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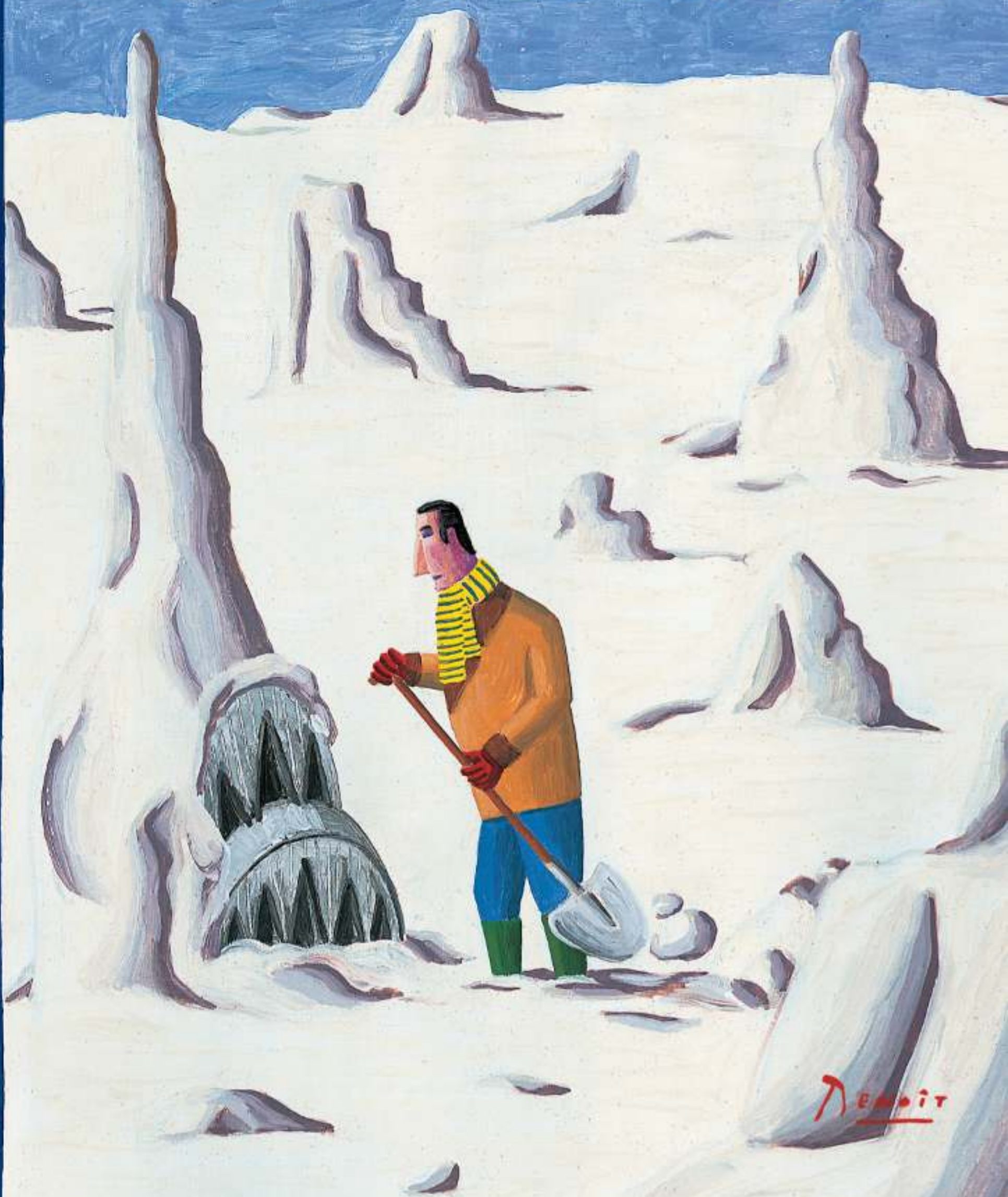

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MARCH 1, 2021

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CONTRIBUTORS

Ian Parker (*"Figuring It Out," p. 32*), who contributed his first piece to *The New Yorker* in 1992, became a staff writer in 2000.

Souvankham Thammavongsa (*Fiction, p. 54*) has written four poetry books and the short-story collection "How to Pronounce Knife," which received the 2020 Scotiabank Giller Prize.

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Emily Jungmin Yoon (*Poem, p. 50*), the poetry editor for *The Margins*, published the poetry collection "A Cruelty Special to Our Species" in 2018.

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Danielle Kraese (*Shouts & Murmurs, p. 25*) is an editor at Bustle.

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Gregory Pardlo (*Poem, p. 40*) won the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for poetry for "Digest." He directs the M.F.A. program at Rutgers University-Camden.

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

DISPATCH

Caroline Lester reports on the rural towns in Alaska that are leading much of the country in vaccine distribution.

CULTURAL COMMENT

In the age of the advice-column boom, Jamie Fisher asks, what are we really searching for?

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LEFT: JONATHAN NEWTON / THE WASHINGTON POST / GETTY;
RIGHT: LARISSA HOFF

THE MAIL

OUT OF OFFICE

John Seabrook's piece about the post-pandemic future of the office covered a number of important topics related to working from home ("Office Space," February 1st). Two other factors are worth considering. First, remote working pushes the costs of maintaining office space onto employees. Some companies do offer stipends for office technology and at-home setups, like chairs and Wi-Fi, but many employees end up shouldering the majority of these costs. We must ask who benefits from the ostensible savings represented by home offices. For many employees—especially parents—working at home is much harder and sometimes more costly than working in an office. The second factor involves office dynamics: with people at home, there are likely fewer opportunities for sexual harassment and other detrimental encounters between colleagues, and any attacks can be recorded. Although working from home could be less safe for those facing domestic violence, many employees may find that it eases their interactions in the "office."
Alicia Kershaw
New York City

Seabrook adroitly assesses the questions that many businesses are facing about the future of the office. As the C.E.O. of a design group, I've been telling companies to take inspiration from an unlikely source: the M&M's store in Times Square. Up until now, most offices have been designed to facilitate a combination of solo work and collaboration. But, as the past year has proved, most of this can be done virtually. In the future, offices should be designed around immersive experiences that allow companies to see their employees' visceral reactions to the brand. They should build places where employees can interact with products and services in development, look through confidential materials, and socialize. Give workers twenty-first-century reasons to show up in person, and they will return to the office.
Jason Korman
Miami Beach, Fla.

MORANDI'S DEMONS

I read with delight Peter Schjeldahl's comments on the Josef Albers and Giorgio Morandi show at David Zwirner's New York gallery (The Art World, February 1st). He makes great sense of why two very different artists are paired in the same exhibition. I am a painter myself, and can attest that Morandi is treasured by many of my contemporaries. I do wish that Schjeldahl had lingered more on what I find most significant about Morandi: his metaphoric subjects. His unassuming clusters of vases are like groups of people or village buildings, reflecting his own isolation and compartmentalized life. He compassionately shows fear and struggle amid his attempts at control—an approach to life that perhaps informed his early fascination with Fascism. Regardless of Morandi's politics, he is a painter whose work I continue to seek out.
Ed Shay
New Buffalo, Mich.

THE SENSUOUS SENSES

Rachel Syme, in her essay about the cultural history of olfactory obsessions, notes that, "in our clumsy efforts at the ineffable, there is both passion and melancholy" (Books, February 1st). Scent shares a resistance to verbal description, even by the most extravagantly poetic language, with another sense: sound. Vision depends on the spatial distance between the human subject and the object of perception, but scent and sound seem to overcome such an epistemological gap. They both evoke aesthetic sensation and envelop us in the world in affective, intuitive ways that neither critical reason nor analytical language can fully explain.
Rolf J. Goebel
Huntsville, Ala.

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In an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, many New York City venues are closed. Here's a selection of culture to be found around town, as well as online and streaming.

FEBRUARY 24 – MARCH 2, 2021

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

The shimmering, polychromatic music that Stravinsky composed for "The Firebird" has inspired many productions since the fairy-tale ballet débuted, in 1910. The one that John Taras choreographed for **Dance Theatre of Harlem,** in 1982—which is streaming on the company's YouTube channel on Feb. 27—is less Russian than many. Fantastical sets and costumes by Geoffrey Holder combine orchidaceous foliage out of a Henri Rousseau jungle with a Levantine hero and a Japanese villain. The dancing is equally vibrant and warm.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NAKEYA BROWN

ART

"Albers and Morandi"

In this show, subtitled "Never Finished," the Zwirner gallery pairs two artists who can seem bizarrely mismatched: Josef Albers, the starchy German-American abstract painter and color theorist, who died in 1976, at the age of eighty-eight, and Giorgio Morandi, the seraphic Italian still-life painter, who died in 1964, at the age of seventy-three. Albers, who was wedded to a format of three or four nested, hard-edged squares, is academic in spirit—easy to admire but hard to like. Morandi, transfixed by the bottles and vases in his studio for fifty years, is deeply poetic. Yet viewing them together electrifies—this is one of the best-installed shows that I've ever seen—as their works' extremes play off each other. Think of it as a pas de deux of a drill sergeant (Albers) and an enchanter (Morandi). Most of the pieces in the show (twenty-three by each artist) are small. This was Morandi's habitual scale and Albers's most successful one. The soft cosmos of Morandi is both relieved and refreshed by the architectonics of Albers, and vice versa. Neither artist looked over his shoulder at trends of the day. They were brothers in perseverance.—*Peter Schjeldahl (davidzwirner.com)*

Medrie MacPhee

In 2012, when this Canadian-born painter started a conceptual fashion line called RELAX—featuring bespoke garments stitched together from sweatsuits and similarly comfortable, affordable castoffs—she also discovered an innovative, collagelike structure for her abstract canvases. (MacPhee, who moved to New York in 1976, had previously been depicting surreally empty architectural spaces.) In the four new paintings in her current show, at the Tibor de Nagy gallery, blocky flatness and rugged surfaces rule. The big compositions' irregular shapes are plotted out by the seams of deconstructed garments, like parcels of land on a map. In "Take Me to the River," a commanding work in bright navy blue, an overlay of white lines suggests fragmented circuitry; "Favela" is a handsome crowd of mustard, crimson, burgundy, and blue trapezoids. Although MacPhee sometimes plays with the gender associations of the fabrics she chooses, such concerns feel secondary to her invigorating and magnetic formalism.—*Johanna Fateman (tibordenagy.com)*

Jeanne Reynal

During the ascent of Abstract Expressionism, Reynal reinvented the art of mosaics, embracing lyrical geometries and biomorphism in a glimmering, varied body of wall-mounted and freestanding works. This bountiful survey, filling two floors at the Eric Firestone gallery, spans three decades of the New York School artist's career, from 1940 to 1970. (Reynal died in 1983, at the age of eighty.) Her novel approach involved a degree of spontaneity that is not usually associated with the ancient medium; a short documentary on view, from 1968, captures Reynal speedily sketching into wet cement and scattering stone tiles. Her early compositions are flat and graphic, as exemplified in a 1943 collaboration with Isamu Noguchi, for which she decorated the surface of a low triangular table. But moody, encrusted works from the fifties play up the craggy topographical potential of mosaics, which Reynal studied with a Russian master, in Paris, in the nineteen-thirties. By 1970, her pieces had become quasi-figurative, seen here in a striking procession of undulating, patterned pillars rising from a bed of white gravel.—*J.F. (ericfirestonegallery.com)*

TELEVISION

The Bureau

The title of this French show (on Sundance Now), created by Eric Rochant, refers to the *bureau des légendes*—a fictional undercover operation run by France's foreign-intelligence service, the D.G.S.E. Guillaume Debailly, an agent with the code name Malotru (Mathieu Kassovitz), has just returned home from a mission to Syria, where he lived as a French teacher named Paul Lefebvre, gathering information under the eye of Bashar al-Assad's regime. But Guillaume discovers that it's not so easy to break character, especially once his lover from Damascus, the historian Nadia El Mansour (Zineb Triki), arrives in Paris to attend secret talks between the Syrian government and the opposition. At great cost to his colleagues, and to his country, Guillaume clings to the fiction of being Paul—though who's to say at what point a role, played with total conviction, crosses over and becomes the truth? Following in the tradition of John le Carré, "The Bureau" succeeds both as an exemplary spy drama and as a critique of the same: it detonates the genre from within.—*Alexandra Schwartz (Reviewed in our issue of 2/8/21.)*

AT THE GALLERIES

To survive, most American artists need a side hustle, and **David Byrd** was no exception. For thirty years, the Illinois native—who studied painting at a French academy in New York City on the G.I. Bill—worked as an orderly in the psychiatric ward of a Veterans Affairs hospital, in Westchester. The despair (and, sometimes, the peace) that he witnessed became the subject of the plaintive figurative canvases he refined in almost total obscurity. (Byrd's first solo exhibition preceded his death, in 2013, by just seven weeks.) The artist would have turned ninety-five on Feb. 25, the day that the Anton Kern gallery opens an homage to his magnum opus, "Montrose VA 1958-1988." The cycle of notations and drawings (including the untitled image pictured above) crystallizes Byrd's memories of his three decades at the institution from the vantage point of his retirement. Parts of it may call to mind the alienated souls of George Tooker, but Byrd's concerned regard for his subjects sets him apart.—*Andrea K. Scott*

OPPOSITE: SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH: MARTHA SWOPE / COURTESY DANCE THEATRE OF HARLEM (DANCER); RIGHT: © THE DAVID BYRD ESTATE / COURTESY ANTON KERN GALLERY AND THE DAVID BYRD ESTATE

ON TELEVISION

The new made-for-television documentary **"Framing Britney Spears,"** part of the "New York Times Presents" series (streaming on FX and Hulu), updates the public on the thorny and often troubling facts surrounding the decade-long conservatorship that has enabled the pop star's father to control her finances and career decisions. The film unspools the story of the #FreeBritney movement, formed by a crusading group of fans who want to "liberate" Spears from her legal entanglements, and who spend hours speculating about her cryptic Instagram captions. What the film does not do is paint a full picture of Spears as an artist who upended the pop landscape when she broke onto the scene with pompoms in her pigtails and a Fosse-esque precision to her dance moves. Seeking to rewrite the tabloid narrative of the past, the film introduces villains including the paparazzi who hounded Spears as a new mother, Justin Timberlake and his spin on who was to blame for the couple's 2002 breakup, and, most of all, the media itself. In asking "Did we do a bad thing?," the documentary gets close to the central drama of Spears's life: how a rapacious press dined out for years on headlines about the unravelling of a gifted talent. However, the film ultimately raises more questions than it can answer—there is still much more story to tell.—*Rachel Syme*

Call My Agent!

In this warm, witty French show (on Netflix), the film agents at the Agence Samuel Kerr do what they do for the sake of art. "We create marriages," Andréa Martel (the wonderful Camille Cottin) says. They are better at making films than they are at making money. One inspired conceit is that the famous people whom A.S.K. represents—Juliette Binoche, Isabelle Huppert, Sigourney Weaver—play themselves, which they do in fine, divaesque fettle. (Created by Fanny Herrero, the show pointedly comments on the film industry's retrograde gender politics while keeping things light.) Now, in the fourth and final season, the whole operation is teetering fatally on the brink. Andréa's plan to open a new agency with her endearing schlub of a colleague Gabriel (Grégory Montel) has imploded. The wily operator Mathias (Thibault de Montalembert) has departed with his paramour and former assistant Noémie (Laure Calamy, a treasure) for a stint at a production company. And a new villain appears, Elise Formain (Anne Marivin), one of StarMédia's top agents, who is a classic homewrecker—which only underscores the fact that the office, for these crazy people, has become a family.—*A.S. (2/8/21)*

DANCE

New York City Ballet

Live performances at Lincoln Center won't resume until September, but digital offerings fill some of the gap, mostly for free. Premières by Kyle Abraham and Justin Peck are gestating for spring arrivals, but first comes a three-week series called "Three Sides of Balanchine," starting on Feb. 22. Each week is devoted to a different work, with podcasts and filmed rehearsals leading up to the broadcast of a performance recorded pre-pandemic. The first selection is "Prodigal Son" (1929), the second-oldest Balanchine piece in the company's repertory, followed by "Theme and Variations" (1947) and "Stravinsky Violin Concerto" (1972).—*Brian Seibert (nycballet.com)*

Joffrey Ballet

In its first digital performance since shutting down last February, Chicago's Joffrey Ballet presents a new work by the company dancer Yoshihisa Arai on its YouTube page, premièring Feb. 26 at 7. "Boléro" is a sixteen-minute work for fifteen dancers, set to Maurice Ravel's eponymous score, which seems to attract choreographers like moths to a flame. The subject is connection and the disruption to physical contact that is part of life today. The dancers wear costumes that evoke traditional Japanese dress, and masks, an allusion to both the current plague and Japanese theatrical tradition.—*Marina Harss (youtube.com/thejoffreyballet)*

The Sarasota Ballet

This admirable Gulf Coast company, which is celebrating its thirtieth anniversary, has managed to present a convincing virtual season with new films of excerpts and full ballets from its repertory. Its fifth program (out of seven) includes a Balanchine classic from 1960, "Donizetti Variations," first performed by the company in 2010. The piece, set to opera-ballet music by the Italian composer Gaetano Donizetti, is like pink champagne, all wit and fizz. The second half of the program contains a work by the company's choreographer-in-residence, Ricardo Graziano, who is also one of the troupe's top dancers. That piece, "Amorosa," from 2019, is set to excerpts from several cello concertos by Vivaldi. Tickets to watch the program, which can be seen Feb. 26-March 2, are available on the company's Web site.—*M.H. (sarasotaballet.org)*

Mariana Valencia

"An electrical demand that exceeds the available supply of its power." That's how the choreographer Mariana Valencia defines "brownout" in her visual essay of the same name, made for the Baryshnikov Arts Center's digital season. In the thirty-minute solo dance film, streaming on the center's Web site March 1-15, she wryly teases out the metaphorical applications—physical, emotional, perceptual—of a drop in voltage with movement, spoken word, and semi-transparent visual effects.—*B.S. (bacnyc.org)*

MUSIC

Dominique Fils-Aimé: "Three Little Words"

SOUL Dominique Fils-Aimé's voice—a defined, sinewy muscle—guides her across a constellation of genres and eras in a robust

ILLUSTRATION BY AGNES RICART

trilogy dedicated to the history of Black music. "Nameless," a throbbing tribute to the blues, from 2018, opens with Fils-Aimé's chilling update of Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," and "Stay Tuned!," from 2019, finds her sinking warmly into jazz melodies. "Three Little Words," the sweeping, celebratory end to the project, is powered by her love of soul sounds past and present. Her interpretations of the genre are eclectic and unexpected: she disguises one standout, "While We Wait," as a weightless doo-wop tune until her harmonies slowly build and transform the song into a dramatic, power-packed anthem urging change.—*Julyssa Lopez*

Lesley Flanigan

ELECTRONIC If a musician performs in an empty room, does she make a sound? In Lesley Flanigan's case, the answer is yes. The experimental electronic musician is an ingenious singer who builds her own instruments and fixates on sound sculpture. When the artist performs her solo set "Headphone Space," entirely without amplification, in the Brooklyn experimental-arts venue Roulette, her haunting, ethereal vocalizations and sine waves resound, via the Internet, directly to listeners in their homes. In this one-off show, Flanigan sits alone with her headphones and transmits to those doing the same, creating a sense of intimacy during a time of isolation.—*Steve Smith (Feb. 26 at 8; roulette.org.)*

"R+R=NOW Live"

JAZZ The R+R=NOW project, led by the keyboardist Robert Glasper, may seem overrun by talented artists, but they all contribute to a well-composed and cohesive sound. On this live recording, Glasper, the trumpeter Christian Scott aTunde Adjuah, the saxophonist and vocoderist Terrace Martin, and the synthesizer player Taylor McFerrin—each a significant component of the au-courant fusion of hip-hop, R. & B., and jazz—are buoyed by the glued-tight rhythm team of Derrick Hodge on bass and Justin Tyson on drums. Captured in 2018, during Glasper's month-long residency at New York's Blue Note following the release of the group's first album, "Collagically Speaking," this collective of heavy hitters sounds as sparked and free-flowing as a deeply road-tested outfit. A suitable climax—a waxing and waning twenty-five-minute jam on "Resting Warrior"—is kept sharp and responsive by Adjuah's dexterously distorted solo and the supple Hodge-Tyson hookup.—*Steve Futterman*

Skream: "Unreleased Classics Vol. 3"

ELECTRONIC Though he spent much of the twenty-tens playing straighter house and disco sets, the London d.j. Skream made his name with dubstep's rise: his 2005 single "Midnight Request Line" put the bass-centric British scene on the dance-music map. The third and final volume of Skream's "Unreleased Classics" series, covering 2003 to 2007, features tracks he and other d.j.s played in contemporary sets—charming snapshots of the era, the bulbous bass lines playful rather than bludgeoning. The finale is a remix of "Midnight," titled "Requestline VIP," that distends its drunken, skeletal percussion lines even further.—*Michaelangelo Matos*

Bill Stone: "Stone"

FOLK The psychedelically inclined folk-singer Bill Stone recorded his lone album, "Stone," in 1969, singing through a walrus mustache inside a Maine pottery studio. It may seem as if all young men dwelling under that era's existential clouds spent 1969 recording folk albums in pottery studios, but Stone casts his own kind of wintry haze on this album, singing, at times, as a guitar solos alongside him in cool discordance. Released regionally in an early-seventies micro-pressing, the record reached only a few ears—not exactly lost, but never quite found—and Stone soon shifted his focus to a career in education. Now his LP gets its first major pressing through *Galactic Zoo Dossier*, a Chicago magazine and recording imprint that specializes in such psychedelic excavation jobs. The album exudes its era's warmth and weirdness; though now sanctified with a proper release, it maintains the air of a secret.—*Jay Ruttenberg*

"Titon et l'Aurore"

OPERA In January, the master puppeteer Basil Twist and the eminent Baroque-music conductor William Christie came together for the first time, at Paris's Opéra-Comique, for a delightful production of Jean-Joseph Cassanéa de Mondonville's "Titon et l'Aurore" (1753). An overlong prologue aside, Mondonville's efficiently plotted *pastorale héroïque* centers on the goddess Aurora and the shepherd, Titon, who loves her, as two petty, meddlesome gods conspire against them. Twist embraces Mondonville's simplicity by committing to a series of specific, characterful choices: in one brilliant flourish, Aeolus, god of wind, is continuously trailed by billowing fabric that responds to his emotional state. Christie conducts Les Arts Florissants in a graceful, buoyant performance, and the singers reflect his taste for compact voices, technical proficiency, and stylistic polish, which sometimes come at the expense of individual flair—with the notable exception of the tenor Reinoud Van Mechelen's buttery-voiced Titon.—*Oussama Zahr (Available to stream for free at medici.tv until April 19.)*

MOVIES

Bamboozled

This sharp, riotous satire from Spike Lee, released in 2000, zeroes in on the grotesque misrepresentation of Black people in American media—and on their underrepresentation in the corporate offices in charge. Pierre Delacroix (Damon Wayans) is the sole Black executive at a TV network. Wanting to prove his bosses' obliviousness, he proposes a monstrous absurdity—a "Saturday Night Live"-style minstrel show, featuring Black actors, in blackface, reprising vile stereotypes. To Pierre's horror, the show is picked up and becomes a hit, restoring those stereotypes to popular culture. With a wide range of incisive, sardonic, hyperbolic humor and drama, Lee sketches the circular connections among racist images, racist policies, and a lack of leadership to resist them. The exuberant performances of the show's stars—a comedian (Tommy Davidson) and a tap dancer (Savion Glover), whom Pierre plucked off the streets—bring out Lee's potent theatrical paradox. Mocking stereotypes risks perpetuating them, which is why comedy—as embodied by the old-school comedians Junebug (Paul

INDIE ROCK

"Ignorance," the majestic fifth album by Tamara Lindeman's folk project the Weather Station, is an ornate act of world-building. Over the years, the Toronto singer-songwriter has expanded and deeply inhabited her songs, filling them with considerable detail, but this is an evolution of a greater magnitude. The band's self-titled record, from 2017, was heavier than previous ones—in pursuit of rock music. "Ignorance" is even more substantial, with saxophone, flute, and extra percussion on top of keys, guitar, and bass. The album explores the personal implications of the climate crisis: human existence encroaching on nature, generations robbed of a sustainable future. Lindeman's graceful vocals drift just above her well-crafted songs as she sings softly and achingly about making a life in a place that's gradually decaying.—*Sheldon Pearce*

ILLUSTRATION BY HALEY TIPPMANN

Mooney) and Honeycutt (Thomas Jefferson Byrd)—is, in Lee's view, a high and serious calling. With Jada Pinkett Smith, as Pierre's conflicted colleague.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on the Criterion Channel.)*

Blancanieves

As if bewitched, the legend of Snow White is transferred to Seville in the early twentieth century and transformed into high melodrama. A renowned bullfighter, Antonio Villalta (Daniel Giménez Cacho), is wounded and widowed in a single day, and married again not long after; his new wife, Encarna (Maribel Verdú), cuckolds him, spurns his devoted young daughter, and luxuriates in the pampering of her own image. (Rather than gaze into a mirror, this stepmother likes to read about herself in the press: one of many sly twists on the Brothers Grimm.) The dark-eyed daughter—played first by Sofía Oria, then, with added dazzle, by Macarena García—seeks refuge with a bunch of bullfighting dwarves, allowing the tale to turn full circle and wind up back in the bullring. Pablo Berger's film is laced with flamenco music and ready-stuffed with scraps of other movies; it is silent and monochrome, yet its timbre feels very different—riper and more extreme in both its comic grotesquerie and its creepy sorrows. As for the original fairy story, it all but melts away, like snow, in the dramatic heat. Released in 2013.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 4/8/13.) (Streaming on Amazon, Google Play, and other services.)*

Can You Ever Forgive Me?

In this 2018 drama, based on a memoir by its real-life protagonist, Melissa McCarthy brings passion and poignancy to the role of a literary loner in not so quiet desperation. She stars as Lee Israel, a fiftyish biographer and journalist living on the Upper West Side, who, in 1991, loses her sources of income and—discovering the value of a celebrity letter in her possession—also finds that she's good at fabricating letters in the name (and voice) of famous writers. The frustrations of the brilliant, bitter woman—whose lacerating wit creates a barrier of privacy and solitude—offer peeks into an underground of genteel artistic poverty that has little place in the newly upscale city. The director, Marielle Heller, anchors the action in New York's gay and lesbian community as the AIDS epidemic raged, and evokes a powerful sense of mourning and gratitude. Richard E. Grant co-stars as Jack Hock, Lee's shambolic friend in need and partner in crime. Written by Nicole Holofcener and Jeff Whitty.—*R.B. (Streaming on Amazon, Vudu, and other services.)*

Daddy Longlegs

A largely autobiographical, free-spirited street poem by the Safdie brothers, Benny and Josh, about a divorced bohemian father who turns his young sons' annual two weeks with him into an exuberant form of hell. Lenny Sokol (Ronald Bronstein), a projectionist who lives in a ramshackle apartment amid unstrung friends who are living relics of a scruffy old Manhattan, is casual about rules; the boys, Sage and Frey (Sage and Frey Ranaldo), are in constant trouble at school and face vast, sudden, and scary changes. Some of the film's episodes come off with a tender shrug; others (such as when Lenny gives the boys sedatives when he has to work all night) are as harrowing as they are keenly observed. The heart of the movie is the audacious performance by Bronstein, also a notable director, whose credit as co-writer makes clear the movie's debt to his inventiveness. This nightmarish childhood, the Safdie brothers tell us, didn't kill them; instead, it left them with a compassionate, good-humored wisdom that's rare in filmmakers of any age. Released in 2009.—*R.B. (Streaming on Amazon, iTunes, and other services.)*

Test Pattern

This drama, written and directed by Shatara Michelle Ford, is a sort of social experiment regarding the experiences of a young Black woman in Austin, Texas, that reveals, with fiercely focussed observation, the combined breakdown of public institutions and private life. Renesha (Brittany S. Hall), a development executive, meets Evan (Will Brill), a tattoo artist (who's white), at a club; they begin a romance and move in together. During a girls' night out with her friend Amber (Gail Bean), Renesha is drugged and raped by a man. What follows is a grim odyssey in which she and Evan rush from one medical center to another so that she can be forensically examined with a so-called rape kit; the agonized expedition, with its absurd practical complications, hurdles, and failures, exposes fractures in the couple's relationship. Ford's direction is plain but their sense of detail is sharp, bringing both emotional and political self-awareness to the fore; she audaciously breaks chronology to highlight crucial moments in Renesha's memories with a diagnostic shudder.—*R.B. (Streaming on virtual cinemas via Kino Marquee.)*

For more reviews, visit
newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town

WHAT TO STREAM

ALAMY

Thousands of films listed on IMDb have links for free streaming via IMDb.tv, including treasures ranging from "The Gold Rush" to "The Grand Budapest Hotel." One of them, Peter Bogdanovich's historical Hollywood drama **"The Cat's Meow,"** from 2001, is oddly timely, as a precursor to David Fincher's "Mank," in its depiction of the relationship between William Randolph Hearst (Edward Herrmann) and Marion Davies (Kirsten Dunst)—and between Hearst and the truth. It's based on the real-life mystery of the death of the producer Thomas Ince (Cary Elwes) aboard Hearst's yacht, in 1924; the film follows the prevalent (though disputed) theory that Hearst, in a jealous rage, shot Ince, and then covered up the crime. One of Hearst's guests, Charlie Chaplin (Eddie Izzard), is a key figure in the action, and another, the gossip columnist Louella Parsons (Jennifer Tilly), is lavishly rewarded for her silence. The seemingly carefree frivolity of the rich and the talented is laid on a little thick, but it makes the coverup plot, complete with blackmail, all the more jolting; Bogdanovich ruefully links the allure of classic Hollywood and the ruthlessness of its potentates.—*Richard Brody*

TABLES FOR TWO

"Bollywood Kitchen"

Recently, I had an unusually exciting Friday night. While frantically switching between recipes for chicken curry and chocolate chai affogato, I smelled something burning. The culprit: the paper tabs on the Lipton tea bags that I'd added to a pot of boiling water for the chai. Apparently, I wasn't supposed to let them dangle over the side—as evidenced by the fact that they were on fire.

Crisis was, fortunately, averted. On my laptop screen, a dashing fortysomething was completing the same tasks without breaking a sweat. I was watching "Bollywood Kitchen," an interactive performance co-produced by the Geffen Playhouse, in Los Angeles, and New York's Hypokrit Theatre Company. The man onscreen was Sri Rao, an Indian-American screenwriter and the author of a 2017 cookbook of the same name, which collects his family's recipes and pairs them with Bollywood films.

Two nights a week, Rao, broadcasting live from his sleek Manhattan kitchen, makes a few dishes from the book for a remote audience that's invited to cook along. There are three tiers of tickets: the first provides streaming access and recipes, the second adds a Bollywood Box, containing most of the necessary nonperishable ingredients, and the third includes the opportunity to appear on camera yourself, and to chat directly with Rao.

As a second-tier participant, I was delighted to find, in my Bollywood Box, tiny plastic jars arranged in a cardboard version of a *masala dabba*, a traditional Indian spice tray, and neat stacks of carefully labelled plastic bags. There was also a shopping list and a schedule, for getting your mise en place ready before curtain. I spent a meditative, if surprisingly exhausting, afternoon chopping onions, chicken thighs, and cilantro, steaming basmati rice, mincing garlic and ginger, and grating cucumber, to be folded into yogurt, with cumin and chili powder, for raita.

I was lulled into momentary relaxation, at the beginning of the show, with an extremely delicious cocktail called a Mumbai Mule (vodka, ginger beer, and fresh lime juice, punched up with ground coriander and cumin and shaken over ice) and an excellent bowl of popcorn. Per instructions, I had popped the kernels in a provided paper bag in the microwave, then coated them in butter, lemon juice, salt, cumin, paprika, coriander, chili, and garlic powder.

As he cooked, Rao spoke dreamily of his childhood, in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, and of his early passion for Bollywood musicals and the portal they opened to India, from which his parents had emigrated, interspersing memories with film clips. In my kitchen, all was copacetic until he started on the curry. How was the oil in his Dutch oven already shimmering? How did he get his turmeric-dusted chicken to brown so fast? What did I do with that baggie of coconut powder? The next thing I knew, I was twenty minutes behind, tea-bag tabs ablaze.

That this distracted me from Rao's monologue didn't much matter. The strength of "Bollywood Kitchen" lies more in the format than in the theatrical content. Though Rao's impulse to tell his family's story seemed heartfelt, and I was mesmerized by the film clips, the connections he drew between the two were vague and the show's themes were generic. I wondered if his best material was left untapped; not only is he a lifelong megafan, he's also the only American-born Indian to write a major Bollywood film, "Baar Baar Dekho," from 2016.

Still, there was comfort in the communal cooking, and in the food itself. If ashes ended up in my chai—brewed with cinnamon sticks, peppercorns, cardamom pods, and fresh ginger—they went unnoticed; the finished tea, with milk and cocoa powder whisked in, was perfectly calibrated for the sweetness of the vanilla ice cream I poured it over. The chicken was plump and brightly flavored, and gave me something to look forward to the next day, when it tasted even better. *("Bollywood Kitchen" tickets, $40, $95, or $175.)*

—Hannah Goldfield

PHOTOGRAPH BY MOLLY MATALON FOR THE NEW YORKER; ILLUSTRATION BY JOOST SWARTE

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
ASSESSING THREATS

Early in Shaka King's new film, "Judas and the Black Messiah," Roy Mitchell, a white F.B.I. agent, and William O'Neal, a Black informant, have a conversation about why O'Neal has been asked to infiltrate the Black Panther Party and gather intelligence on Fred Hampton, the leader of the Illinois branch. "Don't let Hampton fool you," Mitchell says. "The Panthers and the Klan are one and the same. Their aim is to sow hatred and inspire terror." It's a pointed moment not simply because it prefaces Hampton's death at the hands of Chicago police officers during a raid in December, 1969, but because it presents a moral equivalency that raises more questions than it answers.

The Ku Klux Klan arose after the Civil War and orchestrated a campaign to effectively revoke Black citizenship; the Panthers were born a century later, as a reaction to the ways in which that campaign had been successful. Most significantly, the Klan used terrorism to achieve its ends. The Panthers were guilty of sporadic acts of violence, but they had no ethos of terrorizing swaths of the public. That distinction places the F.B.I.'s actions in Chicago in stark relief. The killing of Hampton, who was just twenty-one when he died, was part of a coördinated strategy employed by federal and local law-enforcement agencies across the country to disrupt the Black Panther Party.

The radical, armed-self-defense-oriented Panthers were not alone. Under the direction of J. Edgar Hoover, the F.B.I.'s COINTELPRO initiative targeted the more pacifist wing of the civil-rights movement. It extensively surveilled and menaced Martin Luther King, Jr.—activities that are chronicled in another new film, Sam Pollard's documentary "MLK/FBI." Yet the Bureau took no such actions against the leadership of the Klan, which was responsible for an uncountable number of murders, or against George Lincoln Rockwell's American Nazi Party, which formed in opposition to the civil-rights movement. This contrast in responses is even more remarkable given a comment that President Joe Biden made last month, when he nominated Merrick Garland to be Attorney General. Biden said that Garland would restore integrity to the Department of Justice—it oversees the F.B.I.—which, he added, was created during the Administration of Ulysses S. Grant to enforce civil-rights amendments and to prosecute the Klan.

Like so much of this nation's traumatic racial history, the false equivalencies that Shaka King depicts in his movie have gained renewed salience. Last week, the N.A.A.C.P. filed a lawsuit on behalf of Representative Bennie Thompson, Democrat of Mississippi, the chair of the House Homeland Security Committee, against Donald Trump, Rudy Giuliani, the Proud Boys, and the Oath Keepers, for violating the Enforcement Act of April, 1871. The Klan Act, as it is known, prohibits the use of "force, intimidation, or threat" to prevent government officials from executing their responsibilities. The suit argues that attempts to interrupt the certification of the Electoral College vote qualify as such a violation.

The Klan Act, which also made people liable for impeding any citizen's right to vote, and authorized the President to use military force against attempts to curtail the rights guaranteed in the Fourteenth Amendment, led to many hundreds of indictments against Klansmen and their affiliates in the eighteen-seventies. The group was moribund for decades, until the 1915 film "The Birth of a Nation" reignited interest in it. Yet the government's successful disruption of the organization serves as an example of what can be achieved through legislation and bureaucratic commitment. Grant, who commanded the Union Army during the Civil War, understood better than most that the dangers presented by militant white supremacy were not limited to Black America, and would eventually touch every corner of the nation. That insight

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

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was all but lost on subsequent generations.

On October 6th, the Department of Homeland Security released a threat assessment stating that "ideologically motivated lone offenders and small groups pose the most likely terrorist threat to the Homeland, with Domestic Violent Extremists presenting the most persistent and lethal threat," and expressing particular concern about "white supremacist violent extremists." The report warned that some elements might target "events related to the 2020 Presidential campaigns, the election itself, election results, or the post-election period." Three months later to the day, an unwieldy alliance of right-wing radicals, some bearing Confederate flags, stormed the United States Capitol, took actions that led to the death of a police officer, and called for the hanging of the Vice-President. Pipe bombs were planted near the headquarters of the Democratic and Republican National Committees. Police made relatively few arrests on the day of the attack. As of last week, well more than two hundred people had been charged, but the initial leniency, especially compared with the law-enforcement response to the Black Lives Matter protests last summer, did not go unnoticed.

The concern is not simply the disparity in treatment but the continued reluctance to recognize white racial extremism as the security threat it is until the problem has metastasized. Last Tuesday, the *Times* reported that at least thirty law-enforcement officers have been identified as part of the mob at the Capitol. In recent years, law-enforcement departments in Virginia, Florida, Nebraska, Louisiana, Michigan, and Texas have fired officers for membership in the Klan. A year and a half ago, the Philadelphia Police Department fired thirteen officers for posting racist or offensive messages on Facebook. Last month, more than a hundred officers were injured as they attempted to protect Congress, but the public also realized, with alarm, that among the officers' ranks may have been some who were sympathetic to the crowd.

The fact that the N.A.A.C.P. has invoked the Klan Act to file suit against a former President is notable, but not nearly as notable as the reasons that make the law applicable today. President Biden, in his Inaugural Address, took the unprecedented step of declaring the need to destroy white supremacy. Like Grant, he inherited a situation in which the prosecution of these forces is essential not only to his agenda but to American democracy itself. The Homeland Security assessment noted that the threat of domestic extremism will persist "at least through early 2021." That is what bureaucratic understatement sounds like. It has taken decades to recognize the threat; it will persist a spell longer than the spring.

—Jelani Cobb

DEPT. OF RED TAPE

VACCINE YENTA

The vaccine booking process has been likened to Soviet bread lines, or to the Massapequa D.M.V. But these comparisons fail to capture the particularly digital nature of the bureaucratic dystopia. There are too many Web sites to check, and not enough people answering phones. Portals crash, confirmed appointments vanish. Slots go not to the most at risk but to the most tech-savvy. People could use some I.T. support. A designated grandkid? Millennial concierge?

"I prefer 'vaccine yenta,'" Carolyn Ruvkun, who has secured about a hundred appointments for friends and strangers, and sent links and tips to many more, said the other day. Ruvkun, who works in TV and lives in Windsor Terrace with a boyfriend, Will, and a kitten, Schmooze, is one of an army of Good Samaritan vaccine bookers. "It helps that I'm unemployed," she said.

Being of good health and sound moral character, Ruvkun, who is twenty-nine, has not yet scheduled a vaccination for herself, but has seen the process play out since the first phase: her mother is a cardiologist, her boyfriend is a teacher, and her grandmother is an octogenarian. The system was largely broken, but she was pretty good at it. She began helping friends' parents. "On the phone they'd want to catch up," she said. "I'd be, like, 'We'll catch up later, give me your date of birth!' I'd call my friends to say, 'Sorry I yelled at your dad.'"

Ruvkun and Will were sitting in their apartment, in their pajamas, laptops out. Schmooze puttered. ("She's very excited by cursors.") It was Sunday morning. At one minute and one second after eight, New York would begin accepting appointments for people with preëxisting conditions. Ruvkun had a list of six names. First up: her father. At 7:55, Ruvkun called her brother, who'd offered to help, and put him on speakerphone. Web pages were loaded. Sentences became clipped. At 8:01, they hit Refresh.

