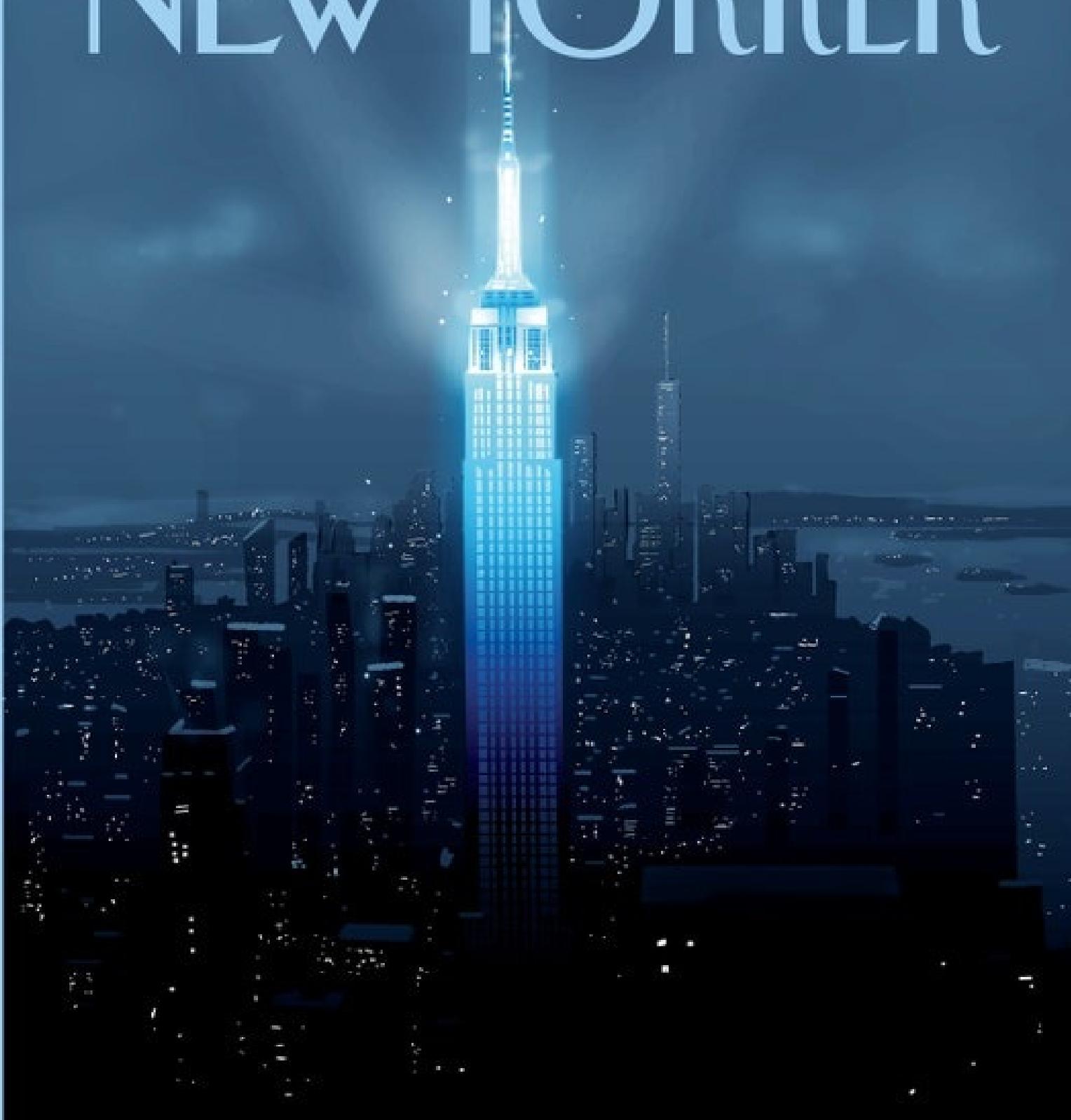


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- [Annals of Politics](#)
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- [Letter from the U.K.](#)
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- [On Television](#)
- [Personal History](#)
- [Podcast Dept.](#)
- [Poems](#)
- [Profiles](#)
- [Shouts & Murmurs](#)
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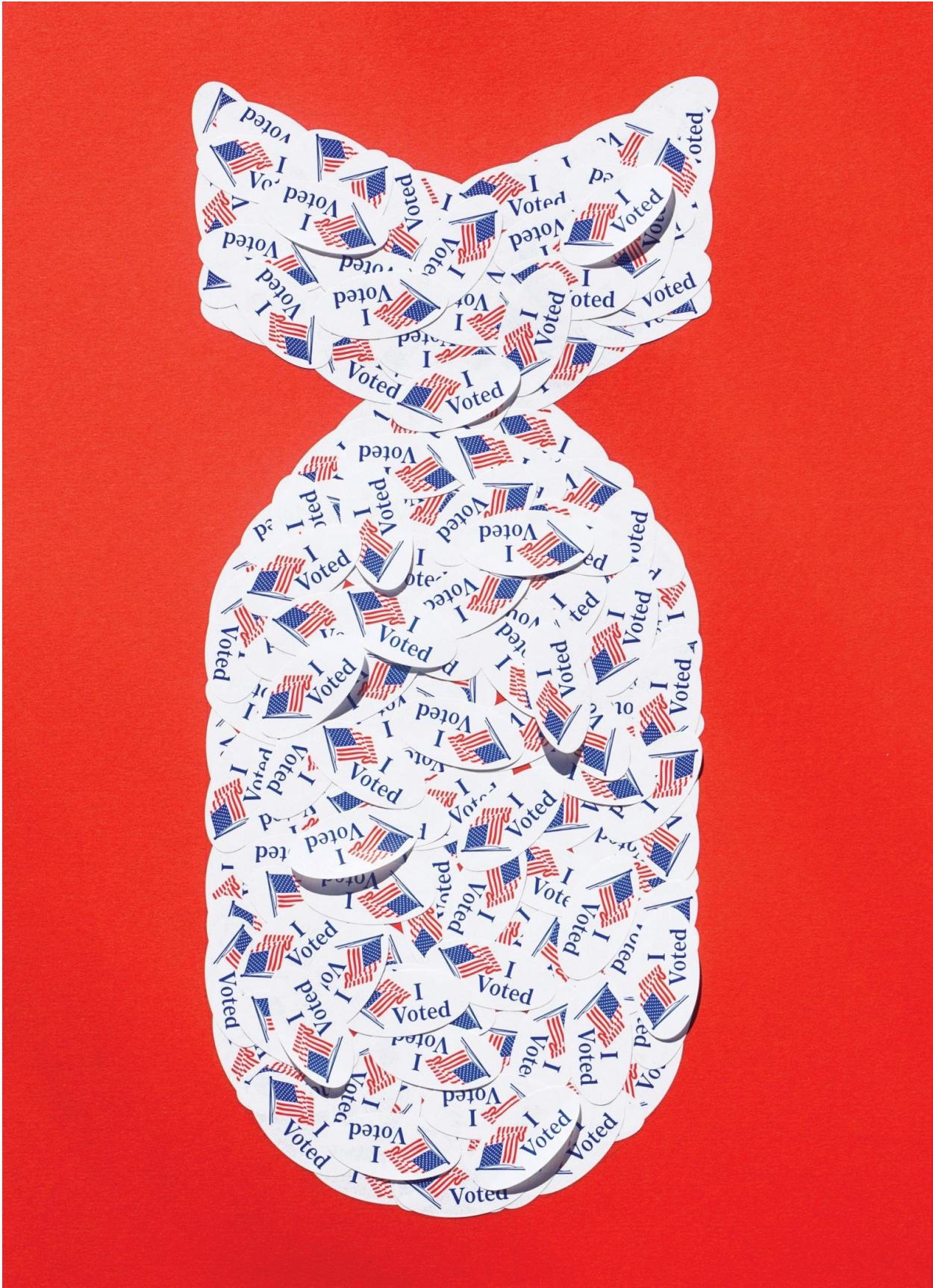
- **Pulling Our Politics Back from the Brink**

Pulling Our Politics Back from the Brink

After a bitterly contested election, the country teeters between persuasion and force.

By [Evan Osnos](#)

November 9, 2020



In the hours after Election Day, as [Donald Trump](#) seemed on the point of losing the Presidency, he spiralled through emotions like Lear on the heath—raging at Fox News for calling Arizona for [Joe Biden](#), fantasizing about “fraud,” vowing to seek salvation from his appointees to the Supreme Court.

Biden, in his campaign, had presented himself as a firebreak, a barrier against the inferno of another four years. But, to Democrats’ disappointment, Americans had not delivered a blunt repudiation of Trump and his values; instead, they had shown themselves to be intractably divided. A century and a half after the Civil War, America was again a cloven nation. Ending Trump’s Presidency would not solve the underlying problems that produced it, leaving Americans to face a haunting question of history: Can a country argue its way back from the abyss?

In the summer of 1858, as the American experiment careered toward war, two foes—Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas—met in northern Illinois, for the first in a series of debates on the future of slavery. Lincoln, who was challenging Douglas for his seat in the Senate, loomed a foot taller than his opponent, a squat, tenacious debater celebrated as the Little Giant. The men embodied both sides of America’s fatal divide: Douglas, who warned that Lincoln would make the prairie as “black as night,” advocated “popular sovereignty,” which would hasten the spread of slavery into the Western territories—a prospect that Lincoln could not abide.

By the standards of politics today, the debates—seven in all—were an exhibit of unrecognizable democratic rigor. In each one, either Lincoln or Douglas spoke first for an hour; then the other responded for an hour and a half; finally, the first spoke for another half hour. (In a previous encounter, they had held forth for seven hours.)

Since the ancient Greeks, effective politics has combined spectacle and substance. For a people untouched by television, Lincoln-Douglas was “the best circus in town,” as a reporter on the scene described it. Before the speakers began, bands played and liquor flowed. But, if the debates were social occasions, they were not trivial ones. Thousands of people crowded around to listen, without the comfort of chairs or shade or electric amplification. Politics was mostly reserved for white, wealthy males, but on the edges of the crowd were women, European immigrants, and semiliterate frontiersmen. Attendees were so desperate to hear the debaters that they climbed onto a wooden platform, which

collapsed under their weight. They shouted encouragement (“Hit him again!”) and hung banners with taunting nicknames (“Douglas the Dead Dog—Lincoln the Living Lion”).

Week after week, the debaters traversed Illinois. Lincoln, short on cash, travelled by coach and ferry, while Douglas, a wealthy man whose wife owned slaves, journeyed on a private train, announcing his arrival by firing a cannon marked “Popular Sovereignty.” At times, the discourse onstage neared combustion. When Douglas falsely accused Lincoln of a conspiracy to abolish slavery, Lincoln leaped from his seat and advanced on his opponent until a colleague pulled him back. But the event stayed in the realm of persuasion. As Lincoln had put it, “Reason—cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason—must furnish all materials for our future support and defense.”

For Lincoln, the debates became the venue for the full expression of his humanism. He sought to be progressive but electable, “radical without sounding too damned radical,” in the words of David S. Reynolds, the author of the new cultural biography “Abe: Abraham Lincoln in His Times.” Lincoln’s boldest comments came in the final encounter, when he made a stark distinction between “one class that looks upon the institution of slavery as a wrong, and another class that does not look upon it as a wrong.” Framing the issue in clear moral terms, he said, “It is the eternal struggle between these two principles—right and wrong—throughout the world. They are the two principles that have stood face to face from the beginning of time.”

Lincoln lost his race for the Senate, but his performance in the debates made him famous. In the Presidential contest of 1860, he won the North, which included all the states in which Black men could vote and also the six states in which the Lincoln-Douglas debates had been published. When he received invitations to speak, he often told people to read the debates instead. The Lincoln-Douglas debates came to be regarded as a preëminent example of American political discourse in the nineteenth century—a fierce clash of ideas, sustained by the close attention of the public.

But they also came to represent a darker lesson: for all their eloquence, they could not avert the Civil War, or protect Lincoln from assassination. American political culture was bounded by a contest between reason and violence—a seesawing battle that continues to this day, between the aspiration to persuade fellow-citizens to accept your views and the raw instinct to force them to

comply.

In 2018, the comedian John Mulaney offered an analogy for Trump's managerial style: he compared the President to "a horse loose in a hospital," a wild-eyed creature dangerously out of place. "No one knows what the horse is going to do next, least of all the horse," Mulaney said.

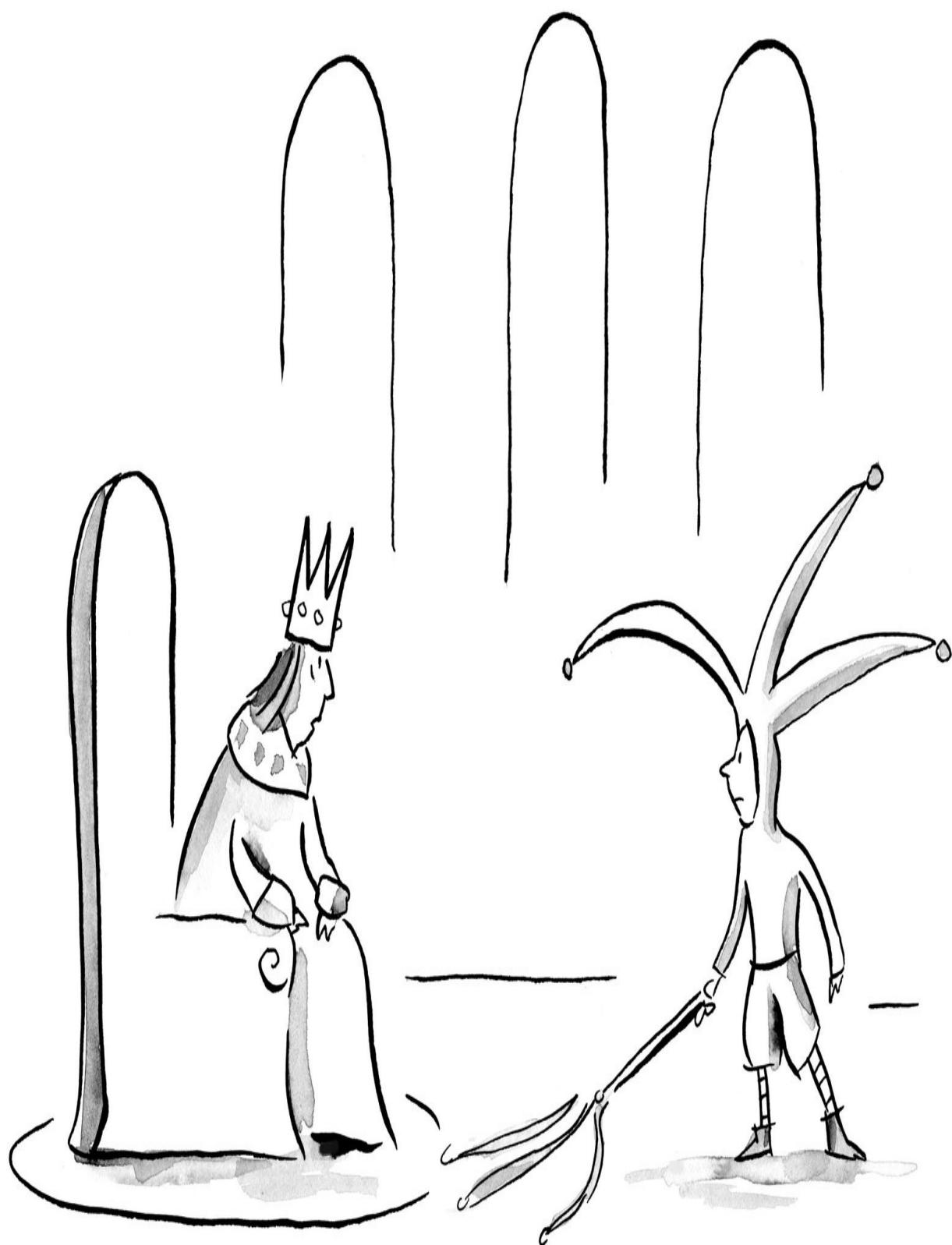
In 2020, instead of Lincoln-Douglas, Americans were subjected to the [Trump-Biden debates](#), an opera-buffa display that was relieved only when Biden turned to the camera and beseeched the public, with an expression usually reserved for hostage videos. Confined to two-minute statements, with frequent interruptions, the debates addressed only narrow aspects of the present distress. There was no mention of Trump's declaring "when the looting starts, the shooting starts," his invention of an "Obamagate" conspiracy, his taunting women of color in Congress ("Send them back"), or his funnelling federal money into his golf courses and hotels—much less his expansion of oil-drilling rights in Alaska or his failure to address school massacres. After the candidates' [second debate](#), in which Trump was subdued by the moderator's ability to cut off his microphone, Chris Lehane, a Democratic political consultant, conceded that it was "not exactly Lincoln-Douglas." He told the *Times*, "One guy showed he was not a thug for about seventy-five minutes out of ninety minutes. And the other guy showed he was not senile."

It's not clear that many people would have been susceptible to persuasion. At the Fund for Peace, a think tank in Washington, researchers ranked the political "cohesion" of various countries between 2008 and 2018; they measured the entrenchment of factions, trust in the security forces, and the level of popular discontent. The United States recorded the largest drop in cohesion among any of the countries studied, including Libya, Mali, and Bahrain. In 2009, Barack Obama's first year in office, the number of anti-government "patriot" groups more than tripled, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center. Since 2001, right-wing terrorists have killed more people in America than Islamic extremists have. In a paper presented two years ago, the political scientists Nathan Kalmoe and Lilliana Mason found that fifteen per cent of Republicans and twenty per cent of Democrats believed that the U.S. would be better off if large numbers of the opposing party "just died."

For nearly four years, Trump has governed in the register of force. "You have to dominate," he told state governors in June, as protests expanded in the wake of

George Floyd's killing. "Most of you are weak." In the run-up to the election, Republican leaders in Congress abandoned even the pretense of restraint, in pursuit of enshrining minoritarian rule by a party that is older and whiter than the country at large. They [hustled](#) a conservative Supreme Court nominee through confirmation at breakneck speed, filed scores of suits to bar the casting or the counting of ballots, and curtailed a census that would record growing populations in diverse, Democratic-leaning areas. It was a brazen acknowledgment that, without a significant intervention, Trump lacked the public support to remain President. Days before the election, a caravan of trucks and cars surrounded a Biden campaign bus on a Texas highway, trying to run it off the road. Trump tweeted, "These patriots did nothing wrong."

Larry Diamond, a political scientist at Stanford's Hoover Institution and a former adviser to the Coalition Provisional Authority, in Iraq, told me, "There's no other way to say this: the Republican Party, with notably few exceptions, has become a party of semi-loyalty to democracy. If you want to stop this, the answer is very simple. The Republican politicians who know better, in the House, the Senate, and the governorships, have to speak up. If they don't put the preservation of democracy and civility over their own political careers, we're going to keep sliding down this path."



DONNELLY

"I'm sorry. I just don't find anything funny right now."
Cartoon by Liza Donnelly

As Americans confront the uncertainty of the next four years, it's not clear if the tradition of force or of reason is ascendant. Some theorists and philosophers are optimistic, beginning to map out plans to revive social cohesion and common purpose. Others fear that the cleavages will only widen, until Americans reckon with a culture of political warfare that comes ever closer to actual combat.

From the beginning, the people who built America were seeking to improve on “what kings and popes had decreed,” the Stanford historian Caroline Winterer wrote in [American Enlightenments](#), from 2016. “Wielding the gleaming razor of human reason, sharpened by empirical evidence, common sense, and withering sarcasm, they would slash away at traditions that rested on nothing but the dust of convention and privilege.”

Early Americans formed literary salons, subscription libraries, and scientific societies, animated by the spirit of the Enlightenment. Benjamin Franklin gathered what he called “ingenious Acquaintances” into a “Club for mutual Improvement.” Known as the Junto, it was devoted to rigor, training, and the spread of the printed word, an ethic that the club called “Reason’s eye.”

By the mid-nineteenth century, the country was in the midst of a vibrant literary outpouring. In Washington, orators such as Henry Clay and Daniel Webster gained influence through speeches that drew huge crowds. “Eloquence, in this empire, is power,” a journalist observed. A generation of writers and politicians —Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Peabody, Frederick Douglass, Walt Whitman—produced impassioned writings and speeches that they hoped would reform the young Republic, giving rise to what the scholar James Perrin Warren later called a “culture of eloquence.” On the lyceum circuit, they travelled from town to town, an adult-education campaign offering lectures on everything from physical exercise to the moral crisis of slavery. Alfred Bunn, an Englishman visiting in 1853, said that it was “a matter of wonderment” to see “the over-tired artisan, the worn-out factory girl” rush from work to “the hot atmosphere of a crowded lecture room.” Even as the country slid toward the Civil War, the lectures continued, rooted in the belief in what Warren called “the word as a means toward reform.”

At the same time, America was embarking on a surge of political violence, much of it directed at Black people, immigrants, Native Americans, and abolitionists.

Between the eighteen-thirties and the outbreak of war, there were at least thirty-five major riots in the Northeast. One of them began in June, 1857, when three nativist gangs—the Chunkers, the Rip-Raps, and the Plug Uglies—attacked Catholic immigrants in Washington, D.C., as they tried to cast ballots. The U.S. Marines, called in to quell the unrest, ended up responsible for a number of deaths.

But the most ominous sign for the Republic was the growing brutality among some of the country's most powerful people: members of Congress. In "[The Field of Blood](#)," the Yale history professor Joanne B. Freeman examined scores of previously unstudied attacks and melees, often initiated by Southern lawmakers who regarded opposition to slavery as a threat to their property and their power. In the eighteen-forties, Representative John Dawson, of Louisiana, threatened to cut a colleague's throat "from ear to ear," and was stopped from shooting another only by the intervention of other congressmen. Freeman described a legislature guided by the ethics of professional wrestling: "Punching. Pistols. Bowie knives. Congressmen brawling in bunches while colleagues stood on chairs to get a good look." The fighting escalated to the point that a Southern lawmaker threatened to lead an assault on the Capitol, and British diplomats came to regard the House floor as too dangerous to visit. Benjamin Brown French, a genial New Englander who served as clerk of the House of Representatives, stopped socializing with Southerners and ultimately took to carrying a pistol.

When I asked Freeman how violence and the cult of reason could coexist, she said that they sprang from a shared motive: "How did you prove that you were a leader in that period, to a vast audience? How did you earn support? Maybe through aggressive oratory. Maybe by making, and keeping, promises for your constituents, state, and section of the Union. And, for a time, maybe by displaying your domination of the political playing field with bullying and aggression."

Freeman's history of congressional violence is an account of how some of the most privileged members of a society began to see their counterparts as enemies, and eventually as existential threats. Once political leaders lost trust in each other, the public was doomed to follow. "Unable to turn to the government for resolution, Americans North and South turned on one another," she wrote.

In 1844, Samuel F. B. Morse, the pioneer of the telegraph, transmitted his first

message: “What hath God wrought?” Morse predicted that his invention would unify Americans, making “one neighborhood of the whole country.” Indeed, the telegraph brought benefits beyond measure. But it also tipped politics toward entertainment and fear, lighting a fuse that runs through to the age of @realDonaldTrump.

The day after Morse unveiled his device, a newspaper used a telegraph to relay the first squib of news from Washington to Baltimore. By the end of the century, readers were wading through a flood of cheap errata from afar—mostly of war, crime, fires, and floods. Neil Postman, one of the twentieth century’s most prominent scholars of communications, wrote, “The telegraph may have made the country into ‘one neighborhood,’ but it was a peculiar one, populated by strangers who knew nothing but the most superficial facts about each other.”

In “[Amusing Ourselves to Death](#),” published in 1985, Postman described how the triumph of television further heightened the entertainment value of politics. He watched the 1984 Presidential debates, between Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale, and lamented the hollow dodges, casual deceptions, and abbreviated answers. With a level of alarm that now looks quaint, he bemoaned Reagan’s easy laugh lines and wrote, “The men were less concerned with giving arguments than with ‘giving off’ impressions, which is what television does best.” It would be three decades before the host of a reality show entered a bid for the Presidency. But Postman already sensed that “the demarcation line between what is show business and what is not becomes harder to see with each passing day.”

Richard Hofstadter, the eminent political scientist, is best known for his work on what he called the “arena for uncommonly angry minds,” including anti-intellectualism and “the paranoid style.” But, in 1970, near the end of his life, Hofstadter became fascinated by the juncture of politics and force. It had swept through American life in recent years, producing assassinations and riots. Working with a co-author, Michael Wallace, who collected two thousand cases of violence—massacres, rebellions, vigilantism—he hoped to address what he called the American paradox: “There is far more violence in our national heritage than our proud, sometimes smug, national self-image admits of.”

Sharp turns in politics and economics inspired new forms of bloodletting. After the Civil War, the Ku Klux Klan and other vigilantes adopted lynching to prevent freed Black people from working, studying, and voting. In the first

scholarly study of lynching, from 1903, the sociologist James E. Cutler described it as a “criminal practice which is peculiar to the United States.” Later, as workers started to organize and demand protections, violence ignited. In 1914, the National Guard stormed an encampment of workers in the Colorado coalfields, causing a rifle battle and setting tents on fire, killing eleven children and two women. The historians Philip Taft and Philip Ross later wrote, “The United States has had the bloodiest and most violent labor history of any industrial nation.”

Hofstadter noted that in America, unlike the rest of the world, political violence rarely involved poor citizens rising up against a powerful state; more often, citizens attacked one another, and, usually, the attackers were established Americans—white Protestants, in many cases—turning on minorities, immigrants, “Catholics, radicals, workers and labor organizers.” Hofstadter made note of “verbal and ideological violence” that laid the foundation for actual harm. He also fretted about a “rising mystique of violence on the left.” By 1969, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, a civil-rights group co-founded by John Lewis, had elected new leadership and dropped “Nonviolent” from its name. The usually staid *New York Review of Books* had featured an instructional diagram for making a Molotov cocktail. On both the left and the right, Hofstadter sensed, politics was giving way to a culture of self-expression suited to the rise of television, in which the “distinction between politics and theatre has been deliberately blurred.” Practitioners had figured out that what played well on TV was often the language and the imagery of force.

Neil Postman liked to explain American history as a sequence of metaphors, which, he wrote, “create the content of our culture.” Each era had its own: the Western frontier, Upton Sinclair’s urban slaughterhouse, and eventually the gilded illusions of Las Vegas. Postman died in 2003, but he might have found the central metaphor of contemporary American culture in the era of “twilight” warfare, which began on September 11, 2001, and extended to Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, and at least nine other countries where U.S. troops were dispatched under the banner of fighting terrorism.

The language of conflict blended with entertainment and bled back into politics. In 2006, Laura Ingraham, the conservative commentator, cited the TV series “24,” which featured frequent depictions of torture. “The average American out there loves the show ‘24,’ ” she said. “In my mind, that’s as close to a national referendum that it’s O.K. to use tough tactics against high-level Al Qaeda

operatives as we're going to get."

At times, the war came home, captured in headlines about a foiled plot or a radicalized "homegrown" terrorist. But, for most Americans, it was an abstraction, fought far away from what was now routinely described as the "homeland." In the twilight war, Americans had acquired an enemy that felt invisible but ever present, everywhere and nowhere, threatening enough that any measures became permissible. Geography and details became incidental. More than three years into the Iraq War, a *National Geographic* poll found that fewer than a quarter of Americans with some college education could locate Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Israel on a map.

The peril of ignorance is a perennial American lament. Less than a generation after the founding of the country, Thomas Jefferson wrote, "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be." But, by the early years of the twenty-first century, Americans were no longer surprised by annual reports that showed our students falling behind other countries'. In a 2005 survey, two-thirds of Americans could not name the three branches of government. Scarcely a third of high-school seniors read at or above the level of proficiency.

Americans were not just losing their grip on the basics of science, civics, and cultural knowledge; they didn't seem to care. In 2004, an aide to George W. Bush (widely identified as Karl Rove, though he denied it) dismissed the "reality-based community," by which he meant people who insist on inconvenient facts. "We're an empire now," the aide told the journalist Ron Suskind, "and when we act, we create our own reality." Magical thinking was taking its place on the main stage of politics. Bill Moyers, in a speech on end-times rhetoric in evangelical politics, lamented, "One of the biggest changes in politics in my lifetime is that the delusional is no longer marginal." In the 2008 book "[The Age of American Unreason](#)," Susan Jacoby declared, "America is now ill with a powerful mutant strain of intertwined ignorance, anti-rationalism and anti-intellectualism."

Trump made the invention of reality a central doctrine of his government. He installed a sixty-inch television in his dining room, and was said to spend as much as eight hours a day watching cable news. (Trump denies this.) He often ambled into unfamiliar facts; he suggested that Frederick Douglass was still alive ("getting recognized more and more"), congratulated Poland on the

anniversary of its invasion by the Nazis, and pronounced Yosemite to rhyme with Vegemite, the Australian breakfast spread. Because of his aversion to reading intelligence briefings, aides resorted to showing him pictures and homemade movies. Linguists who assessed his spoken vocabulary found that he used the most primitive language of any of the last fifteen Presidents. (Herbert Hoover was ranked the most sophisticated.) According to the standard measure of complexity in writing, the Flesch-Kincaid index, Trump communicated at the level of a fourth grader.

The crises of 2020 imposed immovable facts on Trump's politics of unreality. Facing the deaths from the [COVID-19](#) pandemic and a pattern of police killings of Black men and women, Trump's government slumped into paralysis. Congress proved unable to pass real policing reforms, and could not even gather itself to approve a second round of emergency economic assistance. Week by week, as Trump raged against problems beyond his aptitude to address, he leaned ever more on the language and the symbolism of force—a mode of expression that might be called the violent style.

Trump, who came to the Presidency by generating a miasma of fear around Mexicans and Muslims, adapted his weapons to new enemies; he railed against “human scum” and “thugs” and “traitors,” threatening to send a “surge” of federal agents into cities, such as Chicago, that are home to large Black populations. When scattered acts of looting accompanied early protests against racial injustice, Mark Esper, the Secretary of Defense, called for dominating the “battlespace.” Trump dispatched paramilitary agents to Portland, Oregon (“Worse than Afghanistan,” he said), forcing people into unmarked cars. In a speech from the South Lawn, on July 4th, he likened his project to that of the “American heroes” who “defeated the Nazis, dethroned the Fascists, toppled the Communists.” He said, “We are now in the process of defeating the radical left, the Marxists, the anarchists, the agitators, the looters.”

His most zealous supporters embraced fantasies of [Antifa](#) invasions, deep-state coups, and a cabal of Satan-worshipping, pedophile “Democrat” billionaires. Opponents began to look irredeemable, beyond rehabilitation. In August, a popular pro-gun activist who goes by Colion Noir posted a video titled “Why New Gun Owners Should Fear a Joe Biden Presidency.” He told his audience, “They'll be coming for the handguns. These aren't new tactics—Hitler did the same thing in Germany.”

As the election approached, the threads converged in a toxic political sludge: the Boogaloo Bois, with their ironic memes and Hawaiian shirts, bracing for civil war; the record-breaking gun sales—the spirit of John Birch, in the era of AR-15s and 4Chan. The current culture of political warfare was about more than guns or fringe conspiracy theories. It was a mutant version of a mainstream ethos: a survival mind-set derived from a sense of zero-sum contests, in which only one side can prevail. The weaker the public felt, the more they grasped for gestures of force; as in Freeman’s portrait of antebellum violence, Americans were coming to believe that they could no longer afford to abide by the old norms. Freeman told me that violence was filling a void left by America’s eroded democracy: “The current moment has reams of people who feel unheard and unrepresented amidst multiple crises, people who have been stewing in that gripe for years. They sense that the tides of demographics and culture are turning against them.” She said, “Cloak that in the rhetoric of democracy, and it has a real appeal.”

Part of America’s predicament is that its political parties magnify the intensity of factions, rather than negotiating toward a compromise. Ideally, parties pull people into blocs that help bridge their racial, religious, and professional differences; it gives them an alternative collective identity. America’s parties do precisely the opposite: they compound and amplify the differences.

Hardly anyone who studies political violence expects the risk to subside after the election. In a survey conducted in September, a team of prominent political scientists found that an alarming number of Americans believe that violence “could be justified to advance their parties’ political goals.” Multiple studies show that the figure is at least one in six, twice what it was three years ago. “That’s a very significant jump,” Larry Diamond, of Stanford, who helped conduct the research, told me. “But it’s not just the numbers. It’s also the context that is so unsettling.” Diamond cited recent episodes—from white supremacists in Charlottesville to Trump’s exhorting the Proud Boys to “stand back and stand by.” Diamond went on, “The level of armaments that these people have, the stockpiles of military-style weaponry and body armor, the high-volume gun clips—there’s no precedent in American history for this, and that’s why I think the current era is more dangerous than anything we’ve seen in decades.”



E.S.GLENN

"I could've sworn I heard one of the kids moving back in."
Cartoon by E. S. Glenn

What pushes people over the threshold from talking about violence to perpetrating it? Scholars have studied examples as diverse as student protests in Germany and Italy, riots outside the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, and democracy protests in Hong Kong. In many cases, the point of ignition is government repression, real or imagined—a moment that inspires bystanders to join fellow-citizens in fighting the perceived abuse of authority. Trump has encouraged followers to see his political opponents as tyrants. On October 8th, federal and state authorities charged six men with plotting to kidnap Gretchen Whitmer, the governor of Michigan. She had been one of Trump's most frequent targets of criticism; this spring, as protesters with guns demonstrated in the Michigan capitol, Trump tweeted out a militia slogan, “LIBERATE MICHIGAN!,” and called them “very good people.” The plotters had reportedly found one another online and through friends involved with the boogaloo movement. During a pro-gun rally in Lansing, on June 18th, some of the men talked about attacking the capitol. They met for tactical training and tried to make bombs. Adam Fox, the accused ringleader, told others, “I just wanna make the world glow, dude. . . . I don’t fuckin’ care anymore, I’m just so sick of it.”

Diamond, who has studied the workings of democracy in dozens of countries, recognized a disturbing pattern that led to violence: “All of these instances of pressing out the normative boundaries of what’s acceptable are the prelude to more daring, outrageous acts of political violence. Look at the climate in Israel in the months preceding the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. You see the same rise in inflammatory rhetoric and the same erosion of the constraints. It’s a downward spiral that gave the signal to this violent right-wing extremist that it actually could be O.K.—even morally necessary—to assassinate the Israeli Prime Minister.”

What would it take to pull American politics out of the fire? To make democracy more functional and trustworthy? To make Americans feel, in any real sense, that we are all in this together?

One set of ideas focusses on bending the course of political culture—the habits and the attitudes that govern our encounters. In 2000, Robert Putnam, a Harvard political scientist, published “[Bowling Alone](#),” a now classic account of a decline in “social capital,” the networks of trust developed through civic, social, and leisure organizations. A society that retreated to the sofa, he warned, risked

losing the habits of democracy. (“TV-based politics,” he wrote, “is to political action as watching ‘ER’ is to saving someone in distress.”) Twenty years later, he saw that pattern of seclusion reach its logical extreme, as Americans fragmented in the solitude of the pandemic.

In a new book, “[The Upswing](#),” written with Shaylyn Romney Garrett, Putnam identified a different thread of history, in which Americans have oscillated between individualism and community. He examined how the Gilded Age—a time, like the current one, of jarring inequality, political polarization, and cultural narcissism—gave way to the Progressive Era, when a broad swath of Americans called for fundamental reform. In that period, Americans created public high schools, labor unions, the federal income tax, and financial regulation. In 1912, all three major Presidential candidates—Teddy Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and Woodrow Wilson—adopted the progressive label, and all three supported anti-monopoly laws and a progressive income tax.

“One lesson we take from that period is that ideas matter—words matter,” Putnam told me. “All the stuff that Trump was spewing was pushing in exactly the opposite direction.” But Putnam and Garrett also highlighted the importance of a “moral awakening,” which encouraged those in office to reverse a trend toward “widespread selfishness.” In one encounter after another, inescapable realities had forced influential Americans to acknowledge the need for change. Frances Perkins, an architect of the New Deal, was a New York socialite and a local activist until 1911, when she witnessed the horror of the fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, in which scores of women and girls jumped to their deaths. Others were shaken by the reporting of Ida B. Wells on Jim Crow, or of Upton Sinclair on meatpacking. Paul Harris, the president of the Rotary Club, was nudging businessmen to build public toilets and embrace “Service Above Self.” Garrett told me, “It was becoming unacceptable to continue in that mode of social Darwinism. It was a moral and cultural shift. And we think that’s becoming true today.”

Putnam said, “We don’t like the metaphor of a pendulum, because it swings back and forth by itself. In every case, people had to do it.” He went on, “After this election, fighting will break out within the Democratic Party, and I think it should, because that will reflect that broad coalition starting to push the envelope.”

In that spirit, another set of proposals emphasizes changes to laws and

institutions. Commissions, as a rule, are not known for dispensing vital reading. But, in June, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences published the civic equivalent of the 9/11 Commission Report: a blueprint for avoiding another political catastrophe. The project began in 2018, with a bipartisan search for ways to revitalize modern democracy. The academy convened listening sessions across the country, and gathered a mountain of technical advice on ways to “birth for ourselves a sense of shared fate.” The result was “Our Common Purpose,” a set of thirty-one proposals, chosen with an eye for what could be plausibly achieved by 2026. Many of them sounded radical a few years ago but are increasingly mainstream, including a federal law to expand the House of Representatives (and, thus, the Electoral College) by at least fifty members; ranked-choice voting (which has been shown to reduce polarization) and multi-member districts; a term limit of eighteen years for Supreme Court Justices; and a universal mandate for voting, as exists in Australia and Belgium.

Some of the proposals would require moves by Congress or state legislatures, but others can be achieved with no legal changes. Remarkably, only one proposal—undoing parts of the Supreme Court’s Citizens United decision—would require a constitutional amendment, and even that is not as radical as it might sound. Historically, Americans maintained the agility of democracy by amending the Constitution, on average, at least once a decade, until the pace stalled, half a century ago. Other than a minor amendment in 1992, to adjust congressional salaries, the last major change to the Constitution was in 1971, when the voting age was lowered to eighteen. Danielle Allen, a Harvard political theorist who helped lead the project, told me, “The conversation about the health of our political institutions and political culture is really just beginning.”

Allen and her colleagues also identified techniques of reviving the habits of citizenship. To break down social segregation, they call for expanding AmeriCorps and similar programs, to foster “an expectation of national service,” and establishing a National Trust for Civic Infrastructure, seeded by private and philanthropic money, which could expand the occasions “where Americans can encounter people different from themselves.” The United States already has more public libraries than Starbucks locations, but many of them need a burst of new resources, as do parks, museums, and performance spaces.

It would be hard to look at the 2020 election and not question the real-world effect of earnest studies of political culture. But Allen was hardly disappointed. On the morning after the election, she said, “There is a part of me that just feels

quite exuberant about the election results, because of the level of turnout”—the highest in a hundred and twenty years. “People without college degrees increased their turnout. Young people increased their turnout. Communities of color were actively engaged.”

Reviving democracy, Allen said, hardly guarantees a simple notion of unity. Rather, it provides a legitimate forum for the harsh clashes that may be necessary for progress—what Frederick Douglass called the “awful roar.” The goal of American politics should not be “a world where everybody agrees with you,” Allen said. “That will never be the reward of life in a constitutional democracy. The reward is the chance to participate in free self-government. If you love that, then you can tolerate the hard work of ongoing, routine contestation with people who disagree with you.”

For four years, Trump has worked to equate disagreement with treason. He has banished loyal opposition and called for the criminal investigation of ordinary opponents. In “[Audience of One](#),” the *Times* television critic James Poniewozik described Trump as the ultimate expression of “the cultural anger machine,” an endless source of violent imagery that combined the spirit of “Breaking Bad” and “The Sopranos” with the dopamine-delivery system of hurricane coverage. For decades, Poniewozik wrote, Trump had essentially been a cable-news channel in human form—“loud, short of attention span, and addicted to conflict.” In the White House, “he and cable had achieved the singularity, a meshing of man and machine.”

The Biden campaign could not have conveyed a more different spirit. “To make progress, we have to stop treating our opponents as enemies,” Biden said last Wednesday, as the steadily rising vote count suggested that he could win. “We are not enemies,” he said, echoing Lincoln’s first Inaugural Address. “I am campaigning as a Democrat, but I will govern as an American President.” It was one of his favored clichés, so familiar and soft that it usually slipped by unnoticed. But for a beleaguered people, bracing for battle, the sentiment was something close to radical. ♦

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David Remnick writes.

