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Content

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In the winter of her sophomore year of high school, Mackenzie Morrison sat in her bedroom closet and began a new diary. Using her phone to light the pages, she listed the “pros of telling”: “no more physical/emotional attacks,” “I get out of this dangerous house,” “the truth is finally out, I don’t have to lie or cover things up.” Under “cons of telling,” she wrote, “damaging mom’s life,” “could go into foster care,” “basically I would probably lose everything.” After she finished, she loosened the screws of a vent panel on the wall outside her closet and slipped the notebook behind it.

Mackenzie went to Whitfield, a private prep school in St. Louis, where the school’s wellness director, Ginny Fendell, called her the “queen of compartmentalization.” She got A’s, served in student government, played varsity soccer, managed the field-hockey team, and volunteered for the Special Olympics. She was five feet ten with long curly blond hair—“the picture of Americana,” as one friend described her. Mackenzie’s parents had separated when she was six, and Mackenzie lived with her mother, Carrie Morrison, the director of breast imaging and mammography at St. Luke’s Hospital, in Chesterfield, a wealthy suburb of St. Louis. They liked to imagine themselves as the Gilmore Girls: the single mother and her precocious daughter, so close they were nearly fused. But Mackenzie’s friends and teachers noticed that in her mother’s presence Mackenzie physically recoiled. Lisa Smith, the mother of one of Mackenzie’s best friends at Whitfield, said that her daughter once asked why Mackenzie was always injured: “My daughter kind of looked at me funny, and I looked back at her and said, ‘What are you trying to say?’ ”

When Fendell asked Mackenzie about her bruises, Mackenzie offered vague comments about being clumsy. Fendell told her that, if she couldn’t talk about why she was injured, she should write it down. “I don’t ever want to cause her any pain or anything, which is why I’ll probably end up burning this,” Mackenzie wrote in the journal. “I wish that I had the courage to tell someone. Or even to write everything down in here. Because if I’m being honest, there are things that I’m too ashamed to even speak of.”

Mackenzie began documenting her life with her mother and her mother's boyfriend, Henry Lovelace, Jr., a personal trainer who had won the Missouri Strongest Man Championship in his weight group. Two days after starting the journal, in March, 2014, she wrote an entry about a head injury she'd suffered three months earlier. She had been hospitalized for four days at St. Luke's, where her mother worked. "Mom heard her tumble, thought maybe tripped going up the stairs," the medical records said. Mackenzie told the hospital staff that she didn't remember what had happened. A consulting physician said that Mackenzie "most likely fell down the steps at home and hit her head." He observed, "She appears scared."

In the months since her head injury, Mackenzie had regained memories from the weekend before her fall, and she recalled that she and her mom had been fighting about Lovelace. "Did she actually have something to do with it? God, I don't know," she wrote. Eventually, the theory became impossible to avoid. "If I look back at all the signs, at the days leading up to and proceeding my 'accident,'" she wrote, "the signs all seem to point in the same direction. The one that I feared most." She didn't elaborate on the thought, because, she added, "I'm literally getting nauseous thinking about it."

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Her mother was a respected figure in the St. Louis medical community, and, when Mackenzie was injured, she saw doctors affiliated with her hospital. "She is brilliant and can charm anyone," Mackenzie wrote. "She's pretty much invincible." Mackenzie felt certain that, if she shared details about her mom or Lovelace, her mother would convince people that she was lying, or crazy. "She is just so amazing at getting people to think, feel, and do what she wants," she wrote. "*She lies better than I can tell the truth.*"

A month after beginning the journal, Mackenzie came to school with a black eye. She'd tried to cover it up with concealer, but her teachers noticed, and Fendell pulled Mackenzie out of her Spanish class. "I went with the story my mom told me to tell, which is that I was playing with my dogs in the living room and I tripped and fell into a table," she wrote in her journal. Fendell did not accept the explanation, and she later told Mackenzie that she was legally obligated to notify Missouri's Department of Social Services.

Mackenzie stayed at school late that night, rehearsing for a musical. When she got home, a caseworker was at her house, chatting with her mother. “They were talking about work and school and whatever else and having a great time just like they were old friends,” Mackenzie wrote. White, upper middle class, and in a position of power, Mackenzie’s mother was demographically dissimilar to most parents who come to the agency’s attention. Interviewed in her mother’s presence, Mackenzie repeated the story about falling into a table. Before leaving, the caseworker, who was white, explained that “she didn’t really need anything else from us and she was sorry to bother us, but was glad everything worked out,” Mackenzie wrote.

After the caseworker’s visit, Mackenzie was “on high alert, trying not to set anyone or anything off,” she wrote in her diary. During conversations with her mother in the kitchen, she made sure “to keep the kitchen island in between us,” while also “bracing for impact.” She thought about running away, but she didn’t have anywhere to go. She had become estranged from her father, a former soap-opera actor, against whom her mother had filed an order of protection, alleging that he posed a physical threat to Mackenzie; a guardian ad litem had been appointed to protect Mackenzie’s interests during the custody proceedings, which were prolonged and bitter. “Thinking about existing in a world where I had no parents just couldn’t be a possibility in my mind,” she told me.

After Lovelace bought Morrison a gun for her birthday, Mackenzie wrote, “If I’m being perfectly honest, I’m terrified.” She described an incident, a year earlier, when she had fallen asleep watching a movie in her mom’s bed and woke up to Lovelace on top of her, “feeling my boobs, running his hand around my inner thighs & exploring other places.” She got out from under him, ran into her own room, and eventually called her mother, who wasn’t home, and related what had happened. “She just bursts out laughing,” Mackenzie wrote. Her mother told her that it was an accident, saying, “I’m flattered that he got me mixed up with my 15-year-old daughter.” In the year since the episode, Mackenzie said, Lovelace had continued to sexually assault her. She felt as if her mother were both sanctioning his abuse —“offering me up to him on a silver platter,” as she later described it—and punishing her for attracting Lovelace’s attention. “I still just don’t

understand why she won't protect me," Mackenzie wrote. "Did I do something wrong to make her not want to?"

In her journal, Mackenzie described her mother as having two faces, one manipulative and aggressive, the other nurturing and kind. She wondered if the kind face was a type of "ego defense mechanism" that her mother would use in an attempt to "undo" the wrong she has most recently done." Sometimes, in the journal, Mackenzie used the word "family" in quotes. "Family is not the people you are related to by blood," she wrote. "They are the people that support you, look out for you, & love you unconditionally." She went on, "By those standards, the standards of *real* family, not one person I'm related to by blood meets those requirements or even comes close."

Still, she was sometimes hopeful that the kind face her mother presented could actually be real. "I know that good part is still there somewhere," she wrote. "There just might be a small part left that loves me in some way, at least I hope."

In September, 2014, early in her junior year, Mackenzie drove to school and looked for her history teacher, who had become one of the few people in whom she felt comfortable confiding. "She showed up at my classroom door with a bloodied and battered face and then fainted," the teacher wrote. An ambulance was called, and Mackenzie was taken to Mercy Hospital, in St. Louis, and admitted into the pediatric intensive-care unit. Sherry McLain, a nurse assigned to her, told me, "She had two black eyes, and her hair was full of blood. She had bruises all over her body in different stages of healing —an obvious sign of child abuse."

Within a half hour, police officers arrived at the hospital. They learned that, the previous day, the history teacher had called Missouri's Child Abuse and Neglect hotline, because Mackenzie had revealed details to her about being sexually abused by Lovelace. (A hotline caseworker had notified the police.) When Mackenzie had come home that night, she said, her mother told her, "I know you have been talking," and pushed her down their staircase and struck her several times in the face. A detective named Carrie Brandt had been planning to follow up with Mackenzie at school that day, but instead she came to the hospital. Brandt stood beside Mackenzie's bed and asked

who had hurt her. "My mom," Mackenzie responded. Then she grabbed Brandt's hand and asked her to keep Morrison out of the hospital room.

That morning, Brandt and an investigator with the Department of Social Services (D.S.S.) interviewed Morrison in a waiting room of the hospital. They asked how Mackenzie had been injured. According to Brandt's report, Morrison replied, "Well I guess either she did this to herself or someone broke in and did it to her." Morrison also said that, the night before, she had helped Mackenzie get gum out of her hair; they had been at the top of the staircase, and Mackenzie had fallen two steps but had not been hurt. Brandt later noted that Morrison had not "asked how Mackenzie was doing or showed any emotion."



"Here's an apocryphal story that I figure prominently in."
Cartoon by William Haefeli

Brandt also asked Morrison about the episode, which Mackenzie had reported the day before, when Mackenzie had woken up to Lovelace touching her breasts. Morrison said that Lovelace had made an innocent mistake. "She thought it was funny that [Lovelace] mistook her"—Morrison—"for a 15 year old girl," Brandt wrote. (In a separate interview, Lovelace, who had been the subject of complaints to the police by Morrison and two other women with whom he'd been romantically involved, denied ever touching Mackenzie.)

Brandt read Mackenzie's diary and interviewed her principal, her soccer coach, and her teachers. One of Mackenzie's tenth-grade teachers shared that Mackenzie was afraid to talk about her home life, so the teacher had begun asking her if the weekend had been "cloudy" or "stormy." Fendell, the wellness director, said that she had seen text messages in which Morrison had lashed out at Mackenzie, calling her "a fucking piece of shit" or telling her, "Get your fat ass home." Brandt also spoke with Mackenzie's pediatrician, who felt guilty that, at Mackenzie's annual physical a month earlier, she hadn't X-rayed a large bruise on Mackenzie's arm. The pediatrician felt "awful for not pushing the issue," Brandt wrote.

The D.S.S. determined that it was not safe for Mackenzie to return home and placed her in protective custody. "It's hard to breathe because my ribs are so severely bruised, and I can't laugh, smile, or chew without it hurting," Mackenzie wrote in a journal she kept at the hospital. She had a feeding tube inserted, and was given a diagnosis of "post-concussion syndrome." Molly Mudd, a nurse assigned to her case, told me, "There was the physical component happening with her head injury, but there was also the emotional component of someone who has been fearful for a long time and has tried to push it down, and all of a sudden it catches up to her. I just remember her being fixated on worry that her mom was going to come into the hospital." At the nurse's station, a small picture of Morrison was taped to the wall, so that, if she entered the building, nurses could alert security.

After Mackenzie had been in the hospital for a week, Brandt met Morrison at the police station and asked again about the circumstances of Mackenzie's fall. Brandt wrote, "The only thing she can think is Mackenzie did this to herself." When Brandt asked why Mackenzie would accuse her of such a thing, Morrison replied, "I guess she has more problems than I thought." Brandt placed Morrison under arrest.

An article in the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* announced that Morrison had been charged with felony child abuse and misdemeanor assault, running a picture of her wearing a pearl necklace and a white lab coat, with a breast-cancer-awareness ribbon pinned to her chest. She had straight blond shoulder-length hair, and her teeth were impeccably white. In comments online, the *Post-Dispatch*'s readers seemed almost uniformly outraged at the arrest. "Bet the

daughter is an entitled brat," one said. "Such a shame this angry teenage girl just destroyed her mother's career," another wrote.

While Mackenzie was in the hospital, Morrison was released on bond, and she began calling people close to Mackenzie to tell her side of the story. Rachel Webb, one of Mackenzie's teachers from elementary school, said that Morrison left a message on her voice mail. "She said, 'You know me—I would never hurt my beautiful girl. Mackenzie is making this all up. As you know, she's mentally ill.' But here's the thing," Webb said. "We had never talked about her being mentally ill." Webb had hoped that the elementary school would rally around Mackenzie. But, she said, "I think they didn't want to make our school look bad, like we had missed anything when Mackenzie was with us. Because Mackenzie had always been kind of trotted out by our school as this shining example of a successful alumna."

After three weeks at the hospital, Mackenzie was discharged into a foster home. The D.S.S. had considered placing her with one of Morrison's sisters, but the Whitfield principal had called the D.S.S. to express "grave concerns" that Mackenzie would not be protected there. Parents and teachers from Whitfield gave her new clothes and school supplies. She showed up at the foster home, where three other children lived—one was a foster child and two were the foster parents' biological children—carrying clothes in a plastic bag. "I felt like a passenger in my own body," she said.

When Mackenzie returned to school, she learned that her mother had hired William Margulis, who had sent four children to Whitfield and later served on the school's board of trustees, as her defense attorney. Margulis's son was in Mackenzie's math class, and she worried that, if she did anything out of the ordinary in the boy's presence, her behavior could be used against her. "It felt like such a calculated move to exert power over me," she said. Margulis told me, "I spent a lot of time meeting with the prosecutor and convincing him that the daughter had no credibility and made all of this up."

There were only seventy-one students in Mackenzie's grade, and soon everyone seemed to have an opinion about her life. Mackenzie's friend Kate Minorini told me, "Mackenzie's mom was using the Whitfield buzz book"—the school directory—"to plead her case, so the rumor mill would have happened regardless, but a lot of the hearsay seemed to be based off the

defense arguments of our classmate's dad." There were rumors that Mackenzie's bruises were self-inflicted, that she had thrown herself down the stairs to get attention. Some people said that she had been inspired by the movie "Gone Girl," about a woman who stages her own murder.

Lisa Smith, the mother of Mackenzie's friend, said that Morrison called and "tried to be really sweet with me and get me to change my mind about what had happened, but when I said, 'I'm not interested in hearing what you have to say,' she got ugly." Once, at the airport, Smith ran into another Whitfield parent, who commented that "Mackenzie wanted to go to an Ivy League school, and this was her way in." Smith said, "I was, like, 'You've got to be kidding me. This girl is traumatized. She cries, she doesn't eat, she doesn't sleep. And why would an Ivy League school say, 'O.K., you've been abused —we're going to let you in.'" That's not even a thing.' "

Before Morrison's case could go before a grand jury, the St. Louis County assistant prosecuting attorney dropped all the charges. A spokesperson for his office said that new evidence had been uncovered. Brandt demanded an explanation. "He was not able to provide a direct answer," she later wrote. "We argued about the case, I advised him that this was ridiculous, and this had to be a 'status thing.' " A few weeks later, the prosecuting attorney decided not to press charges against Lovelace, either, citing a lack of evidence.

Morrison petitioned the St. Louis County Circuit Court to expunge her arrest record. According to a one-page form signed by a judge, there was no probable cause "to believe that the petitioner committed the offense." The arrest had been "based on false information."

Once the charges were dropped, Mackenzie's Spanish teacher, Catalina Martinez, sensed that community sentiment toward Mackenzie had shifted. "When you've grown up with privilege—and everything around you is pretty and pristine and predictable—your tolerance for anything outside that world isn't very high," Martinez said. "People didn't want to deal with it anymore. People who had once supported her were finding excuses to turn their backs or walk away."

Mackenzie moved into a second foster home, because the first was chaotic; while she was there, the other foster child had attempted suicide. The second arrangement fell through, too, and she was moved into a third foster home, with a young couple. (She also spent long stretches sleeping at friends' houses.) During her free period at school, she roamed the halls looking for teachers who might be willing to chat. "I just wanted some sort of closeness with an adult," she said. In a psychological evaluation administered by the D.S.S., she was asked to share anything about her life that she wanted others to understand. She wrote, "DNA doesn't make a family." When asked to respond to "what I want most," she replied, "To have a family of my own someday and to be a great mom."

Whitfield gave Mackenzie a full scholarship for her senior year. She had not seen her mother in private since the day she was hospitalized—a court had ordered family therapy, but Mackenzie was terrified—and had no financial support from her family. Her college counsellor recommended that she apply to universities through a nonprofit, called QuestBridge, that matches exceptional students facing financial challenges with schools that will fully fund their tuition. In an evaluation for QuestBridge, Mackenzie's history teacher wrote that Mackenzie, after escaping her "wealthy but abusive parent," was "on her own in every way."

Mackenzie explained in a biographical essay that her private school was among the most élite in St. Louis. "Nobody fits into a certain mold or stereotype, just like I do not," she wrote. For her personal statement, Mackenzie responded to the prompt "Describe an experience which caused you to change your perspective" with an essay about finding herself in the pediatric intensive-care unit and looking at her bruised face in the mirror. She described "the one who almost killed me . . . the one who is my mother. *She broke me.*" She concluded, "I was never broken. She was."

Mackenzie was admitted to the University of Pennsylvania with a full scholarship, facilitated by QuestBridge. She imagined that "starting over would be the easiest thing b/c I wasn't leaving behind a regular family like so many others," she wrote in her journal, two weeks after arriving at Penn. "Yet, I was wrong. So, so wrong." Some of her high-school teachers had reassured her that she was part of their family—their "bonus child." But they stopped calling. Her foster parents had had a baby, and Mackenzie felt

increasingly peripheral to their lives. She was struck by the way other students relied on their parents, consulting them even about small choices, such as how to phrase an e-mail to a professor. She was ashamed to tell people that she'd been in foster care; she felt so alone that she thought about dropping out. But, she wrote, "if I truly can't do this, where am I supposed to return to?"

Holiday breaks were a source of panic. "It felt like an equation of where I would feel the least uncomfortable and the least excluded," she said. When she visited friends and former teachers, she tried to take up as little space as possible. Lisa Smith, her friend's mother, recalled that, whenever Mackenzie stayed at her house, "she would meticulously clean stuff. She was trying so hard to please, to get acceptance." At Penn, Mackenzie began to realize, "Oh, I actually have no idea who I am."

When Mackenzie had applied to Penn, the university's automatic coding system had categorized her application as "first generation," because she had not filled in personal data about her biological parents. Mackenzie said that her college counsellor had told her that, as an independent student estranged from her family, this information was not required. Mackenzie had been invited to a pre-orientation program for first-generation and/or low-income (F.G.L.I.) students, and, though she didn't attend the program, she began going to events hosted by Penn First, an F.G.L.I. student organization. Anea Moore, then a sophomore, had helped found the group the previous year. "We wanted to push the university to understand: if you're going to accept more and more high-need students, you have to be prepared to sustain them throughout their time here," she said. "You have to become a caretaker." Moore didn't think it was right, for instance, that universities commonly closed many dorms and cafeterias during the holidays, leaving vulnerable students feeling displaced. Mackenzie said that Penn First was "one of the first spaces on campus where I felt, These are my people. There was commonality in the fact that a lot of us had different relationships with home or family." When she got into Penn, she said, "I had never heard of F.G.L.I., but these labels resonated with a story I was still trying to process."

Mackenzie was one of fifteen freshmen selected for Penn's Civic Scholars, a program for students committed to social justice and community service. Walter Licht, the faculty director of the program, described Mackenzie as the

sort of student who “asks a question that makes everyone stop and brings the quality of conversation to a different pitch.” The Civic Scholars were encouraged to analyze how their identities intersected with systems of oppression and privilege. In a letter to herself, an exercise assigned to all the scholars, Mackenzie wrote, “I know that my first 18 years on this planet will always be a part of who I am, but how do I move on and start this new chapter of my life without pretending like it never happened?”

Elizabeth Cannon, the senior associate director of Civic House, where the program is based, sensed that Mackenzie was more vulnerable than she acknowledged. “She was working multiple jobs, and she owned almost no personal or material items,” she said. “She was walking around in the smallest, lightest winter coat.” When, during her freshman year, Mackenzie had surgery for a bone infection, Cannon offered to pick her up from the hospital. “I could tell that she was embarrassed, and she didn’t want to be a burden,” Cannon said. As Mackenzie recovered, a friend, Ayah El-Fahmawi, stayed with her and made her food. El-Fahmawi told me, “I was genuinely worried and surprised—she was completely on her own.”

During her sophomore year, Mackenzie decided to apply for a master’s at Penn’s school of social work—she could begin the program while completing her undergraduate degree—because she wanted to help young people who had aged out of foster care. One question on the application asked, “Are you the first generation in your family to attend college?” The Web site of Penn First Plus, a university program founded in 2018 to support F.G.L.I. students, defines “first generation” broadly, including students who have a “strained or limited” relationship with a parent who has graduated from college. This definition resembles the one used in the federal Higher Education Act, which says that first-generation status depends on the education level of a parent whom a student “regularly resided with and received support from.” (A spokesperson for the university said that Penn First Plus’s definition is designed to be inclusive and is not the institution’s official definition.)

Mackenzie said her reaction to the question about family was “Fuck that—I don’t have one of those.” Without providing context, she marked that she was the first in her family to go to college. “I had so much anger and grief, and I didn’t want them to be affiliated in any way with this new life I was

building,” she said. “I wanted so deeply for people to understand what it means to not have a family, and I had this fear of people being, like, ‘What happened to you—that doesn’t count.’”

Although all criminal charges against Morrison had been dropped, the D.S.S., which has its own procedures for assessing guilt, substantiated Mackenzie’s allegations. Morrison challenged this decision, but the Missouri Child Abuse and Neglect Review Board, an independent panel appointed by the governor, upheld the finding. Morrison’s name was entered into a state registry for perpetrators of abuse and neglect. After Morrison’s arrest, St. Luke’s announced that it no longer employed her, but within a year she had been granted privileges by another local hospital. She petitioned a circuit court in St. Louis to remove her from the registry, arguing that the board’s finding was based on insufficient evidence and would compromise her employment. The court agreed to hold a trial reviewing the evidence against her.

At Mackenzie’s request, Penn had not listed her contact information in its online directory. Nevertheless, strange packages were occasionally delivered to her dorm: a pair of sneakers, which she assumed came from Lovelace, who used to act as her personal trainer, helping her stretch; a bracelet with an inscription about finding the truth. She met with the associate director of special services within Penn’s Division of Public Safety to share her fear that her family had discovered where she lived. Jane Dmochowski, a faculty member at Penn who had become close with Mackenzie and often had her over, said that in the months before the trial Mackenzie got several hang-up calls: “She would get so upset, and I never pried and asked who it was, but it was hugely concerning.”

Morrison’s trial was held during the spring of Mackenzie’s junior year. There were only four witnesses: a psychologist, a D.S.S. investigator, Mackenzie, and her mother. Morrison denied that she had ever hit her daughter, whom she described as emotional and intense. “We read, you know, enumerable books on the difficult child, the spirited child, the willful child,” she said. She described in detail how she had been at the top of her carpeted staircase trying to tease gum out of Mackenzie’s hair with a comb: “She immediately screamed, ow, jerked her head back,” and, after stepping back two or three stairs, stomped off to her room and slammed the door. The

next morning, Morrison left the house before seeing her daughter's face, she said.

Mackenzie testified that her mother had pushed her down the stairs and that, after she had fallen, "my mom was on top of me and she was striking me in the face." One of the next things she remembers is waking up in her bedroom early the next morning. Her mom knocked on the door and told her, "I'm taking your keys and I'm calling you in sick to school." When Mackenzie heard her mother leave the house, she got a spare key and drove to school, though she had no memory of doing so. She did recall that, once she was inside, there was a "kind of commotion, and eventually, like, a bunch of administrators kind of rushed into the room, and somebody said, 'Call 911.' "

Morrison's lawyer, Allison Schreiber Lee, had obtained a personal statement that Mackenzie had written to get a scholarship, which was nearly identical to her college essay, and she interrogated Mackenzie about differences between her medical records and her rendering of the experience. "It says that 'your facial features are so distorted and swollen that I cannot tell them apart'—did you write that?" she asked.



"Can I help you find anything or prevent you from folding that shirt in such a way that I will immediately have to refold it?"
Cartoon by Brendan Loper

Mackenzie said yes.

“Well, you could tell them apart, right?”

“I had bruising around my face,” Mackenzie replied.

“It says that ‘your hair is caked with dried blood.’ That didn’t happen, did it?”

“I remember there was some blood with my lip, yeah,” Mackenzie said.

In the essay, Mackenzie referred to the “metallic taste of the feeding tube.” Lee asked her, “It was metallic?”

“That’s what I tasted, yeah,” Mackenzie responded.

Lee informed Mackenzie that the tube was plastic.

“It’s what I tasted, though,” she said.

A month after the trial, the judge concluded, “While it is possible that Petitioner was the cause of the alleged injuries, the court cannot make that finding by a preponderance of the evidence based on the evidence presented.” The judge ordered that Morrison’s name be struck from the state registry. In an e-mail, an attorney for the D.S.S. notified Mackenzie’s lawyer of the decision, writing, “I am very saddened by the result in this case as I have always believed Mackenzie 100% on everything and I always will.”

Morrison declined to speak with me on the record, except to write, “Our greatest desire is that Mackenzie chooses to live a happy, healthy, honest and productive life, using her extraordinary gifts for the highest good.” Speaking for her side of the family, she added, “We will always be here for her.”

After the trial, Mackenzie decided to change her last name. She wanted to sever her remaining ties with her biological family, and she hoped a new name would make it harder for her mother to find her. After filling a notebook with lists of surnames that she thought sounded bold (Fairstone, Stronghill, Silverfield), she submitted a petition with the Court of Common Pleas of Philadelphia County, changing her name to Mackenzie Fierceton. In January, 2020, the winter of her senior year, she wrote in a Facebook post

that the process of choosing a name had been about taking “ownership of my identity” and exerting “agency in a way I was never able to growing up.”

Two months later, as *COVID* hit the Northeast, Penn urged students to leave campus within a week. One of Mackenzie’s professors, Anne Norton, who teaches political science, checked in on students who she suspected might be stranded. Norton said, “Mackenzie always tried to say, ‘I’m fine, I’m fine’”—after she and her roommates gave up their apartment off campus, she lived with a roommate’s family in Ohio and then stayed at a classmate’s home in Philadelphia—“but eventually it became clear she was just couch-surfing at friends’ houses, and you can’t couch-surf in a pandemic.” In late May, Norton invited Mackenzie, who had just graduated with a B.A. and had one more year until she completed her M.S.W., to move in. Norton and her partner, Deborah Harrold, live in a large house in northwest Philadelphia. Norton said, “I told Mackenzie, ‘You don’t have to spend any time with us if you don’t want to, but you need to be safe.’ ”

That summer, Mackenzie decided to apply for a Rhodes Scholarship, to get a Ph.D. at the University of Oxford. Her friend Stephen Damianos, who had just been chosen for the scholarship, had told her she would be an ideal candidate. “She was tireless—she seemed to be fighting the world’s fight and really engaged in the struggle for a more just world,” he said. In addition to having an excellent academic record, Mackenzie was a policy fellow for a Philadelphia City Council member, a volunteer birthing doula with the Philadelphia Alliance for Labor Support, and a social-work intern at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia.

Mackenzie talked with Cannon, her mentor at Civic House, about whether to apply. “It was a pretty emotional conversation, because of her fear that, if she did get the scholarship, there would be press, and her bio family could find her and tear her down,” Cannon said. But she said that Mackenzie concluded, “I’m going to continue to try to move forward in my life.”

In a form that Mackenzie submitted to Penn, which formally nominates students for the Rhodes, she described her sense that students applying for scholarships “sometimes felt confused and pressured to be someone they were not amidst their application process.” In an interview with a writer working on a guidebook for F.G.L.I. students, she had expressed a similar

concern about the sorts of personal statement expected from disadvantaged students: “The expression that comes up is ‘poverty porn’—continually being pressured by your school, when you get to a higher-education institution, or even in high school, to share your story—and thank donors, and whatever the case is.” (Penn said that it doesn’t pressure students to tell their stories but supports them when they choose to do so.)

In her Rhodes application, Mackenzie proposed studying the entanglement between the child-welfare and juvenile-justice systems (the subject of her undergraduate thesis, too)—a project she hoped would “uplift the voices of my foster peers.” But, in two paragraphs that drew connections between her personal background and scholarly interests, she took some liberties, such as describing a kid at one of her foster homes as a foster child, even though he was actually her foster parents’ biological child. Mackenzie told me, “I wish I had taken more time to precisely describe the nuances of their lives—it was a simplification of a complex story.”

A letter of endorsement from Penn, signed by Beth Winkelstein, the deputy provost, said that “Mackenzie understands what it is like to be an at-risk youth, and she is determined to re-make the systems that block rather than facilitate success.”

The sixteen-year tenure of Penn’s president, Amy Gutmann, had been defined by her efforts to position Penn as a school that addressed inequality rather than perpetuating it—a pivot that many élite universities have attempted. Gutmann more than doubled the number of Penn students from low-income and first-generation families, her faculty biography explains. In an interview, she described how she, too, had been a “first-generation, low-income student.”

Universities didn’t start regularly tracking first-generation status until the early two-thousands, and there has never been a clear definition of the term, which emerged in part because it was a more politically digestible label than race. In a 2003 ruling regarding race-conscious admissions at the University of Michigan Law School, the Supreme Court narrowly upheld affirmative action but wrote that the practice should not continue indefinitely. Universities began looking for other ways to encourage diversity. The number of first-generation students on campus became a new benchmark, a

sign that a university was fulfilling its social contract. But institutions used different definitions of the term; one study analyzed eight definitions of “first-generation” commonly used by researchers and found that, in a sample of more than seven thousand students, those who qualified as first-generation ranged from twenty-two to seventy-seven per cent, depending on which definition was used.

In November, 2020, the Rhodes Trust named Mackenzie one of thirty-two scholar-elects from the United States. Penn seemed to embrace Mackenzie’s story as evidence of its commitment to promoting social and economic mobility. In a press release, Gutmann expressed pride that the award had gone to a “first-generation low-income student and a former foster youth.” After the announcement, Wendy Ruderman, a reporter from the Philadelphia *Inquirer*, interviewed Mackenzie for roughly twenty-five minutes. That day, the *Inquirer* published an article that began “Mackenzie Fierceton grew up poor.” Mackenzie says that she never described her childhood this way. Ruderman acknowledged that Mackenzie didn’t use those exact words, but she said that Mackenzie did describe herself as an F.G.L.I. student—an abbreviation that may invite confusion, because it can refer to people who are either low-income or first-generation, not necessarily both. The *Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof tweeted the *Inquirer* article, saying it was thrilling that a Rhodes Scholarship had gone to “a first-gen low-income foster youth,” and Mackenzie retweeted what he wrote. She told me that she wished she’d pushed back harder on the way she was characterized. “I just kind of crumbled behind the pressure,” she said.

The father of one of Mackenzie’s high-school peers reached out to a Penn official, to explain that the news coverage about Mackenzie was inaccurate. (A former classmate had also sent an anonymous e-mail to Penn’s news office.) The father’s message was shared with Penn’s general counsel, Wendy White, who asked to be put in touch with Mackenzie’s mother. Morrison and White spoke on the phone. Three days after the *Inquirer* story was published, Morrison wrote White an e-mail, thanking her for the conversation and explaining that Mackenzie “has been loved and cherished every moment of her life.” She said that “when Mackenzie imploded”—at the time of her hospitalization—“she had just failed the first AP Chem test and was overwhelmed with work load in other classes.” (Mackenzie said she didn’t fail any chemistry tests; her transcript shows that she earned a B-plus

in the class.) Morrison continued, “She was falling apart under the academic stresses at school and was exhausted, and I believe looking for an out.”

A few days later, Mackenzie received an e-mail asking her to meet with Winkelstein, the deputy provost, to address questions that had “arisen from an anonymous source.” Sensing her mother’s involvement, Mackenzie asked a university staff member to attend the meeting as her informal adviser. According to a detailed reconstruction of the conversation, composed by Mackenzie and the staff member soon afterward, Winkelstein asked why, in Mackenzie’s application for the school of social work, she had categorized herself as first-generation.

“When you are in foster care, your legal guardian is the state,” Mackenzie responded, according to the reconstruction. “I was considered the only generation at this point.” She went on, “I legally did not have parents and never considered them as such to begin with.”

After asking about Mackenzie’s time in foster care, Winkelstein moved on to her college essay. “You describe an experience,” Winkelstein said. “And ultimately you say it was your mother. If we review your medical records, is it going to show broken ribs and injuries to your facial area?”

“Yes,” Mackenzie said.

“And you reported this to your school?”

“Reported what?”



Cartoon by P. C. Vey

“What was going on.”

“Um, eventually, yes,” Mackenzie said. She took a sip of water and began crying.

“What happened after that?” Winkelstein asked.

“After what?”

“After you talked to the school. And this next question may be tough. How did you get to school the next morning?”

“I don’t remember, but I was told I drove,” Mackenzie said.

Winkelstein asked what happened the night before she was hospitalized.

Mackenzie took another sip of water. “It was bad,” she said.

“What happened the night before?”

Mackenzie was crying, and Winkelstein asked again, “What happened?”

Sobbing, Mackenzie responded, “My mom tried to kill me.”

Winkelstein paused, so that Mackenzie could catch her breath, and then asked, “Do you think these documentations were an accurate representation of your experiences?”

“Yes,” Mackenzie replied.

After the meeting, Walter Licht, the faculty director of the Civic Scholars program, said that the staff member—who didn’t want to use her name, because her job at Penn is not secure—called him distraught. “She said she had never been party to such an interrogation,” he said. “She said it felt like an attack on a student.” Licht was disturbed that the conversation appeared to have been provoked by “a mother possibly seeking vengeance.” (The university has said that Winkelstein’s questions were appropriate and that her manner was not aggressive. At the end of the interview, she offered to connect Mackenzie with support.)

Mackenzie did not know that anyone at Penn was communicating with her biological family. But her mother and Wendy White apparently stayed in touch—in an e-mail after Mackenzie was questioned, Morrison said that she was saddened to learn that “M stuck to her story.” She wrote, “She has become emboldened over time, and has been successful with her evolving tale for 6 yrs.” She offered that White or her staff could visit her home, in St. Louis. “We would never have believed any of it if we weren’t living it,” she wrote, adding that Mackenzie had “directed her masterpiece perfectly.” One of Morrison’s sisters also wrote White an e-mail, saying that Mackenzie “deliberately tried to frame Carrie and planted ‘evidence’ around the house, including her own blood.”

The week after the meeting, Winkelstein sent a letter to the Rhodes Trust expressing concern that Mackenzie (whose birth name and place of birth she got wrong) may have misrepresented her childhood. She wrote that Mackenzie, in her application, had failed to “acknowledge her upper middle-class upbringing and provides a description of a life of abuse that the judicial process concluded could not be substantiated.” Winkelstein attached orders showing that a circuit court had reversed the D.S.S.’s finding of abuse, and that Morrison’s arrest had been expunged.

A month later, the Rhodes Trust informed Mackenzie that it was launching an investigation into her personal history. “I really don’t have words,” Mackenzie wrote in an e-mail to a mentor at the Penn Women’s Center. “It is seven years later, and I am still having to prove and prove and prove what has happened to me.”

Anea Moore, who helped found Penn First, wrote the Rhodes Trust a letter about Mackenzie. “When I founded Penn First, it was for students just like her, and her membership and leadership in the club was welcomed with open arms,” she explained. “FGLI kids can go to private school and/or college preparatory school just as Mackenzie did. We are not all inner-city children who live in filthy ghettos and attend crumbling, rat-infested public schools as the wider media may portray us to be.”