"This is so weird! It's blank right now," Ruvkun said. Glitch. Typing commenced. Muttering followed. Two boxes popped up on the page, each with options for "Yes" and "No," but their corresponding questions were missing. Were they of the "Do you have a comorbidity" variety? Or more like "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" An optimist, Ruvkun's brother clicked on "Yes" to both.

"Appointments available!" he said. At 8:14, after more clicking, he declared, "Appointment confirmed!"

"I'm relieved but also confused," Ruvkun said. Next up: Ramona, the grandmother of one of Will's former students. Ruvkun managed to find one non-crashing Web site, but it placed her in a virtual queue forty-three minutes long. "I haven't seen this before," she said.

While waiting, she said, "One thing I try to do is just reassure people that this is insane." She has picked up a few scoops. (The Flatbush Y.M.C.A.—phone only—was a gold mine for locals.) She has yet to fail, although some appointments take several days to book. At 9:02, her computer dinged. "Got through!" she said. "I think it worked!"

Four hopefuls remained: a relative, a stranger, two people with heart conditions. "People come to me through existing communities," she said. "I'm just a link. Basically, my starting point is: we live in a society!" Early on, she joined a group of techies who created NYC Vaccine List, a Web site that collects the latest intelligence and displays all availabilities on one page. She exchanges tips with unions, senior centers, and a few city bureaucrats. Will's students referred essen-

tial-worker parents. Her assistance was offered to churchgoers and at synagogues. "Someone joked, 'My rabbi is going to call you. I'll need him for my son's bar mitzvah, so please speak to the rabbi!' "

After another hour of virtual putzing, Ruvkun was ready to call it a day. Schmooze had a 10:40 vet appointment. Ruvkun trawled Twitter one last time for tips. She reloaded a page. "Hold on one second," she said. "I can't believe it took me so long to find this." More typing. "Yes! It worked!" Four more appointments, confirmed, with minutes to spare for the vet.

Later that afternoon, at a vaccination center in a gymnasium in the Bronx, Helen Mack—seventy-six, hand-sewn mask (four-ply), Ruvkun bookee, nervous but sufficiently prayed for—didn't look when the needle went in. "It's over?" she said. "I didn't even feel it! Thank the Lord! It's over!"

—Zach Helfand

THE BENCH

SWAT TEAM

Last March, after President Trump declaimed that the only way he could lose the election was if there was fraud, Seth Waxman couldn't sleep. A member of the tiny, élite club of litigators who have served as Solicitors General of the United States, Waxman is not a mellow guy. An obsessive runner with the wound-up energy of a twisted rubber band, he often wakes up at three in the morning agitated by something or other. Typically, he makes a cup of tea, works for an hour, and goes back to bed. But the insomnia last March, he said, "was, like, five nights in a row!"

The proximate cause was what he calls "the Doomsday scenarios," which he feared could unfold if Trump tried to subvert the 2020 election. Could the President order the election postponed because of the pandemic? he wondered. Could he call a reunion of the ICE agents he sent into Portland to intimidate minority voters in urban centers?

Night after night, Waxman tabulated every possible thing that could go wrong. Having advised several Democratic Presidential campaigns, he was familiar with the pitfalls. But none of the nightmares conjured by Trump "corresponded with anything I'd worried about in earlier campaigns," he said. He ended up with a three-and-a-half-page single-spaced list of potential catastrophes.

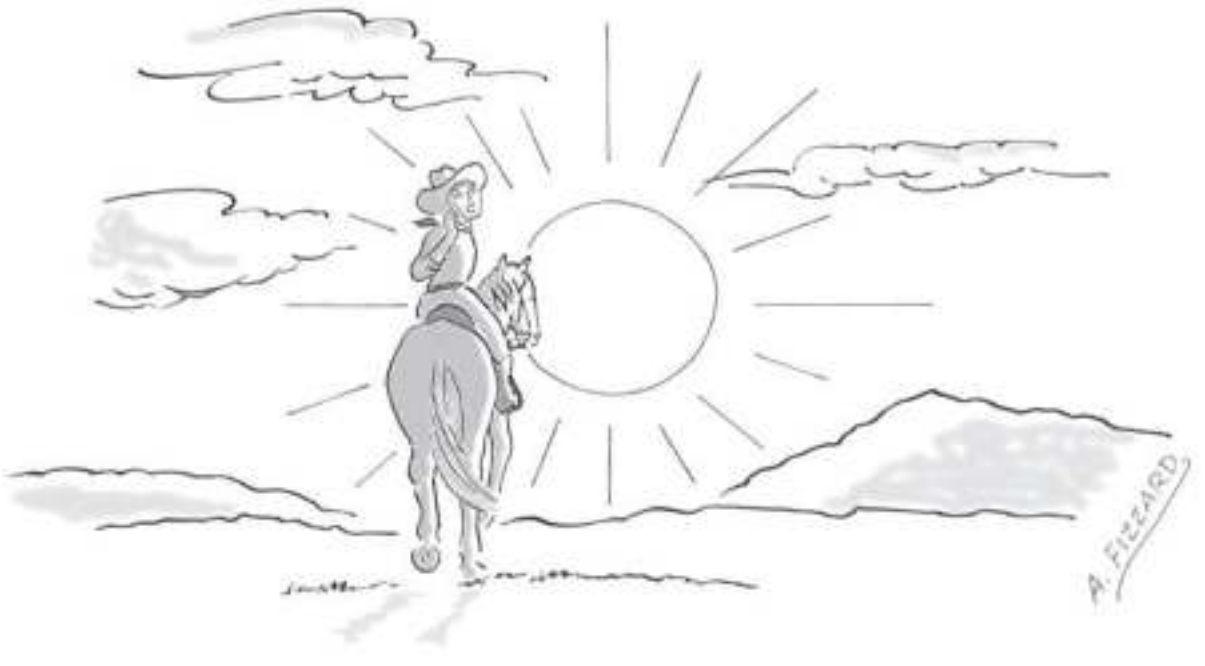
Eleven months before the Senate impeachment trial exposed an unprecedented level of political savagery, Waxman quietly prepared for the worst. He reached out to two other former Solicitors General, Walter Dellinger and Donald Verrilli, who served as the Clinton and the Obama Administrations' advocates, respectively, before the Supreme Court. By April, they had formed a small SWAT team to coördinate with the Biden campaign. They called themselves the Three Amigos, but the campaign referred to them as SG3. Their goal: safeguarding the election.

"They were phenomenal," Bob Bauer, a legal adviser to the Biden campaign, said. "Our preoccupation was to do everything we could to address the potential that the electoral system would just collapse." To describe the trio's special area of legal assistance, the Biden campaign avoided using Waxman's term, "Doomsday scenarios," in favor of the less apocalyptic term "unconventional challenges."

"It was an unreal exercise," Waxman said of his under-the-radar strike force. "I kept shaking my head and asking, Why, in a mature democracy, am I even worrying about the President federalizing the National Guard to intimidate voters?" He knew that safeguarding the system would be an enormous legal undertaking, requiring hundreds of lawyers in as many as eighteen states, far more volunteers than his firm, Wilmer-Hale, could provide. Coördinating with the Biden campaign's lawyers, each of the Three Amigos headed up a separate task force. Verrilli rounded up volunteer legal teams to address the ways in which Trump might try to use his executive powers to disrupt voting. Dellinger focussed on what could go wrong after the electors cast their ballots, in December. Waxman handled everything else, including potentially rebellious state legislatures, which they considered the most likely threat. By May, he had twenty legal teams on it.

Bauer said that the squads of lawyers "produced thousands of pages of legal analysis, and what I call 'template pleadings,' " in preparation for every conceivable kind of breakdown in the democratic system. "Some of these scenarios were beyond unlikely, such as federal marshals seizing ballot boxes, and federal troops at polling places. But we had to game out what someone of Trump's ruthlessness and lack of concern for the law would do."

Even before the Capitol riot, the group had prepared Supreme Court pleadings in case Trump strong-armed Vice-President Mike Pence into rejecting the certification of the Electoral College votes. "We were fully prepared to go to the Supreme Court by nightfall,"



"I've got that kind of restlessness that can only be fixed by buying something."

Dellinger said by phone from North Carolina, where he teaches at Duke Law School. "We had paper filed and ready." By then, the Biden campaign had sent the trio hoodies emblazoned with a special "Team SG3" logo. "Even though we planned for every possible loony scenario we could think of," he went on, none of them foresaw the Capitol riot.

"We watched in horror as it unfolded," Waxman said. For months, people had been teasing him about being paranoid. Verrilli recalled, "Seth said in December that we needed to make sure people could get to the building on January 6 to meet." But an armed insurrection, in which five people died, was beyond the imagination of even the legal profession's best and brightest.

"The lesson we learned," Waxman said, "is that the state of our democracy is perilous—even more so than we thought. I am very, very worried."

—Jane Mayer

MAN'S BEST FRIEND

THE SMELL TEST

At the AmericanAirlines Arena, in downtown Miami, eighteen hundred N.B.A. fans lined up outside Lexus Gate 5 for a K-9 inspection. Banners instructed guests how to proceed through the security line:

KEEP 6FT APART
WEAR MASKS AT ALL TIMES
DETECTION DOGS WILL NOT ATTEMPT TO TOUCH YOUR PERSON AND IN ALMOST ALL INSTANCES THERE IS NO CONTACT, ALTHOUGH IT IS POSSIBLE THAT AN INADVERTENT, MOMENTARY CONTACT COULD OCCUR

Ticket holders were unfazed; the vibe was more outside-a-night-club than T.S.A.-checkpoint, although there wasn't any music, and a sixty-pound German shepherd named Abby paced up and down the queue. Her leash was held by Adam Davila, who spent fourteen years as an Army Ranger before training as a bomb-sniffing-dog handler. A guy wearing orange tie-dyed pants and Gucci loafers hollered to a woman ahead of him who had on a purple hoodie: "You look like a supermodel! This is like Chanel's Presentation 2022!"

Dogs can be trained to sniff out just about anything: bedbugs and black-footed ferrets, firearms and peroxide-based explosives, gourmet fungi, toxic mold, marijuana, malaria, ovarian cancer, even contraband cell phones and child pornography. Last month, the Miami Heat announced that its detection dogs—Abby, Happy (another German shepherd), Magni (Belgian Malinois), and Tina (Dutch shepherd)—had learned to detect the coronavirus.

At around 6:30 P.M., an hour before game time, a security guard in a yellow polo welcomed a group into the K-9 screening area with an air of well-practiced authority. "The quicker we do this, the quicker we can go!" she said.

"So what's the dog sniffing out?" a skinny man in a Knicks T-shirt asked.

"COVID," the guard replied.

"No!" the guy said. "You're messing with me. I thought they were sniffing for, like, guns or bombs or something."

"If they did that, half this line wouldn't make it inside!" the guard said, laughing.

A second guard instructed the next group. "O.K., guys, nothing in your hands!" he said. "Keep both hands to your side, facing forward, please. Nothing at all in your hands. Sir!—"

A curly-haired young man was filming the goings on with an iPhone.

"—Can you put the phone away for a quick second, please?" The man kept filming. "Sir!"

He obliged, and Magni, the Malinois, gave him a thorough sniffing—hands, legs, feet, groin. "All clear," the dog's handler said. The young man had just tested negative for COVID-19, according to a dog.

"The dogs don't know what they're looking for. Like, our COVID dogs don't realize they're COVID dogs," Mike Larkin, a retired Marine Corps master gunnery sergeant, and an executive at Global K9 Protection Group, the company contracted to train the dogs, explained. "An explosive dog doesn't know, 'Hey, I'm looking for a bomb.' They're looking for an odor that they've been imprinted to react to, and they're looking for their reward." (Magni's reward: a rainbow-colored fetch ball.) "The dog is just having fun. This is a game to them."

Larkin went on, "Everything has a unique odor signature—a piece of plastic, a pair of Jordans, marijuana, cocaine, black powder. You can isolate the specific scent signature of an item, and then you teach the dog to find that." Someone asked about COVID-19's scent signature—how was it developed, what's it called, what is it, anyway?

"So it's proprietary," Larkin said, apologetically. "SNIFF"—a technology company started last June by a real-estate executive from New Jersey—"designed and developed the solution." He added, "We went the direct route of identifying the odors specific to the virus itself."

Nearby, a woman wearing spandex leggings and a ripped jean jacket shouted, "Yay! I don't have COVID," and a wobbly man, who smelled of Bud Light, said, "I think this is dumb as fuck, and you can quote me on that."

Raymond Crowley, another K-9 executive, motioned for an observer to step away from the screening area. "Come over here," he said. "I don't want the dogs to see what I'm doing." He pulled an ultra-smelly sterile cotton gauze pad from his pocket and discreetly slipped it to the observer. Apparently, it smelled like COVID-19.

Following instructions, the observer joined the queue, arms by his side, smelly gauze pad in his right hand. Happy, a German shepherd, and Wayne Weseman, a retired St. Lucie County

deputy sheriff, walked along the line.

Happy sniffed, sniffed again, and started wagging his tail.

"Are you sure?" Weseman asked the dog. Happy sniffed some more. "You got it? Good boy." A security guard quietly removed the observer from the line.

Inside, the score was 97–96, with forty-seven seconds on the clock. A fireball danced on the Jumbotron, and a man holding a big cardboard cutout of Baby Yoda bellowed with something like joy. Happy paid no attention to the game. He stood on his hind legs, near Gate 5, and licked Weseman's face. Grinning, Weseman said, "I stink like a dog!"

—Adam Iscoe

THE PICTURES
VIEWFINDER

Akira, a white Ford Transit van, was parallel-parked along Pacific Coast Highway one crisp, sun-dazzled February noon. Behind her, a showy gold-toned 500-horsepower Mountain Aire. Ahead of her, the open road. On the passenger seat, a denim patchwork quilt and a copy of "Story," the screenwriting manual by Robert McKee. On the roof, an excessive amount of solar panelling.

"I would show you inside, but it's just been gutted," Joshua James Richards, a cinematographer who co-owns Akira with his partner, the writer-director Chloé Zhao, said, before reluctantly opening the sliding door. Inside was an unmade double bed, and no kitchen. "If any of the nomads saw that, they'd be ashamed of me."

He meant Linda May and Swankie, two of the real-life van dwellers who play versions of themselves in Zhao's new film, "Nomadland." It stars Frances McDormand as Fern, a woman who hits the road after losing her husband, her job, and her town. The gypsum plant where she works closes, and the town becomes a modern-day Pompeii, abandoned mid-thought, coffee cups still on counters. Her conveyance is Vanguard, a careworn white van, its headlights searching out a new future, everything bungee-corded down. "I'm not homeless, I'm just houseless," Fern says. Radical self-sufficiency is her true north.

Richards, who is thirty-six, with a scruffy beard, was wearing a navy barn jacket and grimy jeans. He was director of photography on the film, and head of production design. He outfitted Vanguard in the front yard of his and Zhao's house, in Ojai. "A neighbor came up to me and gave me his friend's card—a guy who decks out vans," he said. "He thought I was trying to make it nicer!"

Richards and Zhao got Akira in 2018, and that summer drove all around the West, scouting locations, meeting van dwellers and train hoppers, and trying to be unobtrusive in R.V. parks and campgrounds; they became connoisseurs of Famous Dave's. "Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, Oregon, Nevada. We were trying to write a movie *and* live in a van," Richards said. "As soon as the door shuts, the curtains close, you're in a cocoon. Once you close it, there's no one knocking on the door. Ted Bundy vibes! You feel very safe."

He clambered over some rocks that formed a breakwater between the highway and the surf. "This is how I grew up really, in Cornwall, sitting on rocks on the beach." His family were nomadic, too, and not well-off. Born-again in a country of Anglicans, they moved every couple of years, as his father, a preacher, sought out new congregations. "It was always being the new boy at school. Casting out demons on a Sunday morning when you want to be skating with your mates." He wanted to go to America, to find out how the story of Western expansion ends.

He found his way to N.Y.U.'s film school, and then to the campus bar, where he met Zhao. "There are two kinds of students," he said. "Those who go home to work on their script, and those who go to the Apple Bar." He went out West with her, to the Pine Ridge Reservation, in South Dakota. "It was the American West of my dreams," he said. "There'd be multiple lightning storms going at once. You think about the religion of those people. Of course they have a thunder god!" On the reservation, Zhao made "Songs My Brothers Taught Me," using locals to tell a loosely fictional story about a Native boy and his sister. Richards shot it, and submitted it as his thesis.

"Tarantino says digital is the death of cinema," he said. "Fuck you, man. Chloé could get no backing, because she's a Chinese woman. With digital, we could make our own movies for a hundred thousand dollars at the level they could be shown as cinema." Zhao's next film is "Eternals," a two-hundred-million-dollar Marvel movie with Salma Hayek and Angelina Jolie, and Richards, operating the camera.

Joshua James Richards

It was low tide, and a fisherman stood in the shallows, surf-casting, dark against the light-crazed sea. Richards held up his index fingers like goalposts, an imaginary viewfinder. "Madness and loneliness," he said. "It's Herzogian." He said that he was starting a new project, focussed on the old surfers in the shore community known as carps. He looked up and down the beach. There were characters everywhere. "California nomads! It's capturing something that's kind of gone, hanging by a thread."

What other story is there, anyway? Zhao, he said, had edited "Nomadland" during the pandemic. A sense of loss pervades the film; wistful dusks deepen into dark, as Fern walks across the Plains with her lantern. The Amazon warehouse, where she works during the holidays, is a fluorescent Death Star.

"We're all in existential crisis," Richards said. "We need to give ourselves time to mourn. To grieve for the life we've had that's not coming back. When Fern walks out of the only life she's ever known, it's that complete paradigm shift we've all had."

—Dana Goodyear

CORONAVIRUS CHRONICLES

THE COVID CONUNDRUM

Why does the pandemic seem far deadlier in some countries than in others?

BY SIDDHARTHA MUKHERJEE

On December 2nd, Mukul Ganguly, an eighty-three-year-old retired civil engineer in Kolkata, India, went to the Salt Lake Market to buy fish. The pandemic was surging around much of the world, and he wasn't oblivious of the risks of spending time at a wet market. His wife, a former forensic analyst, protested vehemently. But Mr. Ganguly wouldn't be deterred. He picked up his fabric shopping bag, tucked a doubled-up handkerchief in his pocket, and stepped out.

Mr. Ganguly lives in a modest, two-story, book-filled house a few blocks from the market. He tied his folded handkerchief into a makeshift mask, and spent about two hours buying groceries, choosing vegetables and sweets, and bargaining with the venders. (Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to haggle with a fishmonger and you'll feed him for a lifetime.) Two days later, he came down with a fever and a dry, incessant cough; he was barely able to walk to the bathroom. His daughter-in-law, in New Jersey—a cousin of mine—called me in a panic: he had tested positive for COVID-19.

We worked up a plan. He was to be isolated in a room with a pulse oximeter. His vitals were monitored twice daily. We arranged for a supplemental oxygen tank to be brought home in case his O_2 levels dipped too low. I called my doctor friends in Kolkata and asked them to stand by. For two days, Mr. Ganguly had a fever—100 degrees, 101 degrees—and then it subsided. By Christmas, he was pretty much back to normal. When I spoke to him in late December, he told me, in Bengali, that his experience had been typical. Various friends, all in their seventies and eighties, had contracted COVID-19. All had bounced back.

I called a friend in Mumbai, Shashank Joshi, who is a member of his state's COVID-19 task force. "Our I.C.U.s are nearly empty," he told me. Joshi is a doctor with seemingly infinite reserves of energy: a stethoscope perpetually dangling across his chest, he has spent the past several months carrouselling among slums, hospitals, and government offices, coördinating the state's response. Early last spring, when the first serious spread of COVID-19 was reported in India, Joshi jumped into action. Dharavi, in Mumbai, is Asia's largest slum: a million residents live in shanties, some packed so closely together that they can hear their neighbors' snores at night. When I visited it a few years ago, open drains were spilling water onto crowded lanes. (The next monsoon season, three young boys fell into the drains and died.) The tin roofs of the houses overlapped one another like fish scales; a roadside tap dripped a brown fluid that passed for potable water. When a toddler ran out from an open door onto the street, a neighbor caught him and lifted him up. Someone in the family—I counted six people in a single room, including an elderly couple—sent another child to retrieve him. In that episode alone, I later realized, I had witnessed at least nine one-on-one contacts.

After the pandemic was declared, last March, epidemiologists expected carnage in such areas. If the fatality rate from the "New York wave" of the pandemic were extrapolated, between three thousand and five thousand people would be expected to die in Dharavi. With Joshi's help, Mumbai's municipal government set up a field hospital with a couple of hundred beds, and doctors steeled themselves to working in shifts. Yet by mid-fall Dharavi had only a few hundred reported deaths—a tenth of what was expected—and the municipal government announced plans to pack up the field hospital there. By

Many regions report a COVID-19 death rate that's a hundredth of the U.S. rate.

ILLUSTRATION BY TYLER COMRIE

late December, reports of new deaths were infrequent.

I was struck by the contrast with my own hospital, in New York, where nurses and doctors were prepping I.C.U.s for a second wave of the pandemic. In Los Angeles, emergency rooms were filled with stretchers, the corridors crammed with patients straining to breathe, while ambulances carrying patients circled outside hospitals.

And there lies an epidemiological mystery. The usual trend of death from infectious diseases—malaria, typhoid, diphtheria, H.I.V.—follows a dismal pattern. Lower-income countries are hardest hit, with high-income countries the least affected. But if you look at the pattern of COVID-19 deaths reported per capita—deaths, not infections—Belgium, Italy, Spain, the United States, and the United Kingdom are among the worst off. The reported death rate in India, which has 1.3 billion people and a rickety, ad-hoc public-health infrastructure, is roughly a tenth of what it is in the United States. In Nigeria, with a population of some two hundred million, the reported death rate is less than a *hundredth* of the U.S. rate. Rich countries, with sophisticated health-care systems, seem to have suffered the worst ravages of the infection. Death rates in poorer countries—particularly in South Asia and large swaths of sub-Saharan Africa—appear curiously low. (South Africa, which accounts for most of sub-Saharan Africa's reported COVID-19 deaths, is an important exception.)

As the pandemic engulfed the world during the past several months, I kept returning to the question of what might explain these discrepancies. It was an epidemiological whodunnit. Was the "demographic structure" of a population the real factor? Were the disparities exaggerated by undercounting, with shoddy reporting systems hiding the real toll from public-health analysts? Was government response a critical variable? Or were other, less obvious factors at play? Perhaps any analysis would prove premature. If new viral strains, such as the South African variant of the virus, known as 501Y.V2, were to sweep through Africa, every prediction of mortality might be overturned. But as I started speaking with colleagues from around the world I found that my puzzlement was widely shared. For many statisticians, virologists, and public-health experts, the regional disparities in COVID-19 mortality represent the greatest conundrum of the pandemic.

"However you might think of it, the mystery remains," Mushfiq Mobarak, an economist at Yale who has helped research COVID-19 response strategies for developing nations, told me. "Tenfold differences, or one-hundredfold differences—these aren't minor. You have to account for other factors. You can't just wave the numbers off. It's going to be a lesson for this pandemic and for every future pandemic."

Mobarak, who grew up in Bangladesh (a hundred and sixty-three million people; eighty-three hundred reported COVID-19 deaths, or 3.5 per cent of America's, on a per-capita basis), studies populations and health. When I asked him about the puzzle, he began with what everyone accepts is the most potent variable for COVID-19 severity: age. The median age in India is twenty-eight. In Spain and Italy, it's forty-four and forty-seven, respectively. After the age of thirty, your chance of dying if you get COVID-19 doubles roughly every eight years.

So, if we were building a predictive model, we'd want to go beyond crude numbers, like median age, and get a more detailed picture of the so-called population pyramid. What's the proportion of people between seventy and eighty in Senegal versus Spain? How does the population pyramid of Pakistan compare with that of Italy? Even a carefully drawn pyramid can tell us only so much. Mexico has a median age similar to India's; the percentage of the population that's over sixty-five is within a point or two of India's. Yet India's reported rate of COVID-19 deaths per capita is less than a tenth of Mexico's.

So perhaps other populational features are significant. Take, for instance, the structure of an individual family and its living arrangements: who cohabitates with whom? Since the virus is often spread by close contact among family members—a grandchild infects a grandmother—we might want to know how often the elderly are found in multigenerational dwellings. As a rule, the higher a nation's per-capita G.D.P., the smaller the household size of the elderly. In the United Kingdom, where the per-capita G.D.P. in 2019 was forty-two thousand dollars, the average household size is 2.3. In Benin, where the per-capita G.D.P. is twelve hundred dollars, the average household size is 5.2, and nearly a fifth of these households have at least one member above sixty-five.

Mobarak suspects that, in places like the United States, "the spatial distribution of the elderly" probably also matters. Around a third of the deaths in the United States have occurred among residents and staff of long-term nursing homes. How do you assess the relative risks of the "warehoused elderly" in the developed world and the "homebound elderly" in the developing world, where seventy- and eighty-year-olds often live with a handful of younger family members? Is the grandfather of the Orou family in Benin, sharing a home with children and grandchildren who go out and about in the city, more vulnerable than the Smith couple, seventy-five and eighty-two years old, who reside in an assisted-living facility in Long Island with dozens of other elderly people, attended to by a rotating crew of visiting nurses?

Ideally, we'd also take account of the average level of contact among individuals. In densely populated, highly social contexts—urban environments, with wet markets, shantytowns, or subways—that number is high; in rural environments, it tends to be low. The virus spreads more easily in crowded spaces.

The task, then, is to factor in both intrinsic vulnerabilities (such as age or obesity) and extrinsic vulnerabilities (the structures of households, the levels of interpersonal contact). And here you start to get a sense of the challenges that our medical mathematicians must contend with. There are trade-offs battling trade-offs: are the risks greater for a younger country with a larger family size but with infrequent social contacts or for an older country with a smaller family size but frequent contacts?

The epidemiologists with whom I spoke agreed that these variables were the important ones to factor in. Accordingly, amid the spring surge, researchers at Imperial College London enlisted these variables in building models of COVID-19 mortality—with options for dialling up or down the level of interpersonal contact and viral contagiousness, and

generating a range of possible outcomes.

The models didn't always provide a time period when these deaths would occur; perhaps the worst is yet to come. Still, for rich countries, deaths predicted by the model weren't far from what we've seen, or, anyway, what we can now reasonably extrapolate. (The pandemic is far from over.) The surprise emerged when looking at South Asia and most of sub-Saharan Africa. The model—which, it should be emphasized, took age differences into account—appeared to be off, in most cases, by a staggering margin. Pakistan, with a population of two hundred and twenty million, was predicted to have as many as six hundred and fifty thousand deaths; it has so far reported twelve thousand. Côte d'Ivoire was predicted to have as many as fifty-two thousand deaths; by mid-February, a year after the pandemic reached the continent, it had reported under two hundred.

I called Abiola Fasina, an emergency-medicine physician in Lagos, Nigeria. In the early days of the pandemic, a prominent sponsor of public-health initiatives in Africa had envisaged "bodies out on the street" there. Between April and July, Fasina had run a field hospital and an isolation unit for COVID-19 patients. At first, she told me, "we were seventy or ninety per cent full. When I walked through those wards, I remember that the patients were mostly asymptomatic or mildly symptomatic. But as the pandemic continued patients mostly remained mildly symptomatic. It's all quite mild over here."

I asked Fasina, who is also a health-policy expert, to look out her office window at the street life below. "You know, life goes on pretty normally," she told me. "The markets are open. If you walk around the city, there are some people with masks and some without." Watching a video of street life in Lagos, I had a similar impression. In December, 2020, as London entered another stringent lockdown, the storefronts on Lagos's Nnamdi Azikiwe Street and Idumagbo Avenue were open. Carts shaded by brightly colored umbrellas were doing a brisk business. A woman carrying a basket on her head navigated gracefully past a man pushing a trolley full of gasoline cannisters.

A policeman pulled a motorist over—because he was unmasked? No, because he was smoking, and in Lagos State it's against the law to smoke while driving. Meanwhile, dozens of maskless people pushed past one another through shoulder-to-shoulder pedestrian traffic.

"Lagos is many things, and it's New York in Africa—activity on steroids," Olajide Bello, a lawyer there, told me. "We practically all live cheek by jowl, with almost no green spaces." The city, with fourteen million inhabitants, has returned to its usual chaos, Bello found. In late January, amid a new surge in COVID-19 infections, a national mask mandate was enacted, but enforcement has been spotty, and so has compliance.

Nigeria was predicted to have between two hundred thousand and four hundred and eighteen thousand COVID-19 deaths; the number reported in 2020 was under thirteen hundred. Ghana, with some thirty million residents, was predicted to see as many as seventy-five thousand deaths; the number reported in 2020 was a little more than three hundred. These numbers will grow as the pandemic continues. As was the case throughout much of sub-Saharan Africa, however, the statistical discrepancy was of two orders of magnitude: even amid the recent surge, the anticipated devastation still hasn't quite arrived. The field hospital that Fasina had helped set up in Lagos was packed up and shut down.

"Look, I don't come into your home office and tell you to get out of the tub."

Could the mortality gap be a mirage? Politicians may have an incentive to minimize the crisis (although the matter of incentives is complex: countries like Ghana and Nigeria sought and received billions of dollars in foreign assistance to help them combat the virus). At the same time, COVID-19 can be stigmatized in poorer countries, and, as Mobarak pointed out, that stigma, which he's seen in Bangladesh, "can lead to exclusion from economic life." The fishmonger has cause to keep his infection covert. And it's easy to imagine how such deaths might be underreported; a coroner's report might classify a COVID-19 death as "pneumonia" or "sepsis."

Oliver Watson, an epidemiologist at Imperial College London, who helped build the models, had a strong argument that systemic underreporting was a factor. He cited the example of malaria: "Only one in four deaths from malaria are estimated to be detected globally—in some low-income settings, it can be one in

twenty. And so a one-in-ten detection rate for COVID-19, an illness that carries far greater stigma, might well easily explain some of the discrepancy." Most of these undetected COVID-19 deaths occur at home, and hospitals routinely record COVID-19 deaths incorrectly.

Watson directed me to a study in Zambia, which recorded under four hundred COVID-19 deaths in 2020. (The model had predicted between twenty thousand and thirty thousand there for the entirety of the pandemic.) In Zambia's capital, Lusaka, researchers performed post-mortem tests of three hundred and sixty-four people who had been assigned various causes of death, and found that the coronavirus was present in seventy, or almost one in five. Forty-four of the seventy had manifested symptoms suggestive of COVID-19, including cough, fever, and shortness of breath, though only five had been tested for the virus while alive. The researchers carefully distinguished between "probable" and "possible" COVID-19 deaths, drawing from often scant clinical records, but, whatever the exact numbers were, it was obvious that the official records drastically shortchanged the reality. Lawrence Mwananyanda, a physician and global-health expert who helped lead the study, believes that Zambia's real death toll from COVID-19 might be as much as ten times as high as the official one. Any notion that the pandemic has bypassed Africa is, as Christopher Gill, an infectious-disease specialist at Boston University and another leader of the study, puts it, "a myth born of poor or absent data." Underreporting was plainly a serious issue.

The data problem could be worse in some countries, better in others. We'd expect that the amount of undercounting would vary from place to place because public-health resources vary, too. Westerners often think of sub-Saharan Africa as an undifferentiated landscape of underdevelopment, but that's far from the case. Zambia's per-capita G.D.P. is just sixty per cent of Ghana's or Nigeria's. Burkina Faso's is sixty per cent of Zambia's.

What to do when you can't take coroners' reports at face value, assuming that you even have a coroner's report? Public-health experts have a saying: "It's hard to hide bodies." So a surge of deaths under any description—"all-cause mortality"—might help us glimpse the true dimension of the problem.

What's the story in India? I turned to Ajay Shah, a soft-spoken economist from New Delhi, who has performed a notably detailed analysis of deaths in India during the pandemic. Rather than relying on hospital data, Shah and his co-author, Renuka Sane, have used a longitudinal household survey, in which each household is assessed three times a year, to examine the number and the pattern of deaths. They found that the total number of "all cause" deaths reported between May and August almost doubled in India compared with the same period in each of the past five years.

"Is that because the number of COVID deaths in the country has been vastly underestimated?" I asked.

"It's impossible to have a decisive answer," Shah told me. "But the pattern of the excess deaths doesn't really shout out COVID as the cause. It just doesn't." When his researchers analyzed the data by age, location, and gender, they found that excess deaths tended to be observed in younger cohorts, and in rural rather than in urban settings; nor was there evidence of the usual coronavirus skew toward greater lethality in men. "The telltale signatures of COVID just aren't there," he said. He won't venture any hypotheses about the cause of the excess deaths. But among the possible candidates are indirect consequences of the pandemic: wage loss, displacement, malnourishment, forced migration, and disruptions in health care—the skipped clinic visit for malaria, diabetes, TB, or hypertension. According to World Health Organization analyses, disruptions in medical care and prevention programs related to malaria, TB, and H.I.V. will have cost many more lives in sub-Saharan Africa in the past year than the coronavirus. In poorer regions, especially, infection isn't the only way that the pandemic can cost lives.

What if the storm simply hasn't yet arrived in the countries reporting oddly low death rates from COVID-19? Patrick Walker, another Imperial College epidemiologist and modeller, cautioned, "There's a time element that has not been built into the model. There have been waves after the first wave, and we still don't know how many deaths each wave might carry." It's certainly true that, in much of the Global South, reported COVID-19 deaths have risen substantially this season. To what extent have low-mortality regions simply avoided exposure to the pandemic?

In July and August, the health economist Manoj Mohanan and a team of researchers set out to estimate the number of people who had been infected with the new coronavirus in Karnataka, a state of sixty-four million people in southwest India. Random sampling revealed that seroprevalence—the rate of individuals who test positive for antibodies—was around forty-five per cent, indicating that nearly half the population had been infected at some point. Findings from a government survey last year showed that thirteen per cent of the population was actively infected in September. A large-scale survey in New Delhi, according to a recent government report, found a seroprevalence level of fifty-six per cent, suggesting that about ten million of its residents had been infected.

It's difficult to get seroprevalence numbers for Nigeria, say, but it's far from a secluded enclave; in 2019, it had an estimated twelve thousand Chinese workers, and, in a typical year, millions of people fly in and out of the country and within it. "Oh, there is probably a *lot* of endemic COVID transmission going on over here," Fasina, in Lagos, told me. "But we are just not seeing the extreme severity." (Most African deaths, the W.H.O. finds, are associated with such risk factors as hypertension and Type 2 diabetes.) In Niger State, which is the largest in Nigeria and is situated in the middle of the country, a seroprevalence study conducted in June found an infection rate of twenty-five per cent, comparable to the worst-hit areas in the United States. Fasina expects that the rate in Lagos and its surroundings will be higher. Nearly a year after Nigeria confirmed its first infections from the new coronavirus, Niger

State has reported fewer than twenty deaths. The country's numbers are climbing—but they'll need to grow exponentially in order to catch up with the models.

Some epidemiologists argue that an accurate account of geographical disparities must give due weight to another extrinsic factor: certain governments have responded more effectively to the crisis than others. Bethany Hedt, a statistician at Harvard Medical School, has worked in Rwanda for the past decade. She noted that in 2020 the low-income country reported only a hundred-some deaths from COVID-19, out of a population of thirteen million. "It's clear to me, at least," she said, "that it's because the government had very clear and decisive control measures." She went on, "When news of COVID hit, they imposed a strict curfew, and the Rwandan population really listened. There was limited travel outside the home without documentation. The police would stop you and check. Schools were closed. There were no weddings or funerals. And then, as the numbers decreased, the government played a very good game of whack-a-mole. They have a really strong data center, and anywhere they see an outbreak they do strict control at the local level."

Mohanan, the health economist who led the Karnataka study, agreed that, in some places, "decisive government action led to suppression of the pandemic." In Dharavi, health-care workers rightly take pride in their heroic efforts to track, trace, and contain infection. But the vigorous implementation of public-health measures was far from the norm in much of Africa and the Indian subcontinent. "If anything, India's response is a textbook case of what *not* to do in a pandemic—overly aggressive policy responses combined with communication strategies that undermined the importance of public-health prevention," Mohanan argued.

But what to make of the much discussed reports about how everyone in India started to wear masks this fall? My colleagues in India were doubtful about the reported level of compliance; they also noted that the recorded incidence of COVID-19 deaths in the country was creeping down almost as gradually as it had crept up, which didn't signal an abrupt change in behavior. My mother (who is under strict instructions to wear a mask and maintain social distance) routinely sends me pictures of gatherings in Delhi with dozens of maskless minglers.

Government actions in Ghana may have been better than in some of its neighbors, but mask-wearing in crowded urban centers remains intermittent. I was told of a bill-payment center in Accra, Ghana's capital, that, early in the pandemic, had mandated masks for entry. There weren't a lot of masks around, so the bill payers who had queued up took to wearing a mask to enter the building, and then handed their (used) mask to the next person in line when they exited, treating the mask mandate like the dress code at New York's Metropolitan Club—you put a "loaner" necktie on to get in, and hand it back for the next person to use when you leave. Yet New York City's official COVID-19 death toll in December was almost three times as high as Ghana's for all of 2020.

Other researchers are exploring whether acquired differences in human immunology might play a role. Acquired, or adaptive, immunity involves two principal kinds of cells: B cells make antibodies against pathogens, and T cells hunt for cells infected by a pathogen. B cells can be imagined as sharpshooters that target a virus with well-aimed bullets, while T cells are gumshoe detectives that go door to door, seeking viruses that are hidden inside cells.

Both B cells and T cells have an unusual capacity: after generating an immune response, some of them may become long-lived passengers in our blood, and carry the "memory" of an already encountered pathogen. These so-called memory cells are triggered when the pathogen reappears, and they can swiftly raise forces to fight it.

At the La Jolla Institute for Immunology, in California, researchers led by Shane Crotty and Alessandro Sette were studying the B- and T-cell responses to the coronavirus through samples of human blood plasma. To quantify the level of immunological activity against the virus, Crotty and Sette wanted a "negative control"—that is, samples of plasma that were collected before the pandemic.

But there was a peculiarity in the data: in more than forty per cent of pre-pandemic samples, the researchers found evidence that the new coronavirus was somehow triggering a T-cell response. These T cells were acting as if they'd recognized a virus they had assuredly never before encountered.

Sette, who was born in Italy, wears blue-rimmed spectacles, and rides his motorcycle to the lab where he works. "A negative control is supposed to be negative," he told me, stabbing his finger in the air. "We were totally surprised." He lifted his hands emphatically and waved them around, his ash-gray sweater stretching over his torso. "But the cross-reactivity is always there. We've repeated it. Other labs have confirmed the data. The number varies by geography and by the population—twenty per cent, forty per cent—but it's always there."

Why is that? Part of the answer may have to do with how T cells recognize pathogens. It's natural to think of our memory T cells as brandishing a criminal's mug shot. But what they "remember" is more like the curve of a nostril, the shape of an ear—distinctive snippets of a larger protein picture. Now, suppose a former intruder's much worse cousin shows up; it's a fresh face, but it shares a family trait—maybe those batwing ears—that could alert at least some of the memory T cells. Could the novel coronavirus share such traits with previously circulating pathogens?

He told me about an island in Italy, Isola del Giglio, that, he thought, might have been swept by a respiratory infection a few years ago. "But, when COVID-19 came and swept through Italy, the Giglio islanders were all spared," Sette said. "It may just be a story, but it makes you wonder whether one infection might protect you from another, perhaps via cross-reactive T cells."

Ben McFarland, a structural immunologist at Seattle Pacific University, had some thoughts about the possible origins of cross-reactive T cells. Last

spring, McFarland assigned his undergraduate students a project. "The university was under lockdown, so I had to think of something that the students could complete in their kitchens with the simplest of computer tools," he recalled. "And I thought, Why not line up the sequences of all the proteins from the different coronaviruses—both from the ones that cause common colds and from SARS-CoV-2—and look for fragments that they might share?"