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Books

- [Our Love-Hate Relationship with Gimmicks](#)
- [Shirley Hazzard and the Art of Outsized Intimacy](#)
- [Briefly Noted Book Reviews](#)

Our Love-Hate Relationship with Gimmicks

Why is the same word used to describe the harmless enchantments of literary technique and the cruel buffoonery of contemporary political and economic life?

By [Merve Emre](#)

November 9, 2020



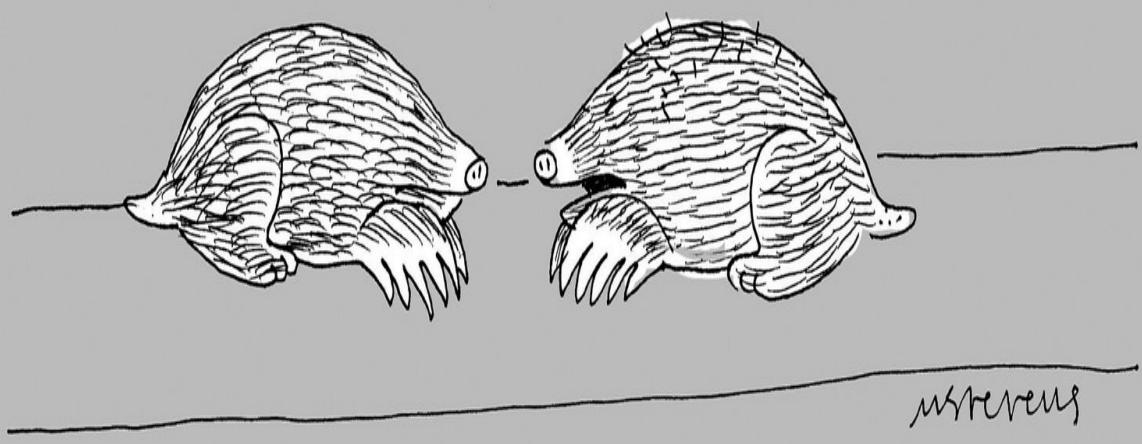
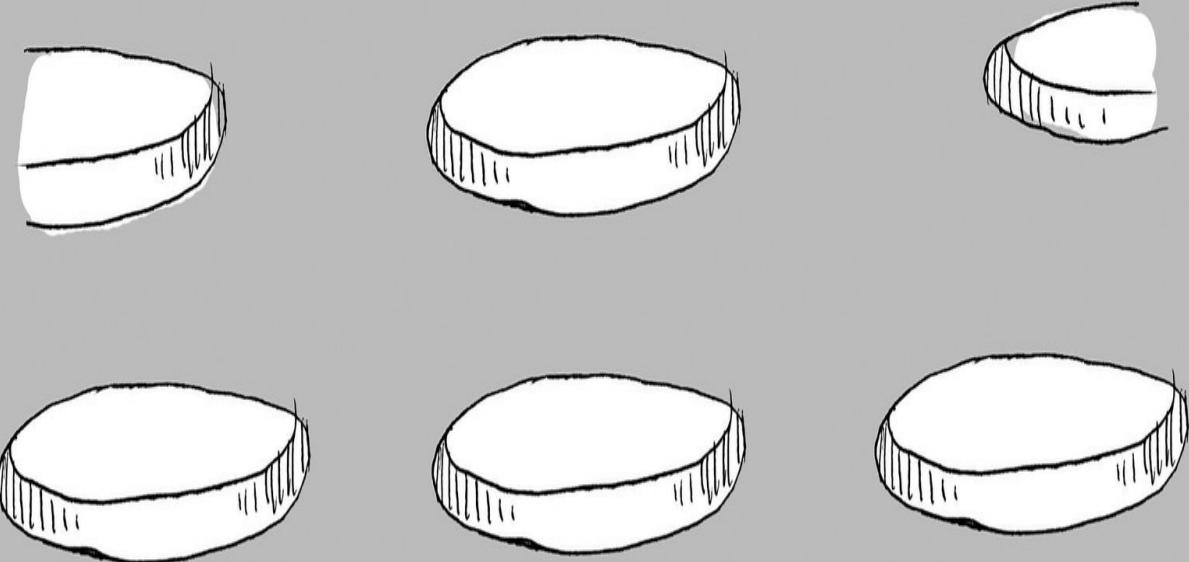
When [Jennifer Egan](#)'s novel "[A Visit from the Goon Squad](#)" won the Pulitzer Prize, in 2011, much fuss was made over its penultimate chapter, which presents the diary of a twelve-year-old girl in the form of a seventy-six-page PowerPoint presentation. Despite the nearly universal acclaim that the novel had received, critics had trouble deciding whether the PowerPoint was a dazzling, avant-garde innovation or, as one reviewer described it, "a wacky literary gimmick," a cheap trick that diminished the over-all value of the novel. In an interview with Egan, the novelist Heidi Julavits confessed to dreading the chapter before she read it, and then experiencing a happy relief once she had. "I live in fear of the gimmicky story that fails to rise above its gimmick," she said. "But within a few pages I totally forgot about the PowerPoint presentation, that's how ungimmicky your gimmick was."

The word "gimmick" is believed to come from "gimac," an anagram of "magic." The word was likely first used by magicians, gamblers, and swindlers in the nineteen-twenties to refer to the props they wielded to attract, and to misdirect, attention—and sometimes, according to "The Wise-Crack Dictionary," from 1926, to turn "a fair game crooked." From such duplicitous beginnings, the idea of gimmickry soon spread. In Vladimir Nabokov's novel "[Invitation to a Beheading](#)," from 1935, a mother distracts her imprisoned son from counting the hours to his execution by describing the "marvelous gimmicks" of her childhood. The most shocking, she explains, was a trick mirror. When "shapeless, mottled, pockmarked, knobby things" were placed in front of the mirror, it would reflect perfectly sensible forms: flowers, fields, ships, people. When confronted with a human face or hand, the mirror would reflect a jumble of broken images. As the son listens to his mother describe her gimmick, he sees her eyes spark with terror and pity, "as if something real, unquestionable (in this world, where everything was subject to question), had passed through, as if a corner of this horrible life had curled up, and there was a glimpse of the lining." Behind the mirror lurks something monstrous—an idea of art as device, an object whose representational powers can distort and devalue just as easily as they can estrange and enchant.

Trick mirrors are gimmicks, but they are also metaphors for how gimmicks work, eliciting both charm and suspicion. In "A Visit from the Goon Squad," Egan transforms a clunky corporate technology into an ingenious storytelling technique by embedding it in the older technology of the novel. Seen in this context, the PowerPoint's history as a management tool begins to vanish behind

the story of a young girl’s life—the novelist’s version of the magician’s final act, when he folds his assistant in a trunk and makes her disappear. Teetering between novelty and banality, Egan’s novel manages to squeeze a drop of wonder out of a crude communication method. Yet its single-use success—no other writer could get away with repeating her trick—reminds us that the literary marketplace, as Theodor Adorno once observed of the art world, favors “work with a ‘personal touch,’ or more bluntly, a gimmick.”

The seductive wonders of Nabokov’s mirror or Egan’s PowerPoint are harder to find in the gimmicks of the present. Recent headlines offer up a wide range of gimmicks rushed into production to contain the spread of the coronavirus (robot chefs, antiviral cars), as well as products and ideas whose sudden obsolescence (“fun” workplaces, airline miles) reveals that they were gimmicks all along. [Donald Trump](#)’s threat to veto the National Defense Authorization Act, in order to stop Confederate names being removed from military bases; [Kanye West](#)’s announcement of his Presidential run; and Amazon’s new surveillance drone, the Ring Always Home Cam, have attracted scorn as “gimmicks”—promotional shticks, dangerous stunts. Why is a word used to describe a literary technique also the word used to describe the buffoonery, the cruelty and carelessness, of contemporary political and economic life? What is in a word as minor as “gimmick”?



Mitrevens

"No way! It's your turn. I got whacked all day yesterday."
Cartoon by Mick Stevens

For Sianne Ngai, a professor of English at the University of Chicago and the author of “[Theory of the Gimmick](#)” (Harvard), the answer is: everything, or at least everything to do with the art consumed and produced under capitalism. One of the most original literary scholars at work today, Ngai has made a career of unravelling the social and political histories that shape our aesthetic judgments (“How beautiful! How hideous!”) of novels, films, and photographs, as well as of show tunes and YouTube videos, bath toys and smiley faces. Her work draws attention to the public dimensions of apparently private reactions to art, and to the world in which these aesthetic experiences arise—a “capitalist lifeworld,” she writes, where art is increasingly trivial and artifice reigns supreme, where fun and fright merge to create the same arresting, alienating magic as Nabokov’s mirror.

Ngai’s first scholarly book, “[Ugly Feelings](#),” published in 2005, examined a set of negative emotions—irritation, envy, paranoia, anxiety—that she described as “minor and generally unprestigious” compared with the “grander passions” of love, anger, and sympathetic uplift, which have historically animated so much of art and literature. The passivity and inscrutability of these ugly feelings, which Ngai tracked in works from “Bartleby, the Scrivener” to “Single White Female,” offered a frustrated response to the sense of limited agency—to living and working, especially as a woman or a nonwhite person, in a “highly differentiated and totally commodified world.” Her next book, “[Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting](#)” (2012), placed the three ambivalent assessments in its subtitle at the heart of aesthetic theory, arguing that they best captured the nature of aesthetic experience in “the hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism.” The cuteness of a sculpture by [Takashi Murakami](#), for instance, fetishized the helpless; the zaniness enacted by Lucille Ball or [Richard Pryor](#) showcased the incessant activity of a person who was always working.

Although Ngai’s books are conceptually and philosophically dense, their appeal comes from how they tap into our ordinary use of language. Unless I collect art, or live in a many-windowed house at the edge of a westerly peninsula, where the sea is gilded by the sun and silvered by the moon, I am unlikely to have regular encounters with things I would call “beautiful” or “sublime,” and I may well find the rush and roar of such Romantic descriptions embarrassing. But not a day goes by when I do not call something—my son’s stuffed animals, a dress, a

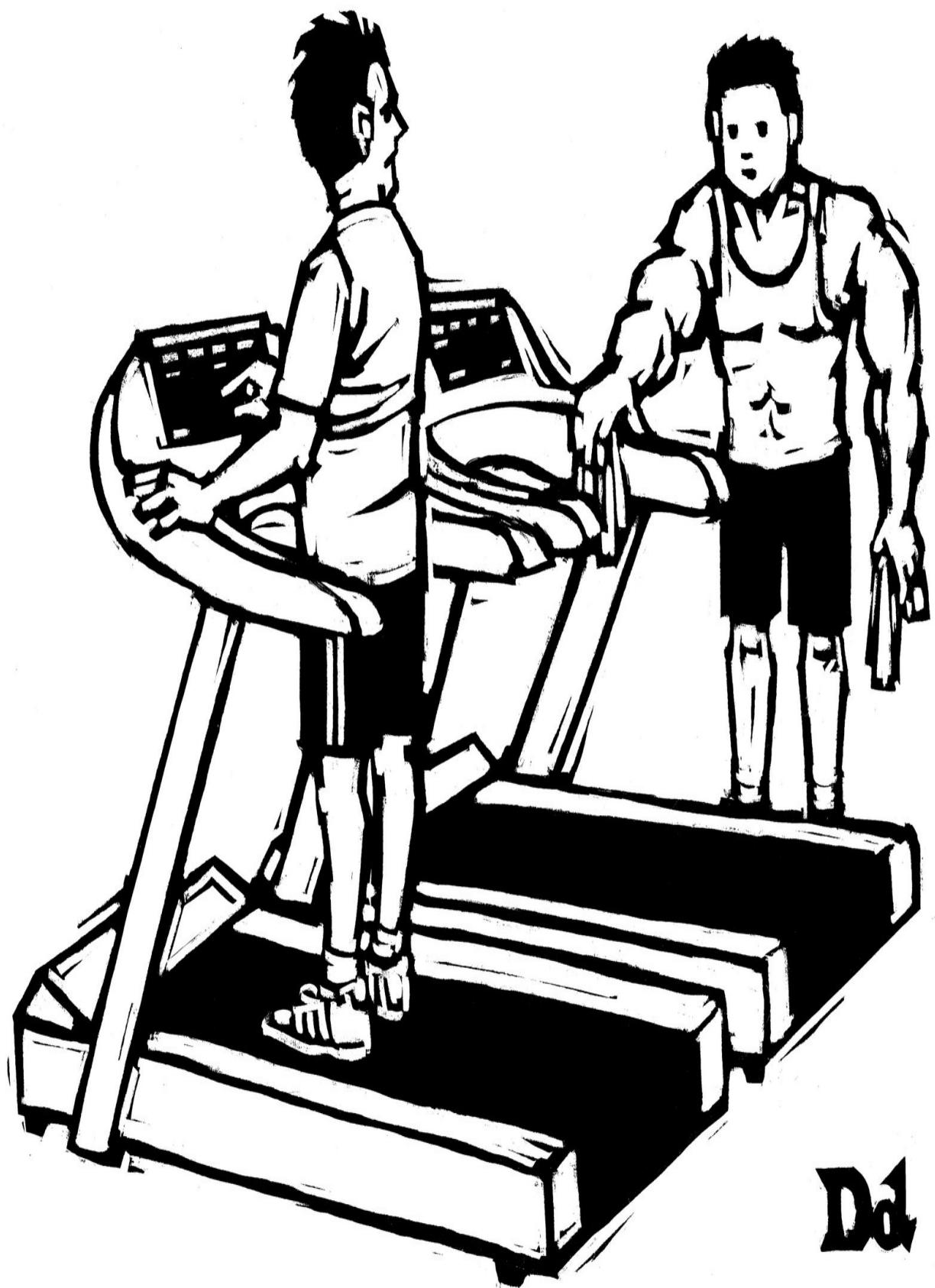
poem by Gertrude Stein—"cute," or a novel or an essay "interesting." And I can't count the number of times I've called a kitchen gizmo my husband swears we really, really need (but we really, really don't) or a colleague's online persona "gimmicky." "Theory of the Gimmick" finds in the pervasiveness of the gimmick the same duelling forces of aesthetic attraction and repulsion that shape all Ngai's work. "'You want me,' the gimmick outrageously says," she writes. "It is never entirely wrong."

As with all aesthetic judgments, calling something a gimmick begins simply, with a feeling of pleasure or displeasure, or some uncertain mingling of the two. Consider the pandemic-era robot chef: behind its flashiness and the obvious expense of producing it, behind the hypnotic slicing and dicing of its hands, I sense its fraudulence. No doubt it will underperform, cooking meals only as well as a Roomba cleans a house. No doubt it will occasion gruesome comic mishaps—say, if the cat tries riding it. None of this needs to be explained; I know a gimmick when I see one. My judgment is elicited by my perception of what Ngai identifies as the gimmick's defining feature: "dubious yet attractive promises about the saving of time, the reduction of labor, and the expansion of value."

Although my calling something a gimmick registers a subjective response, it also demands agreement or invites confrontation, and more brazenly so than other judgments. Should a fan of robot chefs and Roombas question why I harbor such unwarranted suspicions about them, I will feel compelled to convince him that my suspicions ought to be felt universally. But I will also delight in a newfound sense of superiority, my belief that only I am discerning enough to see that these devices are overvalued, too good to be true. Every gimmick, Ngai tells us, needs a dupe. For every skeptic, there must be a person, or an entire market society, who will affirm the value of what the skeptic judges to be—in the words of Ron Padgett's poem "Gimmicks"—"cheap, tricky, fast, without substance, even immoral."

For Ngai, the problem of the gimmick—the mismatch between how it appears and the value it creates—is also the fundamental problem of capitalism as explained by Karl Marx. In "[Capital](#)," Marx tells the story of capital's relation to value with the help of a gimmicky character he introduces as "our friend, Moneybags." Moneybags is an "embryo capitalist"—no mustache, no top hat yet—looking for a special commodity to buy, one whose consumption will create value, allowing him to make money from money. Luckily, Moneybags meets a

worker. He buys the worker's "labor-power" by paying him a wage, sells whatever product the worker makes, and appropriates the difference between the two—what Marx calls "surplus-value"—as profit. That, at least, is how capitalist relations appear in the market, "the noisy sphere, where everything takes place on the surface and in view of men."



Dd

"I don't lift weights. I got this way because I wipe down the equipment really, really hard."
Cartoon by Drew Dernavich

But when Marx accompanies Moneybags into “the hidden abode of production,” he draws back the glittering green curtain on wage and profit, exposing how value is created: the exploitation of labor. Though Moneybags requires his worker to labor for twelve hours a day to earn his wage, the worker needs only six of those hours to produce his means of subsistence: the daily cost of the food, clothing, and housing he needs to replenish his “muscle, nerve, brain” and reproduce his labor-power. In the six hours he works beyond that, “he creates no value for himself,” Marx writes. “He creates surplus-value which, for the capitalist, has all the charms of a creation out of nothing.” The wage makes all labor performed during the workday appear as if it were compensated labor, when, in fact, half of it is not. Cloaked by the “magic and necromancy” of money, capital’s “trick” is its command of unpaid labor and time to create value. Behind the appealing illusion of free, happy exchange sits a hollow and untrustworthy reality, a gimmick.

Leaning long and hard on Marx, Ngai argues that the capitalist’s boundless quest to increase surplus labor prompts him to find new ways of enhancing his trick. He turns to “the magic of machinery,” Marx writes—not just one machine but a system of machines, “a mechanical monster whose body fills whole factories, and whose demon power . . . at length breaks out into the fast and furious whirl of his countless working organs.” These contrivances intensify capital’s gimmick by increasing the efficiency of labor-power, eking out more work from the same twelve-hour day. Yet intensifying labor also makes it redundant—the same number of laborers can, with less work, convert an ever-expanding quantity of raw materials into products. The devices designed to make capitalism’s trick slicker contain the seeds of the contradiction that drives it to crisis: they also eliminate labor, and along with it the surplus-value on which capital depends.

According to Ngai, calling something a gimmick indicates our discomfort with capitalism’s sneaky distortion of the relationship between value, labor, and time. The gimmick is both an aesthetic and an economic judgment. Think back to Egan’s PowerPoint. Compared with the intricacy of the rest of her novel, the PowerPoint seems like a mechanical shortcut—what Ngai would call a “labor-saving trick,” and what a critic or a creative-writing professor might describe as “unearned.” At the same time, the PowerPoint appears to be working too hard to get our attention. The ambivalence about whether the PowerPoint is, as the cliché goes, working hard or hardly working becomes even more telling when

we learn that its design was outsourced to an unpaid worker: Egan's sister, a consultant, who, as Egan reveals, "made the graphs in the chapter for me because I couldn't seem to crunch the numbers competently."

The female family member who volunteers her labor recalls Rosey, the robot maid in "The Jetsons," perennially unpaid and verging on obsolescence, as well as the trio of strippers from the Broadway show "[Gypsy](#)," who, as Ngai reminds us, sing "You Gotta Get a Gimmick." Why do gimmicks so often feature a woman performing undervalued labor? In a memorable moment in James Joyce's "[Ulysses](#)," Leopold Bloom recalls suggesting to his former boss, a stationer, that he could drum up business by placing in front of his store "a transparent show cart with two smart girls inside writing. . . . Smart girls writing something catch the eye at once. Everyone dying to know what she's writing." Bloom's gimmick grabs attention by conflating sex with intellectual labor and, in the process, devaluing both. The smart girls may be paid to sit there, but they are not paid for the writing they do or for men to ogle them. "Have a finger in the pie. Women too," Bloom boasts, hinting that business and sex might be dispensed by the same gimmick.

For Ngai, no novelist knows this dynamic better than [Helen DeWitt](#), who draws sexual and intellectual labor together with zany brilliance in "[Lightning Rods](#)." DeWitt's sleazy hero, Joe, proposes to solve the problem of sexual harassment in the workplace by founding a temp agency staffed by women who provide male employees with on-site sex, stopping them from harassing full-time employees. He also comes up with a gimmick, the Lightning Rod: a contraption that divides a woman in half, like the magician sawing his lovely assistant in two. Her front half performs intellectual labor—reading [Proust](#), applying to law school—while her back end, Ngai explains, protrudes "through a hidden door into a bathroom stall for the male user to fuck." Once Joe has cornered the market on sex, he persuades his clients to outsource all their temporary hiring to his company, also called Lightning Rods.

The comedy of DeWitt's gimmick—a woman embedded in a machine embedded in a sex service embedded in a temp agency—confirms the depressing reality of those whom capitalism exploits most ruthlessly: women. It's not just that women's labor in the workplace is increasingly contingent and precarious; women are also disproportionately responsible for many forms of unwaged labor—domestic work, child rearing, arguably even sex. "Capitalism's ultimate labor-saving device is just simply a woman," Ngai concludes, for women are "the

permanently transient, cheaper labor used to further cheapen labor in general.”



Cartoon by Carol Lay

Until around the end of the Renaissance, Ngai suggests, aesthetic devices we might now find gimmicky—the pneumatic heads in “[Don Quixote](#),” the talking animal spirits in Margaret Cavendish’s “[The Blazing World](#),” the deus ex machina in theatre—were received without suspicion. “Devices like these were wonders, not in any way equivocal,” Ngai writes. They made “no particular claim to abbreviating work on which they could henceforth renege.” The capitalist gimmick, by contrast, “is both a wonder *and* a trick. It is a form we

marvel at *and* distrust, admire *and* disdain.” And it often arrives overloaded with unearned praise, wrongful or embarrassing hyperbole that one feels compelled to take down a notch.

Perhaps the earliest accusation of literary gimmickry was made by [Samuel Johnson](#). In 1775, during a meeting of the Literary Club, he attacked Jonathan Swift’s “[Gulliver’s Travels](#),” declaring, “When once you have thought of big men and little men, it is very easy to do all the rest.” It is telling that his criticism hinges on the idea of ease. Swift’s trick of scale let him avoid the hard work that Johnson believed was a novelist’s duty, making him instead the kind of writer who, as Johnson wrote elsewhere, scribbled “without the Toil of Study, without Knowledge of Nature, or Acquaintance with Life.” The high-concept premise of “Gulliver’s Travels” was a shortcut, a con by which Swift could smuggle in tired social satire, using fantastic creatures, instead of ordinary humans, as mouthpieces for his ideas.

From here, one could see the history of prose fiction as a series of allegations of gimmickry—of writers’ and critics’ cutting down their predecessors’ sleights, puncturing the inflated plaudits they had garnered. To the narrator of Jane Austen’s “[Emma](#),” sentimental romances, like the ones Emma imagines herself in and that Austen’s novels ironize, turn on coded letters, word games, and other vehicles “for gallantry and trick.” Both romance and realism, according to G. K. Chesterton, were “tricks and tricks alone,” and he railed against the “technical dodges” of realists such as Charles Dickens and Gustave Flaubert. “It is a trick to make a heroine, in the act of accepting a lover, suddenly aureoled by a chance burst of sunshine, and then to call it romance,” Chesterton wrote. “But it is quite as much of a trick to make her, in the act of accepting a lover, drop her umbrella, or trip over a hassock, and then call it the bold plain realism of life.” Gimmickier still, to Henry James, was the novelist who menaced a beautiful young woman with illness or death, “the very shortest of all cuts to the interesting state.” James’s late works, which Ngai considers at length, threaten women with something different: the corny insinuations, or verbal gimmicks, of men who refuse to acknowledge the care and sexual attention that women have given them.

With the ascendance of modernism, narrative itself started to seem like an untrustworthy contrivance. The Russian literary theorist and novelist Viktor Shklovsky speculated that “plots were mere motivations for tricks” and applauded novelists who displaced them with illusions of spontaneity, “rough

drafts” of consciousness. But, of course, modernism itself remained open to charges of gimmickry, and not only from reactionaries. Virginia Woolf, irritated by the critical acclaim for Joyce’s “Ulysses,” wrote, “A first-rate writer, I mean, respects writing too much to be tricky; startling; doing stunts.” Later, Roland Barthes described Franz Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis” as a “profitable gimmick,” because it fooled readers into calling “Kafkaesque” the tropes —“solitude, alienation, the quest, the familiarity of the absurd”—that belonged to many modernist writers. My favorite fictional example of this kind of aesthetic judgment is a scene in Elena Ferrante’s [“The Story of a New Name”](#) in which a man and a woman who will fall recklessly in love ponder the lonely silences in Samuel Beckett’s plays. “What does it mean that life is more life without sight, without hearing, even without words?” the woman asks. “Maybe it’s just a gimmick,” the man suggests. “No, what gimmick,” the woman replies. “There’s a thing here that suggests a thousand others, it’s not a gimmick.” The conversation is enough to suggest that their relationship is doomed. It’s easy to fall out of love with the gimmick’s dupe.

The closer we come to the present, the easier it feels to enumerate genres of literary gimmick—once-fresh conceits about to curdle. In a world overrun by advertising and marketing, where “thought is simultaneously reified and fetishized,” Ngai writes, “‘gimmick’ and ‘concept’ are well-nigh synonymous.” There is the gimmick of metafiction, which, unwilling to part with its one-time trick of referring to itself, has recently been rebranded as autofiction; the gimmick of writing a novel with interchangeable parts or multiple endings; the gimmick of structuring a novel as an archive, with boxes, diaries, and found objects. “All art becomes intrinsically gimmick-prone after modernism,” Ngai observes, for the simple reason that all art risks undermining itself when it lays bare its technique.

But if we are told to expect gimmicks everywhere, spotting them feels easy: if the propensity for gimmickry is all around us, then it is also nowhere in particular. The wider Ngai casts her net for examples, the less significant being netted starts to seem. As “Theory of the Gimmick” proceeds, one senses Ngai working harder and harder to equate the techniques of artistic production with the productive processes of capitalism. Gradually, the concept of the gimmick begins to recede from intelligibility, until one is left suspicious of the category—of all aesthetic categories. And the more we become aware of Ngai working hard, the more we wonder if her high-concept procedure, developed in the course of three ingenious books, isn’t something of a gimmick itself. “Somehow,

you need a trick,” Toni Morrison once said of what gave the most thrilling writing its edge. Certainly, one could hardly imagine Ngai, or anyone else, pulling this trick off again. But while it lasted it was very good: exhaustive, demanding, and enlightening—an ungimmicky gimmick, the best kind of critical pleasure. ♦

Shirley Hazzard and the Art of Outsized Intimacy

In her fiction, Hazzard bridged extremes of scale, imbuing minor love stories with epic meaning.

By [Alice Gregory](#)

November 9, 2020



Toward the end of Shirley Hazzard's first novel, "The Evening of the Holiday" (1966), a young woman and a man twice her age sit in a parked car in Tuscany, near the ruins of a villa. Sophie is from England, in Italy on holiday. Tancredi is a Sicilian architect who is separated from his wife. They have spent the summer in a stately courtship, and Sophie has mostly managed to not think explicitly about its end. But the time has come for her to return home. There is no immediate obligation calling her back, but she is determined to go.

Sophie struggles against their claustrophobic misery. As her mind gyres outward ("All around them, across the countryside, men and women went about their work or sat down to their lunch, talked and laughed—or wept, as they wept now"), she tries to "fit this love into some immense, annihilating context of human experience, assailing it with her sense of proportion." Tancredi, wryly credited with being the one "who knew more about proportion," lifts his head. "What could be worse than this?" he asks Sophie. "What could be worse?" The chapter ends soon afterward, and the next one opens half a year later, during a winter of record-breaking freezes and deaths.

These contrasts in scale—individual and historical, intimate and epic—occur throughout the novels of Shirley Hazzard, whose writing, like her name, tends to begin demurely enough, all weak tea and lace curtains, but grows quietly comic, and then abruptly calamitous. Her characters know poetry by heart, believe in honor, and speak in epigrams. Their biographies are revised, drastically, by plane crashes and shipwrecks, fatal battles, and grave illnesses. They travel widely and suffer emotional devastation.

Hazzard, who died in 2016, at the age of eighty-five, once described her reading life as one of "impassioned humility." This is the effect of her books, too, in which vast, inhuman forces circumscribe her characters' most personal experiences. She was, as she told the *Paris Review*, skeptical of fiction that was "hard, cool, indifferent"; she thought that literature should be "an intensification of life," not merely a skillful recapitulation of it.

Hazzard was in her late twenties when she completed her first short story. She mailed her only copy to this magazine from Tuscany, where she was living in a vineyard-surrounded villa with a family of anti-Fascists. It was one of roughly thirty thousand unsolicited manuscripts that *The New Yorker* received annually at the time, but William Maxwell, the fiction editor, pulled it out of the slush pile

and instructed Hazzard to send more.

“Woollahra Road,” which closely heels to the consciousness of a small Depression-era Australian child, was, in 1961, the first story of Hazzard’s that the magazine published. It now appears, along with twenty-seven others, in “Collected Stories” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), edited by Brigitta Olubas, a literary scholar from the University of New South Wales who has edited a collection of academic essays on Hazzard and is at work on a biography. The stories, most of which were written in the nineteen-sixties, are often set in exotic locations—the Gulf of Corinth, South China, Florence—and are filled with short sentences of tossed-off-sounding sophistication: “The War Crimes people gave parties that lasted all night”; “The Danish couple and the Greek guide speak French among themselves.”

In “The Picnic,” from 1962, Hazzard came upon a theme that preoccupied her for a lifetime: the way love can be at once perishable and, in its reshaping of our minds, permanent. Nettie and Clem—distant relatives by marriage, illicit lovers long ago—sit in awkward silence on a hillside. The story contains hardly any dialogue. It is the first time they have seen each other in a decade. Clem takes note of Nettie’s inappropriate dress, which she has (predictably, he thinks) stained. Nettie observes Clem’s faded face and dreary caution. Their private thoughts construct a history of their relationship and reveal what they both deny to themselves: that they have lastingly altered each other’s very cognition; that each still intrudes on the other’s thoughts almost every day; that they are themselves, in some ways, because of each other. Although they have not been together in years, they have, in this sense, never quite been apart. Love, which takes place in the mind, is eternal, “the only state” in which “all one’s capacities” are engaged. The entire story spans just a few minutes.

In “Collected Stories,” we see Hazzard practicing the floor routines of her later novels, sticking all the landings if not always having yet worked out the full choreography. The erudite similes and lethally precise adjectives are there, as are the astute observations about domestic phenomena. The sentences of shocking wisdom appear freakishly often. The intelligence is relentless. Hazzardians will read “Collected Stories” with impatient pleasure, reminded from the first page that, once they are through, they can start rereading the novels.

The globe-trotting cosmopolitanism of Hazzard’s own life emerged out of a childhood in what she described as “a remote, philistine country.” Growing up in

Sydney, Australia, with a bipolar mother and an alcoholic father, Hazzard yearned for the authority of England, with its smoking chimneys, hedgerows, and correctly timed seasons. When it was winter in Australia, it was summer everywhere that seemed to count. “Literature had not simply made these things true,” she writes in “The Transit of Venus,” her 1980 masterpiece. “It had placed Australia in perpetual, flagrant violation of reality.”

Her early education was conducted at a school that primed its young charges with poetry, but it soon became impossible to ignore the conflagration that had overtaken Europe and the Pacific. Already Hazzard was familiar with the wounded veterans of the Great War who hobbled down the streets of Sydney, and, as a child, she had once been evacuated to the countryside with her fellow-students. “I had been raised in the climate of war,” she wrote half a century later, having by then published five books of fiction absolutely rife with combat imagery.

Hiroshima was a wasteland when Hazzard arrived there at the age of sixteen, less than two years after the attack. She saw a city where (as a character in one of her novels puts it) “the crust of the earth had been lifted off only to reveal more man-made horrors beneath.” The family was en route to Hong Kong, where Hazzard’s father had accepted a diplomatic post. Once there, having quit school, she found a job working for British intelligence; on her time off, she read literature with an autodidact’s reverence for tradition, and had a love affair with a British Army officer. After her sister contracted tuberculosis, the family relocated to New Zealand. Hazzard said that the move was “a sort of death.” Heartbroken in Wellington, she studied Italian and read Leopardi.

The family moved again, in 1951, to New York City, where Hazzard took an underpaid secretarial job in the “dungeons” of the United Nations, a hellish experience on which she drew heavily in “People in Glass Houses,” a collection of linked satirical stories published in 1967. Though her disappointment in the institution, with its squandering of talent and its misplaced ideals, is the subject of two nonfiction books of hers, “People in Glass Houses” conjures the dark comedy of a place where co-workers banter on rugs donated by the Republic of Panama and officials carry on about freedom as though it were “some extinct creature being pickled in a jar of spirits.”

Like one of her fictional U.N. employees, Hazzard has said that she was granted a “miraculous” reprieve by the Suez Crisis, when, at the age of twenty-five, she

was sent to Naples for a year. In a “blitzed town” where the streets had been littered with both shrapnel and Vesuvian ash, Hazzard learned to take ceremony seriously and to live amid history. In 1963, the year that “Cliffs of Fall,” her first story collection, appeared, she married Francis Steegmuller, the recently widowed Flaubert scholar. The couple settled in Manhattan but spent half of every year in Capri. There they befriended Graham Greene, after Hazzard met the novelist in a café and helpfully supplied him with the last line of a Robert Browning poem he was struggling to remember. (Their friendship was the subject of Hazzard’s “Greene on Capri,” a short memoir, published in 2000 and filled with sentences like “We were speaking of Dryden.”)

By the decade’s end, she had published her first two novels, “The Evening of the Holiday” (1966) and “The Bay of Noon” (1970). Delightfully outmoded and set in Italy—whose summer sky, in a lapse of cosmic good taste, is colored “an injudicious paint-box azure”—both are about self-knowledge, love, and epicurean errands. (Hazzard bristled at comparisons to Henry James, whose “greatness” she conceded only with reservations.) Still, like a Jamesian character, she felt herself, in Italy, to be “living more completely among the scenes and sentiments of a humanism the New World could not provide”; centuries seemed to collapse in on themselves all around her. It was the country’s constant “admixture of immediacy and continuity, of the long perspective and the intensely personal” that, in the coming decades, bloomed in each of her books.

Though Hazzard’s politics were left-leaning, her self-presentation was decidedly Old World—starched shirts, a closet full of Chanel tweeds. In an act of treasonous grooming, she wore her hair pinned up in a bouffant through the late nineteen-sixties and seventies. She spoke in a muted British accent that was the muddied average of all the English-speaking countries in which she had lived. “If a highly intelligent and principled moth were able to talk,” the art critic John Russell once said about Hazzard, “that is what she would sound like.” A young friend lovingly characterized her as “preposterous, though not absurd,” and recalled her speaking “in full, long paragraphs without line breaks.”

With far-flung origins, an itinerant coming of age, and a husband a quarter century her senior, Hazzard lived a life remote from those of her contemporaries. She disliked television and, later, literary theory and personal computers. Her fiction, which is about straight, white, well-read expatriates who speak to one another in mannered, idea-dense dialogue, was old-fashioned even at the time

(“Victorian,” per the book reviews). Yet, if the turbulence of privileged spheres feels familiar, the intensity and precision of her focus does not.

“Scruple was a tiny measure, used perhaps by a jeweler or a chemist,” Aldred Leith muses in “The Great Fire” (2003), Hazzard’s final and most autobiographical novel. Leith, a wounded British soldier travelling through postwar Asia, has fallen in love with the much younger Helen Driscoll, an Australian teen-ager living in occupied Japan: “He had never dealt, in love or otherwise, in such minute quantities.” These are the quantities—subjective, invisible to the naked eye—with which Hazzard most often deals. The intellectual thrill of her work arises from her ability to describe the small, constituent particles of emotional matter we typically consider irreducible. A character in her 1964 story “Comfort” notes that “not kind” was a more damning characterization of a person than “cruel,” as it “implied having understood the principle of kindness and having rejected it.” Confidence, another observes in “The Party,” published two years earlier, is “one of those things we try to instill into others and then hasten to dispel as soon as it puts in an appearance.” Then, the corrosive rejoinder: “Like love.”

Writing about “The Transit of Venus” in the third person feels a bit like telling a lie by omission. I first read the book two years ago and have reread it five times since, finishing it always with the impression that something very real and a little beyond language has happened to me. I’m desperate to talk about the book with those who have read it, and find myself at some remove from those who haven’t. In this way—*Was it like this for you, too?*—the novel is akin to sex or drugs or physical pain. “A state of mind,” one character warns another, “will overtake you like an event.” Each time I begin the novel, I laugh a little at the first line, pretending for a moment that it refers to me: “By nightfall the headlines would be reporting devastation.”

“The Transit of Venus” opens, like a fairy tale, in the middle of a storm. Ted Tice, a young man carrying a decaying suitcase, appears at the door of his future employer, an arrogant astronomer of wealth and stature. At the astronomer’s lavish English country home, Ted meets Grace and Caroline Bell, two beautiful orphaned sisters—one fair, one dark—who have left their far-off kingdom of Australia in search of a new life in a more civilized world. Grace, the fair sister, is engaged to the astronomer’s son, a seething civil servant named Christian Thrale. Ted falls in love with the dark sister, Caroline, who herself is in love with Paul Ivory, a manipulative playwright engaged to an aristocrat from a nearby

manor.

From this cut-diamond opening, the rest of the novel's plot flickers and refracts. Caroline, known as Caro, has an affair with Paul and, when it ends, is overtaken by a desperate depression. She is rescued by a gallant American of virtuous pursuits, whom she marries. Christian and Grace temporarily fall in love with other people. The years pass, Ted rises to professional prominence and gets married himself. Still, he loves Caro, who has become for him a legend. And then a rival dies, a lifelong love is returned. When calamity strikes, we realize it was always to be so—that breadcrumbs, dropped for years, have made a trail leading straight to tragedy.

Throughout, the outsized emotions become ours. When Ted first visits Caro at her husband's house ("To come and go at will, forever, across this threshold was not simply a happiness denied him but held so large a meaning that it seemed scarcely permissible to anyone"), or Grace becomes infatuated with her son's doctor ("The trouble was, the very abundance of her feelings sufficed for mutuality"), or Christian regrets falling in love with his secretary ("If only the tinderbox condition of the globe would obscure, minimize, or even make irrelevant his own dilemma"), we experience our sympathy for them in the same way that Ted presents his love to Caro: "As wisdom, even genius."

"The Transit of Venus" articulates the values by which it seeks to be judged: one character is praised for having a "meticulous voice from another century"; a second, for his "fidelity to unfashionable ideals." A book within the book passes the ultimate test: "Open at any page and find truth, like the Bible." Hazzard's own fearless pursuits of "ideals" and "truth," her absolutely sincere belief in the power of art, her insistence on the huge meaning of single lives, produces a plot of unapologetically wide scope. Characters seduce, wed, widow. They betray and grant mercy. They break one another's hearts and attempt to mend them only after it's too late. Beliefs espoused in youth gain dramatic irony from the vantage of old age. Life-altering events are revealed in offhand comments or clause-long slips into the future tense. Emergencies occur off the page. Words spoken by one character will be remembered, years later, by another. The terms of the novel's contract are clear: one must read it with unusually close attention; in exchange, astonishment will be granted.

Few other twentieth-century authors dared the audacity of Hazzard's melodrama. The sense of destiny that shrouds her characters gives them—and, by some

transitive property, the reader—an archaic grandeur of feeling. Perhaps you really are fated to live where and when you do, surrounded by secret heroes and villains. Perhaps you really were meant to have fallen in love with that person and to have had him cleaved from you on the exact date that he was. Hazzard's plots give us permission to imbue our own lives with great significance. As Ted tells Caro when they are young, "Maybe the element of coincidence is played down in literature because it seems like cheating or can't be made believable. Whereas life itself doesn't have to be fair, or convincing."

No doubt the same holds true of literary careers. Although Hazzard's earliest short stories had a wide and sophisticated audience by virtue of being published in this magazine, and both "The Transit of Venus" and "The Great Fire" won literary awards, her work is rarely taught at universities. It's neither fair nor convincing but simply true that her fiction, which broke no new ground stylistically or thematically, does not fit into the chronology of twentieth-century literature. Hazzard, in being from everywhere—Australia, America, Europe—was of nowhere. "A conscious act of independent humanity is what society can least afford," Ted warns in "The Transit of Venus," and perhaps this is why Hazzard isn't quite as celebrated as everyone who has read her work thinks she ought to be.

Yet what society can least afford is what Hazzard's readers find most rewarding. Like a photographic master of deep focus, Hazzard is able to keep both single lives and mass events in sharp definition. Love between two people is not minor, she argues, and no amount of world-historical suffering will make it so.

Many of us have, in recent years, come to live the way the sisters in "The Transit of Venus" do when they are young: with "esteem for dispassion" and an "aversion to emotion." This is what contemporary novels typically supply. More important, it is what our world demands; we know that caring about everything as much as it deserves to be cared about would be ruinous to our psyches. But Grace and Caroline Bell change over the years, and their stories invite us to feel with abandon. From "beyond the Equator that equalized nothing," they sense a possible future. They start "to yearn, perverse and unknowing, towards some strength that would, in turn, disturb that equilibrium and sweep them to higher ground." ♦

[November 16, 2020 Issue](#)

Briefly Noted

“The Silence,” “A Lover’s Discourse,” “A World Beneath the Sands,” and
“Grieving.”

