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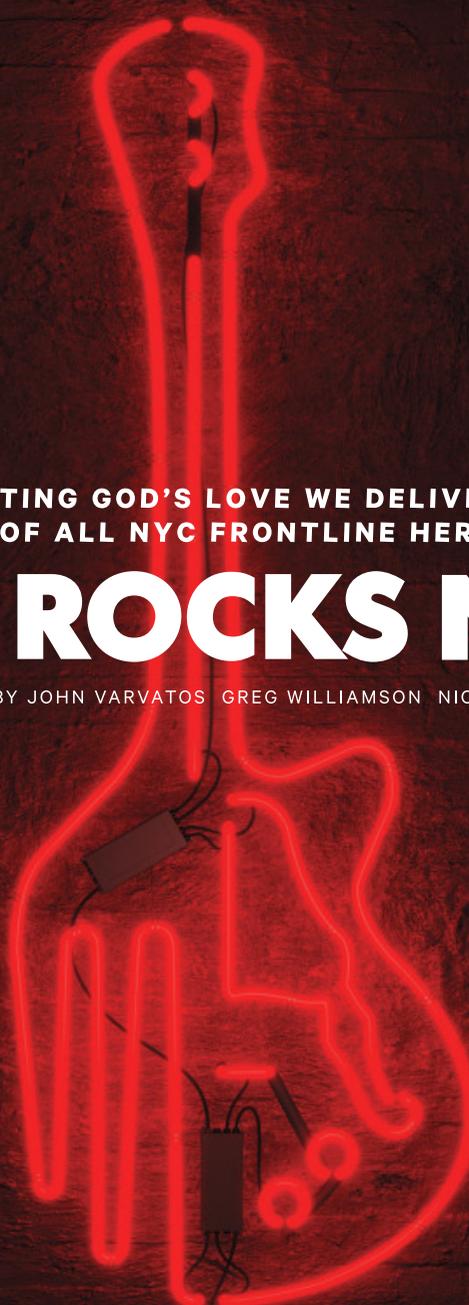
APRIL 5, 2021

# THE NEW YORKER



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# CONTRIBUTORS

**Rachel Aviv** (*Past Imperfect*, p. 28) is a staff writer. She received the 2020 Front Page Award for investigative reporting, for her story about a COVID-19 outbreak in an Arkansas prison.

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**Kathryn Schulz** (*Where the Wild Things Go*, p. 22), a staff writer, won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing. Her new book, "Lost & Found," will be out in early 2022.

**Sterling HolyWhiteMountain** (*Fiction*, p. 48) grew up on the Blackfeet Reservation, in Montana. A former Stegner Fellow and a current Jones Lecturer at Stanford University, he is at work on a novel.

**Madeleine Schwartz** (*Books*, p. 60) is a regular contributor to *The New York Review of Books*.

**Michael Ian Black** (*Shouts & Murmurs*, p. 21), a comedian, an actor, and an author, has written the forthcoming children's book "I'm Sorry."

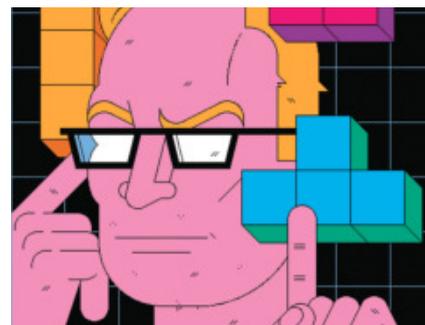
**Kaveh Akbar** (*Poem*, p. 52) is the author of the poetry collections "Calling a Wolf a Wolf" and "Pilgrim Bell," which is due out in August.

## THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



### CULTURAL COMMENT

Mary Gaitskill on a strangely poignant tableau of pro-Trump paraphernalia in a neighbor's yard.



### CULTURAL COMMENT

Jacob Sweet writes about a younger generation who is using the Internet to master classic Tetris.

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LEFT: MIN HEO; RIGHT: NICK LITTLE

# THE MAIL

## IMMOBILE HOMES

Sheelah Kolhatkar describes how, when investment firms acquire mobile-home parks and suddenly raise rents on the land, mobile-home owners become trapped (“Trailer-Park Trades,” March 15th). One solution, as Kolhatkar discusses, is for the law to treat mobile-home parks more like rental housing, and to extend tenants’-rights laws to cover them. This may help in the short term, but it does not change the fundamentally feudal relationship between homeowner and landlord.