It was akin to putting a bunch of closely related criminals in a lineup—some relatively harmless, some murderous—and asking the students to find closely matching features: a distinctive chin cleft or ear shape. The results were suggestive. "The students found a number of peptides"—the building blocks of a protein—"that could possibly induce T-cell cross-reactivity," McFarland told me. That novel coronavirus wasn't *entirely* novel. Even if the T-cell reaction wasn't strong enough to prevent an infection, he wondered whether it might diminish the severity of the disease.

Although the La Jolla researchers saw T cells in pre-pandemic blood samples which reacted to SARS-CoV-2, they didn't find antibodies that did so. This wasn't so surprising: they were looking only for a certain type of antibody, the "neutralizing" type that binds to a particular area of the spike protein. And, where T cells are guided by the equivalent of a flat snippet of a picture, antibodies typically attend to the full three-dimensional structure of a protein fragment. The antibodies are therefore more discriminating, less likely to fire in error—to be triggered by a criminal cousin.

Neither bench-lab work nor computer analyses, to be sure, tell us what happens with actual human beings. But researchers at Boston University tried to explore the hypothesis that prior common-cold coronavirus infections might affect the severity of COVID-19 by looking at patient outcomes. They identified a group of people who were found to have had any of four relatively harmless coronavirus variants—collectively termed eCoV—between May, 2015, and mid-March, 2020. When the tsunami of COVID-19 reached Boston, some of these people began to get infected with SARS-CoV-2. The researchers then compared the disease trajectory in eCoV-positive patients with that in a group of eCoV-negative ones. Among patients known to have had eCoV infections, there were lower rates of mechanical ventilation, fewer I.C.U. admissions, and significantly fewer deaths.

"Always an oil spill. Never a vodka spill."

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Unfortunately, the sample size was small in the Boston study; all the correlations could be accounted for by some as yet unidentified variable. A chastening recent study by a group of Philadelphia researchers didn't find that the presence of common-cold coronavirus antibodies correlated with clinical benefits. Cross-reactivity was seen, but not the kind that helped prevent or control infection. Meanwhile, German researchers have identified a surprising group of unrelated pathogens that share protein snippets—targets for antibodies and T cells—with the new coronavirus.

If it turns out that certain previously circulating pathogens can indeed induce a helpful level of immunity, then the specific geography of their reach—possibly in Lagos and not in Los Angeles—could show up in geographical disparities in death rates during the current pandemic. Shashank Joshi is among those who are inclined to credit the prior-immunity hypothesis, albeit tentatively. He told me that, in Mumbai, "there are plenty of infected older people living in crowded circumstances, such that we'd expect many hundreds or even thousands of deaths. But that's nowhere close to what happened." He made another observation: "In India, we've found that most people had really high levels of antibodies after an infection, and the levels don't decay, even among the older people. They stay on for a long period."

It reminded me of people who, having experienced chronic trauma, react to even the faintest trigger. Joshi was reluctant to speculate further about differences in immune reservoirs among populations: "It could be T cells, or it

could be some other aspect of the immune response. But we are definitely seeing signs of it in India."

It's tempting to think that Mr. Ganguly was one of those immunologically primed people, susceptible to infection but somewhat protected from the virus's worst effects. Maybe he was. Yet the prior-immunity hypothesis presents puzzles of its own. Why would some particularly protective viral strain, or strains, have reached South Asia, but not Latin America? Why Nigeria, but not South Africa, where the pandemic's death toll is so much higher than elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa? Maybe there have been complex interactions between the intrinsic *and* the extrinsic.

Once you enter the zone of the plausible but unproven, other theories arise. Some researchers wonder whether the disparities are, in effect, dose-related. "I think one possible factor driving low deaths in India could be the low viral loads," Mohanan ventured. He and his lab-testing partners had found unusually low virus levels in infected patients. He went on, "One possible explanation for low viral loads is the open-air ventilation, which is more common in warmer parts of the world. This 'low-dose exposure' hypothesis is also consistent with the huge share of asymptomatic infections we've seen in India." Just as epidemiology calls for a truly detailed sense of a population's demographic structure, it might benefit, too, from a more intimate understanding of a population's immunological and socio-ecological profile.

William of Ockham was a fourteenth-century theologian who was educated at Oxford and wrote on a range of topics, from logic to theories of knowledge. But if his name is remembered today it's because of "Ockham's razor": the idea that, when seeking the cause of an event, we should favor the most parsimonious solution—the simplest one. Centuries before Ockham, and centuries after him, a host of thinkers argued for shaving away extraneous hypotheses to arrive at a straightforward and singular explanation for whatever they were puzzling over. It's among the strange ironies of intellectual history that if you ask "Who thought of Ockham's razor?" you'll wind up with not one but a plurality of answers.

The principle of parsimony has a special premium in the realm of science. We worship an elegant universe; we don't need to invoke multiple causes for why the planets move in geometrical orbits. Natural selection explains why the bones of human fingers look like those of a gorilla, just as it explains why new viral variants that have higher degrees of infectiousness can arise in the midst of a pandemic. Delving into mysteries, scientists are compelled by the logic of the classic mystery tale: one murder, one murderer, one weapon. In the pages of Agatha Christie, Hercule Poirot might unveil the solution with the flourish of a magician, and Miss Marple might murmur it into her pilled cardigan, but we finish such stories with a satisfying sense that all loose ends have been tied up, all oddities neatly accounted for.

Yet parsimony has its own perils, and the work that best helps me remember those perils, as it happens, isn't some meditation on the scientific method; it's Christie's "Murder on the Orient Express." A man has been found murdered on the train, his body perforated by multiple stab wounds. Poirot, on the train by happenstance, sets out to determine which of the passengers was the culprit. But the usual process of elimination fails him. Eventually, Poirot realizes that the murder is a long-planned act of collective revenge. There wasn't one murderer; there was a plurality of murderers.

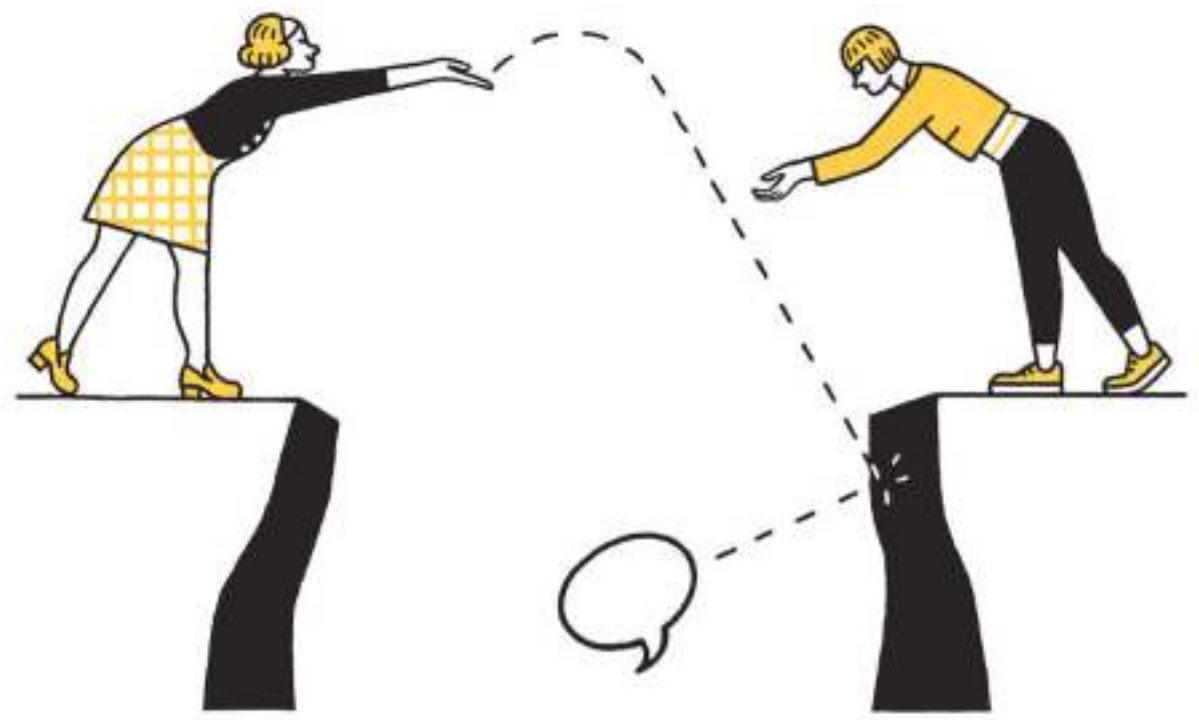
What researchers have described to me as the pandemic's most perplexing feature may turn out to be the epidemiological version of that mystery on the Orient Express: there's no one culprit but many. With respect to the raw numbers, underreporting is an enormous problem; differences in age distribution, too, make a very deep cut, and perhaps the models must further calibrate their weightings here. Plainly, certain countries have benefitted from the strength of their public-health systems, fortified by a vigorous government response. (Our country has suffered grievously from corresponding weaknesses.) In New Zealand, raising the drawbridges and stringently enforcing quarantines made all the difference. But to come to grips with the larger global pattern we have to look at a great many contributing factors—some cutting deeper than others, but all deserving attention.

The COVID-19 pandemic will teach us many lessons—about virological surveillance, immunology, vaccine development, and social policy, among other topics. One of the lessons concerns not just epidemiology but also epistemology: the theory of how we know what we know. Epidemiology isn't physics. Human bodies are not Newtonian bodies. When it comes to a crisis that combines social and biological forces, we'll do well to acknowledge the causal patchwork. What's needed isn't Ockham's razor but Ockham's quilt.

Above all, what's needed is humility in the face of an intricately evolving body of evidence. The pandemic could well drift or shift into something that defies our best efforts to model and characterize it. As Patrick Walker, of Imperial College London, stressed, "New strains will change the numbers and infectiousness even further." That quilt itself may change its shape.

Today, in Britain, the National Health Service, like many of its patients, is fighting for its life, overwhelmed by a new influx of COVID-19 patients, many of whom have the highly contagious B.1.1.7 strain. In Nigeria, the reported per-capita mortality rate remains low by Western standards, but people remember that the President's chief of staff—a father of four—succumbed to COVID-19, and watch as the nation's health-care system continues to fray. Many officials are seeing a second wave decidedly worse than the first, as both the highly transmissible British variant and the South African one have started to crop up across the continent. Ghana recently suspended its parliament after an outbreak among members and staff. Throughout western, central, and eastern Africa, health officials hope that the mortality rates will stay relatively low, but know better than to assume that they will.

Dr. Joshi is still shuttling between hospitals and clinics in Mumbai, although, with a substantial proportion of the local population having already been infected, he expects that new cases will keep declining. In Kolkata, Mr. Ganguly has fully recovered. He plans to go to the fish market this week. ♦



THE ADVICE GAP

BY DANIELLE KRAESE AND IRVING RUAN

Advice My Parents Gave Me: Go to college and major in what you love.
Advice I Will Give My Kids: Go to college only if you'll major in science, engineering, or money. It's a bleak job market, and majoring in English literature or anything with the word "English" in it has been useless since the Taft Administration.

My Parents: Never show up to a party empty-handed.
Me: Never show up to a party. Send a text to the host twenty minutes before the party starts to say that you're "soooooo sorry" to cancel but your stomach is feeling "weird."

My Parents: To find a job, walk into the offices of ABC News's "This Week with George Stephanopoulos" and ask for one.
Me: Apply to jobs via LinkedIn, ZipRecruiter, or nepotism. Write a cover letter and attach your résumé, then manually enter the same information through the company's portal, which looks as though it was designed in Microsoft Paint. Do this twenty times a day for two years, and you're bound to make it to a third round of phone interviews before getting ghosted.

My Parents: Don't put photos of yourself on the Internet. You'll get kidnapped!
Me: Post thousands of carefully curated photos of your life on Instagram so you can build a following and attract sponsors who reflect your core values, such as Bacardi and MeUndies.

My Parents: Spend your twenties finding true love within a two-mile radius of your village.
Me: Spend your twenties moving between L.A. and New York to figure out what you want in your ideal partner by dating all the worst people from both coasts and Austin, Texas.

My Parents: Show how much you appreciate your friends by making them elaborate, cellophane-wrapped gift baskets. Fill the baskets with gourmet biscuits, teas, and an ornate sugar spoon that says "Gimme a little sugar, baby."
Me: Just Venmo them five dollars.

My Parents: Never date someone who rides a motorcycle.
Me: Never date someone who rides a unicycle ironically (unless the person got a MacArthur "genius" grant for it).

My Parents: Learn the difference between a 401(k) and a Roth I.R.A. so that you can start investing early.
Me: Learn the difference between a 401(k) and a Roth I.R.A. so that you can explain it to me.

My Parents: Marry someone from a good family.
Me: Marry someone from a good tech startup that has Series P funding and a robust diversity-and-inclusion program that was created for ethical reasons and not because it's a useful corporate litigation shield.

My Parents: Never wait to do your taxes.
Me: If you wait long enough to do your taxes, there might be a global crisis that forces the federal government to extend the deadline. Then you can wait some more and do them right before the new deadline.

My Parents: Don't talk to strangers on the Internet.
Me: Talk to every stranger on the Internet, because meeting new friends in your thirties is really fucking hard. In fact, I met your dad on Twitter when we realized that we both replied "THIS" to the same sponsored tweet from La Quinta Inn.

My Parents: Always keep extra money in an emergency fund.
Me: For emergencies, check your Venmo balance. Maybe you forgot to cash out a friend's five-dollar gratitude payment?

My Parents: Work hard so you can save for retirement.
Me: Retirement is something you'll read about in your history books under the rubric "Abstract Ideas."

My Parents: When we're gone, look after your siblings and never fight with them over money!
Me: When I'm gone, clear my browser history. Don't squabble with your siblings over who gets my monthly ten-cent payments from Medium. And, if my ex shows up at the funeral, be sure to kick him out. He'll be the one riding a unicycle.

My Parents: Get a Costco membership.
Me: THIS. ♦

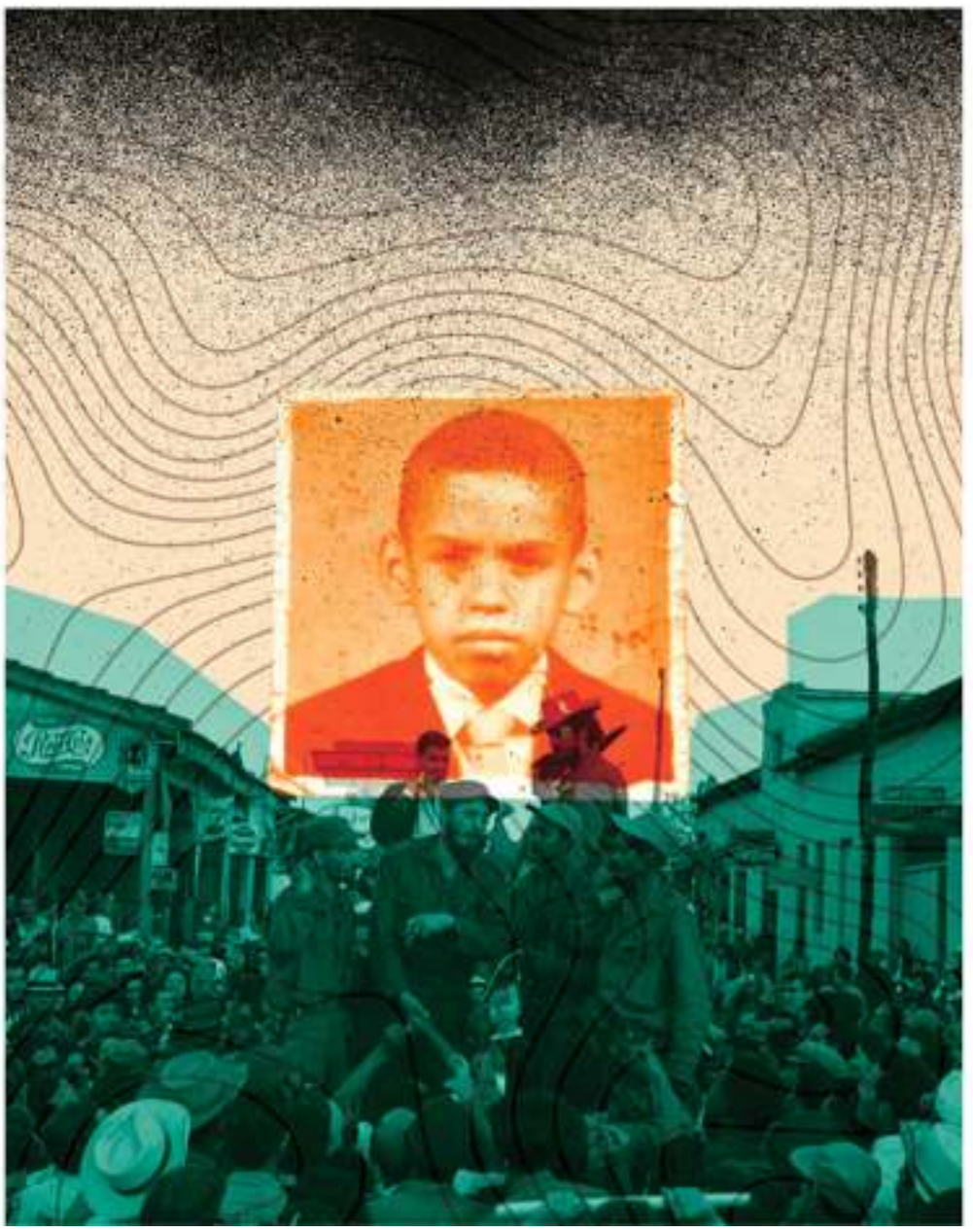
LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

PERSONAL HISTORY

MY BROTHER'S KEEPER

Early in the Cuban Revolution, my mother made a consequential decision.

BY ADA FERRER



My mother was always asking my sister and me to do things—to call her union about her monthly pension checks (forty-nine dollars), to research the contraindications of a new prescription, to drive her to the wholesale distributor to pick up fifteen-pound boxes of frozen tilapia and some nice eye-of-round roasts. Six years ago, when she was eighty-seven, she wrote a letter outlining everything that we would need to tend to after her death. Her first request was that we send a hundred and fifty dollars to Tía Niña—our name for her sister Ada—every December, March, June, and September. She included the phone number and address of the man in Hialeah who would deliver the money to Cuba. "Even dead," she added in parentheses, "I will bug you." If we cooked the food she cooked and made sure that her granddaughters could play dominoes, she would be happy in Heaven. She would await our arrival there, she wrote. Buried in the middle of the letter was my mother's most fervent appeal, one we had heard before. "As to Poly, don't ever abandon him," she said. "He is the way he is because of me."

My half brother Poly, or Hipólito, was born in Havana in 1953. Our mother and his father were married only briefly, and, when Poly was still small, he and my mother went to live in the three-bedroom rental out of which her family ran a little restaurant. It sat half a block behind the city's military hospital and not far from Camp Columbia, Cuba's main military installation at the time. In 1957, as many Cubans were waging a revolution against Fulgencio Batista and his government, my mother met and fell in love with my father, an Army stenographer and a lunchtime regular.

In the early-morning hours of January 1, 1959, Batista fled the island in defeat, and Cubans poured into the streets to celebrate. Cars blasted their horns, churches rang their bells. Fidel Castro, who had been fighting Batista's troops in the mountains of eastern Cuba for more than two years, arrived in Havana a week later, to thunderous cheers. My mother was delighted, and distributed red T-shirts to her neighbors. My father, who was wary of the new regime and steered clear of revolutionary rallies and political organizations, immediately quit the Army and began to sell sandals in the park behind Havana's capitol. He moved into my mother's family home; every night he would count out his earnings in front of Poly and give him a small share.

In March, 1960, President Eisenhower approved a plan for the C.I.A. to train Cuban exiles in guerrilla warfare so that they might return to Cuba and topple Castro. Though the operation was supposed to be covert, the training camps in Central America and elsewhere made the headlines in the U.S. and Cuba. As John F. Kennedy took office, Castro was already preparing to repel an invasion. On April 15, 1961, exile pilots bombed Cuban airfields, missing many of their targets and killing at least seven people. Castro addressed the nation at a funeral for the victims, calling on Cubans to defend the revolution, which for the first time he defined as socialist. Across the country, the government began to arrest thousands of people who it suspected might side with the invaders.

That night, my father did not come home for dinner. My mother eventually found him, and many other detainees, at the Blanquita Theatre (later renamed the Karl Marx). He was still there on April 17th, when, in the early hours of the morning, exile troops landed on Cuba's southern shore, at the Bay of Pigs. The invasion failed spectacularly. A hundred and fourteen of

PHOTOGRAPHS: BETTMAN / GETTY (CASTRO); GETTY (LINES)

ILLUSTRATION BY ELENA GIAVALDI

the exiles were killed, and 1,189 were captured and imprisoned.

In the aftermath, the U.S. government severely tightened its economic embargo on Cuba, and Castro accelerated the country's transition to a one-party state. Every day, twelve hundred Cubans applied for entry to the U.S. The Kennedy Administration welcomed the arrivals, pointing to their growing numbers to discredit the revolution. In April, 1962, when my mother was seven months pregnant with me, my father left Cuba and settled in New York City, working as a short-order cook in a hotel in midtown Manhattan. As soon as he could, he began the paperwork for my mother, Poly, and me to join him.

But Poly was someone else's son, and his father, a member of the revolutionary police, wanted Poly to remain in Cuba. My mother, my aunts, and my grandmother begged him to let Poly leave with her, but he refused. Years later, my mother told me that one day, as she was walking with us near the docks in Old Havana, she saw a crowd gathered around an American ship—it may have been the S.S. African Pilot, which had arrived in Havana with medicine and other supplies to be exchanged for prisoners from the Bay of Pigs invasion. In a last-minute arrangement, relatives of the prisoners were allowed to board for the return journey. My mother said that the scene was chaotic, and that she saw passersby seizing the opportunity to flee Cuba. Holding me in her arms and my brother by the hand, she considered going, too, but she turned back. She hadn't been able to leave without saying goodbye to her mother.

Four months later, on April 29, 1963, she left Cuba with me, without saying goodbye to her son. We had left the house the evening before, at 6 P.M. Poly was out playing with friends. When he came home, my grandmother and my aunt Ada told him that my mother had gone to the countryside to care for an ailing relative. I don't know how long it was before they told him the truth. Decades later, when I met my aunt Ada, she explained that for weeks, maybe months, after we left Poly would clutch my mother's housedress at night and cry. He was nine years old.

My mother wore stiletto heels for the journey, her legs so skinny that her shinbones protruded. I was ten months old, a baby on her hip. At the airport in Havana, a customs agent almost confiscated the tiny gold posts in my ears, a gift from my grandmother. Direct flights to the U.S. had been suspended the year before, so we flew to Mexico City. A distant relative of my mother's was supposed to collect us from the airport, but he didn't show up. My mother had no money with her. "*¡Cómo pasamos trabajo tú y yo!*"—"How we struggled, you and I," she would say, taking my hand, as she told me the story of our departure. In the most consequential passage of her life, I had been her companion. She always kept an eight-by-ten portrait of my brother on her dresser.

Ours was not the only family torn apart by the revolution. Between 1960 and 1962, thousands of children were sent abroad alone, their parents fearing that Castro's government would ship them off to the Soviet Union for indoctrination. Young men of military age were forbidden from leaving. Some teenagers stayed behind when their parents fled, committed to a cause that their families rejected. Revolutionaries were not supposed to communicate with people who had left, so family members often spent decades without contact.

I can explain how, amid the turmoil, my mother felt forced to take one child and leave another. She did not think a Communist revolution on an island less than a hundred miles from the U.S. could possibly survive. She assumed that we would return to Cuba before too long. She told herself that, once she was gone, Poly's father would relent and her son would join us. None of it—not the revolution, not our migration, not Poly's abandonment—was ever meant to be permanent.

Still, my mother's decision has always haunted me. After I had my own children, I sometimes found myself measuring the progress of their childhoods against my brother's. Alina is turning nine, I thought—Poly's age when we left him. Lucía's ten—by that age, Poly had spent almost a year without his mother. I would look at my daughters and wonder what could ever make me leave them. Could I have gone, as my mother had, in secret, without saying goodbye? I couldn't picture it at all.

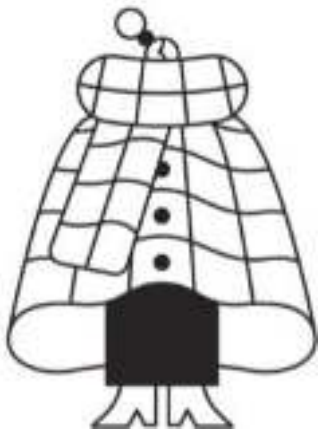
At nine, Poly was a sweet, skinny boy, quick to smile, with large eyes and big ears. He was smart and liked to read, although he sometimes got into trouble; a neighbor had once jokingly advised my mother to enroll him in military school to keep him in line. As a teen-ager, he cut school, got into fights, and began committing petty crimes. More than once, someone denounced him to the state-sponsored neighborhood-surveillance network, the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, for one infraction or another. Poly's father was, for the most part, absent. Poly dropped out of school, couldn't keep a job, had run-ins with the police. Maybe he expected to join us in the U.S.; maybe he feared that he never would. Only under exceptional circumstances would the government allow a man of military age to leave. Poly lived in the house where we had left him, with my grandmother, who tried to guide him, and my aunt Ada, who had no children of her own and became his de-facto mother. She made him write letters to my mother, to me, and to his new sister, Aixa, who was born in Brooklyn in 1964.

I remember Poly's letters, the way his "A"s looked like triangles. I usually responded on Saturdays, as I watched cartoons about English prepositions or how bills became laws. We lived in West New York, New Jersey, a working-class Cuban enclave across the Hudson River from midtown Manhattan, where my father had continued to work as a cook. My mother worked in a factory five blocks from our apartment, sewing collars onto winter coats. She taught us old Cuban songs, patriotic poems, the chants of street venders. At our church, priests led us in prayers for the release of Cuban political prisoners; once a year, we marched in a procession in honor of La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre. We ate mostly Cuban food, and we always kept a drawer full of clothes to send to Cuba. Most of our neighbors did the same, and many of them, too, expected to welcome loved ones to the U.S. I awaited Poly's arrival unambivalently. In my mind, he was like a brother in a Beverly Cleary

novel, handsome and funny—maybe I would fall in love with his best friend. I speculated that the shape of his "A"s showed that he was a born architect, like the father in "The Brady Bunch."

No one in our family had gone to college, and few people in our community went *away* to do so, but my mother always insisted that I would. I was already browsing through college brochures when Castro's government agreed to allow Cuban exiles to return to the island for short visits. In 1979, my mother was one of more than a hundred thousand who participated in the family-reunification trips, as they were called. I remember her singing as she packed, writing Poly's name on the labels of the clothes she had bought for him. He was twenty-five by then. My grandmother had died, but most of my mother's eleven siblings were still living in Cuba, and had their own families. As she counted out five-dollar bills for nieces and nephews, I made her promise to take a photograph in front of the University of Havana, which, I explained to her, I would have attended had we stayed in Cuba.

My mother never told me what it felt like to return to the old house or to reunite with Poly. But I can see her there, laughing warmly, sadness be damned. My brother went with her to the university, and he must have taken the picture I have of her in which she stands in the distance, a blurred figure near the top of the university's steps. I have another photo of them from that trip, posing together on the capitol steps. In the image, Poly is unsmiling, with his arm around her shoulder.



In the spring of 1979, the Miami *Herald* estimated that the Cuban government might make as much as a hundred and fifty million dollars from the exiles that year alone. The government paid dearly in other ways. The cash, the gifts, and the tales of American plenty all fed the desire of many people on the island to leave. The following year, on April 1st, six Cubans stole a bus and crashed it through the gates of the Peruvian Embassy in Havana, demanding asylum and safe passage out of the country. When the Embassy refused to hand them over to the government, Castro ordered the removal of the security detail around the building. In the next forty-eight hours, nearly eleven thousand people flooded in, perching on eaves and tree branches, camping out with little food or water. According to one account, a baby was born there and an elderly woman died.

Pro-government protesters gathered outside, angrily chanting, wishing them good riddance: "*¡Que se vayan!*" But at first neither Peru nor Cuba could figure out how to evacuate so many people. The Cuban government gave the members of the crowd the option to go home and await instructions. Some stayed anyway, worried that, if they vacated the Embassy, they might never leave the country; others, hungry and exhausted, went home to find themselves subjected to state-sponsored harassment by their neighbors. About three weeks after the crisis began, the government settled on a plan. It would allow Cubans from the U.S. to pick up their relatives by boat at the port of Mariel, some twenty-five miles west of Havana, provided that they also collect Cubans from the Embassy.

The operation quickly took on its own momentum. Thousands of Cuban-Americans mobilized, hiring so many vessels that, as one observer remarked, had they lined up one behind the other, people would have been able to walk from Mariel to Key West. Castro insisted that those leaving were "antisocial elements." He routinely called them "scum." Soon, disgruntled Cubans embraced the label, and began appearing at local police stations, asking to be cleared for departure. The government also took the opportunity to expel from the country certain prisoners and psychiatric patients. By the time the boatlift ended, in October, some hundred and twenty-five thousand Cubans had reached Florida.

In May, my mother boarded a Greyhound bus at Port Authority and travelled to Miami, then caught a ride to Key West. She feared the sea and couldn't swim, but found a boat that was taking Cuban-Americans to Mariel, and paid the captain in cash. She spent the duration of the voyage, ten or twelve hours, clutching her purse and pretending to sleep. At one point, she told me, the captain had misgivings and announced that he was turning around. A passenger took a machete out of his duffel and threatened to kill him if he didn't continue on to Mariel. My mother reached for the rosary beads in her bag and led some of the passengers in prayer.

At Mariel, hundreds of boats jockeyed for position. Every captain was to give the Cuban officials a list of the people his passengers wanted to pick up. It took time for the government to locate them, and the boats sometimes had to wait for days, even weeks. A night club was set up aboard a government-owned ship to entertain impatient sailors. Other vessels patrolled the harbor while guards on the shore pointed their weapons toward the water. At night, floodlights illuminated the scene. My mother managed to disembark, find a phone, and call the house to let Poly know that she had come to collect him. My aunt answered and told her that he had already left. It had not been hard for Poly to convince someone that he should be banished. My mother returned to the crowded pier and talked her way onto a boat back to the U.S.

Poly told us that he arrived in Key West on May 11, 1980—Mother's Day. It was one of the busiest days of the boatlift, with more than forty-five hundred Cubans landing in Florida; one boat alone, the America, might have carried as many as seven hundred people. Sentiment in the U.S. was turning. The *Times* ran a front-page article titled "Retarded People and Criminals Are Included in Cuban Exodus." More than sixty thousand Cubans who arrived without family members were sent for processing to military bases across the country while the government determined what to do with them. Poly ended up at Eglin Air Force Base, in the Florida Panhandle. A plane circled the facility, flying a banner that read "The KKK is here." By mid-June, he had been cleared to enter the country; my mother and father flew down and brought him home.

My brother was not at all what I expected. He didn't talk much, and when he did his voice sounded loud and angry. My sister and I were used to having dinner in the living room in front of

the TV, but after Poly arrived we began eating together in the small kitchen. I asked Poly continually about Cuba, until my mother told me that my questions were making him feel bad about not having an education or a career. My sister and I soon went back to the TV, while the adults ate alone at the dinner table, my mother trying to keep a conversation going with her husband, who was silent as usual, and her estranged son. At the end of that summer, I left for my first year at Vassar College.

My mother helped Poly rent an apartment in our building, and an uncle helped him get a job at an embroidery factory. Poly soon lost the apartment and moved back in with us, sleeping on the couch in the living room. When I came home on school breaks, the apartment smelled of beer and cigarettes. I spent as much time as I could at the riverfront park, reading on a bench with a bag of cherries. Poly had grown a thick mustache, and I hated it. At night, he would come home late. From my bedroom, I could hear him on the sofa next door making strange noises, sounding wounded and scary. Was he crying? Masturbating? Maybe sick or hungover? One afternoon, while my father was out, Poly got angry about something, and when he stormed off toward the kitchen I assumed that he was getting a knife. My mother suddenly collapsed, and all three of us—my sister, Poly, and I—rushed to help her, the altercation temporarily forgotten. My mother told me later that she had only pretended to faint.

The summer between my freshman and sophomore years, my parents took us on vacation to Miami. We stayed at the Bancroft, a modest hotel in South Beach where most of the guests were Cuban. Relatives came to see us, and Poly sat at the pool drinking beer with old friends from Havana, other Mariel arrivals. My sister and I spent our days swimming and tanning, our evenings playing Ping-Pong and pinball. One night, Poly slapped my sister after he thought he saw her flirting with a boy. I confronted him, and he threw me to the ground and began kicking me, stopping only when a cousin grabbed a phone to call the police. As I lay on the floor crying, he warned me that, if I told my father, "*va a haber muertos*"—there would be bodies. When I told my mother what he'd said, she asked me to keep it to myself. She didn't want my father to leave or to kick Poly out.

"They're playing our song."

• •

It was around this time that my mother first told me that Poly had threatened her, too, when she'd picked him up at Eglin Air Force Base. He told her that he was in the U.S. to ruin her life just as she had ruined his by leaving him in Cuba. I began to imagine all kinds of terrible scenes unfolding. I was reading a lot of Hardy and Balzac, and knew how the sins of parents were usually visited on their children.

In 1986, two years after I graduated, my parents moved to Miami with my sister, and Poly followed a year later. I moved to Austin, Texas, to begin a master's degree in Latin-American history. I spent Thanksgiving with Jeanne Claire, a new friend, and her brother, Gregg, a Ph.D. student, who was visiting from New York. He was handsome, and we were both reading books about revolutions. He was caring for his father, who was dying of AIDS and whose longtime lover had died earlier that year. Gregg and I fell in love, moved in together in New York, and, in 1989, got married at Columbia University, where his father had taught. We invited Poly to the wedding, and I prayed that he wouldn't attend. He didn't. My husband and I moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where I did my doctorate, and then to Washington, D.C. Eventually, we moved back to New York, and Alina and Lucía were born there in 1995 and 2001. We didn't invite Poly to their baptisms, in Miami Beach.

I became a history professor at N.Y.U., focussing my work on the history of Cuba and on revolutions. I often travelled to Cuba to conduct research in archives and libraries across the island. The flights left from Miami, so I would visit my parents on the way. My mother always gave me gifts for Tía Niña: clothes, shoes, medicine bottles sometimes full of medicine and sometimes stuffed with oregano and bay leaves or needles and thread. My aunt would open the packages with delight—"*¡Mira que mi hermana me conoce!*" She would tell stories about my mother, my grandparents, and Poly as a boy. I met the cousins he had grown up with. I met another half brother, my father's son, whom I had learned about only as a young adult, and travelled to General Carrillo, a tiny town in central Cuba, to see where he lived and meet his family. He was a funny, soft-spoken high-school literature teacher with an elegant mustache like José Martí's. Late at night, as we walked around, he pointed out the Milky Way. That was the first time I heard its name in Spanish—Vía Láctea. By then, Cuba had become a kind of home for me. It also became a professional base; I won prizes writing about its history.

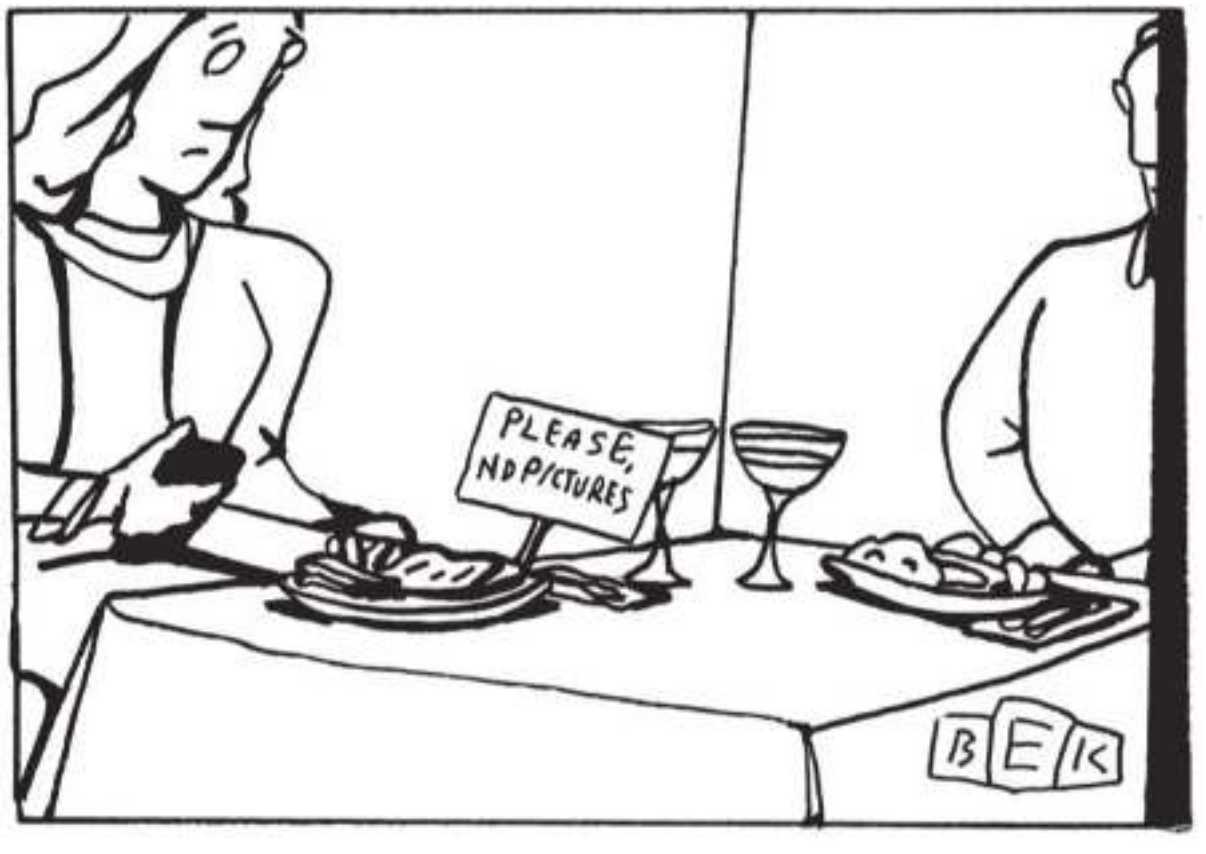
One time, I went to Cuba for a week with my mother. At the Havana airport, as we waited to board our return flight to Miami, I went to buy a carton of cigarettes for Poly. My mother had lost her voice from all the talking and laughing

with her family, and when I got to our gate I found her sitting there, exhausted. She rested her head on my shoulder and looked at the cigarettes. Had she known what her departure would do to Poly, she said, she would never have left. I imagined that alternative, asking myself, for the first time, Was my good fortune built on Poly's suffering?

While I made my life in New York, my sister raised her daughter, Nailah, in Miami with the help of my parents, who joined the ranks of the elderly poor. When they could no longer afford the rent in South Beach, my husband and I bought them a small one-bedroom there. My mother spent most of her time at home, cooking, cleaning, and doing word-search puzzles, which she referred to as studying. She pored over mail-order catalogues, buying gifts for her three granddaughters. She read *El Nuevo Herald* and invariably supported Republicans.

In 2000, she became obsessed with the case of Elián González, a six-year-old Cuban boy who had been rescued alone at sea in November, 1999, three miles from the coast of Fort Lauderdale. He had been making the crossing with his mother and several other people on a small boat; she and most of the other passengers had perished after the boat capsized. Elián, who had drifted at sea for two days, was treated at a hospital and handed over to relatives in Miami. The boy's father and the Cuban government wanted Elián back on the island. His family in Miami wanted him to stay. My mother would often call to talk to me about the case, but she couldn't discuss the subject calmly, and our conversations sometimes grew heated. I remember hanging up on her at least once. When federal agents seized the boy from his Miami family, on April 22nd, my mother was furious. She took a newspaper photo of Bill Clinton's Attorney General, Janet Reno, and, using a pair of sewing scissors, poked out the eyes. Elián shared Poly's birthday, December 6th.