Moore, who had been chosen to become a Rhodes Scholar two years earlier, had been surprised to see how her personal story was packaged for the media. Both her parents had recently died, and she was going through a severe depression, but, she told me, “Penn dragged me to every single news outlet that asked for an interview and sent a Penn communications person with me to make sure I said the right things. It was, like, ‘Oh, yay, Penn has a Black Rhodes Scholar with dead parents who grew up working class.’” (Penn says that Moore was never made to do an interview or told what to say.) With Moore’s permission, her story was put on fund-raising material sent to alumni, and Gutmann summarized Moore’s life story in a commencement address. “To be fair, I was using Penn, too—it gave me economic and social capital,” Moore said. “But one young Black lady with dead parents using a multibillion-dollar Ivy League institution feels entirely different than the institution using her.”

Mackenzie understood that her abuse allegations would be investigated all over again, and she found two lawyers who agreed to help her pro bono. Knowing that Penn had already spoken with Morrison, they asked her for a meeting, too. Michael Raffaele, one of the attorneys, said that Morrison presented herself as a model parent who didn’t understand why Mackenzie wouldn’t accept her love and come home. Raffaele was reminded of a line in the space movie “Serenity,” in which an agent called the Operative advises that, in order to trap a rival, one should “leave no ground to go to.” Raffaele said it seemed as if Morrison were “trying to manufacture a situation in

which Mackenzie must go home to her mother, because she has no ground to go to—if she's personally ruined."

Mackenzie's lawyers learned that the university was considering initiating a process in which Mackenzie's bachelor's degree could be revoked. The university offered her a deal: as Raffaele described it to Mackenzie in an e-mail, the university would "take no action against your undergraduate degree," if she gave up the Rhodes, along with her Latin honors (she'd graduated summa cum laude). In addition, she would have to take a mandatory leave—"to get needed counseling and support"—before the university would grant her M.S.W. degree. When White learned that Mackenzie had been telling professors that she felt the university was threatening her, she added a new requirement. In an e-mail, she said that Mackenzie would have to write a statement saying she'd agreed to withdraw from the scholarship "voluntarily and without pressure."

Mackenzie rejected the offer. She sent the Rhodes Trust medical and family-court records, along with letters from twenty-six people in her life. A teacher from Whitfield wrote, "While her mother used her wealth to evade conviction, there was never any doubt in my mind that she abused her child and is diabolical in having no remorse." A childhood friend wrote that Mackenzie had confided at the time that "her mother's boyfriend would come into her bedroom at night and how her mother would do nothing about it." (Morrison did call the police when he came to their house to show Mackenzie pictures of his new gun.)

Three of the people who had written Mackenzie recommendations for the Rhodes composed new letters affirming that she had never misrepresented her life to them. In another letter, Mackenzie's lawyers argued that she had not constructed a narrative about herself to deceive anyone, but instead had tried to build a new identity after a trauma that had made her question nearly every aspect of her life. Mackenzie told me, "I have heard people describe sexual assault as a kind of erasure of self," but she said that, because her abuse occurred when she was so young, "it felt like there was not a self to begin with."

If trauma creates a kind of narrative void, Mackenzie seemed to respond by leaning into a narrative that made her life feel more coherent, fitting into

boxes that people want to reward. Perhaps her access to privilege helped her understand, in a way that other disadvantaged students might not, the ways that élite institutions valorize certain kinds of identities. There is currency to a story about a person who comes from nothing and thrives in a prestigious setting. These stories attract attention, in part because they offer comfort that, at least on occasion, such things happen.

In April, 2021, an investigative subcommittee for the Rhodes Trust issued a report recommending that Mackenzie’s scholarship be rescinded. The report acknowledged, “This is a tragic story,” but said that truthfulness “cannot be overridden by appeal to trauma.” It referred to childhood pictures—enclosed in a twenty-two-page letter written to the Rhodes Trust, in mid-December, by an anonymous sender who displayed a great deal of familiarity with Mackenzie’s childhood—that showed Mackenzie engaging in “typical upper middle-class childhood activities,” like horseback riding and going to the beach. Though the Trust said that Mackenzie’s abuse allegations were beyond the scope of its investigation, it repeated an argument originally advanced by Morrison’s lawyer at trial: that there were discrepancies between Mackenzie’s medical records and an essay she’d written to get into college—evidence, it said, of a broader pattern of misrepresentation. The Trust determined that, in Mackenzie’s medical records, “there is no reference to dried blood, distorted facial features, or cessation of breathing.” The report also pointed to inconsistent descriptions of the length of time Mackenzie had spent in foster care. In her applications to college and to social-work school, she had written that, in 2014, she had become a ward of the state “once again”—Mackenzie said that she was referring to her involvement in the family-court system as a child but acknowledged that the phrase was confusing. (A spokesperson for the Rhodes Trust wrote, “Fairness to all our applicants demands that if any issues or allegations arise, we consider them carefully,” adding, “We provide applicants multiple opportunities to respond, correct inaccuracies and share information.”)

Mackenzie wanted to submit a response to the Rhodes report, but Raffaele warned that her case could be referred to federal prosecutors, on the ground that she had misrepresented her finances in her application for federal aid—a possibility that he said White had raised. The questionnaire for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid asks, “At any time since you turned age 13, were both your parents deceased, were you in foster care or were you a

dependent or ward of the court?" Mackenzie had correctly answered "yes," which put her in the category of an independent student. Nevertheless, Raffaele encouraged her not to take any risks. "If the U.S. Attorney's Office is getting their information from general counsel at the University of Pennsylvania," he told me, "they might act differently based on where they are getting that tip, and there is no quick way out of a federal criminal prosecution."

Mackenzie agreed to withdraw from the scholarship. Norton, with whom Mackenzie had been living for nearly a year, told me, "I cannot avoid the sense that Mackenzie is being faulted for not having suffered enough. She was a foster child, but not for long enough. She is poor, but she has not been poor for long enough. She was abused, but there is not enough blood." Penn had once celebrated her story, but, when it proved more complex than institutional categories for disadvantage could capture, it seemed to quickly disown her. Norton wrote a letter to Gutmann, Penn's president, warning that the university had been "made complicit in a long campaign of continuing abuse." Norton says that Gutmann did not respond.



"I just hope the world doesn't end before people can see our outfits."
Cartoon by Colin Tom

In April, 2021, six days before Mackenzie gave up the Rhodes Scholarship, she got a letter from Penn's Office of Student Conduct (O.S.C.) notifying her that the university had requested an investigation because of "concerns

that you misrepresented and/or embellished your background.” She was supposed to receive her social-work degree the following month, but the letter said that her records would “automatically be placed on hold until this matter is resolved.”

Norton asked Rogers Smith, a colleague in the political-science department, if he would serve as Mackenzie’s adviser for the disciplinary proceedings. A professor of constitutional law and a former associate dean, Smith had previously worked at Yale, where he chaired the school’s undergraduate student-disciplinary committee. It quickly became clear, he said, that “this was a very unusual process, and my knowledge of standard disciplinary processes was of limited relevance.” O.S.C. investigators were reviewing e-mails between Mackenzie and Penn faculty, presumably to see if she had portrayed her life accurately; they also interviewed Morrison and the St. Louis prosecutor who dropped her criminal case—without telling Mackenzie. When Smith realized this, he wrote the O.S.C., “I am profoundly ashamed of us all.” (The university says the O.S.C. doesn’t recall Mackenzie asking for witness names before it issued its report, and that it is standard practice not to identify witnesses.)

After investigating Mackenzie for more than three months, the O.S.C. released a report on its findings. “Mackenzie may have centered certain aspects of her background to the exclusion of others—for reasons we are certain she feels are valid—in a way that creates a misimpression,” the report concluded. Her case was referred to a panel of three faculty members in the social-work school. Smith was hoping that the panellists would consider how Penn’s F.G.L.I. programs had affected Mackenzie’s understanding of the concept of first-generation, but the panel determined that Mackenzie should be disciplined—with a four-thousand-dollar fine and a notation on her transcript that she’d been sanctioned—for misrepresenting herself on her application to the school of social work. Mackenzie appealed the decision, arguing that the first-generation question had not felt straightforward. When concerns were initially raised about her first-generation status, Mackenzie had e-mailed the associate director of admissions and recruitment at Penn’s social-work school to ask how former foster youth should answer the question. “I personally believe the education level (or/and financial status) of the biological parents would be irrelevant,” the associate director responded. “The youth should select into the option

that provides them access to the most funding—which would be to indicate that they are a first-generation college student.”

Anthony Jack, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education who studies low-income and first-generation college students, told me that he would not consider a student like Mackenzie first-generation. But he was troubled that her status as a low-income student had ever been challenged. “When we allow stereotype to be our stand-in for disadvantaged groups, we are actually doing them a disservice,” he said. “That’s what scares me about this case. It’s, like, ‘You’re not giving us the right sob story of what it means to be poor.’ The university is so focussed on what box she checked, and not the conditions—her lack of access to the material, emotional, and social resources of a family—that made her identify with that box.” He went on, “Colleges are in such a rush to celebrate their ‘first Black,’ their ‘first First Gen’ for achievements, but do they actually care about the student? Or the propaganda campaign that they can put behind her story?”

When Mackenzie initially contemplated applying for the Rhodes Scholarship, she asked Moore and Damianos, the recent Rhodes Scholars, if they thought it would be a problem that she was involved in a wrongful-death lawsuit that a family had filed against Penn. Damianos said, “She asked me, ‘I wonder if this litigation will come back to bite me.’” Damianos and Moore both assured her that institutional endorsement for scholarships was handled by an office that was not likely to be concerned with lawsuits against the university.

Mackenzie had been an organizer on campus for a variety of causes—she advocated for the university to defund campus police and to reimburse public schools for unpaid property taxes—but in the months before she applied for the Rhodes she had been involved in a more straightforward matter: improving building safety. In the winter of 2020, she’d had a seizure in the basement of the Caster Building, where classes in the school of social work were held. According to her classmates, she was unconscious and intermittently seizing for roughly an hour, because it took emergency medical personnel that long to extract her from the building, as they struggled to fit a stretcher into the elevator or the stairway.

Mackenzie was in an intensive-care unit for three days and was given a diagnosis of epilepsy. (Her doctors said that her head injuries in high school may have put her at greater risk for the disorder.) After she was released, her classmates told her how long they believed she had waited for medical care. Mackenzie remembered that, two years earlier, a student named Cameron Driver, a thirty-eight-year-old Black man, had had a medical emergency in the Caster basement. He had died. She interviewed Driver's classmates about what had happened to him, and she and another student, Kate Schneider, took photographs of the building's entryways. Schneider told me, "We wanted to document everything, because we were, like, 'This is a pattern. One student died, and another could have died, because of issues of access in this basement.'" Mackenzie wrote letters to the social-work school and to Gutmann, the university's president, expressing her concerns. (Penn denies that there are accessibility problems with the Caster Building which contributed to Mackenzie's medical emergency or to Driver's death.)

Mackenzie also sent a note to Driver's widow, Roxanne Logan, offering to share the details she'd gathered. "The thought that this information may have been withheld from you felt utterly horrifying," Mackenzie wrote.

According to Mackenzie, Logan, who had been pregnant when her husband died, asked her to meet. Logan hadn't known that her husband and emergency responders had allegedly waited for almost an hour together before he was taken away in an ambulance—twelve minutes later, he was declared dead. In August, 2020, Logan filed a lawsuit, asserting that her husband's death was owing to "system-wide logistical and structural failures created by the negligence and recklessness" of the university. Her complaint described "another Penn student"—Mackenzie—whose medical crisis in the Caster Building had exposed nearly identical problems. Mackenzie was deposed in Logan's lawsuit in March, 2021, a month before she gave up the Rhodes.

Some Penn professors have wondered if Mackenzie's role in the lawsuit might have bearing on the university's scrutiny of her credibility. Amy Hillier, a faculty member at the social-work school, took a sabbatical from Penn because she was so disillusioned by Mackenzie's treatment. She wrote to the dean of the social-work school with a list of concerns, including the "appearance of retaliation against Mackenzie for giving a deposition in

wrongful death lawsuit against the University.” (The university has denied that its dealings with Mackenzie had anything to do with the lawsuit.)

Logan said that her lawyers did not want her to talk with me. “I’m a Black woman, I’m middle-aged, I’m a single parent of a special-needs child, and I can’t do anything that would jeopardize the lawsuit,” she said. “But I’m thankful that Mackenzie came forward.”

Last fall, Mackenzie began the sociology Ph.D. program at Oxford, which had admitted her before she withdrew from the Rhodes; she’d lost her funding, but a professor at Penn offered to pay for her first year. Two months later, in December, 2021, she filed a lawsuit against Penn, accusing it of retaliating against her and discrediting her “for Penn’s institutional protection.” By then, Gutmann had been appointed the U.S. Ambassador to Germany, a position she began last month, and Winkelstein had been promoted to interim provost.

In talking about her childhood, Mackenzie was fragile, sometimes narrowly avoiding tears, but when she reflected on how her life intersected with her political ideals she became focussed and self-possessed. She has been in therapy since she went into foster care, and she attributes her capacity to heal, at least to some degree, to her sense of fellowship with other children and women who have not been believed. “I’m telling my story because I think it’s a microcosm of how institutions of power can manipulate truth,” she told me.

At the time that Mackenzie filed her case, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* was finishing an article about her lost Rhodes Scholarship. The university had thirty business days to answer Mackenzie’s suit, but it produced a hundred-and-thirty-page response in nine business days, during the Christmas holiday. The university’s pleading portrayed Mackenzie as a discredited person who cannily concocted a tale of abuse: as a child, she had “regular temper tantrums, beyond the normal range for an adolescent.” Then she had “claimed to fall ill” at school and presented a “fictitious account of abuse by her mother.” According to the pleading, her claims of abuse kept her family “muzzled,” leaving her “in control of her narrative.”

Four days after the response was filed, the *Chronicle* published its [article](#), giving ample weight to each side and quoting from the university's pleading. The story was quickly picked up by other news outlets. “‘Rhodes Scholar’ claimed she grew up poor and abused—then her story started to unravel,” the New York *Post* wrote. A student publication at Oxford declared, “A privileged student faked being poor to get into Oxford Uni.” A morning radio show, syndicated to some hundred stations in the U.S., named Mackenzie its “donkey of the day.”

Norton felt that Penn was defaming its own student, and in a grievance she accused White and Winkelstein of violating university procedures with “arbitrary and capricious” conduct. “This is not simply a matter of believing survivors or showing a decent deference to a person’s understanding of their life experience,” she wrote. “It is a deliberate indifference to evidence.” Smith and Hillier signed the grievance, too. In a supplement to the grievance, Smith wrote that Penn’s disciplinary procedures “served to shelter the University from review of its role in encouraging the decisions for which it is now punishing her.”

Mackenzie’s social-work degree is still being withheld. She learned last week that she had lost her appeal. Her degree will not be granted until she submits a letter of apology, a requirement imposed by an appeals panel. (Her fine was withdrawn, because the university’s charter says that financial restitution cannot be imposed in cases involving academic integrity.) After finishing her second term at Oxford, she had returned to Norton’s house for a few weeks. She felt relieved to be back in Philadelphia, where Norton and a handful of friends and professors constitute what she calls her “chosen family.” “I don’t want to be gone from them too long, because then, like, they might move on,” she told me. “It’s just difficult to describe what it’s like to go through the world feeling like you don’t have some sort of anchor.”

Mackenzie moved around Norton’s house lightly and with deference. She, Norton, and Harrold sat down for family meals, but Mackenzie almost never had people over; when she did, she hosted them on the front porch. Her room, on the third floor, was mostly bare, though she had hung seventeen photographs, mostly of college friends. Norton has tried to create new domestic routines—doing puzzles; watching rock-climbing movies, a shared

interest—so that, she said, “it’s not about her fitting into our life. It’s about trying to construct a common life together.” Occasionally, Mackenzie has a painful longing for the mother she remembers as a young child, but “it is not her that I am grieving,” she said. “I am grieving the idea of her—the idea I had once created for her.”

Mackenzie told me that, in the past year, she’s experienced a state of self-doubt that she hadn’t known since high school: “There have been moments of almost panic where I am just cognitively questioning myself, like, ‘Did I misremember something?’ It’s easy to slide back into that state, because I want anything other than the reality—that it is my bio family who has caused so much harm—so I will do backflips to try to make it not true.” In her high-school journal, she had described this cycle of doubt. “You start to think that maybe you had it wrong and that maybe it actually did happen the way that they say it did,” she wrote. “And then you just throw away the real memory, the true one, and replace it with the one that they have fed you a million times, until that is the only thing you can remember.” ♦

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Bio-Pic Dept.

- [Valérie Lemercier's Céline Dion Kinda-Bio-Pic](#)

By [Lauren Collins](#)

The living-person bio-pic is a tricky genre. Make a movie about N.W.A., and the group's former manager sues you for a hundred and ten million dollars. Take on WikiLeaks, and Julian Assange sends you a letter calling you a "jobbing actor." It was maybe not Valérie Lemercier's most foolproof idea, then, to write, direct, and star in "*Aline*," about Aline Dieu—a highly disciplined, lovably bonkers Quebecois power balladeer with thirteen siblings and an omnipresent husband/manager—who Lemercier acknowledges is "freely inspired" by Céline Dion. There's also the fact that Lemercier, who is fifty-eight, decided to play Aline at every point in her life, starting as a five-year-old in ankle socks.



Valérie Lemercier/Illustration by João Fazenda

But this is the French cinema! Lemercier's collaborators and financiers loved the pitch. There were the biographical similarities between Lemercier and Dion: rural upbringing in a large family; prodigious talent in a body that didn't always look or move in the way that the entertainment industry thought it should. "I wanted to talk about the solitude of leaving the stage," Lemercier said, the other day. "There's a kind of emptiness that you have when the crowd has gone." Lemercier is a major star in France. Known for her off-kilter physical humor, she had already infantilized herself to success, with a well-known bit, about a youth talent competition, that she performed entirely on her knees.

"I approach my roles as though I'm the lawyer for my character," she said. "I wouldn't send my assistant to defend her when we make fun of her—I want to do it myself." Somehow, the gambit works, even with minimal special effects. Lemercier's willingness to let the bizarre into the life of a diva renders it realer than dutiful realism.

Lemercier was walking from a café in the First Arrondissement to a nearby apartment that she keeps for work. She arrived wearing high-heeled gold boots, jeans, and a bomber jacket on loan from Dior. In the hall, she ran into a neighbor, who told her that he'd liked "Aline."

"It was a little bit long, though," he added.

Lemercier winced. (Later, she confided that a negative comment from a stranger can ding her confidence for days.) In the apartment, strewn suitcases regurgitated shoes and clothes. "Pigsty!" she said. She offered buckwheat tea—"de l'or pour ton corps"—before asking if it was O.K. to light a cigarette. "Some journalist wrote that I vaped," she said, disdainfully. She was giving great French Movie Star, sitting in front of a floor-to-ceiling window as dusk fell over the serried chestnut trees of the Palais-Royal garden.



"Look, I love them, too, but Pharaoh wants to go another way."
Cartoon by Pia Guerra and Ian Boothby

She said that she made the decision to call Céline “Aline” to free herself up as she wrote the script. She was inspired by “Amadeus” and the “extremely strong angle” that the film’s creators took in exaggerating the rivalry between Mozart and Salieri; she looked to “Amélie” for its light touch with the passage of time. Even the made-up scenes in “Aline”—a trek in skates to an audition, an ice-cream-cone engagement—seem in keeping with Dion’s sentimental spirit. One of the surprise good guys is a character representing René Angélil, Dion’s husband, who comes across as a genial protector rather than as the Svengali of press reports. Wasn’t Lemercier going a little against the grain, in valorizing a romance between a pair who met when he was thirty-eight and she was twelve?

“She was twenty when they started their affair, and at twenty we kiss who we want,” Lemercier replied, adding, “I would have loved to have a René by my side sometimes.”

Once, she did. “He worked in a different industry. He had his life,” she recalled. “I got a horrible review, and he went to the newsstands in the neighborhood and bought up all the copies so that I wouldn’t see it.”

The film has drawn criticism from some of Dion’s relatives (“We come off as a bunch of bums”) and from defenders of Quebec (“Imagine if we released a film about Tony Hairday or Judith Paf”), but it’s been a box-office and a critical success. (By contrast, a 2008 film in which Lemercier appeared in blackface, as a racist cosmetics executive with a disease that darkens her skin, “didn’t generate the slightest controversy,” according to *Le Monde*. “It’s a film which today, with hindsight, could indeed have been played, danced, and sung by a Black actress who would have been made up in white for the first two-thirds of the film,” Lemercier said.) In February, Lemercier won Best Actress at the Césars, the French Oscars, for “Aline.”

The film ends shortly after Angélil’s death, in 2016, ignoring Dion’s transformation into a lewk-throwing fashion icon, a period that many consider the most interesting of her life. “I find it too dark,” Lemercier said. “I sense a kind of frenzy.” Lemercier’s offering to Dion is that of restitutive calm. “I wanted to give her moments of freedom and anonymity that she’s never had.”

Portraying Dion, she said, has given her the ability to get over herself a little bit. Lemercier recently participated in a biographical documentary, something that she never would have done, she said, without Dion's sporting example. She said, "I realize now that it's not all that dramatic, that one has to say who one is." ♦

Books

- [The British Empire Was Much Worse Than You Realize](#)
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By [Sunil Khilnani](#)

Content

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At the height of the British Empire, just after the First World War, an island smaller than Kansas controlled roughly a quarter of the world's population and landmass. To the architects of this colossus, the largest empire in history, each conquest was a moral achievement. Imperial tutelage, often imparted through the barrel of an Enfield, was delivering benighted peoples from the errors of their ways—child marriage, widow immolation, headhunting. Among the edifiers was a Devonshire-born rector's son named Henry Hugh Tudor. Hughie, as he was known to Winston Churchill and his other chums, pops up so reliably in colonial outposts with outsized body counts that his story can seem a “Where's Waldo?” of empire.

He's Churchill's garrison-mate in Bangalore in 1895—a time of “messes and barbarism,” the future Prime Minister complained in a note to his mum. As the century turns, Tudor is battling Boers on the veldt; then it's back to India, and on to occupied Egypt. Following a decorated stint as a smoke-screen artist in the trenches of the First World War, he's in command of a gendarmerie, nicknamed Tudor's Toughs, that opens fire in a Dublin stadium in 1920—an assault during a search for I.R.A. assassins which leaves dozens of civilians dead or wounded. Prime Minister David Lloyd George delights in rumors that Tudor's Toughs were killing two Sinn Féiners for every murdered loyalist. Later, even the military's chief of staff marvelled at how nonchalantly the men spoke of those killings, tallying them up as though they were runs in a cricket match; Tudor and his “scallywags” were out of control. It didn't matter: Churchill, soon to be Secretary of State for the Colonies, had Tudor's back.

Imperial subjects, of course, sometimes found their own solutions to such problems. A hard-line British field marshal, atop the I.R.A. hit list, was gunned down in Belgravia in 1922. Tudor, worried he would be next, made himself scarce. By the following year, he and his Irish paramilitaries were propagating their tactics for suppressing natives in the British-controlled Mandate of Palestine, Churchill having decided that the violence-prone Tudor was just the fellow to train the colonial police. A letter from Tudor to

Churchill that I recently came across crystallizes all the insouciance, cynicism, greed, callousness, and errant judgment of empire. He opens by telling Churchill that he's just commanded his troops to slaughter Adwan Bedouins who had been marching on Amman to protest high taxes levied on them by their notoriously extravagant emir. This tribe was "invariably friendly to Great Britain," Tudor writes, a touch ruefully. But, he adds, "politics are not my affair."

Tudor had cheery news to impart, too. Not only could the Mandate be a "wonderful tourist country," but prospectors had discovered vast sums' worth of potash in the Dead Sea valley. Should Britain appropriate the resources and increase the policing budget, its difficulties in the region would "smooth out," he told Churchill, assuring him that Palestinians would be easier to pacify than the Irish: "They are a different people, and it's unlikely that the Arab if handled firmly will ever do much more than agitate and talk."

In the twentieth century's hierarchy of state-sponsored violence, Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia, and Hirohito's Japan typically take top spots. The actions of a few European empires have invited harsh scrutiny, too—Belgium's conduct in Congo, France's in Algeria, and Portugal's in Angola and Mozambique. Britain is rarely seen as among the worst offenders, given a reputation for decency that the Harvard historian Caroline Elkins has spent more than two decades trying to undermine. "[Legacy of Violence](#)" (Knopf), her astringent new history of the British Empire, brings detailed context to individual stories like Tudor's. Visiting archives in a dozen countries over four continents, examining hundreds of oral histories, and drawing on the work of social historians and political theorists, Elkins traces the Empire's arc across centuries and theatres of crisis. As the sole imperial power that remained a liberal democracy throughout the twentieth century, Britain claimed to be distinct from Europe's colonial powers in its commitment to bringing rule of law, enlightened principles, and social progress to its colonies. Elkins contends that Britain's use of systematic violence was no better than that of its rivals. The British were simply more skilled at hiding it.

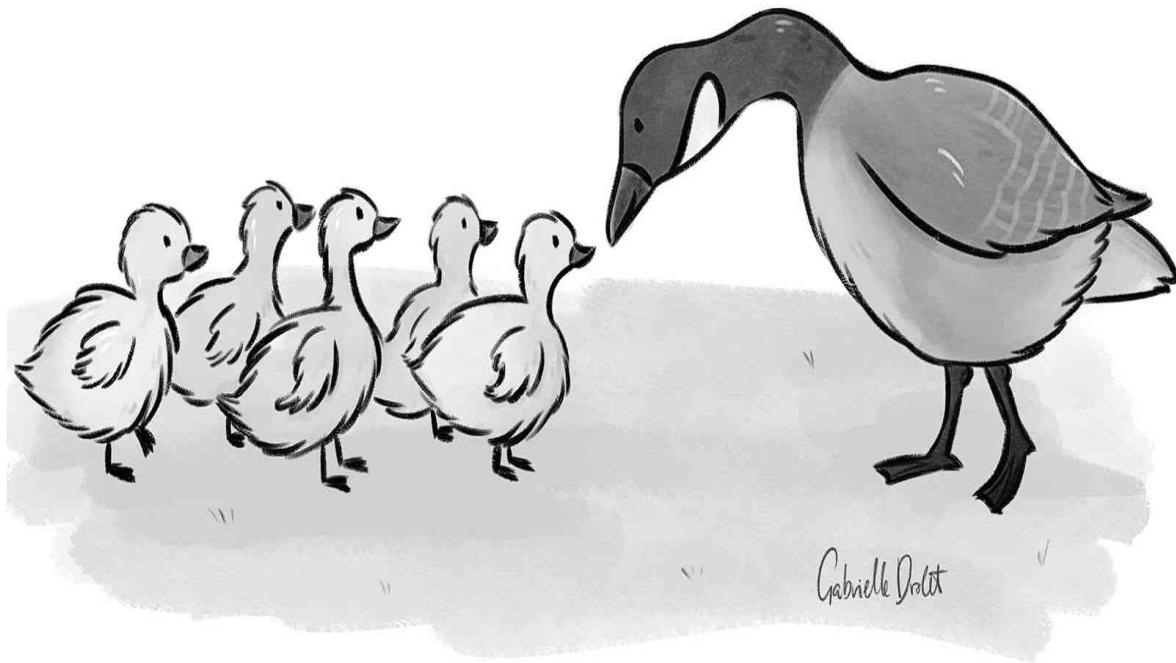
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More than half a century after the British Empire entered its endgame, historians are nowhere near a full assessment of the carnage shrouded by its preacherly cant, and, later, by administrators' bonfires of documents as they prepared for the last boat out. The richest sense we have of the damage inflicted on colonies tends to come in regional silos. Elkins doggedly links them, moving from South Africa to India, Ireland to Palestine, and on to Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus, and Aden, revealing a pattern visible only in the long view. As military and police personnel crisscrossed the Empire, spreading techniques of repression far and wide, the higher-ups rarely checked such violence. Instead, over and again, they gave it the full force of law—sustaining more brutality still.

It's startling to recall that, not so long ago, leading historians accepted the images of empire's end that were projected in propagandistic newsreels—governors-general in plumed helmets and starched whites inviting grateful natives to the podium. "Next to no fighting," concluded the Cambridge historian John Gallagher, one of the Old Guard whom Elkins has in her sights. She counters that the practice of blowing Indian sepoys from cannons after the 1857 uprising, the Maxim-gun slaughter of Mahdists in the eighteen-nineties, the use of concentration camps in the Boer wars, the massacre of peaceful protesters in Amritsar, reprisal killings and the sacking of civilian property in Ireland: all this state-inflicted savagery was just the British Empire warming up. In her account, the British paramilitary cadre, many of them trained by Tudor's Toughs, became the basis of an increasingly violent ruling culture that sought to reassert control in the aftermath of the Second World War, when the Empire needed colonial resources to rebuild a depleted economy and to bulk up a waning geopolitical status.

We misunderstand the end of empire, Elkins says, because the old liberal imperial historiography focussed more on high policy—the stratagems of what Gallagher and his cohort termed the "official mind"—than on the acts of get-it-done enforcers in the field. The striking thing, she suggests, is not how much the denizens of Whitehall didn't grasp about the retail-level mayhem but, rather, how much they did. Elkins draws on the work of Uday Singh Mehta, Karuna Mantena, and other theorists who argue that British liberalism, for all its talk of universal freedoms, served the goals of empire by rationalizing its domination of other peoples. (Colonial pupils, in their

political short pants, required firm instruction before they could be awarded their liberties.) Indeed, the main reason that the British Empire was able to sustain itself for more than two centuries, she maintains, was that the British model of state violence came wrapped in this “velvet glove” of liberal reform.



"Today, we learn how to terrorize the park."
Cartoon by Gabrielle Drolet

Add to its longevity an unrivalled global footprint, and the British Empire’s baneful legacy may well have been deeper and more diffuse than that of any other modern state. Was British liberal imperialism, given the extent of the damage it inflicted over generations, a more malevolent influence on world history than even Nazi Fascism? It’s a question that Elkins’s new book implicitly poses. And her first book, the Pulitzer Prize-winning “[Imperial Reckoning](#)” (2005), is a lesson in not discounting her pointed inferences too swiftly.

When the British Trinidadian intellectual C. L. R. James reflected, in old age, on his standard-setting account of the Haitian Revolution against the French, he chided himself for an overreliance on white witnesses. Had he worked a little harder, he believed, he might have unearthed more Haitian perspectives. A vast amount of what is understood today about the experience of colonial subjects still comes through white, Western eyes, often those of ruling administrators, missionaries, and travellers. “Imperial

Reckoning" did its part to rectify that great imbalance in the historiography of the British Empire.

It probed one of the grimmest periods in British colonial history: the suppression of a nineteen-fifties uprising of a clandestine Kenyan nationalist movement, the Mau Mau, whose name subsequently became a byword for native barbarity. Elkins, working in British and Kenyan archives as a young scholar, noticed gaps in the record-keeping from this period which suggested that the British had culled the files. Some incriminating documents had survived, though, and she started gathering evidence that the British had detained far more than the eighty thousand Kenyans they had previously acknowledged, and that among the tactics the Empire used against the Mau Mau was outright torture. ("With possibly a few exceptions," read one report she uncovered, the detainees "are of the type which understands and reacts to violence.") Thus began what she termed an "odyssey" of research, including field work in rural Kenya—potholed roads, battered Subaru—which ultimately brought to light the harrowing accounts of some three hundred survivors of the campaign against the Mau Mau.

In "*Imperial Reckoning*," Elkins moved deftly between oral and archival histories to describe a British strategy of detention, beatings, starvation, torture, forced hard labor, rape, and castration, designed to break the resistance of a people, the Kikuyu, who, having been dispossessed by the British and then, during the Second World War, enlisted to fight for them, had plenty of reason to resist. In 1957, a British colonial governor informed his superiors in London that "violent shock" was the only way to break down hard-core adherents, justifying a brutal campaign called Operation Progress. More than a million men, women, and children were forced into barbed-wire village compounds and concentration camps for reeducation in circumstances that the colony's attorney general at the time called "distressingly reminiscent of conditions in Nazi Germany or Communist Russia."

When Elkins's book won the Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction, some scholars raised an eyebrow; they suggested that she had libelled the British by printing undersubstantiated claims. Other critics questioned her tally of the Mau Mau dead and missing: up to three hundred thousand, she said, with

scant evidence. But aspects of her argument were vindicated in 2011, six years after publication, when her research helped make history.

That year, London barristers representing the Kenya Human Rights Commission and seeking damages for elderly Kenyan survivors of torture introduced Elkins as an expert witness, along with the British historians David Anderson and Huw Bennett. During the discovery process, the British government was pressed to explain a memo detailing the airlift of documents from Nairobi. After decades of denial, the government acknowledged spiriting masses of files out of Kenya—and, it emerged, out of thirty-six other former colonies. The files had been stashed in a high-security storage facility, in Hanslope Park, that the Foreign Office shared with British intelligence agencies. Documents were now unearthed which confirmed key aspects of both Elkins's account and that of the Mau Mau survivors. In a landmark reparations case, fifty-two hundred Kenyans who were brutalized during the insurrection were each awarded around thirty-eight hundred pounds, and the U.K. government publicly acknowledged using torture in controlling its empire.

“Legacy of Violence,” like Elkins’s earlier book, shuttles between horrific details and historical and thematic contexts. And it, too, relies occasionally on questionable statistics—for instance, an outdated finding that nearly two-thirds of the British public take pride in the British Empire. (By 2020, as Elkins’s own source indicates, that proportion had declined to less than a third.) Yet some of what she recounts is devastating, including the story of how British dark arts were distilled in interwar Palestine, propelling the grisliness of liberal imperialism to another level.

By the late nineteen-thirties, a revolt was under way in Palestine, ignited by radical populist movements that had sprung up in the towns and cities. Dispossessed rural Arabs flocked to these urban areas as Zionist colonies rapidly expanded to accommodate Jewish refugees from Europe. To quash the uprising, the policing apparatus that Hughie Tudor had helped build grew to twenty-five thousand men, including two Army divisions. (Tudor himself, fearful of continued I.R.A. death threats, had decided on a quieter life as a fish trader in Newfoundland.) Elkins, building on recent work by Laleh Khalili, Georgina Sinclair, and other historians, shows how imperial tactics converged in that fighting force.

From Ireland had come paramilitary techniques and the use of armored cars; from Mesopotamia, expertise in aerial bombing and the strafing of villages; from South Africa, the use of Dobermans for tracking and attacking suspects; from India, interrogation methods and the systematic use of solitary confinement; and, from the Raj's North-West Frontier, the use of human shields to clear land mines. As one soldier recalled about the deployment of Arab prisoners, "If there was any land mines it was them that hit them. Rather a dirty trick, but we enjoyed it." Other practices seem to have been homegrown by the British in Palestine: night raids on suspect communities, oil-soaked sand stuffed down native throats, open-air cages for holding villagers, mass demolitions of houses. While perfecting such tactics on the Palestinians, Elkins suggests, officers were gaining skills that were put to use when they were later dispatched to Aden (in the south of present-day Yemen), to the Gold Coast, to Northern Rhodesia, to Kenya, and to Cyprus. Palestine was, in short, the Empire's leading atelier of coercive repression.