A better answer is for residents to organize themselves in cooperative mutual-aid associations and together buy the trailer-park land. Successful examples of this approach exist. I worked with residents near Cumberland, Wisconsin, who, when faced with the sale of their mobile-home park and possible eviction, formed the Country View Cooperative and purchased the property. Each mobile-home owner has one share in the co-op, and the accompanying right to lease his or her lot; lots are owned collectively by the residents through the co-op. For mobile-home owners, the threat of withholding rent payments can be a source of power. And, by forming a co-op with the intention of keeping monthly holding costs low, residents can ward off absentee investment groups, which will be discouraged by unstable revenue streams.

*Stephen Parliament*  
Department of Teacher Education  
University of Wisconsin–River Falls  
River Falls, Wis.

Kolhatkar’s article highlights the terrible situations that low-income people face when they rent space from politically powerful interests. This story is part and parcel of a larger issue: the monopolization of land itself. Mobile homes are relegated to rented space in the first place partially because zoning laws for the perimeters of urbanizing areas tend to prevent entry-level housing from encroaching on tony exurban developments. The laws, which tend to require

a minimum lot size and only one family per lot, make it nearly impossible for mobile-home owners to afford to buy land within commuting distance of a major city. Such rules are usually justified as protecting farmland or deterring sprawl. But the truth is that landowners fear that someone might park a mobile home nearby.

Those who build McMansions in the exurbs and use zoning to deny homeownership opportunities for adjacent properties have effectively established a monopoly. In a free housing market, people should have the right to buy a small plot of land and develop it in accordance with their means—even if doing so offends a neighbor.

*Richard Cowden*  
Takoma Park, Md.

## HIDDEN LIFE ON SIXTY-THIRD STREET

Casey Cep’s review of Paulina Bren’s new book about the history of the women’s-only Barbizon Hotel, in Manhattan, is insightful and, for me, evocative (Books, March 8th). I lived in the Barbizon for five weeks in the mid-nineteen-sixties, while working as a guest editor for *Mademoiselle*. In retrospect, I feel as though I inhabited a metaphor. I will never forget the contrast between the elegant reception area, which was on display for outsiders, and our airless, confining, basic bedrooms. The Barbizon’s façade projected desirability, and masked the constraints we encountered behind the scenes, in our careers and love lives. We may have appeared to be sophisticated and carefree, but even those of us who went on to achieve luminous successes faced daunting obstacles during our time there.