November 9, 2020

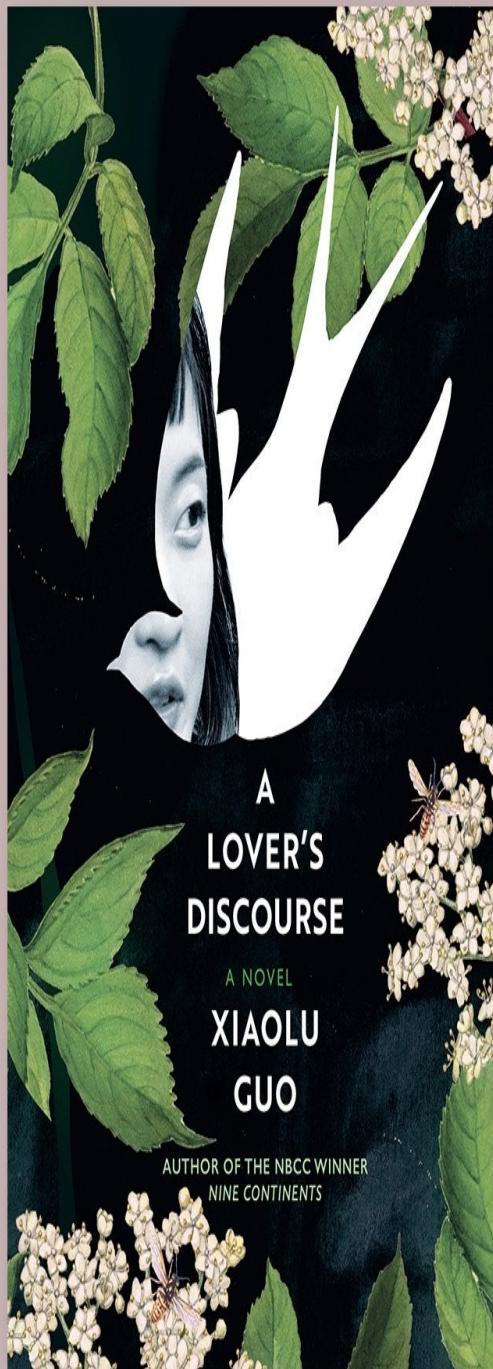
THE
SILENCE

A NOVEL

DON
DELILLO

NATIONAL
BOOK
AWARD-WINNING
AUTHOR OF
UNDERWORLD

[**The Silence**](#), by Don DeLillo (Scribner). Classic DeLillo themes—digital technology, graphology, geopolitics—abound in this slim novel, in which friends gather amid a mysterious cataclysm. On a Sunday in 2022, screens go blank and circuits fail, interrupting a couple’s Super Bowl party and causing a plane to malfunction. As the aircraft goes down, a man on it imagines “all those thousands of passengers before us who have experienced this and then were silenced forever.” DeLillo subordinates the characters’ individuality to a wide-angle view of the blackout, and creates a powerful rendering of a crowd unified by a terrifying event that defies all available models of comprehension.

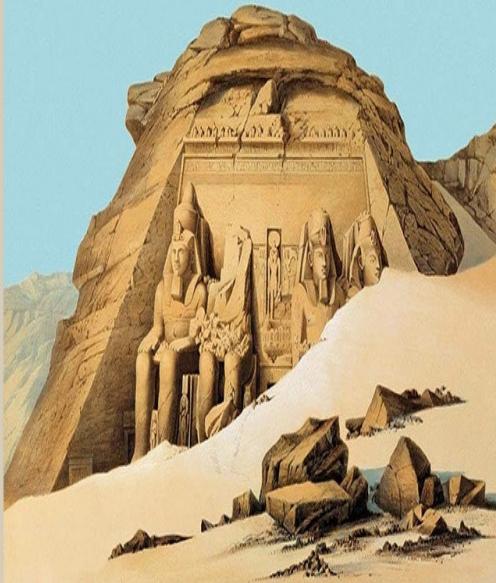


[**A Lover's Discourse**](#), by Xiaolu Guo (Grove). Like the Roland Barthes treatise from which it takes its title, this novel unfolds as a series of vignettes. Guo's narrator, a recent immigrant to London from China, addresses each episode to her Australian lover. After the Brexit referendum, the couple attempt to reconcile their differences in class, race, and family history through high-minded discussions about art, originality, and language. ("Perhaps I should learn a man's character by paying attention to the way he uses verbs," the woman says, after a particularly frustrating miscommunication.) Their ideological disagreements give way to more practical considerations of belonging as they move from England to Australia to Germany, wondering, at each uprooting, if the new locale will assuage their alienation.

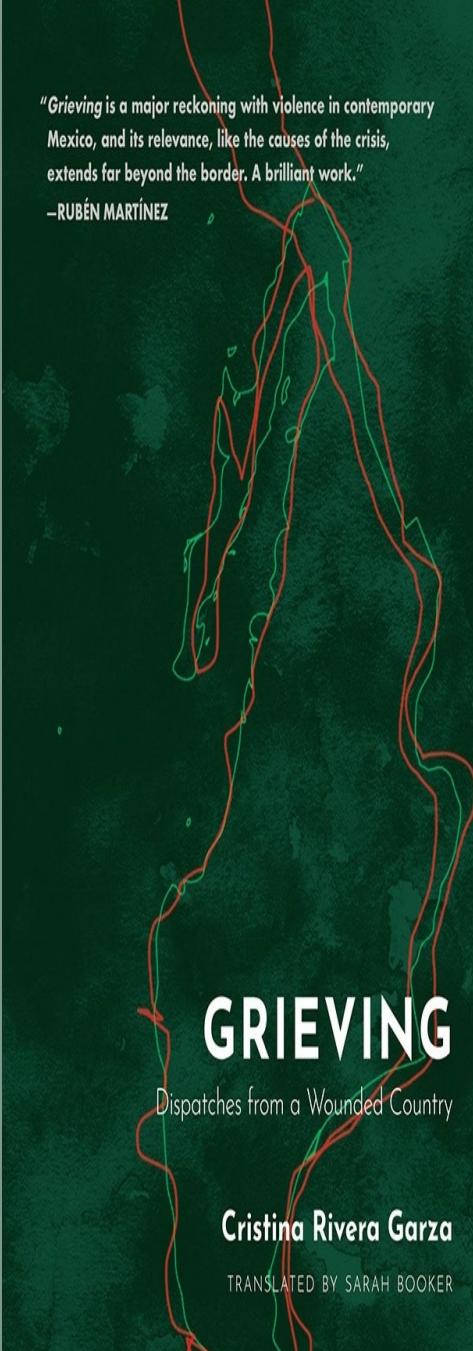
A WORLD BENEATH THE SANDS

THE GOLDEN AGE OF EGYPTOLOGY

TOBY WILKINSON



[**A World Beneath the Sands**](#), by Toby Wilkinson (Norton). In 1798, when Napoleon embarked upon his Egyptian campaign, he brought along some hundred “savants,” tasked with unlocking the secrets of ancient Egypt. The era of Egyptology, vividly detailed in this history, had arrived, with successive European powers using “ownership” of Egypt’s archeological riches to assert cultural supremacy. Wilkinson focusses squarely on Western personalities (Egyptian perspectives are largely absent), yet this is not a glorifying account. For every scholarly triumph (the deciphering of the Rosetta stone, say), there is an outrage: artifacts smuggled, workers abused, sex slaves bought. Above all, Wilkinson amply conveys the pettiness, racism, and condescension that underpinned the looting of a civilization.



"Grieving is a major reckoning with violence in contemporary Mexico, and its relevance, like the causes of the crisis, extends far beyond the border. A brilliant work."

—RUBÉN MARTÍNEZ

GRIEVING

Dispatches from a Wounded Country

Cristina Rivera Garza

TRANSLATED BY SARAH BOOKER

[**Grieving**](#), by Cristina Rivera Garza, translated from the Spanish by Sarah Booker (Feminist Press). In this collection of essays, journalism, and criticism, a noted novelist turns an erudite eye on the damage wrought in Mexico by drug wars, migration, violence against women, and neoliberalism's erosion of communitarian life. Mining experiences from a lifetime lived in both the United States and Mexico, Rivera Garza returns repeatedly to the vulnerability of the human body and to writing's potential as a tool of resistance. For all the losses tallied, the pieces are imbued with optimism and an activist's passion for reshaping the world. In an essay from 2016, just after Donald Trump's electoral victory, she writes that "perhaps time is just beginning and our lives have just begun."

Comment

- [The Biden Era Begins](#)

[November 16, 2020 Issue](#)

The Biden Era Begins

American democracy has survived Donald J. Trump.

By [David Remnick](#)

November 7, 2020



American democracy was on the ballot on Election Day, and although American democracy won, an occasion of immense relief, the margin of victory should not be exaggerated.

Joe Biden, the victor in the popular vote by a margin so far of more than four million, has won the Electoral College and will become the forty-sixth President of the United States. Senator Kamala Harris, the daughter of a Black father and an Indian-American mother, will make history as Biden's Vice-President. Donald Trump, who will finish out his term as the most cynical character ever to occupy the Oval Office, was mendacious to the last, claiming victory before the ballots were counted and accusing an unknown "they" of trying to steal the election from him. He is sure to pursue his case, however misbegotten, in the courts and in the right-wing media. It would also come as no shock if he provoked civil unrest on his own behalf. If four years have proved anything about Trump, it's that he is capable of nearly anything.

The unhinged, if predictable, spectacle of Trump's press conference early Wednesday morning at the White House was outrageous even to some of his closest allies: here was an unstable authoritarian trying his best, on live television, to undermine one of the oldest democratic systems in existence. "This is a fraud on the American public," he complained. "This is an embarrassment to our country." As far as he was concerned, citing no evidence, "we have already won it." Trump was willing, as always, to imperil the interests and the stability of the country to satisfy his ego and protect his power. On Thursday evening, Trump reprised this malign and pathetic performance, as he took to the White House pressroom to claim, again without proof, that he was being "cheated" by a "corrupt system." Reading from a prepared text, he said that his vote was being "whittled down" as ballots were being counted. He spun a baseless conspiracy theory about dishonorable election officials, a burst pipe, and "large pieces of cardboard." His words were at once embittered and deranged; his voice betrayed defeat. There has never been a more dangerous speech by an American President, and it remained to be seen if his party's leadership would, at last, abandon him.

Full Election Results

[Follow the latest results from the 2020 race.](#)



There can be no overstating the magnitude of the tasks facing Biden. If he survives whatever challenges, legal and rhetorical, that Trump throws his way in the coming days and weeks, he will begin his term facing a profoundly polarized country, one even more divided and tribal than the polls have suggested. It is a nation in which one half cannot quite comprehend the other half. He also confronts a country that is suffering from an ever-worsening pandemic, an ailing economy, racial injustice, and a climate crisis that millions refuse to acknowledge.

Many Biden supporters had hoped to gain a more resounding mandate, and on Election Night there were early glimmers of hope in Texas and Ohio. In the end, with close finishes in so many states, Biden would have to be satisfied with unseating the incumbent. Crucially, he outperformed Hillary Clinton in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania, and widened the playing field to Arizona and Georgia, where Democrats have struggled for years. The polls had been, almost uniformly, wrong, often by significant margins. They again underestimated Trump's over-all support. Predictions of a towering "blue wave" washing away the Trump Administration and the memory of the past four years proved to be a fantasy. And yet the end of the Trump Presidency is, by any measure, a signal moment in modern American history. These four years have wrought tragic consequences; there is no question that another four would have compounded the damage immeasurably.

Throughout his term, Trump openly waged war on democratic institutions and deployed a politics of conspicuous cruelty, bigotry, and division. He turned the Presidency into a reality show of lurid accusation and preening self-regard. But what finally made him vulnerable to defeat was his mishandling of the [coronavirus pandemic](#), which has killed nearly a quarter of a million Americans. His disdain for scientific and medical expertise, his refusal to endorse even the

most rudimentary preventive measures against the spread of the virus, was, according to medical experts, responsible for the needless deaths of tens of thousands. Perhaps the most emblematic sign of his heedlessness was the Rose Garden ceremony at which Trump announced his nomination of [Amy Coney Barrett](#) to the Supreme Court; within days, it was clear that the ceremony, a predominantly mask-free affair, with people seated in tightly packed rows, had been a superspreader event.

The pandemic also served to heighten the difference in character between the two candidates. For many months, Trump betrayed little sense of loss. Fellow-feeling is not in his emotional vocabulary. At his rallies, he ranged between flippant and indifferent, unwilling to acknowledge the gravity of the pandemic in any recognizably human way. “We’re rounding the turn!” he declared again and again, as the death toll rose higher and a new wave of cases crested in hundreds of American towns and cities. For a fleeting moment, when he was ill himself, Trump pretended to experience a glimmer of sympathy for people who had died, been sick, or feared the virus. That soon passed.

To Biden, loss, and the recovery from loss, is the very condition of life. As a young man, he suffered the deaths of a daughter and his first wife in a car crash; more recently, his elder son died of brain cancer. Biden is a man of transparent flaws—regrettable political decisions during his long Senate career, a speaking style that often tips into bewildered verbosity—and yet in his public life he rarely fails to project a quality of empathy. That quality may have been as essential to his appeal as any policy proposal.

Trump could never bring himself to promise an orderly transfer of power. He now will doubtless cast blame, concoct conspiratorial reasons for his downfall, and, if past is prologue, compare the beneficence of his rule to that of Abraham Lincoln. It is hard to imagine him appearing at Biden’s Inauguration and behaving with even an ounce of grace. He knows well what follows, and he cannot bear it: Joe and Jill Biden will move into the White House, and he will retreat to [Mar-a-Lago](#), where he could spend years fending off creditors, [prosecutors](#), the Internal Revenue Service, and the judgment of history. Trump might develop a new media venture. He might even lay plans for a run in 2024. The Constitution allows it.

But, even if Trump’s career in elective politics is over, Trumpism will, in some form, persist. In 2016, he recognized the hollowness of the Republican

establishment and quickly buried front-runners for the G.O.P.’s nomination, from [Jeb Bush](#) to [Marco Rubio](#). As President, he made the Party his own, bending former opponents to his will and banishing anyone who questioned his authority, his judgment, or his sanity. Republican leaders made it plain that they were willing to ignore Trump’s antics and abuse so long as they got what they wanted: the appointment of right-wing judges and diminished tax rates for corporations and the wealthy. His appeal was nearly as frightening to Republicans in Congress as it was to those who voted for Biden. Trump has lost this race, but it is hard to describe the election as a wholesale repudiation. Tens of millions of Americans either endorsed his curdled illiberalism, his politics of resentment and bigotry, or were at least willing to countenance it for one reason or another. The future of Trumpism remains an open question.

So is the prospect of a Biden Presidency. At first, Biden ran a wobbly campaign as a centrist, a meliorist, open to such reforms as an expansion of the Affordable Care Act and a reassertion of such international accords as the Iran nuclear deal and the Paris climate agreement. But, unlike his opponent [Bernie Sanders](#), Biden would never use “revolution” or “movement” to describe his intentions. Having spent more than forty years in Washington, he entered the field hoping to be a candidate of restoration, compromise, and reassurance, a return to some indefinable form of “normal.”

In the early debates and primaries, Biden stumbled. His opponents highlighted his uneven record, his rhetorical blunders, and his age. (Biden, who will be seventy-eight on November 20th, is older coming into the White House than Ronald Reagan was when he left it.) His early campaigning did not inspire confidence. Pundits recalled how, in 2008, he had scored one per cent of the vote in the Iowa caucuses and quickly bowed out. Would the same happen in 2020? Memories of his performance at the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings and other moments of misjudgment were a drag on his candidacy. His effort seemed tired, without evident purpose. Writing in BuzzFeed News at the time, Ben Smith rightly observed that Biden’s campaign was “stumbling toward launch with all the hallmarks of a Jeb!-level catastrophe—a path that leads straight down.”

But, after getting buried in Iowa, New Hampshire, and Nevada, Biden persisted, deploying a steady appeal to his own ordinariness, a sense of decency. His message, to a great degree, was that he’d been Barack Obama’s Vice-President and that he had the best chance of beating Donald Trump. In [South Carolina](#),

thanks in part to an endorsement from Representative James Clyburn, a lingering glamour from his place in the Obama Administration, and heavy support from Black voters, he won the primary. Thereafter, his campaign came alive. He and Sanders, in particular, continued to debate the issues, but one sensed that among all the Democratic contenders there was an underlying priority—the need to deny Trump a second term.

On April 8th, after suffering a string of primary defeats, Sanders suspended his campaign. Calling Biden “a decent man,” Sanders declared that he had won the ideological argument on climate change, the minimum wage, and many other issues. And, in some ways, he was right. He had hardly converted Biden to democratic socialism, but he had at least pushed him in the direction of greater ambition. Biden, who had begun as the most establishmentarian of the Democratic candidates, now seemed to understand that some sort of Obama-era restoration was insufficient to the moment.

Events in the following weeks shaped the Biden candidacy even more than the competition had done. Almost immediately after becoming the presumptive nominee, he had to confront two realities: the Trump Administration’s bungling of the pandemic response and widespread demonstrations, under the banner of [Black Lives Matter](#), that had been sparked by the killing of George Floyd, in Minneapolis, and the legacy of systemic racism. Biden was forced to recognize that if his Presidency was to meet the challenges facing the country he would have to act with no less dispatch than Obama, who had come into office, in January, 2009, amid an economic collapse. More and more, Biden made the case that, as President, he would emulate Franklin Roosevelt in 1932.

In late October, Biden spoke at Warm Springs, in rural Georgia, where F.D.R. had a home known as the Little White House and would come for polio treatments. Biden’s theme at Warm Springs was national healing. “These are all historic, painful crises,” he said. “The insidious virus. Economic anguish. Systemic discrimination. Any one of them could have rocked a nation.” He vowed, in a sense, to go well beyond his instinct for centrism. To manage the public-health emergency, to deal with economic distress and catastrophic climate change, he would have to build a broad political coalition and act with compassion and determination. “God and history have called us to this moment and to this mission,” he said. “The Bible tells us there’s a time to break down, and a time to build up. A time to heal. This is that time.”

The success or failure of the Biden Presidency will depend on whether his speech in Warm Springs was a matter of stagecraft or true intent; his political fate, and the country's, will depend on whether he can unite a radically divided country (at least to some degree) and, at the same time, make good on his commitment to confront these myriad crises with anything like Rooseveltian ambition. The Senate will not make it easy. Biden will find himself challenged by the same sort of ideological and political resistance that Obama met when Mitch McConnell vowed to thwart him at every turn.

The task of repairing liberal democratic institutions and values awaits Biden, too. The country's intelligence agencies concurred that Vladimir Putin had acted on his long-standing antipathy for Hillary Clinton and meddled in the 2016 election in Trump's favor. Historians and experts in cyberwarfare will continue to argue about the degree to which Russia interfered in the election and the degree to which it mattered. What is less mysterious is *why* Putin preferred Trump. The Russian leader wished to be left alone, free of American intrusion in Ukraine, free of NATO's influence in the Baltic States and in Eastern and Central Europe. So long as the United States was tied up in its own internal tumult, so long as the new President disdained postwar international alliances, Putin was pleased. For him, America's pretensions to moral authority on the world stage were—particularly after its military adventures in the Middle East—a colossal hypocrisy. “The liberal idea,” Putin told the *Financial Times* last year, has “outlived its purpose.” Trump’s victory seemed to vindicate Putin’s dark conviction.

The pandemic revealed the human cost paid by states without humane social safety nets and equal access to medical resources. It also revealed the capacity of capable democratic leadership. [Angela Merkel](#), in Germany, and [Jacinda Ardern](#), in New Zealand, were exemplary in the way they communicated the facts with their populations and acted to contain the virus based on scientific evidence and rational decision-making. Trump’s behavior, by contrast, resembled the denialism and the autocratic style of [Jair Bolsonaro](#), in [Brazil](#).

To rebuild trust in democratic processes, Biden needs to restore faith in the integrity of government itself. He needs to empower scientists and medical experts at the C.D.C. and the F.D.A. and oust charlatans at the Department of Justice and fossil-fuel lobbyists at the E.P.A. Trump routinely mocked figures of integrity like [Anthony Fauci](#) and threatened to fire them. He railed against the perfidies of the “deep state,” slashing programs and regulations, undermining the

work of devoted public servants. It is encouraging that Biden has said that on his first day in office he would “stop the political theatre and willful misinformation” and “put scientists and public-health leaders front and center.” He needs to make it clear that expertise is invaluable in all realms of government: the courts, public health, environmental science, diplomacy, defense, the economy. In order to repair American democracy, he also needs to address the antediluvian mechanism of the Electoral College and help reform an unjust system of voting.

Biden’s election is a moment to take stock. Another four years of Trump’s recklessness would have meant the intensification of a public-health disaster. It would have meant squandering more time in a fight against a climate catastrophe that is already upon us. It would have meant that Trump, an authoritarian by instinct, would be even more emboldened to surround himself only with satraps and advisers willing to do his bidding. It would have meant more attacks on the press, more assaults on truth itself.

During the 2016 campaign and beyond, Obama generally upheld the tradition of post-Presidential discretion, but he feared the worst and could not always contain himself. At one point, he called Tim Kaine, Hillary Clinton’s running mate, and said, “Tim, remember, this is no time to be a purist. You’ve got to keep a fascist out of the White House.”

Joe Biden is just as much a small-“d” democrat as he is a big-“D” one. It is, finally, possible to see an end to a singularly destructive carnival. As President, Trump never seemed to realize how much wreckage, political and spiritual, he was inflicting on the country. Nor did he care. For him, the Presidency was a show starring himself, and everyone had to watch. The job came with a big house, a motorcade, a fabulous plane, limitless business opportunities, and, best of all, round-the-clock media attention. At a rally late in the campaign, in the Lehigh Valley, in Pennsylvania, he glanced at an eighteen-wheeler that was parked nearby. “You think I could hop into one of them and drive it away?” he said with a smirk. “I’d love to just drive the hell out of here. Just get the hell out of this. I had such a good life. My life was great.” To the end, it was all about him. ♦

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-

The version above has been updated to reflect the latest developments in the 2020 Presidential election as of 11:30 A.M. on November 7, 2020.

By [Eric Lach](#)

By [Evan Osnos](#)

By [Nicholas Lemann](#)

Dept. of Anticipation

- [Awaiting Voting Results, New York Becomes Plywood City](#)

[November 16, 2020 Issue](#)

Awaiting Voting Results, New York Becomes Plywood City

From Jimmy Choo to Versace to 30 Rock, entire blocks in Manhattan were boarded up in anticipation of Election Day destruction.

By [Zach Helfand](#)

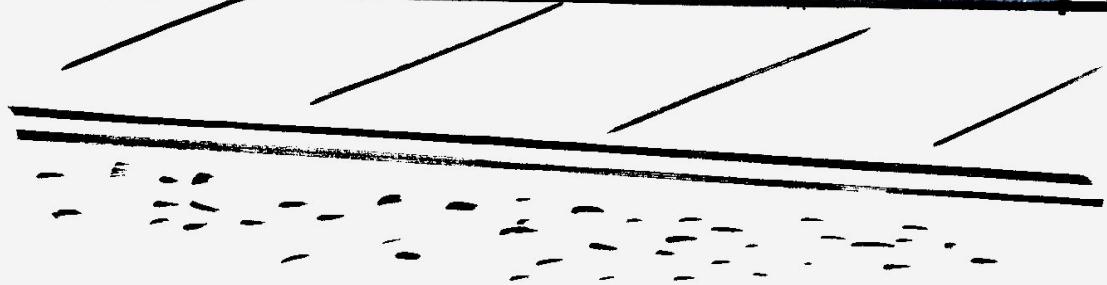
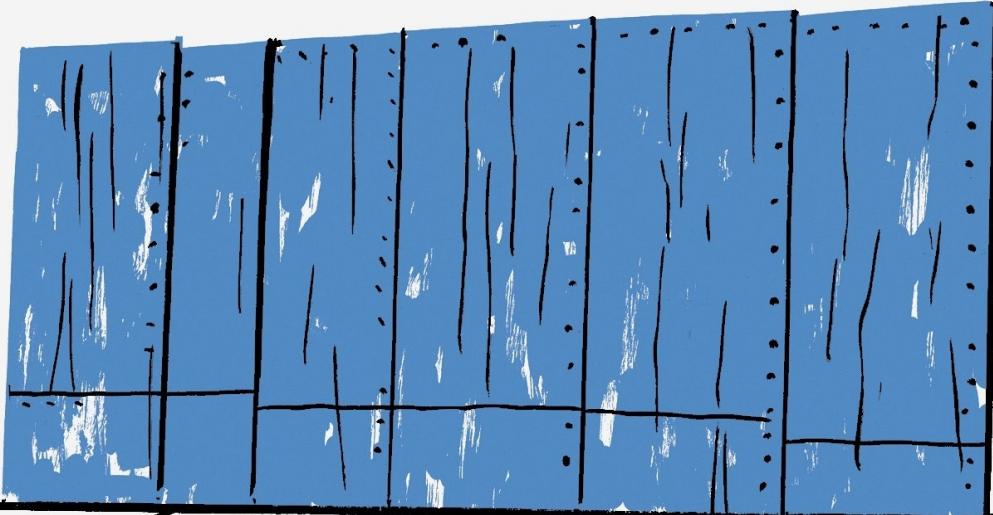
November 9, 2020

It is not a promising sign for democracy that New York City prepared for a Presidential election as if it were a hurricane. If the symbol of the 2000 race was the hanging chad, and 2008's was the "Hope" poster, 2020's may be the boarded-up storefront. Before the votes came in, the smart money among the business class was on destruction, whether in celebration or in protest. Or maybe both. In Manhattan, as Tuesday approached, entire blocks were shuttered.

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MUSIC HALL



This made Tom Buiocchi an important figure. In normal times, his company, ServiceChannel, helps businesses such as Chipotle and Tory Burch find contractors to do work on their buildings. “The common problem is, you know, the toilet blew up in the bathroom of the Banana Republic in Walla Walla, Washington,” he said. Recently, however, he’s become a consigliere to companies nervous about election unrest. In the two weeks leading up to Election Day, ServiceChannel helped put up plywood and other looting deterrents at twelve hundred buildings. Two hundred and twenty-nine of them were in New York.

The decision to lock down can be tricky. “Being the first to board up, or the only one that didn’t board up, could be perceived that you’re siding with some particular stance,” Buiocchi said. During the scattered looting after the murder of George Floyd, this spring, some companies were slow to respond. At one of the stores Buiocchi services in the Bay Area, he said, “things were being boarded up as the protesters were coming by. There was literally a negotiation between the contractors and the protesters.” Before the election, owners exchanged tips. Looters had started bringing drills to unscrew the plywood, so owners learned to use screws with unusually shaped heads. They added corrugated metal. The deep-pocketed switched to plywood that was fire resistant. Strategies were devised to prevent the spillage of blood. (“Biohazard,” Buiocchi explained. “It elongates the amount of time you have to stay closed.”) One new approach involved pleas for peace painted directly onto the plywood. In SoHo, someone had scrawled a quote from the Dalai Lama on the Jimmy Choo boutique. A Ralph Lauren store nearby had one from Ronald Reagan. A saboteur, perhaps? (“Borderline insurance fraud,” someone called it.) “What the stores have learned never to do is to put up merchandising and brand-specific information like, ‘Hey! Two-for-one sale today!’ ” Buiocchi explained.

The best outcome, business-wise, was a resounding victory for either candidate. “Clear, decisive, everybody go back to work in twenty-four hours,” Buiocchi said. By Wednesday, he was ruling out that dream scenario. Yet for the next two nights only small protests materialized in the city. Calm—or exhaustion—mostly prevailed.

All the plywood began to imply a diminished faith in self-government. It also, in a way, conveyed confidence in a product. The boarded-up Versace store reinforced the idea that lots of people want Versace. But there were limits. The

Sweetgreen near Union Square was boarded up; was it worried that citizens would make a run on Shroomami bowls? “The reason is, sometimes people just want to throw a garbage can through a window, and if they damage equipment it could be hundreds of thousands of dollars,” a contractor, whose company had shuttered a bakery last week, explained.

For those most pessimistic about the long-term stability of the body public, the best option was something permanent but not panicky. In the weeks before the election, Riot Glass, a company offering shatterproof reinforcement for windows and doors, got more orders than it could keep up with. Brad Campbell, the C.E.O., invented the product six years ago, on a hunch: “I’ve always felt that there was some sort of imminent chaos coming.” His product has survived sledgehammers and worse—“we’ve shot it with AK-47 rounds,” he said, and still no shattering—but it’s also unobtrusive. “It doesn’t make their building look like an armed camp,” he noted. “They don’t want to look fortified, but they want to *be* fortified.”

By the week’s end, as the vote counts trickled in and a conclusion neared, the peace was holding across the country, but barely. Armed right-wing protesters were massing outside a ballot-counting center in Maricopa County, in Arizona. The N.Y.P.D. was roughing up an elected official. Trump’s campaign was urging his followers to “*FIGHT BACK.*” (Some seemed to be heeding the advice: police in Philadelphia said they foiled a planned attack outside the city’s election center.) But big business was sanguine. Stocks shot up, likely at the prospect of a Republican Senate with a Biden White House—the same friendly tax rates, without the pesky tweets. But where to spend the extra dough? A spokesman for Tiffany’s pointed out that its store near Trump Tower, despite being covered in plywood, was still open for business. ♦

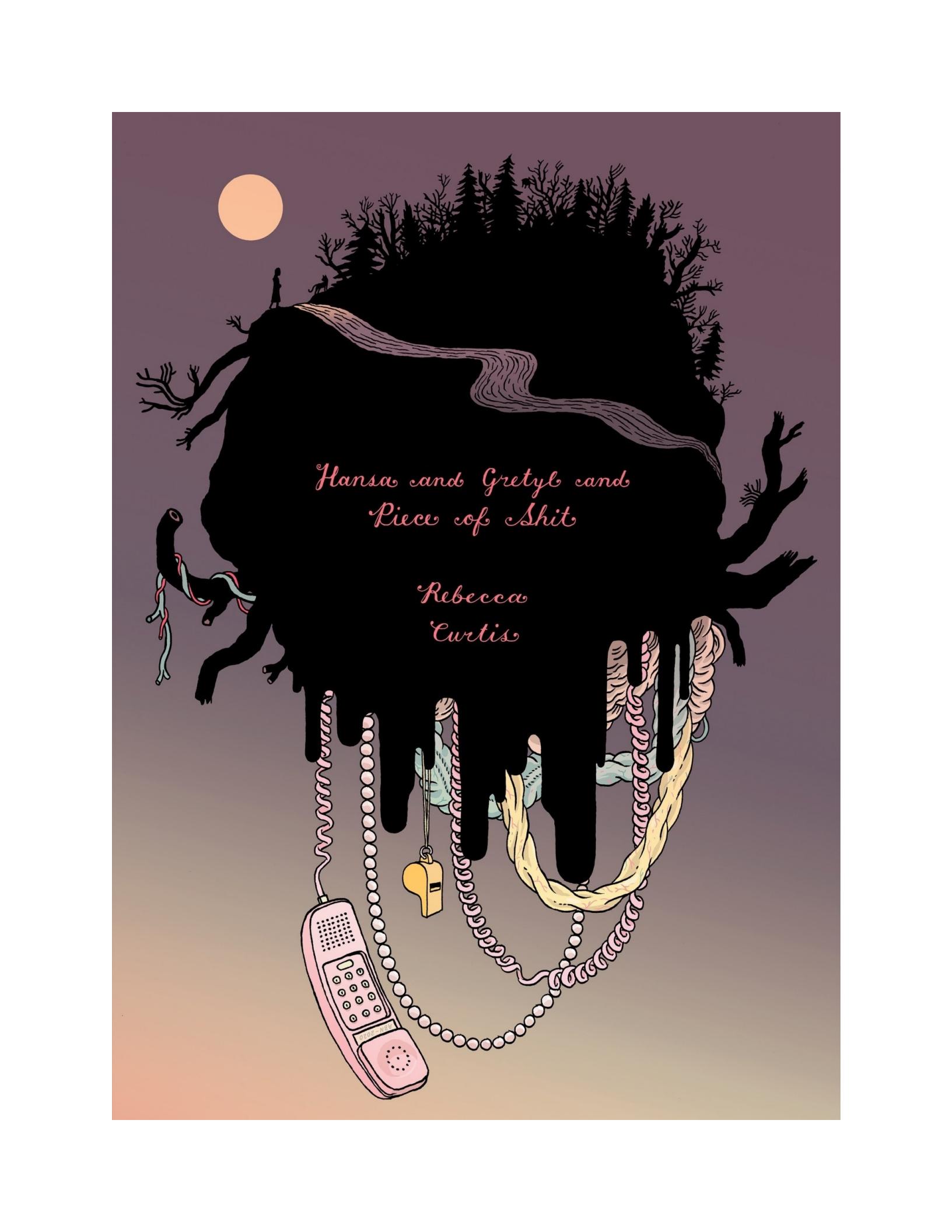
Fiction

- [“Hansa and Gretyl and Piece of Shit”](#)

Hansa and Gretyl and Piece of Shit

By [Rebecca Curtis](#)

November 9, 2020



*Hansa and Gretyl and
Piece of Shit*

Rebecca
Curtis

Audio: Rebecca Curtis reads.

Gretyl wakes at 6 A.M., as usual, but her stomach feels crampy. These are not what her mother calls the “normal” cramps, which gnash her abdomen for four days each month. These fissures poke her midsection with acidic fingers as she dresses. She hunches while she brushes her teeth, unloads the dishwasher, and mops the kitchen. She walks down to the cellar, carries up stacks of logs, and feeds the woodstove. She toasts bread, but finds she’s not hungry, so puts it in her heavy schoolbag.

She doesn’t ask to stay home. Her mother’s warned her that she knows the girl feigns illness because she’s unpopular—a loser!—because she’s lazy and unlikable. The girl knows better than to whine about a stomach ache.

As Gretyl leaves, her mother turns in bed upstairs, groans and snorts. A scrawny calico slinks out from an overgrown shrub. Gretyl retrieves a fistful of kibble from her pocket, whispers to the cat, and tosses it into the bowl hidden under the shrub. Gretyl hunches as she strides, through cold October wind, down the mountain road. She passes her grandparents’ chalet. A sleek fox lopes through the meadow that abuts the road. The sky is pale and crisp.

[Rebecca Curtis on fantasy and reality.](#)

Today again, at the bottom of the hill, sits the dented yellow Chevy. The man in the bone-colored leather coat leans against it. He towers over the car and is skinnier than a praying mantis. He has tilted black-brown eyes, olive skin, a large nose, and a bearlike black beard. He’s about thirty years old. Under the coat, he wears brown jeans and boots. Beside him, a huge, muscular brown dog pants. A bear-dog, the man has explained. His partner, Charon. The dog lunges toward the girl. Its ruby tongue lolls. The man grips the leash.

Good morning. Cold today. Are you warm enough? He smiles bemusedly. I’m sorry to bother you. Almost bus time. We must hurry.

Two weeks ago, the man’s carburetor malfunctioned, and he asked Gretyl to lend him her scrunchie to jerry-rig it. That night, her mother smacked her for losing it. Last week, the man’s fan belt snapped; he asked Gretyl for a paper clip to hold it together. Gretyl gave him the clip that bound her history report, and her teacher changed its grade from an A to a B-minus because Gretyl hadn’t fastened

the pages. Now the man says, in his soft growl, The front wheel's stuck in mud.

He'd be grateful, he says, if she'd steer the wheel and pump the accelerator while he pushes.

Gretyl hesitates. Rifles fill the back seat. If she gets in the car, he could abduct her. He looks Arab. His Chevy's parked on her father's land. Her parents would order her to alert the sheriff, not help him. But she likes his face. And has four minutes.

She steers and pumps the accelerator while the man pushes.

The car slides out of the mud.

The man thanks her.

No prob, she says.

Why does she hold her stomach? he asks. Is she ill?

No, she says. Just a tummy ache.

Maybe she'd like a doctor? He indicates the Chevy. He'll take her, he says.

Her head jerks down. Nah.

He opens the car door, grabs a rectangular object, and pushes it toward her.

Maybe you want a BlackBerry?

She stares.

It's a phone with a computer inside, he explains. With it, she can contact anyone. He works for a company, has dozens. Someday, he says, everyone will own a BlackBerry.

No, Gretyl whispers. My parents have a phone.

Then take this. He presses something hard into her hands. A plastic orange whistle.

The huge dog licks her gloves.

Sorry, the man says. It's Charon's storm whistle. He hears it from across the continent.

He grins. He has a fantastically wide smile. If you need help, he says, blow it. Maybe we'll come.

She mumbles thanks and hurries to the bus stop. When she looks back, she sees them jump the fence that lines her dad's woods. The man raises a glove. On the bus, she clutches her schoolbag to her stomach.

Gretyl's fourteen, but by the hunter's moon she'll be fifteen. She's five-nine, slender. She has long white-blond hair, a sweet oval face, a Roman nose, and violet eyes. Because kids teased her, she plucked her thick eyebrows, so that they no longer meet above her nose. In her room, on a shelf, are a hundred quartz figurines. Counting them makes her feel safe. She bought them with money she earned busing tables at a restaurant in Markleeville, to which she rides her bike. She enjoys solving problems, helping people, reading, doing math, playing Dungeons & Dragons, and talking with friends—about the Iraq War, capitalism, the Y2K apocalypse. Gretyl wants to grow bigger, so she can leave this small Northern California town to study something useful, so she can do something useful.

She lives with her father, a pilot, and her mother, a homemaker, in an A-frame on the mountain. Around them are meadows of mule's ears and purple lupine, sagebrush fields, and thick forests that dip to a river, then surge up the peak. Deer wander the forest—also wild turkeys, coyotes, bears, and elk. The father has posted "No Hunting" signs.

Though Gretyl's older sisters' college tuitions were paid long ago, the family's strapped. They live in an eternal "not enough." The mother, Grethilda, treks to the local goldsmith's shop and peers for hours at his wares. But, once the ruby bracelet hangs on her wrist, she desires with unquenchable longing the emerald earrings.

Grethilda spends too much on groceries, her husband, Hans, contends. She doesn't need to buy ten-gallon tubs of ice cream and overpriced chicken fingers from the Schwan Man. She doesn't need organic butter and jumbo shrimp. *He* eats canned tuna happily. Why can't *she*?

I do like canned tuna, Grethilda replies. I also like jumbo shrimp. I also like lobster. I want to dine out more, at nicer restaurants. And I want to take a tropical vacation, without the girl.

Grethilda, Hans yells, we're broke!

Grethilda points out that Hans has a yacht. When home, he's always fixing his Jaguars or sailing his yacht. You have *your* things, Grethilda explains. *My* things are jewelry and tropical vacations. Hans groans. He doesn't know how they'll survive.

Grethilda wants Gretyl to go to boarding school. The girl makes life difficult, she says. She's thankless and rude. She'd thrive at private school! And you and I, she adds, would have adult time.

Hans grimaces. He doesn't want adult time with his wife. He doesn't want to banish his daughter. She's overfull, but he enjoys looking at her. Of his children, she's disappointed him least.

He says, We can't afford it.

Well, Grethilda says, we could sell your yacht.

Public education's good, Hans protests.

She's miserable, Grethilda repeats. She fakes gross illnesses to avoid school!

Her husband's preference for their daughter's company has not escaped Grethilda. But she never objects when Hans praises Gretyl's math skills, and she limits herself to one Indian rope burn per week.

Privately, Hans agrees that the girl's awkward. She slouches, doesn't play sports, seems morose. Sometimes observing her causes him pain. She used to hug him voluntarily, call him Daddy. Sometimes he thinks, It'd be good if she were gone.

At school, the girl hunches. It lessens the pain. She aces her geometry test. During shop, she sands her chair slowly. At lunchtime, she doesn't eat.

What's wrong? her friends ask.

My stomach hurts, she admits.

See the nurse, they say.

Honey, the nurse says. Women get pains *all* times of the month.

She offers to send Gretyl home.

No, the girl says. She won't bother her mother. The girl has an unyielding love for her mother. The mother's repeatedly told the girl—while sobbing—that she suffered a terrible childhood. She was orphaned. She lived with cousins, then strangers, then at a hairdressing school! If it weren't for the daughter, the mother explains, she'd be a doctor now. She got an A-minus in college biology. The daughter feels guilty. She does not mention that the mother bore Gretyl at forty. When the mother slaps her, she does not slap back.