To legitimate the control machine in Palestine, the British raked their empire again, this time for ways of securing legal impunity. Emergency codes were imported from Ireland, to permit collective reprisals, detention, and the destruction of property, and from India, to authorize censorship and deportation. Although military officials sought martial law in the Mandate, the Attorney and Solicitor Generals in London denied the request. They worried about the precedent of the Crown ceding power to the military, and, besides, Palestinian courts might well object that no state of war existed. A more elegant solution was to augment the power of the civilian executive. A 1937 order conferred on him the right to make whatever regulations "appear to him in his unfettered discretion to be necessary or expedient for securing the public safety, the defense of Palestine, the maintenance of public order and the suppression of mutiny, rebellion and riot, and for maintaining supplies and services essential to the life of the community." British troops and police were thus free to operate "virtually without restraint or fear of prosecution," Elkins writes. Just as with the repertoire of torture and suppression, these guides to imperial impunity would become models for future campaigns.

Defenders of empire like the historian Niall Ferguson insist that the rule of law proved Britain's most important gift to its colonies when, in time, they

achieved independence. In Elkins's view, the emergency provisions that abrogated the rule of law were the vital legacy. Insecure local leaders, some handpicked in Whitehall, struggled to govern polities in which colonial policy had sharpened social divisions. To stifle political opposition, they readily turned to colonial emergency codes and legal sleights. Helping them enact the templates were "Security Liaison Officers": M.I.5 agents, embedded in the former colonies, who would steward the incoming nationalist cadres into the methods of intelligence gathering, interrogation, and domestic security. Ghanaian leaders, shortly after their country became independent, in 1957, cribbed from British preventive-detention laws the right to detain citizens for five years without trial. In the nineteen-sixties, Malaysian officials, building on British models, enacted laws permitting suspects to be detained indefinitely. In the seventies, Indian leaders used colonial emergency powers embedded into their constitution to censor the press, jail political opposition, clear urban slums and even sterilize their residents.

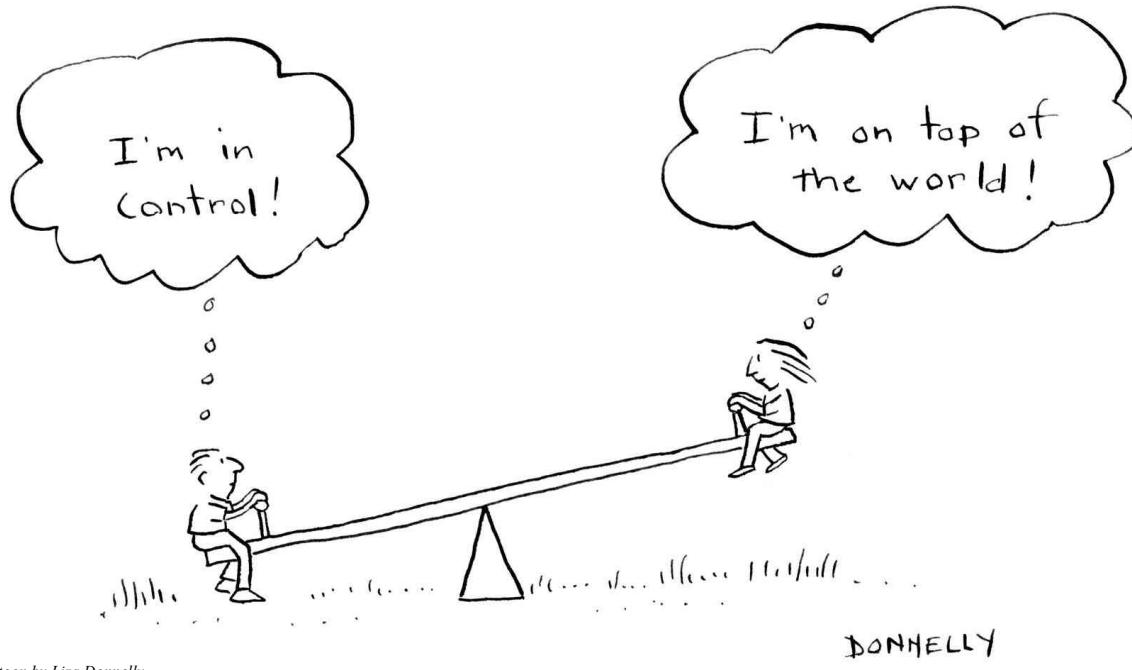
But it was in post-Mandate Palestine that the legacy of imperial violence was most enduring. The British had secured their hold on the territory by issuing promissory notes to multiple claimants: Arab élites were offered the prospect of an independent kingdom or nation; Zionists, the prospect of a national home; European allies, the prospect of a carve-up. With the land thrice promised and its peoples played against one another by shifting British policies, the cycles of violence and repression ahead had been underwritten. Not long after a 1947 United Nations vote divided the Mandate into Jewish and Arab states, Israeli security forces began emulating British methods, from killing civilians to flattening whole villages. In 1952, a British-controlled concern that excavated potash and other Dead Sea minerals—the immense value of which Hughie Tudor had extolled to Churchill—passed quietly into the control of the Israeli government. In 1969, when Israel's Prime Minister Golda Meir asserted that "there was no such thing as Palestinians," she was, in a way, asserting an erasure of recognition and rights which the British Empire had set in motion half a century before.

Yet "Legacy of Violence" goes further than detailing the depravities of empire; it has a larger thesis to advance, concerning liberal imperialism's extraordinary resilience. The test of that thesis must be its ability to explain

not only how the Empire endured but also how it ended. And it's here that Elkins's account runs into trouble.

I grew up in the post-colonial states of Kenya, Senegal, and India, and one constant was hearing stirring stories about "fathers of the nation" on the state-run radio. Later, encountering scholarship that reflected Gallagher's argument that decolonization was "not usually a victory won by freedom-fighters," I came to view nationalist mythmaking with a cooler eye. A cooler eye, but never quite a cold one: Was what Gallagher had called the great, wave-tossed ship of empire really so imperturbable, I wondered, that it went down "without agony" at its own command? Did the doings of those local heroes amount to nothing?

So I sat up when Elkins, in her opening pages, says that the story of liberal imperialism is "also a story of demands from below." One lively chapter centers on C. L. R. James, George Padmore, and other Black anti-colonial radicals of the nineteen-thirties and forties, who called out the hypocrisies of empire in lacerating prose. She also follows Cypriot activists of the nineteen-fifties as they partnered with Greek lawyers and the London-based Movement for Colonial Freedom to bring a British campaign of murder and torture to international attention. But Elkins rules that, ultimately, these and other nonviolent challenges by colonial subjects and their allies around the world "did little to alter coercion's grip on the empire."



Cartoon by Liza Donnelly

For her, all such efforts were bound to be impotent because she is convinced of liberal imperialism's ability to absorb and neutralize criticism—something that more brittle ideologies like Nazi Lebensraum could not do. Britain's colonial subjects protested, questions were raised in Parliament, inquiries were commissioned, reports were printed and shelved, and, in the end, repressive capacities emerged with tempered strength. Liberal imperialism, in Elkins's telling, was thus a self-repairing, ever-expanding web. When her theory corners her into an account of the final unravelling of empire couched largely in terms of high-policy calculations about when to forgo power and instead pursue influence, it's as if the ghosts of imperial history that she set out to vanquish had returned to inhabit her book.

The story of the British Empire in the twentieth century is also a story of forced retraction. Unfortunately, the forensic skill that Elkins applies to empire's incarnadine claws is less in evidence when it comes to the nationalist tactics that, decade by decade, helped loosen their grip. As Lee Kuan Yew, who worked to throw off the British in Singapore, famously noted, one way for the weaker to defy the more powerful was to become a poisonous shrimp: "they sting." In 1930, Gandhi launched the Salt Satyagraha with a twenty-five-day march protesting a tax imposed by the British salt monopoly—a brilliant bit of counterpropaganda theatre that goes unmentioned in this book. In the wake of that nonviolent mass mobilization,

with the international press watching, the British were limited in the violence they could deploy in India.

As Elkins has it, Gandhian approaches were ineffectual because the only language empire really understood was violence. She details at length how Zionists like Menachem Begin and his Irgun, having been schooled by Tudor's legatees in the deployment of terror, used attacks and assassinations to expel the British. Colonized peoples in Africa and elsewhere wrote off nonviolence less quickly. Regardless of how incremental or indirect the progress could seem in the moment, empire's financial or reputational costs could still be ratcheted up beyond what was supportable.

In the late nineteen-fifties, in the southeastern African protectorate of Nyasaland (now Malawi), the Nyasaland African Congress employed tactics of noncoöperation to protest a federation established by British rulers with white-settler-dominated Southern and Northern Rhodesia. The British declared emergency rule and killed some fifty Africans—atrocities that the survivors labored to bring to the attention of the world. The British were pressured into investigating whether the emergency rule was necessary, resulting in a report by Justice Patrick Devlin. Elkins's loyalty to her quasi-Foucauldian theory of liberal imperialism, as an all-encompassing net of power, leads her to minimize the report's impact. But this one didn't gather dust on a shelf. Weeks after the Devlin report arraigned the colonial government for running a “police state,” representatives of Ghana cited that stark conclusion in the U.N., as momentum gathered for a landmark resolution: a formal call for an end to colonial rule. In the next five years, the British withdrew from eleven colonies, Nyasaland among them.

Although Elkins nods from time to time at empire's variety and “kaleidoscopic processes,” her quest for a unifying theory sends her gliding over significant distinctions in the governance of wildly different colonial territories—some crowded treaty ports, some sparse hinterlands, some with settler populations, some holdings acquired in the eighteenth century and others in the twentieth. She posits the presence of a “colonial state”—enforcer of order and dispenser of violence across the various jurisdictions of empire—and yet the capacity to deliver and control violence was hardly uniform. In the late nineteen-thirties, as the Arab revolt in the Mandate was under way, plantation and factory workers rose up in Jamaica, whose

bananas and sugar were more immediately valuable than even the potash of Palestine. Initially, true to form, the British killed resisters, but when protests intensified the Empire didn't unleash the Dobermans and quell the workers. Instead, Britain started making concessions. Six years later, the Jamaicans had gained universal suffrage, becoming one of the first British colonies to be fully enfranchised. Hughie Tudor was one face of empire; it had others.

By the time Elkins considers the case of Aden, which she identifies as the end point of her great arc of post-1945 imperial violence, she seems to have lost the energy to insert another colony into her nuance-vaporizing ideological apparatus: the port city, with its century of colonization and its final overthrow, is dispatched in a single paragraph. Perhaps theories of imperial power this grand don't need to descend to the specific case?

Just as the nature of colonial governance varied across time and space, so did liberalism, whose "perfidiousness" is as much a bête noir of Elkins's book as empire is. Strains of liberalism embraced or accommodated paternalism, racism, and authoritarianism, helping provide intellectual cover for unimaginable cruelty. Yet liberal philosophies also elaborated ideas of autonomy, individuality, and collective self-rule that, in turn, seeded principles about legitimacy that anti-colonial thinkers and activists enlisted to their cause. Amid colonial condescension about their peoples' civilizational adequacy, they sought to teach their Western liberal counterparts to imagine politics in genuinely universalist terms.

In Elkins's book, however, the contributions of intellectuals like Tagore and Yeats are notable only as "accounts of suffering and resilience," just as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Josiah Mwangi Kariuki are valued for their "firsthand accounts of suffering." Ingrained presumptions can be hard for even self-described "revisionist" historians of empire to shake off, and one such presumption involves the division of intellectual labor. The judgment about whose ideas and actions counted in the making of history is taken as the prerogative of the professional historian, usually Western. The primary job of colonial subjects, for these historians, is to have borne witness: their task, in Elkins's account, is to pen "wrenching indictments" that leave "a trail of evidence" for her and her colleagues to follow.

Near the end of “Legacy of Violence,” Elkins revisits the campaign to bring justice to the Mau Mau victims in the London courts, describing a climactic moment when, after her work in the Kenyan uplands to recover the survivors’ stories, she helped expose “liberal imperialism’s underbelly” to the world. To underline what she was up against in that recovery effort, she invokes, as she often does, a line from Kenya’s first leader, Jomo Kenyatta: “Let us agree that we shall never refer to the past.” Curiously, though, she fails to acknowledge that, shortly after those words were spoken, government officials and private citizens in Kenya embarked on a decades-long effort to surmount British stonewalling and reconstruct the nation’s colonial history. Remembering wasn’t just the white man’s burden. Mau Mau veterans and former detainees, too, were piecing together their past, bridling at being cast as mere spectators to how their history was shaped. Although the movement was long banned by the government, a study by the historian Wunyabari O. Maloba noted that, by the mid-nineteen-eighties, former members were gathering evidence to counter the narratives being produced by scholars. Soon, there were nearly two hundred groups of lay historians. Assisting them were renegade British ex-colonial officers like John Nottingham, who had married the sister of a Mau Mau general, helped Kariuki write his memoir, and been working to connect movement activists to professional historians, Elkins included.

A salutary methodological precept of Elkins’s is that, because official records can’t be trusted, historical sourcing must be broad and deep. So I was surprised to see such a shrewd scholar repeatedly minimize the impact of anti-colonial thinkers and actors. As she once again evoked her “arduous” struggle in Kenya, meanwhile skating over a colonized people’s greater struggle to bring their own history to light, I found myself reminded of the stirring hero tales of my childhood—tales that, as Elkins reminds us, should not always be taken whole. Like the historians she draws on, she has added important dimension to our still partial understanding of the British Empire’s sadism and hypocrisy, joining the novelists and the dramatists who, as she says, have reminded the world “that alternative narratives lie buried beneath the rubble of power.” Yet oversimplified theories are themselves prone to bury other histories. The ungainly truth is that liberal thought has been a resource for repression and resistance alike, and theories of imperial power impatient with this ambiguity may not withstand the scrutiny they deserve. ♦

By [Casey Cep](#)

Content

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Two weeks after the novelist Harry Crews died, the *Times* appended a correction to his obituary. The original version had reported that as a child “he fell into a cauldron of scalding water used to slough the skin off slaughtered hogs.” The correction clarified that the scalding water was for sloughing off the hair.

Dehairing a shoat is the sort of thing Crews knew all about, along with cooking possum, cleaning a rooster’s craw, making moonshine, trapping birds, tanning hides, and getting rid of screwworms. Although he lived until 2012, Crews and his books—sixteen novels, two essay collections, and a memoir—recall a bygone era. The best of what he wrote evokes W.P.A. guides or Foxfire books, full of gripping folklore and hardscrabble lives, stories from the back of beyond about a time when the world seemed black and white in all possible senses.

We often wonder why a writer fades from prominence, but with Crews it’s easy to chart the course to his obscurity. There’s so much brawling, drinking, domestic abuse, disease, mutilation, racist talk, racial violence, rape, sociopathy, and womanizing in his work that no algorithm could design an author more certain to fail the Bechdel test, the DuVernay test, the Vito Russo test, and any other test to which art is subjected these days. But Crews wrote about what he knew, not as endorsement or even by way of explanation—it was simply the wellspring for his writing.

Forsaken regions and forgotten subcultures were Crews’s material. His novels—including “The Hawk Is Dying,” which is his best known, and “A Feast of Snakes,” which is his best—were flawed, but the memoir is flawless, one of the finest ever written by an American. Crews was a decade into his career, with six novels to his name, when his publisher rejected an autobiographical manuscript that he submitted. The memoir that he crafted in the face of that rejection answers some specific questions, namely where its author came from and how he became a writer, but it asks broader ones, too: why anyone becomes anything, how we square our pasts with our

futures, and why certain things—a book, its author—are rescued from oblivion.

The memoir’s title alone merits a small eternity’s worth of consideration. “A Childhood: The Biography of a Place,” first published in 1978, has just been reissued as a Penguin Classic. The childhood recorded in its pages unfolds in the thirties and forties, and the place it brings to life is Bacon County, Georgia. The title’s colon balances two improbabilities: that the events in the book really did occur in a single person’s early life, and that those events, far from extraordinary for their time or setting, represent a common experience, shared by kin and community.

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Crews was born in 1935, in the county seat of Alma, some two hundred miles south of Atlanta, not too far north of the Okefenokee Swamp, in a one-room house that his father, using crosscut saws, wedges, mallets, and axes, built on a patch of land that had to be cleared of pine trees, palmetto thickets, and gallberry bushes. His parents, Ray and Myrtice, were tenant farmers, and they moved from one plot to another, surrounded by neighbors engaged in the same near-subsistence existence, each family possessed of so few belongings that everything they owned could be inventoried in just a couple of sentences. “Families were important then,” Crews writes, “and they were important not because the children were useful in the fields to break corn and hoe cotton and drop potato vines in wet weather or help with hog butchering and all the rest of it. No, they were important because a large family was the only thing a man could be sure of having.”

Crews’s own family was a source of mystery and torment. His father died when Crews was twenty-one months old, struck down in his sleep by a heart attack so sudden that it did not wake his wife or their two sons, with whom he was sharing a bed. Crews’s mother then married his father’s brother, Pascal, an arrangement kept secret from Crews until many years later. All manner of relatives, mostly on Crews’s mother’s side, walk into and out of “A Childhood,” some of them imparting comfort, comedy, or wisdom, others offering orneriness, bad news, or terrible advice. “I come from people who believe the *home place* is as vital and necessary as the beating of your own heart,” Crews writes. But because his family moved around so much,

“driven from pillar to post,” he has no such place. As a result, he regards all of Bacon County as his home, and the memoir is full of local characters: the faith healer Hollis Toomey, who is “drawn to a bad burn the way iron filings are drawn to a magnet”; the moonshiner Tweek Fletchum, who once shot at Crews’s daddy (he missed, and it was only bird shot anyway); Crews’s best friend’s grandmother Auntie, a former slave who convinces Crews that he sleepwalks because a bird spit in his mouth; and Bad Eye Carter, a man so mean that he chops off the hand of another man for resting it on his fencepost. (“Two of Bad Eye Carter’s kinsmen were killed in the fight to get the hand back,” Crews writes, explaining that the man who lost it had “wanted to give it a Christian burial.”)

Even Crews’s nameless characters are as memorable as the main characters of some memoirs. Consider the mulemen, the perfect avatars—homespun yet Homeric—of the place Crews comes from and of how ably he writes about it. “A mule man,” Crews says of these masters of animal husbandry, “can always tell within a year or two how old a mule is.” Mules, he goes on, shed two teeth a year until they are five years old, but, after that, determining their age gets trickier:

Then you have to go to the cups to tell his age. Mules and horses have little trenches, called cups, in the top of each tooth. Eating corn and picking up sand when they graze on grass wear down those cups. Each year they become shallower, and by the time he’s ten he becomes what farmers call smooth-mouthed. When the cups are entirely gone, the mule starts to get a noticeable overbite—buck-toothed. From the age of ten until the animal dies, it becomes progressively harder to get his age with much certainty.

Unless, that is, you are a real muleman, in which case you can get the age of a mule from how his haunches sit, how he walks, whether he has stiff joints or sore spots, how shiny his coat is, and whether he kicks. Any market invites fraud, though, and mulemen are matched by mouth doctors, who, for a dollar if they aren’t very good or for five if they are, will use a drill to recondition a mule’s teeth, the way a used-car salesman might roll back a car’s odometer. This makes Crews’s memoir sound like “Moby-Mule,” but the whole equine excursus is only a few paragraphs, a short prelude to an explanation of how Crews’s mother came to pay twenty dollars for a mule

named Pete, who had to stop every seventy yards to rest, not because he was tired but because he'd picked up the habit from the eighty-year-old farmer who owned him before.

Earlier, when Crews describes how he fell into the cauldron of boiling water, the accident is prefaced by a granular account of hog-killing in Bacon County. He moves between several registers—the culinary, the veterinary, the down-home—deploying highly specific words like a poet: goozle, haslet, gallus, gambreling stick, cracklins, headcheese, heel strings. After Christmas, when the winter was deep and the crops were in, families would gather at a farm, as if for a barn raising, to butcher hogs, putting meat away in a smokehouse for the coming year. The temperature outside, cold enough for the pork not to spoil, was crucial, as was the temperature of the water into which the hogs were dipped: too hot and the hair stiffens and can't be removed from the hide; just right and “the hair slips off smooth as butter, leaving a white, naked, utterly beautiful pig.”

That perfect temperature was still so blistering that it scalded Crews, who was five when he tumbled into the water after being snapped off a chain of children playing pop-the-whip. Crews remembers a neighbor reaching into the water to get him out, and then, as if he were one of the hogs, the skin on his hand slipping off like a glove, fingernails and all, and collecting into a puddle on the ground.

That was the third time in about as many years that Crews's life nearly ended. The year before, he woke up with his legs drawn up under him, suffering from what he would later learn was polio. He was told that he would never walk again, and months of bed rest left him with a sense of being both blessed and cursed, granted special privileges but subjected to endless stares and speculation about his infirmities. Three years before that, when he was just a toddler, his father had been spraying the family's tobacco fields for cutworms when their two yearling cows wandered near a barrel of poison. His mother ran to shoo them away, and when she came back into the house Crews was bleeding from his lips, holding the raw lye that she had been using to clean the floors. They rushed the boy to the doctor, and when they returned home the cows were dead anyway, having got into the poison while they were gone. “How tragic it was and how typical,” Crews writes. “The world that circumscribed the people I come from had so little margin

for error, for bad luck, that when something went wrong, it almost always brought something else down with it.”

Tenant farmers, mouth doctors, faith healers, conjure women: the Bacon County of Crews’s book is populated with people who know how to do things—the kinds of things that can help you survive, if they don’t kill you. And Crews knew how to do things, too, things he learned in his home place, the same way others learned their trades. Storytelling was something everyone in Bacon County did, and Crews paid attention. He practiced what he learned by making up tales about the people in Sears, Roebuck and Company catalogues. These characters would invariably come to bad ends, because that was the direction most stories tended where Crews came from. The men around him told tales about people they knew, full of violence and death and yet somehow always darkly funny; the women told harrowing stories about anyone at all. “It was always the women who scared me,” Crews writes.

By way of example, he sits us down on the floor of his family’s cabin, under his mother’s large, square quilting frame, listening as she and other women sew, their thimbles and needles clicking like keys on a typewriter. “The Lord works in mysterious ways,” one woman says. “None of us knows the reason.” The quilters keep on with their staccato sermonizing about the certainty of God’s mysteries and the need to keep the faith—and then comes the turn: “A week ago tomorrow I heard tell of something that do make a body wonder, though.”



"Why don't you look at me the way you look at anyone with pizza?"
Cartoon by Emily Bernstein

“Nobody asks what she heard,” Crews writes. “They know she’ll tell. The needles click over the thimbles in the stretching silence. Down on the floor we stop sucking and have the sugar tits caught between our teeth.” That “we” is Crews and two other young children, but it includes us, too, since the stories of how Crews learned to write are also fine demonstrations of how well he does it. Like all of Crews’s stories, it is built on diction so distinctive that it’s confined to one or two census tracts, on sentences so plumb that you could rest a level on them, and on characters you cannot forget.

What Woolf wrote of Dickens is true of Crews: he has astonishing powers of characterization, and he sketches full figures with striking simplicity. Such individuals could seem like caricatures, except that they are seen as children see: with attention, curiosity, and awe. Crews’s childhood is Dickensian in other ways, too—ways that are almost unimaginable in today’s safety-strapped, cotton-balled world. He loved imagining the lives of the models in the Sears catalogue because they seemed wildly unlikely to him: none of them had scars, and all of them had complete sets of fingers, teeth, and limbs. The people in his world were maimed and marked by hard labor and hard living.

This was true not only on the surface but often at the core. Crews recognized the ugliness in Bacon County as well as the beauty, and he did not shy away from the former. The first page of “A Childhood” is an account of how Crews’s father “got the clap” from a “flat-faced Seminole girl.” Later, “the sorriest man in the county” uses a racial slur as an “affectionate name” for his wife, and an aunt interrupts Crews when he refers to a Black man by the honorific “Mister” to tell him that he should use the same slur. A friend’s father routinely beats his entire family “until he had punched them all enough to make them listen,” and Crews’s stepfather menaces his family with fists and a twelve-gauge until Crews’s mother finally takes the kids and flees. She tells a crying Crews, cold and tired from walking through the night, to quit wishing that he could go back to his father. “Wish in one hand and shit in the other,” she says. “See which one fills up first.”

We all leave childhood behind, but we don’t all leave everything behind, as Crews did. First, his mother moved her sons a hundred miles south to Jacksonville, Florida; then Crews left for the Marine Corps, eventually attending the University of Florida on the G.I. Bill. After earning a graduate degree in education, he became a creative-writing professor and taught in Gainesville for thirty years. Every one of these moves took him farther from Bacon County—if not in miles then in milestones, each more estranging than the last.

“Blood, Bone, and Marrow,” a readable and sympathetic biography by Ted Geltner, from 2016, chronicles the other seventy years of Crews’s life after the six recorded in “A Childhood.” In Gainesville, Crews became an acolyte of the novelist and critic Andrew Lytle, an associate of Robert Penn Warren and Allen Tate. Crews hated suburbs and strip malls as much as any Southern Agrarian did, but he knew too much about subsistence living to defend it; he came from a different class and arrived at a different politics than most of the Agrarians. That was true when it came to what he later called the “racist virus,” which he insisted he never caught, even though he was exposed to it like air during childhood. Lytle taught Crews about craft, both how to hone it and how to teach it, but Crews ultimately rebelled against his teacher and the field of creative writing. He was alienated by the middle-class life style that the university setting offered, and he acted out by offending its mores and transgressing its rules. He also transgressed in his personal life, which remained as turbulent as it had been in his childhood.

He married and divorced the same woman twice; they lost their firstborn when the boy, not yet four, drowned in a neighbor's pool.

A one-novel-a-year pace through much of the sixties and seventies gave way to three decades in which Crews, by his own account, wasn't sober a single day. He drank booze and did cocaine, Dilaudid, Darvon, heroin, quaaludes, and any other drugs he could find; in between benders, visits to rehab, and affairs with students, he put together a few dozen essays and features for magazines, including *Playboy* and *Esquire*. For much of his life, Crews looked like he belonged either behind a bar or behind bars: his head was wide like his shoulders, he had worry lines and wrinkles that looked as deep as the furrows in a field, and he showed off as much muscle and tattoo as the weather allowed. He was obsessed with sports—bodybuilding, boxing, drag racing, dogfighting, karate, hawking. While working on a story about a pipeline in Alaska, he woke up one morning with a black hinge inked on one of his elbows. Years later, he covered an arm with a smiling skull and the calligraphed words of an E. E. Cummings poem: “how do you like your blue-eyed boy, Mister Death?”

Death was often—too often—the agent of plot in Crews’s novels, many of which don’t end so much as stop when the main character is murdered. His first, “The Gospel Singer,” which Penguin has also reissued, closes with the titular singer hanging from a tree after his last revival goes off the rails; his seventh, “The Gypsy’s Curse,” reveals at the end that the whole book is a confession to murder by its protagonist, Marvin Molar, a deaf man who lives at a gym, where he works exclusively on his upper body because he has stumps for legs. A turnrow Tarantino, Crews had a thing for, as he put it, “people who have special considerations under God,” the sorts of folks others called freaks—an identity that he had claimed for himself during his bout with polio. His novel “Car” features Herman Mack of Auto-Town, who eats an entire Ford Maverick a half a pound at a time, passing each day’s metal so that his bowel movements can be sold as souvenir key chains. “Naked in Garden Hills” stars a six-hundred-pound phosphate magnate, Mayhugh Aaron, and his manservant, John Henry Williams, who is ninety pounds when soaking wet.

The bleak dénouements in Crews’s fiction sometimes feel contrived, but the conclusion of “A Childhood” is one of the more heartbreaking banishments

since the angel took up a flaming sword in Genesis. It unfolds in the briefest of epilogues, hanging like a price tag at the end. Two decades have passed; Crews is home from the Marine Corps, working a tobacco field with some cousins on a July day so hot that he curses the sun—a blasphemy to the boys, who see him for what he has become. “I stood there feeling how much I had left this place and these people,” he writes, “and at the same time knowing that it would be forever impossible to leave them completely.”

A lot of us feel betwixt and between our roots and our branches. Among writers, Crews is in good company: this is the turf cut by Seamus Heaney in “Digging,” and it’s the longest journey in the world as described by Norman Podhoretz in “Making It.” Although the tone of “A Childhood” is anything but inspirational, the book itself is inherently so: we know that the little boy grows up to be the writer he always wanted to be, even if his books didn’t sell as well as he wanted, or got bad reviews, or are now so hard to find that old paperback versions get passed around like rare 78s.

More than a few times in Crews’s life, it seemed like he was about to catch a lucky break. Elvis was going to play the lead in a film adaptation of “The Gospel Singer,” and when that didn’t work out Tom Jones bought the rights, but the movie was never made. Later, Madonna became interested in his work, as did Sean Penn, who gave him a cameo as a grieving father in “The Indian Runner,” but, despite hopes and rumors, they never adapted any of Crews’s books. Kim Gordon borrowed his name for an obscure punk band she helped start, which released an album with track titles that were homages to his work. Then she got busy with Sonic Youth. Fame was as awkward and unstable a fit for Crews as the academy—two more yearling cows that went belly-up.

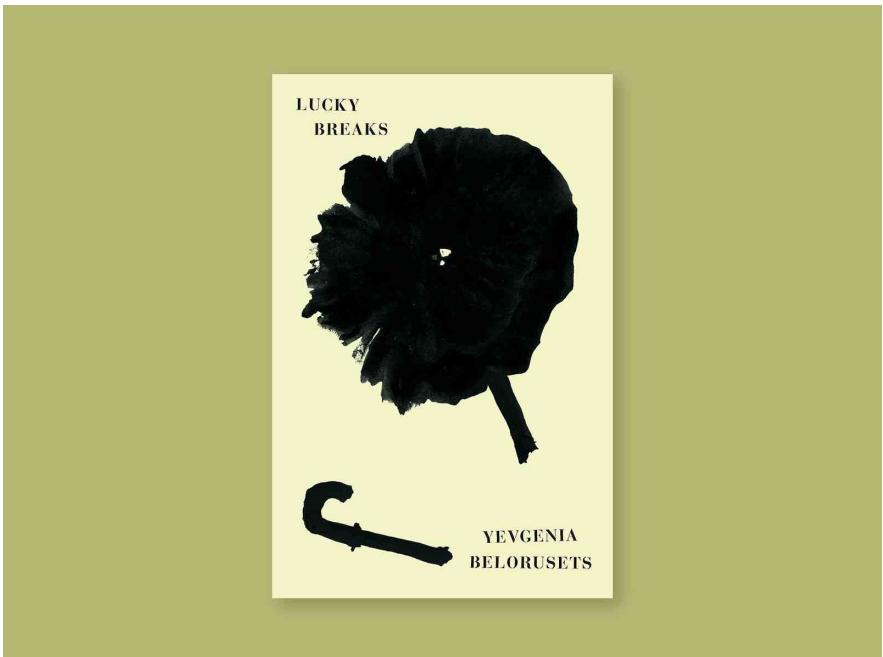
Like so much in Crews’s life, “A Childhood” was salvaged from disaster. As Geltner details in his biography, Crews turned in a draft of a memoir called “Take 38,” covering his first thirty-eight years, to the renowned editor Robert Gottlieb, then at Knopf. Gottlieb saw it for what it was: a briar patch of incomplete and incoherent autobiographical ideas, including, most regrettably, a drug-fuelled travelogue wherein Crews attempted to hike the Appalachian Trail from the Blue Ridge Mountains of Georgia to the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference, in Vermont. Forget thirty-eight years, Gottlieb told Crews; the first eight were the best. Those years contained, in keeping

with Rousseau's dictum, everything necessary to an understanding of the book's subject.

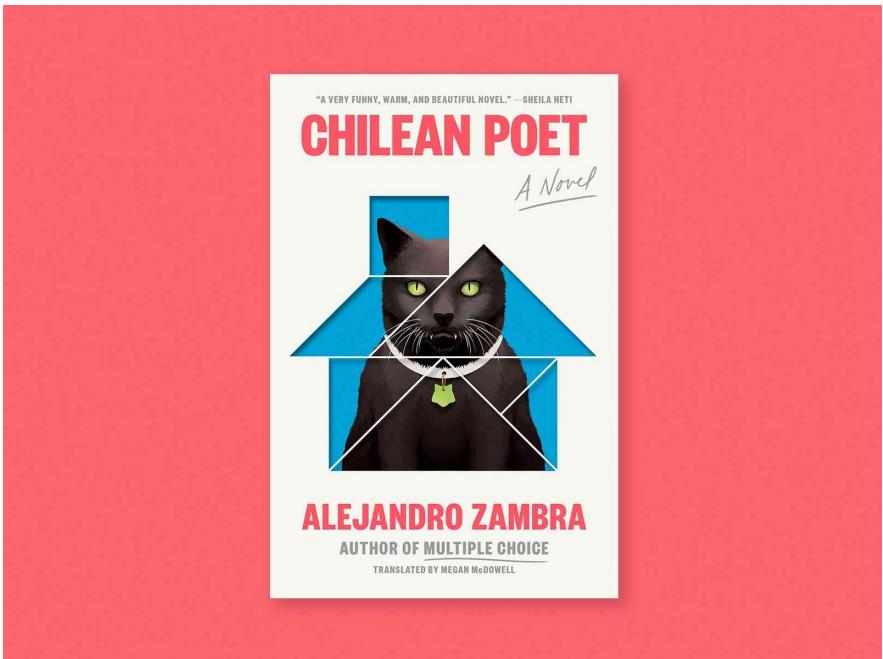
Gottlieb was right, but Crews struggled to implement his advice. He liked to tell his students that the secret to writing was to "put your ass on the chair," but, for the first time in his life, he experienced writer's block. He began sitting by himself in the dark and talking into a tape recorder, trying to mimic forgotten voices and resurrect lost lives. When he finished, Knopf didn't publish the memoir, but Harper & Row finally did.

Today, "A Childhood" would likely be packaged as an insider's account of red America or as an advertisement for the American Dream, but Crews had more personal hopes for the book. "When I sat down to write," he later explained, "my dead father and his brother, who was also my father, haunted me and lived in my dreams, dreams that were an inseparable mix of the unendurable and unspeakable, the good and the bad. There was too much I did not understand. I wanted to understand it so I could stop thinking about it. I thought if I could relive it and set it all down in detailed, specific language, I would be purged of it." The memoir did no such thing. "It almost killed me, but it purged nothing," he wrote.