Poly lived in studio apartments in the poorest blocks of Miami's Little Havana and nearby Hialeah. He drank heavily and gained weight, his belly protruding. My mother routinely gave me updates on his life. He showed up drunk at a party for a friend's child and beat someone up. He did cocaine, grew his pinkie nail long, and ran drugs by boat. One of his best friends, another Marielito, was found in pieces in the trunk of a car. Once, someone shot Poly in the head, and somehow he survived. Another time, someone beat him with a pipe; surgeons reinforced his skull with metal. In 1991, he was arrested and charged with attempted murder, but a jury acquitted him. My mother and father went to the trial and made Aixa go with them. Other arrests followed—for petty larceny, aggravated assault with a deadly weapon, driving under the influence. In 2002, he was arrested after stabbing a man in a bar and seriously wounding him.



Poly called my mother collect from jail at least once a day, often in a rage. He blamed her for all his troubles, for his inability to find love, to marry, and to have children. She visited him weekly, dragging Nailah with her on two city buses. Nearly two years after his arrest, Poly was convicted of attempted murder in the first degree, and sentenced to twelve years of probation. He lived at a court-approved facility and attended a compulsory rehabilitation program. After a few years, he was allowed to leave, provided that he wear a tracking device. My mother helped him rent a small studio in Hialeah, and called him every night. He often hung up or yelled at her. Sometimes he threatened suicide; sometimes he said that he would kill her and my father. If he did that, he said, he would be deported to Cuba, which was fine with him. One time, he sounded so desperate that my parents spent a night hiding in a hotel room with my sister, her husband, and Nailah. My father occasionally urged my mother to break ties with Poly, but he knew that she never would.

I mostly kept my distance. He would sometimes call me at home, to ask for money, or just to rant. When I visited Miami en route to Havana, I'd ask my mother not to tell Poly that I was there. At other times, I found myself putting off plans to visit Miami, booking flights only at the last minute. My family and I visited Poly twice a year, with my mother, who would ride in the back seat with the girls. I would leave my cell phone in the car, not wanting Poly to see it and ask me for the number. Before entering his apartment, I would remind my mother not to hold my hand, knowing that it made him jealous. I was glad that my daughters could distract themselves with Gordi, a stray Chihuahua he had adopted at some point. At the end of each visit, my husband would take a picture of Poly with the girls, I would give Poly a little cash, and we would all hug and kiss. I think my mother thought that if we went through these motions enough times Poly would find a way to forgive her. She had faith; she prayed for Poly all the time.

I prayed, too—mostly that Poly would change and find peace. But sometimes I wished that he would die, or that he would be deported without hurting anyone first. As my parents got older, I began

to feel that it would be better for my mother to die before my father did: if he died first, Poly might move in with her. If we held her wake according to her wishes—with an open casket and mourners milling around for hours, murmuring prayers over rosary beads—we would need to hire security, in case my brother lost it and did something awful. Poly had not changed, and surely my mother's death would make everything worse. Perhaps sensing the same thing, my mother routinely elicited promises from my sister and me not to abandon him. He was our brother, and he would be our burden.

My aunt Ada died first, in April, 2017, in the house behind the military hospital. Poly kept a picture of her on his bedside table in his Hialeah apartment, and I knew that he would be devastated by the news. I called him—perhaps the first time I had ever done so when it wasn't his birthday. He didn't answer, and I left him a voice mail sending my love. He later told me that he had appreciated the call, but he never wanted to talk about our aunt; it hurt him too much, he said. I think her death changed us both a little. I saw him again as vulnerable, and he saw my mother that way, too, noting her ailments: hypertension, diabetes, heart failure. Her usually skinny feet were now always swollen and purple, her fingers crooked with arthritis.

A year later, my mother fell and broke her hip. To the astonishment of the entire family, as she recovered in a rehabilitation center, Poly visited three or four times a week, sitting by her side, sometimes for hours: a stocky, sixty-four-year-old man with trembling hands, his voice loud but less angry. He brought her sweets and an occasional scratch-off lottery ticket. After she was discharged, Aixa and I hired two caregivers to watch my parents, one for the daytime and one for the evening. My sister, who worked as an administrator at a big law firm, looked after them at night, sleeping on the couch. I made monthly trips to spell her. About six months later, my mother had heart surgery, and, not long afterward, a pleurodesis procedure on her left lung. Then my father fell and broke his hip. Poly visited my mother regularly the whole time, bringing groceries once a month. I think he may have purchased them with food stamps; she gave him cash. He was affectionate and eager to surprise her with the perfect pineapple, a Cuban tamal, his favorite ramen soup. She loved it when he brought Gordi, and called Poly every night after "Wheel of Fortune."

In March of last year, as New York City went into lockdown, Poly called to check on me, ending his voice-mail message as he had signed off his letters to me when I was a girl: *Tu hermano que siempre te quiere.* Your brother who always loves you. My mother's heart failure was worsening; her lungs kept filling with fluid. My sister and I arranged at-home hospice care. In May, I took my family to see her. Remarkably, she revived. Sometimes I lay down next to her, on the small hospital bed in her room, my head in the crook of her shoulder. Sometimes she sat in her wheelchair at the dining table, where she would talk the girls into sharing their Coke with her. With her first sip, she would sigh with loud and thorough satisfaction, like a character in a commercial. She was sometimes confused, but seemed happy and light. My daughters painted her nails and combed her hair. We played dominoes together, my parents sitting in their wheelchairs. Over and over, we listened to her new favorite song, Mercedes Sosa's rendition of "Gracias a la Vida." Every night, when I asked if she wanted to talk to Poly, she perked up and said "*¡Claro!*" I would dial the number, chat with him, and then hold the phone to her ear. She wanted to know how he was, what he had for dinner, what he was watching on TV. He called her *mamita linda*, encouraging her to eat well to regain her strength. When I returned home in late June, I called her almost every night, but she was often too sleepy to talk. I also began to call my brother every few weeks. We joked about our mother's new loopiness. One time, he complained of chest pain, attributing it to his new diabetes medicine, and I told him to get it checked out. I sent him money without his asking; it felt like love.

On August 4th, Aixa received a call from a Hialeah detective asking whether she was Poly's sister. The detective was on his way to her office. Aixa called me, worried that something had happened to Poly or that he had reverted to his old ways. At her office, the detective told her that Poly had been found dead, sitting on the toilet, at home. He had been there for days before a neighbor reported the smell. His body was so bloated that the medical examiner could not lift prints from his fingers, but the metal in his skull helped the forensics team to identify him. The medical examiner ruled out suicide and murder, recording hypertensive crisis as the cause of death. It was a horrible end, seeming to me almost designed to validate Poly's complaints—that we had never been there for him, that he was all alone.

Aixa and I discussed how best to break the news to our mother. I offered to be there via Zoom or FaceTime, but my mother's medical team thought it best not to tell her at all. She was confused and sleeping most of the time, and was no longer asking to call Poly. We postponed the decision. Her condition deteriorated. On the afternoon of August 16th, I flew to Miami, wearing blue rubber gloves and two masks beneath a face shield. I recall scolding a woman on the plane for wearing a mask under her nose. It was nightfall when I arrived at the apartment. My father and one of the caregivers were watching television in the living room. My mother was asleep in the bedroom, a male nurse seated by her side, the portrait of Poly as a boy on the dresser.

Late the next afternoon, one of the nurses gestured to us and we gathered around her bed: my sister, my niece, the caregiver, and me. My father lay on the other twin bed in the room, his eyes open, staring at the ceiling. I held my mother's left hand, Aixa her right. I bent down to her ear and told her what she had always told me, that everything would be all right. I promised to keep sending money to her nieces and nephews in Cuba. I said we would take care of our father. I told her she was the best mother in the world, that I adored her. My sister, holding her other hand, said the same things. Then, as I stroked her hair, I told her a lie. "We will take care of Poly," I said. "We won't abandon him." I think my sister nodded. My mother died a few minutes later. On this journey, she went with my brother, and I am the one left behind, wondering whether he ever forgave us. ♦

FIGURING IT OUT

How Nicole Eisenman choreographs bodies on a canvas.

BY IAN PARKER

Nicole Eisenman, whose paintings and sculptures often show people—with cartoonish distortions of their hands, feet, and noses—trying to make the best of tragicomic circumstances, grew up in a house on a quiet street in Scarsdale, New York. A gate in the back yard opened onto the playing field of the elementary school where she was once a student; she could wait at home in the morning until the bell rang, and then run, and not be late.

One day last July, Eisenman was standing at that garden gate. She had driven from Williamsburg, in Brooklyn, where, in a studio close to her apartment, she was working on three large paintings, each of which included at least one vulnerable-looking figure making awkward, and to some degree ridiculous, progress under skies filled with clouds. Eisenman had painted a bicycle accident; a procession involving someone atop a giant potato; and a man on a zigzagging path blocked by Rhodesian Ridgeback dogs.

Eisenman, who is fifty-five, constructs figurative, narrative images filled with angst, jokes, and art-historical memory. Her work tells stories of broad political inequity—"Huddle" (2018) conjures a surreal and sinister gathering of white men in suits, high above Manhattan—and, more intimately, of solitude and of solidarity, at the beach and in the back gardens of bars. Partly because Eisenman's creations often trouble to notice how the world looks now, and won't look forever—a man in Adidas slides; a laptop on the train—they seem likely to survive long enough to carry into the future a clear sense of our present. In a recent conversation, Eisenman said, of Vermeer's "The Lacemaker," "*That's* an old technology. But the peace and domesticity, the late-morning chore—you understand the feeling."

Terry Castle, the critic and essayist, once wrote that Eisenman's art captures "the endless back-and-forth in human life between good and evil, tenderness and brutality." "Coping," a 2008 painting in which people stroll, and meet for drinks, on a small-town street that is thigh-high in mud, or shit, could lend its title to many Eisenman works. Her depictions of melancholy and decay claim space often occupied by serious writing. (She spoke to me, at different times, of her admiration for Karl Ove Knausgaard, Wisława Szymborska, and Don DeLillo.) But her art is animated by a generous, sometimes goofy earnestness, so that a viewer—even in the face of work that is dark, or hard to parse, or both—can often extract some quiet encouragement to keep trudging on. She reports on intrusions and obstacles, but not on the end of the world. Not long ago, as gifts for her assistants and her family, she had some "Eisenman Studio" baseball caps made. They were embroidered with the shrug emoticon: ¯_(ツ)_/¯.

On Eisenman's visit to the suburbs, she was wearing orange-and-blue rubber sandals, Nike shorts, and an old T-shirt showing a cat tearing at a painting of a sailboat, along with the words "Clawed Monet." After she and her two brothers, David and Josh, left home, in the nineteen-eighties, their parents stayed on in the house. David is now a doctor who runs the U.C.L.A. Center for Public Health and Disasters; Josh is a digital-advertising producer. Their father, Sheldon Eisenman, a psychiatrist, died in 2019. This past summer, Kay Eisenman, his widow, a retired environmental planner, was preparing to sell the place and move across town into what Nicole described, in her mother's hearing, as "a really cute apartment building for all the little old ladies in Scarsdale whose husbands pass away." Her mother gave her a look. Nicole laughed. "You're not a little old lady! I'm sorry to describe it that way! I'm so happy you're moving there."

Several paintings by Esther Hamerman, Nicole's great-grandmother, hung in the house. Hamerman, who died in 1977, began painting around the age of sixty, soon after arriving in the United States. Her work draws on memories of Jewish village life in Poland, and on later memories of Trinidad, where she and her family first settled after escaping Nazism. One of her pieces is held by the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Eisenman's work in the house included a large pastel drawing, made in her freshman year at the Rhode Island School of Design, that she described as "two heavy people on the beach"; the faux-marble finish on a mantelpiece (faux finishing was once Eisenman's day job); and a print showing a Nicole-like figure, with short, dark hair, lying barefoot on a couch in the office of a psychiatrist who resembles her father.

Nicole and her mother filled a trash bag with surplus family photographs.

"Thank God you came up today," Kay Eisenman said to Nicole when they took a break in the back yard, with iced tea. "I couldn't look at that until you got here."

"But it's not *too* bad?" Nicole asked.

"It's fine, with you here."

They talked about the family's half century in the house, and the years when Nicole was drawing cartoon figures in her bedroom, and carpooling to nearby Hartsdale for art classes. (Joan Busing, who taught those classes, told me that "some of the most interesting students were the children of psychiatrists.") And they touched on periods of parental distress during Nicole's teens and twenties—connected first to her coming out as gay, and then, in the nineties, to her drug addiction. Kay recalled that her daughter, while at RISD, had promised to provide her with grandchildren. Nicole, hearing this, was at first disbelieving,

Eisenman, in front of a new painting. She said of the fallen figure, "That could be me—tweak a few genes and that's me."

PHOTOGRAPH BY COLLIER SCHORR

and then said, "I was just trying to make you feel better."

"Yep, you were," Kay replied. Nicole now has two children, aged fourteen and twelve, with a former partner.

Kay said that she sometimes found her daughter's early work hard to enjoy. Nicole had her first success, in the nineties, with mordantly entertaining drawings and installations that, in her own recent description, were often " 'Fuck you'-related." They were "very aggressively out, and kind of making a joke about feminist separatism." In Nicole's account of her career, things changed about fifteen years ago, after she found ways to infuse her paintings with some of the looseness of her drawings. She expressed this in the form of a question, her voice shrinking with each word: "The paintings started getting good?"

In the nineties, her parents went to her New York openings. But, Kay said, the work "was a bit shocking, I have to admit." She added, "I wish she would sometimes do landscape, because I love watercolor landscapes. When I go to the Metropolitan Museum and look at all the wonderful bucolic paintings . . ."

I referred, indirectly, to "Jesus Fucking Christ," an Eisenman drawing, from 1996, that took its title literally. Nicole asked her mother if she remembered it. She did.

"Did you like it?" Nicole asked.

"No," her mother said. "I mean, I admired it. I admired the skill."

"Did you think it was funny, at least?"

"I remember the one that I particularly found disturbing was this woman who was pregnant, and she was being hung, or something."

"Oh, yes, the Horts have that," Nicole said, referring to Susan and Michael Hort, who are friends, and whose large collection of contemporary art includes dozens of Eisenman's drawings and paintings, and a sculpture. In a recent phone call, Susan Hort noted, "We have some castrations."

Kay talked of the moment when a psychologist at Nicole's elementary school told her that Nicole showed signs of a grave developmental disability. In fact, she had more manageable issues, including dyslexia. Kay had until then been sure that her daughter "was a genius"; she was "an amazing child from the minute she opened her eyes—she took everything in."

Nicole, interrupting, said, "Funny, turns out I *am* a genius." She was referring to the award, in 2015, of a MacArthur Foundation fellowship, whose citation praised her for "expanding the critical and expressive capacity of the Western figurative tradition through works that engage contemporary social issues and phenomena."

Her mother—who balances supportiveness with an effort to avoid overdoing it—said, "They don't *actually* call it the 'genius' award."

"I'm joking!" Nicole replied. "My genius sense of humor."

Kay went on, "The psychologist said, 'You know, Mrs. Eisenman, Nicole is testing borderline retarded.' "

"You're telling me this now?" Nicole cried out, laughing.

"I've *told* you," her mother said. She recalled that the psychologist had noted that Nicole didn't know how to skip. "And she said, 'You'd better practice skipping with her before she comes into kindergarten.' So Nicky and I skipped up and down the driveway all summer. Remember that?"

Nicole did: "I was just, like, 'Why are we doing this? Why am I learning to skip?' But I learned. I was proud of myself."

One morning in the spring, at a time when Eisenman was working in her Williamsburg studio every day, but when pandemic-lockdown protocols prevented her from having visitors, she described to me, on the phone, the paintings in front of her.

The subject of the largest, about eleven feet by nine feet, was the bicycle incident—a "kind of a slow-motion accident," she said. "It's a romantic painting of two people meeting. One is falling off a ladder, and the other is riding a bicycle into the ladder—and popping off the top of the bicycle. She's flying through the air. And they kind of have their eyes locked on each other. I think it's very romantic—a Douglas Sirk film still." She connected the image to a relationship that had recently begun between herself and Sarah Nicole Prickett, an essayist and art critic.

After the call, she texted me a photograph of the painting, with scaffolding and paint stripper in the foreground. There were pink clouds above a mustard-yellow field, and a path leading downhill, from top left to bottom right. The ladder, before falling, had been leaning against a tree that stood on the left. There were two other trees in the background. Eisenman had painted folds in the sweaters of the two figures, but their heads and feet were as yet marked only in outline. The image seemed to illustrate a folktale just out of the reach of memory.

I saw the painting on later visits to Eisenman's studio. The space, once a garage, is reached directly from the sidewalk, through opaque doors. There's a sofa, a swing for the children, a kitchen area. Eisenman often works while listening to the news or to podcasts. Recently, she looked at a painting completed twenty years ago, and recalled a public-radio feature on American incarceration that was being broadcast as she worked on it.

The new painting filled a large part of the back wall. The last time I was in the studio, this past fall, Eisenman described it as "pretty close." Nearby was a grid of small portraits, done over time, that, she said, might become a work derived from the pandemic experience of Zoom calls. In the space between the grid and the new work, Eisenman had put up four blank canvases, side by side. She wouldn't allow herself to make a mark on these until she had finished with the ladder and the bicycle. If this was a self-disciplining ploy, it also indicated preëxisting discipline. Prickett later said, of Eisenman, "Her relationship to work is appalling in its healthiness." Hanging on the other side of the studio was the potato-procession painting and a Bernie Sanders campaign T-shirt, splattered with paint, that for the moment had the status of art object.

We sat on either side of a high counter, with a view of the nearly finished painting, which now included a cat. On an earlier visit, I'd asked Eisenman why the man had been climbing

the tree. "See, *that's* the problem," she had said. At one point, she had thought that he would be picking apples. Then she decided that she wanted the tree to be leafless, and therefore fruitless. So perhaps he was pruning? She had finally decided on a cat rescue. The cat, modelled on her own, crouched on a high branch. As Prickett later put it, appreciatively, the animal's hunched posture suggested "a human wearing a leopard costume."

The cat-rescuer's head was crashing onto the path. The cyclist, in a skirt, cable-knit socks, and penny loafers, was suspended in midair, and had a long way to fall. But their faces, now nearly finished, revealed surprising expressions of calm, or at least acceptance; they were apparently ready to claim the incident as a collaboration. The cyclist's arms, outstretched, were better set for a consoling embrace than for breaking a fall.

Sam Roeck, Eisenman's studio manager, was sitting in an administrative nook, involved in various e-mail discussions: how to join one part of a sculpture to another, for a show that was about to open in the English rain; where to get polystyrene and paper pulp for making little sculptures of scrambled eggs on toast, which were to become gift-shop items at a forthcoming survey show in Norway. He was also tracing misdirected, if not stolen, goods. Eisenman had heard, after being tipped off by someone on Instagram, that her youthful pastel of people on the beach, which I'd seen in Scarsdale, had just sold in a New Jersey auction room for around twenty thousand dollars. A few weeks earlier, the moving company that was emptying the family home had promised Eisenman that the pastel, and a few others, would be taken to the dump. (The work was all returned.)

We could hear a construction crew hammering overhead. Eisenman bought the building a few years ago, with the plan of adding a floor to the existing two, and making the upper floors her home, with a bedroom for each of her children, and perhaps a pizza oven on the roof. That expansion, long delayed, was now under way. Eisenman, who is not coy about the advantages of commercial success, but prefers things to be interesting, was paying her contractor partly in drawings, which is also how she is paying her children's orthodontist. The children live for most of the week with her ex, Victoria Robinson—whom Eisenman sometimes ironically calls her "baby mama"—in a nearby house that they all once shared.

A black-and-white image of a bicycle wheel, derived from a photograph of Eisenman's own bicycle, was taped to the wall next to the painting. This wheel was the immediate task. She had earlier explained that she sometimes outsourced the precise painting of mass-produced things. She had shown me a reproduction of "Morning Is Broken," a 2018 painting with a beach-house setting. "It's *so* David Hockney back there," she had said, pointing at a swimming pool in the background. "If I want to flatter myself." A figure in a red sweatshirt holds a can of Modelo beer whose silver side reflects a hint of red; the can, she said, was done by another artist, Soren Hope. "I was on a roll," Eisenman said. "I didn't feel like slowing down to paint this—like, to get the details." Although her technical skill is in little doubt, she proposed that those few square inches were more beautifully executed than anything else in the work. "Look what she did!" Eisenman said. "That's not good for my fragile ego." She later asked Hope to paint the bicycle's crank.

She looked at the new painting warily. "The colors are really *keyed up* in the background, more than I want," she said. "That yellow just needs to calm down." She went on, "I think if you could pull off a painting on this scale, it could be really exciting. I don't know if this is going to be that. With some paintings, it's, 'All right! This is *there!*' Like 'Another Green World.'"

That painting, finished in 2015, is one of Eisenman's best-known works, and is now in the permanent collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles; the museum's gift shop sells it in the form of a jigsaw puzzle. It shows two dozen youngish people at a houseparty, painted at various levels of verisimilitude, as if from different periods in art history. One figure, leaning against a blue blanket, is blue-skinned. At the center of the image is a record-player and a scattering of album covers—some of them painted by Soren Hope—that include Brian Eno's "Another Green World." But, in Eisenman's memory, she first wrote the words "green world" in a sketchbook after reading Northrop Frye's observations, in "Anatomy of Criticism," about "the drama of the green world" in Shakespeare's comedies. These plays, Frye writes, enact "the ritual theme of the triumph of life and love over the waste land." Eisenman's painting applies Frye's description of "The Two Gentlemen of Verona" to a good night out in Brooklyn: "The action of the comedy begins in a world represented as a normal world, moves into the green world, goes into

"Goodbye, Rascal. You were truly an enormous hamster."

"Another Green World," from 2015, shows people at a houseparty, painted at various levels of verisimilitude.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ANTON KERN GALLERY / COLLECTION THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

a metamorphosis there in which the comic resolution is achieved, and returns to the normal world."

The perspective of the painting is flattened: Eisenman re-creates in a single image the experience of stepping around people and furniture to get to the cheese board. The sofa forms a horizon, but so does the horizon, seen through a window, beneath a Caspar David Friedrich moon. Roeck, the studio manager, noted that the paintings often "bend the rules of perspective to fit Nicole's world." Prickett, who showed me a photograph that she took of museumgoers staring happily at "Another Green World," said that the spread-out perspective creates "a feeling that there's room for you in the painting."

Eisenman, whose work tends to be marked by indeterminacy—of mood, of the likelihood of a happy ending—painted several figures in "Another Green World" that don't supply binary gender information. The fluidity is both in her rendering of bodies and, one can suppose, in the imagined room. The distinction seems unimportant: to use a term that Eisenman recently used when talking about herself, the painting's quiet default is gender agnosticism.

One couple is kissing, and others are hugging, but in the foreground of "Another Green World" are several people contentedly alone. One is looking at a phone. The painting directs no apparent satire at those whose appetite for socializing has been satisfied by turning up. Eisenman, who approves of parties and is clearly invested in the lives of her friends, is sometimes perceived as carrying herself in company with an observer's remove. These characteristics may help explain her side career, some years ago, as a d.j. at art-world parties: DJ Twunt. Her friend Eileen Myles, the poet, recently said that, at gatherings, Eisenman can have an air of "I'm not going down with the ship." Victoria Robinson said, "She's not outwardly playful, but her *brain* is playful."

Helen Molesworth, who in 2015 was MOCA's chief curator, saw "Another Green World" in Eisenman's studio before it was completed. Molesworth recently said that it can be unrewarding to visit artists in their studios: "They're just fucking around, or they're really experimenting, so you're seeing a lot of failure. But that wasn't what was happening in Nicole's studio. It was very clear—she was *on fire*. I said, 'I—we—want that. Please, please, please.'"

Before "Another Green World" reached MOCA, it was part of what Eisenman remembers as "probably the best show I've ever done"—at the Anton Kern Gallery, in Chelsea, in 2016. In the years that immediately followed, she continued to make paintings but turned largely to sculpture, and worked out of a separate studio. In 2017, her "Sketch for a Fountain" was installed in a park in Münster, Germany, as part of a citywide exhibition of sculptures in public places. The work, in an area of the park with a history of gay cruising, was an assembly of heroically larger-than-life figures, in poses of self-contained inactivity, around a rectangular pool. Two figures were bronze, three made of plaster. Some of them spouted water—from legs, from a shoulder, and from a beer can. Even more than is usual in Eisenman's work, the figures became studies in vulnerability: people in Münster subjected them to repeated vandalism, including a decapitation, a spray-painted swastika, and what Eisenman called "a dopey cartoon penis."

"Procession," Eisenman's offering at the 2019 Whitney Biennial, installed on a sixth-floor terrace, also included outsized figures made from various materials, but this time they were in postures of effortful movement, encumbered by a square-wheeled cart and other absurdities. Critics—referring to Bosch, Fellini, and immigrants seeking asylum—generally agreed that it was one of the show's finest works. Before the opening, Eisenman had joined dozens of other artists in the show in supporting a campaign to remove Warren Kanders from the Whitney's board; his company manufactured supplies for the police and the military, including tear gas. After the Biennial opened, that May, with Kanders still in place, Eisenman and seven other exhibited artists asked for their work to be taken out. Kanders resigned from the board a few days later, before any work had been removed, but Eisenman felt exposed and a little panicked. A boycott was not an agreed-upon strategy of the anti-Kanders camp, she recalled, and she "felt that it could easily erupt into a giant Twitter war."

Against this background, she recommitted herself to painting. "I wanted to get back to 'Another Green World,' that whole show—where I left off in 2016," she said. She missed working alone, without hourly consultations with fabricators and assistants. (The list of materials used in "Procession" includes a fog machine, mirrored Plexiglas, a telephone pole, a bee, tuna-can labels, and "various twigs." One figure wore socks knitted by Roeck's mother.) She wanted to "push the world out."

She also foresaw an obligation. By the end of the summer of 2019, Eisenman had decided to sign up with Hauser & Wirth, an international firm with galleries from Hong Kong to St. Moritz, making it her primary dealer in place of the Anton Kern Gallery. Hauser & Wirth would never press an artist to work in one medium rather than another, but Eisenman recognized that, for her début show in New York, within a year or two, the company would hope to fill a large new space it was building in Chelsea with large new Eisenman paintings.

Marc Payot, now a president of Hauser & Wirth, had been in conversation with her for many months. On one occasion, Eisenman recalled to me, "Marc came in here and saw a giant painting—this size—and he said, 'Yes, we could work with this. I could sell that for a million dollars, *easily*.'" She laughed. "My first reaction was, Wow, that's amazing! And I thought of all I could do with a million dollars." (She had never sold a painting for much more than half of that, although she mentioned that a film-industry collector has valued his Eisenman at two million dollars—an annoyance for any institution that hopes to borrow it, and for which the insurance costs of an exhibition are significant.) "But then, when we had a serious sitdown in Marc's office, I said, 'I don't want my prices to go up.'" Any increase, beyond a nudge, "just sounds too scary."

Payot, in a recent phone call, remembered his million-dollar remark, but asked for it to be understood as "a declaration of belief in who she is," rather than as an argument for reckless inflation. He noted that Hauser & Wirth also represents the estate of Philip Guston; in Eisenman's work, he said, "like Guston's, you have the very strong

painterly virtuosity, and it's psychologically loaded, and there's the political side sometimes, and also a very funny side." He added, "I have no doubt that she will be part of history." Eisenman is often compared to Guston, and although she recognizes it as a compliment, she is wary of any suggestion that there is a line of influence. When, in college, Eisenman began twisting cartoons into political art—"subjecting Richie Rich to whatever torturous fantasies I had"—she was barely aware of Guston. She took inspiration instead from the German artists Sigmar Polke and Jörg Immendorff.

Before the Biennial closed, that September, Eisenman began making sketches for a future show of paintings. Previously, she had tended to start with text—a line of Blake's, a pun. She now started with scraps of imagery, among them a picture she'd noticed somewhere of a man coming off a bicycle. She recalled her state of mind at the time. "A little excitement, a little fear, a bit lost," she said. "It's being enshrouded in a mist that you can't see through. And just looking—trying to find landmarks that you can grab onto. Maybe something appears. It's really the gruelling part in all of this—sitting at the desk, just generating imagery."

She drew, using vintage pencils, on printer paper from Staples. As we talked in the studio, she showed me some of these pages. Eisenman had drawn a figure confronted by dogs; in one iteration, the figure's "leg is a bone, and a dog is gnawing on it." The painting that she began a little later was "so much nicer," she said—no gnawing—but retained some of the jitteriness that she recalled from 2019. The work shows a man on a crooked path, in an unsteady green landscape, walking toward dogs, one of which has a smudge of paint for a nose. "I guess the dogs are the painting's id," she said. "They're blocking the path. But they're not standing there in a threatening way. They're playing. So they'll *probably* hop out of the way."

In her sketches, she had drawn someone carrying a barrel, and someone else with a belt of knives. The barrel made it into the potato painting, which, she says, most directly refers to the experience of the pandemic: the composition also includes a horseshoe bat and a large, naked (and perhaps Presidential) figure. This painting falls into the category of Eisenman's works to which viewers' first reaction may be fear that they are being asked to decode a dream. "I mean—obviously—a potato is a very bland food that you associate with famine," Eisenman told me.

She then said of the painting with the barren trees, "I have a sketch of a guy falling off a ladder, and I have a sketch of a girl popped off a bike. They were separate drawings." Sometime in the fall of 2019, she joined them in a single sketch. She recalled "a mode of thinking when you're arranging bodies to make a shape, and realism is beside the point." She continued, "I mean, it has to nod toward reality, but it's more important that her arms are reaching toward the figure on the ground. The narrative makes the body have to *be* a certain way. In that way, it's like dance, a little bit." In her description, the image became "this disaster happening, and a kind of romance inside this disaster."

Eisenman and Prickett first met, briefly, in the middle of 2019, at an *Artforum* event in New York. Prickett, who is in her thirties, told me how much she was drawn to Eisenman, and then described Eisenman's wardrobe: "She was dressed like a soccer coach. Sneakers, a windbreaker, possibly a fleece pant even." At the time, Prickett, who has often written for *Artforum*—and who generated her own magazine coverage when she ran *Adult*, an erotically oriented magazine—was living with her husband in Los Angeles. By last spring, she and Eisenman had become a couple, and when the city began to close down, in March, she moved in. Soon after, Eisenman described the satisfactions of their early pandemic—"She's so smart, she's such a fabulous cook"—and then felt bad to be talking about her happiness. She had begun a painting, smaller and simpler than the others then under way, of a shirtless woman, painted in a bold red outline, clipping long fingernails. "Sarah's new to all this lesbian stuff," Eisenman explained, when we first spoke on the phone. (Prickett later said that this wasn't quite true.) In the image, Eisenman said, Prickett's "fingernail is flying off and it's making what looks like a Nike swoosh." Eisenman called the painting "Just do it. (Sarah Nicole)."

To paint the cyclist's stance, Eisenman worked in part from posed photographs of Prickett. Eisenman also photographed Roeck, to help with the ladder figure. But, she noted, "the guy is wearing *my* shoes, and has short dark hair." Eisenman acknowledges elements of self-portraiture throughout her work; she sees herself, for example, in the man on the zigzag path. This doesn't extend to every image—her work isn't "a Jungian dream world," she said. But, in the case of the ladder figure, "that could be me—tweak a few genes and that's me." (As Prickett told me, the figure is also François Leterrier, the French actor and director. Eisenman downloaded photographs of him after she and Prickett watched him in Robert Bresson's "A Man Escaped.")

And so the collision painting, which, Eisenman said, "had started before I had any inkling that Sarah and I were going to be together," became about her and Prickett. Or, at least, it became the source of a shared joke for the way that it seemed to capture the moment: "She was getting divorced. This turmoil on one side, and this lovely thing on the other." The painting is also "very her in tone," Eisenman said. "She's a very romantic person—and dramatic. She loves drama."

I first met Prickett in person in June, in Washington Square Park, at the end of an upstart alternative to New York's annual Pride parade, the Queer Liberation March, which focussed last year on themes of racial justice. She and Eisenman were sitting on the grass with friends; a few minutes earlier, N.Y.P.D. officers had thrown themselves into one part of the march, in a way that had reminded Eisenman of jacked-up crowd-divers at hardcore concerts in the nineties. On the lawn, Eisenman, who had recently begun sketching studies for a painting depicting the Occupy City Hall encampment, then still in

place, was wearing a "Black Dykes Matter" T-shirt. She was in a half-serious discussion with David Velasco, the editor of *Artforum*, about whether she should accept the gift of a tablet of Adderall, the prescription amphetamine, to see how it might affect her productivity. Prickett objected—playfully, but not entirely so. "Baby," she said. "Everyone takes Adderall to be like you! You are stealing valor!"

Later, in a phone call, Prickett recalled an evening in the spring when Eisenman had talked of being frustrated with the color of the sky in the bicycle painting: "I said, 'Get the color of a pink wool blanket—a woollen pink, kind of dusty.'" Eisenman, who's better known for greenish yellows, browns, and saturated reds than for what could be called Philip Guston pink, took the advice, and was happy with the result, although, Prickett said, she complained that the sky now looked too much like the work of the German artist Neo Rauch. Prickett added that Eisenman had described the bicycle painting as "by far the most heterosexual painting I've ever made."

At one point, Prickett sent me a long, wry e-mail that teased Eisenman a little for some magical habits of mind—Eisenman had just described "the ghost of a German artist who sits on her shoulder when she paints and says which colors to use." Prickett also observed, "Great artists are not often mothers, or when they are they are not seen to be maternal. Nicole looks less maternal than she is, perhaps, in larger part because of her profession and in smaller part because of 'how she presents,' as they say in gender studies. Even a dad can be a mother—I guess I knew that but didn't get it." She went on, "How is it that she works and produces greatness and supports her children and is friends with her ex-wife and sees her mother once a week and goes on vacation with her girlfriend and reads and thinks and participates in civic life and responds to all her messages and helps raise funds for a hundred causes and relaxes. . . . Maybe I am still too embarrassingly wowed by adulthood."

In her studio, Eisenman looked at the trees in the bicycle painting. "I was thinking about this yesterday," she said. "Why are they so representational? Why did I do that? And I think it was, after having not painted for two years, I forgot that there's another way. I forgot the lessons of my own work." Not every element in a painting has to have the same level of realism. One person can have an Andy Capp nose. "It's interesting to hear myself making excuses for painting like this," she continued. "I also *like* it! I like making pictures that I like. I like the mood that arises out of the paint." That mood—which includes the possibility that the disaster may overwhelm the romance—wasn't in the early sketches. In the painting, she said, "they're both potentially hurt. This could be the second his head hits the ground before it cracks open. You don't see the blood spilling out." She was laughing. "We don't know if he's O.K. He could not be."

"The way to a man's heart is through this small incision right here."

• •

One morning in July, Eisenman was sitting on the deck of a shared summer-rental house in the Pines, on Fire Island. Prickett was indoors, preparing chilled cucumber soup, following a recipe that Sylvia Plath once mentioned in a letter. Other housemates came and went, talking of the size of the waves that day, and which movie from the eighties they should watch that evening. Eisenman asked one of them, her friend Matt Wolf, a documentary filmmaker, "Did I ever tell you that my mother says that she babysat for Amy Irving?" She also described an experience from early childhood: "I remember getting on a chair and seeing the top of my dresser and being, '*What*? There's a whole fucking world up here? There's all this stuff I didn't know about?'"

In the shade, by the pool, Eisenman talked a little about her father. "Intellectually, he was really *there* for me," she said. When she studied art theory, at RISD, he read some of the books she was assigned—Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer—so that they could discuss the course. "And I loved talking to him about psychiatry, and his patients." She later added, "He really had a gift for analysis and interpreting dreams, so it was fun to talk to him about my work." The work seems to imagine, as an ideal viewer, someone with her father's interpretive gifts, and she is readier than many artists to offer analysis of her own imagery, with only so much eye-rolling. She called one survey show "Al-ugh-gories."

After she returned home at the end of her sophomore year, her girlfriend, a

Brown student, wrote to her, and the letter included the description of a dream. Sheldon Eisenman saw the letter in her bedroom, read it, and interpreted the dream. This was how Eisenman came out to her family.

"My father was an old-school psychiatrist who thought that being gay was a mental disease," Eisenman said. "His first response was 'I saw this letter, and you have to get away from this person. She's really dangerous.' And I'm, like, 'She's just a lesbian!'" Eisenman went on, "He was a fucking nightmare. By the time he was done with me, I hated the whole idea of being gay." (She corrected herself: "I didn't *hate* it. I had a complicated relationship to being gay.")

At the end of that summer, Eisenman began a year of studying abroad, in Rome. Being in Italy "felt like an awakening," she recalled. "Just being that much *in images* all of the time." She later showed me a sketchbook from the trip: receipts saved as souvenirs, paragraphs of self-examination, marginal cartoon doodles, beautifully fluid ink drawings of statues and buildings. (When I spoke to Joan Busing, Eisenman's art teacher in Westchester County, she had a volume of selected works by her former student open in front of her, and remarked on similar juxtapositions. "One page, this wonderful, almost Tintoretto style," she said. "The next has a hand with a finger cut off and the caption 'OH SHIT.'") Dana Prescott, who ran RISD's program in Rome when Eisenman was there, recalled, "She was totally cool. She had that short, dark shank of black hair. She was thin as a stick." Eisenman was "a tiny bit aloof," but it was clear that "she was digesting it all, especially Renaissance art—anything sequential, any storytelling, really spoke to her."

Against the background of this immersion, Eisenman's father was running a campaign against her sexuality. "I would get a fat envelope of legal-size paper, his writing front and back, just making a case for why it was dangerous and bad and ruining my life," she said. "It was such a fucked-up thing to do. And then you can see his tears on the page, the ink running." Eisenman laughed. "It was really hard. I always felt like I had to read the letters. I should have just thrown them out." She was ill-equipped to fight back. "I knew he was wrong, but it got in my head," she said. "I didn't *know* enough. I was too young. Pre-Internet, I didn't know where to look to find the writing I needed."

Eisenman said of her father, "It was just this one thing, which was a big thing. It really fucked our shit up." She added, "My mom saw it, and she didn't intervene." (When Eisenman and I were in Scarsdale, later that week, her mother said, "When Nicky came out as gay, I totally blamed myself. And I felt absolutely crushed. It really was very hard.")

"But, you know, all of that fed my work in the early nineties," Eisenman said. "It was really about visibility, and a big 'Fuck you' to the patriarchy—namely, him." She checked herself. "It was *not* just him. It was all of culture, it was my education. I was going to RISD and reading Janson"—H. W. Janson's "History of Art"—"and it was *this* thick, and there wasn't one woman in the entire book. I didn't read anything about feminism at RISD. I had to catch up on that stuff, you know, over the years, on my own."

Eisenman moved to New York immediately after graduation, in 1987. "It was grunge culture, and it was druggy, and it was lesbian," she said. "It was really fun." She soon took the job doing faux-finish marbling; some of her handiwork survives today in the lobby of the Peninsula Hotel, on Fifth Avenue. (A little later, she was hired to paint murals, in a socialist-realist style, in Coach stores.) At night, she was making ink drawings of lesbian bars, and creating comics "that were kind of sexy and violent and funny and weird." She thought of herself as "a tough little fucker, romping around the city."

When Eisenman first started show-

ALLEGORY

Professional wrestler Owen Hart embodied his own
omen when he battled gravity from rafters to canvas

in a Kansas City stadium. Like a great tent collapsing,
he fell without warning, no hoverboard, no humming-

bird's finesse for the illusion of flight, no suspension
of disbelief to hammock his burden—the birth of virtue—

in its virtual reality. His angelic entrance eclipsed
when his safety harness failed. He fell out of the ersatz

like a waxwing duped by infinities conjured in a squeegee's
mirage. Spectators wilted as the creature of grief emerged

to graze on their sapling gasps and shrieks. I'd like to think
that, freed of self-hype, he realized his mask was not a shield,

and that he didn't spend his last attempting to method
Zeno's proofs. E.M.T.s like evangelicals huddled to jolt

the hub of Hart's radiating soul as fans prayed the stunt
might yet parade the emperor's threads wrestlers call kayfabe.

Kayfabe, a dialect of pig Latin, lingo for the promise to drop
at the laying on of hands. To take myth as history. Semblance

as creed. A grift so convincing one might easily believe
it could work without someone else pulling the strings.