The mother, five-three, weighs a hundred and fifty pounds. The girl, five-nine, weighs a hundred and ten. It's too late for me, the mother sometimes says, sighing. Gestating you destroyed my metabolism. Now I can't practice medicine.



J.A.K.

"If my client is guilty of anything, it's loving tax evasion too much."
Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein

Gentle snowflakes fall as the girl walks home. She sticks her tongue out as she climbs the hill. Approaching the house, she removes kibble from her schoolbag. She calls, Here, Mihos, come, Mihos, and pours it into the bowl under the bush.

Inside, she bites into a cracker, then feels nauseous.

An ivory Tibetan-wool rug covers the floor of the living room. Bookshelves bear Encyclopædia Britannicas, Bibles, a stereo. Two couches, their cream-colored upholstery inlaid with hundreds of turquoise-and-gold-feathered peacocks, face each other. They are the mother's pride and joy.

On one, she sleeps.

When Gretyl enters, one eye opens.

Storm tonight, she says. Ten inches. Your father has a trip.

I hope he'll be O.K., Gretyl says.

The mother sighs. You didn't feed that cat, did you?

Gretyl shakes her head.

Why do you hold your stomach?

Stomach ache, Gretyl says.

Jesus, the mother says. It never ends with you.

The eye closes.

Later, the girl sneaks down to the cellar. With difficulty, she carries up an old wooden playhouse. She hides it under the shining willow at the edge of the yard and covers it with a tarp. She brings over the now empty bowl and calls the cat, but nothing comes.

At dinner, Gretyl can't eat.

More for me! the father says. He pulls the girl's plate toward him.

At nine, the eldest daughter calls and Gretyl picks up. Hansa is twenty-nine, a state congresswoman partnered with an aerobics instructor. She left California to attend college in Boston and stayed there. Hansa and Gretyl both read three fantasy novels a week. They both float fifty feet above their bodies sometimes, before sleep. They walk fast and like coffee. They're beautiful, smart, hardworking. But Hansa fears pain. Can't tolerate the tiniest needle. Gretyl won't blink when a drill's ten inches into her gut. Hansa plays tennis for hours. Gretyl dislikes exercise. Hansa doesn't understand remorse. But sometimes she senses things. On this night, Hansa has a feeling.

She asks how Gretyl's doing.

Gretyl says her stomach hurts.

How?

Gretyl describes it.

Listen, Hansa says. It's your appendix.

Hansa explains that, when an appendix gets infected, it must be removed. If not, it ruptures and leaks toxic goo into the gut, which causes sepsis, organ damage, and, within a day or two, death. Hansa says that she had these symptoms two years ago. She went to the hospital, she says, despite her partner's skepticism. The doctors scoffed and tested Hansa for eight venereal diseases; eventually, however, they scanned her abdomen, spied her enlarged appendix, and removed it. Six months back, Hansa adds, their middle sister, Piece of Shit, developed pains. Hansa called, heard her symptoms, and urged her to find a hospital. Piece of Shit refused, because she wanted to teach her Kaplan class. She went only because her boyfriend insisted, and after the doctors tested her for ten venereal diseases they scanned her torso and saw an infected appendix. It seems unlikely, Hansa muses, that three sisters would contract appendicitis within two years. Particularly since they all live in different states, and no known relative has ever had appendicitis. It sounds, Hansa says, like a fairy tale. But life, she adds, is strange. Stress affects the immune system in mysterious ways. They all grew up in the same isolated, anxious house. Perhaps their bodies, though separated by distance, communicate with one another. Who knows?

Go to the hospital, tonight, she says. If you don't, bad things may happen.

O.K., Gretyl says.

Hansa says, Promise?

Yes.

The parents are watching TV, eating chocolates, and drinking Irish cream. The father's adjusting the picture-in-picture function, which malfunctioned *just* as the mother wanted to use it.

Gretyl relays what Hansa said.

The father's eyes widen. Of his daughters, he hates the eldest most.

Ha! he says. Nice that she makes the decisions from three thousand miles away! Does she think she's a doctor? Does she know how expensive the E.R. is?

Gretyl says she's not sure.

The father asks, Does your stomach hurt?

Gretyl nods.

Then take Tylenol.

Hans, the mother says. Check her temperature.

They check. A hundred and one, the father says. Just a flu.

Don't you think, Gretyl says, it might be my appendix?

Listen, he says. Appendicitis is rare. If you need the E.R., we'll take you. But you barely have a fever. Eat a Tylenol.

•

At eleven, Grethilda dons a negligee, slides into bed, and wakes her husband. At 3 A.M., Hans drives to Sacramento. He'll deadhead to Dallas. At four, it snows. The cat wanders into the playhouse under the willow, in which Gretyl has built a cave of wool blankets.

Such pain fills Gretyl's torso that she can barely walk. But she slowly dresses for school, cleans the kitchen, feeds the fire, and puts kibble in the playhouse. She woke extra early but misses the bus. At the bottom of the road stands an army of white-helmeted trees. Gretyl feels amazed by their beauty. She takes small, painful steps up the slippery hill. Falls and falls again. A car pushes through the white veil—a station wagon. Her grandmother peered out her kitchen window and saw Gretyl. She picks her up. Another break-in, the grandmother says. Robbers got the TV. Neighbors don't know each other anymore, and hunters roam the woods.

Gretyl mentions that Hansa believes she has appendicitis, but that their parents disagree.

Her grandmother turns to her—they're at the school now—and Gretyl sees that her blue eyes are filmy. Her hand covers Gretyl's. It's cold.

Your parents are your parents, she says slowly. They get angry when I meddle. I hope you feel better. Have a good day at school!

•

During classes, Gretyl's body curls into a ball. She's sent to the nurse.

You again? the nurse says.

Gretyl admits that her stomach hurts. She suggests appendicitis.

The nurse measures blood pressure. Checks tonsils.

She says, Hurts where?

Gretyl points.

Honey, the nurse says. With appendicitis it only hurts *here*. She pokes Gretyl's lower-right gut. Gretyl gasps.

•

As she climbs the hill home, her torso's in agony, she's dizzy, but, nonetheless, when she sees white-topped meadows shining in cold sun, gold-lit green pines

swaying, she's amazed. When she reaches her yard, she's trembling. She pours all the kibble she has left into the cat bowl.

Her mother snores on the couch.

Mom, she says. I'm sorry to bother you, but I think I need to go to the E.R. Can you take me?

The mother checks Gretyl's temperature: 101.5.

She sighs.

We'll go, she says, to the clinic.

•

The nearest city is dotted with crumbling foundries, abandoned mills, pawnshops, XXX-video stores, and record stores. Sixty people cough and wheeze inside the clinic's tiny waiting room.

After three hours, the girl is seen by a physician's assistant. He's skinny and very young. His eyes are bloodshot. They're understaffed, he apologizes; he's been on duty since yesterday. Gretyl lists her symptoms: bloating, nausea. Diarrhea. Pains through the torso.

The P.A. asks if she ever goes outside barefoot.

The mother nods.

Does she go places children gather, like school?

The mother affirms.

The P.A. nods knowingly.

Common grossness, he says. They shouldn't feel ashamed.

Of what? Gretyl asks.

Worms, the P.A. says.

Might it be her appendix? Gretyl asks calmly. Could they check?

The P.A. peers out at the sixty coughing people, some with purple rashes. It's helminths, he says. He prescribes three days of Biltricide. At first she'll feel worse, he sings gaily, but then she'll be right as rain!

•

At nine, Hansa calls. She informs their mother that she believes Gretyl's appendix is infected. If she's not taken to the E.R. tonight, Hansa says, she could die. Hansa's own appendix was infected, she reminds the mother, and her symptoms were the same.

You're not a doctor, the mother replies. The doctor said she has helminths. If, once she's finished her worm medication, she still feels sick, then *I'll* decide what to do. I'm her mother.

Hansa says, May I speak with her?

No, the mother says. She's resting.

Hansa says she'd like to visit. She'll buy—right now—a ticket for a cross-country non-stop early tomorrow. It'll cost two thousand dollars, but she'll pay.

You may not, the mother says. You're not welcome. You're no longer part of this family. You live in Boston. Family means *nuclear* family. Husband, wife, dependent child. You think you know everything, just because you're a congresswoman. But we have illness in our home, so you may not visit.

The girl can no longer move. At her request, the mother puts blankets on a living-room couch. She places the girl's schoolbooks on the coffee table.

How's your stomach?

Better, the girl lies. She's grateful when the mother asks, Want some tea?

She's fourteen, but by the blood moon she'll be fifteen.

No thanks, she says. I just want to lie near you.

.

All evening, the mother watches TV. In her sleep, the girl hears a cry from outside.

The mother says, What was that?

Gretyl says, It was me.

She wants to feed the cat. When the mother retires, she decides. But, once she hears footsteps go upstairs, blackness overtakes her.

She wakes feeling buoyant; rises and grabs a coat. The night is silent, cold. She steps toward the woods upon the snow's crust. She's so light that it holds her up. The gibbous moon illuminates the trees. It illuminates the starlings, sleeping in rows on the electrical lines above the meadows. A noise comes from behind her. Pitter-patter, pitter-patter. She looks back; nothing. She continues toward the woods. The warning light at the mountain's dark top blinks: red, red, red. She hears: pitter-patter, pitter-patter, and sees that Mihos walks nonchalantly beside her.

Don't enter the woods, the cat says.

The girl walks on. She's drawn to her childhood playground.

You'll pay a price, the cat says. But listen: leave a trail. If you don't, you won't get home again.

The girl touches her pearl necklace. A twelfth-birthday gift from her grandmother. She snaps the string. Pearls cascade into her pocket. Every ten feet, she drops a pearl. She crosses the frozen creek. The cat leaps the gully. They climb the icy, wind-whipped hill. Halfway up, deep in pines, stands a cottage gleaming with light. It's decked with jewels. An ogre peers out the window.

Come inside, she calls. I'll fix you.

Mihos shakes his head.

The girl says, I'm cold.

If you go inside, the cat says, you must shove her into the oven. If you can't, you're fucked.

The girl nods. O.K.

The walls are capiz shells supported by ivory pillars. Rubies frame the windows. Watermelon tourmalines cover the roof. The door is amethyst.



WORKING FROM HOME 2.0

The ogre ushers Gretyl inside. She indicates a golden chair. The girl sits. Your metabolism's good now, the ogre says, but it'll change. Every winter, you'll gain seven pounds.

A fire burns in a vast stone oven. The ogre adjusts the logs with tongs. The girl stands. She remembers the cat's words. But the ogre turns around, and now she wears the mother's face. She pushes the glowing poker toward the girl. The girl's hands and legs won't move. She squirms like an overturned bug. Don't worry, the ogre says, I'll fix you. I've waited for the chance.

No, don't, the girl says, please.

Lucky my husband's not here, the ogre says. I'm better than him.

She spears the poker into the girl's gut. The pain is a star's explosion. That's it, Gretyl thinks. I'm done.

In the morning, she still can't move, but her torso hurts less.

See? the mother says.

The mother does laundry, vacuums, irons the father's shirts.

At lunch, she brings chicken-meatball soup.

Oh, thank you, the girl says. The soup smells good!

She takes a mouthful.

It tastes strange, but she hasn't eaten in three days. She takes another.

Her stomach bulges. She jerks forward and pukes all over herself: a foul, hot, battery-acid waterfall.

The mother changes the girl's clothes and puts a steel bowl beside her.

If you're going to yak, tell me first.

I'm sorry, the girl says.

•

At two the TV repairman arrives. He's slender, weathered, with a mop of white hair.

He opens up the TV, fiddles.

Eventually, he looks at Gretyl.

Got a virus?

Worms, the mother says.

The man turns pink.

She's taking medication, the mother adds.

The mother goes upstairs. The man rebuilds the TV. Packs his tools.

He approaches the girl.

I have 'em, he says quietly. Makes my crack itchy. He pauses. Every night I feel the buggers sliding inside my bumhole. Medicine don't fix me. I've taken everything, and had 'em for decades. But I'm working. It don't hurt. Get back to school, kid!

O.K., the girl says.

The man salutes. She salutes back.

•

At dusk, Hansa phones the middle sister. She relays that Gretyl likely has appendicitis, and that she begged their parents to drive her to the hospital but they refused.

Piece of Shit is twenty-five. She's studying "creative writing," in the rolling hills of Idaho. She has a cheap two-bedroom rental, a kind boyfriend, and a fellowship.

You had the same pains, Hansa says.

Piece of Shit recalls that, when she awoke from her appendectomy, six months prior, her parents were in her hospital room. She hadn't even told them she was ill. The memory is repellent.

I know you dislike them, Hansa says softly. Please call. Maybe *you* can persuade them to take Gretyl to the E.R.

Piece of Shit says, Ugh.

Piece of Shit is lazy, vain, solipsistic, and stupid. But she understands that the parents would have been more likely to take Gretyl to the E.R. if Hansa had asked them *not* to. She understands that Hansa does not understand this. Whenever Piece of Shit speaks to the parents, they announce that Hansa is a bossy harridan. How her husband stands it they don't know!

What the parents say about *her*, she guesses.

She understands, well enough, why their parents won't take Gretyl to the hospital. But she can't fathom how to make them do it.

I'll try, she says.

Don't wait, Hansa says. Do it now.

In her capacious, light-filled apartment, Piece of Shit sits at her dining-room table and shuffles tarot cards.

She cuts the deck and selects: Death.

She shuffles and draws: Failure.

Shuffles again and draws: Agony, ten swords in the back.

She recalls how, when she ran away, at fifteen, to live with an aunt, she threw her belongings into trash bags.

Meanwhile, Gretyl sat nearby. Gretyl had a bowl-shaped haircut. She was five. She looked up at Piece of Shit and said, Please don't go.

Don't leave me, Gretyl said. Please.

Piece of Shit left her sister in the house by the woods.

•

Piece of Shit edits a classmate's story. In the story, the narrator's kind, loving, late-fifties mother has cancer, and donates her eyes to a lady with bad vision. Piece of Shit circles phrases like "blinding light" and writes *This is a cliché* all over the manuscript. She also writes, *What is the conflict???* Everyone in class will love this story. A year later, the author publishes a book about the mother who donates the eyeballs, and it sells millions of copies.

•

At seven, Piece of Shit's kind boyfriend comes over. She relays all.

Call now, he says.

He sits nearby.

Gretyl answers.

She says the mother's at Bible study.

Piece of Shit asks how Gretyl's feeling.

Gretyl says she felt an explosive pain the night before, and now, if she doesn't move, the discomfort's bearable.

Listen, Piece of Shit says.

She says Gretyl needs to go to the E.R. She reminds Gretyl that she had appendicitis, which Hansa diagnosed; that Hansa had appendicitis; that, if Gretyl doesn't get help now, she will die.

I'll be O.K., Gretyl says. I'm taking worm medication.

Piece of Shit says that worm medication won't help. She tells Gretyl that she should just dial 911 and get an ambulance to come.

Gretyl whispers, I can't.

Why?

Gretyl says she doesn't want to upset their parents.

Why not?

I'm tired, Gretyl says. I need to sleep. Don't worry, I'll be fine.

The instant Piece of Shit hangs up the phone, Kind Boyfriend says, *You should call 911.*

Piece of Shit blinks.

She should call, give her parents' address, and order an ambulance for her sister.

Piece of Shit says slowly, Nooo.

Why not?

Piece of Shit considers. A white wall fills her vision.

She feels far away from herself, as if she cannot move.

Because, she says . . . It's their house.

But Gretyl's sick, Kind Boyfriend points out, and might die! His voice cracks. Two actual tears roll down his face. He's six-four, extremely muscular, and often mistaken for a pro wrestler.

The white wall has black, unreadable scribbles all over it. The scribbles dance. Piece of Shit observes her boyfriend.

Young for you, she says, isn't she?

Kind Boyfriend's eyes widen. Jesus! he says. He's known Gretyl, he says, since she was eleven! He just doesn't want her to die!

Piece of Shit says she's not calling 911. It wouldn't be right. Someone adds, Besides, Gretyl's taking worm medication.

In later years, no day will pass in which Piece of Shit doesn't fly backward to

this moment and pick up the phone and dial 911. Every day until her death, she orders an ambulance to carry her sister away from the house.

•

At eight, the mother discovers that the girl has shit the couch. She's asleep, clean bowl beside her, but a dark creek slides down the cream-colored couch and onto the ivory Tibetan-wool rug.

She shakes the girl. You soiled yourself.

She brings fresh clothes, sponges the girl. Scrubs rug and couch. The stench is unbearable.

I'm so sorry, the girl says.

It's ruined, the mother says.

The girl offers to save up to buy a new couch.

The mother sighs.

Mom, the girl says. Will you take me to the E.R.? Please?

Outside, the wind blows; snow slides off the hedges. The moon's three-fourths full. In the forest, shots ring out.

Tomorrow, the mother says, I'll speak with your father.

•

That night, the girl flies over the forest. She sees the bear in the cave on the ledge, the foxes in their dens, Mihos hunting mice in snow; she sees the boulder she often climbed as a child; in the valley, the school; farther off, the neighboring town, the train tracks that go elsewhere.

In bed, the mother ponders: What if the girl died? Would her husband love her as he did before the children? She sees the two of them lying on a beach . . . she's lost weight . . . she always does when they go somewhere tropical . . . her allergies improve . . . her husband touches her, desires her. She knew, when they

met, she recalls. Knew he was different, though not how or why. Knew she'd protect him. That she'd love him until the day she dies.

The father wants to relax with a beer and saltines. But the living room smells bad.

Hey! he greets the girl. Are you still on the couch? Something smells funny! I wonder what it is?

The girl says it's probably her.

The mother pulls the father into the kitchen and updates him.

The father visualizes thousands of dollars flying out of his bank account. Do you think we should take her to the E.R.? he asks.



STEED

"High? This place is off the goddam charts."
Cartoon by Edward Steed

The mother dissents. Gretyl's temperature is only a hundred and two.

The father hesitates. The daughter looks pale. But the E.R. costs money. He's always been a good father, he thinks. He's only ever loved the child. He worked himself raw to buy her expensive clothes, food, art, music lessons. If he borrowed moments for himself sometimes, just a couple of times a week, when she was small, it cost her nothing; the things he allowed himself were always done with love. He placed a pillow gently over her face so that she wouldn't see or remember. But she's grown morose. Won't sail with him anymore, or play checkers. Her sisters were worse: mean, sarcastic, and careless of the pain they caused. He's surrounded by women; he receives no thanks, only criticism. Were the girl gone, his mind volunteers, he could leave the mother. Everyone understands that a child's death destroys a marriage. He could remarry. Someone sweet, young. He'd be free.

He considers Gretyl, on the couch, unable to move.

Recently, she's grown figlike breasts and a faint mustache. But he still loves her.

He sighs.

Grethilda hesitates. She has a solution, she says. She'll book the girl with an *excellent* doctor!

Oh. Hans brightens. Dr. Blood!

•

Hansa and Piece of Shit each call their parents and beg them to take Gretyl to the E.R. They contend that she likely has appendicitis; if the parents don't drive her to the E.R. now, she'll die. The mother responds that she, *the mother*, already took the girl to *one* doctor, and tomorrow they'll see another.

At 9 p.m., the cat yowls. It sounds like an infant being sliced up. The mother tells the father to put it down. The father goes outside with a rifle and an open can of tuna fish. The cat's M.I.A. He puts the can down, hides around the corner of the house, and waits. Soon the cat appears; it stops thirty feet from the can. The father calls, in falsetto, Here kitty kitty kitty. He shoots. The cat turns tail,

but there's an ungodly scream. The father gets it, he's sure, before it runs off.

The morning's crisp, golden. A diamond crust covers the sagebrush fields. Ice daggers glint from the eaves of the roof. Ravens atop the telephone lines watch as both parents haul Gretyl to the car.

Dr. Blood's a fat old red-faced alcoholic. On his office wall is a poster of a warty man-size frog. Dr. Blood always orders the girls to "look at the frog" right before he needles them.

He feels Gretyl's stomach.

Yes, he says, *quite* swollen! He takes her temperature and hears about the puking, lack of appetite, and diarrhea.

Yes, he says. Absolutely!

Gretyl says, Is it my appendix?

What? he says. No.

Gretyl's tummy hurts *all over*, he says; were her appendix infected, her tummy would hurt only in the lower-right quadrant.

Her sisters had the same symptoms, Gretyl says politely, and had appendicitis. Shouldn't she be tested?

Ha ha ha, Dr. Blood says, so young and already a doctor!

He's had seven glasses of Maker's Mark; he reeks of whiskey and mouthwash.

You have, he says, MarsVirus.

He prescribes an antibiotic.

In five days, he says, she'll be shipshape!

At midnight, the girl awakens. She strides, free of pain, to the kitchen, opens the fridge, grabs a hamburger for the cat, and goes outside.

In the woods, she knows, the shelter of the trees creates warmth. She wants to

climb to the ledge and meet the bear.

Mihos walks beside her. He's leonine, lion-size.

When she offers him the hamburger, he looks away.

You know, he says, everyone who enters the forest must leave a trail.

Gretyl feels her neck—bare. Arms and wrists—bare. Sporadically, she tosses hamburger bits behind her. She doesn't see, though the gibbous moon illuminates the field, starlings swooping down and gobbling up the meat.

On the ledge, the cat says, You won't return, I don't think.

She says, Why not?

The cat holds up a paw. Licks it.

It's late, the cat says, to be honest. Long past the time when you could have.

The girl shakes her head. I'm fine.

Furthermore, the cat says reasonably, the birds ate your hamburger. Now you're lost. But, if you cheer up, I'll take you to visit the bear in the cave on the ledge. You'll like him. He'll rend your body and eat you, but that's all. And it won't take long. Then you'll feel rested; I'll stay with you, and when you're ready you'll *become* again.

The girl blinks. I want to go home. I want to see my parents, sisters, friends.

The cat sneezes. I'm afraid it's not possible. You're gone, you see. But if you insist—the cat stretches—just this once, I'll carry you home.

The cat's pupils grow huge.

But you'll lose parts of your body. You'll never digest food normally. Never defecate without pain. He scratches his neck, then closes one eye. You'll never bear children. Not only because of physical deformities but because someone siphoned off the part of you that could have loved a child. Do you still want to go home?

Yes, the girl says.

The cat crouches down. She sits astride his haunches, and he lopes through the forest and carries her across the moonlit fields.

The mother cooks bacon, “Farmers’ Almanac” waffles, eggs; the father eats, then works in the garage. After breakfast, the mother devours an extra waffle, then goes to the bathroom, defecates copiously, and enjoys a long bath. Later, she brings Gretyl an antibiotic. She notices a dense scent, like a decaying rat. Her daughter’s curled into a ball, and breathing rapidly.

Sit up, the mother says.

The girl tries. She’s dizzy. But she swallows the capsule and sips ginger ale.

Thanks, Mom.

She sips more ginger ale.

Her eyes bulge. She vomits.

Jesus, her mother says.

After the mother changes the fouled blankets, she makes the girl swallow another pill.

•

In her dreams, Hansa and Piece of Shit are running away from her, throwing pebbles behind them, yelling, Catch the pebbles! Catch, *catch!* But she cannot breathe or move, and her sisters disappear into darkness.

•

In the afternoon, beautiful classical music fills the house. The mother sits at the computer desk, wearing her ruby bracelet for luck. She has a mission. She needs a new rug. But she already has a rug—with hand-tied knots, high thread count, and vegetable dyes—for every room. So, she’s decided, she’ll sell her least favorite on eBay. She clicks on hundreds of rugs, saves, deletes, narrows criteria. Hours pass. On the couch, Gretyl writhes. A naughty idea occurs to the mother:

if they build an extension, a sunroom—which she’s always wanted—they’ll need a new rug. But there’s no money. But, a second mortgage?

•

The grandmother brings coffee cake, but the girl’s asleep.

After gulping cake, the father wanders into the living room. Gretyl’s on the couch. In her sleep, she trembles. He enjoys seeing this daughter. She’s reasonable and still attractive. He sniffs. The smell’s strong. He opens a window. He feels anxious. He doesn’t want her to die. But thoughts proliferate. He sees a funeral: himself suited, handsome but solemn; a divorce; a new family, possibly sons, who’d be free from the complications, lamentations, and recriminations daughters bring.

Dad?

Gretyl’s eyes open. I’m so cold.

Hi, sweetie! he says. I opened a window because it smells!

Oh, she says. It’s probably me.

It’s nothing, he says. In winter, houses smell. Your mother farts. I don’t, but your mother does, a lot!

Dad, the girl whispers. Could you take me to the E.R.?

The father frowns. Honey. You just saw the doctor.

The girl shivers under the blankets.

•

Upstairs, he says, Grethilda, she looks pretty sick.

Hans, the mother says. She’s taking antibiotics. She adds gently, This will be over soon.

O.K., the father says. Because he who says yes to “A” must also say yes to “B.”

•

Years later, the mother takes the daughter's name. Call me Gretyl, she tells her friends—other mothers who teach catechism. Oh, they say, why? Wasn't that your daughter's name?

Yes, the mother admits, but there's no reason it can't be mine. It's more fun, it suits me. Please call me Gretyl. And they do.

•

Hey, the father says that afternoon. Feeling better?

She whispers, No.

He pauses. Want to play Happy Days? It's his favorite board game. It allows players to party with the Fonz, drag-race, collect allowances, and go on dates.

No thanks, she says.

All right. Don't say I didn't offer.

He's fixing cars when gunshots sound.

He calls the police, complains, goes back to the garage. He needs carburetor parts from England. Once he gets them, the rest'll be cake.

•

In the small hours, Gretyl convulses. She realizes that the cat's dead. Too many nights below freezing, coyotes. She misses her sisters. She realizes that she'll die. She tells herself that, in her sleep, she must find a solution. But she's like a worm squirming on asphalt; she cannot find a way out or in. She's not religious, but she prays. Please God, if there is a God, help, please. The room's dark. Her parents turned the heat down. From the couch-bed, she peers out the window. Winter constellations have spun into view. Right of Venus, Orion lunges. His long sword hangs from his belt. She breathes shallowly. Her hands fold on her chest. Something pokes her. She reaches inside her bra and pulls out the orange whistle. Pops it in her mouth. She has no idea why she has this whistle, or whom it's from. Breathing causes pain, but she blows three long calls. The sound is

deafening.

Silence fills the night. No wind. No distant horns. They're far from urban life, on this mountain.

Her father clomps downstairs.

He's in his robe. He's red-faced.

Jesus *Christ*, he says. What's that *noise*?

A whistle, she says. I blew it.

Well, cut it out, he says. Your mother and I are sleeping.

Sorry, she says.

Her father thumps back upstairs.

Her heart beats rapidly. All around is deep silence.

The father says, Wanna come to church?

Hans, the mother says. Let her rest.

Just offering!

To the girl he says, We'll bring home the funnies. Maybe a doughnut!

A shadow passes outside the window.

The mother says, I'm locking the doors. The Gilroys lost their stereo, their jewelry, and all their Walkmans. No matter what, don't let anyone in!

The girl can't think well. She's severely dehydrated. She hears the car roar down the driveway.

There's movement outside. Footsteps.

Something rap-rap-raps at the window. She's terrified. Outside stands a man with spiky black hair and a beard. He has the blackest eyes she's seen, a big nose,

olive skin. Dried blood covers his neck. With bloody gloves, he holds up Mihos for her to see—shrunken, skinny. The man points demonically. He shouts, but she cannot understand anything except Cat! Cat!

He's saying, she thinks, that he'll kill her cat.

New Wrinkles to Worry About



CROW'S-FEET



NEWS LINES



TWITTER FOREHEAD



THE ETERNAL SCREAM
OF UNABATING PANIC

BERNSTEIN

Hot pee soaks her pants.

The man disappears.

The front doorknob jerks wildly. Then the side door's. Gretyl hears low, quiet scraping. A door opens. Boots smack the wood floors and nails clack them.

A huge hairless brown dog bounds in. Licks her.

The man's the tallest she's seen, the skinniest. His bone-colored coat is blood-splashed.

I'm sorry to intrude. His growl's bearlike. But I knocked, and you didn't answer. I used my skeleton key.

He sits, holding Mihos, on the opposite couch.

The dog's at his feet.

This cat, the man remarks, may make a good mouser. He strokes his beard. Maybe a vet appointment—it looks mangy. But perhaps this is your cat. Is it yours?

He leans across the coffee table.

His eyes widen.

Gretyl blushes. She realizes she smells. But there's nothing she can do.

She admits that she's been feeding the cat but can't keep it.

Take it, she says. His name is Mihos, she adds imperiously. He's a lion-headed deity.

Aha, the man says. Thank you. I'll give this prince a good home.

His voice deepens.

Your parents left, the man says. Where'd they go?

Gretyl understands that the man's been watching her house.

I'll be honest, he adds. You look terrible.

She tries to move. She's energized. Perhaps it's seeing her cat. She recognizes the man.

She says, Well, you have blood all over you.

The man glances down.

Aha, yes. I shot a buck! He adds gracefully, Perhaps these are your parents' woods!

She nods.

His hands extend, palms up. I've trespassed, he says. Forgive me. But, tell me, were your parents going to eat all those deer?

She whispers, No.

He says, My family comes from Palestine. But I grew up in Kazakhstan. Cold and beautiful, like here. In Kazakhstan, if you see a buck, you shoot. But, I admit, I didn't just shoot a buck. I also found a sleek fat doe, and I shot her in the face. He watches the girl seriously. She'll taste delicious, he says, and I'll eat her all up.

The girl blinks.

He saw fawns, the man offers, which he let go.

He asks, Want a granola bar?

The girl says she can't; she hasn't eaten in nine days.

Aha. He speaks casually. But he's a hunter. The child, he sees—saw the moment he looked in the window—lies beside death. He sees death reclining beside her, clutching her curiously, ready to breathe into her mouth.

Well, I'm hungry. The man stands, stretches. I think I'll use your phone to order a snack.

He pads into the kitchen. His voice rumbles. She hears him yell, Hurry up! Bring it fast!

The man returns with tuna fish, which he puts by the cat. The cat eats.

The man sits.

The girl whispers that he should leave. Her parents will call the police.

Is that so?

The girl nods.

He leans forward. They won't, he says softly, because they're God-fearing people. And that means, he says, they fear me. Because today I'm God.

He's scratching the cat's ruff when they hear sirens. First faint. Then loud, close. The hunter holds the front door open for the emergency-medical technicians who carry the stretcher inside.

•

Seven surgeons cut the girl open. They test and culture. They pull all her intestines from her body, to clean the putrefaction.

This is not possible, they declare. It's not!

Her appendix ruptured seven days ago. All their textbooks agree. Peritonitis, septic shock. Massive heart attack, heart failure. They've seen corpses, not miracles. Surgeons excise rotted sections of bowel. None of them will forget this child, with her oval face, violet eyes, Roman nose, and neatly plucked eyebrows, who's alive when she should be dead.

•

She's in the hospital thirty-three days. For weeks she needs feeding tubes, ventilators, respirators. Upon the hunter's moon, she turns fifteen. School friends deliver notes from class. Her parents bring roses.

What a terrible case of malpractice, they tell the surgeons. No one could have

known she had appendicitis. How could we have?

But they pity Dr. Blood, who made an honest mistake.

The girl's scar is blood-red, rat-size. Later, her parents pay for its surgical removal. Gretyl's grateful for their love. Her father sits in her hospital room for an hour every day and reads spy novels—and he dislikes books! The mother braids the girl's hair. Hansa flies cross-country. She's cordial. A simple case of malpractice, she says. The father agrees to construct a sunroom for his wife.

After years of study, Gretyl becomes an anesthesiologist. She chooses the underfunded, Oakland. She works through recessions, protests, and pandemics.

She marries a tall Persian-American with a black beard, who works as a federal prosecutor, has a bachelor's degree in forestry, and likes playing Dungeons & Dragons.

They're happy. But, despite their efforts, surgeries to remove scar tissue from her uterus and abdomen, and all their prayers, they don't conceive a child.

Gretyl lavishes her family with love, and she pays for her parents' house cleaners, landscapers, vacations. But when—not often—she sleeps in her childhood bed she sometimes hears a cat yowl in distant woods. When she asks her husband, What was that? he says, I didn't hear anything. ♦

In the fall, when wind breaks and snaps the tree branches, she dreams that she hears the crack, crack, crack of a rifle. The sound fills her with joy and expectation, for several reasons, some of which she can't access. Primarily, she understands that someday, in some universe, she'll meet Mihos and the hunter again. ♦

By [Willing Davidson](#)

L.A. Postcard

- [After Years of Protests Every Wednesday, L.A. Activists Welcome a New D.A.](#)

[November 16, 2020 Issue](#)

After Years of Protests Every Wednesday, L.A. Activists Welcome a New D.A.

The outgoing Los Angeles District Attorney, Jackie Lacey, has sent twenty-two people of color to death row. Now she's been voted out.

By [Dana Goodyear](#)

November 9, 2020

“It’s the last time, can you believe it?” “This is our last one. What are they going to do on Wednesdays without us?”



Helen Jones—a Black woman, whose son, John Horton, died in the custody of the L.A. County Sheriff’s Department, in 2009—and Baba Akili, a veteran organizer and Black Lives Matter leader, stood outside the Hall of Justice, in downtown Los Angeles. They have been there every Wednesday for three years, protesting, along with other activists and families of people killed by the police at grocery stores; in malls; on bicycles; while in the midst of mental-health crises. To the protesters, the building is the Hall of *Injustice*: the headquarters of the sheriff’s department, which is responsible for many of those deaths, and the office of District Attorney Jackie Lacey, who has been cautious about charging law-enforcement officers. The day after the election, the street was the site of celebration. Lacey had been voted out.

“Day One, she’s been in bed with law enforcement,” Jones said. “We thought, She’s a woman. She’s a mother. She’s a Black woman. She understands our plight. Who knows better than her? It was exactly the opposite.” Lacey, who opposed numerous pieces of criminal-justice-reform legislation and sent twenty-two people of color to death row, reportedly raised seven million dollars, mostly from police and deputy unions. Her opponent, George Gascón, who is Cuban-American and a former L.A.P.D. officer—he also served as police chief in San Francisco and, later, as the city’s D.A.—ran on a platform of decarceration and decreasing police funding. He outraised Lacey nearly two to one.

Dr. Melina Abdullah, a co-founder of Black Lives Matter L.A., arrived, in a B.L.M. T-shirt and beaded cowrie-shell earrings. What looked like military planes passed overhead; L.A.P.D. and sheriff’s-department helicopters buzzed back and forth; the streets were blocked by parked police S.U.V.s, lights flashing. Abdullah looked serene. “We have been demanding for years that Jackie Lacey be accountable to the constituency that elected her, especially Black folks,” she said. “She continues to run and duck and hide and refuses to meet with us.” Right before the primary, Abdullah led a bus full of protesters to Lacey’s house. “We headed out to the deep valley, where she lives, and set up chairs on the public sidewalk in front of her house. We prayed, we poured libations, we did a land acknowledgment, and then we walked to her front door and invited her to join us.” When the door opened, Abdullah said, it was Lacey’s husband, a retired investigative auditor for the District Attorney’s office, pointing a gun at her chest. “He says, ‘I will shoot you, I don’t care who you are.’ He had his finger on the trigger.” (In August, the state attorney general’s office filed assault charges against Lacey’s husband, to which he pleaded not

guilty, and Abdullah recently filed a civil claim.)



"I thought working from Hell would be temporary."
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

Los Angeles is the most populous county in the country; the city of L.A. is among the world's largest jailers. A progressive district attorney would be a triumph for the criminal-justice-reform movement. The crowd was giddy with victory. "Bye," one protester had written, in eyeliner, underneath one eye. "Byeee Jackie" read a banner stretched between two protesters. On the flatbed stage of the organizers' truck, "Fuck Donald Trump" played from a set of speakers. Next to the speakers was a suitcase with a sign on it saying "Pack Your Shit Up Bitch." A security announcement: Avoid "undisciplined factions that have come to disrupt." And be aware of undercover cops in the crowd.

Akili pointed out a parked police van. "I have never seen them that close," he said. He is seventy-two, was wearing a "#byeJackie2020" T-shirt, and had a glitter tattoo of a black-and-gold fist on his arm. He recalled, as a child, hearing his parents talk about the murder of Emmett Till. He was happy about Gascón's win, but wary. "We have no illusions," he said. "He is in an institution that is set up, designed, and implemented to punish, and in America if you set up an institution like that it will always punish Black people more and more severely." He went on, "There's been at least nine murders, mostly by the sheriffs, since George Floyd. Control the threat and suppress the danger, that's what they're trained to do. We are seen as a threat and a danger. The difference now is at least whoever occupies that office knows that we are going to be expecting some accountability."

On the other side of the Hall of Justice, the sheriff's department had amassed a huge concentration of trucks and deputies in riot gear. They said they were there to protect the building. A legal observer in a neon-green hat and a face mask approached with a notebook, asking questions. "I can't hear you!" one deputy shouted three times, until he went away. More legal observers gathered on a street corner, watching as people joined the event. Two beefy men with buzz cuts approached purposefully. "Here come some more undercovers," one of the observers said. "You can tell by the body language, build, their whole demeanor." A reporter tried to follow them, but, conspicuous as they had seemed a moment before, they disappeared into the crowd. ♦

Letter from the U.K.

- [The Curse of the Buried Treasure](#)

The Curse of the Buried Treasure

Two metal-detector enthusiasts discovered a Viking hoard. It was worth a fortune—but it became a nightmare.

By [Rebecca Mead](#)

November 9, 2020



Leominster, in the West Midlands area of England, is an ancient market town where the past and the present are jumbled together like coins in a change purse. Shops housed in half-timbered sixteenth-century Tudor buildings face the main square, offering cream teas and antiques. The town's most lurid attraction is a well-preserved ducking stool, a mode of punishment in which an offender was strapped to a seat and dunked into a pond or a river while neighbors jeered; the device, last employed in 1809, is now on incongruous display inside the Priory Church, which dates to the thirteenth century. Christianity has even older roots in Leominster: a monastery was established around 660 by a recent convert, the Saxon leader Merewalh, who is thought to have been a son of Penda, the King of Mercia. For much of the early Middle Ages, Mercia was the most powerful of the four main Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, the others being Wessex, East Anglia, and Northumberland. In the tenth century, these realms were unified to become the Kingdom of England. Although the region surrounding Leominster (pronounced "Lemster") is no longer officially known as Mercia, this legacy is preserved in the name of the local constabulary: the West Mercia Police.

On June 2, 2015, two metal-detector hobbyists aware of the area's heritage, George Powell and Layton Davies, drove ninety minutes north of their homes, in South Wales, to the hamlet of Eye, about four miles outside Leominster. The farmland there is picturesque: narrow, hedgerow-lined lanes wend among pastures dotted with spreading trees and undulating crop fields. Anyone fascinated by the layered accretions of British history—or eager to learn what might be buried within those layers—would find it an attractive spot. English place-names, most of which date back to Anglo-Saxon times, are often repositories of meaning: the name Eye, for example, derives from Old English, and translates as “dry ground in a marsh.” Just outside the hamlet was a rise in the landscape, identified on maps by the tantalizing appellation of King’s Hall Hill.

Powell, a warehouse worker in his early thirties, and Davies, a school custodian a dozen years older, were experienced “detectorists.” There are approximately twenty thousand such enthusiasts in England and Wales, and usually they find only mundane detritus: a corroded button that popped off a jacket in the eighteen-hundreds, a bolt that fell off a tractor a dozen years ago. But some detectorists make discoveries that are immensely valuable, both to collectors of antiquities and to historians, for whom a single buried coin can help illuminate the past. Scanning the environs of King’s Hall Hill, the men suddenly picked up

a signal on their devices. They dug into the red-brown soil, and three feet down they started to uncover a thrilling cache of objects: a gold arm bangle in the shape of a snake consuming its own tail; a pendant made from a crystal sphere banded by delicately wrought gold; a gold ring patterned with octagonal facets; a silver ingot measuring close to three inches in length; and, stuck together in a solid clod of earth, what appeared to be hundreds of fragile silver coins.

The find had all the hallmarks of a hoard—the term used by archeologists to characterize a collection of valuable objects that was deliberately buried or hidden, usually with the idea that it would later be retrieved. [The Vikings](#), whose name means “raiders,” began making plundering incursions into Anglo-Saxon Britain from Scandinavia in the second half of the eighth century. Although the Vikings did not use coins as a form of currency, they had a bullion economy—the trading of metals, based on weight and purity—and appreciated coins as portable forms of wealth. They coveted silver, which was not mined in their own lands; gold was even more prized. To obtain these precious metals, the Vikings stole or requisitioned the contents of Anglo-Saxon monastery vaults, which often included finely worked silver or gold, and chopped them into pieces, for purposes of trade—[archeologists](#) call such fragments hacksilver or hackgold—or melted them into ingots, for ease of weighing. A Viking hoard typically contains these forms of metal, and also coins minted by the Anglo-Saxon kings whose lands they had invaded.