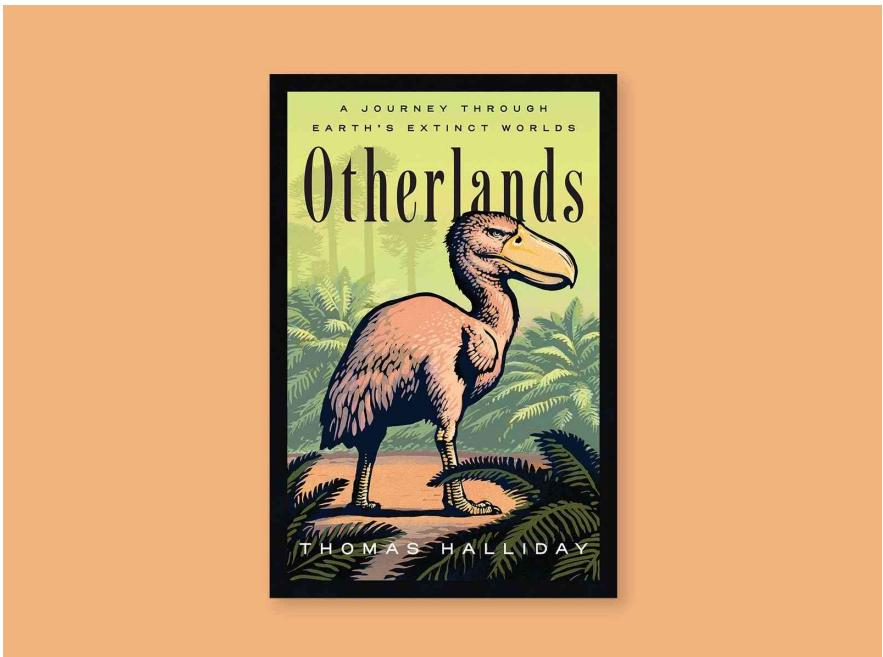
He knew that history, even our own personal history, can take the form of myth if we let it, and he hints at this in the memoir's opening: "My first memory is of a time ten years before I was born, and the memory takes place where I have never been and involves my daddy whom I never knew." What he then recounts is something he was once told. Much of what we know about the world is secondhand, as is everything we know about the past, and we demonize or mythologize it at our peril. Find a way to cherish it, sure, but Crews knew better than to reject the world that made him or to romanticize what he barely survived. The beauty of "A Childhood: The Biography of a Place" is that it animates nostalgia and then annihilates it. Crews never says that it was better then or he is better now, only that this is who he is and this is how it was. "Survival," the book's epigraph says, "is triumph enough." ♦



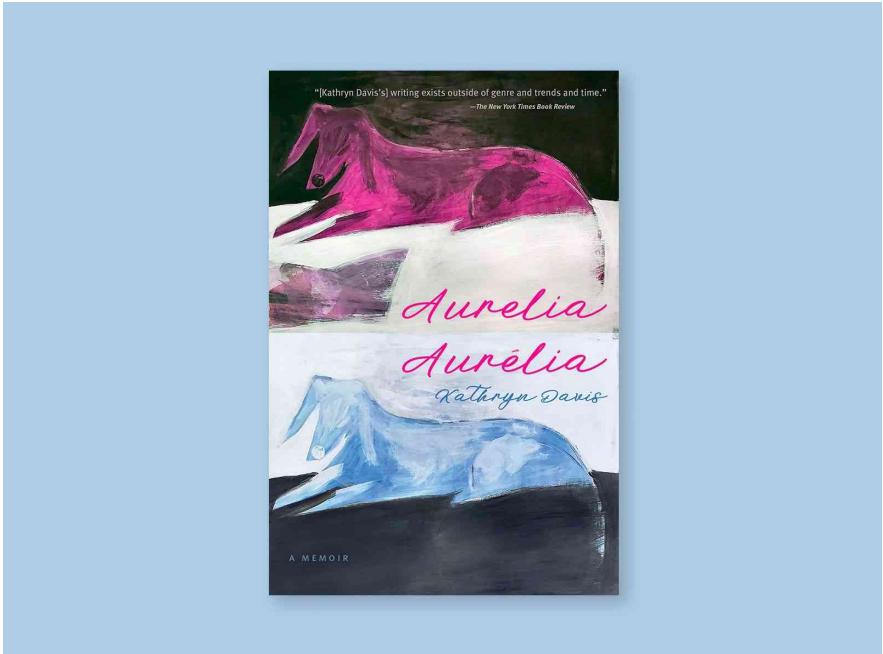
Lucky Breaks, by Yevgenia Belorusets, translated from the Russian by Eugene Ostashevsky (New Directions). Published in Ukraine in 2018, these surreal short stories by a noted photographer probe the experiences of women from the Donbas region, many of whom fled the separatist conflict that erupted in 2014 and now live as refugees in Kyiv. The stories, ethnographic in perspective but Gogolian in register, gravitate toward inexplicable disappearances, repressed memories, and phantasmagoria. Belorusets writes of “the deep penetration of traumatic historical events into the fantasies . . . of everyday life” and richly evokes the fatalistic humor of her marginalized characters, one of whom observes, “If you had the luck to be born here, you take things as they come.”



[**Chilean Poet**](#), by Alejandro Zambra, translated from the Spanish by Megan McDowell (Viking). This charming novel follows Gonzalo, an aspiring poet, from his teen-age sonnets and sexual escapades to his relationship with a girlfriend, Carla, and her son, whom Gonzalo adopts as his stepson. (Gonzalo notes the unfortunate resonance between the Spanish for stepfather, *padrastro*, and *poetastro*, bad poet.) The stepson, Vicente, also wants to be a poet, and the second half of the novel sends up the Chilean literary scene as he guides a gringa journalist through a country where poetry is a national passion. As one character says, “Being a Chilean poet is like being a Peruvian chef or a Brazilian soccer player or a Venezuelan model.”



[Otherlands](#), by Thomas Halliday (Random House). Covering some five hundred and fifty million years, this history of the Earth's ecology proceeds in reverse chronological order. Each chapter focusses on a single place and time, from the relatively familiar vistas of Pleistocene Alaska to the teeming microbial mats of Ediacaran Australia. These accounts touch on some paleontological favorites—mammoths, dinosaurs, trilobites—but the real stars are the fantastical environments that once characterized our planet, including Antarctic rain forests, glass-sponge reefs, and valleys dominated by giant fungi. As alien as such vistas may seem, Halliday shows that contemporary ecosystems are subject to the same evolutionary and climatological forces, in ways that may point to an over-warm, plastic-strewn future.



[Aurelia, Aurélia](#), by Kathryn Davis (*Graywolf*). In this impressionistic wisp of a memoir, a well-known novelist reflects on the death of her husband, Eric, from cancer. Davis approaches grief slantways. Her chapters, essay-like, often seem to be about something else—having to get off a train during a snowstorm, a friend’s new piano—but then, suddenly, there’s Eric, saying something about home or requesting that the pianist friend play at his memorial. Davis’s dogged inquisitiveness makes it hard for her to find peace with her loss, but it offers moments of clarity. “The skin held the parts together,” she writes, of the brutal mechanics of illness. “Then the corruption set in and the unity of the body was forever destroyed.”

Comment

- [What Is Putin Thinking?](#)

By [David Remnick](#)

In 1996, the year that [Vladimir Putin](#) moved from St. Petersburg to Moscow to take a post inside Boris Yeltsin's Kremlin, the government newspaper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* asked its readers a leading question: "Do you agree that we've had enough democracy, haven't adapted to it, and now it's time to tighten the screws?" The paper set up a hotline and offered the equivalent of two thousand dollars to any caller who could come up with a new "unifying national idea." The exercise reflected an impoverished country demoralized and adrift.

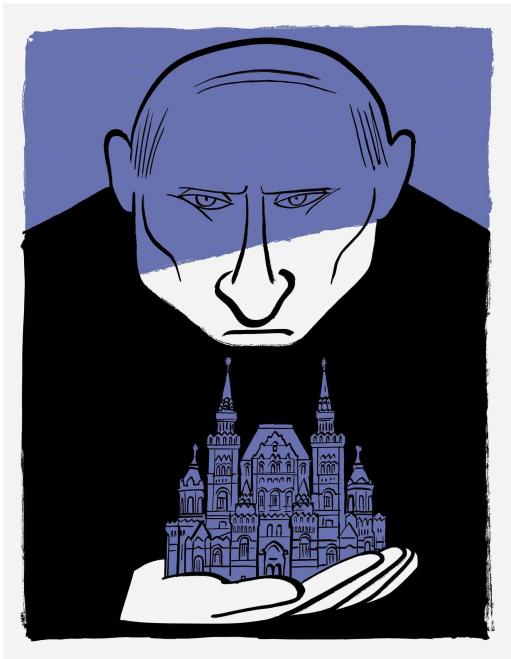


Illustration by João Fazenda

At around the same time, Yeltsin assembled a committee of scholars and politicians to formulate a new "national idea." Perhaps the newspaper contest could feed the process. But the efforts went nowhere. Yeltsin had failed to build any momentum behind democratic ideals, and the political optimism of the period between 1989 and 1991 was, for most Russians, now a bitter memory. The Soviet-era social safety net had been shredded. People were tired of looking through shopwindows at glittering imports while a coterie of [oligarchs](#) were permitted to buy up the country's most valuable state enterprises for kopecks on the ruble. Yeltsin won reëlection, defeating the Communist candidate, Gennady Zyuganov, but only by enlisting those oligarchs who, with self-preservation in mind, bankrolled him and helped cover up his exhaustion and his alcoholism. By the late nineties, democracy,

demokratia, was referred to as *dermokratia*, shit-ocracy. Yeltsin's support fell to the low single digits.

The same intellectuals who had dreamed of free speech, the rule of law, and a general movement toward liberal democracy now experienced acute feelings of failure. “There is no sense of what this new country, Russia, really is,” a prominent cultural historian, Andrei Zorin, said at the time, contrasting the atmosphere with the Enlightenment ferment that attended the birth of the United States and republican France. “These last four or five years in Russia have produced little besides pure hysteria.”

Putin came to power, in 1999, advertised not as a man of ideology but as a figure of rude health and managerial competence. In truth, he was a man of the K.G.B., trained to view the West, particularly the U.S., as his enemy, and to see conspirators everywhere trying to weaken and humiliate Russia. He did not form any committees to devise a national idea; he set up no hotline. He established, over time, a personalist regime built around his patronage and absolute authority. And the national identity he has helped promulgate—illiberal, imperial, resentful of the West—has played an essential role in his brutal [invasion of Ukraine](#).

To create the trappings of this Russian identity, Putin seized on existing strands of reactionary thought. While most observers paid closer attention to the intellectual and political turn to the West in the late nineteen-eighties and nineties, many Russian thinkers, publications, and institutions drew inspiration from far different sources. Newspapers such as *Dyen* (*The Day*) and *Zavtra* (*Tomorrow*) published screeds about the pernicious influence of American cultural and political power. Various academics celebrated the virtues of “the strong hand,” exemplified by such repressive tsars as Alexander III and Nicholas I and foreign autocrats such as Augusto Pinochet. A crackpot philosopher named Aleksandr Dugin published neo-fascist apocalyptic tomes about the eternal battle between the “sea power” of the West and the “land power” of Eurasia, and found an audience in Russian political, military, and intelligence circles.

Putin, from his first years in office, was obsessed with the restoration of Russian might in the world and the positioning of the security services as the singular institution of domestic control. *NATO*'s expansion and the bombing

of Belgrade, Iraq, and Libya propelled his suspicion of the West and his inward turn. He also recognized the importance of symbols and traditional institutions that could unify ordinary people and help define the particularities of a new Russian exceptionalism. He restored the old Soviet anthem with updated lyrics. He told interviewers and visitors that he was an Orthodox believer and did nothing to dispel rumors that he had taken on a *dukhovnik*, a spiritual guide, named Tikhon Shevkunov. Father Tikhon, who has appeared in films and runs the Web site Pravoslavie.ru., denied that he had notable influence over Putin (“I am no Cardinal Richelieu!”), but made it plain that he was a conservative nationalist who believed in the “special path” of Russia.

In 2004, when Ukraine was in the midst of its Orange Revolution, Putin not only called on his security services to combat Kyiv’s drift to the West; he turned up the volume on his conception of an imperial ideology. He began to speak approvingly of such conservative émigré thinkers as Nikolai Berdyaev and Ivan Ilyin, who believed in the exalted destiny of Russia and the artificiality of Ukraine. In case anyone missed the message, the Kremlin distributed the appropriate reading material to regional governors and bureaucrats.

In 2007, the year that Putin delivered a famous diatribe against the West, in Munich, he visited a writer and thinker who had once been considered the greatest enemy of the Soviet state: [Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn](#). Like Putin, Solzhenitsyn believed that Russia and Ukraine were inextricably linked, and Putin tried to exploit Solzhenitsyn’s moral standing to underscore his own disdain for Ukrainian independence. What he conveniently ignored was Solzhenitsyn’s insistence, in 1991, that if Ukrainians chose to go their own way—as they did by a ninety-per-cent vote—he would “warmly congratulate” them. (“We will always be neighbors. Let’s be good neighbors.”)

By the time Putin returned to the Presidency, in 2012, his attention to distinctly conservative values had deepened. He cracked down on dissenters, vilifying them as “traitors,” an American-backed “fifth column.” He occupied [Crimea](#) and invaded eastern Ukraine. His vision of Moscow as a center of anti-liberal ideas and Eurasian power intensified. During the pandemic, he rarely met in person with his advisers, yet, according to the

political analyst Mikhail Zygar, he spoke for days at his dacha with Yury Kovalchuk, a media baron and the largest shareholder in Rossiya Bank, who shares his messianic vision and sybaritic life style. In recent years, Putin has even succeeded in exporting his particular brand of illiberalism to, among others, the National Front, in France; the British National Party; the Jobbik movement, in Hungary; Golden Dawn, in Greece; and the right wing of the Republican Party. As Donald Trump's ideologist, Steve Bannon, put it recently, "Ukraine's not even a country."

The devastation of Mariupol and other Ukrainian cities suggests that there is little mercy or modesty in Putin's faith. Early in his reign, according to the journalist Catherine Belton, he went with his confidant, banker, and eventual antagonist Sergei Pugachev to an Orthodox service on Forgiveness Sunday, which is celebrated just before Lent. Pugachev, a believer, told Putin that he should prostrate himself before the priest, as an act of contrition. "Why should I?" Putin is said to have replied. "I am the President of the Russian Federation. Why should I ask for forgiveness?" ♦

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Friday, March 25, 2022](#)

By [Robyn Weintraub](#)

Explorers Club

- A Secret Voyage Across the Seven Seas of Central Park

By [Ben McGrath](#)

If you see something, say something, or so we're often told, though on a recent moonlit night in Central Park the sight of two men lifting Kevlar canoes over the iron fence around the reservoir seemed to concern no one. Joggers jogged, walkers walked—and Neil King and Tyler Maroney, self-styled urban rusticators, scampered down a steep embankment and pushed off into what King later called the “epicenter of emptiness” for an illicit crossing of Manhattan’s largest body of freshwater. A hundred yards in, they clapped paddles together, in celebration. Twenty minutes later, they were high and dry again, heading south and portaging to the Turtle Pond, in anticipation of an amphibious assault on Belvedere Castle.



Neil King Illustration by João Fazenda

This lark was King’s idea. A former *Wall Street Journal* reporter, he’d decided last year, amid what he called “the blur” of formless *COVID* days, to walk from his home, in Washington, D.C., to New York—a ramble to the Ramble, as he conceived it. While he worked on a book about the experience, a yearning for new adventure took hold. During the winter, he went through a “polar phase,” devouring stories about Antarctic exploration. (“Seriously, shut up about Shackleton,” his wife, Shailagh Murray, an administrator at Columbia, told him.) With spring approaching, and the blur sadly extant, he set his sights on something more realistic and truly novel—traversing what he calls the Seven Seas of Central Park, from north to south:

the Harlem Meer; the Pool, west of the North Meadow; the reservoir; the Turtle Pond; the Lake; the Conservatory Water, with its model sailboats; and the Pond, across from the Plaza. Speaking of his paddling partner Maroney, a private investigator based in Los Angeles, King said, “Not that Tyler is fourth on my dance card, but I floated it to a couple of people, and they were, like, ‘No, I already spent one night in a jail in New York, and I don’t want to do it again.’”

A hitch emerged during daylight recon: the Conservatory Water had none. It was a basin of mud, apparently drained for maintenance. So they substituted the Loch, a stream that descends from the Pool under a stone arch. King produced photocopies of old maps showing what used to be called Montayne’s Rivulet, originating on West 101st Street. Neither man wore a life jacket. Maroney brought a ziplock bag for his phone—“just in case there’s a capsiz,” he said. King, courting danger, carried in his backpack a laptop that he’d forgotten to remove. On two occasions, while attempting to enter the Loch, King took on water and had to turn his canoe upside down before starting over.

Each boat weighed less than twenty pounds. The lightness proved helpful both in forestalling fatigue during the long overland stretches and in facilitating the pair’s most triumphant moment: scaling the hundred-plus feet of schist up to the castle with canoes perched on shoulders, and stumbling only briefly near the top. “What do you call it when you mix canoeing and free soloing?” Maroney said, as King poured restorative hot toddies from a thermos. King called this their “Guns of Navarone” moment, alluding to Gregory Peck’s ascent of a cliff on the Aegean. Nearby, in the castle’s courtyard, there was a different sort of blur, emanating from the toy lightsabres of “Star Wars” reënactors, who paid the invaders no mind.

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Five down, two to go. Putting in on the north end of the Lake, Maroney paused to admire the “view of the oligarchs” on Central Park South. Under the Bow Bridge they soon drifted. Pedestrians were scarcer, and scores of ducks registered annoyance at the invasion of their accustomed privacy. Still no sign of cops. “We flattered ourselves that the authorities were going to care,” King said. “I’d worked out all these retorts.”

Midnight approached as they launched into the Pond. The proximity of the skyscrapers created what King called a “Grand Canyon effect” from water level, like a sheer rock face. It had been three hours since they began. Neither captain was quite ready to relinquish his ship. Surely nobody had ever done this before, and they wanted to bask in the moment. After a few victory laps and some flash-enabled selfies (more blur), the two disembarked and hugged. King hailed a taxi to retrieve his car in Harlem, while Maroney waited with the canoes on Fifth Avenue. ♦

Fiction

- “The Ukraine”

By [Artem Chapeye](#)

She and I converged on a sullen love for our country. A hate-love, some might say. A love with a dash of masochism, I used to say. A love in defiance of pain, she used to say. And that was how she and I loved each other, too—through pain and a bit frantically.

Almost every weekend, she and I would get on a train or a bus and head off somewhere. And, in Ukraine, you can get far in the course of a weekend. And make it home, too. Only once were we late for work on a Monday—when we were hitchhiking back from Milove, in the Luhansk region, in January. It's the easternmost point of the country. We made it there on buses and headed back on foot along a snow-covered road, hand in hand. We had just fallen in love then. Guys in Soviet-style Zhiguli four-doors were giving us rides, no problem, but each time they'd give us a lift for only a few kilometres, then drop us at the side of the road and turn off toward their villages. We shivered in the blue twilight, but we were happy.

We felt a melancholy love for precisely everything in Ukraine that annoyed many of our acquaintances. The random thrashiest of thrash metal on intercity buses. The obligatory multi-hour sessions of awful comedy shows like “Evening Quarter.” The flat-screen TVs at the fancier bus stations, like Dnipro, where the thrash on the speakers was even harsher—like that little rap that goes, “The best feeling’s when you’re the coolest of ‘em all”—and performed by Ukrainians who write their names in the Roman alphabet because they think it will be more familiar and appealing in the West. The sour smell of the alcohol that was poured in semidarkness on the lower bunks of the economy-class sleeper car while we were trying to fall asleep on the top ones. The instant coffee in plastic cups and the plasticky sausages in hot-dog buns. The cheap train-station food, like cabbage-filled patties or meat pies wrapped in paper; even back then I wondered why it was that she didn’t at all care about her health.

[Artem Chapeye on defending Ukraine.](#)

Or the more tender things: the slightly squat, chubby mother and daughter speaking Surzhyk, that slangy combo of Russian and Ukrainian, so alike in appearance—dark, cropped hair, their faces wide, a deep beet-colored flush on their cheeks—who wouldn’t have been all that pretty if it weren’t for the

huge, kind gray-green eyes that made them beautiful! They were the proprietors of a cheap café at the bus station of a nameless town, with tables covered with oilcloth carelessly slashed by the knives of previous guests, which the daughter rubbed with a gray rag before bringing out plates of food that her mother had prepared for us. We had a meal there—for less than a dollar, if you add it up—of mashed potatoes with a sun of butter melted in the center of the plate, pork chops fried to a crisp, and homemade sour-cherry juice in tumblers. Or the people with gray faces, smileless and weary after a long shift, on the buses of Donetsk. The wet autumn leaves stuck to the footpaths of the Storozhynets Arboretum, in Chernivtsi, where we had gone just to take a stroll—likely the only people ever to make a daylong excursion to have a look at a city where, when push comes to shove, there's nothing much worth looking at.

She was quoting Serhiy Zhadan, her favorite poet: “*Ya liubliu tsiu krainu navit bez kokainu*”—“I love this country even without cocaine.” I prosaically chimed in, “And without antidepressants, either.” It was then that she stopped taking antidepressants; she said they made her gain weight—the only vanity I noticed in her in all those years. And now she always resurfaces in my mind along with a line from my favorite poet, Tom Waits: *She was a middle-class girl.* . . . She had spent a few years living in the U.S.: her father had gone to earn some fast cash, then brought her over, too. While there, she finished college, got married, and quickly divorced. It was a past I was jealous of, and that was why we rarely talked about it. One time, she told me that her friends in the U.S., and even her ex-husband, used to call her home country “the Ukraine.” With the definite article. Even though they knew that in English it was correct to just say “Ukraine,” their tongues kept reflexively pronouncing “the” first. Why? she would ask her ex-husband. One time, after some thought, he said, “I think it’s the ‘U’ sound.” The U.S., the U.K., the Ukraine. She and I laughed about this, but from then on we began to notice and point out to each other situations and instances when it was actually correct to say “*the* Ukraine”—because there’s Ukraine as such, but there is, in fact, also a *the* Ukraine—a “voilà-Ukraine.” A Ukrainian Dasein.

For example, it’s the middle-aged men in peaked caps, with long mustaches and leather jackets over their warm sweaters. It’s the middle-aged women in chunky knit hats. The college girls who, on their way back to the dorm after

a weekend at home, step over puddles of oozy mud in their fancy white boots, clutching the handles of checkered plastic tote bags with fingers red from the cold, trying not to chip their long painted nails. It's the old lady in the ankle-length brown overcoat and cheap white sneakers who's carting apples on a hand truck. The coiffed, aging blonde behind the wheel in a traffic jam in Donetsk who's calmly smoking out the car window, watching life pass by.

Once in a blue moon, during the worst frosts or protracted rains, she would plant me in the red Škoda Fabia her father had given her—because, of the two of us, only she had a license—and then we would look out at the country, separated from our fellow-Ukrainians by glass and music: usually, Tom Waits, who, for some reason, perfectly suited the Ukraine. But, in the end, the trip would sour her mood, because, separated in that way by music and glass, we could only watch and not experience, not identify. The following weekend, we would once again buy tickets for a train or a bus and be among the people.

The Ukraine, for us, was a gigantic and empty new bus station, dusted with snow, at the edge of, I think, Cherkasy. I didn't understand why it was so gigantic or so empty. She and I stood in the bitter cold in the middle of a snow-covered, concrete field beneath an open canopy, alone. Opposite us was a single minibus, a white Mercedes Sprinter—ours. I opened the door, but the driver barked, "Shut the door! Don't let the cold in! This isn't the stop."

So we stood and blew on each other's fingers until, fifteen minutes later, he pulled up fifteen metres. Her face flushed in the frozen air. In the van, too, our breath turned to vapor. We paid the driver, who grumbled, "This is the stop." She giggled softly and whispered in my ear, "This here is the Ukraine."

She was generally quick to laugh, though sometimes with a dark sense of humor. For instance, one time in Khotyn we were taking a selfie at her prompting in front of a store called Funeral Supplies and Accessories. She let out a ringing laugh and said that this, too, was the Ukraine.

When the bus stopped on the highway north of Rivne and in climbed an old woman whose sheepskin coat smelled of hay and cows, the people turned up their noses, not appreciating that this old woman was, in fact, the Ukraine. The official folk kitsch—that stereotypical woman with ribbons flowing from her hair, holding bread and salt on a traditionally embroidered towel—is a fake, but that dilapidated mosaic at the entrance to the village, depicting a Ukrainian woman with ribbons in her hair—only she’s missing an eye—now, that’s the Ukraine. The Ukraine is also the romance of decline. The unfinished concrete building on the outskirts of Kamianets-Podilskyi. The bottomless, purple-green lake in a submerged quarry in Kryvyi Rih, which you’re looking at from a tall pile of bedrock, fearfully watching as a single minute swimmer slowly does the breaststroke, holding himself up above the lake’s impossible depth on the treacherous film of the water’s surface. It’s the slow destruction of the Dominican cathedral in Lviv, grayed by rains, and the faded-white plaster Soviet Pioneers with lowered bugles in Kremenets, in a gorge between the creases of mountains, unanticipated among all the fields overgrown with withered grass. The abandoned Pioneer camp outside Mariupol, where we sat on rusted swings, thermoses in our hands, with a view of the Sea of Azov, which swished with ice, pushing its surf, layer by layer, onto the shore. And even in Kyiv—the gray, multilevel concrete interchange at the Vydubychi transport hub, framed by the smokestacks of the TETs energy plant, which belch a thick, dense smoke into the deep-blue sky.

We were wanderers: we glided on the surface and often saw the Ukraine through misted windows. In the final years, she’d have her treatments in the summer, and we couldn’t travel then. That’s why the trips I typically remember were in late autumn or very early spring, when the country is in a palette of gray, rust, faded yellow, and pale green. It is unimaginably beautiful. Side roads along alleys of poplar or birch trees, barely winding through hills, lead you to places where you haven’t been and aren’t visiting, and you feel the urge to stop, to climb out of the bus, and go—actually go—to those places where you haven’t been and aren’t visiting.

One time I dozed off, my head resting on my hat against the steamy pane, and, when I awoke, through the window I saw, right next to the road, large and seemingly metallic waves frozen in time.

“Is this a reservoir?” I asked her. “Where are we?”

She laughed softly and stroked my temple.

“Rub your eyes.”

Those waves frozen in time turned out to be large mounds of plowed black soil.

Once, at night, behind a belt of forest, bare in November, a tractor was running with four blinding headlights, two on the bumper and two above the cabin, and this detail struck me as particularly romantic, for some reason, yet somewhat mysterious. Another time, the minibus driver stopped at a café in the middle of the woods—near Chudniv, I think. The café was encircled by a wall of logs, sharpened on top like pencils, with frightening, elongated, crested faces of Cossacks wearing large earrings carved on them. It was trash and kitsch, but it was the Ukraine. The night was frosty, and star-pierced deep space loomed, black above the forest road.

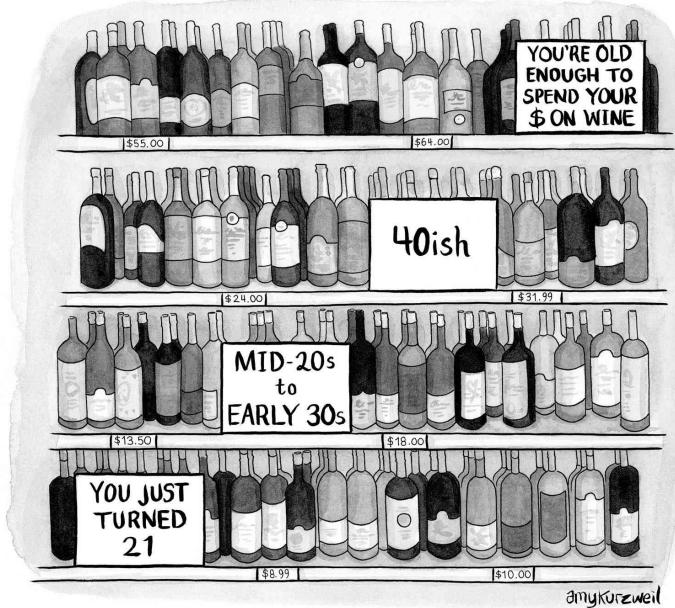
I think that fatigue, too, affected our perception on these trips. We were under-rested, and everything struck us as a little unreal and simultaneously über-real. Blurred objects and people emerged through the fog, becoming distinct as they approached. In silence, with a shared pain and delight, the two of us could spend whole minutes watching a droplet trickle down the other side of the pane. Even then, she was succumbing to mood swings, which were rubbing off on me, too. One time, I recall, the other people in the bus were mouthing, “Starkon, Starkon. We’re heading to Starkon.” There was something cosmic, futuristic, and damply mysterious in this word. When, an hour later, it turned out to be Starokostiantyniv, for some reason she grew disenchanted, pouted, and withdrew into herself. For the next hour, everything seemed horrible. In Starkon, two young men sat down behind us, reeking of alcohol. All the passengers were gray in the partial darkness of the cabin and swayed like sacks on the rugged road; no one was smiling. Then, suddenly, one of the drunks behind us began to tell the other one about his little son.

“I look over, and he’s got a snotty nose and he’s crying. I tell him, ‘Open up your mouth, I’ll take a look.’ He shows me his mouth, and he’s got a little

side tooth that, you know, had pushed through in two places. I felt so sorry for him. ‘Poor little kid!’ I say. And I start kissing him, and I grab him in my arms. . . .”

The bus was suddenly bathed in love and beauty. All the people who had been sitting silently, swaying with the bus’s motion, lost in their own thoughts and their own problems, ceased to be gray mannequins: inside each of them, behind the mask of weariness, was an entire universe, a gigantic cosmos brimming with internal stars, and she leaned over and whispered in my ear, “People are beautiful, even if they don’t realize it.”

Sometimes she and I would set out on our weekend journeys on foot. In the early years, when it was still possible. Outside Yuzhnoukrainsk, on a Polovtsian grave field in the steppe, we ate a stolen watermelon. Outside Konotop, we got lost in the meanders of the Seim River; emerging from waist-high mud, we walked onto a farmstead, and a young woman, whose husband had gone off fishing in his boat, fed us boiled perch and polenta flecked with scales. And, when we paid her, the woman tried to refuse, but her hands began to tremble because it was an enormous sum of money for her. While it was still possible, we climbed a mountain overlooking Yalta, and from a kilometre up we saw clearly that the earth was round: the deep-blue sea segregated itself from the pale sphere of sky in a distinct arc.



Cartoon by Amy Kurzweil

I had anticipated that during our early trips she and I would be constantly making love, particularly in the fields or in secluded and beautiful spots like that mountain over Yalta. Yet she almost always said, “Ew, we’re dirty.” Once or twice, during a mood swing of hers, she initiated lovemaking on her own—like in the transit hotel on the highway in the bogs of Polissia, where we startled the long-haul truckers—but I quickly understood that, for her, our trips weren’t at all about that. She was catching time, which was trickling through her fingers. Particularly in the final years, when she needed more and more treatments and we travelled less and less.

I was jealous of her past in the U.S., of her learning, which came from I don’t know where. Or, rather, of her chaotic erudition. For example, she had this category: “random fact.” We could be travelling in a black vehicle through a snow-dusted field in the boondocks, which, between the two of us, we referred to as “Kamianka-Znamianka,” and we’d be marvelling at the greenish hue of the asphalt when, out of nowhere, in response to some mental association, she’d burst out, “Random fact: When Voltaire died, his relatives sat him up in a carriage as if he were alive. And just like that, seemingly alive, the corpse was driven to a remote eastern region. You know why? To beat the mail. So that the Church wouldn’t have time to give the bishop there an order prohibiting Voltaire’s burial in consecrated ground.”

I was jealous of her past in the U.S., the past from which these paroxysms flared, while she, it seems, envied me those years which she had missed in Ukraine. I would tell her stories. I told her about how in the nineties, as a schoolboy, I was forever digging in our gardens with my parents because, at the time, we had amassed as many government-issued plots as we could till from elderly relatives and relatives who had gone abroad for work—so that there could somehow be enough food for all the children through the winter. I told her how the electricity would get shut off in winter, and my entire family—clad in thick sweaters, because even the gas heat wasn’t all that warm—would gather in the kitchen, first around candles and eventually around the car battery that Dad had bought, which enabled a light bulb to emit a pale glow; and how, on those kitchen evenings, Mom would bake flat biscuits with a dollop of jam in the gas oven or fry crêpes on the stovetop, which we ate with preserves; and how at the time, of course, I didn’t understand that these would be the happiest memories of my childhood.

I told her how my brother and I travelled to my grandfather's funeral from Kyiv. I was living at the Polytechnic Institute then, not far from the train station, while my brother lived in a hostel in the Vydubychi neighborhood. We bought tickets for the no-frills train that was leaving for Radyvyliv in the middle of the night, when the metro wasn't running, so my brother came to my place, in order to be walking distance from the station. We sat and sat, talked, smoked, but, when we headed out, it turned out that we were running late, and so we sprinted the last kilometre, as fast as we could, panting and sweating, and jumped onto the moving train, teetering on our bellies on the already raised steps. The conductor saw all this and scolded us: "Dumbasses, you could have had your legs chopped off!" I wanted to laugh in relief but thought that laughing wasn't appropriate. We ended up late for the funeral all the same, and, when we arrived in the village of Boratyn, our dad and the neighbors had just returned from the cemetery and were sitting at a table beneath the old pear tree in the yard set with cheap booze, cheap smoked sausage, and homemade pickles. They tried to force me and my brother to have a drink. A minute later, the neighbors were recounting how good each of them had been to the deceased old man and what the deceased had promised to bequeath to whom. Our dad, his son, sat at the table in silence, and later, as he led me and my brother to the grave, he complained, "The body isn't even cold yet, and they're already divvying up the inheritance. I don't need anything, but at least don't start in front of me."

After I told her this, I recall, she and I took to saying that thoughts of the Ukraine always, sooner or later, led to memories of funerals. Why?

"Maybe love is more acute when it's mixed with the feeling of inevitable loss," she surmised.

I think I finally understand what she meant.

One time, in her last year, I told her about how my best friend's mother was dying of cancer in the hospital. And about how he had to take a syringe to the head nurse and give her a twenty-hryvnia bribe each time he wanted her to fill it with morphine for his mom.

She laughed. "That is most certainly a contender for *the* Ukraine."

And then she began to cry.

For the two of us, the booming talk of “official” patriots about their “love for Ukraine” that you hear everywhere—that talk was pompous and stilted, hackneyed, and, above all, it was what the Russians call *poshlo*: passé, tacky. Or, if you prefer English, it was lewd. Paraphrasing an American saying, she used to argue that patriotism was like a penis: irrespective of its size, it’s not a great idea to go waving it around in public. Choral singing and walking in formation. *Sharovary*—the bright-colored ballooning pants of the Cossacks—and everyone on the same day sporting traditional embroidery, on shirts and even plastered on cars. Waving flags on sticks or, better yet, flying the biggest flags possible! Ukrainian tridents on chests. It was all a pretentious demonstration, a showy show. It was an aesthetic on the same level as putting up a billboard beside the road with a picture of your beloved holding a Photoshopped bouquet and the caption “Natalka! I love you! Your Tolia!” Only in this case it was done collectively: “Natalka, lookie here at how you arouse our patriotism!” It was group exhibitionism.