*Joyce Wood*  
Rottingdean, England

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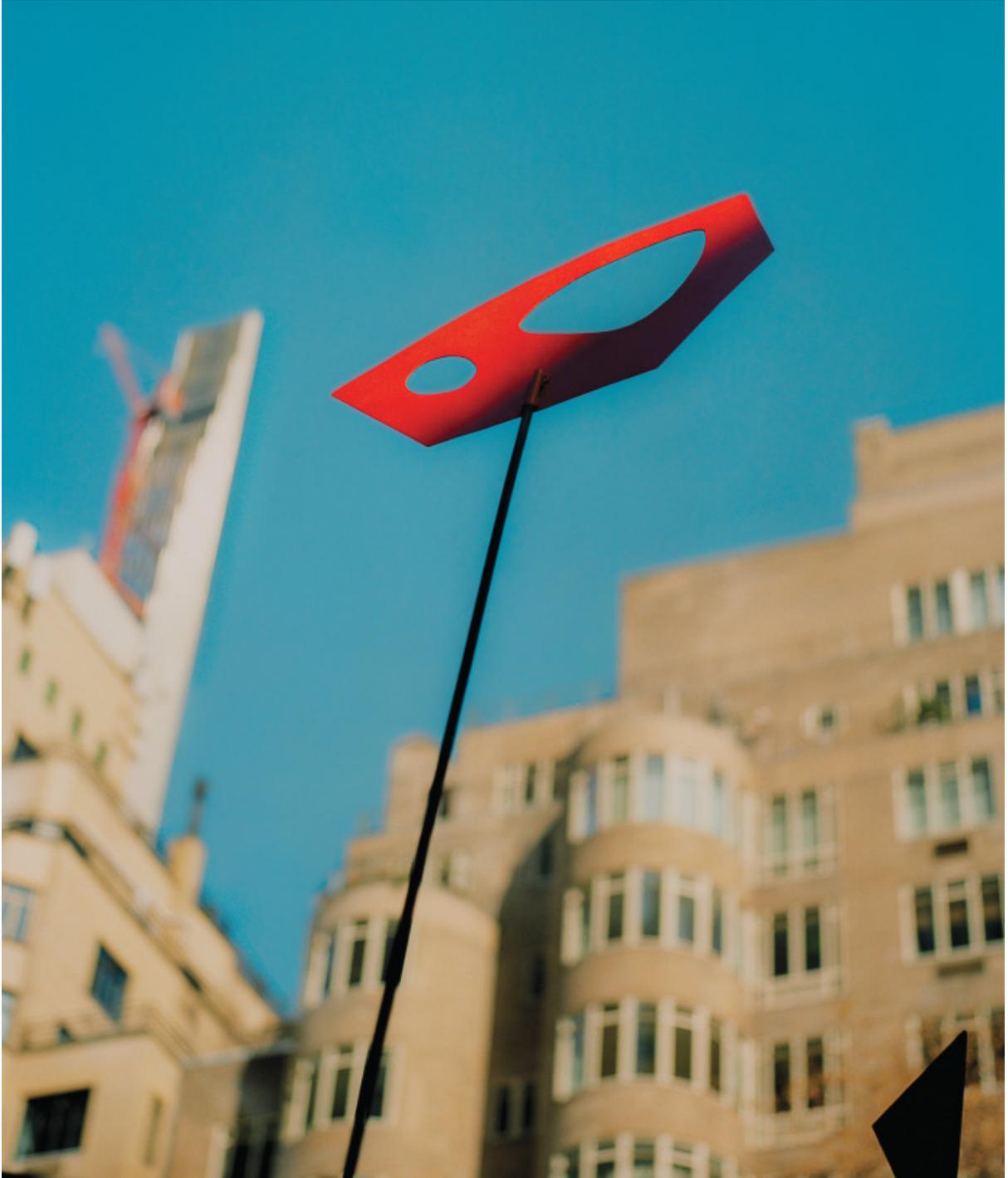
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*In an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, many New York City venues are closed.  
Here's a selection of culture to be found around town, as well as online and streaming.*

MARCH 31 – APRIL 6, 2021



# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



When MOMA first showed the work of Alexander Calder, in 1930, the museum had been open for little more than a year. The artist's first retrospective there, in 1943, proved so popular that it was extended by seven weeks. **"Alexander Calder: Modern from the Start"** (through Aug. 7) explores this nine-decade-long relationship with some seventy works, mostly from MOMA's collection, including the 1945 standing mobile "Man-Eater with Pennants" (a detail is pictured). Conceived for the sculpture garden, it hasn't been seen there since 1970.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SASHA ARUTYUNOVA

## MUSIC

### American Modern Opera Company

**OPERA** The enterprising artists of American Modern Opera Company (AMOC) have spent recent weeks in a bubble residency at the Catskill Mountain Foundation, workshopping a new project with the composer and interactive-electronics trailblazer George Lewis. Now, as the Guggenheim's "Works & Process" series resumes responsibly managed live performances, the AMOC members Jonathan Allen, Anthony Roth Costanzo, Miranda Cuckson, Conor Hanick, Aaron Wolff, and Emi Ferguson showcase material newly developed with Lewis, plus some company favorites, in a brief rotunda performance. Tickets are available seventy-two hours in advance.—*Steve Smith (April 4 at 8; guggenheim.org.)*

### "The Island We Made"

**OPERA** Angélica Negrón's new opera, "The Island We Made," directed by Matthew Placek for Opera Philadelphia's streaming channel, is a gracious observation of the love and healing exchanged between a mother and her children. In Placek's ten-minute film, Sasha Velour—the bald and brainy winner of the ninth season of "RuPaul's Drag Race"—moves about a carefully decorated suburban-style home as she lip-synchs to the vocalist Eliza Bagg's gossamer singing. Wearing a canary-yellow dress and rhinestone accessories, Velour stands out from the sea of beiges and florals like a benevolent spirit: she is the love that lingers in a space after the business of raising a family—with its tears, tantrums, and quarrels—has passed. Negrón's music offers a single, sustained texture of electronics and harp; in its delicacy and calm, it doesn't so much yearn for understanding as embody it.—*Oussama Zahr*