Powell and Davies snapped a few photographs while their discovery was still embedded in the soil, then took more pictures after removing some of the dirt and laying the treasures out on a white plastic shopping bag. They also took photographs of the field where they’d made the find, so that they could locate the spot on a return visit.



In 2015, George Powell and Layton Davies used a metal detector to scan the environs of King's Hall Hill, in Wales. They uncovered a thrilling cache of Anglo-Saxon-era objects, including a pendant made from a crystal sphere banded by delicately wrought gold. Photograph courtesy © the Trustees of the British Museum

Such technology would have been extremely useful to the Viking warrior from Denmark who, more than a thousand years earlier, had buried the valuables, probably to protect them from theft. That anonymous invader, who would have been gathering spoils as a member of the Great Army, which progressed through the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in the 860s and 870s, would have had to make do with rudimentary reminders of where he'd hidden the stash: twenty paces to the left of that footpath, halfway between those two trees. Historians of England contend that the difficulty of accounting for where, exactly, something important has been buried is one reason that Viking hoards and Roman caches of silver denarii are still there for the finding—or, for that matter, for the stealing.

Gareth Williams, the curator of early-medieval coinage and Viking collections at [the British Museum](#), became entranced by the Norse world as a small child, while paging through a library book. His grandmother, encouraging his passion, made him a helmet and a shield out of cardboard. He went on to study medieval history at the University of St. Andrews, in Scotland, where he completed his Ph.D., and then joined the British Museum. Williams, who has a well-developed salt-and-pepper beard and a lively manner, still needs little persuading to dress up like a Viking; he makes educational videos for schoolchildren in which he wears a belted jerkin and a helmet made from leather boiled in beeswax.

In the summer of 2015, he was approached by a contact in the coin trade. As Williams told me recently, the contact informed him that several pieces of what appeared to be a Viking hoard were being offered to dealers. Some of the coins were Two Emperors, a type so rare that numismatists knew of only two extant examples: one was discovered in 1840, the other in 1950. A Two Emperor coin had never appeared on the open market, and a single one was valued at a hundred thousand dollars. A hoard with a substantial number of rare coins could be worth more than ten million dollars. The fact that individual coins were being offered to dealers suggested that the hoard was in danger of being broken up and vanishing onto the black market. According to Williams, the contact told him that he hadn't personally seen the coins but "understood immediately from the description that this must be undeclared treasure."

The word "treasure" conjures everything from a religious relic to a pirate chest spilling over with booty. But in British law the term has a specific meaning: the Treasure Act of 1996 defines a treasure as any object that is more than three

hundred years old and at least ten per cent gold or silver. Because finds of single coins are quite common, they are exempted from this rule, no matter their metallic content or rarity, but a find of two or more coins in the same place—and certainly of a hoard—qualifies as treasure, and the finder is legally obliged to report the discovery to local authorities.

The Treasure Act was passed, in large part, because metal detecting had become such a popular activity. During the [Second World War](#), the technology was used to help sappers find buried mines, but by the nineteen-seventies detectors had become consumer products that were relatively inexpensive and easy to use. Hobbyists began spending their Sundays scanning beaches, parks, and archeological sites. Scholars warned that treasure hunters were vandalizing history, seizing finds as trophies and subverting the possibility of archeological interpretation by destroying the context of their discoveries. Detectorists resented the stigmatizing of their hobby: many of them are amateur history buffs who eagerly take their finds to local museums. As with so many aspects of English life, the conflict was inflected with class antagonism; working-class hobbyists often felt that they were being maligned by a professional élite.

In 1983, two detectorists in Surrey found a number of coins at the site of a Romano-British temple in the village of Wanborough. They informed local curators, but before the site could be properly excavated illicit treasure hunters, known as nighthawks, descended. As many as forty of them scanned the site by moonlight, plundering antiquities and selling them for profit; some dealers bought objects straight out of the ground. The looting of Wanborough helped usher in the Treasure Act. It replaced ancient common law holding that, when the owner of a buried treasure could not be identified, it became the property of the Crown. Under the terms of the current law, treasure still belongs legally to the Crown, but in practice it often ends up in a museum. (In the U.S., comparable laws vary from state to state, but most of them stipulate that someone who finds an object of value or a stash of money is entitled to keep it if the owner cannot be located.)

The Treasure Act provides an incentive for detectorists to declare their discoveries by establishing the right to a reward for the finder, who typically receives half the market value; the other half goes to the landowner. Some forty Finds Liaison Officers across the U.K. urge detectorists to report not just discoveries of gold and silver but also those of more humble metals, which can help explain the daily lives of earlier Britons: fallen brooch pins that might

indicate the route of a Roman pathway; copper pennies dropped in a medieval marketplace.

Last year, detectorists in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland were responsible for thirteen hundred treasure finds, far exceeding the number made by professional archeologists. The expansion of the pastime has been encouraged by a popular sitcom, “Detectorists”—created by and starring Mackenzie Crook, of the original version of “[The Office](#)”—about the quest of two amateurs to make a great discovery. (“It’s basically the Holy Grail of treasure hunting.” “Well, no, the *Holy Grail* is the Holy Grail of treasure hunting.”) The show’s representation of the detectorists is wistful; their search is not just for treasure but for companionship and masculine identity. The hobby is so predominantly male that the code of conduct of one large Facebook group reminds members that it is not a dating site, and advises, “Please do not contact the ladies you may fancy and send inappropriate proposals.”



"... and if you look off the left-hand side of the plane you'll see the smoldering ruins of what's left of our civilization..."
Cartoon by Emily Flake

Detecting tends to be either a solitary pursuit or undertaken in trusted pairs, with a pact to share spoils. Practitioners establish personal territories, known as permissions, by developing relationships with farmers, whose freshly plowed fields can dislodge new finds. In 2001, a detectorist in Kent found a decorative gold cup dating to the Bronze Age, more than thirty-five hundred years ago; having been crushed by a modern plow, it had the shape of a deli coffee cup retrieved from a trash can. More recently, metal-detecting rallies, in which a farmer is paid to open up his land to possibly hundreds of detectorists, have become common, further dismayed archeologists. As participants fan out over a field in the military-style camouflage jackets and pants that many of them favor, they can look like a Great Army themselves, bearing spindly devices in place of weapons.

Sometimes a find transforms a hard-up hobbyist into a wealthy man. In 2009, Terry Herbert, who was unemployed and lived in public housing, and who had picked up a metal detector for a few pounds at a yard sale, scanned fields belonging to Fred Johnson, a farmer friend in the West Midlands, and discovered England's largest-ever stash of Anglo-Saxon precious metalwork. Now known as the Staffordshire hoard, it includes gold and silver ornaments, among them decorative sword fittings. Buried in the seventh century, the collection was acquired by two institutions: the Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, in Stoke-on-Trent, and the Birmingham Museum. The hoard is valued at more than five million dollars.

Powell and Davies had a potential fortune on their hands, but they also had a problem. It is standard practice for detectorists to come to an agreement, preferably in writing, with a landowner whose fields they wish to scan, in order to avoid charges of trespassing or ownership disputes over finds. Terry Herbert and Fred Johnson fell out after the discovery of the Staffordshire hoard, with Herbert accusing Johnson of wanting to keep the reward money to himself. (The proceeds were split.)

Powell, who has a dark beard, an upturned nose, and extensive tattoos on his neck and knuckles, had obtained the permission of one resident in the Eye area, Yvonne Conod, to search a field of crops next to her farmhouse. In addition, he had a go-ahead from Conod's son, Mark, who lived on a farm nearby and also maintained his mother's field. But Mark, a tenant farmer, could not legally

authorize a search of fields that he merely rented. Moreover, Powell and Davies had ventured beyond the Conods' fields, and the hoard had been found on an adjoining property—that of Lord Cawley, the preëminent local landowner, who has a large dairy farm.

The Cawley family once occupied [Berrington Hall](#), an elegant eighteenth-century mansion just east of Eye. In the nineteen-fifties, when the present Lord Cawley's grandfather died, crippling estate taxes forced his widow, Lady Vivienne Cawley, to surrender the house to the Treasury, which subsequently donated it to the National Trust. A condition of the arrangement was that Lady Cawley, who was eighty years old when her husband died, could reside at the house for the rest of her life. No doubt to the stifled frustration of the National Trust, she lived for twenty more years, taking lunch every day in the opulent dining room, obliging restorers to stop their work while she did so. Berrington Hall, now open to the public, sits atop a hill with views of parkland laid out by the landscape designer Capability Brown, and picturesquely grazed by sheep. Beyond the manicured grounds lies Lord Cawley's current property, including King's Hall Hill and the adjoining [King's Hall Covert](#), a small copse that rings with the gunfire of local gentry during pheasant-shooting season.

After trespassing onto Lord Cawley's land, Powell and Davies could have knocked on his door, baseball caps in hand, and made an excuse for having strayed—claiming, say, that they'd got turned around in the landscape—in the hope that, in light of their thrilling discovery, Lord Cawley would overlook a minor violation of protocol. Instead, they returned to South Wales, where Davies posted an image of three coins from the find on the online forum of a metal-detecting club. Gareth Williams, of the British Museum, told me, “The finders were stupidly indiscreet.”

It didn't take long for word of the discovery to reach Peter Reavill, the Finds Liaison Officer for Herefordshire, the county that includes Eye. Reavill tries to cultivate good relationships with detectorists, often addressing meetings of local societies. Ian Richardson, the treasure registrar at the British Museum, told me, of one such gathering, in a pub, “He got this reception almost like a rock star—all these people rushed up to show him their latest finds.” Reavill didn't learn much about what Davies had found—only that it was from the Saxon era. “I record thousands of objects a year, and of those maybe only twenty or thirty will be Saxon,” Reavill told me. In more than fifteen years on the job, he'd dealt with only one hoard of Saxon coins.



Ninth-century coins found by Powell and Davies feature a representation of two contemporary Anglo-Saxon kings—Ceolwulf II, of Mercia, and Alfred, of Wessex—sitting side by side. The discovery that Alfred and Ceolwulf minted coins in the same style offered surprising evidence of an alliance between them—one that Alfred had sought to whitewash in an official chronicle of the period. As Gareth Williams, a curator at the British Museum, explains, “It’s like Stalin airbrushing Trotsky out.” Photograph courtesy © the Trustees of the British Museum

The typical museumgoer is most drawn to the helmets, swords, or jewels of the Vikings and the Anglo-Saxons; for many people, the most compelling object in the British Museum’s early Middle Ages collection is the Sutton Hoo helmet, an ornate, full-face iron-and-bronze headpiece dating from the beginning of the seventh century. It is decorated with a nose, eyebrows, and a mustache, so that almost a millennium and a half later the glowering visage of its wearer—probably Raedwald, the King of East Anglia—outstares any viewer. But, for archeologists and historians, coins, whose detailed inscriptions allow for precise dating, and which are signed by their manufacturer, often provide more crucial insight about the shifting dynamics of power in proto-England.

The Two Emperor coins found in Eye featured a representation of two contemporary Anglo-Saxon kings—Ceolwulf II, of Mercia, and Alfred, of Wessex—sitting side by side. On the obverse of each coin was a stylized profile of either Alfred or Ceolwulf. King Alfred, known as Alfred the Great, took control of Mercia in the late ninth century—a victory recently dramatized in the Netflix series “The Last Kingdom.” He thereafter commissioned the writing of [the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle](#), annals that remain the principal source of information about early medieval England between the departure of the Romans, around 400, and the arrival of the Normans, in 1066. In the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Ceolwulf II is briefly dismissed as *anum unwisum cyninges begne*—a foolish king’s servant—who collaborated with the Viking invaders. The discovery that Alfred and Ceolwulf minted coins in the same style offered surprising evidence of an alliance between them—one that Alfred had sought to whitewash in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. As Williams, the British Museum curator, explained to me, “It’s like Stalin airbrushing Trotsky out.”

Reavill obtained the e-mail addresses of Powell and Davies from a detectorist society, and wrote to them on July 6th, a month or so after their adventure. If they’d made an interesting find, he reminded them, they had a legal obligation to report it. Though the Treasure Act requires detectorists to contact the authorities within two weeks, it allows for a delay should the finder not recognize the value of an artifact (or claim not to). Administrators are sympathetic with detectorists who are reluctant to surrender exciting discoveries, sometimes for reasons more emotional than monetary. Ian Richardson, the treasure registrar, told me, “Obviously, people make a personal attachment to an object.” The elasticity of the law’s deadline is intended to encourage compliance. Historically, even in

cases where a finder mistakenly strayed onto territory where he lacked permission to search, the Treasure Valuation Committee, which decides the apportionment of a reward, has been forgiving, with the finder dividing the prize equally with the landowner. Davies, in particular, might have been expected to respond to Reavill's prompt: over the years, he had brought more than a hundred detecting discoveries to his local Finds Liaison Officer, Mark Lodwick, an archeologist at the Museum of Wales, in Cardiff, who regarded him as a responsible detectorist. But Reavill didn't hear back from Davies and received only an affronted e-mail from Powell—who claimed that he didn't know what Reavill was talking about, and warned, “I won’t tolerate any slander.”

In fact, the coins were already being quietly sold off. Two days after making the find, Powell and Davies met with an acquaintance named Paul Wells, a retired builder from Cardiff who traded coins. Wells had asked a friend with whom he sometimes did business, Jason Sallam, to join them, and the four men met at the café of an antiques market in a repurposed Victorian municipal building in Cardiff. Powell and Davies took about a dozen coins from their pockets and explained that they had found perhaps two or three hundred more—though it was hard to tell how many, because they remained clumped together in the exhumed earth. Wells was astonished by the coins. “It was as if they had been put in the ground on the day they were minted,” he later said. “They had never been used to buy a loaf or a pint of beer.” When Powell brought out the gold jewelry, which he’d wrapped in tissue paper, “my eyes nearly fell out of my head,” Wells said. Powell became so excitably loud that Wells told him, “Shut the fuck up, and go out and have a fag!”

Sallam, who owns Antiques at the Green, a shop in the harborside Welsh town of Tenby, told the detectorists that they had to report their find to the authorities, but he agreed to take the items to be seen by a more knowledgeable numismatic colleague, Lloyd Bennett. A few days later, Sallam went to Bennett’s home, in Monmouth, for a consultation. Bennett, pointing out the pair of kings depicted on the coins, identified them as dating from the late ninth century, and said that they were in very good condition. He then told Sallam that he didn’t want to see any more of the hoard, and that the detectorists needed to declare it as treasure as soon as possible. “Everything here needs to be in a museum,” Bennett warned. Sallam returned the coins to Wells and repeated Bennett’s injunction, adding, “Get in touch with these boys. It needs to be declared. Tell them, ‘Don’t fuck around.’ ”

But Powell and Davies didn't contact the authorities, and nine days after the discovery Powell travelled to a gas station on the M4 motorway, which connects South Wales with London, and met with Simon Wicks, a coin trader and a detectorist from Sussex. Wicks has a blighted reputation, having been convicted in 2014 of nighthawking. "He is, without question, *not* a dealer," Chris Martin, the chairman of the British Numismatic Trade Association, told me. "He's a vest-pocket person who happens to buy things from people, but doesn't really know what he's buying, and doesn't really care what he's buying. He could be buying coins today, motorbikes tomorrow, and old military-cap badges the next day."

On June 18th, Wicks went to London and took seven of the coins to Dix Noonan Webb, a blue-chip auction house in the Mayfair area. James Brown, a coin cataloguer there, later said, "One coin like that would be an incredibly lucky find. To have seven offered at one time is really unusual." It was obvious to him that he was examining objects from a hoard: such items are exposed to the same soil composition, and all seven coins featured rusty-brown staining. Hoard coins often bear a half-moon imprint indicating where one coin has overlain another. Those in the middle of a cache can be in almost pristine condition, having been protected from soil exposure by surrounding coins. Brown told Wicks that he could not give a valuation on the spot, and he retained the objects in a safe on the Dix Noonan Webb premises. Later, Brown estimated that the consignment of seven coins was worth nearly four hundred thousand dollars.

Powell and Davies did make one gesture toward legitimacy after receiving Peter Reavill's e-mail. Two days later, on July 8th, they went to the Museum of Wales to meet with Mark Lodwick, the Finds Liaison Officer with whom Davies had often dealt. Usually, Davies was chatty, but Lodwick noted that on this occasion he seemed anxious. Powell did most of the talking, and at one point produced a plastic takeout container. Inside, wrapped in paper towels, were the three items of gold jewelry: the bangle and the faceted ring, both later confirmed to be from the ninth century, and the crystal orb, which is from the fifth or sixth century. Powell seemed ignorant of the objects' provenances. Lodwick printed a map of the area where Powell said that the items had been found, and the detectorists marked several spots on it, claiming that the jewelry had been buried under a tree. When Lodwick later checked the area on Google Earth, there were no trees to be seen.



Tanith

"Let's have a drink from the toilet, sniff around a little, and then leave."
Cartoon by Mary Lawton

At the end of the meeting, Powell and Davies showed Lodwick two silver Saxon coins, of a style known to collectors as cross and lozenge. The pair was worth perhaps forty thousand dollars. Although the surface tint of the coins suggested to Lodwick that they had been buried together, the detectorists insisted that they had found one coin each, in separate fields, thereby obviating any need to declare them as treasure.

The next day, Powell returned to the Leominster area and visited the home of Mark Conod, the tenant farmer, excitedly recounting to him and his wife, Amanda, that on a recent scan of their property he had found some jewelry, which was now at a museum. He showed them photographs and said, "There might be money in this." They all went outside, and, from a distance, Powell pointed to indicate that he'd discovered the items at the top of the field belonging to Conod's mother, Yvonne.

That July, Reavill alerted the West Mercia Police to the possibility of a heritage crime, and, because of the potential multimillion-dollar value of the alleged find, an investigation was launched. Around this time, Simon Wicks, the coin dealer, returned to Dix Noonan Webb with nine equally remarkable coins, which the auction house also took into its custodianship. All the coins were soon turned over to the police.

The next month, the British Numismatic Trade Association issued an unusual warning to its members, stating that coins believed to be from an undeclared hoard were sneaking onto the market, and that buying any of them would violate the Treasure Act. On August 18, 2015, a little more than two months after their trip to Leominster, Powell and Davies were arrested. Powell warned the police, "I ain't gonna make it easy."

It's impossible to measure how much of a role the black market plays in archeological finds made by detectorists, but it isn't hard to turn up dealers who promise discretion. Nor is there any shortage of collectors who, in their eagerness to create a set of coins, may be willing to overlook a sketchy provenance or two. Coins are simple to move around, including overseas, and the fact that the Treasure Act permits the retention of single-coin finds means that a cunning detectorist, over a period of time, might sell a number of valuable coins one by one, without drawing undue attention. But such an approach is not

foolproof. In 2017, a detectorist from Norfolk, David Cockle, was sentenced to a sixteen-month prison term for theft, after selling off a hoard of ten extremely rare Anglo-Saxon gold coins, having previously declared them as individual finds from various sites around the U.K. Cockle happened to be a police officer, a circumstance that likely added to the vigor with which his case was pursued. Prosecutions of rogue detectorists are uncommon, as criminal-investigation departments contending with cases of rape, murder, and armed robbery are disinclined to dedicate their limited resources to the disappearance of objects whose original owner might have been dead for more than a millennium.

Powell told the police that he was a longtime hobbyist, having started metal detecting with his father. He insisted that the gold he had handed in to Mark Lodwick at the Museum of Wales came from lands occupied by the Conods, from whom he had permission to detect, although he acknowledged that he had not sought permission from the Cawleys—“Lord and Lady of the Manor,” as he characterized them. Powell denied all knowledge of a hoard of coins. “They are telling people I found three hundred coins,” he said. “Why would I hand in the gold and keep the coins?”

The homes of Powell and Davies were searched. Both had display cases containing finds, but there were no valuable objects inside. “They didn’t have the silver coins, and things like that, that you’d expect from detectorists who went out on a regular basis,” Reavill told me. There was certainly no sign of a large cache of Anglo-Saxon silver.

Davies gave the police an account in line with Powell’s: the pair had recently found just the three pieces of Saxon gold and a couple of stray coins—all of which they had declared to Lodwick. When asked about the café meeting with Paul Wells and Jason Sallam, Davies claimed that he and Powell had been lying when they’d said that the coins were from a large hoard: Powell had actually owned the coins presented at the café for years, and the hoard story had been concocted merely to help him “get rid” of them.

A few weeks later, Gareth Thomas, an officer with the West Mercia Police, visited Wells at home and discussed the encounter at the café. Wells insisted that he, Sallam, and Davies had agreed that the coins needed to be declared, but that Powell had other ideas. “George Powell was in it for the money—that was obvious,” Wells said. He also revealed that, some days after the café meeting, Davies had asked him to retain five of the coins for safekeeping. Wells then

showed the officer a leather case for a magnifying glass. On one side, the stitching had been unpicked then glued back together: it was a secret compartment. Wells opened it up, and all five silver coins slipped out. The police officer called his supervisor to ask what he should do. Arrest him, the supervisor replied. "I knew it would come to this," Wells said, as he was taken to the station.



The golden ring found by Powell and Davies was later confirmed to be a rare example of Anglo-Saxon jewelry from the ninth century. It is currently on display at the British Museum, in a gallery featuring recent archeological finds. Photograph courtesy © the Trustees of the British Museum

Late that summer, Tim Hoverd, the archeology-projects manager for the Herefordshire Council, was dispatched to Eye to survey the territory. If, as Powell and Davies claimed, the items had been scattered at different locations, that might mean the presence of a significant new site: a Saxon cemetery, religious settlement, or royal palace. But seasonal changes made clues hard to come by. “By the time we got there, most of the area was covered with maize, which grows damn fast,” Hoverd told me recently. “It was way over my head. And how do you find holes people have dug two or three months before when you can’t actually see the ground?” Hoverd and his colleagues paced the fields, dug multiple test pits, and conducted an aerial survey by drone. “It quickly became apparent that there were no formal structures—no royal burials—that this material could have come from,” he told me.

Powell and Davies hadn’t yet been charged with crimes, but the case against them grew considerably stronger in 2016, when a forensic examination of their mobile phones revealed deleted photographs of glimmering objects being extracted from the ground. In addition to the jewelry, there were hundreds of coins. In Davies’s original interview with police, he had asserted that he hadn’t taken his phone with him to Herefordshire. After being confronted with the photographs, he declined to comment.

When Hoverd examined the deleted images, he immediately keyed into two snapshots of the landscape. “They were designed to fit together,” Hoverd said. “I went back to the field with copies of the photographs and stood where they must have stood to take them.” The hoard’s location had been found—and it was decisively within the borders of Lord Cawley’s property. Nevertheless, apart from the two dozen coins recovered during the police inquiry, any larger hoard had disappeared.

In October, 2019, Powell and Davies stood trial in Worcester, a city about an hour east of Leominster. They had been charged with theft and with conspiracy to conceal and convert criminal property. Wicks, the shady coin dealer, was charged with concealing and converting criminal property, and Wells, the retired builder, was charged with concealment. All four denied the charges. “This case, in two words, is about buried treasure,” Kevin Hegarty, the prosecutor, said in his opening remarks.

The trial, which lasted for two months, offered the jury and others present in the courtroom an extended seminar in numismatics and in Viking history. Gareth Williams, the coin specialist at the British Museum, declared on the stand that the hoard had almost certainly been deposited sometime between the summer of 878 and the autumn of 879, when the Great Army fled northward from Wessex after Alfred the Great's victory over Guthrum, the king of the Vikings, at the Battle of Edington, in what is now Wiltshire. This battle, Williams explained, laid the groundwork for the establishment of England as a unified country by Alfred's grandson King Athelstan, in 927. Williams explained to me that while the Vikings were on the move “they would seize somewhere, normally either a royal estate or monastery, and stay there for the next few months, eating the food that someone's gone to all the trouble of gathering together.” Although the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle doesn't mention Leominster, its monastery likely offered sustenance for a band of Viking fighters during that winter, before they moved on to settle in East Anglia. The coins told the story.

The detectorists, however, offered a different tale: there had never been a hoard of coins. Davies testified that their only finds in Eye had been the gold jewelry and a few coins, and that the dozen coins they had taken to the café came from Powell's own collection. Powell did not testify, but he appeared surprisingly confident as he arrived in court each day, chatting with security guards as he passed through the metal detectors. Hegarty, the prosecutor, told me that Powell was clearly the ringleader of the four men, and “saw himself as a bit of a character.”

When Davies was asked to explain the images recovered from his phone, he offered a new twist to his story: the image showing a large cache of coins in the ground was actually a staged photo. “George had the coins in his rucksack, and he said he wanted to get some provenance on them,” Davies told the court. “He put some coins in the ground, to make it look as if they were found there.” Davies claimed that he hadn't been happy with the idea but had gone along with it. When Hegarty asked him what Powell's motivation for staging such a find might be, Davies said only that Powell wanted to “show off.” (Hegarty told me, dryly, “He was never able to explain why you would come all the way from Cardiff to a piece of land in Herefordshire to dig a hole, and put things in it, and cover them up, and dig it up again.”)

Simon Wicks and Paul Wells also denied any wrongdoing. Wells, who was charged with the lesser offense of concealing the five coins in his possession,

explained that he hadn't sought to hide the coins inside the magnifying-glass case—he'd just wanted to protect them. Some of his testimony must have displeased Davies and Powell. Wells insisted that he had urged both men to declare the coins. After the café meeting, Wells said, he had spoken with Davies, who, indicating that there might be a problem with the landowner, told him, "I'm either going to be very rich or spend a long time in jail."



"Damn! We missed the fall-foliage display."
Cartoon by Edward Frascino

A turning point in the trial occurred after Gareth Williams, the British Museum numismatist, explained that Anglo-Saxon coins were struck by hand, with a hammer on a die, and fashioned by a named moneyer—Torhtmund, say, or Hygered. As a result, such coins all have minute variations that an expert eye can identify. A photograph recovered from Powell's phone showed a Two Emperor coin lying in what a fingerprint expert confirmed was Powell's palm, taken the day after Powell and Davies had made the find. Hegarty told me, "Williams was able to look at the Two Emperor in the photograph and say, 'No, that is *not* one of the coins that has been recovered.' So that proved beyond any doubt that there were more coins." The recovered coins were too fragile to bring to the courtroom—most were less than a millimetre thick. So Hegarty showed the jury slides of the coins. "They were really beautiful," he recalls. The Anglo-Saxon kings looked almost Cubist: Alfred the Great with a large nose and deep-set eyes, Ceolwulf II long-chinned and grimacing. Hegarty told me, "When you realize that this is something that was handmade twelve hundred years ago, you gasp."

The jury deliberated for two days. On November 22, 2019, the four men were found guilty on all counts. The judge, Nicholas Cartwright, was severe in his sentencing. Powell received ten years in prison, Davies eight and a half, Wicks five. Wells avoided prison time but was given a suspended sentence of twelve months. (Hegarty said, "The jury was quite satisfied that he had tried to conceal the coins, because, *literally*, he had concealed them.") Cartwright scathingly declared that the two detectorists had been recklessly motivated by greed. If they had only obtained the required permissions and reported the find to the authorities, they would have been richly rewarded. He told Powell and Davies, "You could have expected to have either a half share—or, at worst, a third share—of over three million pounds to share between you. You could not have done worse than half a million pounds each. But you wanted more."

Not only had Powell and Davies stolen the hoard—the value of which, intact, might have been anywhere between four million and fifteen million dollars—from Lord Cawley, the judge went on; they had cheated the public of its heritage, and deprived residents of Herefordshire of the illumination the find might have offered about the Kingdom of Mercia in the ninth century. Another constituency damaged by the plundering was the metal-detecting community, where news of the conviction was welcomed on online message boards. "I hope the law starts to

come down heavily on these lowlifes,” one contributor posted. The hobby’s reputation had been severely tainted, and landowners would reconsider granting permissions. “They’ve spoiled it for the large percentage of genuine detectorists,” another contributor posted. “They’ll think we’re all a bunch of crooks.” At the close of the trial, James Tucker, the barrister for George Powell, said, of his client, “It is clear, from his point of view, he wishes he had never found the treasure. It became a temptation—and, for him, a curse.”

The spot where the Viking buried the hoard, according to Tim Hovord’s expert analysis, is in the corner of a field just north of King’s Hall Covert, the copse where pheasants are hunted. A spring flows nearby, leaving the soil often sodden. Aerial photographs and topographical analysis indicate that this was once a crossroads: one track connected two local hamlets, Moreton and Orleton; another, which fell out of use two hundred years ago, descended from King’s Hall Hill to the hamlet of Ashton. It’s impossible to know for certain whether Anglo-Saxons and Vikings trod these paths, but it’s reasonable to conclude that they were established thoroughfares for centuries, and that their intersection provided a landmark for anyone with something to hide.

In an almost unbelievable coincidence, a similar Viking hoard was found in October, 2015, just four months after Davies and Powell made their discovery in Leominster. A detectorist named James Mather was scanning a field in Watlington, in Oxfordshire, when he came across what turned out to be hundreds of coins, and also ingots and jewelry. Mather followed protocol to the letter, informing the local Finds Liaison Officer as soon as he determined that there was something unusual in the ground, so that scholars could excavate the site. John Naylor, the National Finds Adviser for Early Medieval and Later Coinage at the Ashmolean Museum, in Oxford, told me that when he examined the Oxfordshire coins, a few days after their extraction, he was amazed to see several Two Emperor coins featuring the visages of King Alfred and Ceolwulf II. “It really reinforces the case that Ceolwulf was accepted by Wessex as the Mercian king,” he told me. Press accounts described the Watlington hoard as having rewritten British history. The Ashmolean, which acquired the hoard for \$1.75 million, now has it on prominent display, with signs citing James Mather’s contribution to its recovery.

Three years ago, more than a thousand people in the Watlington area attended local events in which Ashmolean curators talked about the hoard. “That is the side that the public has really missed out on in Leominster,” Naylor said. “The

interest and excitement have been taken away.” Despite the fact that the Leominster hoard was discovered first, the Watlington hoard has stolen its thunder, reducing it to a footnote in the ongoing reëvaluation of Anglo-Saxon political history. For the time being, the Leominster jewelry and several of the coins have been put on display at the British Museum, in a gallery featuring recent archeological finds; visitors have been able to see up close the chunky gold ring, the slender armband, and a handful of coins that look as thin and delicate as if they had been punched from sheet metal. The county museum in Hereford still hopes to acquire the Leominster hoard, but any display of it will inevitably be colored by the botched circumstances of its only partial recovery. Its main allure may be as a cautionary tale—of a heist gone awry.

The investigation into the missing coins continues. Last year, the Durham Constabulary [reported](#) that, in raids of several properties in the North of England, a silver ingot and a large number of Anglo-Saxon coins had been recovered, including some minted by Alfred the Great and Ceolwulf II. The objects were collectively valued at nearly seven hundred thousand dollars. No other details of the raids were offered, and the Durham Constabulary recently declined to comment on whether its find is connected to the Leominster cache. But several people with knowledge of the case told me that the coins are, indeed, believed to be part of the hoard—though likely just a fraction of it.

In late July, Powell, Davies, and Wicks successfully appealed the length of their sentences. Powell’s prison term was reduced from ten years to six and a half, Davies’s from eight and a half years to five, and Wicks’s from five years to three and a half. (Ordinarily, British prisoners become eligible for parole after serving half their sentence.) But the detectorists will soon face more legal troubles. Early next year, Powell and Davies are scheduled to appear at a “proceeds of crime” hearing, where they will be held liable for the value of the objects they are deemed to have stolen. At the end of the Worcester trial, Judge Cartwright said, “There are hidden assets, by way of unrecovered treasure, worth a very large sum—probably millions of pounds.” Should Powell and Davies be unable to restore the hoard to Lord Cawley or to repay him its equivalent value, they face the prospect of even longer prison terms.

Any observer trying to reconstruct what Powell and Davies did can make only informed guesses—piecing together the narrative like an archeologist deducing the past from scant clues. (Lawyers for Powell and Davies, citing the ongoing litigation, declined to comment for this article.) Gareth Williams told me that he

thought the detectorists were “determined to be clever, and get one over on the system, and be greedy.” Tim Hoverd, the archeologist from the Herefordshire Council, theorized that the defendants may have already had a habit of selling finds on the black market, “but the amount that they found this time was far too large for them to cope with, and they panicked.” Kevin Hegarty, the prosecutor, suggested that, once Powell and Davies realized that they had failed to get Lord Cawley’s permission to scan on his land, they found it impossible to reverse course. Hegarty told me, “I think they had gone too far, and had dispersed quite a large number of coins, and had the money, and couldn’t get it back. It’s a bit like comedy, in a way, where a character tells a lie, and then has to tell another lie in consequence of that, and then he has to act out *all* the lies.”

The Vikings left no written explanation of why they buried hoards, but historians believe that these deposits were generally intended to be stored for brief periods. “The thinking is, probably, ‘We are going to be here for several months, and I don’t trust all the people I am with, so I am going to stick it in the ground for safety, and pick it up before we leave,’ ” Williams said. “And then either something happens to that individual, and he can’t come back, or he comes back later, and he can’t find it. Imagine using a tree as your spot for location, and then a big storm comes and blows the tree down, or some other Vikings come along and chop it up for firewood. It’s easy to imagine circumstances in which they couldn’t find what they buried.” This, too, is an unintentionally comic scenario: the Viking not as a ruthless marauder but as a hapless, *unwis* character wandering a foreign landscape, realizing with dawning dismay that his fortune has slipped through his hands.

Hoverd, who climbed King’s Hall Hill in the footsteps of whoever buried the treasure eleven hundred and forty-odd years ago, told me that he was attracted to an alternative explanation, which didn’t depend on the hoard’s owner having died unexpectedly, or having been unable to locate or return to the spot. He cited an Icelandic saga that describes the law-giving of Odin, the powerful Norse god who rules over Valhalla, the majestic hall that welcomes Viking warriors when they die. One of Odin’s laws states that whatever you put in the ground will return to you after death. Were these warriors actually burying things with no intention of returning for them—because, they thought, they would get them back in the afterlife?

It’s a tempting theory but a problematic one, as John Naylor, of the Ashmolean, explained to me. The text that mentions Odin’s law-giving, the Ynglinga Saga,

wasn't written until the thirteenth century, by Snorri Sturluson, an Icelandic poet and chieftain. Snorri, as he is known, might well have been committing to paper an oral tradition dating back centuries. But it's also possible that Odin's laws are an elegant fiction devised by High Medieval Scandinavians as a way to fill the holes in their understanding of their ancestors. The desire to arrange perplexing material evidence into a shapely story—a desire that motivates detectives, archeologists, historians, lawyers, and journalists—surely motivated ancient Norsemen, too.

The most plausible, if unsatisfying, resolution to the saga of Powell and Davies is that the hundreds of other coins in the hoard have been dispersed on the black market, never to be regathered. But it is possible to conceive of another narrative—one in which those hundreds of missing coins have not been lost after all but have, in effect, been reburied. In this version of the story, the coins remain concealed in a safe hiding place, in anticipation of Powell and Davies's eventual release from prison. They have been stowed away, awaiting the finders' return to the Valhalla of ordinary life.

If the Viking treasure has been rehidden, it will be a very long time until it can be recovered yet again. Tim Hoverd, the archeologist, told me, "You can't do *anything* with it at the moment. Everyone will know where it came from." Given the coins' dramatic discovery and disappearance, their reëmergence would immediately attract the attention of watchful authorities. In monetary terms, at least, the Leominster hoard has gone from being worth millions to being worth nothing. To Kevin Hegarty, the prosecutor, there was one obvious conclusion: "If you are sitting on these coins, you may as well put them back into the ground." ♦

Movies

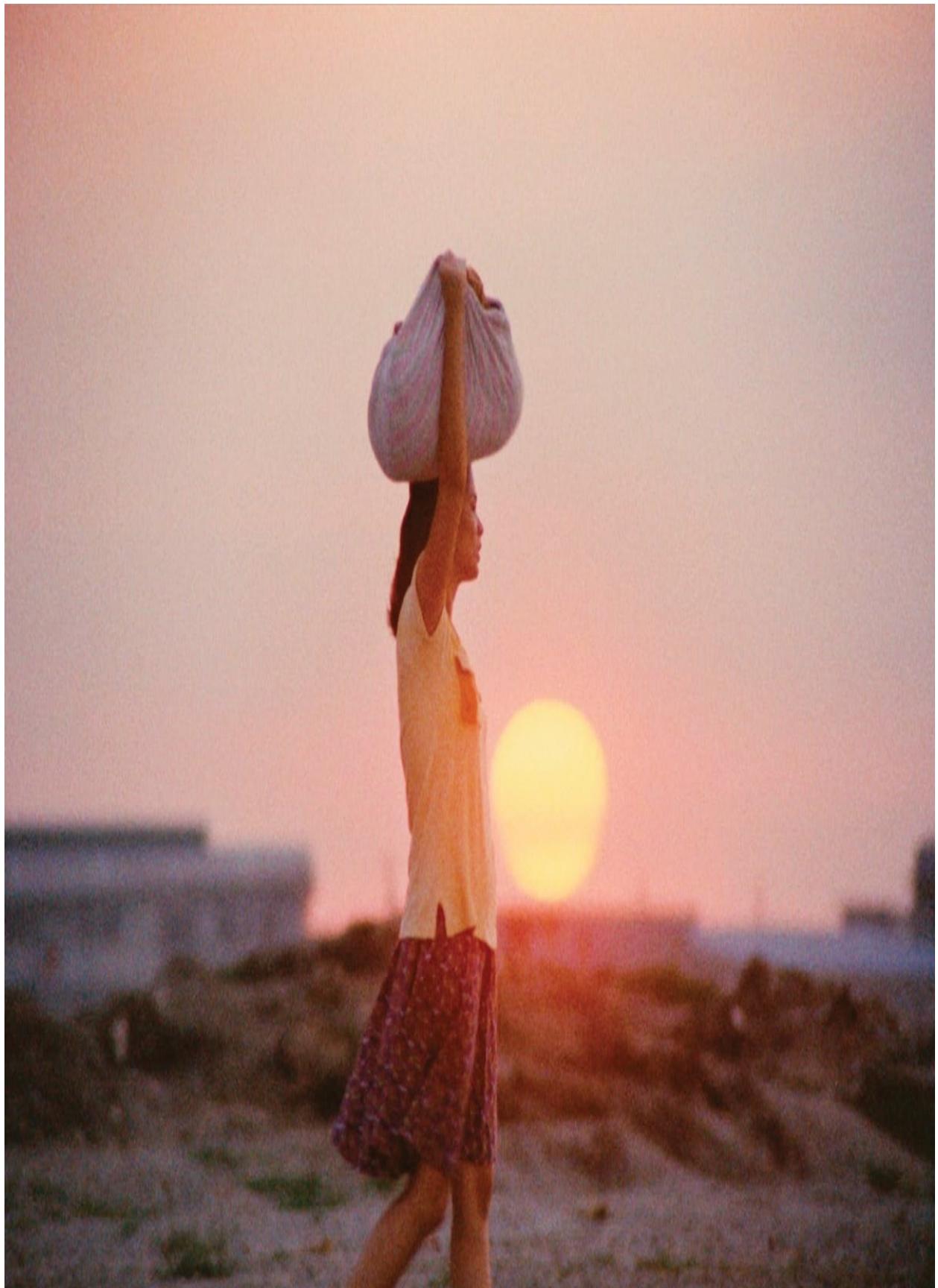
- [The Film Foundation Comes to the Criterion Channel](#)

[November 16, 2020 Issue](#)

The Film Foundation Comes to the Criterion Channel

Lino Brocka's political melodrama "Insiang" and dozens of other classics and rarities are available to watch in a series that begins this month.

November 6, 2020



Photograph courtesy the Criterion Collection

The Film Foundation, launched by Martin Scorsese in 1990, is dedicated to the restoration of acknowledged classics and great rarities alike. An ongoing series of its offerings on **the Criterion Channel** begins, this month, with thirty movies, including Ida Lupino's film noir "The Bigamist," Shirley Clarke's jazz-centric metafiction "The Connection," Med Hondo's drama "Soleil Ô," about race relations in France, and Lino Brocka's political melodrama "Insiang" (pictured above), set in a slum neighborhood in Manila.