Sincere feelings don’t need megaphones. Love is quiet, barely audible. It’s in the comma and in the reiteration: “I love her so, I so love my poor Ukraine.” Today, I almost let out a sob when I came upon this line. Taras Hryhorovych Shevchenko. In defiance of pain, a bit frantically. Tenderly. Acutely. With a fear of loss. In love, the imperative is acceptance.

During one of our final trips, in the heart of winter, the rural bus we were on broke down, mid-ascent, outside Dunajivtsi. Little by little, the cabin of the bus began to freeze. Outside, a cold damp wind blew, piercing through our flesh all the way to the marrow. The driver was poking around in the engine. The bus was old: that was why it had broken down. Someone began to grumble, “And here we have the perpetual ‘Are we part of Europe or are we not?’ ” I, too, was growing irritated. But she was warming her hands in her armpits and smiling. She said, “I’ve never heard that someone up and froze to death in Ukraine from a bus breaking down. O.K., it isn’t pleasant. But it happens.”

I was learning acceptance from her. When her mother called and invited me to the funeral, it was bitterly sad, but I wasn’t surprised. She hadn’t said anything to me directly, but now, looking back, I saw that all along she had

been living a life short on time. Just as she had gleaned satisfaction from depression and from a sullen love in defiance of pain, I was confident that she had even gained a certain pleasure from her suicide. I only hoped that the physical pain of it had been less than the pain she had had to live with.

But now she's dead
She's so dead forever
Dead and lovely now

I didn't notice when I stepped on the edge of the freshly shovelled, soft mound of earth. Her mother looked at me judgmentally. Lips compressed into a thread, painted with dark-red lipstick. A thin, properly contoured, made-up face. Her mother had a wonderful figure for her age; she would have had a similar one had she lived as long. Her mother wore a light-colored business suit, a white overcoat, and black high-heeled shoes: that was why she stayed on the concrete path and didn't approach the mound. She had a scarf on her head because, after all, it was a cemetery. Her mother probably thought I wasn't displaying enough grief. All those years her mother had thought that I was a bad influence on her daughter. That it was me dragging her "who knows where or what for." That it was me refusing to formally start a family, or at least live together full time. I'm curious, did her mother understand the pain her daughter lived with? Someday I'll tell her about it. Or maybe not. Her mother was very orthodox and concealed the truth so that her daughter's body—her body—could be buried in accordance with the rules. In consecrated ground.

I was learning acceptance from her. Clay from her grave stuck to my shoes, and I recalled how she and I had walked around the cemetery in Krasnoilsk the previous spring. Fake flowers adorned almost all the crosses. We read the inscriptions, written in a mix of Romanian, Russian, and Ukrainian, and yellowish clay stuck to our feet in just the same way then.

Her mother and I heard muffled cursing behind us. Apparently, the two cemetery workers who had filled the grave were squabbling over the tip that her mother had given to one of them. If I recall, they were a little drunk. Her mother glanced at the workers, her painted lips clenched, then turned away and snugly tightened her scarf, which she would take off upon leaving the cemetery.

“What horrible people,” her mother murmured.

The gravediggers asked my forgiveness with a gesture. They quieted down and walked past me and her mother, their shovels over their shoulders. When they thought I could no longer see them, one punched the other’s shoulder, then gesticulated: idiot. Yes, they had had a bit to drink. They smelled. They were filthy. Gray, in tattered jackets. They probably consume that TV trash, I thought. They weren’t European, they weren’t civilized. What else was there to say? Inside everyone there’s a universe, a gigantic cosmos brimming with stars. And so be it that an uninviting exterior, humdrum labor, thoughtless amusements, and squabbles over money often keep it from being seen. Sometimes people forget that it exists inside them. Sometimes we do, too.

I turned to her mother: “You know what she used to say? People are beautiful, even if they don’t realize it.” ♦

(Translated, from the Ukrainian, by Zenia Tompkins.)

By [Deborah Treisman](#)

Letter from Idaho

- Killing Wolves to Own the Libs?

By [Paige Williams](#)

Content

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

The gray wolf prefers to eat fleet ungulates—elk, deer—but when Europeans arrived in America with livestock its menu expanded. A wolf that cannot find its favored meal may turn to cattle and sheep. Livestock producers and big-game hunters have considered wolves an existential threat since Colonial days. In 1634, a tract called “[New England’s Prospect](#),” by William Wood, described the animals as “the greatest inconveniency,” noting that there was “little hope of their utter destruction, the Countrey being so spacious, and they so numerous.”

Idaho has plenty of cattle and elk, both of which generate a lot of profit: the cattle industry is worth nearly two billion dollars, and the state collects about six million dollars a year in hunting fees—about ninety thousand people hunt elk. Of the Western states, Idaho has long had a reputation as the most hostile toward the gray wolf, a once endangered species; it’s legal to slay pups in their dens there. But last spring the state legislature dramatically broadened opportunities to target wolves. For the first time, sportsmen could kill an unlimited number. Trappers could operate year-round on private property. Night-vision goggles, silencers, snowmobiles, A.T.V.s—all legal, though such tactics pose ethical concerns about “fair chase.” Sportsmen could now use motorized vehicles to pursue wolves to the point of exhaustion, or simply run them over. The state’s intensifying embrace of wolf hunting was based, in part, on the misconception that wolves were decimating elk and livestock. Over all, these populations were holding steady.

Opponents of the legislation framed it as a chilling mandate to exterminate ninety per cent of the state’s fifteen hundred or so wolves. They assumed that sportsmen would quickly reduce Idaho’s wolf population to the conservation minimum that had long been in place—fifteen breeding pairs and a hundred and fifty wolves. Reports of an impending “massacre” reached the White House and Congress. By fall, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had embarked on a yearlong review of whether gray wolves—which have been moved in and out of federal protection for decades—required

renewed safeguards. Among those who asked the White House to re-list wolves, on an emergency basis, were twenty-one U.S. senators, nearly two hundred tribal leaders, about sixty conservation groups, and more than eight hundred scientists.

This request has not been granted, although President [Joe Biden](#) once said in a virtual town hall on YouTube that his grandchildren were “calling me, saying, ‘Pop, they’re gonna kill all the wolves!’” The clip was incorporated into [a promotional video](#) by a longtime wolf advocate in Idaho, Suzanne Asha Stone; the video débuted in October at Boise’s Timberline High School, whose environmental club had “adopted” a wolf pack in 2003. Current students, incensed that eight of the pack’s wolves had recently been killed, participated in Stone’s video, which was tagged #RelistWolvesNOW. [Jane Goodall](#) also appeared onscreen, saying, “The suffering inflicted on these sensitive and social animals is terrible to contemplate”; Senator [Cory Booker](#), of New Jersey, declared, “We must take action now to prevent the second eradication of wolves in the West.”

Idaho’s remote landscape, and wolves’ formidable ability to elude humans, meant that reaching “fifteen and one-fifty” wouldn’t be as easy to achieve as activists feared. Yet mass extirpation has occurred before, on a greater scale and with less sophisticated tools. Between the late eighteen-hundreds and the nineteen-thirties, wolves across America were trapped, shot, snared, and poisoned nearly to extinction. Last April, retired federal, state, and tribal wildlife managers implored Idaho’s governor, Brad Little, to veto the new legislation. The state’s Fish and Game Commission also opposed the bill, arguing that matters of conservation are best left to experts. An Idaho sheep rancher, Brian Bean, who uses nonlethal measures such as noise devices to thwart predators, went on television and warned that lawmakers weren’t “competent” to manage wildlife, and were facilitating the killing of wolves “for political gain.” Carter Niemeyer, a retired federal wildlife biologist who now advocates for the wolves that he was once paid to eliminate, described the law as hateful “retribution” against liberals. A Republican senator, Van Burtenshaw, who is a rancher and a livestock dealer, had introduced the bill; Little, a Republican from a longtime ranching family, signed it on May 5th.

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Several days later, Brendon Ash, an outdoorsman with a growing social-media audience, announced a plan to take “full advantage” of the new law. He had recently moved back home to central Idaho, to live near the mountainous Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forests with his wife and two sons. About to turn forty, he’d been spending half the year in Arizona, and had missed the Northern Rockies and “the snow and the blow” of winter. The traditions he grew up with included fishing for steelhead trout, trapping, and hunting. His first boyhood rifle was a Winchester Model 94 .30-30—he’d “put lots of meat on the ground with it”—and he often carried a single-action .22-calibre pistol and a bow and arrows.

Ash, who is large and tattooed, dresses in Carhartt and camouflage, his lip often bulging with tobacco. In winter, he lets his hair grow curly, and his beard gathers ornaments of ice. At seventeen, he joined the Navy. He eventually became a trapper for Wildlife Services—a unit of the U.S. Department of Agriculture whose agents have the authority to kill predators. Ash has said that he left because of a back injury. More recently, he has worked as a butcher.



In Idaho, Roman can now hunt wolves with night-vision goggles and silencers.

To him, hunting and trapping is “grocery shopping.” A black bear became chili. A bobcat became tacos. A moose hide became a blanket. Last summer, Ash blew the heads off three rattlesnakes that were sunning themselves on

river rocks where he'd intended to fish for sturgeon with his son Wyatt; Ash cured the skins with pickling salt and used two of them to cover the handle of a bow. He sometimes hashtagged his posts #cavemanshit.

One of Ash's first acts as a repatriated Idahoan was christening his grandfather's 1987 Ford pickup his "trapping truck." He ran traplines at the edge of a forest meadow where he had heard that wolves were attacking cattle. To get there, he drove as far as the back roads allowed, then hopped onto an electric bike that he carried in the back of the truck. The bike was outfitted with a rifle scabbard, saddlebags, and a one-wheeled trailer that could haul carcasses and gear. When a social-media user snarled, "Keep riding your gay bike around the forest," Ash replied, "You seem to have something against the gay community, you homophobic or interested?"

Ash's customized license plate says "*LOBOPRO*." "*Lobo*" is Spanish for "wolf." On his eighteenth birthday, he got a tattoo of a baying wolf on his right shoulder. Around 2010, wolves killed one of his family's horses and injured another so badly that it had to be euthanized. "That got me started in chasing wolves," he told me. Ash volunteered to help ranchers who cared deeply about their livestock and were worried about being "put out of business" by wolves. In 2019, he created [a YouTube channel](#) as a way of sharing trapping techniques—"so the tradition don't die." Initially, he focussed on coyotes, but he named the channel LoboPro Predator Control.

Wolves can be much harder to track down or trap than coyotes, their smaller cousins, but Ash had killed a few wolves over the years, and under Idaho's new law he had permission to scale up his operation. In a post last fall, he wrote, "Patients is key." Detractors told him to "rot and die," but Ash had no qualms about his work. In 2014, commenting on a blog that had urged the humane treatment of wolves, he wrote, "Wild wolves are a apex predator capable of taking down an adult Yukon moose not a cute puppy you walk in the park." He was defending a U.S. Forest Service employee who had been photographed in front of a chained, wounded wolf as it walked in circles, bloodying the snow. Last September, as Ash power-washed dozens of foothold traps, he said of wolves, "I hope they like bracelets."

Wolves attract more outsized opposition than other large predators because, as one Idaho hunter recently complained to me, "they're just too good at

what they do.” The gray wolf is a sophisticated, collaborative hunter that, unlike bears and mountain lions, can traverse thirty miles of rugged terrain within hours. Wolves reproduce consistently and thrive in packs as large as twenty individuals. Each pack establishes a territory of at least twenty-five square miles and will defend it to the death. Gray wolves are also “habitat generalists”—as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service [notes](#), they are “equally at home in the deserts of Israel, the deciduous forests of Wisconsin, and the frozen arctic of Siberia.” A wolf’s survival requires only “sufficient food and human tolerance.”

In 1914, the conservationist William Hornaday, the first director of what is now the Bronx Zoo, described wolves as one of “the most cunning and capable of all American predatory animals,” and endorsed shooting wolves on sight, in the misguided belief that it protected other species. Congress funded a wolf-annihilation program. A U.S. senator from Montana argued that it was un-American *not* to eliminate creatures that threatened the beef providing “brain and brawn for our workers.”

The federal government deployed trappers and hunters throughout the West, formalizing a campaign that had been under way since pioneers started replacing bison with livestock, with inevitable results. Wolves are more often heard than seen, and trappers frequently succeeded where hunters failed. Poison was the most effective lethal strategy; lacing a single deer carcass with strychnine could kill dozens of wolves. By the thirties, ground stakes could be equipped with spring-loaded contraptions that sprayed cyanide into an inquisitive animal’s mouth. These poisons were later restricted, partly because they could also harm whatever creature consumed the tainted animal or the plants onto which it vomited or drooled.

The extirpation was recognized as a mistake even as it was happening. In 1924, a naturalist at Yellowstone National Park, Milton P. Skinner, observed, “We need these predatory and fur-bearing animals alive and living their normal lives.” Balanced ecosystems require predators. Wolves can regulate the presence of coyotes, sparing many of the small mammals also eaten by hawks and bald eagles, and wolf kills feed a range of scavengers. Wolf packs keep ungulates agile and alert, and they cull herds of weak or diseased members. Skinner considered it appropriate for wildlife managers to kill

“animals individually responsible” for attacking livestock, but advised against “declaring war against a whole species.”

By the late thirties, there were essentially no wolves left in the Western United States. Tens of thousands of wolves remained in Alaska and Canada, and stragglers survived in northern Minnesota and Michigan. In 1974, the year after the Endangered Species Act was passed, the gray wolf was added to the list of federally protected animals. Twenty years later, the Canadian government permitted the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to capture sixty-six wolves in Alberta and British Columbia; they were released in the core of the gray wolf’s native range—central Idaho and Yellowstone National Park, which spans parts of Wyoming, Montana, and eastern Idaho.

The public supported reintroduction; ranchers and big-game hunters opposed it. At one public hearing, a Montanan accused wolf advocates of having “stars in their eyes,” asking, “Have you ever seen your pet horse hamstrung by a wolf and eaten alive while it’s still screaming? That’s what a wolf will do.” This was potentially true, wolves being wolves. The president of a wool growers’ association warned of mauled tourists, predicting that “anything that has blood in its veins will be a target.” This claim was spurious: in the past century, there have been two documented fatal wolf attacks on humans in the wild in North America.

Managing wolves starts with counting them. Nobody knows precisely how many wolves live anywhere. Population estimates are based on a combination of techniques, which may include radiotelemetry collars (G.P.S.-like devices that transmit locations and behaviors), trail cameras, mortality reports, and direct observation of “wolf sign”—tracks, scat. In 1995, the U.S. government released fifteen transplanted wolves onto federal land in Idaho. Twenty more were released the following year.

Idaho’s Republican legislature resisted the project, and refused to allow the state’s Fish and Game department, which manages wildlife populations, to assume responsibility for wolves. U.S. Fish and Wildlife contracted with the Nez Perce tribe, of northern Idaho, to monitor the animals. The Nez Perce give the gray wolf status equal to that of human beings. A manager of the tribe’s Natural Resources Department once said, “Actually, we’re probably

lower status than them, because the Indian way is that the creatures were here before us.”

Idaho lawmakers eventually decided that it was in the state’s best interest to participate in reintroduction, in part to avoid seeing wolves returned to federal protection. U.S. Fish and Wildlife agreed to cede control if ten breeding pairs and a hundred wolves had survived for at least three consecutive years by 2002, and if Idaho produced an acceptable management plan. The state went beyond the federal guideline and imposed a conservation minimum of fifteen breeding pairs and a hundred and fifty wolves.



Nobody knows precisely how many wolves live anywhere. Population estimates are based on a combination of techniques, including direct observation of tracks.

By 1998, the number of gray wolves in Idaho had exceeded the mandated recovery threshold for breeding pairs and reached an over-all population of a hundred and fifteen. In December, 2002, U.S. Fish and Wildlife declared the gray wolf “biologically recovered” in the Northern Rockies, and prepared to remove it from the endangered-species list. Environmental groups entangled the plan in lawsuits. Four years later, there were six hundred and seventy-three wolves in Idaho. By 2009, there were more than eight hundred. Defenders of Wildlife, a nonprofit founded in 1947 and based in Washington, D.C., noted that this was “still a low number compared to other normal healthy predator populations,” pointing out that Idaho had three

thousand mountain lions, twenty thousand black bears, and forty-five thousand coyotes.

Sportsmen and ranchers agitated for a wolf-hunting season the moment the population reached the recovery benchmark. Hunting, when properly regulated, augments professional wildlife management. If left to overpopulate, elk and deer ravage the vegetation, and that can affect everything from erosion to river temperatures. Idaho's Fish and Game department strove for ecological balance by limiting wolf harvests, enforcing staggered hunting and trapping seasons, and licensing. It's illegal to hunt without a license and a "tag," an identification document that a sportsman attaches to a carcass when reporting the kill to the state. An elk tag costs about thirty-six dollars, a wolf tag thirteen-fifty. Regulations shift according to herd size, climate, human-population density, weaponry, species characteristics, and geography. The ecosystem of the high desert around Boise is radically different from the timbered, mountainous terrain of the northern panhandle, the part of Idaho that, on a map, resembles the barrel of a gun. What's legal in one zone may be forbidden in another.

In certain areas, elk numbers had dropped significantly, and ranchers were reporting depredations. The U.S.D.A. reimbursed ranchers when livestock were killed by predators reintroduced by the federal government; the agency generally paid seventy-five per cent of the average fair market value of the animal. For a time, Defenders of Wildlife also reimbursed ranchers for fatal wolf attacks. Reimbursement required confirmation of wolf predation from Wildlife Services, the U.S.D.A. unit that investigates livestock deaths.

Niemeyer, the retired wildlife biologist turned wolf advocate, worked for Wildlife Services for twenty-six years, and told me that once a wolf starts attacking livestock it usually doesn't stop. He had to "pull the trigger" on thirteen of them. But wolves were often falsely accused. Predators leave different signatures: coyotes go for the throat; bears like to turn their prey inside out. In "[Wolfer](#)," a 2010 memoir, Niemeyer noted that wolves tend to kill "out in the open" and from behind, grasping "the webbing where legs meet the body." They leave distinctive tooth marks and cause internal hemorrhaging that resembles grape jelly. Contrary to rancher lore, most livestock deaths are caused by "respiratory and digestive diseases, birthing problems, old age, poisonous plants and weather." Wolves were frequently

blamed when livestock had actually died of dehydration, or of a horse's kick to the ribs.

Whenever Niemeyer concluded that a wolf was not the culprit, ranchers called him a traitor. "It's kind of like a lynch mob," he recently told me. He grew to resent both "environmentalists who lashed out at ranchers" and anti-wolf "blowhards." Inflamed rhetoric disturbed him because it yielded "imprecise reasoning." Some ranchers urged the targeting of wolves with a fervor not seen since the extirpation, when cowboys roped wolves and dragged them to their death. Niemeyer recalled seeing a placard that said "*KILL ALL THE GODDAMN WOLVES AND THE PEOPLE WHO PUT THEM THERE.*"

Idaho's first wolf-hunting season started in September, 2009, and ended the next March. Hunters bought more than thirty thousand tags. The statewide population of wolves was then about eight hundred and fifty, and the harvest limit was two hundred and twenty. Each hunter could lawfully kill one wolf. Trapping was illegal. Hunters killed a hundred and eighty-eight wolves that season, roughly thirty of them less than a year old.

In 2011, several ardent sportsmen started a group called the Foundation for Wildlife Management—F4WM in the branding. On YouTube, they declared that they were on "a *mission* to save elk." Based in northern Idaho, the organization, which soon became a nonprofit, argued that the state was not managing wolves effectively, and that sportsmen could do the work of wildlife biologists more efficiently. To recruit members, F4WM leaders asserted that elk hunters had a responsibility to defend their "way of life" by supporting the elimination of wolves. The foundation's logo depicts an elk facing off with a wolf.

F4WM rallied support by sharing disturbing images online: a large ungulate ravaged to its ribs, the remains of a devoured calf. Its promotional materials included a photograph of a wolf eating an elk alive. The gruesome deaths were framed not as the manifestation of a wild creature's natural instincts but as evidence that wolves are—as one hunter recently told me—"mean and nasty." An F4WM recruitment effort on YouTube [declared](#), "While you are sitting on your couch watching football, there are sportsmen working

hard to manage out of control wolf populations for the good of all wildlife, as well as our rural and ranching communities.”

The nonprofit’s director, Justin Webb, characterized Idaho’s wolves as “Canadian” and “non-native,” although they are *Canis lupus*—the species that existed in the Lower Forty-eight before extirpation. Wolves are often unsuccessful when they hunt, and they can go for weeks without eating; F4WM nevertheless portrayed the animal as a relentless, gleeful killer. The group likes to say that an adult wolf annually eats sixteen to twenty-two elk; in fact, it eats the *equivalent* of that amount. Wolves scavenge, and their diet includes birds and such small mammals as rabbits, beavers, and squirrels.

Wolves kill far less than one per cent of Idaho’s 2.8 million cattle and sheep. Mountain lions are the top predator of Idaho’s elk calves. Since wolves were reintroduced in the state, elk populations have fallen by as much as twenty per cent in certain regions, but these declines may have been caused by interconnected environmental factors. The building of roads and the introduction of motor vehicles, for example, can prompt elk to flee an area. Encountering fewer elk in favored hunting grounds does not mean that herds no longer exist; it may just mean that the elk won’t stay where certain Idahoans prefer to hunt. Webb, the F4WM director, once remarked that “hard-core” sportsmen do not enjoy following elk into the agricultural lowlands: “They want to be up here in the mountains.” Over all, Idaho’s elk are fine, according to the Fish and Game department. The current population of a hundred and twenty thousand—a near-record, statewide—meets or exceeds objectives in well over half of Idaho’s twenty-eight elk-management zones. Wolf advocates like to point out that a state official recently called this the “second golden age of Idaho elk hunting.”

During the late nineteenth century, wolf bounties flourished. Bounty systems tended to encourage fraud, and they ultimately failed to benefit the other wildlife that the wolf hunters purported to protect. Killing wolves does not produce more game. As early as 1907, one federal biologist noted that “intelligent ranchmen” questioned the efficacy of bounties.

F4WM immediately aroused the suspicions of environmental groups by cutting checks to members who killed wolves. The nonprofit supported itself through membership dues and donations. Its benefit banquets, attended by

politicians such as Little, sold out. Membership, which is concentrated in Idaho and Montana, climbed to more than three thousand.

At first, F4WM paid up to five hundred dollars per wolf, but the top amount eventually rose to a thousand; wolves that were harvested in areas of “chronic depredation” fetched more. To wolf advocates such as Suzanne Stone, who spent much of her career at Defenders of Wildlife, this sounded an awful lot like a bounty, which is illegal in many states. She told me, “It’s like going back to the Old West.”



A sheep wearing a motion-activated L.E.D. tag, which is intended to deter predators. Idaho's intensifying embrace of wolf hunting was based, in part, on the misconception that wolves were decimating livestock. In reality, wolves kill far less than one per cent of the state's 2.8 million cattle and sheep.

So far, F4WM has paid out more than \$1.2 million for the deaths of roughly fifteen hundred wolves. The group characterizes its payments as “*NOT* a ‘bounty’ program” but, rather, as an opportunity for sportsmen to recoup the expense of trapping or hunting. Brendon Ash, the trapper from central Idaho, is a member, and promotes the organization as a way of offsetting the cost of “your traps, your backpacks, your rifles, your scopes, your trapping lure, your vehicle.” Ash, who told me that he is neither a Republican nor a Democrat, made this endorsement in early 2020, during a fur sale near Boise; at that point, he had received seventeen hundred and fifty dollars from F4WM after killing two wolves.

Last March, Derek Goldman, of the Endangered Species Coalition, scrutinized F4WM’s publicly available finances while preparing to testify before Montana lawmakers who were considering similarly aggressive wolf-hunting legislation. F4WM had pitched itself as an enthusiastic collaborator. Goldman noticed that many F4WM “reimbursement” checks to hunters were “for exactly a thousand dollars.” He asked the lawmakers, “Are we supposed to believe every single hunter or trapper that killed even a single wolf spent that much money?” To Goldman, the consistency of the payments indicated that they were bounties, not reimbursements.

Webb, the F4WM director, who has killed at least thirty wolves, once told a reporter that he had spent “over sixteen hundred dollars in fuel for every wolf that I’ve caught.” Checking the math, Goldman noted, “Even in an old truck that gets twelve miles a gallon, that’s close to eight thousand miles in driving”—nearly a third of the circumference of the Earth. Montana’s wolf-hunting bill passed, and F4WM continued to operate there. In mid-March, the nonprofit held a series of meetings in Wyoming, and posted, on Facebook, “*ARE YOU READY FOR A F4WM CHAPTER IN YOUR home STATE?*”

In 2014, Idaho’s legislature created the Wolf Depredation Control Board, a five-member panel of state officials and representatives who decide how to spend money earmarked for wolf removal. (There is no similar board for other apex predators.) Since then, the board’s annual budget has risen to as much as eight hundred thousand dollars.

The board initially spent most of its funds contracting with Wildlife Services, the U.S.D.A. predator-control unit. Its agents may trap and shoot wolves, or collar them for monitoring—they are even allowed to create a “Judas” wolf, whose radio signals betray an entire pack’s location. They are also authorized to kill pups. Last August, Stone and seven other activists asked Tom Vilsack, the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, to forbid this practice, writing that “wolf pups pose no threat to domestic livestock.” An undersecretary replied that wolves had killed a hundred and eight head of livestock in Idaho since the start of 2021; after trying nonlethal deterrents, agents had chosen to eliminate eight juveniles in two counties, hoping that the loss of offspring “would encourage adult wolves to relocate, thereby reducing the total number of wolves requiring removal.”

Butch Suor, who represents sportsmen on the Depredation Control Board, disliked contracting with Wildlife Services. He told me, “I have a hard time paying a federal agency for something that they *caused* in the state of Idaho. I’m a states’-rights kind of guy.” Last June, he was pushing the control board to hire F4WM—of which he’d been a member for several years. Idaho’s Fish and Game department had already awarded F4WM tens of thousands of dollars in funding; the board soon provided it with two hundred thousand dollars more. In the fall, the nonprofit’s top payout spiked, to twenty-five hundred dollars per wolf.

By the end of November, F4WM had depleted the monies from the Depredation Control Board. In January, as the board prepared to ask the legislature for a new round of funding, Robert Crabtree, the chief scientist at the Yellowstone Ecological Research Center, and eight other ecologists and wolf advocates wrote a letter to [Deb Haaland](#), the Interior Secretary, imploring her to step in. They cited the activities of F4WM—“No other game species is being managed with these eradication tactics and there is no similar lucrative bounty for any other species in the state”—and reminded Haaland of long-standing federal guidance that allowed her agency to declare an emergency if a state changed its “regulatory framework to authorize the unlimited and unregulated taking of wolves.”

Haaland didn’t intervene, but in February she published [a column](#) in *USA Today* expressing “alarm” that at least twenty wolves had lately been killed in Montana, near Yellowstone. “This happened because the state recently removed long-standing rules in areas adjacent to the park,” she wrote, noting that wolves “do not recognize boundary lines on a map.” She added, “Recent laws passed in some Western states undermine state wildlife managers by promoting precipitous reductions in wolf populations,” and warned that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service would reinstate federal protections “if necessary.”

More than five thousand wolves have died in Idaho since reintroduction. The overwhelming majority—more than thirty-three hundred—have been killed by hunters and trappers.

Robert Roman, a logger and a “lifetime” member of F4WM with twelve children and thirty-five grandchildren, has a reputation for having killed

nearly sixty wolves. When I met him, on Halloween weekend in Coeur d'Alene, a lake town in the panhandle, he told me that he'd made his most recent kill during the summer. "I went out in the dark and sat and listened over this large valley," he said. After hearing wolves howl all night, he set up where he thought they'd be in the morning. Using an electronic call—also legal—he played the sound of a young elk in distress. A wolf appeared. "Bang!" Roman told me. The first sportsman to receive a check from F4WM for a dead wolf, he is now the organization's president.

After we met for breakfast, at a Best Western, we climbed into his pickup. Roman's rifle lay between us in the front seat, pointed at the rear ceiling. There was a roadkill deer in the back, which he planned to eventually repurpose. We drove east for two hours, into the Bitterroot Mountains. Passing some pastured ponies, Roman said, "Wolf bait."

Tony McDermott, a founder of F4WM, was in the back seat. A lifelong hunter in his seventies, he used to sit on the Depredation Control Board and, before that, on the Fish and Game Commission. He said that he'd been "on the forefront of the wolf wars" for decades: "People that live in the cities want to hear wolves howl. People that live in the countryside don't want wolves at all. The cities usually rule." When McDermott remarked that "there's nothing you *can* do" with wolves but "shoot 'em or trap 'em," Roman replied, "I wouldn't *want* to do anything else—it's so much fun to shoot 'em!"

The steep road cut through dense fog; at the narrowest point, marked by a dizzying drop-off, Roman took a call on his cell phone. Eventually, he stopped at a blue-sky ridge overlooking a vast autumnal basin and began speaking in hushed tones. Stepping out of the truck, he told me, "No offense intended, but there's nothing worse in the woods than a woman's voice. They carry a long ways."



"I don't want to do an at-home workout if no one else is."
Cartoon by Suerynn Lee

He put on a backpack and brought along his electronic call and his rifle, which had a silencer. McDermott carried a walking stick and a vintage Winchester rifle. Climbing the windswept ridge, we followed a logging trail for the better part of a mile. At one point, I caught McDermott saying to Roman, “I never *heard* of a moose falling off a cliff, but I guess it happens.”

We stopped five hundred yards above a watering hole. Roman turned on his electronic call—a beige device that resembled a boom box—and unfolded a camouflage seat in front of a pair of hemlocks. He got comfortable, as if ready to watch an outdoor concert. His rifle lay across his knees.

The call’s simulated wolf howls carried into the basin, followed by recordings of an elk calf (which sounded like a mewling kitten) and a wounded rabbit (cranky baby). Nothing moved but the leaves, the grasses, the cirrus, and the shadows of the cirrus. Roman scanned the basin with binoculars. A hawk and some ravens eventually cruised over—that was it. Much as I would have liked to see a gray wolf in its natural habitat, I felt relieved. We reconvened with McDermott and took turns firing at the watering hole, enjoying the satisfying splash.

Roman later wrote in the F4WM newsletter that the wolf issue was media hype, and that, by taking me to see “the immensity of the Idaho

backcountry,” he had underscored “how nearly impossible it would be to kill 90% of Idaho’s wolves, using today’s tools.” He also mentioned “denning”—slaying newborns where they live. He wrote, “I find it quite interesting that killing pups in the den is an unforgivable sin, yet abortion of humans is not a problem.”

In the final weeks of the Trump Administration, the gray wolf was removed from endangered-species lists nationwide. This didn’t affect Idaho, since wolves had already been delisted there, and in any event a federal judge in California struck down the change. Yet Trump’s delisting had an emboldening effect: Idaho’s new law was hurried through the legislative process soon afterward. Ed Bangs, who oversaw the reintroduction of wolves for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, recently [told the online magazine Yale Environment 360](#) that the Idaho law is “about making ‘snowflakes’ cry,” adding, “It’s 1850s stuff—let’s show how much we hate wolves and the people who like them, and let’s stick it to the feds.” McDermott, the F4WM founder, didn’t speak in rude partisan terms to me—he saved his vitriol for wolves. But Roman disparaged environmentalists as liberals who “lie through their teeth.”

Neither side of the wolf divide appeared capable of compromise. Hunters have suggested that environmentalists intentionally overstate the danger that culling poses to wolves; wolf advocates such as Suzanne Stone believe that many wolf hunters won’t be satisfied until all wolves are dead.

McDermott told me that he “could live with” three to five hundred wolves in Idaho, and wondered if that number would appease someone like Stone. Why didn’t he just ask her, I said. He responded that they’d never spoken, even though they’d seen each other at countless public meetings.

Stone, a wildlife advocate since the eighties, wears long patterned skirts and loose scarves, and is so soft-spoken that she is almost inaudible. Her interest in wolves began in her native Texas, after a car that she was riding in one night nearly hit a wolf; as Stone described it to me, she and the creature “locked eyes.” She participated in the federal wolf-reintroduction project and later became the Northern Rockies field representative at Defenders of Wildlife. Recently, she started a nonprofit, the International Wildlife Coexistence Network.

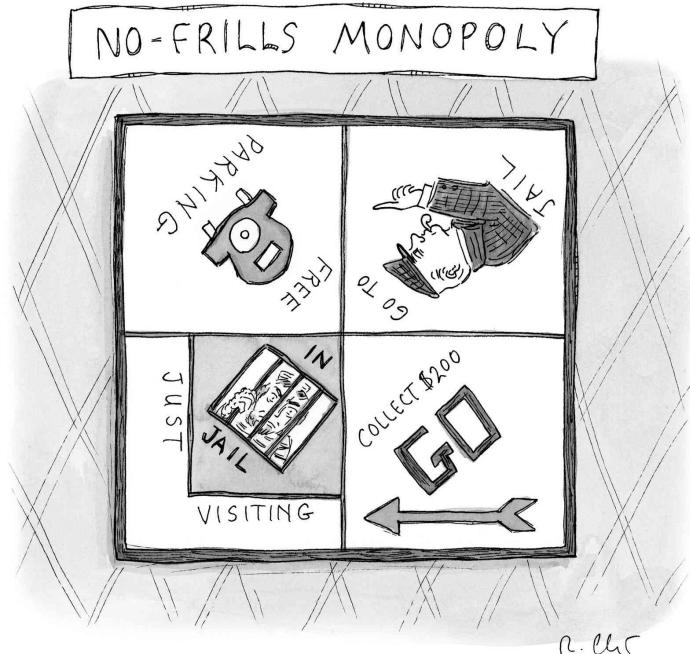
One Monday in November, Stone, who lives in Boise, flew to Spokane to meet with McDermott. He had driven an hour and a half from his home in the panhandle, after getting up early to feed his horses. The three of us went to lunch at Clinkerdagger, which advertised outdoor seating. Despite [the pandemic](#), we arrived to find the patio closed. A movie starring Zooey Deschanel and Casey Affleck was filming there. “Dreamin’ Wild” had us eatin’ indoors.

McDermott flew Army choppers in the Vietnam War, and later taught military science at the University of Montana. He had stayed up late composing questions for Stone. She turned on her cell phone’s voice recorder and started jotting McDermott’s arguments in a small notebook. At one point, McDermott observed that wolves represented “the most complicated issue that you and I have ever dealt with, because there’s no good answers.” Stone replied, “There’s some *great* answers.” When McDermott said of wolves, “We *can’t* eradicate ‘em,” she reminded him that it had happened before.

“With *poison*,” McDermott said.

“And when’s *that* gonna be back on the table?” Stone said.

She confronted McDermott about pups. He assured her that he never targeted pups and didn’t know anyone who did. At different points during the conversation, he said both that he “could condone” the practice, given the size of Idaho’s wolf population, and that it “probably violates the ethics of fair chase.”