—Gregory Pardlo

ing her work, in small group shows, she contributed not ink drawings but paintings—work in the vein of the people-on-the-beach pastel that she recently tried to throw away. In 1992, for the first time, she showed a few of her drawings, including one, she recalled, that involved "a fantasy of this island of Amazons capturing men and cutting off penises." Ann Philbin, then the director of the Drawing Center, in SoHo, saw that work, and, during a subsequent visit to Eisenman's studio, picked out of the trash—and praised—a drawing of Wilma and Betty, the "Flintstones" characters, having sex. Eisenman told me that she had tossed it out for being "silly, too obvious." In a key early boost to her career, Philbin invited Eisenman to make a mural for a group show, "Wall Drawings." Eileen Myles, writing a decade later, recalled Eisenman's arrival, very late, at that show's opening: "She wore a black shirt, her hair was kind of Wildean and awkwardly she was carrying a red rose." The rose, Myles wrote, was "pure punk."

Not long afterward, Eisenman was taken up by the Jack Tilton gallery, and began to make some money. She recalled that it sometimes amused Tilton to notice the limits of her punkishness: whenever she was introduced to collectors and others with power, "the Scarsdale would show," and she'd be extraordinarily deferential. Tilton could see the advantage of a persona that was less civil (or more Tracey Emin). He once said, "Be meaner! Be meaner!"

Eisenman told me, "There's another part to the story that gets a bit dark," and brought up, for the first time, the subject of her drug addiction. She explained that Victoria Robinson had, the previous week, accidentally hinted at this history to the children, and that George, their daughter, then thirteen, had asked Eisenman to explain. Now that the matter had been aired within the family, Eisenman said, it should be included in our conversations.

Back then, all her friends took heroin. She started to do it on Saturday nights. Within a few years, she had added Thursdays and Fridays. "And there was one day, in, like, 1992—I was living with this woman, and she was, 'Let's do a bump,'" Eisenman recalled. "And it was a Wednesday! And I was, If I do it Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, then I'm committing my life to being a drug addict. And I did it." She compared this to a cartoon character stepping off a cliff, legs still spinning. "You've done something very dangerous, but you haven't died yet."

For a few years, as her career took off, Eisenman's drug use "never got so out of control that I couldn't function," she said. "It worked for me." But by the time of the 1995 Whitney Biennial, when she fully arrived professionally—with a mural that showed her coolly working on a mural amid the rubble of a demolished Breuer building—she was "a little lost." Her work increasingly required travel, and so she customized a belt for hiding heroin whenever she had to pass through airport security, never without panic. Sometimes, when she needed money, she'd call up collectors, including her friend Susan Hort. ("I used to say I was her bank," Hort told me. "She'd call me and say, 'Studio visit!'" Hort added, "I felt bad that this was the situation she was in. I really wanted her to clean up.") When Eisenman began making a serious effort to stop, it was less to save herself from harm—"I was full of self-loathing," she said—and more to avoid squandering what she recognized as talent. "My thinking was, I had this gift I had to make good on."

Prickett had heard some of this through the screen door. Stepping outside, she first checked, protectively, that the conversation's turn was Eisenman's idea. Then she said, "The story of how you got off of heroin is quite good, if not exactly inspiring." She repeated something that Eisenman had told her about winning a Guggenheim Fellowship, in 1996: "You said, 'I spent half the money on heroin and the other half on rehab.'" Eisenman laughed: "Something like that." It might have been the money from a different grant, at around the same time. She checked into the Betty Ford Center in California, returned to New York, overdosed, came to with a paramedic sitting on her chest, and then stopped.

The cucumber soup was garnished with borage blossoms. The women were joined for lunch by their four housemates: two male couples, that week, in a house that usually had a larger lesbian component. For a moment, the conversation turned to preferences in pronouns and other identifiers. Matt Wolf called Eisenman "soft butch," and she accepted that, with thanks. They talked about younger lesbians becoming less likely to use female pronouns.

"I need a whiteboard," Eisenman said, at one point. "I'm sorry—it's too byzantine."

TM Davy, an artist, said, "I was misgendered in the New York *Times*, thanks to Nicole." He laughed.

"Whoa, *what*?" Eisenman said.

The *Times* review of Eisenman's 2016 Anton Kern show had characterized "TM and Lee"—a large, dreamy painting with a beach setting—as a depiction of two women. "You kind of made me look like you," Davy said. "I was really happy that they referred to me as she—or, the *figure* of me." Nevertheless, Davy said, his gallery pointed out his maleness to the *Times*. (An ensuing correction, attempting to respect the image's ambiguity, read like a riddle: "According to the artist, one figure is intended to be of indeterminate gender; the work does not depict two women.")

Eileen Myles, when talking later about Eisenman on the phone, used "they" and "them," which are Myles's preferred pronouns. But Eisenman, who is sometimes taken for a man, and who sometimes chooses to pass as one—most often "when rest-room lines are too long"—uses "she" and "her." In 2019, after briefly becoming Nicky Eisenman in her professional life, she restored Nicole. And, after a period when she usually described herself as "queer," she now more often uses "lesbian." These have been decisions taken in the spirit of the shrug emoticon. She told me that she'd agreed to participate in a group photo shoot, entitled "Butches and Studs," for *T*, the *Times*' style magazine, only after she'd established that Alison Bechdel, the cartoonist and the author of "Fun Home," would be there. "I wanted to meet Alison," she said. "I really love her

books." (In the kind of judgment that sometimes marks Eisenman's conversation—and that resembles the way she draws a line in charcoal, smudges it out, then draws it again—she said of the "Butches" photo shoot, "It was fine. It was fun. It was dumb.")

In an e-mail, Eisenman described her "tenuous relationship to 'womanhood.'" She wrote, "Some feminist writers have made analogies between a woman's body and a house. Interior, domestic, hospitable, private, decorated. . . . For me, it's more like being in a rental apartment. Why get invested? Why make a big change? I just don't care that much. This is an imperfect metaphor, but you get the idea." In a later conversation, she added, "I was very uncomfortable for a large part of my life being a woman. I suffered through it. If I could have had top surgery when I was eighteen, nineteen years old, I would have done it. But it was not an option, in the early eighties, for me. I think I dealt with it in certain ways." She laughed. "I ended up a heroin addict! I wasn't the happiest person."

Cajsa von Zeipel, a sculptor, recently put a question about sculpture to Eisenman, who's a friend. "Why do you think you do guys?" she asked. They were standing in a gallery on the Lower East Side filled with seven-foot-tall women sculpted by von Zeipel, largely using silicone. When Eisenman hesitated, von Zeipel added, "There's female in there, sometimes."

"It's both," Eisenman said. She recalled that, for the show in Münster, she had worried about how a female body might be abused by vandals. "And then I think I just also don't want to sculpt breasts. They sexualize the figure instantly. What I ended up doing is making female bodies without breasts." She mentioned a giant Michelangelo book that her father had given her when she was a teen-ager. For years, she used it as reference for her own work. When Michelangelo painted women, he usually worked from male models. "They looked the way I would have wanted to feel in the world," she had told me. "They were as close as I could see in culture to trans-masculine bodies." In Eisenman's drawings from the nineties, her women were Amazonian, exerting power, often with violence. Early in the new century, such figures "left my work, and *I* kind of left my work," she said. "The revenge fantasy ended"—in the work, and in her relationship to the world—"and a kind of social-realism mode kicked in." In that spirit, Eisenman said, "I started looking at my friends who *really were* genderqueer or nonbinary people."

On Fire Island, after lunch, we walked to the beach. As Prickett swam way out to sea, Eisenman talked with Wolf about a future collaboration with A. L. Steiner, an artist and an activist who has been her close friend since the nineties. In the past fifteen years, Steiner and Eisenman have put together a series of events and publications, filled with agitprop gusto, under the heading "Ridykeulous." (Eisenman said to Wolf, "I'm more the humor person, she's more of the, like, Angry Thought person.") In Eisenman's reckoning, the first phase of her career—the "proto-riot-grrrl, irreverent-punk phase"—ended around 2001, with a desire to paint more and be "less the class clown." But, in "Ridykeulous" and in some of her other work, she sustains the spirit of her post-college years. A figure in the "Procession" sculpture emits a fog-machine fart every few minutes. On one of my visits to Eisenman's studio, she gave me a bumper sticker reading "How's my painting? Call 1-800-EAT SHIT." As Lucy Sexton, a performance artist, recently said, "It's someone saying, 'Yes, I've got that gallery thing, but I want to go and get drunk at the Pyramid with you.'" Keith Boadwee, an artist and a friend, who has collaborated with Eisenman, said that, perhaps because Eisenman found "the market's embrace" unusually quickly, "she has this romanticized idea about the coolness of weirdos." He added that, as a weirdo whose work has not always attracted an audience, he felt that the coolness of a career like his was easy to exaggerate.

Eisenman, under a beach umbrella, spent five minutes making a watercolor sketch of TM Davy, and then did one of me, giving me the outsized hands that often help reveal her authorship. Earlier, Roeck had described how, not long ago, he agreed to undergo a digital body scan, in order to help Eisenman shape a forty-foot-high sculpture that is planned for a public space in

Eisenman reports on intrusions and obstacles,

Amsterdam. Eisenman had asked him to enlarge his hands by dipping them in latex, letting them dry, and then repeating the process again and again. When he stepped out of the car that took him to the scanning, looking like someone dressed as an Eisenman painting for Halloween, a passerby recoiled and asked him what was wrong.

After Eisenman had swum, we walked back to the house, and Wolf asked her to explain one or two of her tattoos. Then, in a trial run of a tattoo that Eisenman and Prickett had discussed—in joking tones that suggested mutual unease about being identified

but not on the end of the world. In "Procession" (2019), figures are encumbered by a square-wheeled cart and other absurdities.

VINCENT TULLO / THE NEW YORK TIMES / REDUX

as the idea's instigator—Eisenman used a Sharpie to sign her name on Prickett's foot. Wolf said, "Don't get thematically connected tattoos. *Please*."

When Eisenman was in her thirties and living with Victoria Robinson, she was a serious triathlete. "Running always felt hard," she told me. "But my mantra, this thing I would repeat to myself when it got hard, was 'Smooth as butter, smooth as butter.' And this would smooth me out, and take me into a calmer place when I was struggling." She remembered this mantra when thinking about how, around 2006, "something clicked" in her work. What followed, she proposed, were "the butter years."

We talked about this transition in a garden in Woodstock, New York. This past summer, Robinson and the children spent two months in a house that backed onto a creek, the Saw Kill. Eisenman joined them for a week in August. When I visited, Robinson told me she had come to realize that the house, rented through an agent, was owned by Paul Krugman, the economist and columnist, and his wife. Robinson had been joking with Eisenman about communicating minor complaints through the comments section of the *Times*. As Robinson put it, "Dear Paul, The issue with the dishwasher remains. . . ."

In the garden, Eisenman and her daughter, George, talked about portraiture. When George proposed that street caricaturists sometimes produce uncannily good likenesses, Eisenman agreed, noting, "I did that job when I was in high school. I went to kids' parties—for six-year-olds—to do portraits. But I had a trick. Because, you know, kids all look the same at that age."

George and Freddy, her younger brother, were outraged. "*What*? *No!*"

"They *really do*," Eisenman said. "At

the age of five or so, all kids have kind of round faces, big eyes, little noses." She looked at Freddy. "Like you have. Kids look alike more than adults look alike, I would say."

After they'd both accepted this, Eisenman went on. "So, the trick was to bring a big bin of hats," she said. "I would have them pick out hats and then, essentially, *get the hat*."

Eisenman recalled that George had been body-scanned to help form a bronze figure, in "Procession," that carries a flagpole on one shoulder. "It's the body of an eleven-year-old, but it's *so big*," Eisenman said.

"And you put goop on it," George said, referring to splashes of yellowish insulation foam.

"I goopified it—the technical term."

"And you added a penis."

"I added a penis. A knob. It's really a knob."

We walked down the middle of the creek to a swimming hole, where the children pushed Eisenman in. After we returned to the garden, she talked of how her painting technique used to follow the example of the Italian Renaissance: "You're painting wet paint into wet paint, and you're modelling it, you're using a lot of oil and varnish and glazing, and it's technical and it's exacting and it's historical." She went on, "You're really trying to fool the eye in some way. The thing you're painting looks like the thing that you're trying to paint. It can be so beautiful if you can do it well."

Two decades ago, some of the subject matter of her drawings began appearing in paintings of this kind. "Fishing" (2000) shows silkily rendered, Michelangelo-shouldered women gathered around an ice hole through which a trussed male figure is about to be lowered, apparently as bait. Robinson, who met Eisenman at this time, later told me, "I *loved* that painting—I loved how tight and detailed it was." Eisenman told me that during this period "painting always felt like work, and not fun." She wanted "to introduce into my painting what I was doing in drawing—my drawing was always very fluid and very open and loose and fun."

In 2002, in a decision that Eisenman and Robinson soon regretted, they left the city for a house that they bought in Elizaville, New York, on the other side of the Hudson from Woodstock. Robinson, who had previously worked in film production, took a job at the Dia Art Foundation, which was setting up a new museum in Beacon. Eisenman taught at Bard, and sometimes played Britpop records on the college's radio station late at night.

"Do you remember the guy at the end of the block?" Eisenman asked Robinson. "He had big cages with pit bulls, and broken trampolines everywhere. We moved upstate thinking it was going to be all bucolic. And it was Elizaville." In 2004, they moved back to New York City, and bought a house in Williamsburg. That year, Eisenman had a show, "Elizaville," that she now thinks of as a bridge to a new way of working. Among its successes, she said, was "Captain Awesome," an image that owed something to their former neighbor: a shirtless man in a Fonz-like pose, holding an ear of corn.

In Brooklyn, Eisenman began to blog; she wrote about art shows, her pet parrot, and the rock musician Pete Doherty. She maintained a tone of jokey good cheer—"gentle reader," and so on—except when criticizing the British artist Damien Hirst, a "wanker hack."

When Robinson began trying to become pregnant, Eisenman felt preëmptively nostalgic for what was about to be lost. Talking to her daughter, in Woodstock, she said, "My feeling was that I had to get all my socializing in. Because when you were born I was just going to be busy hanging out with you." Robinson, speaking later about the impact of motherhood on Eisenman, said, "I want to be diplomatic, and it's now much better, but I think when they were really little it was really, really hard for her." (She and Eisenman broke up about a decade ago.) "As an artist, she works alone, her time's alone." Among the figures in "Coping" is one who resembles Eisenman's father, giving directions to someone holding an infant.

George was born in 2007. At some point in the previous year or two, Eisenman had visited the Musée d'Orsay, in Paris, where she was surprised to find herself drawn to works by Renoir—"the least respected of the Impressionists," as she put it. She subsequently became fascinated by the story behind Renoir's "Luncheon of the Boating Party," which is now part of the Phillips Collection, in Washington, D.C. It shows fourteen men and women, most of them identifiable as people well known to the artist, on the

"He's a rescue."

balcony of a restaurant by the Seine, just west of Paris. At a time when Eisenman was dreading social withdrawal, this was a social painting whose production had been social. "I wanted to do this painting," Eisenman said, in Woodstock. "So I put it out on Facebook. 'Are there fourteen people out there who would want to be in a painting of mine? It's going to take some time, you'd have to show up.'" The people who replied were not actual friends. So, instead, she "invited people individually, and filled out the painting that way."

The result, "Biergarten at Night" (2007), was built out of a combination of life studies and imagined figures. It shows the yard of a packed Brooklyn bar, under Renoirish lights, and, among many other figures, it includes two iterations of Victoria Robinson and one of Death, whose head is a skull. Eisenman has described the scene as a moment of communal giddy drunkenness on the verge of turning uglier. (Death is making out with someone.) The composition of the work, and its piecemeal construction, helped her to recognize the extent to which "you can *draw* with paint." In part, Eisenman said, this was just a matter of scale—when a head is one of many, in a field of figures, then "you can make a brush mark, and it's a nose." She set aside the varnish and soft brushes, and instead worked with the kind of bristle brushes that she previously would have used to make an "underpainting" outline, which would then disappear. (Later, she made "Another Green World" with paint sticks, or "oversized crayons.") Such work could be "more fluid, because you're not *coloring in*, you're not covering your tracks, and a background color can flow through a form, and the painting begins to breathe in a different way."

There was now room for a degree of painted abstraction, in part learned from decades of cartooning. In a recent e-mail, Eisenman wrote, "A 'real' nose is particular. It's bony and marked, it's the most characteristic facial feature, presenting ethnicity and genetics often more clearly than anything else on the face. So to abstract the nose is to erase all possible recognition of a character as someone related or familiar to the viewer and instead creates the possibility that this character could be anyone, that what is happening to the character could happen to anyone. . . . Not to *you* necessarily (because you, you being the viewer, do not recognize yourself in the figure any more than you recognize a stranger) but to anyone. This is what helps make the paintings sympathetic no matter what fears or cruelties or mishaps or absurdities they depict."

Helen Molesworth, the curator, remembers the moment in Eisenman's career when "a certain kind of caustic on-the-sidelines commentary gave way to being in the thick of your actual life." She recalled thinking, She's going to be a painter of her time—of modern life.

A few years later, Eisenman was on Fire Island, walking to buy groceries, when her phone rang, and she was told that she'd won a MacArthur award. The citation's remarks about reënergizing figuration took her by surprise. She had recognized that she'd been working in an era marked by an abundance of abstraction. "Some of my favorite painters are abstract painters," she recently said. "But I like the story." The MacArthur's comments, she told me, marked "the first time I *really heard* that I was doing something differently." When the citation was read to her, she was close to tears.

On my most recent visit to Eisenman's studio, we walked a few blocks to get sandwiches, and during the walk she told me about the time, in college, when she hit her friend Leah Kreger in the face, during a fight that they had scheduled, experimentally. Eisenman described the event as part therapy and part flirtation. (Kreger, speaking on the phone, said, "It was 'Can you do it—can you throw a punch?'" She added, without complaint, "I don't think Nicole had as much trouble as I did.")

Back at the studio, sitting at the counter, we looked at the bicycle-accident painting, which would come to have the title "Destiny Riding Her Bike." The scaffolding was still up in front of it. "I'm fifty-five years old, and going up and down the ladder all day is really hard work," Eisenman said. "You know, it's *work* standing on a ladder and painting. I probably have five or ten good years left of working on this scale. It's going to be hard to go up and down a ladder. And if I fall off I'm not going to recover as quickly."

This seemed an invitation to interpret her painting's falling ladder as a premonition of a career's end. She laughed: "There it is! That's what it is. It's me crashing into the end of my career. Oh, my God. Yes."

We talked about the degree of optimism that one can reasonably extract from her work.

"I'm so sad and so worried," she said. "It's just devastating to see the depths of greed in humans. And what that impulse to have control of—and have *more* of—has done to our planet. It's really devastating. And it registers as sadness, ultimately. It should be anger, because that's a little bit more useful, maybe. I'm not good at anger. I am better at sadness. If you can imagine a nanoparticle with sadness on one side and joy on the other—that's what I'm made out of, and they just keep shimmying around. And, you know, it's good. It's fine. It works. I think it's a beautiful fucking life, and the kids are beautiful, and Sarah's beautiful. This is beautiful—you know, this is great! Like, we're here. This is beautiful—this counter, this great bagel. I enjoy my work, and it's a beautiful world, even in its falling-apartness."

She went on, "Freddy and I were out getting burgers at Shake Shack a couple of weeks ago. There was all this oil in a puddle in front. It was just gross. And Freddy said something about the rainbow colors. And I was, 'Yes, it's disgusting, and there are miracles.'" Eisenman looked horrified. "I didn't say that! I wouldn't use that word! It's not a *miracle*. It's just, you know, there's beauty everywhere." That idea was corny, she said, and probably delusional. "But I am not a cynical person. I think art is a creative, hopeful, optimistic position to work. It's something that Sarah and I talk about, because Sarah's a critic, and it's a different mind-set. It's a darker place. It's not cynical, but she doesn't need—she's not interested in—happiness and joy. She's right. It doesn't make sense to be interested in happiness. But I am." ♦

OUR LOCAL CORRESPONDENTS

IT'S NO PICNIC

Battling a global pandemic and a long winter, restaurants struggle to survive.

BY NICK PAUMGARTEN

New York City's first blizzard of the season whipped in on a Wednesday evening in mid-December. Earlier in the day, the air had had that damp chill that even RealFeel can't get right; people wedged through it with lowered foreheads and solstice scowls. All over town, restaurant owners and managers were making their own calculations. Open up just for lunch? Close until the weekend? Shut down indefinitely, or even for good? No matter how you ran the numbers, the outlook was dire. It encapsulated, in miniature, the extinction threat facing them all.

Two days earlier, New York State, citing a steepening of the COVID curve, had banned indoor dining again, after having permitted it for ten weeks, at twenty-five-per-cent capacity. Justifiable as the decision was in epidemiological terms, the timing seemed cruel, what with a forecast of gale-force winds and a foot of snow. In anticipation of the storm, the city had ordered restaurants to shut down outdoor dining that afternoon by 2 P.M. As for the dining structures that restaurateurs in all five boroughs had erected on the street—the sheds, tents, lean-tos, stables, barns, bubbles, tepees, and yurts, as well as the heating appliances, the planters and plastic flowers, the canopies of fairy lights and power cords, the wooden gangways and plexiglass dividers—no one really knew for sure what was allowed and what wasn't, in the event of snow. Were they required to dismantle everything?

For months, restaurants had endured a baffling crossfire of changing rules and regulations, from a gantlet of city and state agencies. That week, the Mayor's counsel had issued a memo stating that, under the Governor's new indoor-dining ban, patrons dining outside were prohibited from going inside to use the rest room, and restaurant workers were effectively not allowed to take their staff meals anywhere but the kitchen. An outcry ensued, and the state insisted that it had made no such prohibitions. This was just another "never mind."

"It has become increasingly clear that the government is run by a bunch of clowns," Eric Sze, the owner of 886, a Taiwanese restaurant on St. Marks Place, said recently. "Have they never worked in a restaurant? Isn't that one of the first things you should do as a normal human being?"

It may be, during this COVID year, that no one should be dining at restaurants at all, outside or inside. The arguments over this question swirl like airborne droplets. Epidemiologists themselves, in polls, say that they are disinclined to eat out. But, regardless of what makes the most sense from a public-health perspective, restaurants must either scramble to survive or go out of business. Or they can do both, as many already have.

"Winter was coming," Lynn Wagenknecht, the owner of the Odeon, the forty-year-old brasserie in Tribeca, said. "We knew this. Why is everything announced just before the first snowstorm?" It was eleven o'clock on the morning of the blizzard, and Wagenknecht, in a fleece jacket, scarf, and white wool hat, sat sipping a rapidly cooling café au lait, at a four-top that her staff had just set under the restaurant's makeshift outdoor shelter. Her carpenter—"José the miracle man," she called him—had erected the structure in the parking lane along West Broadway (or, if you prefer, in the gutter) a couple of months before. The canopy, supported by steel poles, was an assemblage of a few temporary carports, called Quictents, available on Amazon for $219.99 apiece. These were bolted into some broad plywood boards that the M.T.A. had put over the subway grates, perhaps in a quixotic effort to keep the tunnels from flooding. Underneath the Quictents, there were eleven tables, each separated by a chest-high plexiglass panel. (The term "sneeze guard" came germily to mind.) By law, the structure had to be open on two sides, for ventilation, so the length facing east, toward the restaurant, was open, as were flaps at either end. On the street-facing side, at the base of some clear plastic sheeting, was a thigh-high barrier, which was topped with Astroturf and filled, as per code, with sandbags, to serve as a buffer against wayward taxis and panel trucks. Waiter, there's a Lyft in my soup.

As the wind whipped, you could catch a rumor of warmth from the electric heaters overhead. "They want us to take the heaters down before the storm," Wagenknecht said. "What a complete waste of time." It was hard to know what the wind and snow might do to it all. That night, the porters and dishwashers, deprived of diners, would shovel clear the Quictents' perimeter, in part to keep the Sanitation Department plows from mowing them down.

Now the staff was bustling around getting everything ready for lunch, although it was hard to imagine many people coming out. They were putting out tables on the sidewalk as well, in the open. "No one will sit there today, but we set it up anyway to make the place look friendlier," Wagenknecht said. They'd also been setting the tables inside, to foster an illusion of normalcy, a Potemkin Odeon, as you pass through en route to the rest rooms, in the basement, after a temperature check at the door. On the sidewalk, waiters wheeled and lifted patio heaters into position, as though blocking out a modern-dance performance involving giant shiitake-mushroom sculptures.

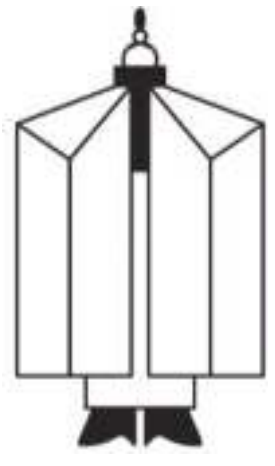
For a while, the Odeon, with quarter capacity inside and ample space outside, had been thriving, at least by the standards of the day. "This is definitely

Sheds, tents, lean-tos, stables, barns, bubbles, tepees, and yurts: New York has a dizzying array of temporary structures.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JULIAN MASTER

not a money-making operation right now," Wagenknecht said. "But, if we can just squeak by, keep it alive, it seems better than a complete shutdown." She had certain advantages. For one, she didn't have to worry about paying rent. She owned the space—that is, the building's ground floor and basement. The Odeon, like many restaurants in town, had discovered that it didn't have adequate power to run the electric heaters, and so, for extra juice, it had tapped into the building next door, which is owned by Joan Pantzer. Pantzer's late father-in-law, Louis Pantzer, had been the proprietor of the Odeon's predecessor, Towers Cafeteria, established in 1933. Another blessing for the Odeon was a loyal local clientele. In Tribeca, which had long since evolved from industrial neighborhood (Towers had been open from 7 A.M. to 4:30 P.M.) to ghost town to artist's-loft district to citadel of wealth, the Odeon was the old-school mainstay.

Nonetheless, Wagenknecht was laying people off. At the beginning of March, there'd been a hundred and ten employees. Come the shutdown, she'd furloughed them all. When the Odeon reopened, in the summer, she hired back about sixty, and eventually she had as many as seventy, before the weather and the rules changed again. Now a new COVID strain loomed, along with the grim prospect of another citywide shutdown, a delivery-only edict. She compared the moment to a scene in the film "Das Boot," when the nuts and bolts start popping as the U-boat dives deep.



In front of the restaurant, state police were mustering, looking, in their Smokey Bear hats, like some kind of occupying force. "It feels like we're at the beginning of the inspection trail," Wagenknecht said. "Every day we get a new inspection." So far, there'd been lots of warnings but no fines. The troopers' presence probably had nothing to do with dining and more to do with a state Supreme Court building across the street. The inspectors she was referring to came from an array of agencies and departments, of both the city and the state: "F.D.N.Y., D.O.H., D.O.T., D.O.B., State Liquor Authority, Sanitation. We get hit randomly, and each has its own set of rules. And then, each week, there are new guidelines, and we basically get inspectors the first day a rule goes into effect."

All over town, restaurants were contending with a Soviet-calibre regimen of contradictory demands. "Sometimes I think this is all a pernicious scheme to turn New Yorkers into Republicans," Wagenknecht said.

It can often feel more like a scheme to turn New Yorkers into Siberians. All this bundling up for dinner, the layers and the poofy coats. Home confinement had already undercut the will to style and accelerated the ascendance of athleisure. Uggs had come out of hiding. Now it became routine to don long johns before dinner. If you were planning to eat outside during the day, you wanted to consider which side of the street you'd be on, to account for the wind and the benefit of direct sunlight. City dwellers tend to be relatively oblivious to aspect, but sitting still for an hour on a sidewalk in January can orient the inner compass—and drive home why there is life on planet Earth. It's true: the sun is warm.

One weekday afternoon, my household (which at the moment includes me, a spouse, and a teen-age son) went out for lunch at an Oklahoma-barbecue place called Au Jus, in East Harlem. The temperature was in the thirties, but the sun was shining up Lexington, at this hour favoring the east side of the avenue. We placed our orders indoors, then sat curbside, in a wood frame without walls, at a picnic table chained to a signpost. A waitress brought out brisket sandwiches and a carafe of ice water. We snarfed down the sandwiches before le jus could cool. As soon as the sun dipped behind the Tuskegee Airmen Bus Depot, a block south, we didn't want to hang around. This was no three-Martini lunch. I couldn't even brave a sip of ice water.

In "Alive," the story of the Uruguayan rugby team stranded high in the Andes after a plane crash, the survivors, sustaining themselves on the frozen corpses of their companions, wait seventy-two days for a rescue. It is hard to fathom this feat while one is dining outside, at sea level, in New York City. Two months? Try an hour. The first twenty minutes are a snap: *Why haven't we always done this*? The second twenty start to smart: *Is it just me, or is there a draft*? The final twenty: *Who do we eat first*? Usually, it's the legs and feet that let you down. Even with the *gatkes*, the cold starts to rise from the ground as the blood retreats to the core. Some restaurants offer blankets, but, like those on a commercial flight, they have to be washed after each use. Cleaned and resealed in plastic, they can cost a restaurant almost eight dollars each. At the Odeon, waiters pass out packets containing space blankets, which are more like fifty cents apiece. These the Uruguayans did not have.

If a table is warm enough, it's probably not outside enough. Traditionally, a small, sealed structure is better for breeding microorganisms than for eliminating them. You don't have to range far to find restaurants that are flouting the rules. Some have basically just erected clubhouses on the street, no more ventilated, really, than their indoor counterparts. I will not shame them by naming them, because they are trying desperately (heroically!) to survive, in an atmosphere of government neglect. Many of those who are following the rules—as well as they can discern them, week to week—resent that there are flouters, but their exasperation is usually directed at inconsistencies in the inspection-and-enforcement regimen. But a spokesperson for the Mayor said, "We've given restaurants every tool they need to understand and comply with the regulations." He added, "Weather changes quickly."

As for the state, an aide to Governor Andrew Cuomo pointed out that the Department of Health's guidance on what constitutes an outdoor dining space has been the same since June, and that it's the city that has added regulations. Here, as in so many instances, the tension and frayed communications between the city and the state, and all their various departments and authorities, have led to undue street-level confusion.

"The problem is that everyone is just doing whatever the fuck they want," said Gabriel Stulman, who, at the beginning of 2020, owned nine restaurants. He now owns four. "Anyway, indoors versus out-

doors is a flawed premise. The question is about proper ventilation."

A prime example in my Manhattan neighborhood (and, let's face it, we are all more confined than ever before to our own immediate patch) is one popular restaurant's makeshift chalet, dimly lit, under-windowed, and garlanded with pine boughs, plastic wisteria vines, and an enormous plume of faux smoke—a mass of white artificial flowers—angling out of a faux chimney. It's utterly enchanting and usually packed, and there's not a chance I'd take one step inside, even in the service of a hard-hitting investigation such as this.

One of my neighbors is Gianfranco Sorrentino, an owner of Il Gattopardo Group, which includes three restaurants. Sorrentino closed them on March 17th, furloughing nearly two hundred employees, thinking that the shutdown would last two weeks. He reopened five months later. "It was like opening a new restaurant," he said. About half the furloughed employees said that they wanted their jobs back, and then only seventy showed up. The no-shows, Sorrentino surmised, were content to collect unemployment, or were scared to expose themselves to the virus, or were Central and South Americans who had gone home.

One chilly day, I went to have lunch with Sorrentino at Il Gattopardo, his flagship, which is across the street from the Museum of Modern Art. We ate inside, in the back corner of an all but empty dining room that in ordinary times is jammed with power brokers and financiers. Of his outdoor setup, which faces the wall of MOMA's sculpture garden, he said, "Right now, I have no panels open, and it's still freezing." Stout and unshaven, with shaggy long hair swept back, he wore a pin-striped suit with a big-knotted necktie and a flying collar, and had an air of amused but melancholic munificence. He had come from Naples to the United States in 1984, to work as a waiter at Epcot Center, in Orlando. His first job in New York was at Gargiulo's, the old-school red-sauce palace on Coney Island. Later in the decade, he managed Bice, the Milanese hot spot frequented by Bill Blass, Giorgio Armani, and Ron Perelman. He opened Il Gattopardo in 2001, and it soon became a favorite of the midtown silverbacks.

"Give me one week to cultivate the perfect comeback to the point you just made!"

• •

"I served Fred Trump and his wife on Coney Island," Sorrentino said. "I served Donald and Ivana at Bice. And then Ivanka and Jared here, with their kids. I hope God forgives me."

In addition to Il Gattopardo, he and his wife, Paula, who is from Brazil, own Mozzarella e Vino, up the block, and the Leopard, in the old Café des Artistes space, on West Sixty-seventh Street. Before COVID, the Sorrentinos also had a robust catering operation. "We lost four hundred and fifty thousand dollars in catering business from March to May," he said. "Our best customer was the film department at MOMA." They'd also lost Broadway, Carnegie Hall, the hotels, the offices, the tourists, the holiday splurgers, and the big wheels who'd fled to Amagansett and Aspen.

Recently, Sorrentino's restaurants have been losing an average of seventy-five thousand dollars a month. Rent, which represents as much as ten per cent of his costs, runs him about $1.5 million a year. (He grossed some fifteen million dollars in 2019.) But he'd done well enough in previous years to put some money aside. "No problem next few months, even if we shut down tomorrow," he said. He'd saved the first round of money from the government's Paycheck Protection Program until he reopened, in August, to pay his employees and cover his rent and utilities.

In September, after Mayor Bill de Blasio indicated that the expansion of outdoor dining could continue past Halloween, there was a run on propane patio heaters, those stovetops on stilts. Only

after they were pretty much sold out everywhere did the Fire Department, in late October, announce its regulations regarding their use. The heaters had to be out in the open air, at least five feet from the building and eight feet from the street, and then five feet from anything combustible, a category that includes people, at least if they are wearing clothes. This triangulation rendered the heaters pretty feckless; even on windless nights, they hardly project their heat more than a foot or two. They look warm, anyway.

"The rules change by the hour," Sorrentino said. "You don't know what tomorrow is going to be."

The release of the F.D.N.Y. propane guidelines touched off a brisk secondary market in the heaters. Some needed to unload them; others coveted them still. Derek Kaye, an owner of food trucks and food-mall pop-up booths, whose business had dried up in the lockdown, began buying and reselling propane heaters, at cost. He also correctly guessed that there was a scarcity of propane-delivery services, which were mostly geared toward welding and construction businesses, which keep different hours. Kaye, who is thirty-five and grew up on Long Island, has roots in restaurants—his uncle, Michael Callahan, owns a bunch, including Indochine and Bond Street—but now he was in the propane business instead. He repurposed a truck and started a 24/7 delivery service, purchasing the propane tanks north of the Bronx.

The main challenge, for restaurants, was storage. The F.D.N.Y. requires that businesses have a permit to keep standard, twenty-pound propane tanks on the premises. Without a permit, you can't keep the tanks inside or outside. Getting a permit is all but impossible. Some restaurant owners and managers resorted to taking tanks home (no more than four at a time, as per the F.D.N.Y.) in their cars (not in the trunk!), but this work-around merely kicked the risk down the road to, say, a garage or a tunnel—or a parking place on the street.

Meanwhile, parking spots, now widely displaced by outdoor-dining structures, were scarcer than ever, at a time when more people, spooked or betrayed by public transportation, were looking for parking. Local parking rituals, the old alternate-side dance, gave way to frustration and in some cases open conflict. A video made the rounds of a parking dispute in Flushing that started with a baseball bat and ended with an Audi hurtling into a bakery. Many urbanists abhor the widespread use of shared outdoor space for private car storage. The outdoor-dining structures amounted to another kind of land grab, of course, but at least it was perpetrated on behalf of the many, rather than the one or two.

Alfresco dining, before COVID, was common enough in New York, but it was rarely sweet, at least to your run-of-the-mill Manhattan grouch of the this-ain't-Paris persuasion. Traffic, noise, exhaust, smells, dirt, critters, jackhammers, weirdos: let the tourists and Sunday brunchers pretend to enjoy it. But, if you don't have a choice, you come around to the idea. For a while, in the fall, the city was a delight, with some improvisational recapturing of the streets, a more alive streetscape, a reimagining of sidewalks, and a brushback of the automobile.

In October, I went to an Egyptian seafood restaurant in Astoria called Hamido. A sign on the façade reads "We Sea*Food Different." You order inside, at a glass counter, choosing whole fish from platters of ice. I was with a group of friends—journalists, filmmakers, a teacher or two—a bunch of whom had, for many years, under the banner of a now defunct outfit called the Wet Towel Club, gathered every month or so to gorge on spicy meats in far-flung, low-key establishments around town. The names summon Zantac memories: Kashkar Cafe (Uighur, Brighton Beach), Cheburechnaya (Uzbek, Rego Park), Mustang Thakali (Tibetan, Jackson Heights). A foray into Manhattan, to an uncharacteristically expensive and trendy spot, featured a rotten pork butt, a couple of long nights, and a vow never to stage a gathering in the borough again. At Hamido, the evening was mild, and the curve was still more or less flat; happy to be around people other than our families, we sat at a large table on the sidewalk, in the open air, sharing platters of bran-grilled orate, grilled octopus, fried sardines, baba ghanoush, and beers of our own bringing. Was all

RELATED MATTERS

I look at the ocean like it's goodbye.

Somewhere, it is touching a land laying prey to fire.

My grieving mother brings the forest inside, a green excess.

When she repots the trees, it is not unlike changing diapers.

But she no longer tends to the small abject frames of the dying.

These days, everything feels like the end.

A few days ago, a typhoon shaved glass off buildings.

A woman in her sixties bled to death after it cut

the window into her arms. The name of the wind, Maysak,

means *teak tree* in Khmer, I learn. *The timber*

retains its aromatic fragrance to a great age, I learn. I am always

learning. What is it that I want

to know? There is nowhere in this world

that I want to live. I look at your face

like it's goodbye. There is nowhere to go.

I shut my window because what else

can I do. Tomorrow's typhoon is called Haishen,

meaning *sea god* in Mandarin. I confess

I want to live. Nowhere, but still, with great desperation, I want.

What is it that you want?

Tell me, is your face the same as mine?

Tell me, do we see the same things?

Tell me we are the same eyes

burning through the night.

—*Emily Jungmin Yoon*

of this reckless? Probably. But we are nothing if not weak. The bustle and shimmer of this busy stretch of Ditmars Boulevard brought to mind a spring evening in Thessaloniki, or Austin in the nineties. In some ways, putting aside the P. & L., the storefronts were better off turned inside out.

I returned to Hamido just before Christmas, for a late weekday lunch with my household. Snow had drifted where we'd had dinner before. A statue of a pirate skeleton was skirted in blackened plow debris. We sat in a shed constructed in the street. It was a structure of plywood and two-by-fours painted cerulean blue, with party lights, windows of corrugated plastic, and wooden posts bolted to the asphalt. All that was missing was a manger. The side facing the restaurant was closed in by thick plastic panels that the waitress pulled back to come and go with fare from the kitchen. Generally, the space was less ventilated than warm. The two other tables, maybe six feet away, were occupied. We kept our masks on until the food arrived. In a bid for fresh air, and in the guise of gallantry, I found myself holding the plastic flaps open for the waitress, to my household's, and maybe the waitress's, mild annoyance.