### Lost Girls: "Menneskekollektivet"

**EXPERIMENTAL** "In the beginning, there is sound," Jenny Hval declares in the opening moments of "Menneskekollektivet," the debut album from her duo Lost Girls. The Oslo musician speaks in the elegantly accented deadpan of dystopian science-fiction narrators. A keyboard drones serenely alongside her voice, courtesy of Lost Girls' other half, Håvard Volden. As the song stretches out, a beat creeps up behind Hval until, unshackled, she lets out a croon, transforming from a Laurie Anderson-smitten spoken-word artist into a disco diva. Much of the album dwells in the little-explored gap between these realms. That a record blessed with the title "Menneskekollektivet"—and starring a vocalist who has published novels in Norwegian—is dominated by English may seem a missed opportunity, yet it remains an absorbing display of this genuinely uncanny pair, dancing in a remote corner they've carved out for themselves.—*Jay Ruttenberg*

### Dr. Lonnie Smith: "Breathe"

**JAZZ** Dr. Lonnie Smith is among a number of very adept and very funky organ players

who followed in the wake of Jimmy Smith, a man who basically put the Hammond organ on the musical map. A respectable career followed Lonnie Smith's emergence, in the mid-sixties, and by the millennium he'd been taken up by a new generation hungry for his authentically soulful keyboard work. On "Breathe," Smith shares space with supporting horn players and his fine guitarist Jonathan Kreisberg, but his slithery organ runs have the last word. Smith's takes on Timmy Thomas's "Why Can't We Live Together" and Donovan's "Sunshine Superman" feature droll readings by Iggy Pop—just the kind of goofy notion you might expect from a man who has adopted a doctoral designation and dons a trademark turban because, well, he feels like it.—*Steve Futterman*

### Tune-Yards: "sketchy"

**EXPERIMENTAL** Although Tune-Yards has never been worried about sounding messy, unbridled, and even a little unhinged, "sketchy" is among the group's most liberated albums, loose at the joints and intense with movement. Inspired by recent books on using creativity for racial healing, the project builds on a growing interest in dismantling systems

of control and oppression—a subject also explored on the band's 2018 album, "I Can Feel You Creep Into My Private Life." Such themes make "sketchy" a challenging listen: the singer and musician Merrill Garbus howls and chants over tangles of vibrating synths and jarring transitions, unafraid to grate and shock the nerves. But there's delight in all the noise, akin to a child happily banging on pots and pans and unlocking a sense of freedom.—*Julysa Lopez*

### Neil Young: "Young Shakespeare"

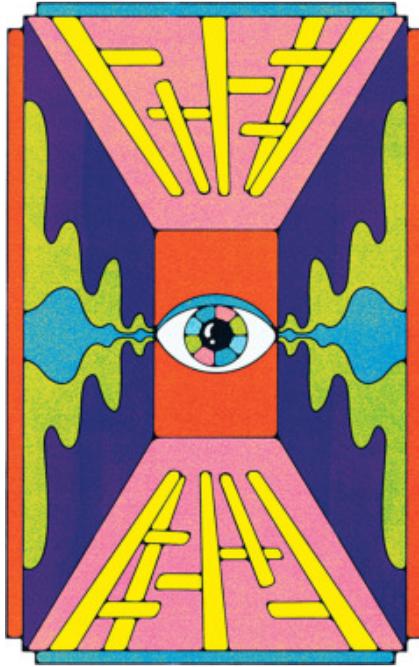
**ROCK** No, the title isn't a declaration of the artist's greatness—this live recording, from January, 1971, took place at the American Shakespeare Theatre, in Stratford, Connecticut. The performances aren't declarative, either; Young was in a contemplative mood, and songs that he has typically performed with a rugged spark, including "Cowgirl in the Sand" and "Ohio," are given tender treatments here. But the performance is hardly sombre: he cracks the audience up while introducing "Journey Through the Past." And the range of the material, traversing six early albums, makes it a decent place for a Young novice to begin.—*Michaelangelo Matos*

## POP



Fame and its power centers become alienating in "Chemtrails Over the Country Club," Lana Del Rey's follow-up to the epic "Norman Fucking Rockwell!," from 2019. Again largely produced with Jack Antonoff, "Chemtrails" finds refuge in small towns, in leaving the big city behind. After years of making coastal pop wafting with nostalgia—for old Hollywood, for the cosmopolitan beatnik scene, for Mustangs, horse races, and other such Yankee status symbols—Del Rey now pushes toward the heartland, and her visions of Americana begin to overlap with the musical tradition. On "Tulsa Jesus Freak," she coos about going back to Arkansas and experiencing backwater romance along the Bible Belt. Over hushed, isolated piano and soft guitar riffs with folk overtones (and a Joni Mitchell cover), one of the more prescient songwriters of our time retreats to a personal hamlet of her own making.—*Sheldon Pearce*