Cartoon by Roz Chast

McDermott had told me he believed that environmentalists stoke controversy in order to stay in business. He read aloud a quote that he attributed to L. David Mech, an eminent University of Minnesota biologist: “Non-governmental organizations that federal and state promoters have been in bed with for several decades have parlayed wolf recovery into a never-ending, billion-dollar enterprise and used tainted science and activist judges to support their destructive agenda.”

“Here’s another David Mech quote,” Stone replied, peering at her phone: “If the wolf is to survive, the wolf haters must be outnumbered. They must be outshouted, outfinanced, and outvoted. Their narrow and biased attitude must be outweighed by an attitude based on an understanding of the natural processes.”

McDermott said, “My quote is from 2019. When is yours? He’s changed his position.”

“He hasn’t changed his position,” Stone said.

The quote that Stone read comes from “[The Wolf: The Ecology and Behavior of an Endangered Species](#),” one of Mech’s eleven books on wolves. McDermott’s quote didn’t sound like Mech. When I later asked

Mech about it, he replied, in an e-mail, “I did not say or write it anywhere, nor would I.” (McDermott was quoting material that had been passed along, inaccurately, online.) Mech verified Stone’s quote but noted that he had written those words in 1968—when wolves could be found only in tiny numbers, in the upper Midwest. The implication was that more nuance was needed, on both sides.

Mech has written that, under some conditions, wolves “can seriously reduce prey herds,” but he stressed that dips in population tend to happen during adverse weather or when herds are “small and isolated.” He has lamented media distortion of the issue, observing, “With wolf lay advocates it is just natural to want to promote their favorite animal and to try to counter the known negative effects of wolves and the claims fostered by people who vilify wolves.” He has also written, “The wolf is neither a saint nor a sinner except to those who want to make it so.”

Watching Stone and McDermott go round and round reminded me of something that Talasi Brooks, a Boise-based environmental lawyer, recently told me: “Wolves are essentially like religion—you’re not gonna change anybody’s opinion.” When Stone asked McDermott, “Why do you hate wolves so much?” McDermott replied, “Suzanne, I am an *elk* lover.”

Stone refused to give McDermott a preferred minimum number of wolves. McDermott declared that, if Idaho kept harboring more than five hundred, the animals would devour the entire ecosystem. If that were true, Stone told him, “there wouldn’t have been another living creature left” when colonists arrived in America. She added, “You guys have seen what you want to see.”

After Stone finished her lunch, a salmon sandwich, she set her purse on the table. She put on a face mask and took it off again. When McDermott said, “How can you call yourself an environmentalist?” Stone said, “O.K., we’re done.” She walked out, telling McDermott, “Have a good life.”

Many ranchers argue that the U.S.D.A.’s reimbursement program for dead livestock fails to cover the true cost of losses from wolves. They point to a series of livestock studies in central Idaho and eastern Oregon, by the U.S.D.A. and the Oregon State University Extension Service. Fifty pregnant Idaho beef cows from a herd that had experienced wolf predation were

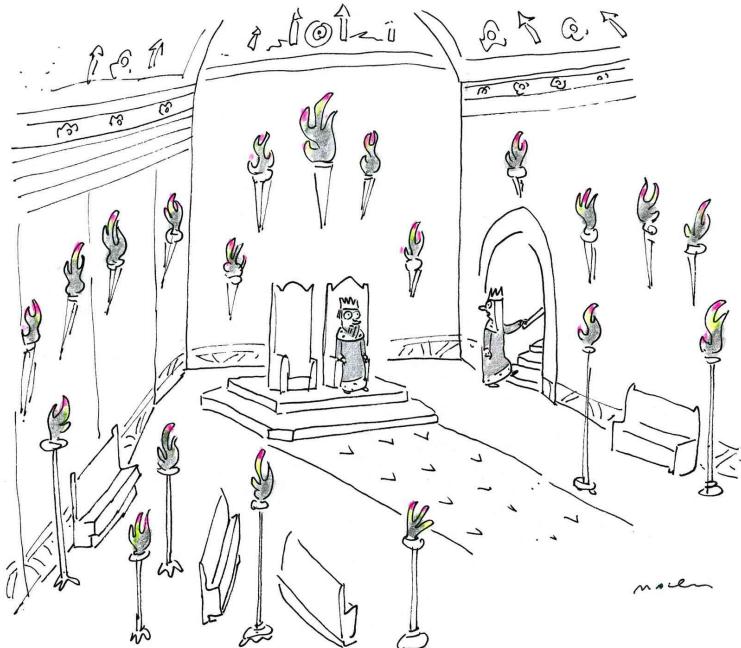
mixed with fifty cows that had not. Researchers soaked cotton plugs in wolf urine and attached them to fencing, then blared recorded wolf howls for twenty minutes. The cows that had had experience with wolves “bunched up in the farthest corner of the pen,” became “more excitable,” and “had an increase in plasma cortisol and body temperature.” The others went about their business. The study—whose backers included the Oregon Beef Council—concluded that the presence of wolves may negatively affect cows’ “productivity and welfare.” Yet the researchers also suggested that G.P.S. tracking and habitat mapping could mitigate interspecies conflict, as could changes in where ranchers allow cows to give birth. In other words, instead of expecting wolves to change, humans needed to change.

At a recent workshop for ranchers, in Colorado, I watched a livestock producer named Shella DelCurto describe a similar outlook. She and her husband run two hundred and fifty head of cattle on the Oregon-Idaho border. The DelCurtos thought of “environmentalist” as a “dirty word” before Defenders of Wildlife paid them to attend an immersive seminar on coexistence and provided wolf deterrents tailored to their ranch.

Loud, sudden noises (air horns, starter pistols) and unexpected visuals (ribbon flags, strobe lights) are known to scare wolves away. Years ago, another organization that Stone founded, the Wood River Wolf Project, started helping Brian Bean, the sheep rancher, defend his herds by using motion detectors, attaching L.E.D. lights to the animals’ ears, and outfitting guard dogs in protective collars made of leather and Kevlar. Such tactics aren’t necessarily cheap, and they require variation and patience—ranchers often give up when they don’t see immediate results. Last summer, Burtenshaw, the Republican state senator who introduced the wolf-culling legislation, publicly complained that it was unfair to make ranchers “hire more and more men or women, or whatever, to run around the ranges to try to scare wolves off.”

The DelCurtos used a combination of electric fences and “range riders,” who patrolled their land. “Human presence is essential,” Shella DelCurto told the Coloradans. She appeared on behalf of Working Circle, a California-based nonprofit that teaches coexistence. Colorado voters had just approved a ballot initiative to reintroduce wolves by the end of 2023, and the ranchers wanted to understand their options. They were familiar with coyotes and

mountain lions, but Colorado had fewer than two dozen wolves. DelCurto advised the ranchers to prepare by ridding their property of attractants such as decaying carcasses and bone piles: “Bury ‘em. Bury ‘em deep.”



“Don’t forget to blow out all the torches before you come up.”
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

She was no radical. Though she believed in coexistence, she told the crowd that workers on her ranch had killed wolves that “would not stop depredatin’.” But she also described how her operation now protected its livestock by restructuring herding patterns and breeding schedules. The herd ultimately produced more—and bigger, stronger—calves, which fetched a higher price at market. DelCurto concluded, “There’s an *advantage* to this.”

Creatures caught in traps often die miserably. Some attempt to gnaw off the immobilized limb. One of Ash’s critics recently told him, “Not only do you make them suffer, you humiliate them as well. May your dick get caught in one of your traps.”

Some states require trappers to check their lines every twenty-four hours, but Idaho law allows devices to go unmonitored for seventy-two. The generous time frame acknowledges the remoteness of Idaho’s backcountry, the cost of gas, and the fact that trappers often work full-time jobs. In a video, Ash once confessed that, while he tries to check his lines more often than the law requires, he has occasionally operated “outside” that window.

This season, he planned to target entire wolf packs and hoped to “hit a thousand subscribers” on YouTube. “I don’t hate wolves,” he told me. “But I do feel that people need to be able to protect their property, and I think wolves need to be managed.” Last September, he biked dozens of traps to the forest meadow, where—for photographs—he hung a buckskin between trees and inscribed it “*WOLF CAMP 2021 2022*.” Ash likes to “set heavy”: he may install fifteen or more traps near where he sees scat or hears howling. He chose his locations after finding piles of poop on an old logging trail and the carcass of a flying squirrel in the forest.

Ash uses foothold traps with spring-loaded steel jaws. Weight triggers the jaws to snap shut. An attached chain, secured to a stake or a tree, prevents escape. He once demonstrated a trap on camera by letting it clutch his hand. “There’s a lot of people say that trapping’s inhumane and whatnot,” he declared. “But I’m here to tell ya, it’s just designed to hold ya.”

Picking out a rotted stump, Ash dug a shallow basin at the edge of it, and set a trap inside. As he sifted dirt and duff over the arrangement, he said that he wouldn’t be able to afford to trap wolves if not for F4WM: “They’re payin’ out pretty big bucks!” He opened a small jar of Fox Hollow lure, which contains “pure skunk essence,” and used a twig to place a dollop near the trap. He then added a sprinkle of Minnesota Brand fox urine.

Ash once told his fans, “I’ve caught wolves a month later, the next day, and sometimes not at all!” His traps had lain empty for eleven days when, in late September, he posted a glum video. It was the sixth anniversary of his father’s death, and he had caught nothing. Then, around sunset, he heard a clanking chain. “Look what we got here, boys,” he said. He showed a wolf—mottled gray, medium-sized—caught by one of its feet. As Ash walked toward it, the wolf jerked frantically at its chain, then crouched behind a fallen log. Ash let the camera run for a bit, then turned it off and shot the wolf.

Afterward, he filmed the carcass, displayed on the log. “There she is, a female,” he said. “A young one.” Ash told his detractors, “You want to hate on me? Hate away.”

Several nights later, Ash, who camped near the meadow, was woken in the night by bawling and howls. “I think them wolves are getting a cow,” he said into a camera. He grabbed a pistol and a flashlight and walked toward the commotion. When the noise stopped, Ash whispered, “Must’ve gotten killed.” The next day, he found a calf dead on its side in the forest, attracting blowflies. He zoomed in on the graphic cavity that was once the animal’s hind end.

That day, Ash trapped a second wolf—mottled gray, like the first, caught by a back leg. He shot it and arranged it beneath his rifle. He titled his video “sweet revenge!” and declared another “cattle killer” dead. Days later, after he filmed the capture and imminent death of a third wolf, a fan commented, “Badass!!” Another joked, “You should be ashamed of yourself for killing such a majestic animal and not inviting me.”

Ash trapped his fourth wolf in early October. He came up on it still struggling to flee and remarked, “Real pretty dog. . . . No more calves for them.” A friend of Ash’s videotaped him taking a knee, holding a pistol. The friend kept the camera trained on Ash as he fired. A California-based animal-rights group, Lady Freethinker, recently sued YouTube for failing to enforce restrictions on videos of animal cruelty, but the platform’s content rules allow creators to air legal acts of hunting. A promotional video for F4WM shows a wolf being shot in the head. Ash was later criticized for taking too long to “dispatch” the wolf, as he terms it. He told me, “I was trying to get a good clean shot—I’m not trying to cause suffering to any animal.”

After killing the wolf, Ash thanked F4WM for what would be his “ten-thousand-dollar reimbursement for this year.”

By October 13th, his audience had grown dramatically. Channels featuring wilderness content have proliferated on YouTube. Jordan Jonas, who won the reality-TV contest “Alone,” after outlasting competitors in the subarctic, is one of Ash’s followers. Ash has promised to teach him how to trap wolves. One fan suggested that Ash headline a video “Crazy hillbilly vs scary wolf”—more lurid titles would help him “get a million views.” Ash replied, “I’m trying to show people how to trap,” not “become a sideshow.”

Wolf No. 5 stepped into one of Ash's traps in late October, just before the first snow. He found it in the daytime, its glossy black coat contrasting with the forest browns and greens. After killing it, he pulled back its lips and examined its teeth, to assess the animal's age. "Big ol' black sucker," he said. Lifting a hind leg, he checked the genitalia, and said, "Big black male." Ash usually did not comment on coloring, but he made seven other references to the fact that this wolf was black, eventually headlining his YouTube post "Caught a big black male." Repeating that haters did not upset him, he gazed into the camera and declared, "All it does is motivate me." Before he could trap more wolves, though, he got a bad case of what he suspects was *COVID-19*, and sat out much of the rest of the hunting season.

Ash usually sells the wolf pelts, but he took his fifth kill to a friend who had "always wanted a black wolf." The wolf lay across Ash's electric bike, its nose bloody, its mouth propped open with a stick. The friend lifted the wolf's head and said, "Another wolf killer down!"

Ash laughed and replied, "*Elk* killer." ♦

London Postcard

- [Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs Go to London](#)

By [Rebecca Mead](#)

In 1965, when David Hare, the British playwright, was eighteen, he visited New York City for the first time. He prowled the Village, hoping to bump into Bob Dylan, and spent time hanging out in Washington Square. “It was exactly as it is now—it was always people with guitars, people playing chess, mothers with baby carriages,” he said recently. At the time, Hare was unaware that a few years earlier a battle had been fought over the integrity of Washington Square Park, with Robert Moses, the ambitious mid-century urban planner who aimed to drive Fifth Avenue traffic straight through the square, pitted against a coalition of neighborhood activists including Jane Jacobs, who was to become the author of “The Death and Life of Great American Cities.”



That confrontation is dramatized in Hare’s new play, “Straight Line Crazy,” which opened last week at the Bridge Theatre, in London, directed by Nicholas Hytner, with Ralph Fiennes in the role of Moses. “Straight Line Crazy”—Hare gives the phrase to Jacobs, though it originated with Iphigene Ochs Sulzberger, a champion of Moses and the daughter of the publisher of the *Times*—partly draws on Robert Caro’s 1974 biography of Moses, “The Power Broker,” the hefty volume that has enjoyed an unexpected vogue as a Zoom-call bookshelf signifier of seriousness. Seated in the bar of the Bridge, Hare explained that in contrast with Caro’s Moses, who was driven by a

hunger for power, his own Moses is overcome by an idealism that has curdled. “He’s a man trapped in a dream,” Hare said. “That, to me, is not about urban planning. It’s about everybody—including myself.”

While the second act concerns the war over Washington Square—a battle that Moses lost—the first act relates a campaign he won decades earlier. He had vanquished a coalition of wealthy landowners on Long Island to construct parkways upon which city dwellers might drive for a day out at Jones Beach State Park, which, with its Art Deco bathhouses and landscaped dunes, was also Moses’s creation. “The motivation that was so inspirational in the nineteen-twenties is exactly the same motivation that was so destructive in the nineteen-fifties,” Hare said. “It’s ‘life is horrible for the working class in these tenements, so let’s get them out to enjoy some fresh air, let them have beaches, let them drive off to wonderful places, which are held by the aristocracy, which the aristocracy is trying to prevent them reaching.’ It’s a democratic urge. Later, it’s the same conviction—we need to knock these filthy tenements down and move these people into nice, clean, Corbusier-inspired blocks. But he takes no notice of the fact that he’s destroying communities that are mostly full of Hispanic and Black people, who are absolutely furious. You have James Baldwin saying, ‘Urban renewal means Negro removal.’ And Moses refuses to accept that what was once a dream is now a nightmare.”

Hare said that he identifies with Moses, up to a point: “It’s believing that it’s so difficult to do what you want to do in life that you become deaf to the objections to it.” At the outset of Hare’s own career, writing for London’s Royal Court Theatre, “a bad review was proof that you were doing something good,” he recalled. “We would say, ‘Well, of course they’re not going to understand this.’” In 1978, “Plenty,” now regarded as one of Hare’s most significant works, opened in London to dismissive notices before it moved to Broadway. (“Straight Line Crazy” opened to mostly positive reviews.)

Robert Moses is a household name in New York. (Other colorful figures, including Governor Al Smith, make appearances.) To London’s theatregoers, he may be more obscure. “There’s a popular feeling that this is a more sheltered place to put plays on,” Hare said. He added that there had been no discussion thus far of a transfer to Moses’s home town—a

contention hardly more believable than Moses's efforts, at the climax of "Straight Line Crazy," to imply that his Fifth Avenue extension was intended merely to ease north-south congestion, rather than being part of a scheme to construct an expressway going east-west through SoHo.

Caro readers will note that Hare doesn't stick strictly to the canon. He stages one of Moses's first confrontations in the Long Island drawing room of one Henry Vanderbilt. (Moses: "Remember, sir, you made your millions out of the despised kikes and wops, living in the tenements you own. Now you wish me to go back and tell the workers that you intend to deny them a day out in the country.") A quick check of Caro's index, and of the Vanderbilt family tree, reveals Moses's nemesis to be a composite plutocrat. "I said to Nick Hytner, 'Is it O.K. to invent a Vanderbilt, or should we try to find a proper one?'" Hare recalled. "He thought nobody would know." ♦

Lost and Found Dept.

- [The Masterpiece in Your Trash](#)

By [Laura Preston](#)

A few days before a group of nine antique dealers convened at a pop-up gallery on the Lower East Side for the first-ever Found Object Show, the event's organizer, Adam Irish, was working out a central question: What is a found object? Consider, for example, a quintessential found object recovered by his friend and co-exhibitor Joshua Lowenfels: a rusty bike enveloped by a tree trunk. Like any good found object, it had, through time and accident, transcended its original form and taken on new meaning. Irish proposed that a great found object is like a burning bush: mystical, beyond language, and immediately arresting. Another term that the exhibitors had bandied about was "incidental art," but Irish didn't like "incidental," which can also mean "trifling." "Some found objects are masterpieces," he said.



Among the possible masterpieces being prepared for sale at the Found Object Show were a fragment of a birdhouse; a tar bucket; an electrified toilet seat; a piece of wire from a fence made woolly by escaping sheep; a handmade massage device; a braille bingo board; a pouch of nineteenth-century cheese; a hunk of Styrofoam that looked like nineteenth-century cheese; a street sign reading "Alone Ave."; a false beard made of real golden hair; a pile of rubber pocket watches; a pork salesman's pig-shaped suitcase; a magician's trick ball; a washing-machine agitator shaped like human hands; a hundred-year-old brick impressed with an animal's footprint; a

forgotten softball grown furry with moss; a copper diving helmet that imploded under immense pressure; and a chicken farmer's handmade wooden shoes, designed to leave spurious bobcat tracks around coops.

Irish and his fellow-dealers find their objects in high and low places— auctions, flea markets, hoarders' barns. Recently, Irish met up with Lowenfels to hunt for some more on a stretch of beach in Brooklyn at the edge of a landfill. Over time, waves had eroded the cliffs, covering the shore with a mantle of mid-century trash. Irish, who owns an antique shop in Providence, Rhode Island, wore a shawl-neck cardigan and round glasses, and had a professorial air. Lowenfels, a lifelong New Yorker and a dealer since the nineties, arrived wearing a bucket hat over the hood of a camouflage jacket. His pockets were stuffed with wadded grocery bags.

Irish was drawn to a mudflat littered with glass bottles, which clinked and crunched underfoot. "There are two kinds of people," he said. "Those who look for natural things and those who look for the man-made." He crouched and then surfaced with a milk-glass cold-cream jar, which he wiped off and put in his pocket. Meanwhile, Lowenfels stood by the water, transfixed by a lumpy beige object the size of a porpoise. On closer inspection, it was a tangle of pantyhose. With effort, he lifted a portion off the ground. The stockings were engorged with sand and swung low. Irish came over to assess. "They look ripe," he said.

Farther down the beach, the pair made another discovery: more pantyhose Medusas. The beach was full of them. "It's the property of the material and how it repeats itself," Lowenfels said. "Like how some things get tangled in the dryer and other things don't."

"I will ask the question: 'What do the pantyhose want?'" Irish said.

Lowenfels turned to an area of bottles whose necks faced out to sea. "The bottles are facing Mecca," he said.

Irish considered this. "Bottles are heavier on the bottom, so the waves pull the necks away from the shore," he said. "That's what the bottle wants."

“Look at this,” Lowenfels said. He held up a white rubber ring, about a foot across, that had warped into a drooping “O.” It was some sort of spoked wheel, but the spokes had rotted away, leaving sharp, rusty pegs around the inner circumference. “It’s from a baby carriage, but it’s kind of like a shark’s mouth,” Lowenfels said. A few paces down the shore, he spied another carriage wheel. This one had deformed into a long, narrow ellipse, like a flaccid rubber band.

“This one is crying, and the other is laughing,” Irish said.

The sun began to set. Irish and Lowenfels decided to return to civilization. Near the parking lot, they examined the carriage wheels under a street lamp. “They say that time doesn’t exist,” Irish said. “Everything is happening right now.” He went on, “Right now, the mother is wheeling the child down the street.”

“I snatched them from her, just as she stopped to talk to her neighbor,” Lowenfels said.

On the drive home, both marvelled at sights ablaze in the dark: a billboard advertising puppies for rent, a window display full of gleaming white tuxedos, an exterminator’s storefront featuring huge, glowing images of every pest he’d happily kill. “Everything in those shops is already in the landfill,” Irish said.

“Everything in your apartment, too,” Lowenfels added. “And she’s still out for a stroll, with Lily in the pram, stopping to talk with her neighbor.” ♦

On Television

- The Comforts of “WeCrashed” and the Modern Grifter Series

By [Naomi Fry](#)

“WeCrashed,” a scripted series about the rise and fall of WeWork, Adam Neumann’s office co-working company, begins not with a startup but with a shakedown. Neumann (Jared Leto), a wannabe entrepreneur from Israel, tries to woo Rebekah (Anne Hathaway), an underpaid yoga teacher, by berating her boss into properly compensating her. “Instead of you giving Rebekah one dollar per student, she’s going to keep the donations,” he barks at the studio’s owner, shaking a finger in the man’s face. Next, we cut to Neumann and Rebekah tumbling into bed.

Sex, money, aggression: this early scene gestures at the show’s ambitions, which can feel as outsized as those of Neumann, who hawked a real-estate company as a revolutionary tech venture. “WeCrashed” seemingly wants to align itself with the golden age of television, marked by the charismatic-asshole DNA of such antiheroes as Tony Soprano, Walter White, and Don Draper. Lithe, long-haired, and occasionally shirtless, Leto certainly looks the part of a rogue. (While watching, I was reminded that he rose to fame in the nineties as the impossibly frustrating teen heartthrob Jordan Catalano, on “*My So-Called Life*.”) He also gamely embodies Neumann’s “rock star” leadership ethos. “Crazy is how we get there,” he says, of his approach. He swills Don Julio 1942 in the office and goes unshod at corporate meetings because he “grew up on a fucking kibbutz.” And yet, for all these shenanigans, “WeCrashed,” which is based on a podcast of the same name, is more closely associated with a newer strain of television, drawn from what one might call Bad Entrepreneur I.P. As with “*The Dropout*,” a Hulu show about the Theranos C.E.O., Elizabeth Holmes, which is based on a podcast of the same name, and “*Super Pumped: The Battle for Uber*,” a Showtime series about Travis Kalanick, the C.E.O. of the ride-sharing company, which is based on a book of the same name, “WeCrashed” adapts an extremely recent historical event, previously packaged in another medium, to tell the story of a megalomaniacal impresario who soars to the upper echelons of the business world before flatlining.

These shows vary in tone: Netflix’s “*Inventing Anna*,” a scam-trepreneur tale about a fake German heiress, is more straightforwardly criminal and less corporate than other examples of the genre, which often focus on the invention of so-called unicorn companies. But all of these programs are,

essentially, shows about failure. Holmes, despite fashioning herself as a female Steve Jobs, didn't have the technological expertise to maintain her con; the subject of "Inventing Anna" is depicted as a charismatic genius, and yet she ends up broke and in jail. Kalanick deserves real credit for his ingenuity as a founder, but he was forced to resign from Uber after making a series of poor ethical decisions. The only reason there are shows about these people is that their behavior was uncovered.

Bad Entrepreneur TV, even when it's good, makes for more antiseptic viewing than earlier antihero sagas. A Silicon Valley pitch session tends to be less stimulating than a dirty backroom deal at the Bada Bing!, no matter how much of a rule-breaker the protagonist might be. (In "WeCrashed," Neumann is portrayed as a stoner, but weed may be the least sexy of all drugs.) The arcs of these shows are predetermined, further lowering the dramatic stakes. One might think of the scam-trepreneur series as the new crime procedural: viewers know where the story starts, as well as where it ends. "We're not selling desks," Neumann says, of WeWork, and Rebekah adds, "We're selling an experience." What kind of experience can "WeCrashed" offer, given that many of us have bought the desks ourselves and know them to be nothing more than that? Despite claims that the grifter boom is exciting and cathartic—that it speaks to a generation of viewers who have become jaded by capitalism—shows like "WeCrashed" often seem designed to be reassuring. *You're not stupid for falling for it*, they seem to say, as celebrities play far more attractive, far more compelling versions of real-life con artists. Bad Entrepreneur TV isn't thrilling; it's comfort food.

"WeCrashed" was created by Drew Crevello and Lee Eisenberg, and the show's main hook is that it's genuinely funny. In 2019, WeWork, then valued at an estimated forty-seven billion dollars, failed in its attempt to go public. Neumann had pursued unsustainable expansion plans, keeping the company afloat with capital infusions from hoodwinked investors, and he was ousted as C.E.O., albeit with a golden parachute worth more than a billion dollars. This isn't a laughing matter—surely not for the twelve thousand overworked and underpaid employees who, with the demise of the company's I.P.O., got bubkes. But Eisenberg, a writer, producer, and director of "The Office," cut his teeth on identifying ridiculous situations that might emerge in corporate settings, and the scenes of Adam and Rebekah in the workplace have a Michael Scott-like absurdity to them. "Barack's great, but

he's not a businessman," Rebekah says, smiling patronizingly, when Neumann suggests that they ask President Obama to join the company's board of directors.

I was skeptical about the casting of Leto, but I don't think I've ever seen a better impression of an Israeli's accent and mannerisms done by a non-Israeli, and I say this as an Israeli. (The image of Neumann, in a mesh muscle tank, squeezing into an elevator beside Rebekah, in the first flush of courtship, with a braying "Sha-lom!" nearly made me cry tears of joy and recognition.) He plays the character as an excitable, self-interested doofus who believes his own hype. "I'm an entrepreneur, and I live for disruption!" he tells Rebekah's boss at the yoga studio, the grandiosity of his words at odds with the piddling sum he's demanding. His neo-Master-of-the-Universe routine includes having "Roar," Katy Perry's paean to winning at all costs ("I got the eye of the tiger, a fighter / Dancing through the fire") played on the P.A. system when he's at WeWork HQ. ("Louder, louder!")

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Meanwhile, Hathaway presents Rebekah, who marries Neumann, as a husky-voiced font of New Age platitudes. "Can you feel all that love and energy that I'm sending to you?" she asks her husband during a call, as she presses a smartphone to her forehead, her eyes closed beatifically. (The vibes, though, can go both ways, as some workers discover, when H.R. fires them at Rebekah's behest for exhibiting "bad energy.") A cousin of Gwyneth Paltrow's, Rebekah cloaks the jealousy she feels toward her famous relative in faux equanimity. "She's just a person, O.K.?" she tells Adam on their first date. "A very pretty person," he responds, obtusely. Rebekah has acting ambitions, too, and one of the show's most amusing sequences involves an excruciating Russian accent she uses while playing Chekhov's Masha. She ultimately abandons her thespian dreams, turning her attention to building WeGrow, a spinoff of WeWork, despite her lack of knowledge. ("I need to order some books on education," she says.) She wants to "manifest" a company that will "elevate the world's consciousness," the kind of loosey-goosey phrase that befuddles corporate daddies like Bruce Dunlevie of the venture-capital firm Benchmark, and Jamie Dimon, the C.E.O. of JPMorgan Chase.

At times, “WeCrashed” sets the comedy aside in order to delve into the juicier nether regions of character. The writers don’t try especially hard to give depth to Neumann, who remains, rightly, a shallow comic subject: brief forays into his family background, as when his absentee father joins him at a conference in Mumbai, are dropped almost as soon as they are picked up. The show is keener on deepening Rebekah, perhaps because most viewers will know less about her. One episode, complete with portentous flashbacks, is partly dedicated to her difficult relationship with her fraudster father, the traumatic loss of her brother to cancer, and her fears of abandonment.

Toggling between a parable of too-much-too-soon speculative capitalism and a realistic psychological study is a tall order, and the strain is palpable. “We will activate this space with energy, with compassion,” Neumann tells some employees, forcing them to laugh and dance, in order to showcase an ideal environment for a visiting investor. As the show made its way toward its final episodes, it seemed to me that it, too, was beginning to go through the motions. More money, more pressure, more problems, more ambitions, more New Age drivel. I wanted to go back to the start, to looser jokes and mesh muscle tanks. ♦

Personal History

- Lucky-Go-Happy

By [David Sedaris](#)

Content

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Throughout the worst of the pandemic, I, like everyone, thought of the many things I'd failed to appreciate back when life was normal: Oh, to be handed an actual restaurant menu; to stand so close to a stranger that you can read the banal text messages that are obviously more important to him than his toddler stumbling off the curb and out into traffic.

Many felt that they had taken their jobs for granted, but not me. I always loved my work, or at least the part of it that was public and involved reading out loud. The last show I did before *COVID-19* robbed me of my livelihood was in Vancouver, British Columbia, in a theatre I didn't much care for, a rock house with a grim, cramped lobby and the sort of dressing room you see in movies about performers who overdose on drugs because their dressing rooms are so depressing. The audience was lovely, though, and I liked my hotel, which, at the end of the day, is really what it's all about. I'm never the one paying for the room, so I'm spared the part where you lie awake and wonder if it's really worth six or seven or eight hundred dollars just so someone can creep in while you're out and arrange a pair of slippers beside your freshly turned-down bed. They're on the carpet and look as if they belong to a wealthy ghost who's just scooted over to make room for you.

In the restaurant of my Vancouver hotel the following morning, I sat beside a handsome actor it took me no time at all to recognize. On the television series I had most recently watched him in, he was quick-tempered and physically abusive, so I liked how polite he was to the waiter and to the woman who floated away with his empty orange-juice glass. "Gee, thanks. That's very kind of you."

As I boarded the elevator back to my room, the hotel manager stepped in and asked me how my stay was going. "Terrific," I told him. "I just saw a big star in the restaurant."

"I can't confirm that," the fellow said, offering a stiff smile.

“I don’t need you to,” I told him, offering a smile of my own. “I know perfectly well who it was.”

Then I couldn’t remember the guy’s name for the life of me. “Oh, you know,” I said to my friend Adam, who produces a good number of my events and who rode with me to the airport an hour or so after I had finished my breakfast. “It was what’s his name who’s on that TV series with the woman who used to be married to the guy who made that movie with a song in it that everybody knows.”

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Aside from my star sighting, my last show was pretty typical. I read something new and realized it didn’t work as well as I’d hoped. Then I signed books for three hours. The evening was unremarkable—a shame, because for the next year and a half I would reflect upon it obsessively, would almost fetishize it. That was what I used to do for a living, I’d think. And now it’s over. On the best days, I’d remind myself that everyone was sitting at home, that this was just a temporary setback. A part of me worried, though, that when the world eventually moved on it would do so without me, or at least without any particular need of me. The circus would take to the road again, but not with this elephant.

I decided from the start of the pandemic not to get Zoom. “What do you mean, ‘get’ it?” my boyfriend, Hugh, asked. “It’s nothing you have to buy or attach to your computer. You press a button and, wham, it’s there.”

“Well, can you mark which button?” I asked. “I want to make sure I never push it.”

In the course of the next eighteen months, I did do one Zoom event, though it wasn’t on my computer. Instead, someone came to the apartment, and I used his.

“How did it go?” my lecture agent asked when it was over.

“I have no idea,” I told him. And it was true. Without a live audience—that fail-safe congregation of unwitting editors—I’m lost. It’s not just their

laughter I pay attention to but also the quality of their silence. As for noises, a groan is always good, in my opinion. A cough means that if they were reading this passage on the page they'd be skimming now, and a snore is your brother-in-law putting a gun to your head and pulling the trigger. You are dead now. The evening is over.

I wrote during the pandemic. I published things, which was scary, as without a public reading I had no idea whether they actually worked or not. I can occasionally try something out on Hugh, but not for long. At most he'll listen for a minute or so before turning away and saying he'd rather read whatever it is himself, and only after the book or magazine comes out in print.

“Yes, but by then it will be too late to make changes,” I’ll tell him.

Hugh and I have vastly different senses of humor—this is to say that I have one and he doesn’t. What I need him for are his comments. “You can’t say that,” he’ll insist on the odd chance I make it past my opening sentence. “Disgusting!” is another of his favorites.

Hugh saying “That’s terrible” is a sure sign that an audience will laugh. One of my many nicknames for him is Congressman Prude, and for good reason. “I just don’t see the need for that language,” he’ll sniff, referring, on one occasion, to the term “bare bottom,” and, on another, to “ovaries.” “Do you have to talk that way?”

To be on tour was to hear, at least ten times a day, “You must be exhausted.” People would insist that what I was going through was grossly unfair, too much to ask of a mortal human, and just as I’d find myself agreeing I’d think, Hold on . . . all I’ve actually done this morning is eat breakfast and take an hour-long flight from Atlanta to Birmingham. That’s not at all exhausting. There were days, certainly, when it was stressful. Flights would be cancelled and alternatives hastily configured. But it wasn’t *me* doing the configuring. Rather, it was a travel agent, a professional. I’d see hotheads in those long customer-service lines, the ones in which every passenger required a full half hour of phone calls and concentrated keyboard pecking, but, since I outsourced the drama to someone else, even with a hectic rerouting I couldn’t really complain.

I flew a dozen or so times during the worst of the pandemic—to North Carolina, to Indiana and Kentucky, to the U.K. It pained me to see the airports so empty, a majority of the businesses shuttered, the lounges closed. Walking through the terminal at Charlotte Douglas one afternoon in the summer of 2020, I came upon what looked to be a fig, lying on the floor in a near-empty concourse. On closer inspection I saw that it was a turd—a dog’s, most likely. What has this world come to? I thought. It was like seeing my office in ruins. The airport was my place. I knew its rhythms and its rules, could tell the professional travellers from the novices the moment they stepped from their cars, the latter with their spongy neck pillows, holding up the T.S.A. screenings: “I knew I couldn’t go through with water, but Sprite, too?”



“After I introduce you to solids, I’m going to need your help with some computer stuff.”
Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

Of course, I’d be in precheck, not inconvenienced by the novices but incensed nevertheless. I guess you don’t realize how good it feels to look down on someone until you’ve both, indiscriminately, been kicked to the curb.