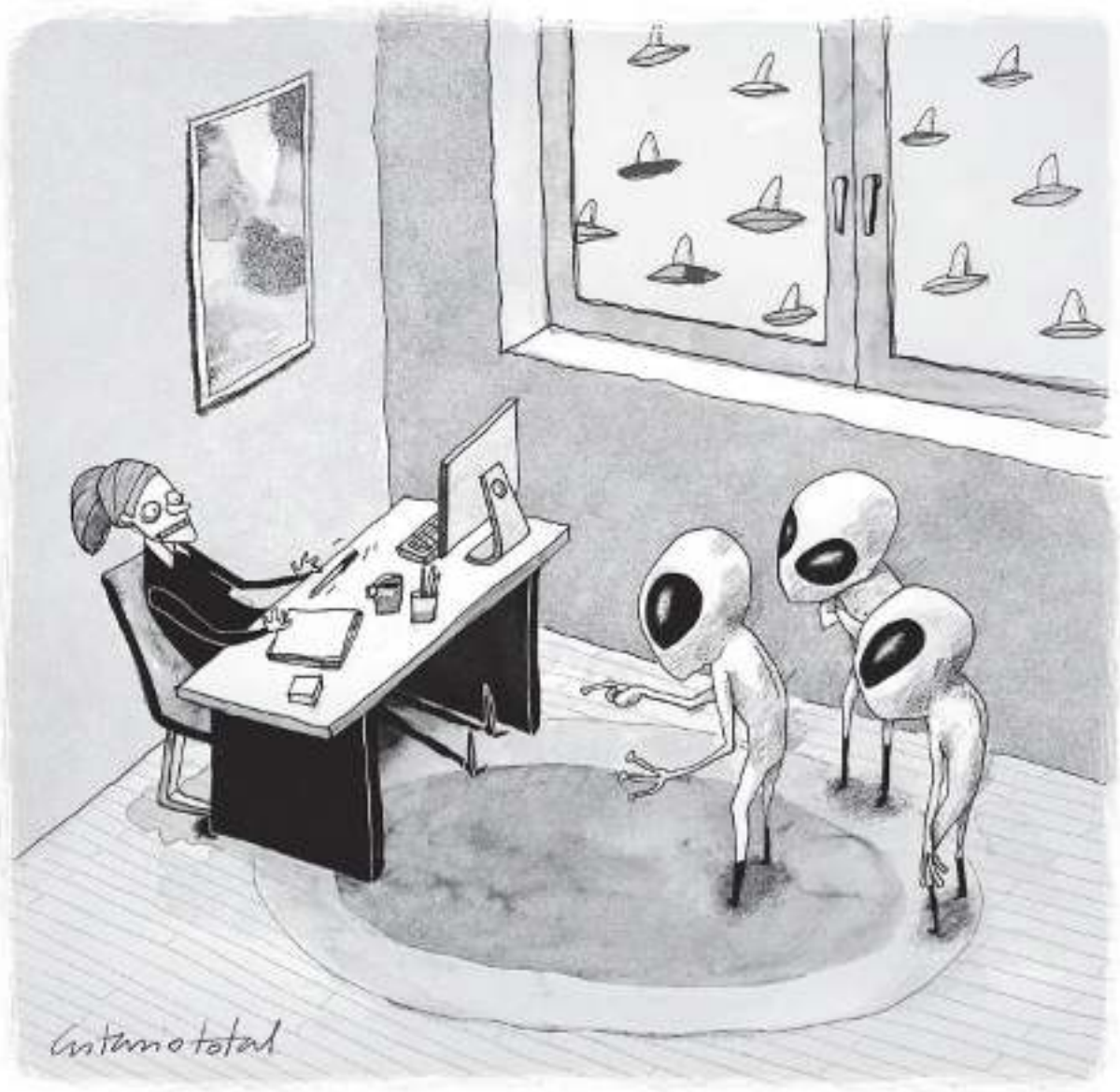
We have a tendency to think of restaurants as a luxury, a concern mainly of the rich. But they come in all shapes and sizes, from affordable to freakishly expensive, and in their variety and breadth and ubiquity they have long provided both sustenance and a scratchy but durable living for the immigrants, artists, actors, dancers, students, and strivers who continually revitalize the metropolis. Restaurants are also at the heart of a vast biome of farmers, vintners, brewers, liquor distributors, appliance dealers, mechanics, laundry services, butchers, florists, spatula straighteners, menu calligraphers, mint replenishers, picture-frame adjusters, matchbook-and-ballpoint-pen customizers, accountants, and lawyers. The ongoing disruption or even obliteration of all of this is hard to comprehend or abide. The food critic Adam Platt, on Grub Street, offered the metaphor of "a huge teeming reef that has been struck out of nowhere by a poisonous tide. This calamity will change life on the reef forever, especially for the thousands of cooks and servers (and overfed critics) who've been making our livelihoods there for as long as we can remember. But the tide will eventually drift away and life will return to the reef—possibly in new, more diverse and vibrant ways than before." Of course, coral reefs also bleach out and die and don't come back.

In January, on the eve of another winter storm, Governor Cuomo, who had allowed indoor dining to resume elsewhere in the state, said that he was maintaining the ban in the city. Andrew Rigie, the executive director of the N.Y.C. Hospitality Alliance, an industry group, said that these "never-ending restrictions" were "discriminatory," and that restaurants had filed several lawsuits. "The government isn't learning anything," he told me.

Gabriel Stulman, the restaurateur who is down to four establishments, moved to the city in 2003, when he was twenty-two, and found work as a bartender downtown. He opened his first restaurant in 2006. The restaurants he still has—Joseph Leonard, Jeffrey's Grocery, Fairfax, the Jones—are in spaces where his landlords were willing to work something out. "Where the landlords wouldn't work with me, I no longer have restaurants," he said, and described his life as "a Mt. Vesuvius of bills and legal engagements."

"We have failed as a country, as a state, as a city," he told me. "Cuomo, de Blasio, Nancy, Trump. Nobody's clean. Nobody's offered a realistic solution." He went on, "So Cuomo gave us a moratorium on eviction. That's not an answer. You still owe the rent. It's 'Gabe, if you can make a deal with your landlord, we'll buy you time. Figure it out on your own. Nice landlord? Good for you. Tough landlord? Good luck.'"

The city is landlord friendly as it is. A lot of commercial leases are secured with personal guarantees: landlords, in normal times, can come after the private assets of small-business owners who can't make the rent. Landlords also have a disincentive to renegotiate, because in many cases lowering or forgiving the rent can endanger their mortgages. Not



"Unsubscribe us or face annihilation."

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everyone would choose good karma over good credit. A survey by the Hospitality Alliance found that ninety-two per cent of restaurants were unable to meet their rent obligations in December.

"It makes me crazy to see people being shamed for eating outside or even inside at a café, or going to a gym," Stulman said. " 'Look at those people eating their pasta!' This is the wrong way to think of it, as this versus that. It's not binary, and it's not right for the government to say what's right for each family. My son's in third grade, and everyone has made this effort to get the kids in school, which is great, but you're telling me—the government is telling me—'We're going to fuck your business prospects, but while your business goes bankrupt and you go under, hey, your son made it to fourth grade.' I'd rather he do third grade over again than we be bankrupt and destitute."

At the beginning of 2020, restaurants employed about twelve million people nationwide. Automobile manufacturers, some of which got a bailout after the 2008 financial crisis, employ fewer than a million. The airlines, which got a COVID bailout, employ fewer than half a million. Before the pandemic, there were some twenty-four thousand restaurants and bars in New York City, with more than three hundred thousand employees, according to the state comptroller. It's almost impossible at this point to get a handle on the scale or permanence of restaurant closures since then—claims I heard ranged from ten to thirty per cent—but, according to Rigie, some hundred and forty thousand jobs have disappeared. The RESTAURANTS Act (an acronym, obviously, for Real Economic Support That Acknowledges Unique Restaurant Assistance Needed To Survive), which was passed by the House of Representatives in October, called for a hundred and twenty billion dollars to go toward helping restaurants with fewer than twenty locations pay their employees and rent. But the legislation stalled in the Senate and was excluded from the second COVID relief bill, which was passed before the New Year.

Camilla Marcus, who closed her SoHo café, West-bourne, in September, helped form the Independent Restaurant Coalition, a lobbying group intent on keeping restaurants afloat during the pandemic. "Airlines have gotten bailouts," Marcus said. "And they're still flying, and they can issue securities. Meanwhile, we've been legally mandated to close."

Eric Sze, born and reared in Taiwan, came to New York City nine years ago, at the age of nineteen, to attend N.Y.U. In the summer of 2018, he opened 886, on St. Marks Place. He felt the pandemic's effects before most did. "Our kaboom came earlier, in January," he said. "Lunar New Year is a big time for us. It just didn't happen. The Szechuan place across the street was the same. I think Asian people were early adopters of social distancing." As February arrived, sales were down twenty per cent; then they were down forty, then sixty, then eighty. Like everyone, he shut down in March, but he worried about his staff. "We started cooking bento boxes for ourselves to eat, and then started selling them to people, at ten dollars each," he said. "Every dollar went to our staff members. That resonated with people." Sze and the 886 crew began donating boxes to hospital workers, three hundred and fifty meals a day, six days a week, underwritten by donations from the general public. By mid-May, they'd donated almost fourteen thousand bentos. "We lost money," Sze said. "But we were able to keep paying every back-office person."

In May, he started doing takeout, and then in July he was among the first to do outdoor dining, modelled on Taiwanese street stalls. Plastic stools, disposable chopsticks. "We don't have the money to build one of those outdoor-indoor spaces," he said. "But it was a vibe and we were booming. Then came November, the election, Thanksgiving, and a change in the weather. It got crazy slow." Still, his landlord had given him a break. "Most of our staff has left town. They're back in Taiwan or in California or Connecticut."

In December, he extended his lease to April. He also signed a lease on a space in Greenpoint, for a new restaurant. "There's this gut feeling that if any city's going to bounce back it's New York, and so why sit idle at one spot when I can be part of the rebuilding? This is either the smartest or dumbest decision I've ever made. This is my everything."

At the end of January, during a stretch of bitter cold, Cuomo relented and approved a resumption of indoor dining, at quarter capacity, in time for Valentine's Day. Various publications, including this one, attacked the decision as irresponsible. Rigie, of the Hospitality Alliance, issued a statement defending it, implying, with some plucky logic, that the rise of infection rates earlier in the winter had been brought on by "forcing people from highly regulated restaurants into unregulated living rooms." More good news arrived in early February, when the Senate voted to include a reported twenty-five billion dollars for independent restaurants in the Biden Administration's $1.9-trillion COVID relief bill. Legislators also dusted off the hundred-and-twenty-billion-dollar RESTAURANTS Act.

Sze was excited to have indoor customers; his employees were getting vaccinated, after Cuomo had amended the criteria and allowed restaurant workers to be deemed essential. Sorrentino's restaurants had been inundated with calls for reservations, most of them for indoors. He had taken three hundred for Valentine's Day. My household would not be among them. We were content, or at least wearily determined, to lie low in our unregulated living room, and to savor the fading memory of what, to date, had been our experience of the optimal ratio of warmth and ventilation.

This had been at Christmastime, at Dr. Clark, a Hokkaido-inspired restaurant/karaoke scene that opened a year ago in the space once occupied by the old cop bar Winnie's, behind the Manhattan Criminal Courthouse. Dr. Clark had installed *kotatsu* booths on Bayard Street. A *kotatsu* is a low table, skirted by a blanket, with a heat source beneath. At Dr. Clark, you remove your shoes and submerge your legs under the blanket and the tabletop, the underside of which has a heated panel, like an electric broiler.

Table for three, 5:15 P.M. In an effort to curtail an alcohol-induced flouting of distance guidelines, Cuomo had decreed that restaurants had to clear everyone out by ten. Five was the new nine. (In February, Cuomo pushed closing time back an hour.) The tables, eight in all, under a wooden lean-to with narrowly spaced vertical wood slats on the street side, were separated by frosted-plexiglass panels, so that they almost felt like discrete booths. Still, some chatter leaked through. At a *kotatsu* nearby, a bearded young man, seated alone, was approached by a friend on the sidewalk.

"What's up, man?"

"Just keeping my legs warm and shit."

We enjoyed, at a not unleisurely pace, a Hokkaido-style prix fixe: sashimi, lamb *tataki*, *zangi* fried chicken, *jingisukan* tabletop grill, scallop risotto, udon, and cheesecake. When we were done, my son and I slipped inside to use the bathroom. As we were on our way out, two plainclothesmen, each with a badge on a lanyard, appeared at the door. "We're from the Mayor's office," I heard one say. The scene did look a little iffy. There was a kitchen worker eating at the bar, and a bottleneck of servers and bussers, plus two-thirds of my household, clogging the floor. Our waiter gave me a scram sign. We went outside and tried to watch through the window.

Inside, Yasmin Kaytmaz, the manager on duty, greeted the inspectors. A little frazzled, she didn't catch where they were from. The restaurant had been getting regular visits from the State Liquor Authority and the Health Department. But these two, who, it turned out, were from the Mayor's Office of Special Enforcement, came off more like police: the one who seemed Russian playing good cop; the other, an Asian man, playing bad cop.

"Do you know indoor dining is closed? Where's your COVID packet?" one asked, referring to a bundle of compliance forms a restaurant is required to have. She went to get the packet, and the inspectors started poking around.

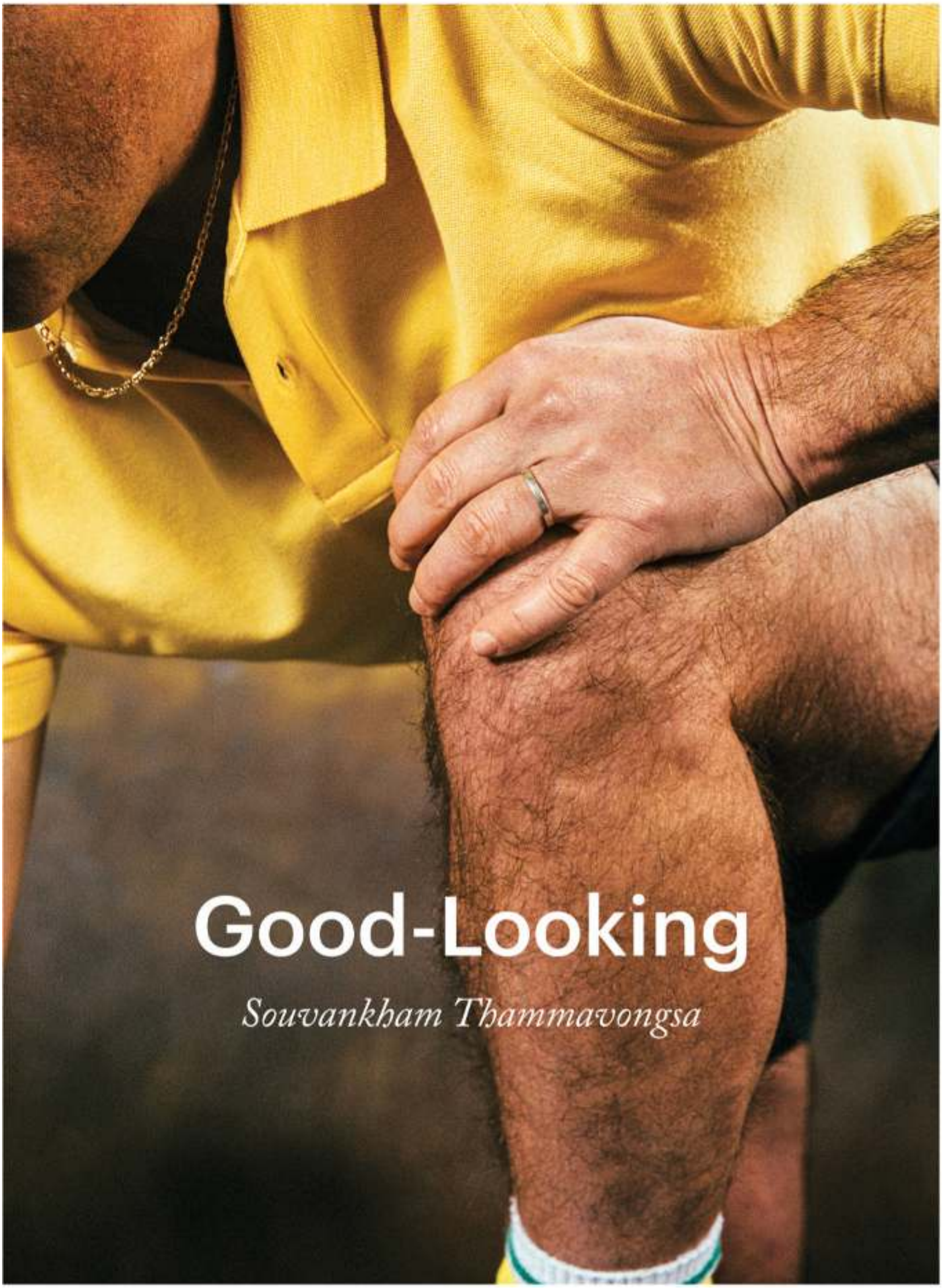
Kaytmaz, who is twenty-five, grew up around restaurants. Her father is Turgut Kaytmaz, a Turkish actor who immigrated to New York in the early eighties and opened more than a dozen restaurants in midtown and on the Upper East Side (Pescatore, Olio). Twenty-four years ago, frustrated by the difficulty of doing business in the city, he moved to Florida, where his daughter grew up. Now she was getting a taste of the New York he'd fled.

After the inspectors had scrutinized the cleaning log in the bathroom, they had Kaytmaz accompany them outside. They noted the lack of sandbags on the street side of the lean-to, and then turned their attention to the vertical wood slats, which one mistook for a wall. Kaytmaz pointed out the space between them, which allowed air to pass through.

"That's not right," the bad cop said.

"No, it's fine," the good cop said. They exchanged some opinions about the definition of open air. Kaytmaz said nothing. Eventually they told her that the sheriff would be making a follow-up visit. Then they took off down the street on foot. My household tried to tail them, to see whom they might go after next, but they shook us somewhere around Bo Ky takeout.

We headed north through Chinatown, into Little Italy. Kaye, the propane distributor, had told me that the enforcement of propane rules often seemed localized, contingent on the disposition of the presiding firehouse and its relationship with its constituents. (The F.D.N.Y. denies this.) The denser groves of patio heaters on these sidewalks suggested that the administration in this precinct tended toward leniency. *Che sorpresa*. A few outdoor-dining sheds had been abandoned and snowed in. But other spots had a smattering of patrons on the sidewalk, and the barkers did their best to herd us toward a second dessert. It was 7:30 P.M. on a Friday, at the height of the holidays. Through the windows of new apartment buildings, you could see giant TV screens and the backs of people's heads. Out of some speakers somewhere came the sorrowful strains of "Christmas Time Is Here." On Spring Street, we boarded the 6 train, to head home to our own TV screen. The car was empty. ♦



Good-Looking

Souvankham Thammavongsa

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBBIE AUGSPURGER

Dad thought himself a good-looking man. He was fit, if you like that sort of thing. He was thirty-eight years old and worked at the gym four days a week for eight hours. He was an instructor for a few exercise classes and filled in when others couldn't make their shifts.

He didn't wear a wedding ring. He said this was good for business. His boss agreed and encouraged the other male instructors not to wear a ring, if they had one—a wife, that is. Dad was encouraged to flirt with women at the gym. Harmless flirting. Talking and smiling and being friendly, being nice. Leave the rest up to the imagination. Mislead, and then apologize. "Exercise, good health—these things don't sell gym memberships!" Dad said. If there were female instructors, Dad never mentioned them. For Mom's sake, I think, and her feelings. He didn't want her to get any ideas, as she had enough of them already.

According to the gym's computer charts and data, most of the members were women, and women were more likely to bring in their friends, too. Men were the worst clients. They took advantage of the free classes, they came alone, and they didn't clean the equipment when they were done. When they lifted weights, they breathed loudly, and when they ran on the treadmill they would grunt and gasp, grab a water bottle and squirt their faces, dripping on their clothes and on the machines. They caused other trouble, too, leering, making inappropriate comments.

Women stayed longer, hanging on for years and coming several times a week for the classes. They picked on themselves, the size of their hips, the skin under their chin. Or their friends picked on them, or other women they didn't know picked on them. Or their boyfriends and husbands and mothers picked on them. The men who came to the gym were mostly single, and when they got themselves a girlfriend, or got married, they stopped caring about their looks. They were loved. The men didn't count.

Now, I don't know if all these things were true. It's just what I gathered during that time, from what Dad told us about his job and how the gym made decisions. I heard him explain it to Mom, too. She didn't like him not wearing his wedding ring. They fought a lot about that.

Mom had good reason to believe that Dad was someone who would get himself into trouble. It was how they'd met. Mom was a woman who thought with her body. She had a large bosom that spilled out of her clothes, which were always too small and tight. There's no shame in any of that. You make do with what you have, and she did. Before Dad worked at the gym, he worked at a shoe store. Mom worked there, too. She was seventeen at the time, and Dad was married to someone else.

Dad likes to be in love. Loves the romance and the flowers and the dancing. The beginnings, when you don't really know each other, and you're on your best behavior, and you forgive, and you allow certain things to go unnoticed. Like how a gap between two front teeth can seem cute at first, but ten years later you notice how little bits of food get caught and lodged there, the dot of a cavity growing ever larger. Dad always knew he wanted children. So at seventeen he got his high-school sweetheart pregnant. Ten years went by, and he met Mom at work. She was seventeen. Dad gets older, but the women stay the same age. Anyway, he left his wife, and he and Mom started living together after four months, and not long after that I came along, and then my two brothers. Dad was twenty-eight then.

Dad thought he was smart. He read a lot, had a lot of theories. His mind was always racing, on fire. He soaked up information real easy. Probably too easy. He didn't know that some things weren't important, that you had to have a filter. He talked fast. It was hard to keep up. I think that was the point. If you couldn't keep up, you were somehow not as smart. He liked you to think that he was smarter, or at least that he knew how to make you feel like he was.

But every ten years Dad got bored, or something like that. And so it didn't surprise us when he started spending more and more time at work. Mom didn't work, she took care of me and my brothers. And, well, she'd had to quit school when I came into the picture. When you have a family to take care of, there isn't time for school, she said.

There was a woman Dad took a lot of interest in that year. A professor at the local university. Unusual for him. I can't remember her name. Honestly, when you're a kid, you don't think about adults and their names. Now, I love Dad, and I hate to say this, but no way would a man like him ever get to meet a smart woman like her outside the gym. He never went to college. Had to quit after two weeks, he said. He had a family to take care of. Dad liked to gossip with Mom about the women at the gym. He said there was a woman who went to all his classes, never missed one. Dad described her as having a lot of energy and bounce, said that she was newly divorced. She had been married for fifteen years, and they didn't have children. Poor thing, he said. She was a careful sort of woman, he said.

One day after class, she got up the nerve to ask Dad out. It was brave of her. Other women looked on, didn't have the nerve. Yeah, I guess I would admit now that Dad was pretty good-looking, and, being the instructor and all, everyone paid attention to him, everyone looked at him. All those sit-ups, leg lifts, jumping jacks, pushups. The pushups especially. He had a bit of a smirk on his face when he did them, his knuckles pressed to the floor. He said later that he knew the women were imagining themselves under him, and chuckled at the thought. Mom chuckled, too, when he told her about it. This was her man, after all.

Dad wasn't a drinker. He kept it that way because he was training and working out, and stuff like that just slows you down. When the professor, who knew this, asked him to go out for tea at eight o'clock at night, by her place, Dad agreed. She'd bought one of those long-term gym memberships, a five-year one you pay all at once, so it was good to keep her happy. And if conversation in the off-hours would make her happy, well, he was willing to encourage it. He took me along.

We got to the café early. The professor had picked it, the Loveless Café. I laugh at it now, that name, but at the time I didn't know. How funny that name is, especially looking back.

We lived across town, so it was a bit of a trek, and we took the bus. Dad didn't drive, and we didn't own a car anyway. We got there early and found a spot by the window. When the professor arrived, Dad waved her over to our table. She seemed a bit surprised, her eyes opened wider, and she smiled at me, confused. I guess I could give Dad credit for telling the truth about who I was, for introducing me as his son. She shook my

hand the way professional adults do. She looked at Dad, and said, "I didn't know you had a child." He said that he had four, actually, and that I was one of the middle ones. He went on to tell her about Mom. He said, "My wife and I, we still go out on dates together," like that was a thing to be proud of, something that would impress the professor, as if he were some rare find, a man still dating his wife. "Oh, I didn't know you were married," she said, and she gave a little forced smile. He said, "Yup, ten years." He paused, and she looked at the table between us. "We exercise together, too. She gained a bit of weight after the babies." Like it hadn't been him who'd made the babies, too. "I don't want any more children. I'm done," he said, as if he'd been the one in labor for days, all just to be sliced open like a ripe peach and never lined back up right. I didn't have to be a grown man then to know it just wasn't proper—what he said and how he was saying it.

Then Dad's phone rang, as if right on cue, and it was Mom, asking him where he was. He said, "I'm out with a friend, from work . . . yeah, he's with me." Then he put his phone down, smiled sheepishly, and said to the professor, "She didn't grow up here. So she gets a bit jealous sometimes."

Now, I wouldn't have blamed the woman if she had just grabbed her coat and walked out. I saw her look at the entrance and then look back at me as if I should tell her what to do. There was something sad in her eyes, and they shone like the candles in the glass jars in the café. Maybe she lived in an armpit of an apartment and didn't want to go back there to feel how wide and empty and cold the bed was, or to hear mice scuttling around the floor, looking for crumbs. The night didn't offer any kind of promise or potential, since I was there. She was the type of woman who thought about a kid like me, how it might affect me. Even though she wanted something for herself, she wouldn't act on that want. But she still could have had Dad. He was what you would call easy.

I watched Dad. He couldn't take his eyes off the professor. I'd never heard him talk so much about books. The professor was quiet. She nodded and held her teacup for warmth. At one point, I saw her shiver. She looked out the front window of the café, at the street, at the snow, and, instead of maybe letting her sit in her quiet, Dad continued on about architecture and how cities were built and about the books he read. I wanted to hear the woman's voice. When she spoke, it was assured and confident and warm. Intelligent people, I think, can just sit with their knowledge because they don't have anything to prove. Dad talked like a motorboat, revving the engine. I felt sorry for him then.

At one point, she asked a question, and it's stuck with me. Her voice was so clear and bare. She said, "How did you know love would happen for you again?" It was a sweet question, a hopeful one. A question that someone naïve would ask. There's nothing wrong with being naïve. I'm not knocking it. It's just that, to be naïve at a time like this, well, you just feel a little for someone like that. It was a question that would come from a woman who believed in magic and romance, in second chances. Dad, the brute that he was, said, "That's life," and shrugged, like love was a thing that could happen to you over and over again.

It occurs to me, almost forty years later, that Dad probably didn't know what love was. Not love as something that was fun to have around or to feel and grab at, but the kind that you were afraid to lose because it wasn't easy to find in the first place. He was so sure he had it, though, and that it had arrived over and over and over—it wasn't just talk and promises but banged into flesh and blood and life. There I was.

The professor, with no kids to prove her love, had nothing except her word. And what good was a word in the world?

She tipped her teacup toward herself, looking in there to make sure there was nothing left. And then she glanced at her wrist, where a beautiful shiny watch was clipped. It was the kind of thing that didn't just tell the time but was worn as jewelry, too. She said, "It's getting late. I'd better get going." Now, I hate to say this, and bless his heart, but Dad had talked all night, looking like a dumb fool, a chunk of muscle.

The professor got up and put on her coat. She paid for our drinks and left a tip. Dad made a gesture, but she waved it away. Dad said, "I'll get it next time," as if there would ever be a next time.

We all walked out of the café together. A bus came by. Someone on that bus seeing the three of us on the street might have thought we were a family. The professor pointed in the direction she was heading, the opposite of ours, and Dad stood close and opened his arms for her to lean into. She stepped into his embrace, and stepped out. Then she turned around and walked away, her spine straight and her footsteps quick in the snow.

Dad said, "Let's go, little buddy," and, walking away, I took one final look at her. I saw her stop. I thought she would come back, but she did not. She paused for a moment, raised her arm, wiped something from her face, and kept walking.

I have to say that, though she was someone I had seen only once in my life, I loved her. I felt a sad gloom like on the last day of a summer vacation, when you try to take photographs of everything. You know you might not ever come back, might not ever get to see any of it again. She was like that to me. The professor could have invited Dad over to her place. It was, after all, so close by. They could have gone into the bedroom together and left me in the living room, with the television on loud. If it had been the other way around, that's exactly what Mom would have done. Taken him home, that's for sure.

Dad started wearing his wedding ring after that night. Maybe he knew he had a good thing, whatever it was he had with Mom and us. I don't know if the professor ever came back to the gym. He never mentioned her.

It is their fiftieth anniversary, Mom and Dad's. That's a big number, isn't it? Everyone's raising a glass. *Clink.* Dad, getting down on one knee, talking about what a lucky man he is. The love of his life, he says. *Clink.* Winks to family and friends looking on. Real charming. *Clink, clink.* The display. And that's the thing that got me thinking, I guess. What do we mean by the love of our life? We think it's the person who's been there, in front of us, all these years. But might it be the near-misses, the ones who didn't take us home, who didn't come back?

"Aren't they the happiest?" a voice near me said. I didn't say anything to that and looked at the champagne glass I held. All the air bubbles rising, surfacing, sparkling. ♦

BOOKS

O LUCKY MAN!

Tom Stoppard's charmed and haunted life.

BY ANTHONY LANE

In 2007, the playwright Tom Stoppard went to Moscow. He was there to watch over a production of his trilogy—"Voyage," "Shipwreck," and "Salvage," collectively known as "The Coast of Utopia." The trilogy had opened in London in 2002, and transferred to Lincoln Center in 2006. Now, in a sense, it was coming home. The majority of the characters, though exiled, are from Russia (the most notable exception being a German guy named Karl Marx), and, for the first time, they would be talking in Russian, in a translation of Stoppard's text. Ever courteous, he wanted to be present, during rehearsals, to offer notes of encouragement and advice. These were delivered through an interpreter, since Stoppard speaks no Russian. One day, at lunch, slices of an anonymous meat were produced, and Stoppard asked what it was. "That is," somebody said, seeking the correct English word, "language."

The meat, of course, was tongue, and the anecdote—one of hundreds that Hermione Lee passes on to us in

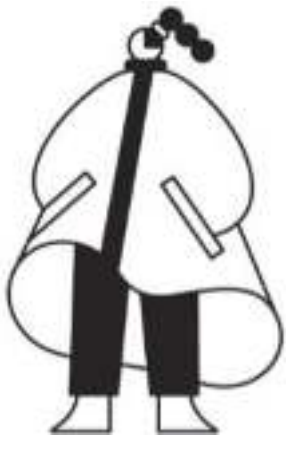
Stoppard's plays are so famous for their cerebral dazzle that their emotional impact tends to be overlooked.

ILLUSTRATION BY ANDREA VENTURA

her new biography, "Tom Stoppard: A Life" (Knopf)—is perfect to a fault. If any writer was going to be on the receiving end of so deliciously forgivable a mistake, it had to be Stoppard. Likewise, at a performance of his 1974 play, "Travesties," how was he to know that the handsome fellow he was chatting with was not, as he believed, his French translator but was, in fact, Rudolf Nureyev? Is it somehow in Stoppard's nature that Stoppardian events befall him, or is it only in his telling that they come to acquire that distinctive lustre? He emerges from Lee's book as a magnetic figure to whom others cluster and swarm, and around whom happy accidents, chance encounters, new loves, and worldly goods are heaped like iron filings. According to one friend, he's "good at being adored." Stoppard's fellow-playwright Simon Gray gave this assessment:

> It is actually one of Tom's achievements that one envies him nothing, except possibly his looks, his talents, his money and his luck. To be so enviable without being envied is pretty enviable, when you think about it.

The placing of that "possibly" is unimprovable. Many folk, less deserving than Stoppard, and with scarcely a whit of his charm, are greeted with godsends. What marks him out is the unusual thoroughness with which he has probed the mechanism of fate, as if it were his moral duty—shaded, perhaps, with a touch of guilt—to understand why he, of all people, should have got the breaks.



What matters, for instance, is not just that Stoppard belonged to a bunch of English-speaking writers who were dispatched, in the summer of 1964, to live and (if possible) to fructify in West Berlin, on a scholarship from the Ford Foundation; not just that he used his time there to toil on something called "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at the Court of King Lear"; not just that a new and Lear-less version was staged, by the Oxford Theatre Group, at the Edinburgh Festival in 1966; not just that an enraptured review of the production was read by Kenneth Tynan, one of Stoppard's heroes, who was then a presiding demigod at the National Theatre; not just that, with the blessing and the exhaustive counsel of Tynan and Laurence Olivier, "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead" opened at the National Theatre in 1967; and not just that its author, three months shy of his thirtieth birthday, was immediately mantled with a fame that would never slide from his shoulders; but that the play itself begins with the toss of a coin, as if all too aware that, after so prolonged a birth, it was lucky to be alive. "Heads," Rosencrantz announces, again and again. "Heads. Heads. Heads." Thereby hangs a tale.

To say that Tom Stoppard was born in Zlín, in Moravia, is true, but it's not the whole story. For Stoppard, stories are never whole. At his birth, on July 3, 1937, he was named Tomáš Sträussler—the second son of two Jewish Czechs, Eugen Sträussler and Marta Becková. Zlín is still Zlín, though from 1948 to 1990 it wasn't; instead, it was graced with the name of Gottwaldov, in honor of Klement Gottwald, the drunken and syphilitic Communist who ruled the country from 1948 to 1953, purging undesirables in a bid to keep favor with Moscow. Then, there is Moravia, which began the twentieth century as part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and ended it as a region of the Czech Republic. As Lee says, "All the names have changed."

Zlín was a company town, centered on the Bata shoe factory, and Eugen was a company doctor. In April, 1939, after the Germans invaded Czechoslovakia, the Sträusslers and other Jews departed in haste. For the Sträusslers and their neighbors the Gellerts, there was reportedly a choice of destination: Singapore or Kenya? Heads or tails? Tomáš and his family went to Singapore—"probably via Hungary and Yugoslavia and thence to Genoa," Lee writes. As the Japanese advanced on Singapore, in early 1942, Marta and her two sons made their escape, on a crowded ship. At Colombo, in what is now Sri Lanka, they were transferred to another vessel, which Marta thought was heading to Australia. But, no, it sailed to India. In the churnings of wartime (and not only then, the adult Stoppard might say), entire lives can change course in the wake of a simple misunderstanding. I would welcome a map in Lee's book, to complement the family tree that she provides, yet maybe the lines of travel would be too faint. At a deep distance, one imagines, memories dim.

The Sträussler boys never saw their father again. Decades later, Stoppard learned that Eugen had probably been on a ship that was sunk near Sumatra. Marta—the definition of a strong and protective mother, her resilience rivalled only by her anxiety—disembarked, with her sons, in what was then Bombay. According to Lee, "In the next four years, the family would move across India six or seven times." Anyone whose early years were nomadic, for whatever reason, will know that the spectre of peregrination never fades; if anything, it returns to haunt one's middle age, as thrilling and as destabilizing as ever. Thus, Stoppard's "Indian Ink" (1995) was set in both the nineteen-thirties and the present day. Time is a looking glass, through which we come and go.

Readers may be puzzled to discover that, for Stoppard, his spell in India offered "a lost domain of uninterrupted happiness." The high point of that domain was Darjeeling, with a view of the Himalayas. The city was busily multinational, and he was struck by the glamour, as he recalls it, of passing American soldiers; does a flicker of that impression survive in "Empire of the Sun" (1987), which he adapted from the novel by J. G. Ballard for Steven Spielberg, and in which the youthful hero, meeting Americans in a prison camp, is seized with similar awe? Stoppard's mother, meanwhile, was making plans for the security of her sons. Without telling them, "she got on the train from Darjeeling and travelled all day (a six-hundred-kilometre journey) to marry Major Stoppard in St. Andrew's Church, Calcutta, on 25 November 1945."

In its plain way, that is the most extraordinary sentence in Lee's book, calmly illustrating the lengths to which people will go to put an end to chaos. The war was over; Major Stoppard was a British officer, to whom Marta had been introduced at the Mount Ever-

est Hotel, when he was on leave in Darjeeling; he could supply her with peace. And so, on the last leg of their odyssey, the Sträusslers turned into the Stoppards, took ship to England, and set in motion the process by which Tomáš would become the very English Tom, with a lavish command of his adopted tongue.

No surprise, then, that to watch Stoppard's work—or merely to inspect his titles, like "New-Found-Land" (1976) and "Rough Crossing" (1984), which is partly set on the tilting deck of a boat, not to mention "The Coast of Utopia"—is to be schooled in restlessness, and in the yearning to reach safe haven. "Shakespeare in Love" (1998), for which Stoppard, in league with Marc Norman, wrote the Oscar-winning screenplay, concluded with Gwyneth Paltrow, as the survivor of a shipwreck, striding up a beach into the New World. Even our ultimate journey gets the treatment; think of the sepulchral joke in "The Invention of Love," Stoppard's 1997 play about the poet and classical scholar A. E. Housman, which starts with our hero preparing to be rowed across the river Styx. He is delighted to be *en voyage*. "I'm dead, then," he says. "Good."

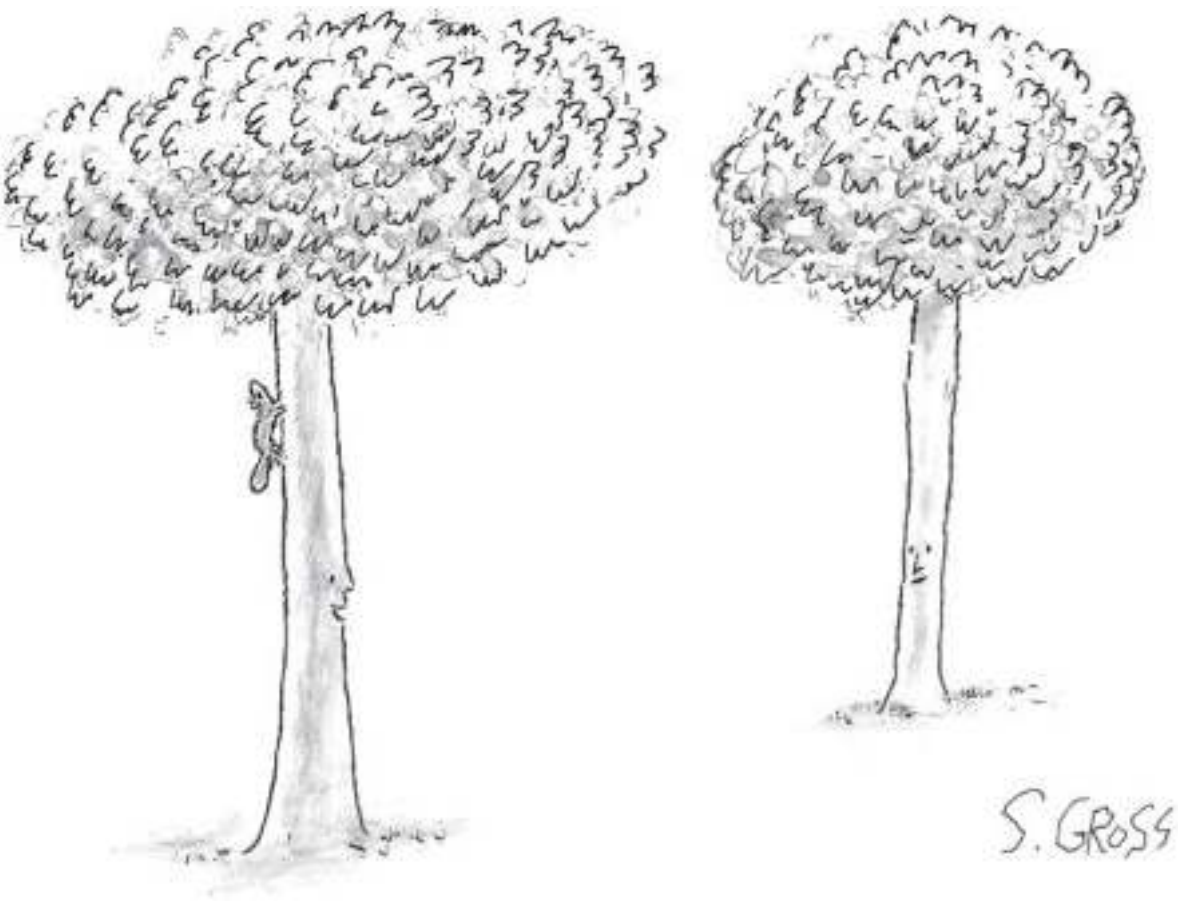
If childhood, as Graham Greene remarked to John le Carré (one peripatetic soul confiding in another), is the credit balance of the writer, then Stoppard was rich by the time he made landfall in England, as an eight-year-old. He was sent with his older brother, Peter, to boarding school and swiftly inculcated into the classic traditions of his new country: cricket, fly-fishing, and a diplomatic camouflage of what is most keenly felt. Chez Stoppard, "the past was not much spoken of," Lee tells us. "Keeping things quiet was their habit: this family did not much communicate its emotions or share confidences." For a writer, such secrecy need not be a hardship. Experiences of value can be safely stored, accruing interest, and awaiting retrieval in maturity.