Is it time, finally, to once again gather in a dark room and watch a play? Maybe, maybe not. But New Yorkers now have an intriguing option in **“Blindness,”** beginning previews on April 2, at the Daryl Roth Theatre. Walter Meierjohann’s production, imported from London’s Donmar Warehouse, is an adaptation by Simon Stephens (“Sea Wall/A Life”) of José Saramago’s 1995 novel, about a city thrown into chaos by a mysterious—and highly contagious—epidemic of sudden blindness. Theatregoers, masked and distanced in two-person pods (lone viewers can purchase a whole pod), listen on headphones as they watch the story unfold amid immersive lighting and staging. For tickets and information on safety protocols, which include “enhanced building ventilation technologies,” visit [blindnessevent.com](http://blindnessevent.com).—*Michael Schulman*



## THE THEATRE

### Glass Town

Miriam Pultro’s new song cycle imagines the Brontë siblings as members of a rock band—this premise, at least, scores points for not being about Emily Dickinson, who in recent years has become pop culture’s go-to nineteenth-century writer. The project is essentially a concert with a few spoken interstitials, with Pultro herself playing Charlotte Brontë as well as keyboards, the bassist and music director Katrien Van Riel as Emily, the guitarist Eddy Marshall as Branwell, and Emma Claye as Anne. Not that you would know without looking at the credits: characterization is lacking and the lyrics sport a vague emo sensibility rather than a fiery romantic one. Produced by the Tank and the Center at West Park and directed by Daniella Caggiano, “Glass Town,” which is named after an imaginary world dreamed up by the young Brontës, does not do much to reflect the original quartet’s bond, or their literary output.—*Elisabeth Vincentelli (thetanknyc.org; through April 4.)*

### Romeo y Julieta

In the 1997 book “Growing Up Bilingual,” the linguist Ana Celia Zentella observed that Puerto Rican children in New York City code-switched from English to Spanish about once every three minutes in conversations with peers. Some of Zentella’s now grown-up subjects may be among the fans of this bilingual audio rendition of Shakespeare’s “Romeo and Juliet,” presented by the Public Theatre and WNYC Studios. During a live-streamed Q. & A. with some of the cast and creative team, one listener commented that the radio play recalled

“a gathering with my Nuyorican family—part Spanish, part English, all Spanglish.” At the risk of alienating monolinguals in both languages, the director Saheem Ali and the playwright Ricardo Pérez González have blended Elizabethan English with Alfredo Michel Modenessi’s modern Spanish translation to create a multicultural mashup that transcends time and space. (“*Buenas noches, till it be tomorrow!*”) The stellar cast of twenty-two, including Juan Castano and Lupita Nyong’o in the title roles, inflect the sixteenth-century tragic romance, originally set in Italy, with regional accents from Mexico, Colombia, Guatemala, and elsewhere, against a sonic backdrop of electronic cumbia, Latin jazz, fireworks, sirens, and swordplay.—*David Kortava (publictheater.org)*

## DANCE

### Matthew Bourne’s New Adventures Festival

This monthlong digital festival sampling the repertory of the British choreographer Matthew Bourne—famous for his familiarizing updates and remixes of classics—finishes with his “Romeo and Juliet.” The darkly dramatic 2019 work, streamable via New York City Center through April 4, takes place in the near future, in a prisonlike institute where teen-agers are controlled with medication, among other disciplinary measures. As in Shakespeare, and in the many ballets set to the same Prokofiev score, love meets death, but here the tragedy of warring families is replaced with the trauma of mental illness.—*Brian Seibert (nycitycenter.org)*

### Miami City Ballet / Paul Taylor Dance Company

It’s a nifty idea: this collaboration, between a dancer from Miami City Ballet (Samantha Hope Galler) and another from the Paul Taylor Dance Company (John Harnage), is a long-distance pas de deux. The two perform in different cities, but thanks to the ingenuity of the choreographer Amy Hall Garner, working through Zoom, they seem to inhabit the same space, responding to each other’s movements and thoughts. Garner, equally comfortable in ballet and modern dance, finds a language that suits both dancers’ ways of moving. The performance, entitled “ViVa,” will be released on both companies’ Facebook pages on April 1.—*Marina Hars*