I couldn’t wait to be back on my high horse, and got the opportunity, finally, in the fall of 2021. My lecture agent had lined up a seventy-two-city tour that was set to begin the second week of September. My old life back, sort of. There would be restrictions: in the states that allowed such things, the

audience would have to show proof of vaccination, and everyone would be masked. I tried not to get my hopes up too high, but at the same time I needed to be prepared in case things went my way. If the elephant was indeed going back out with the circus, he needed to be a little bit less of an elephant. I'd gained a good twenty pounds in the past year and a half and would have to lose them if I was going to fit into my tour clothes. The diet I came up with involved walking fifteen miles a day, eating half the amount that I normally do, and filling up on as much sugar-free Jell-O as I wanted.

People asked, "What flavor?"

But there are no flavors, just colors: red, green, yellow, orange, and a new beige one that tastes beige. It was crazy how quickly I lost the weight. Every other week I was taking my belt to the cobbler and having another hole punched. At first, he was all, "Congratulations!" Then it was, "You again?"

I was just grateful that he recognized me, as I felt that I looked so much older now.

"I think it's your clothes that are the giveaway," Hugh said. And it's true. Think White House-era Harry Truman dressed like White House-era Dolly Madison.

Two days before my tour was to begin, the first city cancelled, owing to fears about the Delta variant. I worried the others would fall like dominoes, but the second, Nashville, held. How thrilling it was to be in front of an audience again, to expend energy and actually feel it reverberating back. To be in a nice hotel! I'd find over the coming three months that many of them had cut back on services—a daily room cleaning now had to be specifically asked for, ostensibly for *COVID* reasons but really because there were so few housekeepers. In city after city, all I saw were help-wanted signs. If McDonald's was offering fourteen dollars an hour, the Taco Bell next door was willing to pay sixteen. Every Starbucks was hiring, every drugstore and supermarket. Have the people who used to work there died? I wondered. Where was everyone?

When teen-agers came to my book-signing table, my first question was no longer "When did you last see your parents naked?" but "Do you have a

job?"

Nine times out of ten, before the kid could speak, his or her mother would take over. "Tyler is too busy with his schoolwork," or "Kayla just needs to be seventeen now." On several occasions, the person was genderqueer, and the mother would say, "Cedar is taking some time to figure themself out."

There was a Willow as well, and a Hickory. I guessed that was a thing now, naming yourself after a tree.

One woman I met, a mother of three, told me that none of her teen-agers held jobs and weren't likely to anytime soon. "Why should they bust their butts for seventeen dollars an hour?"

"Um, because it's seventeen more than they get by sitting at home doing nothing?"

"I grew up having to work and don't want to put my kids in that headspace," the woman said.

Dear God, I thought. America as I knew it is finished. Aren't you *supposed* to have a shitty job when you're a teen-ager? It's how you develop a sense of compassion. My sister Gretchen and I both worked in cafeterias, and Amy was a supermarket cashier. Tiffany worked in kitchens; Paul, too. I made a dollar-sixty an hour and, damn it, I was happy to get it. That's the way this country ran. If, at age sixteen, you wanted a bong, you went out there and worked for it. Now I guess your parents just buy it for you, and probably give you the pot as well.

Toward the end of my tour, the *Times* ran an article about the many schools that were instituting virtual Fridays. Parents were up in arms, as now they'd have to find sitters or stay at home themselves that day. "Well, I think it's much needed," said every teacher I spoke to. "Our jobs are really stressful." Everyone was saying that now. Being a claims adjuster, heading an I.T. unit, publicizing eyeshadow: "It's hard work that takes a real toll on me!"

Because it was so difficult to find and maintain staff, people who, two years earlier, might have been fired for one reason or another were still at their

posts—the desk clerk at one hotel I stayed in, for instance. I arrived shortly after midnight and found the place deserted. Not a soul in the lobby. “Hello!” I called. “Is anybody here?”

When no one answered, I took a step behind the check-in desk and tried again. “Hello?”

I walked to the bell stand and back. I peered into the restaurant, which was closed off with a louvered metal gate. A few more minutes passed, and just as I was wondering if I should call a cab and try some other hotel a woman appeared—mid-forties, slightly dishevelled, and angry. Her mouth was small and looked like a recently healed exit wound. “What are you *doing*?” she demanded. “You’re not supposed to step behind my counter, especially now, in *COVID* times. We can’t have people back here!”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “There was no one around, and I wasn’t sure—”

“We *know* you’re *here*,” the woman snapped. “We got *cameras*. We can *see* you.”

Well, I’ve never worked in a hotel, I thought. How am I supposed to know your setup?

“If you saw me, why didn’t you come out?” I asked.

“I was *busy*,” she said. “Is that O.K. with you, me doing stuff?”

She’d clearly been lying down. The only question was, had she been alone or with someone else? This wasn’t some flophouse that rented rooms by the hour. My one night was costing close to two hundred dollars, but even if it were one-tenth that price you can’t talk to your guests like that, at least not when they’re being reasonably polite.

I decided that on my way out the following morning I was going to tell on this woman, but when the time came and her associate asked, “How was your stay?” I said, simply, “Fine,” thinking, as I always do when someone is rude to me, At least I can write about it.

Then, too, I just felt lucky, not only to be back at work but to seemingly have the one job in America that wasn't too much to handle. There is literally nothing to this, I'd think every night as I walked from the wings of the stage to the lectern, trying not to trip on my floor-length shirt. It had a heavy, braided hem, and I was devastated to realize one afternoon that I'd left it in the closet of the hotel I had checked out of that morning. Of course I called in the hopes of getting it back, though in retrospect I should have said, "Yes, I'm afraid my wife forgot to pack her nightgown." As it was, the desk clerk kept insisting that what had been turned in was most certainly meant for a woman.

"Look at the tag," I told him. "It says 'Homme Plus.' '*Homme*' means 'man' in French."

"Yes," the person said, "but this is . . . decorative."

On top of the countless help-wanted signs and the many Christian T-shirts I saw people wearing—among them were the slogans "*on my blessed behavior*" and "*long story short: god saved my life*"—I noticed how very different it was to go from one state to the next, or even from city to city within a particular state. In Los Angeles, masks were mandatory in all the common areas of my hotel, and I had to show proof of vaccination in order to enter the restaurant. Should I leave for any reason, I'd have to show it again upon my reentry, because this was Los Angeles, where, unless you're either famous or horribly disfigured, no one remembers your face—especially just the top half of it—for more than five seconds, or three if you're over fifty. From there, I went to Palm Springs, where, aside from the staff in their black N95s, my hotel was wide open. It's worth noting that both of those places were high-end. From California I flew to Montana. Out of habit I wore a mask into the lobby of my hotel and received the sort of looks I might have got had I sported a Hillary Clinton T-shirt at a Klan rally. The following afternoon, I went to lunch and was shocked that none of the staff had their faces covered: not the hostess or the waiter, and neither of the cooks I could see when the door to the kitchen opened. For much of America—the red parts, primarily—the pandemic was over, at least on the ground, and a mask actually made me feel *unsafe*.

Meanwhile, in the air, face coverings were mandated by federal law. Pilots made regular announcements, but most of the heavy lifting was left to the flight attendants. Sometimes it was a losing battle. On an early-morning plane I took from Odessa, Texas, to Houston, several of my fellow-passengers said, politely but firmly, “Nope. I’m done with your regulations.” Our flight attendant was all of twenty-three years old, and what could she do, really? When she attempted to scold the guy beside me, he made a comment about her appearance.

“Sir, could I please ask you to cover your nose and mouth?”

“You have a smokin’ body.”

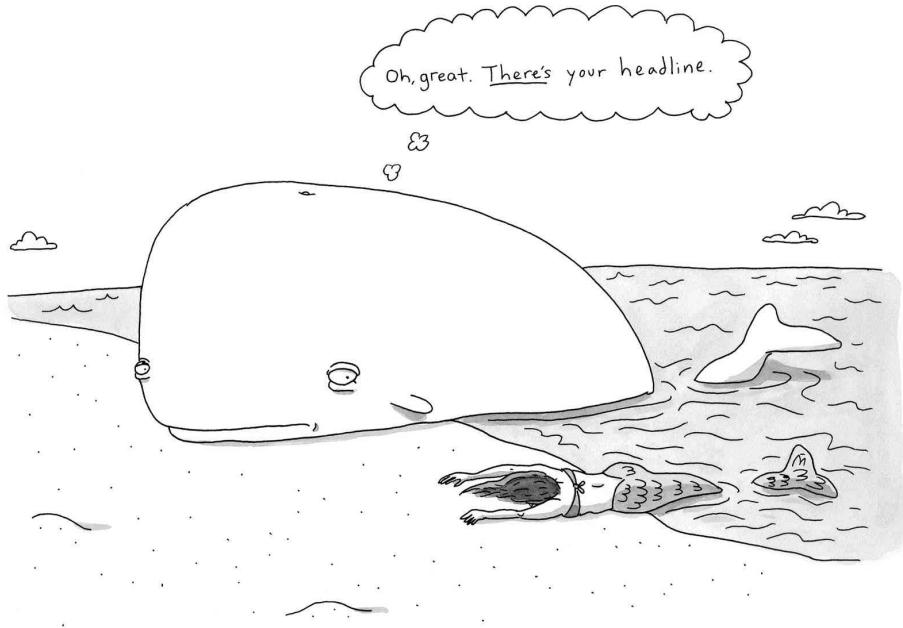
“I beg your pardon?”

“Nice face, too. I’d like to see more of it.”

He had put away two double vodkas, and it wasn’t even 9 a.m. “I’m going to slip that little girl a hundred dollars on my way off the plane,” he told me, his voice like tires on gravel, as we touched down. “See if I don’t, because that amount of money is nothing to me.”

The man was right up in my face, his spittle flecking my glasses, and I thought, Seriously? I’m going to get my *COVID* from you? Why couldn’t it come from someone I like?

But I didn’t get sick. This is remarkable, because I was incredibly reckless. Most nights, I removed my mask for the book signings and pushed aside the plexiglass shield that should have stood between me and the person I was talking to. Otherwise it was too hard to be heard or to hear. I rode in crowded elevators and in cars with drivers whose mouths, like my own, more often than not weren’t entirely covered. There were venues that strictly enforced the mask policy, which was fine unless they were enforcing it with *me*. I liked a situation in which I took no precautions and the rest of the world was made to double up. I liked to be in a red state, maskless and complaining about how backward everyone around me was.



Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

Tours have always been good for getting me out of my bubble, this one even more so. Driving across the Midwest, I saw one Trump 2024 sign after another—this while the election was an entire three years away. “You know you’re in a place that’s inhospitable to liberals when you see fireworks stores,” Adam said in rural Indiana as we passed one powder keg after another.

“Fireworks are guns for children,” I observed.

“They’re the gateway drug,” Adam agreed.

Then there were the actual guns—one I saw, for instance, in Dayton, Ohio, as I waited in line to get a cup of coffee. Ahead of me stood a group of three, none of whom had apparently ever been to a Starbucks before. All were bearded and maskless. Theirs were the faces you’d see on a “Wanted Dead or Alive” poster in the Old West, but colorized. “What’s the closest you got to a milkshake?” the tallest of them asked the employee behind the counter. “Is the ice in a Mocha Cookie Crumble Frappuccino shaved or in chunks?”

A month earlier, at a coffee shop in Springfield, Missouri, I saw a sign for an Almond Joy Latte. For all our talk about health and, worse still, “wellness,” the burning question in most of America is “How can we make this more

fattening?” This has long been the case. I was only noticing it because of my recent diet and my losing struggle to keep the weight off. In Des Moines I heard about a restaurant that served hamburgers on buns made from compressed macaroni and cheese. When, in Boston, I saw “vegan soup” on a menu, my immediate assumption was not that it contained no butter or cream but that it was made of an actual vegan, the heaviest one they could find and boil.

The group of three in front of me in the Dayton Starbucks all ordered drinks that involved the blender and great mountains of whipped cream. Then the tallest of them wondered if Donna wanted anything. She was out in the car—perhaps bound and gagged in the trunk. As he reached into his rear pocket for his phone, his shirt rose, and I saw that he had a pistol tucked into his jeans. A school shooting had taken place twenty minutes earlier in Oxford Township, Michigan, so the sight spooked me more than it might have a day earlier. Are he and his friends going to rob this place? I wondered. Or maybe they’d held up a gas station earlier in the afternoon and were off duty now. I mean, robbers don’t rob *every* business they walk into, right?

The America I saw in the fall of 2021 was weary and battle-scarred. Its sidewalks were cracked, its mailboxes bashed in. All along the West Coast I saw tent cities. They were in parks, in vacant lots and dilapidated squares. In one stop after another, I’d head to a store or a restaurant I remembered and find it boarded up, or maybe burned out, the plywood that blocked the doors covered with graffiti: “*black lives matter.*” “*eat the rich.*” “*fuck the police.*”

During my year and a half at home, I had forgotten about the ups and downs of life on tour. One night you’re at Symphony Hall and the next in a worn-out, once grand movie theatre that is now overrun by mice. “Can you believe they wanted to tear this place down?” the house manager invariably asks, fondly looking up at a gold plaster cherub with one arm missing.

“Um, yes, as a matter of fact.”

It’s the same with hotels. From the new Four Seasons in Philadelphia I went to a Four Points by Sheraton on the side of an eight-lane road in York, Pennsylvania. It was a Friday, and all the guests had tattoos on their necks except me and a very angry mother of the bride, who had hers—two

smudged butterflies—hovering above her right ankle. My room was at the rear of the building, and every time I looked out my window I saw people gathered in the parking lot. Is there a fire drill I missed? I'd wonder.

The following morning, I went out back to see what the fuss was about and found a pile of human shit beside a face mask someone had wiped their ass on.

Noon it was off to the Ritz-Carlton in Washington, D.C. The next day, at breakfast in the ground-floor restaurant, I watched as a woman at the table beside me asked for an extra plate. This she loaded with bacon and eggs and set upon the carpet so that her little terrier could eat from it.

Honestly? I thought. On the carpet? After the dog had finished his breakfast, he strayed. People's paths were blocked by his extendable leash, but no one except me—who had remained seated and thus was not actually inconvenienced—seemed to mind. "Oh, my God!" my fellow-guests cried, as if it were a baby panda they had stumbled upon. "How adorable are you?" One woman announced that she had two fur babies waiting for her at home.

"It must kill you to be separated from them," the lady who'd set the plate on the carpet said.

"Oh, it does," admitted the woman who had started the conversation. "But they'll see Mommy soon enough."

Was feeding your dog from a plate in the dining room better than wiping your ass on a face mask? Difficult to say, really. Both were pretty hard to take. That said, if you're after a decent night's sleep, your safest bet is the Ritz, where most of the guests have at least stayed in a hotel before and know better than to yell "Bro, you are so fucking high right now!" outside your door at 3 a.m.

Whenever the extremes got to me, I'd comfort myself with the many interesting people I met as I made my way across the country—a woman, for instance, whose father had executed her pet hamster with a .22 rifle.

"But why?" I asked.

“Butterscotch had a virus that caused all her hair to fall out,” she told me.

Then there was the psychologist whose father’s last words to her, croaked out on his deathbed, were “You are a Communist cunt.”

The most haunting person was one I never met face to face. In the middle of my tour, I was to fly from Springfield, Missouri, to Chicago, where I would have a night off. I arrived at the airport early, checked my bag, and was walking outdoors, getting some steps in, when I received the message that my flight—that all flights to Chicago—had been cancelled. And so I asked if a car could possibly be arranged. One was and, while I waited for it to arrive, I retrieved my bag and got some more steps in. Because I had to keep an eye on my luggage, I couldn’t go far, so I walked circles around the baggage carousels, none of which were in use. Passing one of them, I saw, huddled in its gutter, two pairs of soiled panties; a nearly empty Tic Tac dispenser; a brush with strands of long strawberry-blond hair caught in it; three AA batteries; and a little sheaf of toothpicks. It was such an interesting portrait of someone—a young woman, I assumed—and I thought of her for months to come, wondering, as I moved from place to place in this divided, beat-up country of ours, where she was and what she imagined had become of her panties. ♦

Poems

- “[Smidgins](#)”
- “[How to Come Out of Lockdown](#)”

By [Rae Armantrout](#)

Content

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

Audio: Read by the author.

My crumpled, wrinkled
blurt
of flesh.

“Let’s face it,”
it says.

*

Poetry hates itself
the way a child
pretends to fall
and looks around
to see who notices.

As much as any
single smidgin
wants to disappear.

*

Poetry loves itself
the way a baby
loves pleasure,

shadows tickling
its skin.

As a swallowtail,
like a folded note,

sways
on a long
blossom.

By [Jim Moore](#)

Content

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

Audio: Read by the author.

1

Someone will need to forgive me for being
who I am, for sneaking back to my blue chair

by the window, where for the last three hundred and seventy days
I have learned that to be alone is what is good for me. I am pretending

as if I really belong with those who want to return to this world
with open arms, even though it has done to us

what it has done. I wish I could love like that,
instead of wanting to turn my back on it all,

as if life in the world were a marriage
assumed too young and necessarily left behind.

Try as I might I will never become
one of the world's faithful ones.

My naked face and your naked face,
maskless. A cold March dawn,

harsh sunlight, impersonal and honest,
mindless like the light from a surgeon's lamp

worn on the forehead as you peer down
into the wound. Nothing in this new life

is asked of me except to remember how small I am.

2

Sometimes the world won't let itself
be sung. Can't become a poem. Sometimes

we are sane, but sanity alone is not enough.
Warm moonlight and wind. I am sitting here,

simply breathing because there is no other way
to be with those who no longer can.

I don't know what to say about it all,
but if you do please show me how to be you.

In the last play I saw, fourteen months ago,
before there were no more plays,

they had made a sea of the stage. Songs were chanted
on its shore. Lives lived. People pretended to die

and a ship sailed into the night. A moon. One star.
Afterward, applause. Then began that long silence

which it is now time for me to admit I have loved
beyond any reason or defense. Who among us

has not seen that star to the left
of the lockdown moon, shining

as the ship sets sail?

Profiles

- [Robert Eggers's Historical Visions Go Mainstream](#)

By [Sam Knight](#)

Content

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

Last September, the filmmaker Robert Eggers was having breakfast—grains, seeds, black coffee—at a bistro in central London. He was preoccupied, to some extent. At seven that morning, he had spoken to an executive at New Regency Productions, to receive the studio’s notes on the latest cut of “The Northman,” the ninety-million-dollar Viking movie that had consumed two years of his life. “The studio is expecting the next cut to be *different*,” Eggers said.

Eggers’s previous films—“The Witch” (2015) and “The Lighthouse” (2019)—were claustrophobic, visionary works that blurred the boundary between the imagined and the real. They didn’t test well at all. The first audiences for “The Northman”—a loose pre-telling of “Hamlet” (Shakespeare’s play is based on a Viking tale) involving longships, volcanoes, transcendental visions, and the singer Björk’s first cinematic role in seventeen years—reported feeling similarly flummoxed. Out of a hundred, the movie was scoring in the mid-sixties; the studio wanted more like seventy-five. “Some audience member wrote, ‘You need to have a master’s degree in Viking history to understand, like, *anything* in this movie,’ ” Eggers said. “Like, ahhh, fuck.”

The budget for “The Northman,” which comes out in late April, started at sixty-five million dollars. Eggers wrote the script with Sjón, an Icelandic novelist and poet, and attracted a major cast. The film stars Alexander Skarsgård and Anya Taylor-Joy, alongside Ethan Hawke, Nicole Kidman, Claes Bang, and Willem Dafoe. But then months of *COVID*-related delays and costly safety protocols pushed the budget way beyond that. “We had kind of an expensive, arty—but commercial—but arty, but commercial, like, Viking movie. . . . Now everyone is kind of, like, ‘If this isn’t “Gladiator” or “Braveheart,” we’re fucked.’ And the thing is: it isn’t,” Eggers said. “It has aspects of that, for sure. But my best intention of doing ‘Gladiator’ or ‘Braveheart’ is still . . .” He let the sentence hang. “Weirder.”

Eggers, who is thirty-eight, has pale-green eyes, a dark cropped beard, and hair buzzed close to his scalp on the sides. He dresses in black, and his left hand is heavy with signet rings and a large gold watch. He could be a double-crossing ambassador in the court of a depraved Habsburg emperor, or the guy in front of you ordering an oat-milk cortado. As a child, he loved comics. But, when Eggers was about ten, an aging Latvian American painter named Hyman Bloom, who influenced Jackson Pollock and was a friend of Eggers's parents, gave him two books of woodcuts by Albrecht Dürer and Martin Schongauer, fifteenth-century German printmakers. "That is when I almost literally, but certainly metaphorically, put away my comic books and became a snob and a dilettante," Eggers told me. "The sea creatures and the satyrs and the wild men and the demons did kind of put Marvel to shame, in my eyes."

Alfonso Cuarón, the director of "Gravity" and "[Roma](#)," read Eggers's screenplay of "The Witch" in 2013, when the movie was still in development. "I was just in awe of it," he told me. "I was, like, more than anything, curious." Cuarón observed that, unlike other filmmakers, who treat the magical or the symbolic as breaks from normality, Eggers makes no such distinction. "It's as if those elements are as natural as the weather. And people coexist with those elements as a matter of existence," Cuarón said. "There's no question about the existence of witches. There's no ulterior explanation. . . . It was just *witches*."

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Over breakfast, I asked Eggers if he could explain why testing audiences were having trouble with "The Northman." In conversation, he hesitates, as if to consider his potential vulnerability, and then answers rapidly and in full, to get it over with. "Currently, with my best intentions, like, I'm not normal," he replied. "I look like a poster boy for a Bushwick hipster, but that is where my relatability ends, I fear."

Eggers was supposed to be in Prague. The previous week, he had been scheduled to move there to begin preparing a remake of "Nosferatu," F. W. Murnau's silent vampire film, from 1922. In high school, Eggers co-directed a stage production of the movie, in which his younger brothers, Max and Sam, who are twins, were painted gray and played motionless gargoyles.

The new version featured Taylor-Joy, who also starred in “The Witch,” and Harry Styles. But, at the last minute, Styles pulled out, citing scheduling concerns. Jarin Blaschke, Eggers’s cinematographer, had already enrolled his daughter in school in Prague.

The change of plans presented Eggers with a vacation—his first in a year and a half. Eggers met his wife, Alexandra Shaker, who is a clinical psychologist, when they were kids. They have a three-year-old son named Houston. They left London for a few days and went to see Stonehenge, staying in a Tudor cottage near the town of Frome, in Somerset. Eggers is a committed Anglophile, but he hasn’t had a chance to see much of the place. “It was fucking awesome,” he said, of Frome, which has Saxon origins. “It’s, like, so cute it’s ridiculous. It looks like a back-lot set. It’s on a hill and it winds around, and it’s, like, a bank next to a pub next to half-timbered bullshit.” He had come back feeling refreshed.

On the street, Eggers called Louise Ford, his editor, and relayed the studio’s notes. He has worked with Ford and Blaschke on every film he has made since 2008: a total of three features and two shorts. The same production and costume designers, Craig Lathrop and Linda Muir, have worked on all of Eggers’s features. But none of them had ever been involved in a film the size or ambition of “The Northman.” “No one. Nobody. None of us were prepared to make this film,” Eggers said.

The studio wanted the beginning of the film to move faster. Ford and Eggers’s challenge that morning was to streamline the grand return of King Aurvandill, Amleth’s father (Amleth is the Viking name for Hamlet), played by Hawke, to his queen, Gudrún, played by Kidman. The sequence, which had been filmed on a windswept headland in Northern Ireland in the fall of 2020, was elaborate, featuring a cliff-top fort, horses, and dozens of extras. Because of *COVID* delays, Eggers had been forced to shoot one scene, involving Dafoe, who plays Heimir, a mixture of holy man and fool, twice—months apart—and stitch the material together in the edit. “This incredibly crucial sequence was just . . . it was so pressured,” he said.

Eggers and Blaschke shoot long, unbroken scenes, often from a single point of view. They eschew handheld cameras, second units, and many other Hollywood filmmaking techniques. Other directors and cinematographers

set up twenty or twenty-five shots in a day—capturing closeups, wide shots, and all the other coverage they might conceivably need; Eggers and Blaschke shoot three or four heavily planned “oners” over and over, and very little else. “It’s a very unique way of making films,” Lars Knudsen, a producer of both “The Witch” and “The Northman,” told me. “We will see on ‘The Northman’ if it translates into, like, a bigger audience.”

“It’s almost like being with people that saw a movie two years ago, and they’re trying to remember it,” Hawke said, of his experience on “The Northman.” He told me that, when he was younger, he might have bristled at Eggers and Blaschke’s methods, but now he admires their exactitude. “So much of moviemaking is people trying to sell you something,” Hawke said. “I’ve spent my life wondering, Will I ever get to be on a set that feels like ‘[Apocalypse Now](#)? You know, like, somebody’s trying. They have the balls, and the hubris and the arrogance to say, ‘I want to make a masterpiece. I’m going to write a movie about Vikings with an Icelandic poet. And shoot it in a way that a film has never been choreographed before.’ So, for me, just seeing somebody take a swing like that, you know, it’s like a jump off a high dive.”

Eggers understood that the studio wanted the film to be unusual. It also wanted a return. “Now everyone’s scared,” he said. We crossed a street near the BBC, on the way to the edit suite, in Soho. The long scenes and the formal composition of Eggers’s films are sometimes more redolent of theatre than of cinema. “The impression is almost of intoxication,” Cuarón said. “You are there, and you’re breathing with those actors.” But Eggers and Blaschke are left with very little spare footage or flexibility that might get them out of a jam—or a tough set of studio notes—later on. “Like, there’s not a lot of alternatives,” Eggers said. “The stakes are really high, and without, you know, coverage.” He said the word with big air quotes.

We passed a film crew unloading equipment from a truck, which Eggers did not seem to notice. He is both present and not. He wakes early each morning to write, and seeks to get lost in the period he is researching. He was working on something Elizabethan at the time. “There’s a lot of scholars who maybe aren’t quite as sophisticated as he is,” Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir, a Viking historian who consulted on “The Northman,” told me. Taylor-Joy describes Eggers as a genius. But he does not like the word. He writes

fluently in Early Modern English, and his idiom is a blend of Brooklyn mumblespeak and something more antique. Eggers readied himself for the day. “I just don’t know on God’s green earth how we’re going to do it,” he said.

Ford speeded up the opening by making a much larger cut than either she or Eggers had thought possible. The next day, they watched “The Northman” from beginning to end and came up with other fixes. “All of a sudden, our eyes were opened to how to do all this other stuff,” Eggers said.



If you need me, I'll be in the next room forever and ever and ever.
Cartoon by Christopher Weyant

I dropped by the editing room the following week. Ford was working at a standing desk, with a model of a longship resting among three screens. Eggers sat against a wall, at a desk littered with books. A blind was pulled most of the way down. While Ford is processing footage, or trying a change, Eggers reads or works on his next script. They had been editing since the start of the year. “We’re like siblings at this point,” he said.

Ford, who is in her early fifties, is from Nantwich, a market town in Cheshire. She came across Eggers in 2007, in Brooklyn, after she was given a script of “[The Tell-Tale Heart](#),” a short that he had written, based on the Edgar Allan Poe story. When they met to discuss the project, Ford was surprised to meet a novice American filmmaker with a passion for [Arthur](#)

[Rackham](#), a late-Victorian British children's-book illustrator. During the shoot, Eggers sourced nineteenth-century constables' hats, for historical accuracy, and triple-wicked beeswax candles from Alaska, for their appearance on film. Now, while Ford tidied up minute blemishes or awkward beats in the opening reel of "The Northman," Eggers commented on some of the academic sources for the Viking artifacts and behavior unfolding on the screen.

"Fun fact for nobody: her headpiece is of Finnish origin," Eggers said, when Kidman's character, Gudrún, came into the shot. "So that would have been something that, like, Aurvandill plundered from somewhere else and brought home to his queen."

Next to Gudrún, Aurvandill sat with his sword across his lap, in the pose of a twelfth-century Norwegian chess piece that was dug up on a beach in the Outer Hebrides in 1831. The royal couple wore golden headbands; crowns would be anachronistic. "I was very insistent," Eggers said, "knowing full well that an audience is going to interpret it as a crown." The longhouse built for the movie's fictional court of Hrafney, which means "Raven Island," was decorated with nine-foot, carved wooden columns, whose motifs were blown-up versions of carvings found in a ship burial south of Oslo. "This is a complex society," Eggers said. "It's governed by vengeance, but there still are rules. There still are conventions, and there still is art, and there's adornment and music and joy."

"The Northman" might be the most accurate Viking movie ever made. "This is kind of a dream for me," Neil Price, an archeologist at Uppsala University, in Sweden, who worked on the film, said. "I doubt that I will ever encounter someone who has the eye and the concern for it that Robert does." Skarsgård, as Amleth, wore a single pair of boots throughout filming, which Muir, the costume designer, repaired with strips of leather as they fell apart. ("More impressive than the Vikings doing all the things they did was that they did it in, like, *moccasins*," Eggers said.) Other garments were made of nettle fabric and reindeer leather. At one point, Amleth's uncle Fjölnir (Claes Bang) wears a showstopping Viking cloak called a *varafeldr*, made with *tog*, the long coarse wool from the outer coat of Icelandic sheep. "It shimmies like a nineteen-twenties flapper dress or something. I mean, it's so sexy and so beautiful," Muir said. "I've never seen anything like that on film."

The “Northman” shoot lasted eighty-seven days, and Price, Friðriksdóttir, and Terry Gunnell, a folklorist at the University of Iceland, handled a stream of calls and e-mails about tiny details of Viking life. Price was out grocery shopping when his cell phone rang with a query about how to light the long hall. Friðriksdóttir was asked whether there had been a taboo about menstrual blood. “I had never thought about that, to be honest,” she said. (She concluded that there probably was not.)

The Viking story of Amleth was recorded in “[The History of the Danes](#),” by Saxo Grammaticus, in the early thirteenth century, but it was likely based on an earlier Icelandic folktale. Writing “The Northman” with Eggers, Sjón imagined the script as a missing saga. Most of the story takes place in the year 914, during the early settlement of Iceland but before the founding of the Althing, the parliament, in 930. “There is still a certain kind of lawlessness,” Sjón said. “I realized that we could slip in a family there, that settled early and then just disappeared from the face of the earth.”

As an Icelander, Sjón felt an obligation to make the story historically plausible but sensed that he was freer than Eggers in his interpretations of Viking lore. “He feels more responsibility to get it right than I do,” he said. More than forty Icelandic sagas survive—and give the fullest extant description of Viking lives and attitudes—but they were written in medieval times, after Scandinavia had converted to Christianity. Much of the research that went into “The Northman” was about trying to see past those later cultural inflections to an earlier, pagan belief system. Eggers and Sjón were guided by recent archeology and anthropological research. In 2017, DNA analysis concluded that a high-ranking Viking warrior, dug up on the Swedish island of Björkö, was a woman. (In the film, you catch a glimpse of her.) “The saga writers, they had to rely on what was known at the time: stories that had come down through the generations, poems, artifacts that were still around,” Sjón said. “Of course, they get a lot of things right. . . . But it also means that there were things lost to them. And some of those things were accessible to us today.”

In the edit, Ford and Eggers checked for glitches during an initiation ritual for the young Amleth, which takes place underground. Eggers’s script said that the scene should smell of mildew and rot, with human bones sticking out of the mud. Gunnell had suggested Maeshowe, a Neolithic chambered

cairn on the island of Orkney, as a reference for the location. “The hair continuity is a little weird,” Eggers observed, as figures came in and out of view. In the sequence, the young prince (played by Oscar Hovak), Aurvandill, and Heimir inhale the smoke of henbane seeds, a Viking-era hallucinogen, and bellow fragments of the Hávamál, the sayings of Odin, while Heimir sports a mask and a rattle painstakingly re-created from archeological discoveries. Eggers explained that this was probably the most fictional ritual in the movie.

Eggers gives himself more latitude at the outset of a project. “It can be sort of the spirit of the age . . . I don’t need to tie it down,” he told me that day. “Honestly, I usually start out feeling like, Well, maybe it’s O.K. if I do a little bit of this and that. And then, the more I get honed in, the more I’m, like, No. This is *this*.¹”

The clapboard farmhouse in “The Witch,” which was set in sixteen-thirties New England, was constructed with froes and drawknives. (Circular saws were a thing of the future.) The family’s possessions were based on the household inventories of early Puritan settlers, and Eggers drew on the diaries of John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, for the dialogue. In “The Lighthouse,” a manual of instructions for lighthouse keepers, from 1881, helped structure the action, and the Maine dialects of Sarah Orne Jewett’s nineteenth-century [novels](#) and poems informed the language. Eggers insisted on building his own seventy-foot lighthouse with a working Fresnel lens. The movie’s financiers wanted him to shoot in color, but Eggers stuck with 35-mm. black-and-white film, forgoing around six million dollars (more than half the film’s eventual budget) in the process. Eggers talks about constructing a doll’s house, in which his movies take place, and in which, through a massing of detail, he can claim his characters’ memories as his own.

“I felt like, you know, he’s in my head,” Dafoe told me, of his experience on “The Lighthouse,” in which he played Thomas Wake, an aging, demonic “wickie,” cooped up with Ephraim Winslow (Robert Pattinson) in a lighthouse station at the ends of the earth. (The description of Wake in the script reads, “His high cheekbones smile even when he grimaces. His wild eyes shine like jewels. He’s an old Pan. A Satyr.”) In 2016, Dafoe saw a poster for “The Witch” and walked into a theatre to see it. The next day, he

took his wife to watch it. He set up a meeting with Eggers, and they agreed to work together.

During rehearsals for “The Lighthouse,” Dafoe realized that the goal was not to help him find his character. “We didn’t really rehearse the scenes,” he said. “What we rehearsed was that he would tell us where the camera would be.” Eggers and Blaschke storyboard almost every frame of their films. Chris Columbus, the director of “Home Alone” and of the first two Harry Potter movies, was an executive producer on “The Witch” and “The Lighthouse.” “I’ve never seen such detailed storyboards from a director, ever,” he told me. “You know, ninety per cent of directors don’t do their own storyboards. . . . His storyboards were precise, almost Hitchcockian.” Dafoe relished the restrictions. “It was, like, for us to bend ourselves to what the frame was,” he said.

It is hard going. During one scene in “The Lighthouse,” which was shot using camera lenses from the nineteen-thirties, Dafoe had to rise from a table, limp over to a coal stove, extract a burning cinder with tongs and light a clay pipe with his left hand, then walk to the window, in conversation with Pattinson, taking specific steps as the camera followed him on dolly tracks. (Blaschke was nominated for an Academy Award for the film’s cinematography.) “They gave me impossible tasks. But it focusses you in a way that you’re never distracted,” Dafoe, who learned to knit for the part, said. “You can only go here. . . . The pipe may go out, but then you have to take the cinder. It was a real cinder. All that stuff roots you. Because it’s really happening.”