Stoppard's teen-age years, in Lee's recounting, dash by. Before we know it, he is leaving school, at seventeen, and setting his cap at the world. He never went to university: a distinguished omission, which places him in company with Shaw and Shakespeare and guarantees a mental appetite that refuses to be sated or soured. Instead, Stoppard stepped into journalism, in Bristol, with a job as a reporter at the *Western Daily Press* (where the fact that he couldn't yet drive a car didn't prevent him from acting as the motoring correspondent for a while) and, later, at the Bristol *Evening World*. Among his colleagues at the latter, "it was rumored that he drank wine." He also hung out at the Bristol Old Vic, one of the most storied of Britain's regional theatres, and befriended Peter O'Toole, whose raging star was then in the ascendant. Stoppard saw O'Toole as Hamlet, over and over, at the Old Vic; saw him at Stratford, in "The Taming of the Shrew," "Troilus and Cressida," and "The Merchant of Venice"; and, bedazzled, wrote home to Marta, "I'd like to be famous!"

And, lo, it came to pass. Along the way, there were halting attempts at fiction, including a frantic novel, "Lord Malquist and Mr Moon." There were pseudonyms: in print, Stoppard signed himself "Brennus," "William Boot"—the name is pinched from Evelyn Waugh—and, briefly breaking cover, "Tomik Straussler." There were plays for radio and television, some of them with "Boot" and "Moon" in the title. (Blithely dreaming up characters named Hound, Dogg, and Bone, Stoppard is ever alert to the plump comedy of the monosyllabic, and to words that are confusingly shared by people and things.) There was a first trip to New York, where he met Mel Brooks. There was a relocation to London. And, always, there were cigarettes, each one discarded after three puffs—Stoppard's factory chimneys, which proved that the manufacture of prose was under way. As Lee informs us:

> He even cut the sandpaper off the match packet and glued it to the desk, so he wouldn't have to put his pen down for a second, and could strike a light as he wrote.

The curtain comes up on the première of "Rosencrantz," in London, on page 128 of "Tom Stoppard: A Life." There are more than six hundred and twenty pages to go. In a sense, the principal drama of the book is over and done with before the dramas begin—before the acrobatically ruminative "Jumpers" (1972), "Travesties," "Night and Day" (1978), "The Real Thing" (1982), the spy-infested "Hapgood" (1988), and "Arcadia" (1993), Stoppard's masterpiece, with its glimpses of a paradise that is not so much lost as laughably difficult to reconstruct. After the



"Squirrels tickle."

pitch and yaw of his early years, and the headlong roll of his apprenticeship, success, when it comes, has an oddly levelling effect, just as war makes peace look flat.

Along the way, Lee steers us through each play, major or minor, with a sturdy account of the background, the plot, the production, the casting, the reviews, the transfers to other theatres, and the intellectual grist. Whether her readers will match her for stamina is open to debate, though you can't predict what will catch your eye as the minutiae stream past. When "Arcadia" first opened, for example, audiences delighted in Rufus Sewell as the comely and Byron-flavored tutor, but did they realize that Ralph Fiennes and Hugh Grant had auditioned for the part? More bewitching yet is the instruction that Stoppard issued to Glenn Close and Jeremy Irons, who were starring in "The Real Thing," directed by Mike Nichols, on Broadway: "If you ever get lost, just drown in each other's eyes."

That's quite a line, not least because it sounds so non-Stoppardian. To his battalions of fans, as to his detractors, Stoppard is the cerebrator-in-chief, whose plays dispatch you into the outside world with a pleasantly spinning head. ("Oh, do keep up!" an actor suddenly said, addressing the audience, at a matinée of "Travesties.") Part of Lee's mission is to demonstrate that this constricted view of him will not suffice. She's right; Stoppard is no more Tin Man than he is Scarecrow, and to treat the emotional impact of "The Real Thing" as an unprecedented jolt, as some critics chose to do, is to ignore the heartaches and pains that suffused what had come before. When I first saw "Rosencrantz," in my teens, it was not the wordplay or the horseplay that stuck with me but the tang of evanescence—"a certain brownness at the edges of the day," as one of the characters puts it. Evidently, the play's maker was more Feste than Osric, decked in the motley of melancholia:

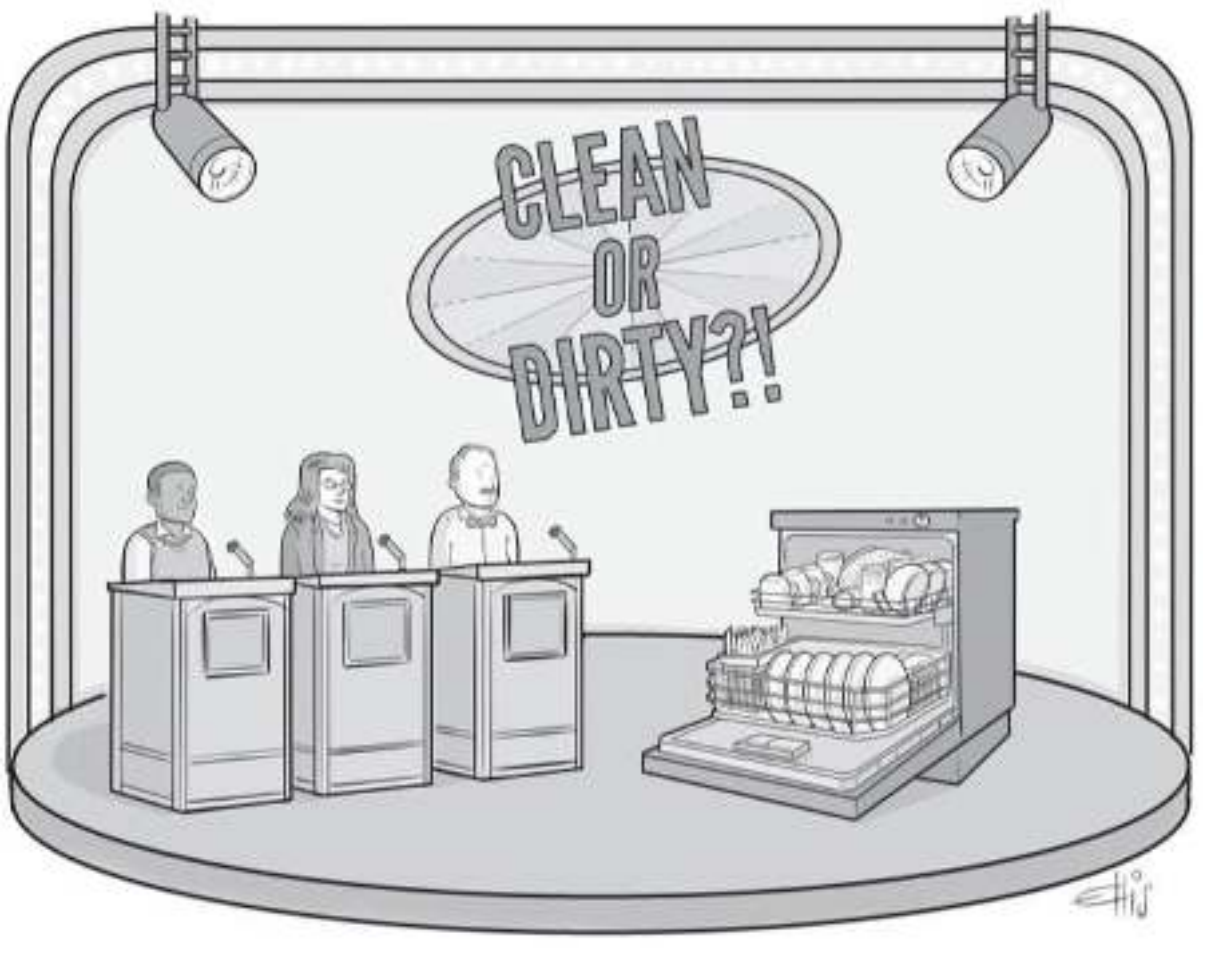
> We cross our bridges when we come to them and burn them behind us, with nothing to show for our progress except a memory of the smell of smoke, and a presumption that once our eyes watered.

That is Guildenstern, rubbing and reviving a cliché, and for what? To show off? No, to conjure a crisp autumnal image, and to air the mortal premonition that lingers in the title of the play. Deaths in Stoppard, as in Greek tragedy, tend to happen offstage, and the distance lends disenchantment; I remember a communal gasp in the theatre, toward the end of "Arcadia," as we were told, in passing, that the heroine, Thomasina—an electrical life force—had died in a fire in 1812, on the eve of her seventeenth birthday. A small fictional spark went out, long ago, and we were slain.

Other sorrows embroil the plays. "Jumpers" revolves around a philosopher named Moore, and Stoppard duly prepared by studying Russell, Wittgenstein, G. E. Moore (not the same Moore), and "the Vienna school of logical positivism," but what we witness onstage, amid the folderol, is the sad sundering of a husband from his wife—the logical negativism to which love, like other attachments, is forever prone. Lee shrewdly notes that "Jumpers" opened two days after Stoppard's divorce from his first wife, Jose Ingle. He was granted primary custody of their two sons, one of whom later described Ingle as "a schizophrenic alcoholic." A letter that Stoppard wrote to his brother, clarifying the crisis, bore an unwonted urgency: "*I had to change my life.*" When existence is no laughing matter, as in this distressing case, is it cool, or cruel, of a creative artist to persist in the devising of a complex entertainment, parts of which may be wrought from those same woes? Or is it, on the contrary, a question of honor, even of courage, to remain, as Henry James says, "one of the people on whom nothing is lost?"

After such lows, in the early nineteen-seventies, Stoppard's fortunes, in Lee's account, rose to higher and firmer ground. In 1972, he married Miriam Stern, whose television programs on science and medicine—she was hotly anti-smoking, which must have added to the fun—would often mean that her celebrity outshone that of her spouse. The marriage lasted twenty years. So crammed were their diaries, we are told, with appointments on different continents, that, in order to find time together, they occasionally resorted to the Concorde: a strange and supersonic parody of Stoppard's childhood wanderings. Back in 1968, in "The Real Inspector Hound," he himself had spoofed the rural murder mystery, with a housekeeper who picked up the phone and declared, "Hello, the drawing-room of Lady Muldoon's country residence one morning in early spring?" Now he acquired a country residence of his own. No doubt he saw the joke.

Honors and obligations fell upon Stoppard like dew. Thus nourished, he bloomed into the consummate English-



man—or, as he modestly put it, "a fake Englishman," spying on himself, with a knighthood to crown the role. In 2014, he married Sabrina Guinness. ("We thought we were quite well connected until we met Sabrina," one member of the British royal family commented. Or so the story goes.) Lee, all of a flutter, ushers us into the wedding. It sounds like the finale of a play:

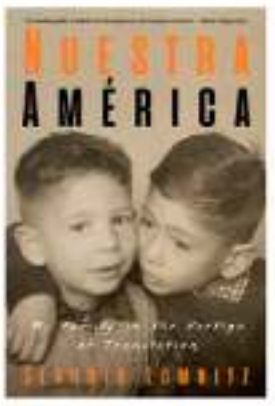
> The flowers took five days to set up, the three-tier cake was decorated in summer blooms, rose petals were thrown, there was a marquee at the house, the sun shone.

If detail is what you crave, you've come to the right book. I hadn't realized, hitherto, that Stoppard can barely carry a tune; confronted with an opera, he has to consume strong mints in an effort to stay awake. (Mind you, when asked to reshape the libretto of Prokofiev's "The Love for Three Oranges," adjusting a literal English translation to fit the rhythms of the score, Stoppard did so with unhesitating grace—"in about five seconds," according to the director.) I was also gratified to read that the author of "Jumpers," a play that sports with the fable of the tortoise and the hare, was once required by law to attend a speed-awareness course.

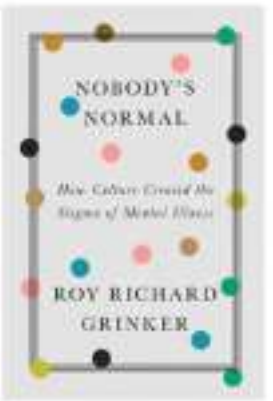
Was it *wholly* essential, however, that we be acquainted with the layout of the house that Stoppard and Miriam bought in 1972 ("upstairs, a wide landing gave onto the main bedroom, with a balcony, a bathroom each, and a dressing room"), and so forth? Or that names be dropped with quite so resounding a clang? We are invited to be invisible guests at the annual *fêtes galantes* that Stoppard hosts, and personally funds, in an idyllic London garden, and thus to stumble upon Mick Jagger, Paul Simon, Harrison Ford, Alfred Brendel, Keith Richards, and the Duchess of Devonshire—the last two, presumably, locked in a close embrace. For good measure, we are regaled with extracts from the thank-you letters that ensue: "Do you think heaven is like this?" It was at one such celestial shindig, in 2013, that Stoppard approached Lee and broached the possibility that she might write the story of his life.

Lee is hardly the first biographer to be wooed by the allure of her subject; to risk being squashed by the weight

BRIEFLY NOTED



Nuestra América, *by Claudio Lomnitz (Other Press)*. In the early nineteen-twenties, Lomnitz's grandparents fled Eastern Europe for South America, seeking refuge from anti-Semitism. In the next half century, his family moved among Peru, Colombia, France, Romania, Israel, Chile, and Mexico. In Peru, Lomnitz's grandparents became part of the Marxist-Jewish vanguard; returning to Romania in the nineteen-thirties, they spent two years trying to persuade Jews to leave. In the wake of mass displacement, a family history like this one, Lomnitz writes, "is no longer an aristocratic incantation of the glories of a lineage." It is a means of confronting and redefining the concepts of homeland, belonging, and history.



Nobody's Normal, *by Roy Richard Grinker (Norton)*. This study, by a cultural anthropologist who comes from a long line of accomplished psychiatrists, traces the relationship between mental illness and stigma. In the sixties, the author's father and grandfather worked together to critique the conformity-obsessed pursuit of "normality," which they believed to be detrimental to mental health. The author's own research both challenges and complements their ideas. He celebrates neurodiversity, a movement that acknowledges cognitive differences as natural, and he takes on modern medicalization, which attempts to explain "previously nonmedical problems" scientifically. Even if we look to biology to explain mental phenomena, he writes, "the meanings of those conditions will still be of our making."

Bina, *by Anakana Schofield (New York Review Books)*. This forceful novel is narrated by the title character, a seventy-four-year-old woman who lives in the Irish countryside. She contends with the lingering presence of an abusive partner, the death of her closest friend, and her growing involvement with a clandestine group that helps people to die by suicide. At once acerbic and compassionate, she offers readers a litany of admonitions based on experience, such as "Don't make a decision if the tea does not taste right." As her elliptical narrative winds through footnotes, redacted names, and lyrical paragraphs resembling prose poetry, her ornery recollections coalesce into a powerful chorus, exhorting readers to "Sit down / Shut up / And if the woman is talking, listen."

Popular Longing, *by Natalie Shapero (Copper Canyon)*. The intersections and disjunctions of art and money, war and desire, labor and pleasure, animate this incisive poetry collection. With a deadpan, surrealistic posture, Shapero investigates the juxtapositions and banalities that define contemporary existence. She considers the notion of transcendence in a world driven by consumerism. In a sonnet sequence, she muses over the value of art and the implications of its destruction. By examining the lenses of nostalgia, appraisal, and surveillance, these poems also interrogate the power dynamics of looking. "We would like to / confirm that everyone is recognized in death," Shapero writes. "Unseen as we are in this life, it's all we have."

of her research; or to concede that, despite her assiduity, much will elude her grasp. The more pressing problem with "Tom Stoppard: A Life" is that, in editorial terms, it's a shambles. Consider one of Stoppard's favorite lines, taken from a play by his contemporary James Saunders: "There lies behind everything . . . a certain quality which we may call grief." Though moved to read it on page 185, I was rather less moved to read it on page 361. When it popped up a third time, on page 730, I was as movable as granite. Likewise, a quotation from Turgenev—a kindred spirit of Stoppard's—is enfeebled, not fortified, by being repeated within four pages. Is it really a source of shame that such recurrences litter the book? Yes, because they ill befit the man at its core. Stoppard is a natural-born precisian, politely coaching actors in the beat of his phrasings; as Housman insists, in "The Invention of Love," "There is truth and falsehood in a comma."

And yet the devoted reader will find force, not merely mass and mess, in this bulging biography. Most of that force is political, and the character who holds the stage is not Stoppard the smooth social operator, Stoppard the fixture of the establishment, Stoppard the marrying man, Stoppard the doting father of four sons, or even Stoppard the hermit, content (like every writer) to be blessedly alone with a book. No, the toughest Stoppard is the moralist, who, from first to last, is vexed by the spectacle of freedom under threat. His chosen cause is nothing so flimsy as British party politics; though Stoppard admired Margaret Thatcher, he has, over the years, voted Conservative, Labour, Green, and Liberal Democrat. Rather, as a citizen of the Cold War, he has stared outward, from his well-feathered roost in a land where you could utter and publish what you liked, toward countries where the likes of others dictated what you could express, and where the wrong idea, whispered in the wrong ear, could tip you into jail.

Here, then, we read of Stoppard's "revulsion" at the protest movements of 1968, in the democratic West; why lash out at a system that, for all its flaws, had granted him sanctuary as an immigrant child? We read of his friendship with Václav Havel, and of the visits that Stoppard made, before 1989, to the Soviet Union and his native Czechoslovakia, from which arose such trenchant works as "Every Good Boy Deserves Favour" (1977), set largely in a Russian psychiatric hospital, and "Professional Foul" (1977), a TV film in which a complacent British professor of ethics goes to Prague and bumps into the unethical thuggery of a totalitarian state. The world's gaze may have swung fitfully, in 2020, to Belarus, but Stoppard was there years ago. In 2005, he flew to Minsk, met with an embattled theatre group, and offered practical aid; back in England, he *did* join public protests, against the Belarussian regime. Striving, on one occasion, to bring order to a fractious committee meeting, he recommended "a contest of generosity."

Good luck with that. The political hubbub—in Britain and America, in Europe east and west—is now so ravenously ungenerous that a voice as temperate as Stoppard's may struggle to be heard, and his valiant insistence that "I'm not impressed by art *because* it's political" seems ever trickier to sustain. His stance is one of equipoise, and his lifelong theme, which answers to his forgiving instincts, is human error: the gravest, the looniest, and the most enduring of all tautologies. "He has no apparent animus toward anyone or anything," Mike Nichols said. "He's very funny at no one's expense." Nichols thought of Stoppard as "the only writer I know who is completely happy."

Is such a thing conceivable? Would a happy writer not resemble a round-the-world yachtsman confined to indefinite shore leave? To judge by "The Hard Problem" (2015), Stoppard's chewy play about consciousness and artificial intelligence, no one would be more qualified to dramatize the lure of life online: our circus maximus, where the ancient virtue of mercy is construed as complicity with the damnable; where privacy is peeled back and exposed, sometimes with our gleeful consent; and where words are in peril of being policed. So much for freedom of speech.

The final act of "Tom Stoppard: A Life" is mainly and rightly concerned with "Leopoldstadt," Stoppard's most recent play. (No need to call it his last. "I don't have plans to stop thinking," he says.) It opened in London in February, 2020, and closed just over a month later, with the advent of COVID-19; let us pray that, with the eventual lifting of lockdown, it travels to New York. Like most people who saw the play during its short run, I caught the full impact of its paradox: how can a single work feel at once so thronged and so bereft? The setting is one capacious room in the home of the Merzes, a family of Viennese Jews; we begin at the birth of the twentieth century, with a child putting a Star of David atop a Christmas tree, and progress to 1924, 1938, and 1955. The Merzes, assimilated at first, are scattered and destroyed.

Lee dates the dawning of the play to 1993, when Stoppard, in conversation with a visiting cousin, was informed—to his amazement, and to the cousin's disbelief at his unknowing—that his roots were entirely Jewish. He later confessed to an "almost willful purblindness" about these origins, which his mother, raising him as an Anglican schoolboy, had taken pains to elide. In common with many survivors of her generation, she preferred the consolations of a light new life to a history too heavy, and too tragically shadowed, to bear. Her attitude, as summarized by Lee, was "We're here now, and that was then," and Stoppard, for decades, followed suit.

The irony, of course, was that, in his profession, he became the acknowledged master at arranging for then and now to join hands; his collected works are a dance to the music of time. He saw, too, that the most fleeting of chances (boarding or missing a boat for India or England, tossing a coin as you wait for Prince Hamlet) could prove to be a matter of life and death. All roads, in the story of Tom Stoppard, lead to "Leopoldstadt," and the last exchange in the play, before the stage goes dark, is between Leo, a young Englishman—whose mother, he says, "didn't want me to have Jewish relatives in case Hitler won"—and his American kinswoman Rosa. He reads out the names of his relations, and she tells him how and where they perished. The recitation ends, "Bella." "Auschwitz." "Hermine." "Auschwitz." "Heini." "Auschwitz." Tails, tails, tails. ♦

CALL IT LIKE IT IS

In Viet Thanh Nguyen's "The Committed," fiction is criticism.

BY JONATHAN DEE

SOURCE PHOTO: BOB CHAMBERLIN / GETTY

"I wanted my fiction to be as critical as it was creative," Viet Thanh Nguyen recalled in an essay a few years ago. "But I didn't know how to do this, and no one could teach me this, and it took the discipline of sitting in a chair for countless hours over 20 years before I could even approach bringing together the critical and the creative." This patience, and this determination to escape traditional influences, help explain why Nguyen made his début as a novelist at the relatively late age of forty-four, a début that proved, for author and readers alike, worth the wait. "The Sympathizer," which won a Pulitzer Prize in 2016, is set during and just after the years of the war between North Vietnam and South Vietnam. Its unnamed Vietnamese narrator is a spy—a double agent, in fact, living as an anti-Communist while working for Communists—though calling the book a spy novel is about as helpful as calling "Crime and Punishment" a police procedural. It is critical, indeed, in more than one sense; it contains and embodies a healthy dose of political and literary theory (Nguyen holds a Ph.D. in English and is a professor at U.S.C.), and it is scathing not only about America's acts during the war but also about its subsequent cultural depictions of those acts.

Nguyen's novels are effectively a delivery system for a singularly unsparing voice.

The novel was greeted rapturously, with many reviewers stressing the new perspective it offered on the Vietnamese experience—on the war and its legacy. Nguyen, partly from modesty and partly as a reprimand, hastened to point out that he was by no means the first writer to offer this perspective. (He named, among others, the memoirist Le Ly Hayslip and the novelist Bao Ninh.) It's just that English-speaking audiences, having ignored those earlier works, imagined that they did not exist. Still, there was something about "The Sympathizer" that was genuinely unprecedented. The novel's angry, unsettled, dialectical intelligence is apparent in the double meaning of its title: "sympathizer," a designation so damning in the worlds of war and politics that it can get a man killed, also describes what might be considered the essential quality of a good novelist—an instinctive, almost compulsive tendency to see every issue, and every human being, from multiple sides. "I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook . . . a man of two minds," the novel begins, in what seems safe to read as a nod to the urtext of American outsider fiction, "Invisible Man." (Nguyen's son is named Ellison.)

Following his début, Nguyen published "The Refugees," a collection of short stories from those self-directed apprentice years, the sort of file-clearing often engineered by publishers to ride the wave of an author's unexpected success. And he has used his literary renown to amplify an outsider's voice with an insider's megaphone. In dozens of high-profile opinion pieces, he has ripped into racism and inequality in the film industry, in college admissions, in the Western literary canon; he has attacked the grad-school mystification of contemporary American fiction, specifically the culture of the "workshop." In December, he published a *Times* Op-Ed warning white American writers not to abandon their trendy political engagement in the post-Trump era and go back to writing novels about "flowers" and "moons." There is an occasional straw-man quality to some of these broadsides (flowers and moons?), but I suspect Nguyen knows that: you don't get heard above the din by arguing politely or with ambivalence; you

ILLUSTRATION BY AJ DUNGO

get heard by getting under the complacent skin of writers like me.

Now, six years after "The Sympathizer," comes Nguyen's follow-up novel, and it depicts the further self-narrated adventures of the same two-minded narrator. The first novel, having followed him from Vietnam to the United States and back again—from war zones to movie sets to reëducation camps—left him on an overcrowded boat heading for the open sea. "The Committed" rescues him from the boat and quickly sets him on French soil. Nguyen's main character is the metaphorical and literal product of France's own long and ugly history in Vietnam. His father is a French priest who impregnated his mother when she was thirteen and never acknowledged paternity. The novel is thus a homecoming of a particularly volatile sort, a tale of chickens returning to roost, and of a narrator not yet done with the world.

The action of the new novel, set in 1981, is chronologically contiguous with that of "The Sympathizer," but "sequel" isn't quite the right word for it; it's more like a reloading. Upon arriving in Paris, our narrator—to whom, for simplicity's sake, I will refer by one of his aliases, Vo Danh, which translates as "Anonymous"—moves in with his "aunt," who's really a spy posing as his aunt. He's accompanied by his lifelong friend Bon, a hard-core anti-Communist who does not know about Vo Danh's double agency. In the early chapters especially, there is quite a bit of recapitulation of things a reader of "The Sympathizer" would already know: Vo Danh was, in the course of his spy work, involved in two murders, for instance, and the ghosts of those victims pop up from time to time as a sort of chorus that only he can hear.

Taking a job cleaning toilets at what is described as "the worst Asian restaurant in Paris," Vo Danh soon switches to selling drugs, seeing, in his aunt's many wealthy, leftist intellectual friends, a lucrative market ripe for exploitation. Those friends include a figure known as "the Maoist PhD" and a particularly loathsome, bunga-bunga-party-loving socialist politician known as BFD. In BFD, one sees and hears traces of Bernard-Henri Lévy, and of the infamous International Monetary Fund head and accused maid-raper Dominique Strauss-Kahn; on a simpler level, these initials can be read as the derisive American-English acronym for "big fucking deal."

The prospect of peddling hashish occasions a little soul-searching in Vo Danh:

> Was I actually becoming that most horrid of criminals? No, not a drug dealer, which was a matter of bad taste. I mean was I becoming a capitalist, which was a matter of bad morals, especially as the *capitalist*, unlike the drug dealer, would never recognize his bad morality, or at least admit to it. A drug dealer was a petty criminal who targeted individuals. . . . But a capitalist was a legalized criminal who targeted thousands, if not millions, and felt no shame for his plunder.

The notion of the drug dealer or gangster as the ne plus ultra of the capitalist society that claims to shun him is not exactly unbroken ground in American art. But for Vo Danh the trouble his new livelihood invites is more immediate: his success soon makes him so recognizable that one day, strolling through Paris with his new Walkman on ("As a man of two minds, I can admit to the successes of capitalism, as I can admit to the charm of French culture"), he is attacked by rival drug dealers, Algerians, and, for the first but not the last time in the novel, nearly dies.

The escalations of revenge, and the questions of whether and why these two representatives of the worst of France's colonial crimes should be trying to kill each other, account for much of the book's story elements. There are also hints of a possible reunion with the man who tortured Vo Danh in the Communist reeducation camp, and preparations for a "culture show," a pageant-like celebration of Vietnamese custom and tradition in which Vo Danh and Bon, with gleeful improbability, are asked to perform.

There was much more in the way of sheer incident in "The Sympathizer," but neither novel is about plot. Rather, Vo Danh—occasional punctuations of violence notwithstanding—is serially placed in situations that will allow him to talk about ideas. The "critical" side of Nguyen's hard-won artistic synthesis appears more forcefully in "The Committed," via Vo Danh's narration but also in the form of references to, even lengthy quotations from, Julia Kristeva, Aimé Césaire, Walter Benjamin, Hélène Cixous, and, above all, the tutelary spirit of post-colonial studies, Frantz Fanon. ("The colonized is a persecuted person whose permanent dream is to become the persecutor.") Nguyen, viewing realism as a sort of bondage for the imaginative novelist, does what he has to do in order to get these writers and their ideas onto the novel's stage; even the bouncer at Heaven, the brothel owned by Vo Danh's boss in the drug trade, nearly always has a book in his hand, and it's always a book that Vo Danh is eager to discuss.

This spirit of improvisation, of adopting the form or tone appropriate to the moment's purpose rather than overvaluing systematicity, hovers over the entire novel, as it did over "The Sympathizer." There's a photograph in it—just one. There are typographical flourishes that might have come from Laurence Sterne. There is a concrete passage in which the words "thank you" and "fuck you" alternate until the page is full. One scene appears in the form of a play. The aforementioned ghosts come and go. A scene in which a gangster tortures his victim while listening to pop music is lifted straight from Quentin Tarantino (and hardly seems worth the effort).

The tone is fluid as well. There are a lot of puns, such as a gangsterish Vietnamese character named Le Cao Boi. The intended effect of describing a boatload of refugees as "wretched in our retching" is hard to calculate, as is a joke about colonization's effect on one's colon. There seems to be a spirit of parody behind the fact that the female characters in both novels tend toward golden-hearted hookers and Mata Hari types, and, while much of this can be excused by the invocation of genre writing that suffuses both

books, that doesn't quite excuse sentences like "The sight of Lana ignited the puddle of passion sloshing inside my gas tank," or "Her taut skin glowed with the light rising from the furnace of her ovaries."

But to approach the novel in this way is to fall into a sort of trap. Nguyen has written, provokingly, about those qualities prized in English-language literature which fall under the quasi-mechanical heading of "craft":

> As an institution, the workshop reproduces its ideology, which pretends that "Show, don't tell" is universal when it is, in fact, the expression of a particular population, the white majority, typically at least middle-class and often, but not exclusively, male. The identity behind the workshop's origins is invisible. Like all privileges, this identity is unmarked until it is thrown into relief against that which is marked, visible and outspoken, which is to say me and others like me.

He argues that many foundational concepts put forward as literary postulates—character, setting, description, theme, plot—often conceal a cultural bias and a political intent. "Craft" is a false flag, a depoliticization of art and thus an undermining of art's ability to change or even to question the status quo.

What's interesting about the short stories in "The Refugees," in this light, is that they are the product of craft—they're more traditionally shaped than his novels, narrated in a notably more detached register, and are, in one way, less pervious to criticism. And though they're good, they have nothing approaching the impact of the novels. It took Nguyen a while, it seems, to be able to act with confidence on what he valued in a work of fiction and what he didn't.

In truth, it doesn't really matter whether "The Sympathizer" is a "better novel" than "The Committed." The absence of conventional craft, as much as the shared content, makes the two books into a single project. It's the voice of the novels that matters, that ramifies, that keeps one reading: the anger, the indictment, the deep, questioning cynicism:

> Yes! I, too, was universal, and my universal identity was to be me and utterly me, even if I was completely fucked up, and isn't that what the French wanted? The French saw our shared past as a tragic happenstance of history, a romantic love story gone wrong, which was half correct, whereas I saw our past as a crime that they had committed, which was completely correct. And who are you going to believe? The rapist or the product of the rape? The civilized or the bastard?

The novel is essentially a delivery system for that voice, a series of pretexts for training it on forms of domination that have too long thrived without answering to it.

As "The Committed" progressed, there was one rather unlikely French author whose name began to sound in my head along with all the referenced ones, and thus it was with a certain exultation that, two-thirds of the way in, I saw that the hyperscholarly brothel bouncer was reading Louis-Ferdinand Céline's "Journey to the End of the Night." Today, Céline is both celebrated as one of the most gifted stylists in modern French literature and reviled as a Nazi sympathizer and a vicious anti-Semite. Nor is it one of those cases, as with, say, Roald Dahl, where the bad human qualities come as a disappointment, or present a mystery as to how such a person could write such life-affirming books. Céline's deep misanthropy is the subject of his work. And yet anyone who has read "Journey to the End of the Night" and "Death on the Installment Plan" (both forerunners of what we now call "autofiction") will remember the pure stylistic energy generated by the spectacle of human beings failing to realize how awful they are, how awful are the crimes they casually commit every day. "As long as we're young," Céline writes in "Journey,"

> we manage to find excuses for the stoniest indifference, the most blatant caddishness, we put them down to emotional eccentricity or some sort of romantic inexperience. But later on, when life shows us how much cunning, cruelty, and malice are required just to keep the body at ninety-eight point six, we catch on, we know the scene, we begin to understand how much swinishness it takes to make up a past. Just take a close look at yourself and the degree of rottenness you've come to. There's no mystery about it, no more room for fairy tales; if you've lived this long, it's because you've squashed any poetry you had in you.

There's a reason that Nguyen has invited Céline into "The Committed." Nguyen, too, is driven to raptures of expression by the obliviousness of the self-satisfied; he relentlessly punctures the self-image of French and American colonizers, of white people generally, of true believers and fanatics of every stripe. This mission drives the rhetorical intensity that makes his novels so electric. It has nothing to do with plot or theme or character. Those years of disciplined work have enabled the reverberant howl evoked by "the parting gift of the colonizer, the venereal disease of hatred." BFD, we're told, "was attired like an asshole,"

> which is to say that he wore the long black tails, gray slacks, and top hat of an English gentleman or a nineteenth-century European nobleman, their refined manners and exquisite fashions suiting them perfectly for overseeing genocidal empires that looted nonwhite countries, enslaving and / or massacring their inhabitants, and sanctifying the result with the name "civilization." . . . Whitewashing the blood-soaked profits of colonization was the only kind of laundering white men did with their own hands.

That voice has made Nguyen a standard-bearer in what seems to be a transformational moment in the history of American literature, a perspectival shift pressing the truth that the only difference between the heroic journey of the Pilgrims to the New World and the voyage of the Vietnamese "boat people" was that the Pilgrims "did not have a camera to record them as the foul-smelling, half-starved, unshaven, and lice-ridden lot that they were." It's a voice that shakes the walls of the old literary comfort zone wherein the narratives of nonwhite "immigrants" were tasked with proving their shared humanity to a white audience:

> If Jesus Christ, child of refugees, born poor in a stable, a colonized person, a hick from the backwaters, despised by his society's leaders and by the rulers of his leaders, a humble carpenter—if this Jesus Christ became universal—then so can I, motherfucker!

May that voice keep running like a purifying venom through the mainstream of our self-regard—through the American dream of distancing ourselves from what we continue to show ourselves to be. ♦

PERFORMANCE

HIDE AND SEEK

Acting Black and white onscreen.

BY HILTON ALS

In the past five years, three movies of great distinction have challenged, in subtle and profound ways, our notions of who gets to speak for whom, especially when it comes to race, gender, and sexuality. In 2016, Barry Jenkins, a straight Black filmmaker, directed "Moonlight," a landmark movie about Black gay life. Three years later, Trey Edward Shults, a white director, wrote and directed "Waves," an extraordinary study of the dissolution of one middle-class Black family. And last month, at the Sundance Film Festival, the actress Rebecca Hall premièred "Passing," her directing début (she also wrote the screenplay), which is based on Nella Larsen's uncanny, tightly structured 1929 novel about Black female friendship, mirroring, deception, and class privilege. ("Passing" will stream on Netflix in the fall.)

Hall, working with the cinematographer Eduard Grau, uses black-and-white film, overhead closeups, and other visual motifs to create a kind of cinematic fugue that explores and reëxplores the minds of the childhood friends Clare Kendry (Ruth Negga) and Irene Redfield (Tessa Thompson) as they struggle with social demands and the excruciating emotional fakery that can inform Black upward mobility. This nervous world, which Hall frames with classical authority—her medium shots are tranquil, regardless of a scene's emotional violence—makes us nervous, too, because what is being said and enacted within it may have little to do with the truth, or what is accepted as the truth. "Passing" is a sort of moral noir, a movie about performance, about how women put on their female drag to please, annoy, flirt with, and provoke one another.

When it was announced, a couple of years ago, that Hall was adapting Larsen's novel for the screen, I didn't think, What's this white woman doing with Larsen? but, rather, That makes sense, given the range and depth of Hall's own performances. (She brought real melancholy to Woody Allen's "Vicky Cristina Barcelona," in 2008, and blew me away as the vulnerable, unhinged protagonist of Antonio Campos's 2016 film, "Christine.") Besides, great art makes a hash of doctrine, and if Hall felt that she had something to say about Larsen's book she should be allowed to say it. Where would we be without Forest Whitaker's performance as Erie, in the 2016 Broadway revival of Eugene O'Neill's "Hughie," a character O'Neill presumably wrote for a white actor? Where would we be without Jeffrey Wright embodying his idea of Abraham Lincoln in the 2001 Public Theatre production of Suzan-Lori Parks's "Topdog/Underdog"? Or without the Native American ballerina Maria Tallchief dancing the Swan Queen in Balanchine's 1951 take on "Swan Lake"? How much poorer would you and I be had Gloria Foster not portrayed Clytemnestra in Andrei Serban's 1977 staging of "Agamemnon" at Lincoln Center, or had David Greenspan not played the sheep in the 2013 Off Broadway production of David Adjmi's "Marie Antoinette"? Where would we be if these people had never tried to inhabit a world in which there were no limits to their various real and fictional selves? I hoped for Hall, as I hope for anyone who risks making art at all.

In a way, "Passing" is Hall's coming-out film. The child of the British theatre director Peter Hall and the American soprano Maria Ewing, Hall grew up in an environment where telling stories was the family business. So many legends. One concerned the racial identity of Hall's maternal grandfather. A light-skinned Black man, he married a white woman and appears to have spent

Ruth Negga's performance as Clare Kendry is one of "Passing"'s astonishments.

PHOTOGRAPH BY RIKKÍ WRIGHT

his adult life passing as white; his daughter, Hall's mother, did the same. It wasn't until Hall was in her mid-twenties, and spending more time in the U.S., that she began to reflect on the issue—and that was when she first read "Passing."

Who can say what history lies under white skin? Or Black? This is one of the questions that Hall's film asks. Another is: What makes a performance? Passing is itself a performance that follows the same rules as acting: the actor decides whom to play, and then makes the fiction real with the help of a script, costume, deportment, as the audience, white and Black, looks on, approving or disapproving.

The so-called white-male gaze is everywhere and nowhere in Larsen's novel. When the book opens, it's the twenties, and Irene Redfield, the light-skinned wife of a successful dark-skinned doctor, is sitting in her Harlem house reading her mail. She discovers a letter from a woman named Clare Kendry; the name is like a bad dream become reality. In flashback, we meet Irene and Clare as girls in Chicago. Clare is quiet and cunning, always intent on her own pleasure. She longs for nice clothes—costuming to belie her tawdry existence. After her brutish white father is killed in a fight, the waif goes to live with his relatives, and Irene loses track of her. (Larsen tells us that Clare's mother, a Black woman, has died, but that's all we know about her. In this book filled with absences, the absence of maternal love is only one of many things that Clare has to endure.)

Twelve years later, on a scorchingly hot day, Irene, in need of refreshment, lets a cabdriver ferry her to a hotel in Chicago where Blacks are not allowed. She doesn't tell the driver or any of the hotel staff that she's Black; her light skin carries the day. It's the first time that she has used her skin tone to cross racial lines. The secret feels awful—and delicious. No sooner has she settled in, though, than someone recognizes her. It's Clare. The women exchange pleasantries. Clare is living in Europe now; her husband has business in Chicago, and she and her little girl came along. Does Irene have children? Yes, two boys. Larsen, with her skill for the specific and the surreal, has Clare and Irene sit and converse like figures in a hallucination framed by race; they are performing women sharing details, not sharing themselves.

Irene learns about her old friend's life with her father's sisters. Religious and pious, they never forgave their brother for having "ruined" a Negro girl. Clare was the unfortunate evidence of that misalliance. Eventually, the crafty young woman attached herself to Jack Bellew, a white man from the neighborhood who had come back from a trip to South America "with untold gold." Jack didn't know about Clare's heritage, and she didn't tell him. Married to a white man, she was granted access to the finer things in life that she had always craved. "You'd be surprised, 'Rene, how much easier [it] is with white people," she says. "Maybe because there are so many more of them, or maybe because they are secure and so don't have to bother. I've never quite decided."