On Television

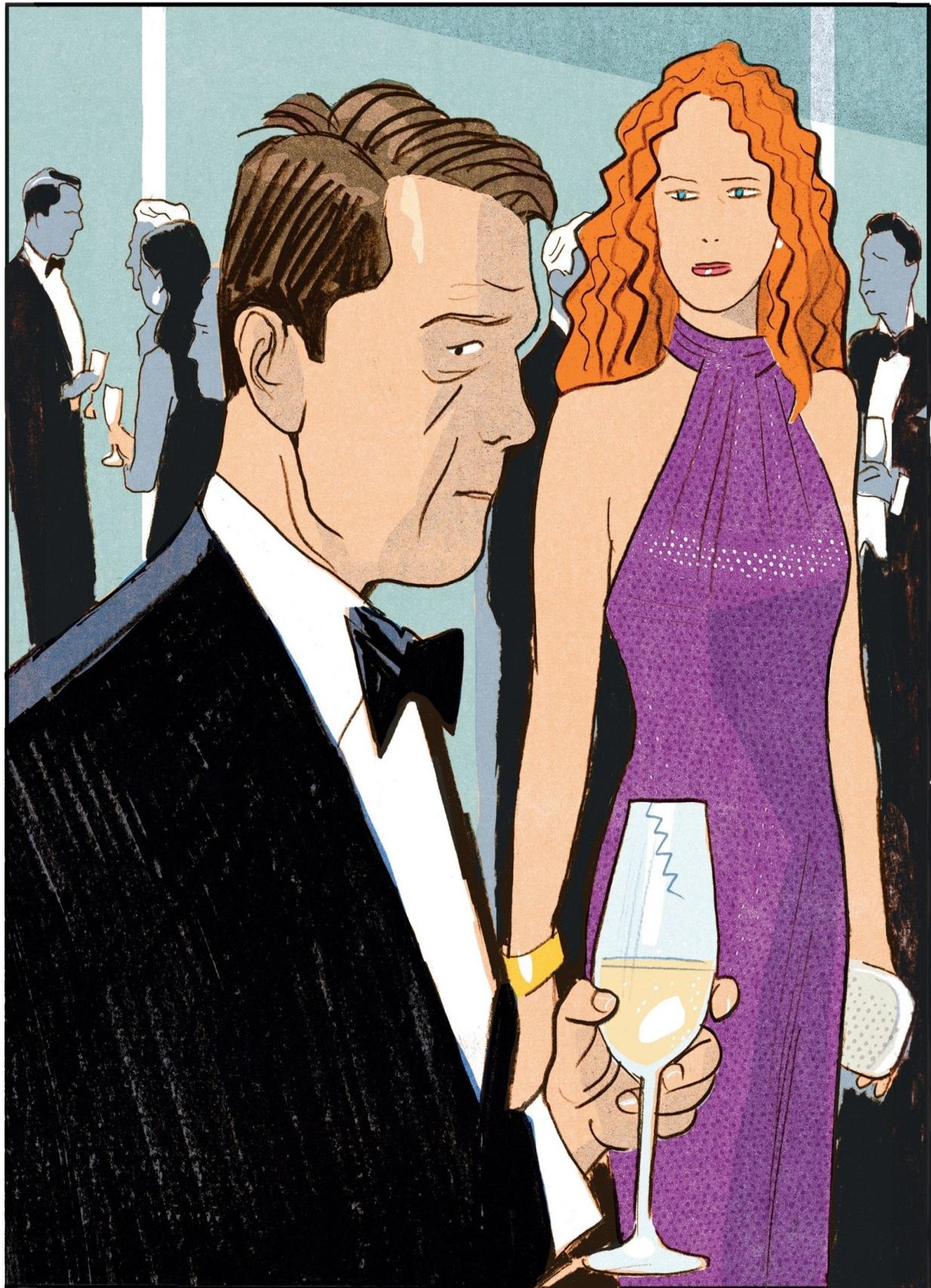
- [“The Undoing” Is Empty Life-style Porn](#)

“The Undoing” Is Empty Life-style Porn

And, like most porn, the HBO drama, which stars Nicole Kidman, isn’t really about the plot.

By [Naomi Fry](#)

November 9, 2020



In an early scene of the HBO drama “The Undoing,” Grace Fraser, played by Nicole Kidman, arrives at the palatial Manhattan apartment of one of the other mothers from her son’s private school. She is there to take part in a planning session for a school fund-raiser, a meeting that devolves into a bitch sesh quicker than anyone can say “classic eight.” “Did you see the David Hockneys?” one woman asks, referring to the home of apparently even richer school parents, where the fund-raiser is set to take place. “Two of them, on facing walls in the dining room,” another mom answers, as a uniformed maid serves tea.

Like “Big Little Lies,” with which it shares David E. Kelley as creator, “The Undoing” has great fun telegraphing the signifiers of wealth. The former show, set in the casual luxury of Monterey, was full of crackling fire pits, double-height living rooms, and rustic decks overlooking expanses of pristine shoreline. Here, we get full-bore Upper East Side resplendence, where cashmere-clad, preternaturally smooth-complexioned women convene in marble-and-gilt rooms so laden with precious *objets* that they could double as the Met’s Wrightsman Galleries.

The fund-raiser these women are working on will solicit money for the school’s diversity efforts, to cover tuition for students who are neither rich nor white. The mother of one such student has joined the planning committee. Her name is Elena Alves, and, although she is played by the Italian actress Matilda De Angelis, the show uses establishing shots of Elena’s apartment in Spanish Harlem to suggest that her character is Latina. Elena has ostensibly come to the meeting to help, but the awkwardness her presence arouses suggests these rich white mothers’ allegiance to what Dickens once called “telescopic philanthropy,” the kind of benevolence that, tinged by racism and classism, works best from a safe distance. In the scene’s climax, the ladies are both horrified and titillated when Elena drops her top to begin nursing her infant daughter at the table, like a sensual Madonna. “Spectacular breasts,” Grace’s friend Sylvia (Lily Rabe) says later, snickering.

“The Undoing” is not subtle, which at first I didn’t mind. The pilot episode hit the exact pleasure center between mild critique and life-style porn. Grace is a successful therapist and the daughter of a leonine billionaire (Donald Sutherland); her husband, Jonathan (Hugh Grant), is a pediatric oncologist who has been featured in *New York* magazine’s “Best Doctors” issue. As I began watching, the show seemed well positioned to skewer its subjects while allowing

the viewer to revel in the flashier aspects of their lives—a “Primates of Park Avenue” for the city’s eleventh-hour pre-pandemic moment.

But, much like the appearance of a soothsaying gypsy in a Victorian novel, the mysterious Elena, with her provocative air and accented English, portends the switch from light satire to melodrama. At the fund-raiser—just after a glass of water has been auctioned off for a thousand dollars, as a show of the parents’ commitment to the cause—Elena decides to go home early. The next morning, she is found dead, bludgeoned by a hammer in her studio. (She is, apparently, an artist, though this detail remains abstract, as does almost everything else about the character.) Jonathan is arrested; it turns out that he was having an affair with Elena, who might have become obsessed with him after he treated her older child for cancer, and circumstantial evidence has made him the main suspect in the case. He is also unable to afford a lawyer—he emptied his coffers while wooing Elena. “Your husband is a bit of a dick,” Jonathan’s public defender tells Grace, suggesting that, although his client might be bad, he is no killer.

Could Jonathan be guilty? He is presented in the pilot episode not as a psychopath, or even as a dick, but as an irresistibly crinkly-eyed, slightly roguish man who cajoles Grace into sex by saying things like “Make an Englishman happy.” He is, in other words, a Hugh Grant character. But his affair and his potentially murderous impulses are reminiscent of one Grant character in particular—the charming, conspiring politician Jeremy Thorpe in 2018’s “A Very English Scandal.”

It may feel as if you’ve seen a lot of these characters—and plot points, and framing devices—recently. “The Undoing,” though conceived as a whodunnit, is much less interested in Elena and her killer than it is in Grace’s internal landscape. The show is the latest in a long tradition devoted to examining the shadowy psychic crevices of high-strung, upper-class white women, calling back to the Lifetime movie, and to steamy eighties and nineties dramas such as “Basic Instinct,” “The Hand That Rocks the Cradle,” and “Fatal Attraction.” (A friend who works as a development executive told me that such content is known in industry parlance as “Adrian Lyne and wine,” after the director of the last movie.)

Some of the most recent TV efforts, glossy things starring A-list actresses, include the Amy Adams-led “Sharp Objects” (which, like “The Undoing,” has a gruesome act of violence at its core) and the Naomi Watts vehicle “Gypsy”

(which features a therapist protagonist). Earlier this year came “Little Fires Everywhere,” starring Reese Witherspoon, three years after the aforementioned “Big Little Lies,” which, as in a game of prestige-TV musical chairs, stars not only Witherspoon but Kidman as well. All of these shows evince an ongoing negotiation between the sociopolitical and the operatically psychological. But “Little Fires Everywhere”—a show in which the life of a wealthy white mom becomes intertwined with that of a working-class artist of color—at least makes an attempt to contend with some of the questions of race and class that it raises. In “The Undoing,” such questions are made irrelevant by the decision to kill Elena off almost immediately. One is left wondering why the show bothered to introduce her at all.

David E. Kelley’s most notable early success was that landmark of post-feminism “Ally McBeal,” the late-nineties network dramedy that focussed on the spectacle of a woman dithering between mating and career within the stage set of the modern workplace. In comparison, Grace, even though she is an accomplished therapist, seems largely post-work. Part of the pleasure of shows like “The Undoing” is their characters’ relative financial freedom, which allows them the time to do things such as plan a fund-raiser or, perhaps, a murder.

Dressed in jewel-toned velvets, with her long auburn ringlets streaming down her back, Grace has the look of a Pre-Raphaelite heroine, wandering the city streets in a daze, her cape-like coat flapping, the muddled, soft-focus haze of the show’s cinematography reflecting her tortured mental state. In a cliffhanger in the show’s third episode, the hunky detective investigating Elena’s murder (Édgar Ramírez) provides evidence that Grace might be involved in the crime—a possibility that appears to come as a surprise to Grace herself, and that hints at the limits of the therapist’s self-knowledge. This mystery, however, stretches wearily along the show’s course, turning from a suspenseful device to something that suggests Grace’s characterological thinness.

Who is this woman? Kidman’s character in “Big Little Lies,” Celeste, was also an enigma, but the actress played the role with such restraint that Celeste’s opacity felt deliberate. As Grace, Kidman seems, at times, unsure of her own character’s intentions, shifting from blithe merriment to imperious boss-lady outbursts to turned-up-to-eleven distress. Beset by hazy visions of events that she might or might not have actually seen—Elena and Jonathan making passionate love, Jonathan joshingly caring for one of his young cancer patients, Elena attacked with a hammer—Grace’s mind seems less a site of internal

conflict than a repository of televisual clichés. In these moments, the camera closes in tightly on Kidman's lovely eyes, as if the answer can be found in their cloudy depths. It cannot. ♦

Personal History

- The Ability to Cry

The Ability to Cry

If I shed one tear, I might become Alice, swimming in an ocean of my tears.

By [Yiyun Li](#)

November 9, 2020



I've been ghosted, I told a friend on a Friday afternoon, when I hadn't been able to reach Julia for days. The following week, I would be out of town, and Julia—I have changed her name—was scheduled to take care of our dog and our younger son in the hours before my husband got home from work, but she had not replied to my messages for confirmation. It was unlike her. The previous two summers when we'd travelled, she had sent multiple photos and video clips, from our home in New Jersey, to let us know that the dog was happy and the garden was prospering. On the days that I was away, she picked up our son from school and had dinner with him. She transcribed their conversations, about history and politics, physics and feminism, Internet memes and Tokyo's rush hours, and sent them to me, accompanied by emojis.

Our little cockapoo was attacked by a pit bull when he was a puppy, and subsequently lost his courage, like the lion in "The Wizard of Oz." Our younger son is a reticent boy, and the person closest to him—his older brother—died by suicide shortly after we met Julia. She had befriended both the boy and the dog as no other adult had.

The calls I made to Julia went straight to her voice mail, which was full. Increasingly agitated, I Googled, and found a two-sentence obituary. Death, in the past sixteen months, had not been a stranger, having taken my elder son, my mother-in-law, and my father. I had not cried the day that Vincent died, or later when first my mother-in-law and then my father died. But, seeing Julia's obituary, I broke into uncontrollable sobs. A friend listened to me cry on the phone and told me that I was crying for the others, too. Another friend wrote to me that night and said that she, too, belonged to the "delayed crying club—and those tears do collect interest."

My father had heart trouble for more than half his life, but he had stayed active until his last weeks. The day before he went into heart surgery, from which he would never regain consciousness, he told me that he was prepared for any outcome. I had the urge then to confess to him the loss of Vincent, his eldest grandchild. I had flown to Beijing, where I grew up and where my parents still lived, when his health declined.

My mother-in-law, who also lived in China, died not long after Vincent did. We had kept the news from her, for she was already frail. The thought that she did not have to suffer the insufferable was a small solace. But the reason I didn't tell

my parents was murkier. The day after Vincent died, my friend Edmund White texted me from New York: “Come to the city. I’ll hold you and we’ll grieve together.” A friend’s mother e-mailed, “I wish I could be with you tonight so I could put my arms around you and try to soothe your pain.” My mother is not one to put her arms around me. My father was not one to express his feelings easily.

In the weeks after Vincent’s death, I thought of telling my father and asking him to keep the news to himself. But that would’ve been the cruellest thing to have done to him, even though he was among the most stoic people I’ve known. When my mother finally learned of Vincent’s suicide, she left a phone message: “All children should love their parents. I just don’t understand how a child could do that to his parents.”

That I shed tears for Julia did not mean I knew her well. These are a few things I remember: she once told me that she felt more comfortable with animals than with people; the first summer she dog-sat for us, she asked me to pick ten novels from my shelf—she read them all, and her favorites were Zora Neale Hurston’s “Their Eyes Were Watching God” and Tom Drury’s “The Driftless Area”; in a few passing conversations, she gave me a glimpse of her childhood, in rural Pennsylvania, with an alcoholic mother and an abusive father; whenever she had time, she would go to public lectures at the university where I teach; she was fluent in Spanish, and she was learning German—her two sons were in middle school and high school then, and she could finally arrange to take evening classes.

A few times, she talked about her depression. One evening, she texted me to say that all she wanted was to curl up on our sofa with the dog. A month before she died, she asked me about a minor character in my first novel, whose mother, a political activist, was executed when he was a young boy. “What do you think he’s like now?” she said. “Now that he’s a grown man, will he know more about her?”

I admitted that I had not thought of the boy after finishing the novel, and Julia said that I should write a sequel. I would never do that, but this I did not tell her. Everything I do, or do not do, may be explained by Marianne Moore’s poem “Silence,” which I read at Vincent’s memorial:

My father used to say,

“Superior people never make long visits,
have to be shown Longfellow’s grave
or the glass flowers at Harvard.
Self-reliant like the cat—
that takes its prey to privacy,
the mouse’s limp tail hanging like a shoelace from its mouth—
they sometimes enjoy solitude,
and can be robbed of speech
by speech which has delighted them.
The deepest feeling always shows itself in silence;
not in silence, but restraint.”
Nor was he insincere in saying, “Make my house your inn.”
Inns are not residences.

Make my house your inn—I can say that to my characters. They have all visited, sometimes staying for years, but inns are not residences.

When I accompanied my father to the operating room, it occurred to me that I had been given another opportunity to tell him about Vincent. If I whispered to him, he might not hear me before he fell under anesthesia. When he woke up, he might not even remember, though I had a feeling that he would not wake up again. There was less than ninety pounds of him left.

After nine hours of surgery, I followed the gurney to the I.C.U., where my father had to have a second, emergency surgery, right after he arrived. The double doors of the I.C.U. opened to a busy waiting area with multiple elevators. There was no seating. My father was being treated at the university hospital affiliated with my alma mater. It was a good hospital, but even a good hospital in Beijing might not always provide seating for the family. Wait for a moment out there, a nurse or a doctor would say, and a moment could be ten minutes, or an hour. I stood outside the I.C.U. for three and a half hours.

I understood then why folding chairs and stools and even chaise longues were sold along with crutches and wheelchairs and adult diapers in the shops near the hospital. I had seen people sitting in a corner as though they were picnicking. But even if a shop were open at midnight I would not purchase a folding chair. “Is there a piece of cardboard you can find and sit on?” my sister asked on the phone. She, too, lives in the United States and had also flown to Beijing to see our father, but had not been able to extend her stay in China, and had left right

before the surgery.

I chose to stand. I was rigid with pride, which was not far from fear. If I sat down, I might not be able to stand up again. If I shed one tear, I might become Alice, swimming in an ocean of my tears.

Before I turned six, I cried easily. One day, my father brought me a mirror. “How sad you look when you cry, but others won’t understand your sadness,” he said. “If you keep smiling, people will think you’re a happy person. You yourself will feel better.”

A year after Vincent died, one of his school friends visited my office. She had just begun to attend the university. She was in high school when he was in middle school, and they had sat next to each other in a language course.

“Back then, I thought, This kid is so smart, so fun, so imaginative—this kid is going to change the world,” the girl said. She was eighteen at most, and the way she called Vincent “this kid” made me change the subject. I asked her about her new college life, and she replied with a poised sweetness. Later, I was hit by a memory: we had been driving home from school when Vincent told me about the high schooler sitting next to him in Mandarin class.

“What’s she like?” I asked.

“Mommy-like,” he said.

I said I wasn’t sure if she would like to be described that way.

“But she has a round face just like you,” he said. “And she smiles all the time like you do.”

When I was seven, I was terrified of darkness, which amplified any small noise into monsters in a cave, or ghosts in a graveyard. “In a Newtonian world,” my father explained to me—and it was the first time I’d heard that we lived in a Newtonian world—“any sound comes from a vibration, and a scientific mind does not make up a story but determines what the sound source is.”

When I was nine, he taught me how to use a cleaver, placing its edge at a safe and efficient angle. “This way, you can cut anything with your eyes closed,” he said. For a while, I practiced, cutting cucumbers in rapid chopping motions

without looking. The cucumber pieces eventually came out paper-thin.

In my last year of high school, I attempted suicide. My father, admitting that he did not understand me, spoke again of our Newtonian reality: “Think of time in classical physics—a linear element, and perhaps all you do now is move along that axis. What you cannot sort out, you may be able to do so when you’re in college. What you don’t want is to stop at this point in time.”

The tears I couldn’t stop shedding—for Julia, for her sons, for our younger son who had to be told about her death, for our dog who would not remember her so would not know to miss her, just as he would not remember and miss Vincent, who had named him Quintus, after he became the fifth family member—all those tears felt like a challenge to my father’s urging to keep smiling or a challenge to Marianne Moore’s restraint. More so, they felt like a confrontation with my own belief: I was like the Pequod, with a sperm whale on the starboard side and a right whale hoisted on the larboard. I had thought that I could proceed with two deaths, my father’s and my son’s, and that I would be weighed down but balanced, not capsizing.

Once, when I was in middle school, my father picked up a book of Tang-dynasty poetry from my desk and read a few pages. “Ah, poetry,” he said, replacing the book. “One thing I’ve missed and won’t ever understand.”

His statement, wistful, was an anomaly. He spoke very little about himself. If I were his biographer, I could write no more than a meagre page.

Here’s what I know about his life:

He was born in Zhejiang Province, in a mountain village so poor that, contrary to what we had been taught in school, there had not even been an evil-landlord class. His father was a peasant, illiterate, but his mother could read and write—and write well, for I used to sneak her letters to my father from his drawer and read them. This was unusual for a peasant woman of her generation, though where and how she had received her education was unknown to me. My father’s uncle and aunt—his mother’s siblings—lived in a nearby town, and when my father finished the village school my grandmother made a sole request of her siblings, which was to advance my father’s education. They brought him to town. After middle school, he thought of enrolling in a normal school and becoming a teacher, but his aunt insisted that he be more ambitious. He went to

the nearest city for high school and, having excelled, was selected to be sent to a university in Moscow. But that future was dashed when he was given a diagnosis of tuberculosis. (Only once did he explain to us how he had become infected: he was a poor boarder, unable to afford food, and a kindhearted teacher often shared his food with him. Later, the teacher was found to have TB.)

For two years, while convalescing, my father taught mathematics at his high school (where my mother, whom he did not meet until years later, in Beijing, had been a student). When he recovered, he studied theoretical physics at university, and was chosen to work for a core unit making nuclear weapons. He seemed not to have enjoyed that, and wanted to go back to do research on quantum physics, a prospect that for a moment looked possible, but the offer from his dream institute was rescinded—why that was one could have many guesses, though all pointless. Instead, he was assigned to work at a place called the Chinese Society for Dialectics of Nature—doing what, I've never understood. He was naturally reticent, and his professional training required a disciplined silence. He never talked about any of his jobs.

My father had told us only a few details of his early life. He started at the village school at such a young age that he didn't even know how to tie his belt, and the teacher had to help him. He saw an automobile for the first time when he went to live with his uncle, and he was so frightened that he ran back indoors. When he graduated from high school, my grandmother could afford only a pair of new socks for him, and he travelled north with a suitcase—bought for him by the villagers—empty but for the socks. His university provided him with clothes and bedding. There, he once ran into a classmate who believed that he was going to fail a theoretical-physics course. My father said a few words—he said he forgot what—but many years later he met the classmate at a conference. He told my father that his words had saved him from despair.

“Always be kind to people,” my father said when he told me the last story. “We don’t often know what could make a difference to another person’s life.”

Be kind. Keep smiling. These principles have become my default mode, but they are also effective in keeping people at a distance. Make my house your inn, and you’ll have my kindness and my smile.

“There are many things you’ve got right in your fiction,” Vincent told me when he was in middle school. “But you’ve forgotten one important thing: people in

life are not as complex as you've made them in your fiction."

I had always believed the opposite: that people in life are infinitely complex, and one can only approximate in fiction.

"I know I am right and you are wrong," he said when I disagreed. "Because once you read good fiction you'll find people in life disappointing."

I admired his certainty, and I've taken his criticism to heart. Though, is it true that people are less complex in life than in fiction? Perhaps complexity, sought by characters or their creators, is more often shunned in life.

Some years ago, my father asked about my professional life: what I was working on, where I travelled for my books, what I taught at the university. I gave perfunctory answers, and then said that I didn't want to talk about myself. He sighed and said, "You always refuse to see that others like to know a little more about you."

Around the same time, I went to my younger son's class for an oral-history project. I told my interviewers a few anecdotes about my childhood, including the fact that I hated the candies given to me for the Lunar New Year. This made me an odd celebrity among the second graders. My son came home and said that everyone knew that I didn't like sweets as a kid, and that they found it strange.

I did not explain to them the reason for my distaste. It would be rude for a child to refuse anything given by adults, who, instead of placing a candy in my hand, often insisted on peeling the wrapper off and thrusting the sweet into my mouth. When no one was looking, I would spit it out and throw it behind a heater.

What can be shared, a small fraction, only underlines what cannot be shared, or what one is unwilling to. Although, my father would have said, "Why not share a little more? In a mathematical sense, more would be better than less, less better than nothing."

But one cannot share without resorting to words, and it is stoicism—silence and restraint—that defined my father, and it is silence and restraint that I have inherited from him. I wish I could have told him, without using my voice, without using any words, about Vincent's death. Had I whispered to him right before his surgery, I might have been nearest to speaking the truth without breaking my silence.

My regret, I now know, is not about refraining from speaking on his last conscious day but about not having spoken in the previous fourteen months. It was not out of consideration that I had spared him but out of pride, which was not far from fear. I did not want my father to remain stoic for my sake—I already have my stoicism. Though, had he shed tears for Vincent—as I did for Julia—I wouldn’t have been able to cry with him. The border between restraint and paralysis is not often cleanly marked.

The day before his surgery, my father told me his worries about my mother and my sister. He did not worry about me—perhaps I had made him believe that things would turn out all right with me. Do I wish otherwise? My father never said to me, “Make my house your inn.” It was that guest-child in me who insisted that I could not make myself a permanent resident in his care.

Some memories about my father that will remain with me, yet also underline what I don’t know about him:

He walked with his right shoulder visibly higher than his left shoulder—an asymmetry just short of being a deformity. This was a result of his working in the field with a carrying pole from an early age—that was all he said. What load was he carrying—stones, yams, firewood, water? I do not know his life as the son of peasants.

He loved a Japanese song called “The Spring of Northern Country,” with its lyrics about the childhood home that one yearns to return to. At different times of his life, I’d caught him listening to it, sometimes on repeat. For a man who seldom expressed his feelings, that song was close to a revelation. A revelation of what, though?

On a visit when we were living in California, my father saw a poem by Vincent, written when he was in fourth grade. We had had it framed and hung it in the living room. My father studied the poem for a long time, and then exclaimed, with an uninhibited wonder that was unlike him, “This is incredible! This child writes better than his mother!”

It amazed me that my father, who had years ago talked about the deficiency in his poetry education, loved Vincent’s poem as much as I did.

A year after my father’s death, I went back to Beijing, and found a collection of short memoirs written by the nuclear physicists and the mathematicians who had

worked on the atomic bombs and hydrogen bombs fifty years ago. There was a piece from my father, too.

I studied the collection with relish. Some of the memoirs read like science papers, with formulas and terms beyond my understanding. Some, inevitably, read like the propaganda from the nineteen-fifties and sixties. Two pieces have stayed with me. One was written by a female physicist, who described the duties of raising children while working on the development of the hydrogen bomb. The other was by my father. He was not a poetic writer, and he had no interest in recounting the glorious contribution he'd made to the nuclear industry. Instead, he wrote about a plant he'd seen in the desert near the testing site. Coming from a mountain village where rain is abundant, he found the plant's root system fascinating. He also wrote about the Army-issued canteen he had received—such good quality, he marvelled. It had stayed in use for more than thirty years. Both my sister and I had taken the canteen on school trips.

There must be a thousand things in his life like the desert plant, remembered only by him, that were never shared with his family.

There are many words that my father and I did not say to each other, "I love you" among them. After my childhood, he hugged me only once, when I was saying farewell to my mother and him at the end of a three-week trip to China. Right before he went into surgery, I patted his face and said nothing. Not saying anything, not letting my father into my sorrow—and not knowing how to. Perhaps one, acting out of kindness, acts out of cruelty, too. Had he known that I had excluded him from the most astonishing loss of my life, he would not have been surprised. I will never know if he would have surprised me: Would he, the most stoic man in my life, have cried for Vincent and for me; would he have told me to keep smiling, as that is what I do the best? ♦

Podcast Dept.

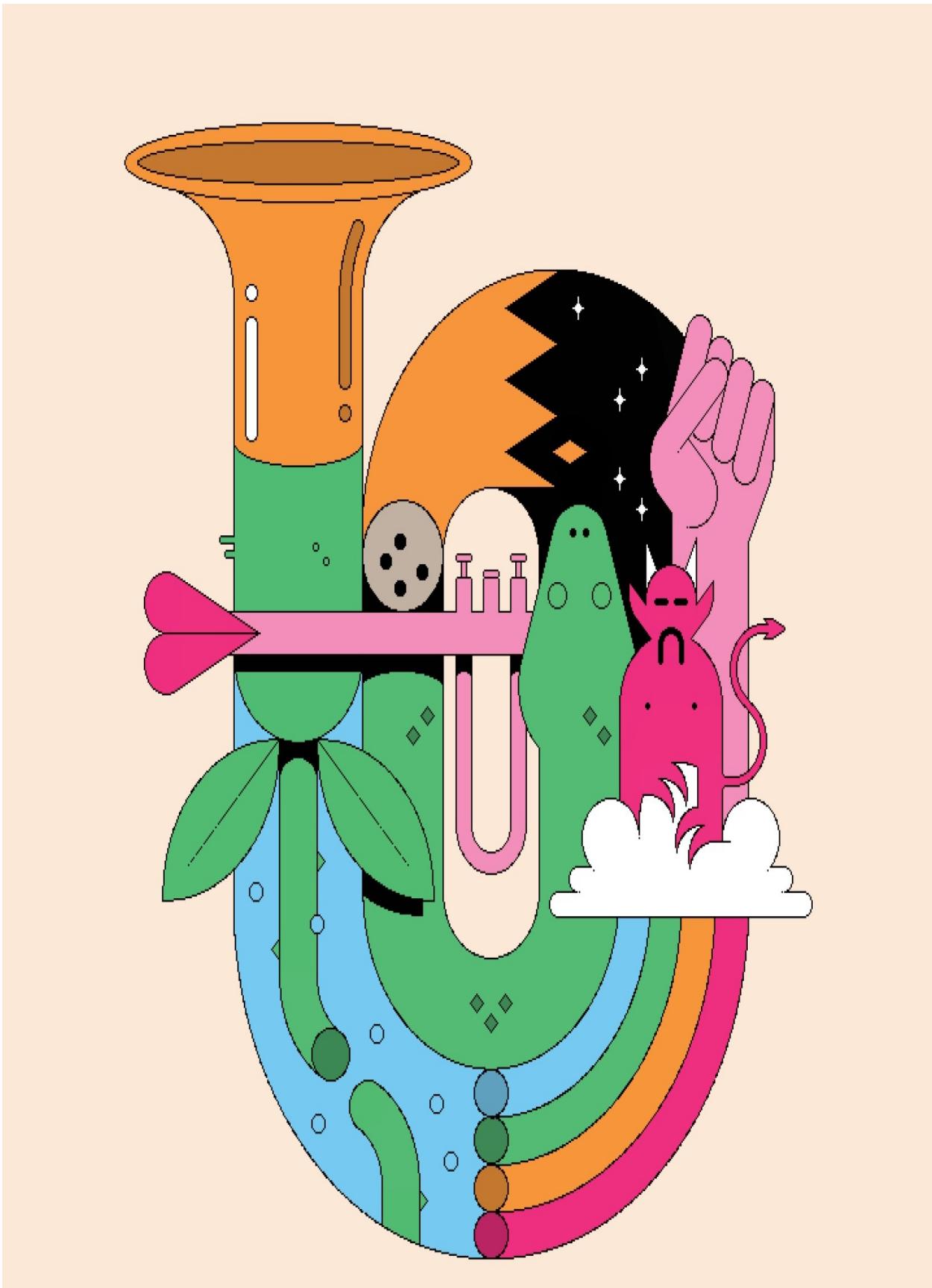
- [The Secret Sounds of “Song Exploder”](#)

The Secret Sounds of “Song Exploder”

We tend to have no idea how music is made. For nearly seven years, one series has supplied some answers.

By [Amanda Petrusich](#)

November 9, 2020



For much of the first half of the twentieth century, it was possible for a curious listener to identify each of the constituent parts of a pop song. A hit such as Frank Sinatra's "Young at Heart," which sold more than a million copies in 1953, featured recognizable analog components: strings, horns, flute, brushes on a snare drum, Sinatra's seductive, lilting vocal. Yet by 1955 the advent of multitrack recording, in which the various parts of a song could be captured separately and then braided together, meant that a recording was no longer merely the document of a live, synchronous performance. Auteurist producers such as Brian Wilson and Phil Spector came to think of sound as pliable—any piece of audio could be denatured and reconstructed. The old way, in which a finite number of fallible people played in a room until they got it right, had been obliterated.

In the past few decades, that sense of pliability has only ballooned. Technology has evolved so fast and so forcefully that the notion of going into a studio—a room in which trained professionals, seated behind a panel of glass, turn knobs and adjust levers—feels nearly quaint. Records can be made at home, using software such as Ableton Live or GarageBand, which can then be augmented with any number of plug-ins, expanding the palette of available sounds. Many of these production techniques were first adopted by hip-hop or electronic artists, but they are now ubiquitous; this means that trying to determine the origin of any single sound on a modern recording is difficult. Instrumentation, in the most general sense of the word, has become opaque. For fans who favor streaming services, the absence of liner notes, which once offered detailed production and songwriting credits, only exaggerates the mystery. Is that an actual violin, a synthesizer that sounds like a violin, a sample of a synthesizer that sounds like a violin, or a raccoon playing a kazoo that has been digitally manipulated to sound like a violin?

In 2014, the electronic musician Hrishikesh Hirway launched a biweekly podcast, "Song Exploder," that works as a tonic for such confusion. Each episode sees a guest artist dissect a song he or she has written, recorded, or produced, considering the provenance and punch of its individual components. The premise might sound vaguely clinical, or even joyless—music, of course, is about more than its parts—but "Song Exploder," which is in its sixth year and has recently been adapted into a Netflix series, is warm, deep, and illuminating. The show is rooted in Hirway's expansive curiosity about how, exactly, art is made. After a while, his central question—"How did you get from nothing to

this?”—begins to feel applicable to nearly every endeavor we undertake.

At the start of each episode, Hirway delivers a brief introduction in a soft, steady voice, and then mostly disappears. The choice to edit his own questions out of the show feels egoless—especially in the podcast business, which seems to reward a kind of unabashed garrulousness—and it lends his interviews a rambling, barstool intimacy. The episodes are short, often between fifteen and twenty minutes, and end with Hirway playing the deconstructed song in its entirety. (For much of 2019, “Song Exploder” was hosted by the musician and songwriter Thao Nguyen, who followed a similar format.) Though Hirway started out interviewing primarily independent or independent-leaning musicians (the first year featured the Postal Service, the Microphones, Spoon, and Julia Holter, among others), his purview has expanded to include more mainstream acts, including U2, Lorde, Ghostface Killah, Iggy Pop, the Roots, Björk, Norah Jones, Nine Inch Nails, and the Killers.

One of the more visceral pleasures of “Song Exploder” is how it makes plain certain enigmas of music production. Hirway wrangles control of an artist’s digital recording files—often called “stems”—and some of the best episodes reveal the earthly source of every single piece of audio on a record. One entry takes on “Shook Ones, Pt. II,” a 1995 single by the Queens-based Mobb Deep. The rapper Prodigy, who made up half of the duo, died in 2017, but the remaining member, Havoc, walks Hirway through how he constructed the song in his bedroom, in the Queensbridge projects, using records borrowed from his father and equipment purchased by Prodigy’s grandmother. Havoc extracted the song’s beat by pitch-shifting two seconds of a scratched copy of Herbie Hancock’s “Jessica,” created the bass line by manipulating a single piano note, and took the track’s signal sound—a bright, rising, atonal wail that appears before the chorus—from an old Quincy Jones record. For an interested listener, the episode can feel like briefly putting on a pair of X-ray specs.

Though Hirway has a technician’s ear, he is just as deft at distilling the animating impulse behind a piece of music. His goal isn’t merely to demystify production; he wants to study the idea or feeling that carried an artist through a song’s creation. One of my favorite episodes is from 2017, when Hirway interviewed the drummer Lars Ulrich and the singer and guitarist James Hetfield, both of the metal band Metallica, about “Moth Into Flame,” a cut from the group’s tenth LP, “Hardwired . . . to Self-Destruct.” For slightly younger artists, the process of songwriting is often a frantic journey of self-discovery. But

Metallica, which formed in 1981, has been doing this work for a long time. In recent years, the band has developed a clear and consistent schedule: drop the kids off at school, and clock in to HQ before 9 A.M. Perhaps because of this—the band’s professionalism gently deflates the idea of art-making as dramatic—I found the episode gripping. “Moth Into Flame” is an unruly and vertiginous song; it can make a listener feel as if she were going slightly too fast on a highway off-ramp. After Hetfield developed the riff during a sound check, Ulrich took it home and began to think about an arrangement. He wanted the drums to sound especially big, in homage to the metal band Mastodon. “I’m letting you in on a lot of trade secrets here,” Ulrich says, laughing. “I’ve never really talked about this stuff in this detail.” Hetfield describes the lyrics as a response to the intoxication of fame and the brutality of life on the road. For him, songwriting is work, but it is also a deliberate and necessary process, and has been for forty years. “This saves my life daily,” he says. “This is therapy for me. We’re writing these songs because we need them.”

The therapeutic impulse is something of a motif in the series. For many artists, writing music is a way of seeing, understanding, and metabolizing their innermost desires. “I’ve always known what I’m interested in and what I’m feeling because of the way my music sounds,” the singer and songwriter Maggie Rogers says, in an episode focussed on her song “Alaska.” In the current season, the pop star Selena Gomez speaks about how her single “Lose You to Love Me” was an attempt to exorcise her heartbreak after a wildly publicized split from Justin Bieber. “Honestly, I’m exhausted, but I just want to tell the truth. I want to let go of this feeling that I had,” Gomez said.

Hirway is considerably more visible on the Netflix adaptation than he is on the podcast, but the lightness of his touch—he is precise, informed, and gentle—seems to invite these sorts of confession. The television show unpacks four songs: Alicia Keys’s “Three Hour Drive,” R.E.M.’s “Losing My Religion,” Lin-Manuel Miranda’s “Wait for It,” and “LA,” by the R. & B. singer Ty Dolla \$ign, who was born Tyrone Griffin, Jr., in 1982. “This is intense,” Griffin says at the start of his episode, taking a seat across from Hirway. Griffin’s début album, “Free TC,” was released in 2015; he named the record after his brother, who is serving a sentence of sixty-seven years to life for first-degree murder, and who Griffin believes was unjustly incarcerated. “LA,” which opens the album, is glossy but mournful, and TC’s voice appears toward the end of the song. The track also features guest performances by Kendrick Lamar, Brandy, and James Fauntleroy, and prominent use of a talk box, a device that allows a musician to

“talk” through her instrument, by singing or speaking into a plastic tube. (“One of the greatest instruments ever created,” Griffin declares.) Griffin nervously smokes a cigarette, and listening to him explain each element of the song—the bass, which was inspired by his father’s funk band, Lakeside; the sparsely deployed strings, which were arranged and conducted by Benjamin Wright, the former musical director for Aretha Franklin—is revelatory. “Songs to me are all about space, different explosions at different times,” he says.

In the episode about “Wait for It,” from the musical “Hamilton,” Lin-Manuel Miranda clarifies his process by walking Hirway around the Morris-Jumel Mansion in New York City’s Washington Heights neighborhood. The house was built in 1765, for the British colonel Roger Morris and his wife, Mary, but was later commandeered by George Washington; in 1810, Stephen Jumel, a French wine merchant, moved in with his wife, Eliza. After Jumel died, in 1832, Eliza married Aaron Burr. “Wait for It” is written from Burr’s woeful point of view, and it laments Alexander Hamilton’s swift success in politics. (“I’m not standing still, I am lying in wait,” Burr seethes.) When Miranda was working on the song, he would visit the mansion, loiter in Burr’s bedroom, and write.

Yet inspiration does not always arrive when we are ready to receive it. Miranda figured out the chorus to “Wait for It” not at Burr’s mansion but while walking to a party in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. “I was listening to the loop, and recording an a-cappella voice memo at the same time,” he recalls. Hirway asks Miranda if he still has the voice memo. We watch Miranda’s face as he plays it back. The recording is crude, hurried, and breathless. As he listens, Miranda appears embarrassed, proud, and, briefly, bewildered. The memo works as a reminder that songs are built by experts, but still, to some small and ineffable extent, divined. ♦

Poems

- “[Ways of Being Lonely](#)”
- “[Spumante](#)”

[November 16, 2020 Issue](#)

Ways of Being Lonely

By [Kim Addonizio](#)

November 9, 2020

Audio: Read by the author.

Like a haunted river no bridge wants to lay itself down over.

Like a taxidermied grizzly in the student union.

You cry at a frequency only subatomic insects can hear.

That time with him in Houston.

Sometimes you flame into a scary flower.

An eruption of coherence in the postmodern seminar.

You stand in a shallow creek and your reflection floats slowly downstream without you.

Alcohol is your emotional-support animal.

The fan hums erratically.

An unclaimed suitcase of miniature toiletries, burst open on the baggage carrousel.

Like an amoeba without an e-scooter.

An extra in an epic battle scene, trampled by a non-Equity horse.

You're a red-breasted flute, but everyone else is a dowel.

A Zen koan growing in the White House Rose Garden.

Sun-damaged curtains in the parlor of an abandoned friendship.

You're the queen, but you're a bee being swept into the pool's filtration system.

Like a version, touched for the very last time.

Spooky piano music rising from the dishwater.

You wake up alone to a bird reciting Keats.

[November 16, 2020 Issue](#)

Spumante

By [Colin Channer](#)

November 9, 2020

Audio: Read by the author.

Weeks diffuse into each other like
they're sprayed; jetted, they shoot certain:
days, times, doodles, kept appointments,
next is lull, pool, fading, flash-disperse.

I was shook and shocked by death,
chanced upon it on a winter walk,
proof of plod for miles behind me
swept in fog, a wet so thick

it blended with the snow that
settled plenty on the sand. It
was not yet daybreak, and I'd driven
miles to walk and think,

find peace in sweat and sea racket,
that ancient wise asthmatic sound.
The light took its lazy time for lifting.
In the shift I saw a darker shaping

than the gray—at two miles a boat
of some proportion, at quarter mile a whale.
Since then I've been lamenting,
moving as if held in gel.

At night I dream it, see it stretched
across the wrack of high tide,
belly to the stars—flung shells and gravel—
throat-part grooved, fins unflappable,

balletic flukes symmetric

in their pointing, how they fused:
all this in half-light, all this in sea dirge,
wet air matte, toned silver,

and I hunched in the hood of my parka,
God-awed before shavasana,
stilled as if the glassy eye that looked to me
had fixed me in a century of tintype.