Neither Eggers nor Blaschke had ever shot a major action scene before “The Northman,” but they stuck to the same principles: a single camera, nothing handheld, increasingly improbable oners. “Some days on ‘The Northman,’ we had one shot, you know, but it’s dense. And it was thought about for months,” Blaschke said. “And then maybe months went by, and then another solution came up, when I was trying to fall asleep, or while Rob was trying to fall asleep.” The adult Amleth takes part in a raid on a Slav village which is prolonged and horrifying to watch and was almost as brutal to configure. Blaschke, who is an antic presence on set—fussing with lights, checking angles—filmed almost the entire sequence in a straight line, with a camera mounted on top of a car. “To do that in a scene with ten actors, twenty stunt

guys, three hundred extras, horses, fire—it drives you crazy,” Skarsgård told me. At the end of the four-minute take, Skarsgård would be on his knees. “And then it turns out that, two minutes into the shot, there was a horse deep background that was facing the wrong way,” he said. “And then you have to do it again. And they end up doing it twenty-five times.”

Skarsgård, who is Swedish, became involved in the development of “The Northman” in 2017. His father, the actor Stellan Skarsgård, has a library of old Hollywood films. As a boy, Skarsgård watched “The Long Ships,” with Sidney Poitier, and “The Vikings,” with Kirk Douglas. With Knudsen, the producer, who is Danish, he had dreamed of one day making a definitive Viking movie. But he had not been on set with Eggers until the shoot began, in August, 2020.

During the first two weeks, in which Amleth mostly labored on a farm, Skarsgård felt conflicted by the filming process. “I’m not used to working in that way,” he said. “There was a moment where I was, like, I could either freak the fuck out . . . because you feel like: Well, there’s no space for me to explore my character. I’m a robot.” But Skarsgård chose to submit: “You play around with it, and then small details will then open up, like a flood of inspiration, and suddenly you’re in it.”

Taylor-Joy, who was working with Eggers for the first time in six years, realized how much of her conduct on set derives from their work together. “Who I am, or how I identify as a performer and a collaborator, really does come from ‘The Witch,’ ” she told me. “If you come onto a movie that’s already been storyboarded . . . and you know that’s the way the film’s going to look, I actually find that incredibly liberating,” she said. “I can do my own version of this dance within the parameters that have been set. And I’ll end up with something more interesting than if you just show up and it’s, like, Oh, we might have the camera here. We might have the camera here.”

On a good day, you’re pushing the cinematic form. “I don’t know of a medieval movie this size that is shot this formally,” Eggers said. “Not even, like, a Soviet movie.” When Skarsgård and his fellow-berserkers landed a bloody fight sequence on the umpteenth take, they celebrated like berserkers. “My God, when it’s there and it works, it’s one of the greatest experiences I’ve had on a movie set,” Skarsgård said.

On a bad day, you're in the tenth month of the edit and you're trying to deal with notes from a test screening in Texas, where the audience was befuddled by the Nordic accents, character names like Leifr Seal's Testicle, and the unsettling moral outlook of tenth-century Iceland. "None of those things are changing," Eggers said, while Ford was processing footage of the young Amleth, hiding in a forest. He started to laugh. "Like, those things can't change. And those are kind of the biggest obstacles." The studio had suggested inserting an intertitle at one point, to indicate the passing of time. Eggers and Ford went into another room, where Paolo Buzzetti, an assistant editor, had mocked up a time card: "Twenty-Two Years Later." Ford noted that this would make the adult Amleth thirty-three, the same age as Jesus when he died.

"Is that relevant?" she asked.

"Not to a Viking," Eggers replied.

Eggers's grandfather Robert Stroud Houston was a geologist and an outdoorsman. When he was conducting field work on the mafic igneous rocks of Wyoming's Sierra Madre, Houston hired old cowboys to keep him company and tell him stories of the frontier. His daughter, Kelly, went to New York to work as an actor and a ballet dancer. She had a recurring part on "One Life to Live," the soap opera, appearing alongside Laurence Fishburne. Eggers was born in the city in the summer of 1983. Soon afterward, Kelly and he moved back to Wyoming to live with her parents. Eggers does not know his biological father. In Laramie, Kelly met and married Walter Eggers, an English academic and Shakespeare scholar, and they had twin sons. (Eggers's brother Max co-wrote "The Lighthouse.")

When Eggers was six, Walter became the provost of the University of New Hampshire, in Durham. The family moved to Lee, a small town nearby. "It was, more or less, like, a church, a library, a country store, and a graveyard. I'm exaggerating a little bit to make it sound more romantic," Eggers said. "We used to throw corn husks at cars—you know, that kind of situation." When Houston retired, he bought an early-eighteenth-century farmhouse in Epping, a few miles from Lee. He filled the place with curiosities: taxidermy, model ships, African masks, Civil War artifacts, lassos and spurs from the Old West.

“It was super magical,” Eggers recalled. He would go with his grandfather to antique stores and handle relics of New England’s Colonial past. He loved costumes and performance of all kinds. The woods outside felt old and haunted. “I think probably the landscape itself informed a lot of Rob’s aesthetic,” Amanda Michaels, a childhood friend, who performed with Eggers in a production of “Oliver Twist,” in the fifth grade, told me. “We weren’t running around playing cops and robbers when we were kids—we played ‘enchanted forest.’ ”

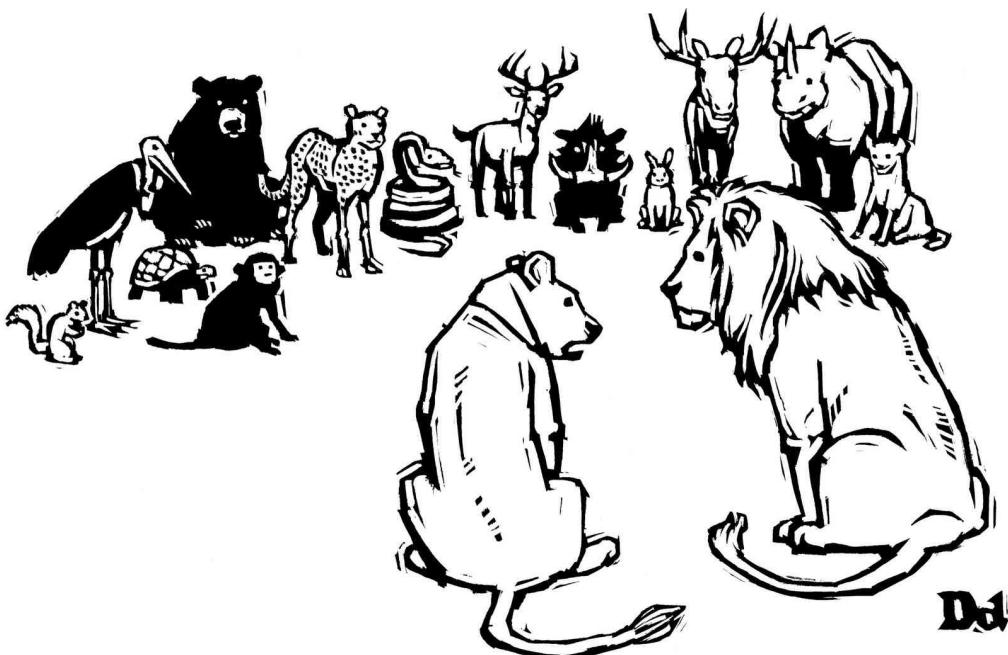
In 1995, Michaels’s mother, Charlotte Mandell, and Kelly set up the Oyster River Players, a children’s-theatre company. The O.R.P. came to include about eighty kids and mounted three or four shows a year. Michaels and Eggers, who were in their teens, helped choose the plays, performed, painted the sets, and rehearsed the younger children. “It was basically O.R.P. seven days a week,” Michaels said. “Rob became the de-facto production designer. It was his eye that guided these productions, even when we were kids.” In high school, Eggers and a classmate named Ashley Kelly-Tata, who is now an experimental-theatre and opera director, staged “Nosferatu” as their senior-year project. Eggers was an erratic student: he aced English, but in French, instead of doing the assignments, he made short films for the teacher. In “Nosferatu,” he played Count Orlok in a scene-for-scene re-creation of the silent film, complete with intertitles and sibling gargoyles.

Eggers invited Edward Langlois, a local theatre impresario, to the dress rehearsal. “He said, ‘I don’t think you’ll be bored,’ ” Langlois recalled. Langlois ran a storefront theatre called the Edwin Booth, in Dover, where he lived upstairs in an apartment full of masks and his own papier-mâché models of saints. A few months earlier, he had cast Eggers as Geoffrey in “The Lion in Winter.” The boy had a presence. “He was so pale and black-haired, a very striking-looking kid,” Langlois said.

“Nosferatu” was mesmerizing. “I was bowled over,” Langlois said. “It was all in black-and-white, except for the blood that would occur on the victims’ necks. And it was all high-school kids. So there was a kind of sweet innocence combined with the depravity.” Langlois invited Eggers and Kelly-Tata to put on the show in his theatre, asking only that they speed up the scene changes, which lasted several minutes. At the time, Langlois, who is of French Canadian descent, was in his mid-fifties. He grew up in a

working-class, Catholic community in Newmarket, a mill town on the coast. Eggers was privileged, by contrast. “He’s a golden boy,” Langlois told me. “The support he’s had has been extraordinary.” Nonetheless, Langlois felt a deep sense of connection. “He suffers from nostalgia, which I do, too,” Langlois said. “He knows things, for someone who has not lived a very experienced life.”

Eggers moved to New York, in 2001, to attend the American Musical and Dramatic Academy, a conservatory on West Sixty-first Street, but he would return to New Hampshire to put on plays at the Edwin Booth. Langlois took thirty per cent of the box-office. One summer, it was “Hamlet.” “Everything was painted white, and all the characters had a specific color,” Tom Macy, a friend, told me. Macy wore blue, as Horatio. Eggers, as Hamlet, was in black. They were eighteen. Eggers played the ghost as well: a giant figure, in armor, filmed and projected onto a backdrop. “Just big swings,” Macy said.



“Is it because they fear and respect you, or because they’re just allergic to you?”
Cartoon by Drew Dernavich

He and Eggers became roommates. They hung furs and swords on the walls of an apartment on the Upper West Side that they called Warwick Hall. Eggers had a waxed mustache and worked as a runner, a waiter, and a set designer on commercials. On his days off, he would watch six films in a row. “Any movie that I had heard the name vaguely, or any actor or director

or anything,” he told me. “I would just, like, rent it and watch it.” He plumbbed IMDb. He worshipped Ingmar Bergman.

In 2007, an Israeli theatre director named Geula Attar was walking through Astor Place with her husband, Victor, when they happened upon a street performance of “Faust.” Eggers had written a thirty-minute, commedia-dell’arte version, in trochaic quadrameter. The troupe wore masks and lavish costumes, and had an old circus wagon. “They were so involved with the people in the street, without playing any distance,” Victor Attar said. “It was like a stream of water in the river. It was beautiful, so imaginative.”

Eggers built sets and designed costumes for two Off Off Broadway shows by the Attars. He told them stories about Edgar Allan Poe. The Attars met Shaker, who also grew up in Lee, and Eggers’s parents. Geula wondered if Eggers’s fixation with the past, and his taste for the macabre, was a way of searching for his father. “I was just, like, Sure. Yeah. Could be,” Eggers said, when he relayed the observation to me. “It’s more easy to talk about *how* I’m interested in it. But I can’t like say, like, where it comes from.”

In 2010, Ford, Eggers’s editor, passed a script of “The Witch” to Knudsen and Jay Van Hoy, producers she was working with at the time. Eggers was horrified. He didn’t think it was ready. “The Tell-Tale Heart” had had a decent festival life, but nothing more. “Everything always fell, I think, a little bit short of his expectations,” Macy told me. “He never said that.” Eggers waited a month before he called Knudsen and Van Hoy, who told him that they loved “The Witch.” In its early drafts, there were five acts, each told from the point of view of a different family member. Knudsen and Van Hoy advised Eggers to simplify the script, if he wanted to get it made.

It took four years to finance the film, which had a budget of three and a half million dollars. Eggers cast it in England, to source the correct accents. The first audition tape he watched for the part of Thomasin was by a seventeen-year-old Taylor-Joy. Shooting began in the spring of 2014, in Kiosk, an abandoned logging town in northern Ontario. There was no cell-phone service. The actors wore straight shoes—no left or right—with wooden soles. “You show up and exist,” Taylor-Joy said. “You don’t have to imagine it.” In the film’s penultimate scene, the Devil, in the form of a black goat, speaks to Thomasin:

BLACK PHILLIP:

Wouldst thou like the taste of butter?

A pretty dress?

Wouldst thou like to live deliciously?

Pause.

THOMASIN:

Yes.

“The Witch: A New England Folktale” premiered at Sundance the following January. Eggers won the festival’s Directing Award. A review in the *Guardian* described the film as a meeting of “The New World,” by Terrence Malick, and “The Exorcist.” Eggers was feted in the trade press and offered a studio deal. In 2016, the movie got a general release. Langlois saw “The Witch” in a cinema in Portland, Oregon, where he was living at the time. (His landlord in New Hampshire had raised the rent; the Edwin Booth was no more.) He sat very close to the screen, which he recommends for watching all of Eggers’s films. “It’s exciting,” Langlois said. “It’s like the ocean. It rolls in, and it rolls out.”

“The Witch” made forty million dollars. In the spring of 2016, Eggers and Shaker, who is a fan of the sagas, took a trip to Iceland. Eggers wasn’t particularly taken with Viking history. “It was just too macho for my sensibilities,” he said. At the time, he was working on a medieval epic, “The Knight,” which was never made.

But when their plane landed at Keflavik Airport, outside Reykjavík, Eggers was awed by the volcanic, pitiless landscape. “It looks like pre-, you know, pre-pre-pre-pre-pre-history,” he told me. The witch’s voice at the opening of Bergman’s “The Virgin Spring” echoed in his mind: “Odin, come, Odin, come.”

Robin Carolan, a friend from Brooklyn, who has worked with Björk, had suggested that Eggers and Shaker meet the singer during their visit. “We

were, like, ‘That’s fine, we don’t need to see Björk,’ ” Eggers said. (She makes him feel that he has to find something interesting to say.) They went to Björk’s house. She cooked salmon. She had seen “The Witch” and introduced Eggers to Sjón, who had written a novel about seventeenth-century witchcraft in Iceland. When he got home, Eggers read Sjón’s books. “I was, like, this guy’s a fucking magician,” Eggers said. “He sees all time, in time, out of time.” A year later, after learning about Skarsgård and Knudsen’s proposed Viking project, Eggers called Sjón and asked him to co-write a script. Knudsen said, “I’ve never been involved with a project of this size that . . . the pieces just fell into place at the right time.” (Carolan is the film’s co-composer, with Sebastian Gainsborough.)

Compared with “The Witch” and “The Lighthouse,” both of which derive from primal American stories, “The Northman” represents a departure for Eggers. The cultural references were new to him. One of the film’s recurring images is the Tree of Kings: an arboreal structure, made from human veins, hung with dead warriors and based on Yggdrasil, the sacred ash tree at the heart of Norse mythology. But Eggers immediately felt at home. He is a student of Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, and Mircea Eliade—twentieth-century believers in the eternal insight offered by myth. Eggers sometimes describes his work as archetypal storytelling. “Like, I get why Aztecs practiced human sacrifice—that’s just not a big leap for me personally,” he said. “Having a religious system where the gods are multifaceted and you’re also having to, like, embrace darkness and death probably makes more sense than how we’re living.”

I once asked Eggers why all his films are set in the past. He directed me to a quote by John Dryden, the seventeenth-century poet: “For mankind is ever the same and nothing is lost out of nature, though everything is altered.” Critics have discerned contemporary themes in Eggers’s films (feminist resistance in “The Witch”; toxic masculinity in “The Lighthouse”), which he claims to notice only afterward. “If performers have a mask, where they can speak truthfully through something that is not them, that’s kind of what he does with another period of time,” Dafoe said. It is the constraints of Eggers’s filmmaking process—the scholarly research, the rigid shooting method—that open a way to lost imaginations. “With all this authenticity and ‘realism,’ it is still a folktale, a dream,” a note to the reader in the script of “The Witch” reads. “As much as I am, like, totally in love with the

verisimilitude of the tangible world, it's getting into the mind," Eggers told me. "To present it without judgment. Just because, it is what it is. And it's fucking fascinating. . . . The most interesting thing is, like, how it's still us."

One day last fall, Blaschke texted Eggers, asking what he was most afraid of. Eggers gave three answers: being alone; being ambushed and stabbed to death; and surrendering to the occult. "I have met a lot of, like, occultists and witches and hippies who have a way of thinking that, like, I would want to be able to go there but would be afraid to," he told me. His films function as a cage, a form of protection from himself. "I can explore it in my work fully and fully commit to being, like, inside it, without getting lost to it and never being able to come back," Eggers said. Blaschke texted back. He hadn't meant to be deep. His daughter was curious. She was drawing a picture for Halloween.

Eggers and Ford finished the new cut of "The Northman." On November 3rd, Eggers woke up to another message from the studio: they liked it. There was no need for more test screenings. "Isn't that great?" Eggers said, on the phone that afternoon. We met the following week in Soho. Eggers ate a lamb thali and asked if he seemed like a different person. A weight was gone. "I think I've delivered the most entertaining version," he said. "The most entertaining version is not necessarily something I'm usually striving for. But it was here, you know, and it happened."

Cuarón saw the cut and gave his approval. "Every single frame is charged with all the thematic elements of the whole film," he said. "I have to say, it is very complex, it is very complicated what he does." After lunch, Eggers and I went for a walk and ended up sitting on a bench in Soho Square. Eggers praised New Regency but described the editing process as the most painful experience of his life. "Frankly, I don't think I will do it again," he said. "Even if it means, like, not making a film this big ever again. And, by the way, I'd like to make a film this big. I'd like to make one even bigger. But, without control, I don't know. It's too hard on my person."

Skarsgård saw the film for the first time a few weeks later, in Stockholm. He watched it with his father, whose collection of Viking movies made him want to enter the canon. "I don't know if I'll ever get to a place where I can watch it and say, 'Oh, yeah, this emotionally connects, or this works,' "

Skarsgård said. “Because you’re so in it.” Then he told me about a boat that had been used in “The Northman.” It was a Viking transport vessel, seen once, far out at sea, not even in focus. “You could have used pretty much anything out there,” he said. But of course it was an immaculately researched, museum-quality replica. “No one would ever know. But Rob would know,” he said. I asked Skarsgård if, as Amleth, there had been occasions when he really crossed over: when there were ghosts and Valkyries, along with the longships and the hand-stitched shoes. “It was all there,” he replied, “and all real.” ♦

Shouts & Murmurs

- [Tom Brady's Time with the Family](#)

By [John Kenney](#).

I'm gonna spend some time with [my family]. . . . It's not always about what I want. It's about what we want as a family.

—*Tom Brady, January 24, 2022.*

These past two months I have realized my place is still on the field.

—*Tom Brady, forty-eight days later.*

Saw the children this evening. Spent some wonderful time with them. Or perhaps I should say near them, as the time I spent was the few moments between my entering the house after my last game and walking upstairs to go to bed. They were in the living room and saw me walk up the stairs, and we looked at one another and I smiled at them, a sign that I recognized them and that I was fairly sure they were my children. And I think it's this kind of thing that makes great family time.

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The children woke me early. It's unclear how they got the access code to my sleeping chamber. Initially, they were confused by the total darkness, the pumped-in oxygen, and the low recorded sound of Tibetan monks chanting, "Wonderful Tom."

"Can we have waffles?" one of the two male children asked. There are two boys and a girl. I believe the girl's name is Vivian. I didn't get the boys' names before security removed them.

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Apparently, a playdate does not involve running passing routes. This was news to me. Vivian did fine, but her friend Abby just wasn't getting it. I told her: stay positive, hit the route, and know that the ball is going to be there when you turn, Abby.

She eventually stopped crying. And ran a decent post pattern.

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The children live in the house year-round. I had not known that.

•

Giselle is away. She asked me to prepare food that the children take to school for a midday meal. I gave each of them a raw ginger root and a bag of protein powder to mix with distilled water. Giselle also said that she always writes a little note on a napkin for each kid and tucks it in with the food. I thought that was a lovely idea. My note said, “When facing zone coverage, it’s vital to check off on the free safety when going over the middle.”

•

There is a place called Chuck E. Cheese. It is difficult to describe—kind of a restaurant and arcade. The smell of fried food and disappointment fills the air, much like the old Giants Stadium. Sounds of children shouting, laughing, crying. One buys tokens for the games. I purchased two hundred thousand dollars’ worth, to start, and lost sight of the children almost immediately as they ran off to the games. The object seemed to be to collect tickets that could then be turned in for prizes, such as a pencil with feathers on it or a plastic box to hold Band-Aids.

Every hour, a person dressed as Chuck E. Cheese came out and danced slowly and silently, the children roaring with delight. Who is this Chuck E. Cheese? Why doesn’t he speak? I didn’t understand what was happening.

I tried to order a mineral water and a papaya-and-chia-seed smoothie but was brought something called a Diet Dr Pepper instead. The children ate pizza, against my wishes. I tried a slice for the first time in thirty-three years, the result being forty-five minutes in the men’s room.

One parent told me that this was her favorite Chuck E. Cheese. I said, “You mean there’s more than one?”

•

Vivian came into my study.

“Would you like to watch a movie with me?” I asked.

“Yes!”

She pulled up a chair next to me.

“What movie is this?”

“Well, it’s not technically a movie. It’s game film of the 1978 Tangerine Bowl, between North Carolina State and Pittsburgh.”

“Oh. Is it good?”

“It’s so good! Here’s my favorite scene, with seven minutes and thirty-three seconds remaining in the second quarter. Pittsburgh has an I-formation backfield and a single wide-out right. Only N.C. State had man coverage.”

“Why are you talking like that? It’s scaring me.”

“Just watch. A simple stop-and-go, but the quarterback looked left and froze the safety.”

“Can we watch ‘Frozen’?”

“Absolutely.”

So I clicked on the 1967 championship game between the Packers and the Cowboys, at Lambeau, where it was minus thirteen degrees and the umpire Joe Connell’s metal whistle froze to his lips.

But by this time Vivian had left.

•

I freaking love Bob the Builder’s attitude. Yes, we can. Bob’s the man. Also the guys in “PAW Patrol.” Chase, Marshall. Super-good work ethic. Rocky pisses me off, though. Do your damn job.

•

Family movie night. Again. “Sing 2.” Again. But this time together, as a family, is so important. We all know the lines in the movie, the songs. It’s a lot of fun. In theory. But you want to be careful not to have too much fun. So I’m in my room, watching “Braveheart,” with my new friend Don Julio Añejo. FaceTime me, if you want. Or not.

•

Jack and Ben, my sons, said they want to try out for their school soccer team. They said football is “beat.” They said that no one plays football anymore. Even their mother thinks so. She’s from Brazil, and soccer is the beautiful game. Football is for idiots. It was painful to hear this. But, at the same time, I also want what they want, as long as it’s also what I want, and so I heard myself saying, “Seriously, you guys suck,” which I hadn’t meant to say out loud.

•

At school pickup, I asked Vivian how her day was, and she said that Sophie was mean to Jasmine at playtime. Sophie said that Jasmine’s Angelina Ballerina headband looked “stupid,” which, Vivian added, it didn’t. I’ve seen it. I told her that this isn’t the first time Sophie has done something like this. Vivian said, I know, it’s a pattern, and that Sophie can be mean. Vivian said Jasmine cried and that they had to have circle time after playtime to talk about Jasmine’s feelings and that Jasmine said “I hate your face” to Sophie and Sophie cried. I said, Good for Jasmine, because Sophie’s behavior lately is bullshit. Vivian kind of looked at me weird and said it was fine, that teacher made them hold hands and say sorry. I said, Are you kidding me? kind of loud, surprising myself. Then I said, I am so sick and tired of this behavior from Sophie. I said, Remember the thing with the Hello Kitty backpack with Desiree? What the hell was that about? Vivian kept looking at me and said that maybe I was getting a little worked up and that really it was fine, that they had had snack and teacher told a funny story and it was O.K. I asked what kind of snack and she said graham crackers. We were quiet for a time, but I couldn’t stop thinking about tomorrow, and whether Sophie would be nice or not and whether she and Jasmine could find their way back to being friends again and what the snack might be. And then I wondered if I was going insane. ♦

Sketchbook

- Instead of a Dog, We Got Puck

By [Liana Finck](#)



Tables for Two

- [Ukrainian Borscht, and Support, at Varenyk House](#)

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

The other day, on a corner in Ridgewood, Queens, I overheard a woman say, “You know that place is owned by Ukrainians?” She was pointing to Varenyk House, a year-old deli and grocery across the street, where I happened to be headed. “It’s a Ukrainian restaurant.” Her companion squinted. “Interesting!” he said earnestly.



Varenyky, hand-folded into half-moons, might be stuffed with a mixture of farmer cheese, potato, and onion.

Taking an interest in Ukrainian food following Russia’s vicious and unprovoked military campaign against its smaller neighbor might seem like a meagre response. But after a conversation with Varenyk House’s owner, Stepan Rogulskyi, I saw value in the gesture. When news of the war broke, Rogulskyi, who emigrated, in 2008, from western Ukraine, where his brothers, parents, and grandparents still live, experienced a period of acute, almost unbearable stress. Weeks later, he was angry, but also optimistic. “I think,” he ventured carefully, “that this war is the only chance for Ukrainians to get a final freedom, to be free from Russian hands.” His spirits had been lifted by “the support of all the people,” and he marvelled at the fact that, at least outside of Russia, few seemed to be falling for Putin’s propaganda. “People all over the world, they realize that this is an invasion.”



Some of the bread is imported par-baked from Ukraine and finished in the oven at Varenyk House.

The solidarity was giving Rogulskyi hope, and an uptick in business; the influx of customers, although not on the level of the long lines at the much more established Veselka and Ukrainian East Village Restaurant, was noticeable, and he was grateful. One person had driven two hours to pick up food. (Varenyk House offers takeout only.) Rogulskyi was collecting donations, in plastic containers, to send home, and he was seeking experienced volunteers to help make a special variety of *varenyky*, the dumplings for which the shop is named, with dough dyed blue and yellow, the colors of the Ukrainian flag; the proceeds from these would be donated, too.



Proceeds from the sales of blue and yellow varenyky will be donated to people back home.

One could argue that *varenyky* are pierogi by another name (parts of Ukraine were once Polish territory), but Rogulskyi draws some distinctions. At Varenyk House, they are prepared according to the specifications of his wife, Natalya, a clearly brilliant cook who cares for their two toddlers full time but performs regular quality checks on the food. The *varenyky* must be half-moon-shaped, Rogulskyi explained, and relatively elongated, with the filling—juicy shredded pork, soft curds of farmer cheese mixed with mashed potato and onion, plump sour cherries—distributed evenly throughout. Pierogi, he noted, have “beer bellies. More puffed.” The *varenyky* can be ordered à la minute, boiled or pan-fried, and are also available frozen, in packs of two dozen.

I stocked up on the frozen, with a tub of high-fat sour cream to toss them in. From a steam table, I got cabbage leaves stuffed with barley and mushrooms and ladled with mushroom gravy; a succulent pork chop, smothered in fried onions; and golden, craggy orbs of ground-chicken schnitzel. Each was served with a choice of rice, barley (last year, Ukraine produced seventeen per cent of the world’s supply), or mashed potatoes, plus cold salads—tart shredded beets, cucumbers slathered in sour cream, radish coins with farmer cheese and scallions.



Sausages, bacon, and ham at the meat counter.

The earthy, sweet-and-sour red broth of the Ukrainian borscht—the beet-based variety originated there—was luscious with fat and thickened with cabbage, white beans, nubs of potato, and bits of pork. (A vegetarian version is also available.) Borscht wants bread: a chewy, crunchy-crusted six-inch black loaf, made with rye and whole-wheat flours and slightly sweetened with molasses, had been imported par-baked from Ukraine and finished in the kitchen. “This was warm a little while ago,” the woman behind the counter told me as she wrapped it. From the meat case—Rogulskyi, who worked in butcher shops before opening his own place, carries sausage, bacon, and ham—I chose a dense pink loaf of ground pork and beef. Seasoned aggressively with garlic and paprika, it sliced like pâté and tasted of home, even if it was someone else’s. (*Dishes \$5-\$12.*) ♦

The Theatre

- [Alex Edelman Gets Political in “Just for Us”](#)

By [Alexandra Schwartz](#)

The comedian Alex Edelman is thirty-three but looks younger. He wears his shock of dark hair swept over his forehead, like a middle-school heartthrob. He has a springy walk, a peppy, engaged stage presence—“pandering and solicitous,” in his own words—and a Muppet-ish physicality, with emphatic jellyfish hands that he likes to flop and flail, and big eyes that pop wide in astonishment or narrow in conspiratorial outrage when a beat needs holding. In the show “Just for Us” (directed by Adam Brace and produced by Mike Birbiglia), which Edelman is performing at the SoHo Playhouse after a buzzy, sold-out run earlier this year at the Cherry Lane, he wears pristine white sneakers, snug black jeans, and a shirt buttoned all the way up to its point collar. Image, the performer’s armor, is a fascinating thing in comedy, from Jerry Seinfeld’s ties and blazers to Ali Wong’s working fantastically filthy in skintight leopard print. When the membrane between person and persona can seem paper-thin, what do you want your audience to assume about you, or not? Edelman presents as a clean-cut people-pleaser, a grown man eager to prove to the world, as he says in his act, that he’s “a good boy”—a moral aspiration that he explores to shrewd effect in the course of a tremendously entertaining seventy-five minutes.

Impressions, the ways that we size one another up, are important to Edelman’s show, and to Edelman. “Sometimes people know that I’m Jewish because of my name, or my face, or anything about my personality,” he tells us, near the start. He grew up Modern Orthodox in “this really racist part of Boston called Boston”; Jewishness is central to his life, and to his sense of self, but it hasn’t always been central to his act. Edelman likes to work in a riffy, observational vein that touches, mildly, on the surreal. He opens with a bit about Koko the Gorilla and Robin Williams, then follows it up with one about horses and step counts. The jokes land—why *did* Koko’s handlers need to tell her that her pal Williams had died?—but Edelman lightly dismisses them as “dumb garbage.” Is this the sum of a comedian’s job, to entertain audiences with finely scrutinized absurdities? The late, great Mitch Hedberg, bless him, certainly thought so, and, for a time, so did Edelman.

Then, not long ago, a fellow-comedian issued Edelman a challenge. It was his role, she argued, “to illuminate the terrifying present for audiences, and give hope to an even more terrifying future”—in other words, to get

political. Edelman was skeptical, but politics, of a sort, ended up finding him. A radio show that he made in England attracted attention, on Twitter, from a couple of anti-Semitic trolls. Edelman responded to the haters, but the haters were fruitful and multiplied. Edelman had the good idea to round up all the anti-Semites befouling his mentions onto a Twitter list—“let them be on a list for once”—which he impishly named Jewish National Fund Contributors.

Essentially, he had constructed a digital terrarium of anti-Semites that he could monitor as they excreted their poison all over the platform. One day, a tweet caught his eye. A meeting was taking place, in Queens, for people curious to explore their #whiteness. Edelman is Ashkenazi, a Jew of Eastern or Central European origin. The Nazis didn’t think that counted for much, but in contemporary American society race is a different story. Edelman, too, was curious about his whiteness, so off he went, on the subway, to gain some insight by infiltrating a group of white supremacists.

That creepy gathering, which Edelman skewers to perfection, forms the nucleus of his show. It’s great comic fodder: an absurd, unnerving premise whose reality turns out to be more pitiful than threatening. There are pastries and puzzles, not to mention a potential meet-cute with a young woman who, like Edelman, has a problem with Jared Kushner, but for markedly different reasons. The ambience is more support group than hate group, if you leave aside the fact that the attendees are griping about Prince Harry’s marriage to Meghan Markle, the scourge of reverse racism, and, of course, the Jews.

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Edelman, who goes in as a fish dangerously out of water, finds that he is, in fact, in his element; he’s a compulsive talker who has never met a crowd of people that he doesn’t want to win over, even if that crowd might prefer that he not exist. But does that instinct to charm the enemy mean that he’s admirably open-minded, a heroic bridger of impossible divides? Or is he just interested in indiscriminately ingratiating himself with diehard discriminators—a survival tactic nobly disguised as empathy?

It’s not hard to ridicule a bunch of bigots; nor, more than half a century after “Springtime for Hitler,” is the exercise particularly scandalous or

groundbreaking, even if it remains surpassingly gratifying when done well. The considerable success of Edelman's show depends on a second act of infiltration. Cannily, confidently, he turns his brief encounter with this sad-sack anti-Semitic social club into a pretext to examine the much more richly unsettled topic of his own Jewishness.

"I sat down feeling like an outsider, but that's how I feel in every room," Edelman tells us. Partly, this is because he's "too Jewish" for the secular circles he runs in; he went to yeshiva, still regularly attends synagogue, and, to fellow-comedians, seems "a beard away" from being a rabbi. Partly, it's because he's not Jewish enough. Edelman—he brandishes his "real" name, David Yosef Shimon ben Elazar Reuven Alex Halevi Edelman, at the audience like a fistful of snakes—contrasts himself with his observant father, who doesn't understand why, out of this veritable charm bracelet of kosher monikers, his son would pick the only one that could pass as trayf. A lot of American Jews have found liberation, comedic and otherwise, in slipping off the suffocating embrace of ritual and tradition. So has Edelman, but he's sustained by those things, too. The tension between wanting in and wanting out places him where all comedians need to be: alone.

Edelman is very good on the weirdness of whiteness as an identity that is utterly revolting when proudly claimed yet impossible to willingly shirk. As a friend points out to him, the essence of white privilege is being able to walk into a room full of wannabe neo-Nazis confident that you will emerge unscathed. Those are the people that the "us" in "Just for Us" refers to, a revelation that is presented as a shock, though it's no surprise at all.

As the show progressed, I found myself more interested in Edelman's own, troubled "us," the one that he implicitly refers to in his title, though he tends to shy away from addressing himself to it. "This is going to be way too Jewish for most of you," Edelman says, before punning on the word "shul." Is it? We're in a small, crowded room in Manhattan; as he admits, "You can't even get sixteen Nazis together in this city without a Jew being in the middle of it."

Edelman wants his act to be accessible to anyone, and, presumably, anywhere; he's been performing a version of it since the 2018 Melbourne International Comedy Festival. Fair enough. But here and there, when he

approached some tough truths about what the conceit of a Jewish “us” can mean to those who claim it and are claimed by it—and “us” is always a conceit, sometimes beautiful, sometimes ugly, and often, as Jews in particular have occasion to know, both—I wondered what Edelman might say if he let himself talk directly to, and not merely about, his community.

“If I was raised secular, I think I’d consider myself bisexual,” he confesses, at one point. “But, because I was religious, I consider myself straight with some secrets.” That joke *is* a surprise, a quick swipe of the knife, and, maybe because it feels so sharp to him, Edelman doesn’t touch it again. The show ends with a well-earned, and very funny, minor victory in the never-ending struggle against those who want “us” gone. But who would we be without “them” to define ourselves against? That’s the unresolved question that kept ringing in my ears. It may deserve a show of its own. ♦

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