### Pacific Northwest Ballet

As we dream of returning to theatres relatively soon, online dance offerings continue to proliferate. Pacific Northwest Ballet presents a mixed bill, running April 1-5, that includes two new works recorded at the company’s Seattle home theatre, one by the soulful Alejandro Cerrudo and the other by Donald Byrd, a veteran choreographer who has tackled such weighty subjects as blackface and minstrelsy, and the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921. Byrd’s piece, “And the sky is not cloudy all day,” for six men, set to music by John Adams, explores the American myth of the West in all its problematic, naive nostalgia. The third ballet on the program is Alexei Ratmansky’s wild, eccentric, and gloriously musical “Pictures at an Exhibition,” in a recording captured in 2017.—*M.H. (pnb.org)*

### San Francisco Ballet

George Balanchine’s ballet “Jewels,” created in 1967, is like food for the soul—and a sort of homage to the historical arc of classical ballet. The first section, “Emeralds,” with music by Gabriel Fauré, takes the viewer to France, where the art of ballet really came into existence. It is elegant, wafting, delicate. Then comes “Rubies,” brash and bold, set to Stravinsky. This is New York, the Jazz Age, the spiky silhouette of the Chrysler Building. Finally, “Diamonds” transports the audience to the grandeur and the melancholy of St. Petersburg, accompanied by Tchaikovsky’s Third Symphony. San Francisco Ballet offers a virtual evening of “Jewels,” available April 1-21. Only “Emeralds,” led by Misa Kuranaga, Angelo Greco, Sasha Mukhamedov, and Aaron Robison, is newly recorded; the other two are from the archives.—*M.H. (sfballet.org)*

### Step Afrika!

In 1739, enslaved Africans in the colony of South Carolina revolted. One outcome of the rebellion was a law restricting slaves’ activities, including the use of drums. And one unintended outcome of that law was to encourage the transfer of rhythms from drums to the body—the beginnings of hambone, stepping, and tap. This is a story that the skilled Washington, D.C., troupe Step Afrika! has addressed before, in its recent stage show “Drumfolk.” Now it riffs on history again, in “Stono,” a forceful thirty-minute film shot in various outdoor locations, available on the Joyce Theatre’s Web site April 1-14.—*B.S. (joyce.org)*

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## ART

### María Fragoso

Stare at the figures in this young Mexico City-based painter's fantastic show at the 1969 gallery and you may have the unsettling feeling that they're staring back. Fragoso's gender-indeterminate subjects are surrounded by figs, pomegranates, glossy conch shells, and snails trailing slime. In "To Mouth," from 2020, one masked couple is awkwardly entangled on their hands and knees, their bodies glowing in supernatural shades of pink. In "Seeding," clear fluid drips from the parted lips of crimson-gloved twins. Thirteen drawings accompany the six paintings on view, revealing another aspect of the artist's vision. Here her symbolic lexicon is isolated and distilled: swans, fruit, ceramic vessels, and ornate portraits are rendered in red colored pencil on white sketchbook paper. Fragoso nods to several historical styles—the smoldering nudes of the European Renaissance, strains of Surrealism, Mexican devotional paintings—but her lush and grotesquely erotic vision is entirely her own.—*Johanna Fateman (1969gallery.com)*

### David Hammons

The real star of the Drawing Center's comprehensive exhibition of the body prints that Hammons made between 1968 and 1979 is the artist's energetic, younger self. In 1963, when he was twenty, Hammons moved to L.A. from his native Illinois and began using his own anatomy, combined with pigment and paper, as a printmaking tool. Yves Klein's "Anthropometries" (made with female models) and Robert Rauschenberg and Susan Weil's collaborative "Blueprints" had already used similar methods to propose that all art emanates from the artist's body. Now, Hammons asked, what if that body is Black? Galvanized by the civil-rights and the Black Arts movements, he returned, again and again, to the subject of America, and her relationship to Black men as builders and targets, outsiders and originators. Throughout the thirty-two prints and drawings on view (with such punning titles as "Bye-Centennial," from 1976), one can feel the provocateur's excitement about his medium, but also his need to push its boundaries, which led to his great interest in performance—another discipline that celebrates the human form, and the ephemeral.—*Hilton Als (drawingcenter.org)*