Ah-gah-pay. I've only recently discovered
love of animals—well, Kili, Nan, and Rebus,
three dogs. Now I've partly taken leave
of language, have given incoherence due.

I know what it's like to be mammal
filled with deepest ocean sounds:
oblivion, solitude, stillness
intermittent by quake roar,

tectonic slipping, lava fissures,
ship propellers drilling,
the human croons of whales.
There is slave in me, fat heritage,

no fluke I'm invested with hurt,
echo of the hunted, located, natural
rights redacted, meagered to resource.
All is flux as I'm collapsing

love and distance, moving through the gel,
my life, edging the canals of my city,
clomping up its hills, memory aerosol,
head in self cloud, getting Melville

as I should have, watching at him
contemplate the vista from a landlocked house,
hills becoming pods of transmigrating giants:
Greylock. Berkshire range.

There's thirst for music in this less than solid

state. Ampless back in my office,
I knee-prop my Fender, ancient black thing.
Strum it casual, weep;

suck salt in darkness, fingers guessy,
lazing up the sound. Still, something
brusque runs up me: shuddered
wood, that deep flesh shook

that makes string music fuse to you.
The thumbing further breaks the thing in me.
I know what now love is,
know tentative for sure its

incoherence, jelly analog, is mine for life.
The windows stay black and phlegmatic
as the air outside begins to heave with rain.
I hum, thumbing, fashion something of a home,

some succor, pulse quick but steady as I deep dive
to dub. With it comes the baleen
wheeze of mouth organs, plangent blue whoop.
I am dub and dub is water.

Exile, I wish you could have lived in me,
plunging, life *spumante*. I'd slip my hold
on you like magma shot for islands
every single time you breach.

Profiles

- What Makes the Difference Between Getting Out of Prison and Staying Out?

What Makes the Difference Between Getting Out of Prison and Staying Out?

For those navigating the challenges of reentry, it can help to have a tough-minded guide with lived experience.

By [Adam Gopnik](#)

November 9, 2020



“Don’t answer! When you come home and someone says, ‘How ya doing?’ it’s not a question. You just say *fine*. Every New Yorker knows that. If someone says, ‘How ya doing?’ and you start telling someone how you are, you might as well be wearing a big sign saying ‘I Have No Idea Where I Am.’ So. How ya doing?” Sam Rivera laughed, and his audience wasn’t quite sure whether to laugh with him or not. It was six o’clock on a Thursday evening last fall at the Castle, at 140th Street and Riverside Drive, and the weekly meeting was just beginning.

The Castle is the main residential wing of the Fortune Society, a nonprofit organization that has been helping people cope with the aftermath of incarceration since its founding, by the Broadway press agent David Rothenberg, more than fifty years ago. “Thursday meeting” is a mandatory, semi-sacred gathering of the Castle’s eighty or so residents, all of whom have been incarcerated, some as recently as earlier in the week, along with people who once lived there or who would like to live there. Various guests may appear, too, ranging from John Edward Wetzel, the secretary of corrections for the State of Pennsylvania, to Luann de Lesseps, the “Real Housewives of New York” star who once spent a night in jail. (Lesseps arranged a beauty day for the women of the Castle, which was broadcast on “Housewives.”)

Much of the language of the meeting is specific to the world of those who have been locked up. “I’m a reluctant veteran of the short bid,” someone might say gloomily—a short bid being a brief sentence. A language of elaborate indirection fills the room. “Justice involved” means that someone was arrested for or convicted of a crime; “been upstate” means imprisoned at northern-county places like Attica or Auburn (where license plates are made) or at Sing Sing (where the electric chair Old Sparky once stood). The catchall phrase for the totality is “lived experience,” the term having migrated here to mean, simply, “I’ve done time.” Either people have lived experience or they don’t.

Partly through the osmosis that teaches all of us our dialects—nobody has to tell a quarterback to say “It was a team victory”; he absorbs the words when he starts playing football—the residents use many cautious voices and tenses to narrate their movement through a hostile world. “I got involved in a bad situation” or “I found myself in a circumstance in which someone got hurt” segues into the first-person active: “I’m putting my life together and reconnecting with my family now.”

Sooner or later, though, the complicated language settles, for a newcomer, into a basic formula of introduction: “I’ve been away. I’ve come home.” At the Thursday meeting last fall, when a recent arrival said that he had been away—perhaps for ten or twenty or thirty years—there was a round of applause, and Rivera, officially the associate vice-president of housing at Fortune but in truth its resident guru and presiding demiurge, was there to say, gently, “Welcome home, brother.”

Rivera is a big man. Of Native American and Puerto Rican parentage, he has the build of the fullback he once was. With a shaved head and an earring in each ear, he had led the meeting for about two years, with good humor and discipline—like one’s ideal of a staff sergeant, who creates maximum morale but with minimal opportunity for goofing off. As a young man, in the eighties, he was arrested on gun and drug charges, and acknowledges significant lived experience himself.

The first-floor room where the Thursday meeting takes place is decorated with a plush rug and photographs of the Castle from back when it was a Catholic girls’ school, and a poster-size *Times* article about the Fortune kitchen, which has a reputation for seriously good cooking. Week after week, the same seats are almost always occupied by the same people. A longtime resident called E., a formidable Jamaican with the voice, and the authority, of Laurence Fishburne, sits in the far-left corner. (“The computer room is not a place to come to hang out,” he announced as one meeting began. “If that’s what you want, to hang out—that’s not the place for that.” After E. speaks, it would be a brave visitor to the computer room who tried to make it the place for that.) To the right, a line of older residents, looking a little worn out and a little wise, fill the chairs. One Thursday, Shawnta Montgomery, who loves to tease Rivera for his sincerity and self-seriousness, was on the right, too, closer up. An older resident, Ervin Hunt, known to all as Easy, sat in the rear, to the left. Lined up beside Rivera at the front of the room, facing the residents and guests, were Stanley Richards, the Fortune Society’s executive vice-president, and David Rothenberg, its eighty-seven-year-old founder. Upstairs, there are comfortable bedrooms for more than eighty residents, but at the moment they were, by the society’s rule, empty. *Everyone* has to come to the Thursday meeting.

The ostensible point of the meeting is to share announcements, discuss the events of the week, create new rules, and greet new arrivals. But its real point, Rivera confided, is “to conduct a group-therapy session for seventy-five people,

which they say you can't do." His goal was to get the people in the room, having come home, to *stay* home.

Rivera can keep the room buoyant with a joke—usually at the expense of Rothenberg, who, as the household saint, can afford to have a few jokes told at his expense (and whose aura is very different from Rivera's: small, high-strung, gay, and Jewish). Rivera and Rothenberg were like a couple who had been working in a hardware store for too many decades; they enjoyed each other and gibed at each other, and by now the enjoyment had become the gibing. "David's idea of a whisper is putting his hands over his mouth and then yelling," Rivera said in the middle of a meeting, after Rothenberg, doing just that, had urged him to move on from some stalled subject. "My kids do that," Rivera said.

Rivera soberly restores order, often in response to an excess of "poetry" that the meeting has allowed itself. ("If you call someone's bullshit 'poetry,' they won't be that offended, even if you're telling them you don't want to hear it.") On this evening, for instance, someone used a formula familiar from twelve-step programs: "You have to hit bottom before you can come back up." This sentiment went around the room with echoing fervor. But Rivera let twenty minutes or so pass before he intervened.

"You know, I just want to come back to something that the brother was saying before," he said. "About how you have to hit bottom to come back up. Now, I don't believe that's true. What's bottom? Where's bottom? How do you know you've hit bottom? There may be a bottom below the bottom you've hit already! There may be a *thousand* bottoms you could hit if you let yourself. So—say that *this*, wherever you are, is your bottom. You're going to declare that it's as low as you're going to let yourself go. Then come back up. Don't wait to hit bottom before you start working your way back up. Call this bottom *the* bottom."

The crowd, including the original speaker, laughed at Rivera's earnest repetition of "bottom," but he had made his point: they couldn't afford the indulgence of self-dramatization. Creating a certain kind of double rhythm was essential to his work: a difficult truth was followed by self-deprecating laughter. A balloon filled with the helium of unrealistic hope was emptied, and then refilled with the warm air of actuality.

On another occasion, Shawnta Montgomery mentioned meeting someone who had worked with Rivera in the past: "He said, 'Sam tried to fix me, but he

couldn't.' But he sends his regards."

"I couldn't fix him?" Rivera said, with some vehemence. "I can't fix him. I can't fix you. I can't fix anyone. Nobody fixes you but you. That's why I say, If you're going around me—to smoke or get high or whatever—you're not fooling *me*. I'll accept you any way you are. The only person you're fooling is you." Rivera emphasizes that change happens only hour by hour and day by day—and that, nonetheless, you can wake up one day and find that the hours of work have accumulated into months and then years. "That's the only way it happens. You're always coming home."

He has a favorite aphorism about those whom he always calls his "clients," which on another afternoon he stressed more fiercely than his usually equable tone allows. "The quote is mine, so I'm gonna own it," he said. "'The crime is not who you are, it's what you did.' David said once, to a journalist who asked, 'How can you work with these violent criminals?,' 'Well, how would you like to be identified for your entire life by the one worst thing you've ever done? If your editor made you put at the top of every column you ever wrote, Written by Tom the Bed-Wetter. Or by Tom, Who Drove Under the Influence.' I've worked in D.C., where people identify themselves by their degrees—'I went to this school'—and that's what it's about. And sometimes people of color introduce themselves that way—'I was in prison.' But that's not you! The crime is what you did. The crime is not who you are."

Like anyone who is naturally good at something, Sam Rivera got to be naturally good at his work by thinking constantly about his performance and being acutely aware of what he is doing as he does it.

"Part of what I have is the contradiction of my appearance," he explained one evening. "I'm a big man, and I can look intimidating." He crossed his arms and looked out at an imagined audience. "So, when I'm there, like this"—he became the man he is in meetings, hands relaxed by his sides, a half smile on his face—"then I'm sending the message that you can be both, a tough guy who is open and not frightened. 'If *Sam* is like that, then I can be like that.' It's about me taking control of what my own experience is. I had a mentor once, and I was telling him everything I was doing, and he said, 'Where is Sam in this?' That was hugely helpful to me. Seeing yourself from outside."

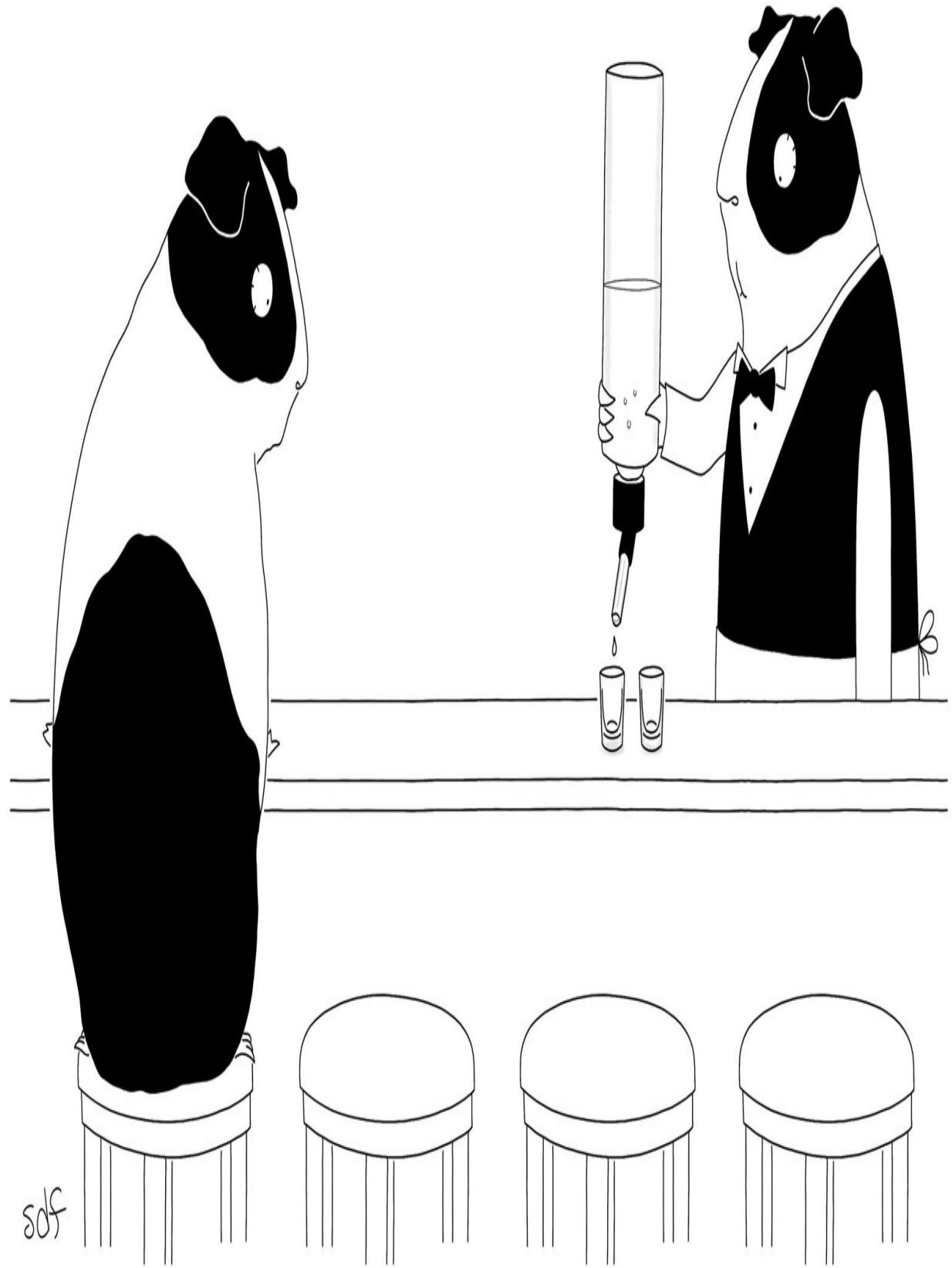
Rivera was sitting over dinner at Trufa, an eclectic little restaurant at Broadway

and 140th Street. The neighborhood, which had been poverty-stricken, filled with abandoned buildings, and therefore affordable when the Fortune Society salvaged the place, in the late nineteen-nineties, is now, as Columbia University pushes north and west, an ever more desirable area, dotted with restaurants and the inevitable espresso joints. The former convent school would be unaffordable now.

“There’s an architecture of the room that I rely on—E. being firm in the corner, Easy kibbitzing from the side,” Rivera went on. What had seemed an accidental weekly arrangement was purposeful. “You can’t emphasize enough things that may seem superficial. The look of a room, the kind of food we serve, which doesn’t look or taste like institutional food. Remember, a lot of our residents are people who went from eating institutional food in school to eating institutional food in prison and that’s all they know. No one’s ever spoken to them empathetically. No one’s ever asked them how they feel.”

Rivera grew up on the Lower East Side. “My mother had me when she was fifteen,” he said. “But we were always working poor. My parents always had jobs.” He speaks with the ancient, “r”-less, broad-vowel speech of a New York working class. In prison, Rivera recalled, he helped care for sick inmates during the height of the *AIDS* crisis, and he has done the same sort of work ever since. Rivera first visited Fortune as a client, in 1991, and then began a career in various post-prison and advocacy groups, including a long stint at Exponents, a leading drug-rehab organization in New York. Since then, he has been back and forth between Fortune and another nonprofit. “I’m a four-time recidivist here,” he has joked. He lives in Teaneck, New Jersey, and has two teen-age sons and a daughter in her twenties.

“That you’ve got to hit the rock-bottom moment?” he said, reflectively. “It’s something I’ve been thinking about for a long time. I’ve looked at programs that were created around recovery protocols, and the theory was: If there was ten per cent left of your rock bottom, they would intentionally bring you down to that zero, and then build you back up. My view is just the opposite. If you still have ten per cent after being through prison and abuse of many kinds, then we can start.”



“So, I tell the story. I was with my boys, watching a show where they’re imploding a casino, and I’m kind of into it. It’s all dramatic, and they hit the thing—old school!—you know, the box with the plunger? And at about the third floor it caved in and the guy said, ‘Wow! With all the dynamite we used to destroy this building, the foundation was so strong that it wouldn’t go down.’ And I’m, like, ‘That’s *it!*’ If we can find your foundation, you won’t fall. You’ll lean! You’ll trip, but you won’t fall. So *that’s* my work, finding the foundation that remains. Let’s not make it about the dynamite. Let’s work on your foundation—what will keep you standing, even if you start to use drugs again, even if you went back to prison. So that’s the only bottom I want to hit. That foundation that’s still there.”

David Rothenberg founded the Fortune Society almost by accident. In the late nineteen-sixties, at the peak of his career as an extremely successful Broadway publicist, working with the likes of Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, he produced a Canadian play about rape in prison called “Fortune and Men’s Eyes,” and realized that the men who were most stirred by the play were ex-cons, as they were called then. Almost as an afterthought, he began a help line for such people—“Really, only an extra desk in the office”—and watched it blossom into a lifetime’s work. Yet he remains spiritually on both sides of the doorway. This makes his conversation a singular braid of show-biz anecdotes and social-activist exhortations. Holding out his right arm, he might say, “This is the arm that Liz Taylor cried on at the opening night of Dick Burton’s ‘Hamlet’ in 1964,” and then avow, “The mistake you make is thinking that they’re *ever* honest about crime numbers. The city will bring them up and down as they want, according to the politics of the moment.”

The turning point, for him, took place on “The David Susskind Show,” in 1968. “Everyone watched Susskind on Sunday nights,” Rothenberg recalled. “They always had six of a kind—six ex-alcoholics or six prostitutes or whatever was coming in sixes that year. I called the producer and said, ‘Have you ever had six former prisoners?’ She said, ‘I want ’em but I can’t get ’em.’ I said, ‘I can.’ So we went on, and the next morning, after the show, I got call after call after call. It was overwhelming! There was an endless line of men snaking up the stairs of this theatrical building. And I began to transition from full-time press agent and part-time prison activist to full-time prison activist and part-time press agent. Well, no-time press agent.”

Rothenberg takes a late lunch or an early dinner most days at Trufa. “Thursday meetings are always essential—we realized that if we had rooms and no services we were just a hotel,” he said. “What Sam does at the meeting is he gets people talking who are comfortable talking, but sometimes he’ll say, ‘Hey, Joe—what’s happening with you?’ And Joe starts talking and doesn’t shut up. He had never been given permission. Joe’s never been asked how he is in his life!” Rothenberg chuckled.

“You know ‘The Green Pastures,’ the movie?” The 1936 film relates Bible stories as Black American folklore. “Yeah, there’s a line, I think it’s from there, that I always repeat. The Lord, who’s represented as African-American, says to an angel, ‘We have to take care of that planet, but don’t forget the wing of the sparrow over there.’ Sam is one of the people taking care of his portion of the planet by taking care of the wings of the sparrow.”

Housing programs for an offender’s reentry into the community usually involve a bewildering array of bureaucracies, and often result in former inmates being placed in halfway houses and homeless shelters that replicate the conditions of prison. Almost three-quarters of the released population are arrested again within three years.

“The Castle began when we kept seeing that there was an urgent need for housing for people released who became homeless,” JoAnne Page, the president and C.E.O. of the Fortune Society, explained from her office at the society’s administrative headquarters, in Long Island City. “More than half the people coming out of state prison to New York City right now are being dumped in shelters. *HUD* defines people who are coming out of incarceration as *not* homeless, so no *HUD*-funded program can take them in. They have to be sleeping under a bridge before they can officially be classed as homeless.” In the late nineteen-nineties, Page came upon the empty Catholic girls’ school. “The city took it from the nuns and left it vacant, with the idea that it would become a TB hospital, but they gave up on that idea, and instead it became a magnet for drug dealing.” In 1998, Fortune bought it for \$1.2 million.

Page emphasizes the society’s “open doors” policy. “We’re bound by laws about sexual offenders and proximity to schools,” she said. But applicants are screened for “current risk of violence, *not* a history of violence. We have some of the people with the worst records in New York City coming for active services, but no metal detectors. We offer people something they really want, and the

condition is that they have to behave peaceably if they want it.”

The Fortune Society holds most of its job-training and vocational-education programs at its Long Island City offices, with the Castle offering its own approach to social services. “It’s valuable that Sam has lived experience,” Page said. “He knows prison faces. He can tell the difference between someone who looks tough and someone who’s a threat. And most of the people coming home will see somebody in that room they did time with. That changes everything.”

The residents of the Castle admired Rivera for being as reliable about small things as he was about big ones. E., the longtime resident with the basso-profundo voice, put it bluntly: “Sam is the difference between leadership and leadershit. If you have leadershit, everything’s going to be shit, and that’s the primary reason why the shelters are such hellscapes. Sam watches the simple things that improve the outlook, improve the humanity.” Hilton N. Webb, Jr., another long-term resident, sixtyish and intensely serious, who is studying for a master’s degree in social work, and writing a memoir titled “Dancing in the Midst of Nothing,” said, “Whatever Sam says is going to happen, it’s going to *happen*. I remember when I was having problems with my roommate and I had to move to a single room. Sam said, ‘You’re going to have the same river view,’ and, to make a long story short, it happened. The river view is a *nice* view. That it was a little thing didn’t mean he thought it was nothing.”

The residents recognized the difficulty of Rivera’s role. “I’m aware of the stresses on him,” Webb said. He described a man trying to get into the building, and screaming at Rivera. “Sam was talking back to him in this very mellow, in this Zen way,” Webb went on, “but I noticed that he was holding a radio, and it was physically impossible that he could have tightened his hand on that radio any harder than he was. Knot-tight! I couldn’t have stood there with this guy spitting in my face saying the things he was saying. Yet I know that Sam wasn’t afraid, and he could have whipped this guy’s ass. So he’s, you know, the whole deal—the warrior-monk kind of guy. Sun Tzu said if you know the outcome of the fight anyway, you have no need to fight. I know and you know, so why don’t we pretend the fight is over and move on?”

One critical part of transitioning is to help someone involved with the justice system get involved with the employment system. “I got my job and my apartment” is a motto of success. As the sociologist Erving Goffman wrote in the nineteen-fifties, “A status, a position, a social place, it is not a material thing to

be possessed and displayed”; it is “something to be enacted and portrayed.” That idea is profoundly relevant to the work of the Fortune Society. Coming home means learning the language and the rituals shared by the society outside prison walls. Weekly workshops at Fortune prepare clients for job interviews, and, particularly, help them address the obvious question: Where have you been for the past four or five (or thirty) years? It is against the law in New York City to ask a job candidate about his or her criminal record, but it is legal, after a job has been offered, to run a search on the prospective hire.

People who have just come home meet interviewers in mock interviews. What is your greatest strength in a work situation? (The right answer is: “I love to work with others.”) What’s your greatest weakness. (“Uh, my greatest weakness? Females,” one newcomer says, a candid but very wrong answer. The right answer is Clinton-esque: “I try too hard to get it right.”) A young man who wants to be a restaurant cook is guided through an interview in which it becomes apparent that he doesn’t know much about cooking. (“You get in the good habit of bullshitting white people,” Rivera remarked later. “And you start bullshitting yourself.”) Interviewers like detail: about work programs upstate, about roofing or custodial work or how to operate a forklift.

Near the end of one mock interview, the questioner said, “You seem like a fine candidate for the job. I’d like to offer it to you. But, of course, I’ll run a background check on you. Tell me, if I do will anything come up?” The candidate, trained in previous classes, struggled to recall the ideal answer, which is something like: “Yes, when I was younger and behaving stupidly, an unfortunate situation occurred and someone got badly hurt. This led to my becoming involved in the criminal-justice system. But I studied hard and attended several programs while I was in jail. That person I was is not who I am now.” That, the interviewer explained, is a version of the perfect answer, which the residents work to adapt. Among the central skills that the Fortune Society teaches is how, in a job interview, to tell the truth while putting the best face on a previous failure.

All of us, of course, have to learn to navigate the waters of such interviews by telling the truth while putting the best face on previous failures. (“I did get a C on that Spanish test, but it was the result of some issues in my personal life and, as you can see, I pulled it right up in the following term” is what a kid raised with good fortune learns to say.) The broader task, as Rivera sees it, is to instill new habits of response among the formerly incarcerated. “You have to relearn all

your reflexes,” Rivera said. “When you feel threatened, don’t react. If I find myself threatened by the possibility of a confrontation on the street—just a car-cutoff thing, you know; happens every day—I’ve found myself literally running in the other direction to remove myself from those reflexes and that risk.” The aim is to learn a new language of performance in order to have a new chance at life.

The theatrical side of the Castle is self-evident to its sharper-eyed residents. “The Fortune face—that’s what I call what you see in the Thursday-night performance space,” E. explained. “I don’t say that in a disparaging way, but that’s what it is—people are auditioning for acceptance into the program and they’re bringing their A-game to be accepted. And then you get to know the person, as opposed to the audition. Sometimes it’s the same person. With some people, it was just a façade, a performance to get in. And those people really don’t last that long. They shouldn’t.”

Some more radical-minded social-justice advocates don’t like the idea that people who were incarcerated should be taught how to blend in with middle-class rituals and mores. Rivera considers this view the kind of luxury that only people who are not struggling to “stay home” can indulge in. “Obviously, we have to reform the system and end the problems, and put fewer people in prison,” he said. “Obviously. But my job is saving lives *now*. If I wait for the world to be better, then the whole society would have to change, and I don’t have a long enough life to wait for that to happen.”

At a Thursday meeting a couple of weeks later, a recent home-comer praised another Castle client for gently urging him away from a confrontation with someone who pushed him—or whom he perceived to have pushed him—on the subway. “I almost lost it,” the home-comer recounted. “I was ready to do something about it, but he told me, ‘Just let it go,’ and I did.”

Rivera seized the moment: “What do we mean when we say we’re going to lose it? I realize I hear it often, ‘I was gonna lose it on this guy.’ What’s it mean for you?”

“Lose control,” one person said.

“Rage,” another said.

“Rage!” Rivera echoed. “But *you’re* gonna lose it. You’re gonna lose your

housing. You're gonna lose your freedom. What causes it?"

One man tried to explain his suspicion that a bunkmate in a homeless shelter had taken money from his backpack. "It's hard coming from doing a whole lot of time. You're bunked with someone and you know you're getting robbed," he said. "And it's hard, because, if you were upstate or in another situation, you would have acted in another way. We live in our own minds. Man is *mind*. We first get out—we're getting that comfortability back—and it's hard to lose it, because you live in a room with it. I spent more of my life in prison than free. It's hard."

Rivera grew gentler: "Can I talk about that? Your voice changed. I heard it."

"It's hard having something taken from you. My life style—I'm not proud of it—but I was a stickup kid my whole life. I'm not used to having anyone take anything from me. There's nothing you could do."

"Here's the deal," Rivera said. "There's something you could do and you chose not to. Don't dismiss that, man! You should be, like, this should be a *celebration*, man. Like, for real—'I did that, and I didn't do what I would normally do.' We all know what we could do. Many of us have done it. Take the power—*I chose not to do that this time.*" He glided into the next thought. "Was anyone around this week when I got stepped to?"

"When you got *what*?" Rothenberg asked.

"David needs help—what is 'step to'?"

"Someone came at him very aggressive," one person explained.

"He had a brick!" someone else added.

When a client had confronted him, Rivera hugged the man, literally, until the confrontation ended. The possibility of violence in the building had shaken everyone.

Rivera hadn't seen the brick, and was startled to learn about it: "He pulled out a *brick*? For real? Let's hold that, because I *definitely* want to know about this brick. But I want to come back to you, brother. Sometimes doing nothing is the best decision we can make, right? Someone says to me, very glum, 'I didn't do

anything.’ No! You *did* . . . nothing. That’s an *action*. You chose to handle it. Doing nothing is doing something. Ignoring someone is reacting to them.”

Afterward, Rivera looked bemused. “I’m interested in this brick. Nobody told me about the brick.” He paused. “I’m *glad* I didn’t know about the brick.”

The coronavirus pandemic hit the Castle hard. Rivera was like a captain approaching a storm, battening down the boat while planning to take the waves broadside. Several residents contracted COVID-19, and the decision was made to stop accepting new residents—a painful departure from long-standing Fortune Society practice—and to shelter the entire population in place, with the positive cases self-quarantining. The Thursday meeting was moved to Zoom. To attend remotely was oddly reassuring in those first panic-stricken weeks of the pandemic in New York; having been through so much worse, and accustomed to enforced isolation, the Fortune community had a kind of unfazed gaiety unique among the difficult interactions of the moment.

Then, in late May, after the standard announcements of a Thursday meeting, Rivera said, as smoothly as he could, “So, *I* have an announcement. I submitted my resignation today.”

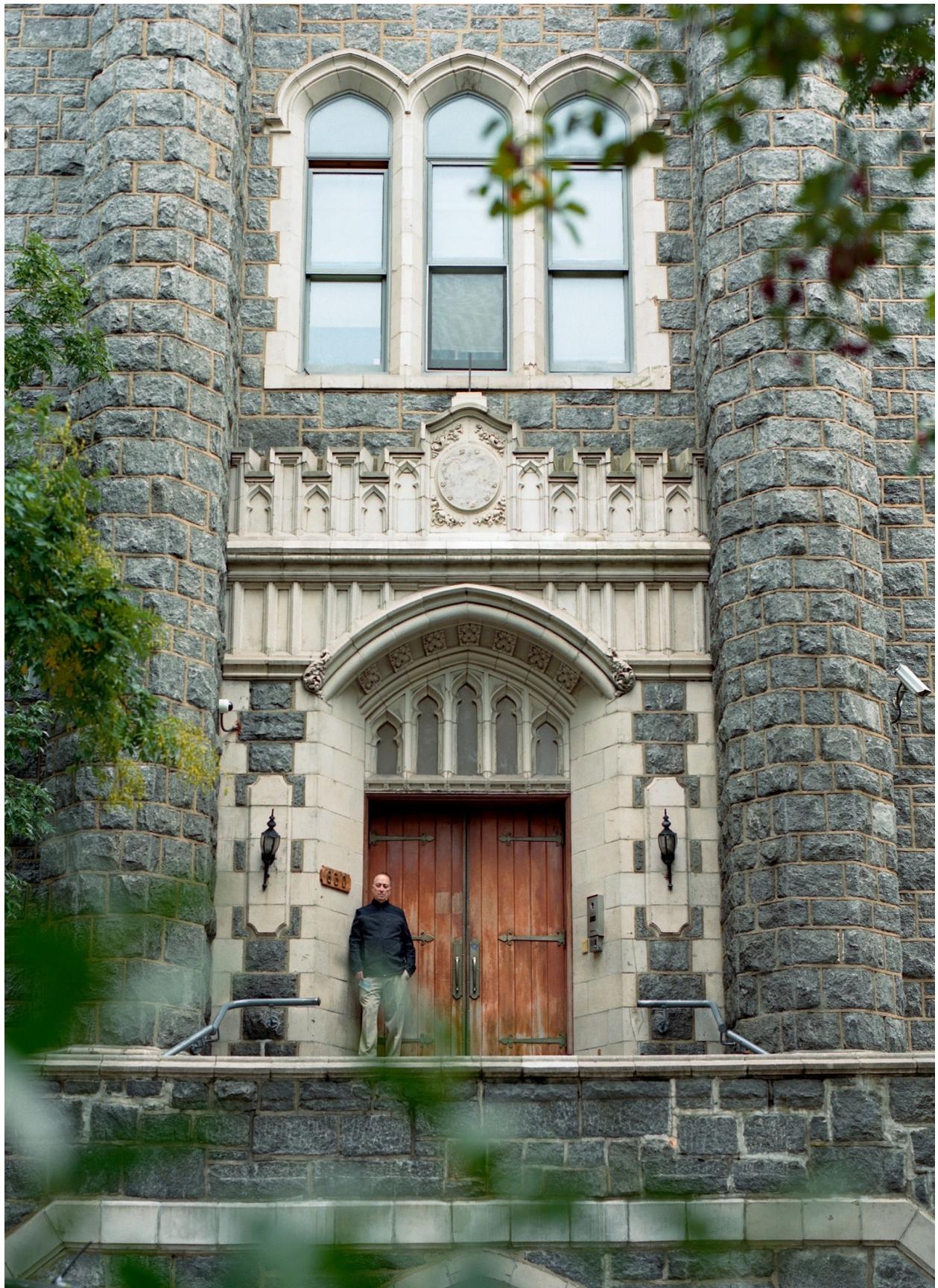
There was a brief pause. “Resignation not accepted!” E. called out, cutting through his usual cool with obvious pain.

“Resignation not accepted!” Easy called out, in turn. And the cry went around the gallery: “Resignation not accepted!”

Rivera tried to quiet them. “Now listen to me, it’s a decision I’ve made.”

E. was insistent: “You can’t just say this. You got to *explain* this shit, man.”

Rivera told them that he was leaving to become the executive director of a “harm reduction” group, an organization that promotes health among drug addicts and sex workers, providing condoms, clean syringes, training in overdose reversal, and the like.



David Rothenberg, the Fortune Society's founder and a former Broadway press agent, in front of the Castle. Photograph by Luis Manuel Diaz for The New Yorker

Eventually, the residents surrendered, and began to congratulate him. “I’m grateful for all you have done to help me see the world more clearly,” one said.

Rivera was privately equivocal about the reasons for his departure. Although he disavowed any internal conflict, there clearly had been complicated feelings between him and some of the top people at the Fortune headquarters. “I would have loved to stay at Fortune,” he said in early June. He was at home, wearing a Che Guevara T-shirt and sitting in front of a picture of the Buddha—an accidental but telling juxtaposition. “But our values just aren’t well aligned anymore.”

Rivera cited the society’s response to the protests in New York and across the country. “In organizations, you have to be careful not to take a political stand—but this isn’t political. And Fortune froze.” He was frustrated that, even though the staff was almost fifty per cent Black, it took weeks for its leaders to speak out. (“I didn’t realize how important it was to make a statement because I thought our actions spoke for themselves,” Page said. “And that was a lesson learned. We’re now making statements.”)

Still, Rivera admitted that he had decided to leave long before the protests started. Conversations with others in the organization suggest that the issue was a familiar one, especially within nonprofits. Sam Rivera, the charismatic center of the operation, had little executive power within it, and over the years this had created some rubbed-raw feelings between him and the people who did. The same rule that holds in a small regional theatre holds in a nonprofit devoted to post-incarceration transitions: the charismatic figure wins the allegiance of his clientele, at the risk of alienating his colleagues, who, without any malice or even conscious envy, become mindful of what they see as his managerial deficits. Tension grows between the charismatic person and the administrators, who have a clear idea of the dogged and unglamorous work required to sustain the institutional structure.

Page insists that the organization will go on more or less intact. Angela Scott, an eight-year veteran of the society, has replaced Rivera. “I ran Thursday meeting for years, and then Stanley did”—the Fortune vice-president—“and then Sam,” Page said. “Now it’s Angela’s turn.”

As with anyone who has left an organization to which he was devoted, Rivera

became more aware of Fortune's flaws and fissures in retrospect. "We came across as participating in the punishment," he said. "Our line was: If you smoke weed, and keep doing it, we're going to discharge you. I'm not going to expel someone for smoking marijuana. I've never met anyone who O.D.'d on marijuana." (Page said that Fortune would never force a client out just for smoking marijuana.)

Rivera returned to an image that haunted him. "I was driving by a playground once, near where I grew up. And I was with one of my mentors, watching these great little kids playing in this playground. And he said, flatly, 'Sixty per cent of those kids are going to prison.' We're still not fixing the problem or even addressing it. What we're doing now with policing, it's as if we deliberately set buildings on fire, and then installed a fire station across the street. The thing is not to let the fires get started."

David Rothenberg, who knew Rivera best, wondered if the coping mechanisms that had enabled Rivera to remake his life had been disabling to him in moments of professional friction. "Sam has gotten so adept at avoiding conflict that he avoids conflict when he needs to engage in it," he said. "I keep telling him that —you just have to accept that, wherever you go, there will be friction between you and the people you work with, and you have to work through it. It reminds me of when I was in group therapy, years ago, and I strongly disliked another member of the group. 'That's the one who will do you the most good!' the therapist said. And he was right."

In early July, Rivera paid the Castle and its residents a final visit. "I want to say goodbye," he said. He and Rothenberg drove together from Rothenberg's apartment in the Village up to 140th Street.

"So, one night Miss Peggy Lee called me at midnight and said, 'I want to do a show of Frank Loesser's music,' " Rothenberg was saying in the car. "'And you're calling me at midnight about this because?' I said. 'Because I need the sheet music,' she said. So I called the Loesser estate. God, she was good!"

He got no response. "You know who Peggy Lee is?" he asked.

Rivera furrowed his brow, as one who, knowing exactly who Peggy Lee was, was disinclined to admit it at just that moment.

As the car pulled up to the Castle, a group of residents, all masked, were waiting

on the steps. But, where in the movie version the returning local hero would be surrounded by a crowd, Rivera quickly sought out one-on-one encounters. Hilton Webb was there, and, with the stoicism that betokens great pride in accomplishment, he narrated to Sam the sequence of certificates he was pursuing.

Instead of congratulating him, Rivera exclaimed, “You gotta accept that getting one degree is enough.” He reminded Webb that the point of the Castle was to get out of the Castle, and that the choice of when to leave would not always be left to the resident. “One of the issues for you is that you’re a brilliant motherfucker —no, no, you are!—but you have to be more than that. I never in my life thought that I’d think that ignorance is bliss. And now I totally respect it, because there are elements in my life right now that I wish I didn’t understand. There are Puerto Ricans in my life who are pro-Trump—I wish I didn’t understand them.” Webb was laughing. “So what I’m saying to you,” he added, more softly, “is that your intellect’s your intellect—you’ll always have it—but you only need one degree. And then you need to move and live.”

Later, sitting with Rothenberg for lunch outdoors at Trufa, Rivera said, “Anything can be an addiction, or a crutch. You can get addicted to education. You can even get addicted to recovery.”

A man careered down the street, obviously high. Rivera discreetly pointed him out to Rothenberg. “Remember him? He used to come to Fortune.”

“He looks bad,” Rothenberg said.

Recently, controversy had arisen about the release of long-term prisoners guilty of notoriously violent crimes, and Rivera and Rothenberg began discussing the difficulties of reconciling the work at Fortune with their sense of moral order. At the Castle, you never ask anyone about the reason for his imprisonment. But no one, as Rothenberg says, goes away for thirty years for jumping a turnstile, and many people at the Castle have been away for thirty years.

“It’s hard, I get it,” Rothenberg said. “There was this wonderful arts editor at the *Times*, who was always kind to me, helped me understand what worked and what didn’t. He was killed by a drunk driver on New Year’s Eve. Years later, I’m at Fortune, and someone introduces me to a woman. She had just come home after doing years for a D.U.I. ‘I think she killed some editor from the *Times*,’

they said.” He swallowed hard and said, “That was the moral test for me. Could I work with her? And, of course, I did.”

Rivera mentioned a friend of his who had seemed in good shape, and then suddenly committed a violent act against a former girlfriend and her new lover. “We hadn’t addressed his trauma adequately,” he said. “We’re all transitioning. You keep coming home. It’s like—you know, I’ve been thinking a lot lately about diets. Everyone has a diet. Monday’s O.K., you eat your soup and salad. Then Tuesday goes better than you hope, but then Wednesday is really hard—you’re hungry. Then on Thursday you go over to Mom’s and she makes fried chicken, and how can you say no? It’s Mom. So then you always say, ‘Well, I blew it, so I’ll start again on Monday.’ And you spend the weekend enjoying yourself. That’s the trick. You have to start again on Friday. That’s all it is. Everyone backslides or has a bad day. The key is going back on the diet on Friday, after you screw up on Thursday, and not to wait till Monday to start again.” He paused and waited for his food to arrive.

“Did I ever tell you about the time Edward Albee came to the Castle on a Thursday?” Rothenberg said, brightening the silence. “And one arrogant woman running for office who was there watching came up to me and said, ‘What was that old con in for?’ I said, ‘I don’t know, I guess for winning three Pulitzer Prizes?’ ” He smiled. “I told her, ‘*Never assume.*’ That’s a line from the Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy movie ‘*Desk Set.*’ ” Rothenberg paused. “People say Hepburn and Tracy. Actually, Shirley Booth did the play on Broadway.”