When Clare speaks, it's as if she were showing off a luxury item during a time of deprivation. To counteract that feeling, Irene brings up the Lord and ethics. (Larsen's characters can never set aside their differences, which is to say their friction-filled doubling.) And yet Irene is mesmerized by Clare's blond hair, her beautiful shoulders, her languor. What's so striking about this exchange—and a subsequent one that Clare and Irene have with another friend, Gertrude, whose husband is white, and who is horrified to learn that Irene married a Black man and has a dark-skinned child—is how passing itself becomes a kind of race, with its own codes of behavior, carefully drawn lines, and exclusions.

Larsen was a distinctly literary writer, and to read her small but unforgettable body of work is to be reminded of other exemplary stylists—Djuna Barnes and Jane Bowles come to mind—who, through art and vision, made their America as queer as Larsen made hers. Part of her queerness has to do with her fascination with the erotic lives of women. Hall shares that fascination: she's as interested in Clare and Irene as they are in each other's bodies and style. (The film's costumes are by Marci Rodgers, who, thank God, doesn't make the nineteen-twenties look as though they'd been filtered through the twenty-twenties.) Hall sets her story entirely in New York, when the women are adults. In this way, she makes it clear that she wants us to sit, from the get-go, in the nightmare of the *now*.

When we first see Irene, she's wearing a wide-brimmed summer hat. We look at her, through the nearly transparent brim, as she, in turn, looks out at the world—tentatively, secretly. She's in a store that caters to a white clientele. The camera follows her as she stealthily navigates the space; she's a spy in a world of whiteness, and we are her co-conspirators. When she steps outside, everything seems bleached by the sun. Indeed, the film's early scenes are blasted by whiteness, like photographic paper in a developing tray, moments before the black begins to show.

The whites become slightly modulated, a little grayer, when Irene, after having tea at the hotel, accompanies Clare to her room. There, an amazing scene of seduction and resistance takes place. Clare asks Irene to help her as she changes her dress. The light fabric flutters on Clare's shoulders, below her blond hair, and the camera zeroes in on these moments of closeness and reserve, as though we the viewers were part of the charged, scented atmosphere. Negga's Clare is aware of her effect—she's as turned on by her duality as Irene is—and New York seems only to ramp up her excitement. But, just as Irene feels herself being drawn in, she pulls back: Clare is mesmerizing, but to lose control would mean losing hold of everything Irene has fought to achieve—a siddity Black life that combines order with moral correctness.

Nevertheless, Irene can't look away from Clare, and neither can we. Negga's performance is one of the film's astonishments. By turns pleading and bitchy, mean and porous, Clare slithers around Irene's sensitivities like a snake curious about the taste of its own poison. And Thompson, as Irene, experiences this intimacy, laced with competitiveness and desire, with a confusion that is not theatrical but true to her character. Irene's instinct is to underplay her own existence in deference to her responsibilities: family and the demands of being a bourgeois member of society. Still, the women, as scripted by Larsen and Hall,

speak the same language: stilted, stylized, "polite" talk that says nothing as it hints at everything. In fact, language is the bridge between Clare's white world and Irene's Black one.

After Irene returns home to Harlem, Hall's palette becomes darker. Irene's skin is dark, the wooden bannister leading down to the kitchen is dark, the maid, Zu (the excellent Ashley Ware Jenkins), is very dark, and so are Dr. Redfield's eyes, hair, and suits. Redfield (André Holland) wants to move to South America, where he believes there is no racial prejudice. He longs for a world away from this segregated society, where even Blacks judge you by your skin color, and your life is defined by how you look, not by how you are. But Redfield gets on Irene's nerves as much as Clare does, especially once she starts showing up at Irene's house and insinuating herself into her daily life. Clare is trying to find her way back to Blackness, or back to the mother we know so little about, and she can do it only with Irene, another Black mother, as her guide. Over time, Irene is filled with an anger that she cannot express—until the film's devastating and enigmatic ending.

As those final scenes played out, I was reminded of two other important works that touch on this subject: Douglas Sirk's movie "Imitation of Life" (1959) and the artist Adrian Piper's 1985 photography and text piece "A Tale of Avarice and Poverty." Sirk was German-born and white, and Piper, who has settled in Berlin, is an American with African ancestry, but both creators seem to reach similar conclusions: dreams of being free and white, and thus powerful, don't free you; they only exacerbate your feverish, specious longing to become a citizen of a kind of no man's land, in which no one can rest, least of all you. Clare and Irene want to belong—but to what? To the other's idea of what makes a person white or Black? And where does their fever come from? The head? The heart? The ground beneath their American feet?

When Hall was a girl, Salome was one of her mother's great roles, and Ewing would appear nude in "Dance of the Seven Veils." Performers often use characters and metaphors to reveal something of themselves, and this was a way of being seen, certainly. To my knowledge, Billie Holiday didn't undress onstage, but she was naked anyway. Part of the tremendous energy in her projected cool was put toward finding a form for that nakedness—a "miracle of pure style," the essayist Elizabeth Hardwick called it—which told us not so much who she was, clothed or unclothed, as what she was, and what we were, too, and why. Looking for the truth of experience didn't limit Holiday to that truth; I doubt whether she would have had much patience for the who-gets-to-speak-for-whom discussion. (As a child, she was known for being what one observer called "don't-careish.") Indeed, in her humanism, she knew that the best stories are less often the ones that directly reflect your own experience than the ones shot through with other experiences that you can mine for art. Just listen to her version of "My Yiddishe Momme," say, and you'll understand that you don't need to have grown up with that mother to know what a dream of maternal love feels like, and how it can be a kind of sustenance, even when it's a wound.

As an artist and a woman, Holiday belonged to what the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier described as *lo real maravilloso* ("the marvellous real")—that which cannot be explained but is irrefutably here. I don't want you to spend too much time on Lee Daniels's new movie about Holiday, "The United States vs. Billie Holiday" (on Hulu), because you won't find much of Billie Holiday in it—and certainly not the superior intelligence of a true artist. What you'll find instead is an illustration of the nasty impulses that spell out Daniels's interest in degradation. A co-creator of the Fox series "Empire" and the director of such deep-fried-chicken-and-pain movies as "Precious" (2009), Daniels has emerged as a skewed moralist, one who, although he is Black, seems to feel that most Black people are both power-mad and powerless, and therefore fodder to be pimped out, debased, and manipulated. (Full disclosure: in the late nineties, I wrote a script about Holiday that Daniels and several other producers were interested in at the time.)

Adapted by Suzan-Lori Parks from a nonfiction book by Johann Hari, "The United States vs. Billie Holiday" is Daniels's response to Sidney J. Furie's "Lady Sings the Blues" (1972), in which Diana Ross portrayed the singer. It's also a bid to win the Best Actress Oscar—which Ross lost to Liza Minnelli—for Daniels's own star, the singer Andra Day. Furie showed physical and drug abuse relatively sparingly in "Lady Sings the Blues," but Daniels's movie explodes in an orgy of violence, sex, and shallow, predictable behavior. He can't get enough of such things because, after all, these are Black characters, and Daniels sees the world through the kind of white gaze that Hall, for one, questions and dismantles.

Less than a half hour into this interminable flick, Holiday, who has been getting high with a guy named Joe (Melvin Gregg), says that she wants some ice cream. Joe is too far gone to move, so Holiday, in her undergarments, puts on his overcoat and is about to go out for the sweets herself when the fuzz storms in, led by a Black federal agent, Jimmy Fletcher (Trevante Rhodes), who, earlier, came on strong as one of Holiday's admiring fans. While other agents handcuff Joe, Fletcher tells Holiday that the cops will be along to search her, and you wonder why he doesn't do it himself. The answer: it would preëmpt the self-conscious drama of the following scene. Holiday, furious, calls Fletcher a "lying Black son of a bitch," and flings off the coat, and then her undergarments, to show that she has nothing to hide, not even her tough, battered vulnerability. The scene is dead at heart because Day is not an actress and what she's been asked to do doesn't come from anywhere internal. The moment, like so many in the movie, is about Holiday being a bad bitch, high on her own humiliation and that other narcotic—show business.

Day is beautiful to look at, but she has no center as a performer. Her presence is a series of postures and imitative voice techniques that serve only to further etch the image of junkie mess into this portrait of a great artist who changed an art form. The movie feels like a revenge number on Blackness *and* whiteness—an expression of the white-power fantasy in which Black artists always lose, because Blackness is trash, or, at least, gets trashed, right here in its own back yard. ♦

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POP MUSIC

LOVE AND OTHER DRUGS

Julien Baker's songs of addiction and redemption.

BY AMANDA PETRUSICH

The singer and guitarist Julien Baker makes raw, ghostly rock music that's rooted in personal confession. But, unlike some artists operating in that mode, she's figured out how to turn fragility into a display of fortitude. Baker's songs—which explore themes of self-sabotage, atonement, and restitution—are aching but tough. This stems, in part, from Baker's spiritual upbringing. She was raised in a devout Christian family near Memphis, Tennessee, and sang in church. When she came out as gay, at seventeen, she prepared herself for a swift denunciation, but her parents were compassionate. (Her father began scouring the Bible for passages about acceptance.) It's possible to hear the echoes of Christian hymnals in her first two albums—ideas of love and grace, mentions of God and rejoicing. Baker has a tattoo that reads "God exists" and has said that she senses a kind of divine presence in art, or, as she once put it, evidence of "the possibility of man to be good."

Baker is now twenty-five, and is about to release her third album, "Little Oblivions." The new songs are unruly, complex, and gorgeous. Baker made the record in Memphis, but it doesn't feel especially linked to the city's musical heritage, or at least not to the version (Elvis Presley's Graceland, Sun Studio, Stax Records) that sells souvenirs and barbecue. "Little Oblivions" is Baker's first record with a full-band sound—she plays most of the instruments herself—and the new material is suited to a bit of squall. (Her work brings to mind that of Sharon Van Etten and the National, two moody, transcendent acts that began in Brooklyn.) When Baker was fourteen, she formed a punk band, first called the Star Killers, and later Forrister; for years, it played scrappy venues around Memphis. She made her second album, "Turn Out the Lights," at Ardent Studios, which is managed by Jody Stephens, the drummer in Big Star, a nineteen-seventies rock band often cited as an early progenitor of alternative music. On "Little Oblivions," some of Baker's early rebelliousness reëmerges. She's made mistakes, and maybe even hurt people, but she hasn't stopped believing in her own capacity for penance and redemption. "It's the mercy I can't take," she sings, on a track called "Song in E."

Baker is back in recovery—she first quit drinking and drugs in her late teens—and "Little Oblivions" is, in many ways, a wounded elegy for the blurry retreat of inebriation. Baker started smoking cigarettes when she was twelve, emulating the older kids at her bus stop, and then experimented with alcohol, weed, and prescription medication. It's easy to overlook burgeoning addiction in a kid. She told *GQ*, in 2019, "That cultural categorization of substance abuse as the taboo but expected misbehavior of children contributed to me having a warped sort of denial." These days, she is careful not to overstate the importance of her sobriety, telling *Rolling Stone*, last year, "I don't want to construct a narrative of this sort of oscillating prodigal redemption." Still, the truth of intoxication—how treacherously good it can feel to loosen one's grip on reality, even briefly—is one of the central themes of the record. Baker is interested in the paradox of addiction: an addict most wants the thing that will eventually kill her. In this state, even death can seem like a welcome stasis. On a track called "Relative Fiction," Baker surveys her choices:

> When I could spend the weekend out on a bender
> Do I get callous or do I stay tender
> Which of these is worse, and which is better?
> Dying to myself virtually, a massacre

Baker explores how treacherously good it can feel to loosen one's grip on reality.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY RES

The song starts out cloudy, and then, around two minutes in, drums appear. Baker's vocals, deep and velvety, are bolstered by a rhythm section; it gives her phrasing power and confidence. "Ringside," my favorite song on "Little Oblivions," is one of its loudest. Baker's voice rises above the din, like a diver suddenly emerging from the depths of a pool.

In 2014, as a student at Middle Tennessee State University, Baker recorded her first solo album, "Sprained Ankle." It took her just two days (a friend secured her some time at Spacebomb Studios, in Richmond, Virginia), and she used only one microphone. Most of the vocals were captured in a single take. Pitchfork later suggested, lovingly, that the album sounded as if it might have been recorded in a bathroom. Baker posted the songs to Bandcamp, and, a year later, the indie label 6131 found, mastered, and formally released them. Even then, Baker was frank about her tendencies toward self-destruction: "I know I shouldn't act this way in public," she sings on "Good News," an exquisitely sad ballad. Baker's ability to be highly specific about the contours of her sorrow occasionally makes me think of Taylor Swift, and especially of Swift's recent turn toward quiet, richly arranged folk songs. On "Good News," Baker sings:

> Your long hair; a short walk
> My biggest fear and a slow watch
> In the thin air, my ribs creak
> Like wooden dining chairs when you see me

In 2018, Baker formed the trio boygenius with Lucy Dacus and Phoebe Bridgers. The group went on tour and released an acclaimed self-titled EP. (Baker's sobriety began to slip after she returned from that tour.) Part of boygenius's mission was to lampoon the limiting, often patronizing ways in which women artists are discussed (the three members are all in their mid-twenties, play guitar, and were once endlessly compared to one another) and to gently dunk on male privilege. Dacus told the *Times*, "If one person was having a thought—I don't know if this is good, it's probably terrible—it was, like, 'No! Be the boy genius! Your every thought is worthwhile, just spit it out.'"

Baker reunites with Dacus and Bridgers for "Favor," a hazy, lonesome track on the new album. Like several of Baker's best songs, it recounts a long, trying night attempting to reconcile with a partner. Baker worries about her capacity to return love. "How come it's so much easier with anything less than human? / Letting yourself be tender? Well, you couldn't make me do it," she sings. "Doesn't feel too bad, but it doesn't feel too good, either."

The cover of "Little Oblivions" features an oil portrait of Baker leaning back in a wooden chair, a wolf hovering nearby. The words "There's no glory in love / Only the gore of our hearts"—from "Bloodshot," the sixth track—are scrawled across the painting. The couplet is a useful key to unlocking the themes of her discography. For Baker, experiences that seem blissful or sweet tend to arrive with significant caveats: love leaves us vulnerable, unprotected, inelegant; it can make us feel burdensome and insufficient. The same can be said of intoxication, and sometimes it's hard to know whether Baker is singing about romance or drugs. She asks, Did I make the people around me suffer? Can something be both nourishing and destructive? Can someone love me without needing to fix me?

The agonies of addiction are hardly new, but self-obliteration has never been a subject of greater obsession; somehow, America has managed to fetishize oblivion while also condemning it. Noise-cancelling headphones, sensory-deprivation tanks, meditation apps, nine-hundred-dollar ayahuasca retreats, weighted blankets, screen time: you're encouraged to deaden the debilitating cacophony of modern life as long as you don't start to like the fog too much. Baker's songs expose this trap. "Until then I'll split the difference between medicine and poison / Take what I can get away with while it burns right through my stomach," she sings on "Hardline," the opening track. The song starts with heavy organ chords, but, by the end, Baker seems to have arrived at something that resembles release. "What if it's all black, baby, all the time?" she belts. She repeats the last part—"all the time"—until the meaning of the phrase falls away, and the only thing remaining is her voice. ♦

MUSICAL EVENTS

WIND SONGS

The "Darkness Sounding" festival, in Southern California.

BY ALEX ROSS

The composer-vocalist Odeya Nini went across L.A., performing outside homes.

ILLUSTRATION BY CHIARA LANZIERI

On a chilly Los Angeles morning in late January, I woke up an hour before dawn and drove to Griffith Park, a rugged expanse that stretches northeast of the Hollywood Hills. Five times the size of Central Park, and home to a solitary mountain lion, Griffith brings a tinge of wilderness to the urban sprawl. During the pandemic, it has been more crowded than usual, but in the half-light of 6 A.M. there was no one about. I hiked up to a point where downtown L.A. became visible. Rains had recently come through, and mists rose from vegetation, giving a gauzy shimmer to the lights of the awakening city.

During quarantine, I've been going on regular sunrise hikes—a habit that would have dismayed my militantly nocturnal younger self. Usually, I leave my phone behind, but this time I brought it with me, so that I could attend a musical event. Since January 15th, the L.A.-based ensemble Wild Up has been presenting a socially distanced, mostly online festival called "Darkness Sounding," and today's offering was an audio stream of Andrew McIntosh's "A moonbeam is just a filtered sunbeam"—an hour-long piece that combines instrumental sounds with field recordings of the wind passing through stands of pine trees.

The inaugural edition of "Darkness Sounding" took place last winter, in both indoor and open-air settings. Christopher Rountree, Wild Up's rambunctious, imaginative leader, has described the festival as an exercise in "embracing ritual, nature, space, listening and simply being together." Sunrise and sunset bracketed several performances in the series. In the past year, that emphasis on diurnal rhythms has become pertinent in a way that Rountree could not have anticipated. Amid enforced inactivity, the apparition of the sun becomes a major event.

COVID-19 lockdowns during the holidays prompted Wild Up to adjust its plans for this year's edition, but the essential idea remains. McIntosh's "Moonbeam" was heard on three consecutive days, both at sunrise and at sunset. The pianist Richard Valitutto live-streamed a marathon recital from his apartment in Ithaca, New York, playing from dawn to dusk. The sound artist Chris Kallmyer constructed two sets of chimes and sent them out to hosts around the L.A. area. The vocalist Holland Andrews telephoned audience members and sang for them, one on one. The composer-vocalist Odeya Nini travelled across the city, performing in front of people's homes. This week, the composer-bassoonist Archie Carey is presenting a walk-through sound environment in the area of Joshua Tree National Park.

Valitutto's recital amounted to about seven and a half hours of music, concentrated at the soft and slow end of the spectrum. Two big twentieth-century pianistic cycles—Federico Mompou's "Música Callada" and Valentin Silvestrov's "Silent Songs"—were interwoven with works by Morton Feldman, Ann Southam, Jürg Frey, Eva-Maria Houben, Linda Catlin Smith, Laurence Crane, and more than a dozen others. There was a casual air to the proceedings: Valitutto paused periodically to grab a bite, chat with viewers of the live stream, or pet his terrier mix, Dingo, who took naps in a doggy bed next to the piano. Yet it requires formidable artistry to maintain a pristine musical surface at a low volume and an unhurried tempo, as Valitutto did.

The pieces by Andrews and Nini, respectively titled "There You Are" and "I See You," are much more intimate in address. For the first, the listener is sent a link to a recording on SoundCloud, and at the appointed time Andrews calls on the phone and sings along with the

audio track for ten minutes or so, in a hypnotically lush timbre. The lyrics are meditative and comforting, though not oblivious of reality. "Just let it be scary," Andrews sang to me. Nini accompanies herself with a drone on a shruti box. She gave me a preview of "I See You" in a park near her home, in Mount Washington. Her long-breathed, sinuous singing, wordless but expressively pointed, owes something to Middle Eastern and South Asian traditions, though it also brings to mind the experimental vocalise of Meredith Monk. Nini told me that this was the first time she had performed for a stranger in nearly a year.

Kallmyer's wind-chimes project is called "Two hearts are better than one." There are two sets of chimes, one with five resonating aluminum tubes and the other with two; both are equipped with dangling strikers made of redwood. Each week, Kallmyer moves the chimes from one home to the next, with the residents becoming the audience. One week I went in pursuit of them, practicing a novel form of music criticism that involved inviting myself into strangers' back yards. One set was hanging above a driveway on the side of a home in Studio City; the other was in a back yard in Altadena, next to a tangerine tree. The weather was favorably unsettled, with gusts of wind creating flurries of activity. The five-toned chimes would bang out quick arpeggios or jangle together in messy chords. The two-toned instrument offered up a surprisingly complex variety of pulses: rapid alternating quavers, dotted rhythms, triplets.

Carey's "Desert Sound Visit," the Joshua Tree piece, takes place on land adjoining a desert bungalow. The visitor puts on headphones, starts playing a forty-minute track, and walks along a path connecting five sites. The first is a small stone labyrinth, which you navigate as a bassoon chorale slowly unfolds. The second is a sundial; bamboo-flute tones gently clash as you watch the movement of the sun's shadow. The third is an outdoor dance floor, equipped with a disco ball and a rough-and-ready dance track. At the fourth, an array of sine tones, emanating both from the headphones and from handheld tuners mounted at the site, evoke the signals being exchanged in the roots of creosote bushes. At the final station, you sit for nine minutes and six seconds—John Cage's "4′33″" times two—and take in the noises of the space: birds, insects, dogs, planes. I reflected on the fact that so many elements of man-made music already exist in nature. Composing begins with listening.

"Moonbeam" bears the imprint of a composer preternaturally attuned to the landscapes and soundscapes of the West. McIntosh grew up in a Nevada desert town and often goes climbing in the mountains of the Great Basin region. Not long ago, he was listening to an interview with the acoustic ecologist Gordon Hempton, who commented on the particular sounds the wind makes as it passes through different kinds of trees. McIntosh began making field recordings in California pine groves and listening for distinctions among them. "Moonbeam" includes the sounds of Great Basin bristlecones, the world's oldest trees, which grow at high elevations and have short needles. When the wind blows around them, it tends to make not a general ambient hum but a more focussed *whoosh* that pans across the forest.

In "Moonbeam," the field recordings serve as the sonic floor for a complex texture that mixes improvisations on violin and viola—McIntosh is a gifted string player—with various thrumming and rustling timbres (bowed piano, bowed wineglasses, bowed cymbals, a scraped slate). Microtonal tunings, electronic processing, and rough string attacks engender ferocious climaxes. Periodically, that fabric drops away to reveal the underlying forest acoustic. "Moonbeam" is a contemplative creation that generates enormous tension and release.

My decision to take "Moonbeam" on a sunrise hike ran counter to the spirit of the piece: McIntosh had intended listeners to conjure up imaginary worlds from home. Since I'd heard the work in the "right" way the previous day, I felt emboldened to bring it a little closer to the wilderness that had inspired it. The sun appeared above a low bank at a moment when high violin tones were glinting in near-silence. The combination was as gorgeous as it was fortuitous, and made me want to carry the piece several hundred miles north, to the Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest, to see what the trees themselves might make of it. ♦

THE ART WORLD

MASTERING SORROW

The New Museum's powerful show of Black American artists.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

Carrie Mae Weems's "The Assassination of Medgar, Malcolm, and Martin."

"Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America," which recently opened at the New Museum, is a terrific art show. I might have expected that, given a starry roster that includes Kerry James Marshall, Glenn Ligon, Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, and Theaster Gates among its total of thirty-seven contemporary Black artists. But theme exhibitions normally repel me, shoehorning independent talents into curatorial agendas. What a difference in this case! "Grief and Grievance" is a brainchild of the Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor, who, notably with his curation of the German mega-show Documenta, in 2002, and the Venice Biennale, in 2015, pried the international art world open for new art from Africa and Asia. He died of cancer in March, 2019, at the age of fifty-five, while planning the present show. The New Museum's artistic director, Massimiliano Gioni, aided by Ligon and the curators Naomi Beckwith and Mark Nash, completed the task, faithful to Enwezor's conception, emphasizing interiority and the patterns of feeling that attend Black experience in America. There's grief, which is constant; grievance, which appeals, however futilely, to some or another authority able and willing to right wrongs; and mourning, the fate and recourse of the irreparably wounded. From this description, you might expect a litany of remonstrance. On the contrary, the show celebrates what artists are good at: telling personal truths through aesthetic form. The predominant result is poetic—deeply so—rather than argumentative.

It's worth noting immediately that there's little explicit address to white racism, white guilt, or, really, white anything, except by way of inescapable implication. Ta-Nehisi Coates, in a devastating essay in the show's catalogue, fills in the lacuna with his well-known, scorching pessimism about white mind-sets. What Coates would like from whites, though he does not expect it, is "a resistance intolerant of self-exoneration." The show was originally intended to open in October, amid the furors leading up to the Presidential election. The pandemic scotched that. But "Grief and Grievance" doesn't have a use-by date. It channels emotional tenors, from personal points of view, that are true to the history, and the future, of race in this country.

Begin with two of the exhibition's few jokes, "Presumption of Guilt" (2020) and "7.5'" (2015), by Cameron Rowland. For the first, the front door of the museum has been rigged to set off a *ding* when opened, like that of a convenience store. The second flanks one side of the door with a vertical strip of height measurements—meant to aid in the identification of departing thieves by surveillance cameras. The ruler tops out at seven feet six inches, suggesting an absolutely colossal brigand. Rowland counts on stereotypical associations of Black men with convenience-store robbery, and of large Black men with menace. You admit to recognizing that if you laugh, as I did. Standup comedians push such buttons all the time, but the trope is beyond rare in serious museums. Now proceed to a darkened room nearby and behold "Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death" (2016), Arthur Jafa's much praised video montage with a rhythmic soundtrack of music and voices. It's a masterpiece. Rapid clips from Black history and daily life, ranging from violent scenes of the civil-rights movement to children dancing, possess specific, incantatory powers. Their quantity overloads comprehension—so many summoned memories and reconnected associations, cascading. The experience is like a psychoanalytic unpacking, at warp speed, of a national unconscious regarding race. Irresistibly exciting and profoundly moving, the work will make you gasp, I guarantee,

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY

and will induce a heightened state of mind and heart to accompany you throughout the exhibition.

I think of Julie Mehretu and Mark Bradford as neo-Abstract Expressionists, what with her storms of kinetic squiggles in clouded atmospheres and his layered impastos of glowering color, both at majestically large scale. In the case of Mehretu's "See Gold, Cry Black" (2019), the title befits a canvas on which orangeish strokes seem to struggle for traction amid enveloping welters of black. Also self-describing, Bradford's "Sapphire Blue" (2019) stars a zone of the eponymous color in raddled expanses of less bold hues. This resurgence of American art's modern breakthrough, after six decades in abeyance, was already apparent in the at once witty and volcanic neo-expressionism of Jean-Michel Basquiat, whose achievement looms ever larger in art of the late twentieth century. He is represented here by "Procession," a painting from 1986, two years before his death, at twenty-seven. That was a period, for him, of illness and faltering confidence, but his originality still blazed. On a ground of boards painted yellow, four loosey-goosey black figures reel and stumble toward a tall man of undetermined race, dressed in red and blue, who brandishes a skull aloft with a gesture of withholding. The work might be a doom-laden allegory of addiction: junkies drawn to a dealer of, ultimately, death. But you rarely know with Basquiat. His teasing mastery of painterly form—he could seem incapable of making a dull mark—speaks, and sings, for itself.

The Chicagoan Kerry James Marshall has become justly famous as a painter who deploys Blackness as a theme and black as a plangent color—hard to do if you're not a Zurbarán, say, or a Goya. A Black cop seated on the hood of a police car radiates watchfulness. Interiors of middle-class homes feature banal furniture and images of civil-rights-era heroes that either hang on walls, like a portrait of Martin Luther King, Jr., bracketed by John F. Kennedy and his brother Robert, or hover as ghosts. Standing Black matrons include a woman who is equipped with angel wings. Another picture incorporates a list of departed Black luminaries spelled out in glitter. Who told Marshall that you can get away with using glitter in an elegiac painting? It's one of many audacities that ignite his style. One interior is overlaid with vertical gray stripes and more glitter. Everything works. Marshall brings genres of domestic and history painting spankingly up to date, achieving an aesthetic and sociological sublime. His art both stirs and mocks nostalgia, subjecting sincerity to irony in ways that intensify both.

There's a piquant backstory to Ligon's "A Small Band" (2015), which consists of the words "BLUES BLOOD BRUISE" displayed in white neon capital letters high on the front of the museum. In 1964, New York police officers beat two Black teen-agers and then refused them medical attention because they weren't bleeding. One of the boys, Daniel Hamm, squeezed a bruise that he had incurred, forcing blood out. He explained later, with a slip of the tongue, that he'd "let some of the blues blood come out." Thus Ligon's beautiful short poem. "Blues" as a stand-in for "bruise" links Hamm's ordeal to a classically African-American way of processing sorrow. Your mind spirals down from an anecdote of police brutality to a sense of the inner life, the subjectivity, and the acculturated sensibility of a victim who is not reducible to victimhood. Ligon's work previews a psychosocial dynamic that abounds in "Grief and Grievance," which takes consequences of oppression and misfortune—grinding poverty, in the case of photographs by LaToya Ruby Frazier—as occasions for tours de force.

The closest the show comes to protest art is Dawoud Bey's "The Birmingham Project" (2012), large black-and-white photographic diptychs recalling the bomb deaths, in 1963, of four Black girls at a church in the Southern city. Each pair portrays a child, male or female, at the age that one of the girls was on the day she was killed—three were fourteen, one was eleven—and an adult at the age that, had the girl survived, she would have been at the time of Bey's work. My first reaction was bemusement at the pictures' excellence as portraiture, sensitively framed and lighted and vibrant with the personalities of the sitters. How could such elegance serve as a memorial of murder? But gradually my reluctant aesthetic pleasure melted into the work's content, registering the distance between present high artistry and the thought, clawing at my mind, of once and forever destroyed young lives. As tranquil as the images are, the burning pain of the reference persists. I've tried to shake the spell that they cast but haven't yet.

Coming after a year of death and mourning as universal spectres, the show's lessons in strategies and tactics of emotional resilience, necessities for Black lives, resonate broadly. The art touches on shared human needs and capacities. It's a start. ♦

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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Joe Dator, must be received by Sunday, February 28th. The finalists in the February 8th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the March 15th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST

"

"

THE FINALISTS

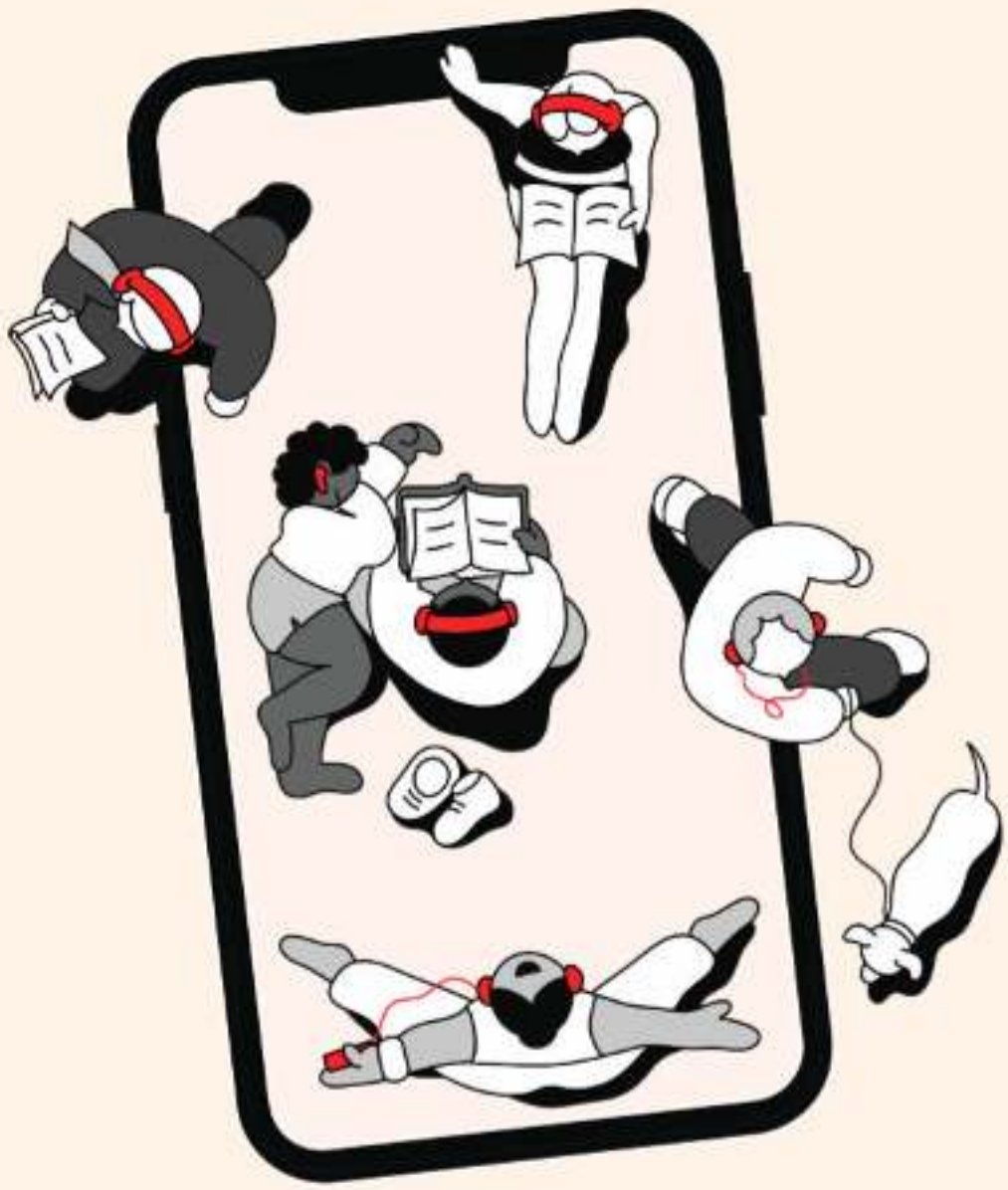
"Yes, it does look more realistic that way."
Roger Strouse, San Francisco, Calif.

"Still not level."
Nathaniel W. Pierce, Trappe, Md.

"Maybe it would go better in the den."
Danny Turner, Baltimore, Md.

THE WINNING CAPTION

"I think it's just a phase."
Rich Eckmann, New Paltz, N.Y.

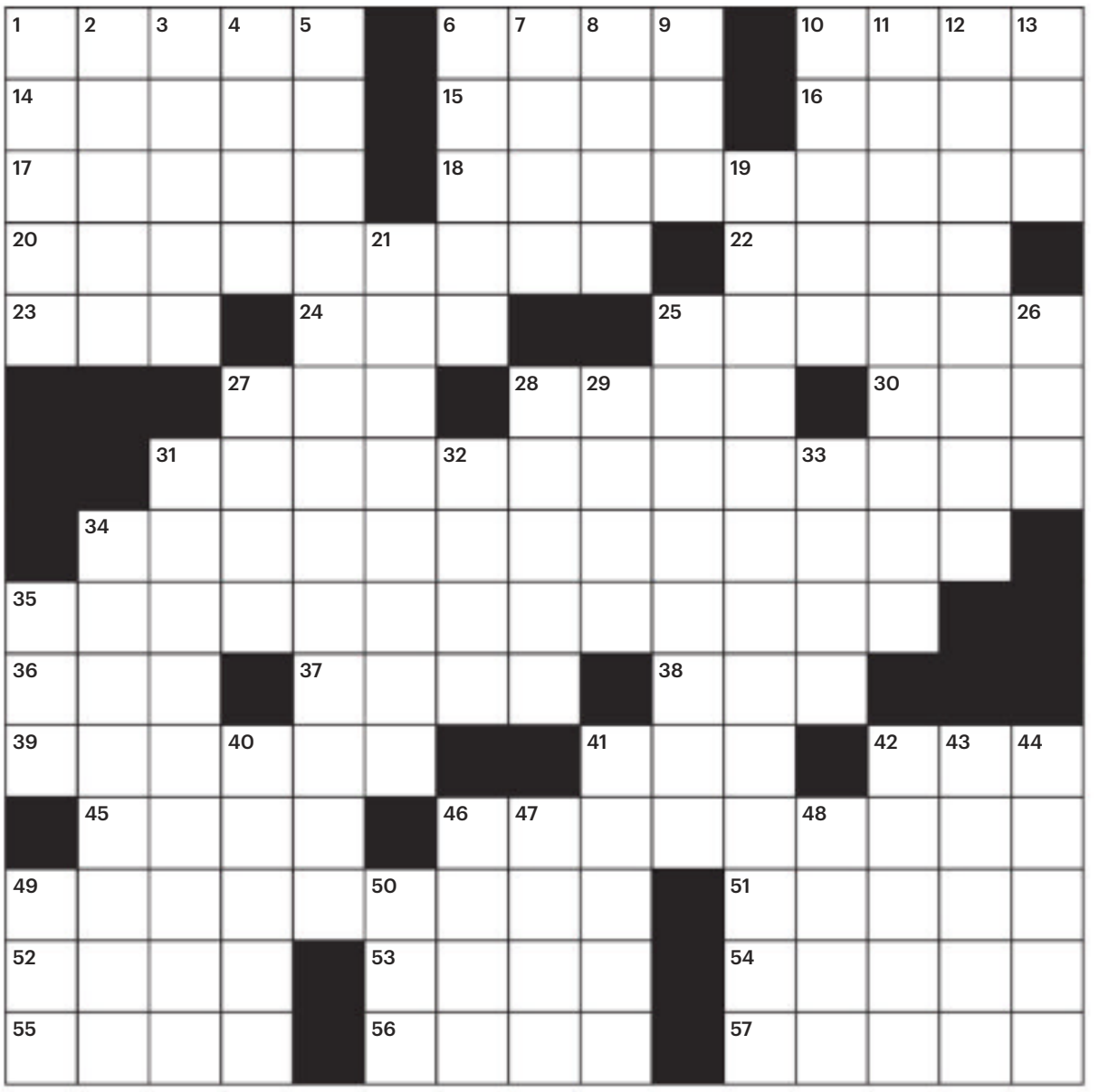


PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A lightly challenging puzzle.

BY ROBYN WEINTRAUB



ACROSS

1 Type of pillow or rug
6 Reason to visit the dentist
10 Pedigree alternative
14 Port-au-Prince's nation
15 Containers in a container garden
16 Covering for Kisses
17 Welles who directed a radio version of "The War of the Worlds"
18 Doesn't have a co-conspirator
20 Technique for intercepting the fleet?
22 Honda or Toyota
23 Big time?
24 Didn't take a stand?
25 Separate
27 Fish served with a schmear
28 Produce grill lines on a steak
30 Olympic gymnast Mary ___ Retton
31 "You got here at the most opportune moment!"
34 "Black Forest" or "blackout" dessert
35 Las Vegas casino and hotel home to the Forum food court and the Bacchanal buffet
36 "It's . . . so . . . cold . . ."
37 Captain Hook's henchman
38 It might be invisible
39 Newspaper section with scores
41 Conjunction in the titles of two Jane Austen novels
42 Where one might see lions and tigers and bears (oh my!)
45 ___ Skoda ("Law & Order" psychiatrist played by J. K. Simmons)
46 Bite-size cylinder-shaped spuds
49 The ___ Inn (New York City gay-rights landmark)
51 Only planet not named for a Greek or Roman deity
52 ___ shui (Eastern design philosophy)
53 Two-dimensional measurement
54 "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" playwright
55 Laudatory poems
56 Some *JAMA* readers
57 Anne who was Jerry Stiller's comedy and life partner

DOWN

1 Yonder items
2 Ms. Winfrey's production company (which is a semordnilap of her first name)
3 No longer in bed
4 ___-Missouria tribe
5 Weekend crash pad for Queen Elizabeth II
6 "Things Fall ___" (Chinua Achebe's first novel)
7 Leaf whose name is half of a soft-drink brand
8 Link letters
9 It's near the end of August and at the beginning of September
10 Black piano key near G
11 Doppelgänger
12 Spiky tree product used in some seasonal decorating
13 "Rah!" relative
19 "It's called the ___ 'cause you have to be asleep to believe it": George Carlin
21 W-2 and 1040
25 "60 Minutes" competitor
26 What "O" means in XOXO
27 Most August babies, astrologically
28 Garlic stalk used in cooking
29 Blues singer James
31 Chemical secretion that others may find attractive
32 "What ___ is new?" ("Duh!")
33 Lightning McQueen's big-rig friend in "Cars"
34 Shaggy?
35 "60 Minutes" network
40 Fifth-day-of-Christmas gifts, in song
41 Guy with a heavy burden to shoulder
42 "___ the Greek" (classic Anthony Quinn film)
43 Marine mammal with water-resistant fur
44 ___ Jackson (Ice Cube's birth name)
46 Root vegetable in a bag of Terra chips
47 Baldwin who tweeted on November 7, 2020, "I don't believe I've ever been this overjoyed to lose a job before!"
48 "The ___ of Peter Rabbit"
49 Bay Area airport code
50 Cash or gum amount

Solution to the previous puzzle:

Find more puzzles and this week's solution at **newyorker.com/crossword**

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