### Roni Horn

An installation of very large drawings—cut up and reconfigured to resemble scrambled maps, neural networks, and circuitry—commands the first room in this veteran conceptualist's show at Hauser & Wirth. They seem like supersized keys to the increasingly intimate works that follow. In the next room, silk screens featuring associative clusters of handwritten words and idiomatic phrases ("when in Rome," "when pigs fly," "a little bird told me") evoke a buzzing semiconscious state. The show's highlight is the diaristic "LOG (March 22, 2019–May 17, 2020), (2019–2020)," composed of more than four hundred works on paper installed in a wall-traversing grid. Photographs of all manner of things—a sky-

line, animals, one of Horn's cast-glass sculptures in a forest—are accompanied by narrative texts and free-form musings. Although it would take a full day (at least) to truly absorb the many entries, that might not be a bad use of time, given the fascinating interiority and poetic qualities of this impressive, impressionistic work.—*J.F. (hauserwirth.com)*

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## MOVIES

### Les Coquillettes

The title of Sophie Letourneur's giddy, time-bending 2012 metafiction means "elbow macaroni," which its protagonists—Sophie

(Letourneur), Carole (Carole Le Page), and Camille (Camille Genaud)—eat twice: in an apartment in Paris where the three young women chat about love, sex, and their previous summer's jaunt to the Locarno Film Festival, and in the apartment that they shared in Locarno. Sophie is obsessed with the real-life actor Louis Garrel and spends much of the festival searching for him; the sexually frustrated Carole is looking for a lover; and the uncertain Camille finds herself in a push and pull with an indifferent young man (the critic Julien Gester). But, as the action flips back and forth between past and present, the women's recollections of their awkward encounters at the festival clash subtly and anticlimactically with the camera's unflinching record. Letourneur's dialogue adorns their

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## AT THE GALLERIES



In 2003, when Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn began hanging shows and hosting performances in her town house on East Ninety-fourth Street, the mood was always more Stettheimer-sisters salon than commercial gallery. This maverick spirit prevailed even when **Salon 94** expanded to two white cubes downtown. Now this unflagging gallerist, design dealer, and art adviser (who was also a judge on a "Top Chef"—but-for-art TV series) has a new headquarters—a four-story building at 3 East Eighty-ninth Street, across from the Guggenheim, that formerly housed the National Academy of Design. Its three inaugural shows (on view through April 24; appointments available via [salon94.com](http://salon94.com)) have an impressive aesthetic wingspan: the gloriously unruly ceramics of Takuro Kuwata, a kaleidoscopic suite of Derrick Adams's stylized portraits, and, most rewarding of all, a deep dive into the radical jubilation of Niki de Saint Phalle, a must-see pendant to the artist's current retrospective at MOMA PS1.—*Andrea K. Scott*

observations with a tooth-tingling array of Franglicisms; much of the action is displaced to Facebook and text messages, and the conspicuous dubbing of voices throughout gives this vertiginous, documentary-style comedy the air of a live-action cartoon.—*Richard Brody* (*Streaming on MUBI.*)

## Crime of Passion

Kathy Ferguson (Barbara Stanwyck), a hard-nosed, street-smart journalist in San Francisco—and a proudly single woman on the brink of middle age—is taken off the gossip desk to cover a murder investigation by two cops who have come up from L.A. She falls in love with one of them, Lieutenant Bill Doyle (Sterling Hayden); her scoop lands her a big New York promotion, but she turns it down and marries him on a whim. Doyle is a big, sardonic doormat of a team player whose burden is lightened by life with Kathy, but she wants more for him. She's ambitious by proxy, and her idle-hands plot for his advancement involves Doyle's boss,

Inspector Tony Pope (Raymond Burr). In this tight-lipped film noir of suburban frustration and doomed romance, the director, Gerd Oswald, gets all the little things right, from the frowzy styles and smeary makeup to the inspired casting (including Fay Wray as Pope's wife) and the terse visual wit of gunshots and kisses. Released in 1957.—*R.B.* (*Streaming on Amazon.*)

## My Name Is Joe

Joe (Peter Mullan), the hero of Ken Loach's funny and excoriating 1999 movie, starts things off by announcing that he is on the wagon. This being Loach, you can be fairly certain that Joe will spend the next ninety minutes falling off it, and, sure enough, he winds up in a foul blur of booze. What comes in between—and, in a terrible way, sets him back on the path of self-destruction—is a love affair. This unemployed Glaswegian meets a health worker named Sarah (Louise Goodall), who appears to offer him a better sort of life. But his old habits and

connections die hard, and Mullan's combative, unsentimental performance makes Joe's slow ruin not just credible but unavoidable. Whether the maddened high drama of the climax rings equally true is another matter; Loach's talent for small pleasures and crackling provincial gags has always been more winning than his determination to be a tragedian, let alone a political soothsayer.—*Anthony Lane* (*Reviewed in our issue of 2/1/99.*) (*Streaming on Amazon, Vudu, and other services.*)