Later that day, Hilton Webb texted Rivera, saying that he would begin to think less about education and more about independence. “I think I may have been delaying things because it’s been almost fifty years since I last lived by myself,” Webb explained. “Scary.” Rivera forwarded the text to a friend and added a comment: “This is why I do what I do.” ♦

Shouts & Murmurs

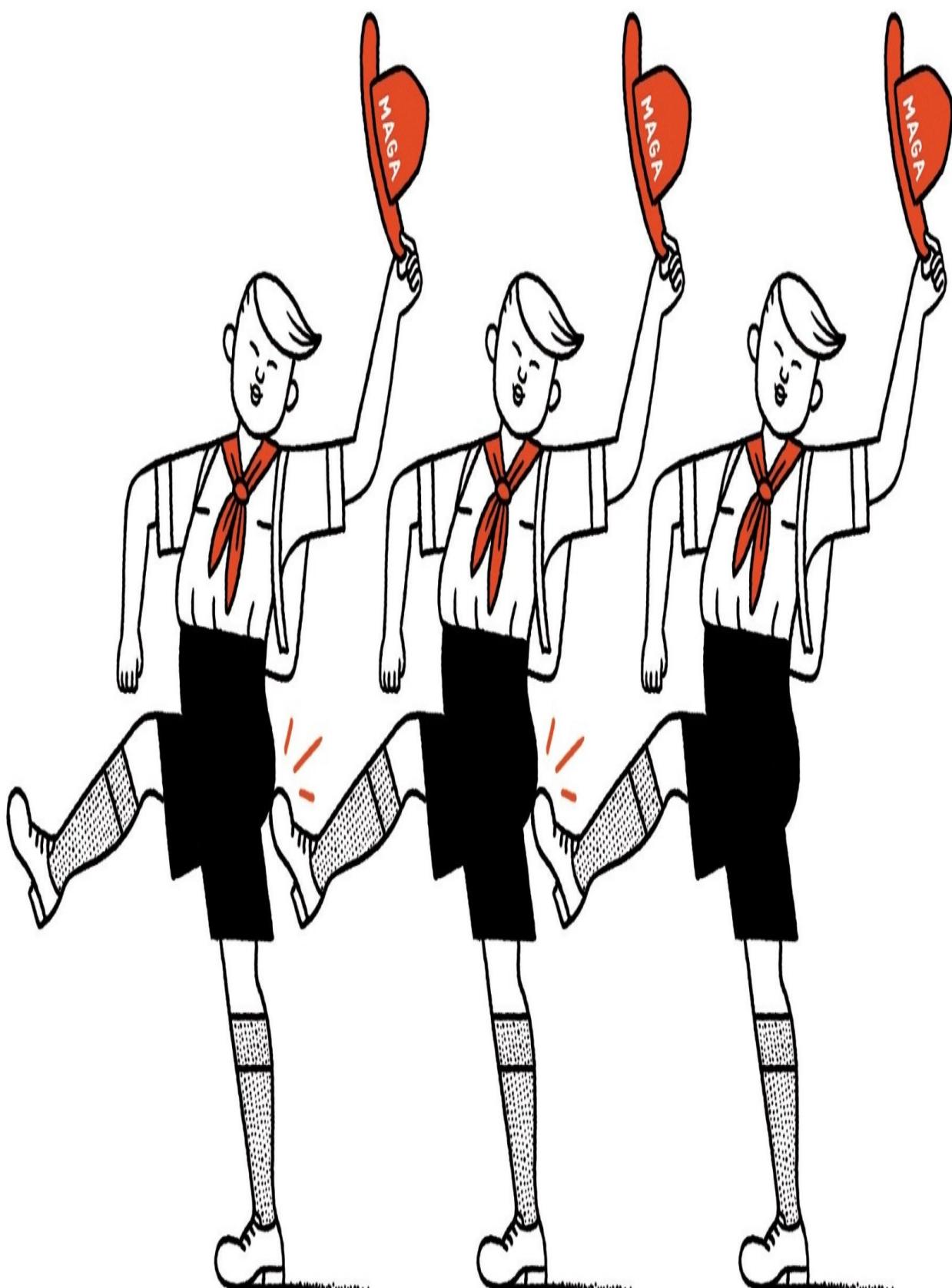
- [Introducing the Trump Scouts](#)

November 16, 2020 Issue

Be Very Prepared!

By [Trey Ellis](#)

November 9, 2020



MEMO FROM THE WHITE HOUSE OFFICE OF SPECIAL PROJECTS:

Now that the general election is kind of, sort of, behind us, I think we can all agree that healing our fractured nation is job No. 1. And what better way to mend our wounds than by creating an exciting new program for our top youths?

Gentlemen and Ivanka, I present the Trump Scouts!

With the original Boy Scouts being forced to admit not only girls but also gay girls, nonbinary-sexuals (is that the same as bisexual?), and everything in between, there is an urgent need for a traditional program that instills core values in our growing boys. (Also, we lost the eighteen-to-thirty-fives bigly, so if we want any shot at a term for Don, Jr., we will need the youthful, extra-constitutional energy of middle schoolers.)

Picture, if you will, thousands of ruddy-cheeked Trump Scouts cavorting in the woods, swimming in swift, icy rivers, and singing “My Old Kentucky Home, Good-Night!” around a campfire. Suburban kids have become weak, lazy, and “woke.” The Trump Scouts will bring them back to an earlier time, when manliness meant gutting a trout and flinging its innards at squealing wimps, or running around naked after a dip and chasing the wussies with sharp sticks in an entirely heterosexual manner. They’ll make acorn pancakes every morning, using hot rocks as a griddle, and then slather them with Aunt Jemima! (What an inspired idea President Trump had signing an executive order that mandated the return of America’s most beloved imitation maple syrup!)

On Day One, each Scout will be given a copy of “The Art of the Deal” and five dollars. After three weeks, the boy who ends up with everyone else’s money will be the “boss” Scout.

The uniform: I’m seeing brown for some reason, at least for the shirts, but we should let Ivanka go wild with the design.

The Jamboree: The highlight of each year will be a gathering of all the Scouts across the nation at a weeklong Jamboree. On the final night, the entrance of the Scout-in-Chief will be one for the history books. Riding a bison or a tank? Lowered from some sort of hovering Space Force prototype? And it is here that we will unveil the special dress uniform that he has been working on since his

first day in the Oval Office. Composed of all the medals, ribbons, epaulets, and sashes confiscated from disgraced generals (so many!), it will cover every last inch of him, from spats to hat, with glory. And the cape! Wait until you see the cape.

Sturgis, South Dakota, seems the most logical location for the Jamboree, since the townspeople there are accustomed to a yearly influx of huge crowds. And now their traditional client base is mainly dead.

Ranks: Our team hasn't worked out precisely what the various Trump Scout ranks will be, but we'll start with Apprentice and will go all the way to Grand Wizard. Just as in the now disgraced B.S.A., Trump Scouts will be able to earn merit badges—but only in subjects that are actually useful to keeping this nation on the path to greatness. Here are just a few.

Land surveying: Every night is taco night as you camp under the stars along the southernmost edges of Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico. It'll be just you and a tripod with a pirate-like spyglass thing on top, an assault rifle, and maybe some wooden stakes to pound into the ground.

Communications: Now that One American News is on its way to acquiring NBC to become OANBC, our friends over there are in need of anchors, reporters, camera-whatevers, you name it. With the staff of MSNBC planning to defect north, to the CBC, the first Trump Scouts to sign up might even find themselves sitting at Rachel Maddow's old desk! Enjoy those Toronto winters, Rachel—eh?

Private investigator: Solve a real case, just like a real private eye! In addition to receiving a merit badge stitched with shiny metallic thread, Scouts are eligible to collect the bounty that President Trump has offered for the First Lady's whereabouts. The lucky boy who finds her will also get an internship with Rudolph Giuliani's law firm and preferred enrollment at Ukraine's Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute.

And don't think we've forgotten about the fairer sex. Girls deserve their own traditional organization, complete with uniforms and jingoistic sing-alongs. So we are also excited to announce the Trump Little-Lady Scouts: a national brigade of high-kicking cheerleaders! The only requirement is that you be taller than five-ten and weigh less than a hundred and nine pounds. *POTUS* himself

has volunteered to design the outfits. Gimme a T! ♦

Sketchbook

- **Is It Time to Change the President?**

[November 16, 2020 Issue](#)

Is It Time to Change the President?

By [Barry Blitt](#)

November 9, 2020

St. Louis Dispatch

- [Cori Bush, a Nurse and Activist, Becomes the First Black Woman to Represent Missouri in Congress](#)

[November 16, 2020 Issue](#)

Cori Bush, a Nurse and Activist, Becomes the First Black Woman to Represent Missouri in Congress

It was seeing a photo of Michael Brown's dead body on the street in Ferguson that propelled Bush into joining the ranks of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in Washington.

By [Bruce Handy](#)

November 9, 2020

Cori Bush can lay claim to more than one professional title. She is Pastor Cori Bush, having founded a church in her native St. Louis, about a decade ago. She is also Cori Bush, registered nurse. And now she is Congresswoman-elect Cori Bush. Her victory, a romp in Missouri's First Congressional District that saw her win by sixty percentage points, was foretold by the August Democratic primary, when Bush, running as a progressive in the anti-sclerotic mode of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ayanna Pressley, defeated Lacy Clay, the incumbent. A member of a local African-American political dynasty, Clay has represented the district since 2001, having succeeded his father, Bill, who was first elected in 1968. Bush, forty-four, isn't just new blood. She will be both the first Black woman and likely the first nurse to represent Missouri in Congress. (Sending clergy to Washington, D.C., is old hat for the Show-Me State.)



Despite its blue tilt, Bush's district contains multitudes. It includes the St. Louis Cardinals, Anheuser-Busch headquarters, and the city's upscale Central West End neighborhood, home to Mark and Patricia McCloskey. They are the couple who became famous this summer—and earned a speaking spot at the Republican National Convention—for waving guns at Black Lives Matter marchers while dressed like models in the most ill-conceived Talbots catalogue ever. Among the marchers that day was Bush; her district also includes Ferguson, where the B.L.M. movement was galvanized, in 2014, following the killing of eighteen-year-old Michael Brown by a police officer. Those protests are what propelled Bush into running for office—something that, as the daughter of a politician, she had sworn she would never do. Her father, Errol Bush, is an alderman and a former mayor of Northwoods, a small city in St. Louis County. “With all the negativity and all the corruption around, with everything he had to fight, I was, like, Why would you sign up for this?” she recalled over the phone, two days after her own election.

The gravity of what happened in Ferguson had dawned on her only gradually, as did her anger. “That afternoon, I was scrolling on Facebook, seeing this picture of this person laying on the ground,” she said of the August day when Brown was shot at least six times. Police then left his body in the street for four hours, on a hot afternoon. “I kept seeing the picture and just not thinking it was real,” she said. Finally, “I’m, like, O.K., let me click on this and see what this is about.” The next evening, she drove to Ferguson, where a second night of demonstrations had begun. “I just drove around, stayed in my car, and just watched what was going on. Then, the next day, I actually got out. It was the fact that the thing didn’t go away, that it was gaining steam.” Looting had begun; a building had burned. “There were thousands of people in the street, with a lot of violence happening. I felt like I could offer something to this situation. I was, like, You’re a nurse, you can be a medic. You’re clergy, you can go out and pray with people.”

Through the mental-health clinic where she worked, she helped set up a crisis-response team. “We pitched a tent just a few feet from where Michael Brown’s body had laid on the ground, to do grief-and-trauma work.” Her group partnered with others to provide food, diapers, and financial assistance to people whose lives had been disrupted.

By Bush’s account, she grew up inured to racist treatment from cops. “I never

really questioned it,” she said. “I saw countless friends abused by the police, harassed by the police, profiled by the police, in different parts of town. As a child, my father was pulled over by the police so many times, I used to think that he was a horrible driver, and I would get so upset, like, ‘Why won’t you drive right?’ ” She went on, “I didn’t think hard on the question of Is this O.K. or not? Is this right? Because you’re taught in school that the police are right.” Her impulse as a girl was to blame herself for two instances when, she said, officers sexually harassed her. “It was, like, O.K., well, maybe I’m doing something wrong. Maybe this skirt isn’t the right skirt. That was the mind-set at that time.”

With the speech-making skills of a preacher and a nurse’s backbone, Bush became a leading voice in the Black Lives Matter movement. Urged on by fellow-activists who wanted to see more Black women in the Senate, she ran in 2016, when Roy Blunt, the Republican incumbent, was up for reelection; she came in a distant second in the primary. In 2018, she set her sights on Lacy Clay, losing again. But this year, buoyed by the surge of B.L.M. activism, and despite being slowed by a nasty case of what was likely *Covid-19*, which sent her to the hospital twice, Bush broke through.

She said she’s not concerned about the way that many Republicans have treated Congress’s young progressive women of color as punching bags—Ocasio-Cortez, for instance, who campaigned for Bush during the 2018 primary. “I have been dealing with anger from the right wing, from extremists, from white supremacists, since 2014, and I’ve learned the best ways for me to deal with it,” Bush said. One of those ways is to shrug it off and laugh, as she did when Mark McCloskey called her a “Marxist revolutionary” at the Republican Convention. “If they couldn’t scare me in the scariest time, which was Ferguson before everybody started to get used to protests, when all of that was new, am I bothered by what they’ll try to do to me now? Not at all.” ♦

Tables for Two

- [A Whirl Through the Philippines with Jeepney's Meal Kits](#)

[November 16, 2020 Issue](#)

A Whirl Through the Philippines with Jeepney's Meal Kits

The restaurateur Nicole Pонсeca offers weekly deliveries of heat-and-serve dishes including adobo-pula chicken and roasted cauliflower with burnt-coconut sauce, plus a dose of secondhand nostalgia.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

November 6, 2020



Last December, the restaurateur Nicole Ponseca closed Maharlika, the first of two East Village restaurants with which she almost single-handedly brought Filipino food into the Manhattan mainstream. Maharlika was beloved for brunch dishes such as eggs Benedict with Spam and calamansi hollandaise, but Ponseca, having parted ways with her longtime executive chef, decided to streamline her business. It was a fortunate choice; better to have one restaurant than two during a pandemic. At Jeepney, her second (and now only) place, she adapted deftly to outdoor dining, met an increased demand for takeout, and then, last month, launched one of the smartest and most gratifying pandemic projects I've seen: Tita Baby's Kita Kits.



Each kit comes with enough mix-and-match dishes to feed a small family or group of friends for several days, with options for breakfast, lunch, dinner, dessert, and substantial between-meal snacks. Photograph by Miranda Barnes for The New Yorker

Every Friday, Jeepney—sometimes Pонсeca herself—will deliver, to Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and parts of northern New Jersey (which has a large Filipino population), enough food to feed “friends, couples, roommates or a family for several meals.” Each kit includes a generous array of mix-and-match dishes suited to breakfast, lunch, dinner, dessert, and even *meryenda*, the Filipino tradition of a substantial snack between meals. All are “heat & serve”; the relatively simple tasks required might include pouring toasty garlic oil into a sauté pan set over a low flame and stirring in clumps of precooked jasmine rice, or sliding a spatchcocked adobo-pula chicken, redolent of cinnamon and red miso, into the oven for fifteen minutes before glazing it in sauce.



An accompanying booklet of detailed instructions guides you through preparation by oven, stovetop, or microwave. Photograph by Miranda Barnes for The New Yorker

The other day, by phone, Pонсеа explained the logistical impetus for the idea. “You can’t get restaurant-quality food at home unless it’s cooked à la minute,” she said. “A meal kit enables à la minute.” The cultural impetus is even more compelling. A captive audience means that Pонсеа and her Tita Baby team—a small group of Filipino chefs with restaurants including Momofuku Nishi and Oxalis on their résumés—can take risks she might not have at Jeepney. “If people are missing their food from a particular region, I can do foods from that region that are not easily found,” Pонсеа told me. “And, if you’re just on a Filipino food excursion, you get to explore.”

Accompanying each kit is a booklet of descriptions and instructions (plus menu suggestions and QR codes for Spotify playlists) interwoven with historical context, jokes, and anecdotes, written by Pонцеа in a chatty, contagiously enthusiastic tone. Eating at home leaves you with a lot of “cereal-box time,” Pонцеа explained. The list of ingredients in the gravy for her *kaldereta kambing*, a goat stew that she recently offered in tribute to the Ilocanos, an ethnolinguistic group that lives mostly on the Philippines’ northwestern seaboard, made my eyes pop: duck fat, bone marrow, tomato, wild oregano, liver, goat cheese, *patis* (Filipino fish sauce), and olive brine. No wonder the dish was so beguilingly delicious; it’s hard to imagine a more enjoyable example of the influence of both Spanish rule and Chinese immigration on Filipino culture.



Jeepney's owner, Nicole Pонсeca, describes Mindanaoan food as "arguably the most un-popular" subset of Filipino cuisine, and unfairly so—she was inspired to build a kit around it by her memories of a visit to the island, during which she learned to cook "with the simplest of tools producing the most complex of flavors." Photograph by Miranda Barnes for The New Yorker

Another week, Pонсeca reminisced about a visit to the island of Mindanao, in the south, whose “flavors and cooking are arguably the most un-popular kids” in Filipino food. “On an empty dusty road in the sweltering heat,” she had come across a woman carrying a bucket of vegetables and fresh coconuts, and jumped out of her car to ask what she was making. To *tinola*, a gingery chicken soup ubiquitous in the islands, the woman told her, she would add young-coconut water and use ribbons of coconut meat as noodles, turning it into a Mindanaoan dish called *binakol*, thought to have medicinal properties. The technique “stopped me in my tracks,” Pонсeca wrote. Years later, her own *binakol* proved an elixir, indeed. Two unassuming plastic quarts of cloudy broth, flecked with beads of fat and fresh Moringa leaves, bloomed on my stovetop to become soothingly fragrant, nourishingly flavorful, and just a little sweet, offering near-effortless access to a secondhand nostalgia and making a kind of sense out of a vexing time. (*Meal kits \$90-\$135.*) ♦

The Art World

- [How to Read Sam Gilliam's Formalism](#)

How to Read Sam Gilliam's Formalism

For decades, the artist has made meltingly beautiful paintings that appeared to make no clear point about identity, but the scholar Fred Moten teases out inconspicuous themes of Blackness.

By [Peter Schjeldahl](#)

November 9, 2020



A powerful show of new work by the Washington, D.C., artist Sam Gilliam, at Pace, is his first ever with a major New York dealer, despite past recognition of him at the city's chief museums and, among other honors, his representation of the United States at the Venice Biennale of 1972. The commercial lacuna calls for an explanation. Gilliam, who is still productive at the age of eighty-six, is a leading light of what is termed the Washington Color School of abstract painting, which came to public attention around 1960 in thrall to the doctrines of Clement Greenberg, who influenced a generation of D.C. artists, including the highly successful Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland. The critic posited flatness and appeals to eyesight alone as the destiny of new painting, as preordained by modernism. That was nuts, be it noted. But the era was still smitten with myths of formal progress in art, and Greenberg's proposition bore elegant fruit for a while. Gilliam broke ranks with the movement—or extended it—in the mid-sixties, when he began draping vast unstretched paint-stained and -spattered canvases from walls and ceilings, creating undulant environments that drenched the eye in effulgent color. (Dia:Beacon, in the Hudson Valley, has on view a magnificent example, "Double Merge," from 1968; exploring it is peripatetic bliss.)



"Blue 96" Disc," from 2020. Art work by Sam Gilliam / © Sam Gilliam / ARS. Photograph by D'Angelo Lovell Williams for *The New Yorker*

Gilliam's qualified apostasy, with a nod to the space-altering aesthetics of Minimalism, was widely noticed but, taking place outside New York, proved poorly situated and timed. Pop art, Minimalist sculpture and a proliferation of heterodox manners that came to be called post-Minimalism, and conceptual art were eclipsing anything to do with color-field painting—and often with painting at all—in the big town, and the Washington School could appear to be a provincial rear guard. Even so, Gilliam's breakthrough and subsequent achievements with his draping method should have loomed large in the moment's hot and heavy discourse. Why didn't they?



"For John Lewis," from 2020. Art work by Sam Gilliam / © Sam Gilliam / ARS. Photograph by D'Angelo Lovell Williams for The New Yorker

Gilliam is Black, which in the art world back then identified an American artist as a special case, so remorseless was the presumed whiteness of “mainstream” Western culture. (An inaudible asterisk long attended mentions of, for example, the sorely underrated, late New York abstractionist Jack Whitten.) Gilliam’s reception was dogged by a double bind of unconscious condescension and compensatory indulgence—or so it seemed to me, over the years. This was more than uncommonly distracting in his case. Gilliam’s art seemed to make no clear point of his identity apart from the occasional title, such as “Lady Day” for a work in 1971, that signalled his cultural background. He is temperamentally a formalist from tip to toe, stalking meaning in nuances of format, color, texture, and the other technical givens of his medium: mainstream indeed, to ambitious art of the nineteen-sixties and, at intervals, ever since. It’s possible to suspect reparative social justice in his renewed eminence, but really it’s a chance to abolish one remnant of double-entry accounting of white and minority artists.



Purgative, to this end, is a dazzlingly stylish essay in the Pace catalogue by the extraordinary Black scholar and poet Fred Moten—a literary work of art in itself, ablaze with on-target wordplay—which teases out inconspicuous racial imprints on Gilliam, from the sight (recalled by the artist) of women’s washing billowing from clotheslines to the free-jazz innovations of Ornette Coleman and to tropes, in recent works, of African architecture and design. Antically exaggerated, the focus pays off, for me, by illuminating a peculiar psychological intensity in even Gilliam’s most circumspect art: an air of taking nothing for granted and of having things to prove, an asperity in the face of felt or imagined resistance, a hint of playing for stakes beyond what’s visible. The formalist credo —what you see is what you see—applies, but Moten proves that a racial audit frees up a general appreciation of Gilliam’s excellence. It can’t explain the art’s self-critically disciplined integrity, skill, inventiveness, and abounding beauty. But Moten’s audacity relaxes any lingering nervousness on the score of race by letting it rip, affirming Blackness as a regular feature, or quality, in American art, even or especially when it’s not overtly at issue.

Gilliam was born in Tupelo, Mississippi, the seventh child of a truck driver and a housewife. The family soon moved to Louisville, Kentucky, where, having wanted to become a cartoonist since childhood, Gilliam plunged into art studies at the University of Louisville. In 1962, after returning from a two-year stint in the Army and earning an M.A. in fine arts, he relocated to the capital. His enthusiasms ranged across modern art, from German Expressionism through Picasso and Braque to Louis and Noland. He took to painting hard-edged stripes and geometric shapes, Washington Schoolishly dead flat. Then he jettisoned concerns with style for a redefinition of what paintings could be and do. His drapings enlist chance operations of pouring and flinging that gradually, as he less directed than monitored them, generate not so random instances of rhythmic snap and chromatic counterpoint. (A watcher as much as a wielder of paint, Gilliam rang a fresh change on Jackson Pollock’s drip technique.) Each viewer of the softly hanging canvases comes to a unique experience of their cumulative effects and then, if sticking around, discovers yet another.

Gilliam’s quest persisted when he discontinued draping canvases around 1980 and returned to the wall by way of intensively pigmented compositions in types of free-form style, categorized at the time as “lyrical abstraction,” often on constructed reliefs of angled and jutting planes—a bit in the manner of contemporaneous works by Frank Stella, but zestier. Circles occurred, oddly

portentous. Again, the works' key success is formal, as an effect of obdurate density and jagged animation. But Moten stays on the hunt for racial propensity. He relates Gilliam's affinity for circles to the title of a 1959 track from Ornette Coleman's 1970 album "The Art of the Improvisers": "The Circle with a Hole in the Middle," which mundanely describes a vinyl record but resonates with hints of a flaw or a void. (Moten upends the suggestion by titling his essay "The Circle with a Whole in the Middle.") Gilliam has embraced the form in recent large wall-mounted wooden doughnut shapes that are dyed, rather than painted, in gorgeous hues. One from this year is titled "Black Mozart / *ORNETTE*." Also new are works on sheets, some more than six feet square, of washi, a Japanese paper made from fibres of the inner bark of the gampi tree, the mitsumata shrub, or the paper mulberry. Repeatedly soaked in acrylics, allowed to dry, and then soaked again, the sheets end up not so much covered as replaced by slabs of solid monochrome, their surfaces varied, when you look closely, by traces of the artist's manipulating hand. These are blasts of pure chroma like nothing else I've ever seen: while meltingly beautiful, they are no more passive than the front ends of oncoming trucks.

The show's main news is in sculpture: there are several small pyramids and one immense one, all raised slightly off the floor and built of innumerable horizontal sheets of laminated plywood with regularly spaced bands of aluminum. Gorgeously dyed in sumptuous color—bringing out and celebrating the textures of the wood grain—the blunt structures radiate like light sources. Do they suggest late entries in the repertoire of Minimalism? They do, but with a sense of re-starting the aesthetic from scratch—getting it right, even, at long last. The pieces play a role in another of the show's revelations: a series of large (up to twenty feet wide) neo- or post- or, let's say, para-color-field paintings that owe the ruggedness of their paint surfaces to incorporations of leftover pyramid sawdust. Bevelled edges flirt with object-ness, making the works seem fat material presentations, protuberant from walls, rather than pictures. But, as always with Gilliam, paint wins. Thick grounds in white or black are crazed with specks, splotches, and occasional dragged strokes of varied color. While you feel the weight of the wooden supports, your gaze loses itself in something like starry skies: dizzying impressions of infinite distance in tension with the dense grounds, which are complicated by tiny bits of collaged and overpainted wooden squares. Registering the jittery chromatic harmonies and occasional underlying structures—ghosts of geometry—takes time. Seemingly decorative at first glance, the paintings turn inexhaustibly absorbing and exciting when contemplated. Like everything else in this show of an artist who is old in years,

they feel defiantly brand spanking new. ♦

The Current Cinema

- Discoveries and Awakenings in “Ammonite”

[November 16, 2020 Issue](#)

Discoveries and Awakenings in “Ammonite”

The amateur paleontologist Mary Anning, barred from the academy because of her class and gender, is reimagined as a sexual rebel rebuking the code of her time.

By [Anthony Lane](#)

November 6, 2020



There are certain fields of human activity to which the keen amateur can make a notable contribution. These fields include archeology, astronomy, and, to a laughable extent, politics. One influential example is that of Mary Anning (1799-1847), an Englishwoman who lived in Lyme Regis, on the Dorset coast—or, as it is occasionally and inadequately known, the Jurassic Coast. The crumbling cliffs along it, dating from the Triassic, Jurassic, and Cretaceous periods, are a happy hunting ground for anyone seeking the fossilized remains of ancient creatures. The nearest American equivalent would be the Academy Awards.

Mary, the daughter of a cabinetmaker, was one of ten children, and a fossil-finder extraordinaire, who excavated the skeleton of an ichthyosaur before she reached her teens. According to an article in *All the Year Round*, a journal edited by Charles Dickens, she became “lively and intelligent” after surviving a lightning strike in infancy. The article commends her “to those who like to study character, and are fond of seeing good stubborn English perseverance make way even where there is nothing in its favour.” No surprise, therefore, that the role of Mary, in “Ammonite,” a new movie written and directed by Francis Lee, should go to [Kate Winslet](#). In any survey of her films, it’s hard to find an instance in which she has *not* given stubbornness a good name. The set of her jaw and the blaze of her glance suggest a self-freeing spirit who knows the path ahead and is determined to take it. With a shyer or more rarefied actress on deck, “Titanic” (1997) might have sunk.

Here she is, then, as the adult Mary, stomping along the beach outside Lyme. It’s shingle all the way; none of that balmy nonsense about golden sands. Gazing cliffward, and spying something of interest, she hikes up her skirts, clammers, tugs at a rock, then loses her footing and slithers down. She is unbroken, but the rock, falling past her, is split in two, revealing the cracked spiral of an ammonite. What matters here is the physicality—how close we are to Mary as she labors, tumbles, and gasps for breath. Later, back at the small house that she shares with her mother, Molly (Gemma Jones), Mary’s hands, even after she’s washed them, look red and raw, with dirt under the nails. The house confronts the sea, and the windows are speckled with grime and salt. Nothing in this film seems easy; living humans, no less than extinct species, get embedded and stuck, and need to be prized out with care.

The prizing takes different forms. Mary attracts the attention of a Dr. Lieberson (Alec Secareanu)—“Foreign?” Molly asks, as if the word were a curse. Suaver

by far is a gentleman named Roderick Murchison (James McArdle), who has an interest in fossils, and has come to pay homage to “the presiding deity of Lyme,” as he calls Mary. (It’s true; her expertise, accrued through years of patient observation, was well known to her fellow-paleontologists.) If she will conduct him along the shore, and school him in her wisdom, he will reward her. They agree to a deal, and shake on it, though she can’t bring herself to look at him as they touch; it’s as if her very nature, acclimatized to being alone, recoils at any pact of understanding. Oh, and Murchison has one other request: he has brought his youthful wife, Charlotte ([Saoirse Ronan](#)), who is spectre-pale. Her health is impaired, and we gather that she has recently lost a child. While he travels for a month or so, could she not stay on in Lyme, “walk out” with Mary, and take the revivifying air?

You can tell what’s coming. Two unhappy souls, having had the misfortune to be born in an unenlightened age, will take comfort in each other’s arms, in a rousing rebuke to the social code of their times. That’s what happened in “[Portrait of a Lady on Fire](#)” (2019), and it happens here, too, though it’s surely a sign of *our* times that we can conceive of such protest only in sexual terms. To Mary’s contemporaries, what would have set her apart, and barred her from the institutions of learning and research where she doubtless belonged, was not just her gender, and her lowly class, but the fact that she was a Dissenter—that is, she was raised in a strain of Protestantism outside the Church of England. As you’d expect, faith goes unremarked in “Ammonite,” which prefers to show Murchison rolling away from his wife, in bed, and saying, “It’s not the right time to make another baby.” Hark to the horrid man!

Yet the movie persuades you, and bears you along. It may lack historical grounding—though Mary and Charlotte were certainly friends, the existence of any further intensity is pure, indeed wild, supposition—but it feels emotionally earthed, and, far from rising above the spartan brutishness of the early scenes, Lee digs deeper still. Watch Mary, back at the beach, squatting down to pee. (Didn’t Winslet resort to alfresco urination in “Holy Smoke,” back in 1999? Does her contract forbid her to use an inside lavatory, or something?) She stands up, wipes her hands, unwraps a pastry, tears it in two, and offers half to Charlotte, who, for some reason, declines it. As the weeks pass, however, the younger woman is pulled downward, away from the ladylike and into the rough stuff of life; there’s an amazing moment, wonderfully played by Ronan, when she enters the house with a bucket of coal, laughs, begins to weep, and slips to the floor, lost in confusion at her own feelings, with her fine dress covered in

smuts.

And so to bed. Nothing is solved or soothed, in Lee's film, by the making of love. Ravenous and frantic, it serves only to remind both Mary and Charlotte of their hopeless predicament, and there are half-comic echoes of their regular toil, with Mary, on her knees, lifting Charlotte's skirts in a fast fumble, just as she raised her own at the base of a cliff; going down looks like climbing up. Lee's boldest move is to cut straight from the final night of carnality to the demise of a loved one, and thus to the sight of Mary laying out the body, as custom demands —dutifully clothing the corpse, with its cold stiff feet, only hours after shedding her own nightgown in Charlotte's heated embrace. Here, I think, is the heart of this yarn: not what it has to say about the overtight lacing of society, but the alarming clarity with which it addresses the elemental. As the land meets the ocean, so death meets desire, and "Ammonite" makes no bones about them.

It is nine years since "[Martha Marcy May Marlene](#)" came out. My nervous system has recovered in the interim, but only just. That film, whose heroine was drawn into the coils of a cult, was written and directed by Sean Durkin—his full-length début, would you believe. Only now has he returned to the fray; his latest movie, "The Nest," is no less serpentine, but what encircles the characters, squeezing the joy out of them, is money.

Ronald Reagan is in the White House, deregulation is the rage, and Rory O'Hara (Jude Law), a commodities broker, decides to move from America to England. He's on a treasure hunt, as it were, and he's confident that his family—his wife, Allison (Carrie Coon); their daughter, Samantha (Oona Roche); and her brother, Ben (Charlie Shotwell)—will benefit from the chase. He rents an old mansion in the countryside, gets the kids into new schools, commutes to his office in London, and, to prove how much he cares, arranges for Allison's beloved horse Richmond (played with great sensitivity by Tornado) to be shipped over. In one ominous shot, we see the O'Hara residence from Richmond's point of view, through the door of his stall, as he neighs and stamps with disquiet. Horse sense tells us of trouble ahead.

Such images abound in the film; Durkin has lost none of his compositional precision. The family home is ill-lit, ill-omened, and panelled in dark wood, with shadows deep enough to harbor the eavesdropper or to shield the fearful. No one seeks refuge more than Ben, who wets the bed and listens in sorrow to parental rants. Shotwell is the most affecting presence here, and you could argue that Ben

should have been the hub of the narrative, like the small boy in “The Fallen Idol” (1948), seeing plenty and understanding only scraps.

Instead, we get the grownups. Coon is as convincing as ever; observe the speed with which, on waking in the morning, Allison greets her frustrations by reaching for a cigarette. As for Rory, it’s not long before his professional schemings falter, his funds run dry, and he winds up pleading for petty cash. All of which is quite predictable, but does it make him a self-deluding, semi-tragic figure, as the movie’s gloom portends? (He may, in truth, be little more than a standard-issue dickhead.) And is Law the right fit for such a role? Whereas Hugh Grant, another fine young dandy of yore, has been rejuvenated by the creases of middle age, Law, I regret to say, looks glum and soured. The problem, for “The Nest,” is that the sourness is present from the start; he never gives off the bounce and the thrust that Rory is rumored to possess. “So, what happened to America?” somebody asks him. What indeed? ♦

Wilmington Report

- [**Delaware Voters Await Joe Biden: “We Just Need Him”**](#)

[November 16, 2020 Issue](#)

Delaware Voters Await Joe Biden: “We Just Need Him”

On Election Day, and then for days after, a small knot of Joe Biden supporters in Wilmington hung around the parking lot behind the Chase Center, hoping for a glimpse of a new President.

By [Dave Eggers](#)

November 9, 2020

The Wilmington sky was a limitless black, and an American flag that looked forty feet tall was billowing between two construction cranes. It was Election Night, and Joe Biden was scheduled to speak in a parking lot behind the Chase Center. Attendance inside the lot was invitation-only, and people were expected to stay in their cars. They'd been lining up for hours, presumably keeping warm.



Outside the parking-lot fence and next to a mini-mall, about thirty journalists and a ragtag group of citizens were gathered, shivering, huddled over smartphones, watching the results come in and not come in. Von Michael Todd, a math professor at Delaware Tech, was wearing a mask bearing Pac-Man's workplace, the blue labyrinth. "This is my city!" he said. "When do we ever have a Presidency in our city? Where you can see Biden come out here?" Not that he hadn't seen Biden in person before. He had—at the train station one day. And he knew where Biden got his groceries: Janssen's.

"All celebrations aside," Todd said, "we need someone with a plan." He enumerated the plans that were needed: a plan for the virus, a plan for police to peacefully interact with African-American men like himself, and a plan for education in the *Covid* era. "I'm a plan person," he said.

The hours passed with no results. Outside the fence, people came and went, but, aside from the journalists, there were never more than thirty people waiting to celebrate the President-elect in his home town. It did not feel like a party.

Crystal Adkins, a social worker, and her daughter Makayla, twenty, had not left their car. In the driver's seat, Crystal was making her way through some pasta from Target. Makayla was on her phone. At least sixty million people had voted for Trump, and this had rattled them both. "I can't believe the world right now," Crystal said. "It means that everything that happened in the last four years—hurting people, the children being taken away from their parents, the derogatory statements that he's made about women and families and people—it all meant nothing. I mean, who are we? Who are we now, to want another four years of this?"

Makayla had been in high school, just outside of Wilmington, in 2016. "The day after Trump was elected," she said, "some students, and even one teacher, came to school wearing MAGA stuff. And I was, like, 'I thought we were friends, but I guess we're not friends.' "

"And it brings me here tonight," Crystal said, "because I just want to be as close as I can to Biden, because we need him. We just need him."

An hour passed with no clarity, and Crystal and Makayla went home. The journalists packed up; nothing would be decided that night. The next day was balmy and bright, and the election was trending Biden's way. Another small

crowd of locals amassed at the fence, under the flag, with word that Biden would make an announcement soon. It was not expected to be an acceptance speech, but even a glimpse was enough for Bob and Tricia Beichner, who were sitting on a curb. Bob's mouth was hidden behind a Grateful Dead mask, but his white Polo sweater and dad jeans hinted at fiscal conservatism.

"I've actually been a lifelong Republican," he said. "The day that I left the Republican Party was the day after the nomination process in 2016." Bob had lived in New York when Trump was a tabloid fixture; he couldn't believe he was being taken seriously as a candidate. "I went to the Delaware Department of Elections and I changed my party affiliation." Since the 2016 election, Bob and Tricia have been baffled about the national psyche and about the friends they thought they knew. "I didn't know a single soul who voted for him," Tricia said. "All my Facebook friends, from high school, college, not a peep." Slowly, though, she realized that a startling number of them were Trump supporters. "And I'm struggling. I'm really struggling now with friendships."

There was a commotion near the Chase Center, and everyone turned to see a caravan of police S.U.V.s, Secret Service vehicles, an ambulance, and what looked like a modified Brink's truck speed by. "There he is!" Bob said, and waved to one of the cars. "I saw him!" Afterward, in the small—perhaps envious?—audience by the fence, there was some doubt about whether Bob had actually seen Biden.

With the clocks having just been set back, afternoon turned to night somewhere around noon. The results were still murky, and the crowd, such as it was, dwindled to nothing. The only people left were three Secret Service agents sitting in a white tent, looking at their phones. Then, just after nine, in the darkness and under the vast flag, an Indian-American group of six—two friends, with their wives and kids, all from Wilmington—arrived. They took pictures of the flag, of each other, and of the empty parking lot where Biden may or may not eventually declare himself the winner.

Approached by a reporter, they nominated the second-youngest of the group, seventeen-year-old Risha Kumar, to be their spokesperson. (The Trump supporter in the family, Risha's father, was demure.) "We're just excited to take photos near here, because it's kind of a historic event, right?" Risha said, her eyes bright, searching for each next word. "Honestly, there's not really been any big politician in history from Delaware, so it's just cool to have someone who's

from the local political scene on the national stage.” Being so young, Risha’s overlooking Biden’s forty-four years in Washington, D.C., could be forgiven. It turned out that she knew her history.

“I honestly think that the No. 1 issue is how much Americans trust their government. I think that a lot of Americans trust the democratic system, but do we really trust the people who are in power? And I think that without trusting the people who are in power at least a little bit, we can’t even compromise, and we’ve become so saddened by the situation. And I think that this has been a pattern. It’s kind of just been going down in our government since Nixon.” ♦

Table of Contents

- [New Yorker Magazine](#)
 - [Annals of Politics](#)
 - [Pulling Our Politics Back from the Brink](#)
 - [Books](#)
 - [Our Love-Hate Relationship with Gimmicks](#)
 - [Shirley Hazzard and the Art of Outsized Intimacy](#)
 - [Briefly Noted Book Reviews](#)
 - [Comment](#)
 - [The Biden Era Begins](#)
 - [Dept. of Anticipation](#)
 - [Awaiting Voting Results, New York Becomes Plywood City](#)
 - [Fiction](#)
 - [“Hansa and Gretyl and Piece of Shit”](#)
 - [L.A. Postcard](#)
 - [After Years of Protests Every Wednesday, L.A. Activists Welcome a New D.A.](#)
 - [Letter from the U.K.](#)
 - [The Curse of the Buried Treasure](#)
 - [Movies](#)
 - [The Film Foundation Comes to the Criterion Channel](#)
 - [On Television](#)
 - [“The Undoing” Is Empty Life-style Porn](#)
 - [Personal History](#)
 - [The Ability to Cry](#)
 - [Podcast Dept.](#)
 - [The Secret Sounds of “Song Exploder”](#)
 - [Poems](#)
 - [“Ways of Being Lonely”](#)
 - [“Spumante”](#)
 - [Profiles](#)
 - [What Makes the Difference Between Getting Out of Prison and Staying Out?](#)
 - [Shouts & Murmurs](#)
 - [Introducing the Trump Scouts](#)
 - [Sketchbook](#)

[Is It Time to Change the President?](#)

[St. Louis Dispatch](#)

[Cori Bush, a Nurse and Activist, Becomes the First Black Woman to Represent Missouri in Congress](#)

[Tables for Two](#)

[A Whirl Through the Philippines with Jeepney's Meal Kits](#)

[The Art World](#)

[How to Read Sam Gilliam's Formalism](#)

[The Current Cinema](#)

[Discoveries and Awakenings in “Ammonite”](#)

[Wilmington Report](#)

[Delaware Voters Await Joe Biden: “We Just Need Him”](#)