Iberia, Louisiana, sent me an article that appeared in the *Advocate* of Baton Rouge on September 23, 2019. If the function of a lede is to engage the reader, this article's lede seemed to me remarkably effective. Here it is:

A veterinarian prescribed antibiotics Monday for a camel that lives behind an Iberville Parish truck stop after a Florida woman told law officers she bit the 600 pound animal's genitalia after it sat on her when she and her husband entered its enclosure to retrieve their deaf dog.

Notice how the reader is drawn in with a single unpunctuated sentence that starts slowly and gradually becomes an express train that whistles right by the local stops without providing an opportunity to get off. A veterinarian is summoned to administer antibiotics to a camel—pretty routine stuff so far. Yes, the camel lives behind a truck stop, which is an unusual domicile for a camel but probably not unprecedented. It wasn’t that long ago that gas stations along highways like Route 66 lured travellers with roadside zoos that were advertised by signs like “See Albino Raccoon” or “Live Two-Headed Goat.” And this takes place in Louisiana, where animal stories that might be considered unusual elsewhere are commonplace. In 2007, when Louisiana finally banned cockfighting, the last state to do so, a state senator from Opelousas fought to exempt a less lethal version of the sport he called chicken boxing. Louisiana once tried to eat its way out of an environmental crisis caused by the nutria, an invasive rodent that devours marshland, by encouraging some of the state’s celebrated chefs to invent tempting nutria dishes with names like Ragondin à l’Orange.

And then we come to the woman who bit the camel’s genitalia and is talking to law officers, perhaps claiming self-defense as a way to wiggle out of a cruelty-to-animals charge. Identifying her as a “Florida woman,” as I interpret it, suggests that we’re dealing here with what Newfoundlanders would call a come-from-away and New Yorkers would call an out-of-towner. The tantalizing implication is that a local woman would have known that you could give a truck-stop camel an infection requiring antibiotics by biting its genitalia.

While the veterinarian was caring for the camel, was anyone attending to that Florida woman? She had, after all, been sat on by a six-hundred-pound camel, an experience that has to be at least uncomfortable and probably injurious. A reader has to wonder if she had some broken bones or some cracked ribs or at least a nasty taste in her mouth.

And we still have the deaf dog to deal with. The Florida woman and her husband (presumably a Florida man) may have tried to call him back (“Here, Fido! Here, Fido! Come out of the camel’s enclosure, Fido”) even though they knew that, because of his deafness, they might as well have been singing the F.S.U. fight song, or whatever Florida people do when things don’t seem to be going their way.

As I see it, the Florida woman and the Florida man have no choice but to enter the enclosure. The Florida woman is still shouting at the deaf dog to follow her out. Her husband has tried to calm her down by saying things like “Hush, Florida woman, or that camel is going to lose his temper and take it in his mind to sit on someone.” The camel has, in fact, been getting a bit riled. He has decided to sit on the Florida woman, but, in his excitement, he fails to do so in a way that evolution has taught him to sit on an enemy without exposing his genitalia to retaliation.

At that point, as if a shutter had clicked, it becomes a tableau vivant—one that I have carried in my mind ever since. The Florida man looks alarmed. The dog looks puzzled. The camel looks pained—even more pained than camels normally look. All we see of the Florida woman is her legs extending from underneath the camel. Talk about engaging the reader! I was so engaged that I felt no need to read the rest of the story. The lede is sufficient. It's now in my collection. ♦

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