## Stephanie Daley

Half a terrific movie. This drama, from 2006, written and directed by Hilary Brougher and starring Amber Tamblyn and Tilda Swinton (who is also an executive producer), reflects the virtues and the burdens of its independent production. The engrossing half concerns the title character (Tamblyn), a sixteen-year-old girl in a Hudson Valley town who gives birth while on a ski trip. The newborn dies, and Stephanie, who successfully concealed her pregnancy from family and friends, is charged with homicide. Most of her richly textured and poignant story—which highlights the pervasive influence of religion in small-town life—is told in flashbacks during interrogations by the forensic psychologist assigned to the case, Lydie Crane, played by Swinton. Lydie is pregnant, has recently suffered a stillbirth, and endures a clichéd range of bourgeois marital stresses and silences. (Timothy Hutton plays her intellectually suave, emotionally needy architect husband.) Her story, despite its potential, is rendered generically; Stephanie, as brought to life in Tamblyn's nuanced and daring performance, deserves to have the film to herself.—*R.B.* (*Streaming on Tubi.*)

## Tower

This documentary, by Keith Maitland, reconstructs with forensic precision and dramatic immediacy the 1966 sniper attack at the University of Texas at Austin that left eighteen people dead, an event that's widely considered the first modern mass shooting. Maitland blends archival footage, original interviews with survivors and responders, and animated images of several sorts—including, strikingly, ones that return the interviewees to their age at the time of the attack. The animation, by Craig Staggs, has a sharp imaginative specificity, and the complex interweaving of styles turns the film into a horrifying true-crime thriller that's enriched by a rare depth of inner experience. The effect is as much intellectual as emotional, folding the movie reflexively into its subject: the personal importance of public discussion. The dearth of archival interviews regarding this event corresponds to the interviewees' retrospective view of the mid-sixties. Exhorted at the time to put the troubles behind them and discouraged from speaking about their experiences, many of the subjects approach Maitland's interviews as long-overdue, albeit pain-filled, acts of personal liberation. Released in 2016.—*R.B.* (*Streaming on Amazon, YouTube, and other services.*)

## WHAT TO STREAM



The director Courtney Stephens's found-footage film **"Terra Femme"** (which is streaming through April 3 in MOMA's "Doc Fortnight" program) began as a series of live presentations. This format converges with the documentary's very subject: amateur travel films—in effect, home movies—from the nineteen-twenties through the forties, made by women, some of whom similarly presented them publicly with their own in-person commentary. Stephens discerningly culled this footage from many public and private archives; she accompanies her insightful montage of the clips with her own deeply researched monologue, intertwining tales from the lives of the filmmakers with self-questioning discussions and stories of her efforts to make a film of her own travels. In showing the filmmakers' wide-ranging cinematic practices and points of view, she pursues the underlying question of whether there is such a thing as the "female gaze"; she develops far-reaching analyses of women's filmmaking in an era when few women had professional directing careers—and ultimately connects their work to the sociology and the spirit of travel itself.—*Richard Brody*

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## TABLES FOR TWO

### Tanabel

In 2017, Hannah Goldberg founded Tanabel, a food-and-events company, in response to the 2016 election. Seeking an outlet for her anger, she had joined a task force at her synagogue devoted to assisting refugees from the Middle East. A culinary-school grad and a professional chef who trained at Jean-Georges and in Europe before a stint in wine and cheese importing, Goldberg organized fund-raising dinners; to support an initiative to supply milk goats to Syrians in a camp in Jordan, she roasted a whole goat.

Soon she began hiring refugees to cook with her, building a business around empowering displaced women by paying them a living wage while spotlighting and preserving their native food cultures, including techniques and recipes passed down through their families. “I met with a lot of the refugee-resettlement agencies,” Goldberg recalled the other day. She was on a search for “a woman who might light up when she talks about food, who just can’t stop feeding people. And they’d be, like, ‘Oh, yeah, we’ve got one for you, she can’t stop bringing food into the office!’”

In addition to a ticketed dinner series, Tanabel’s roster included cooking classes and catering, pop-ups at restaurants, and a stall at the Queens Night Market. The name comes from the Souk el-Tanabel market, in Damascus, where vendors hire local women to process fruits and vegetables in their homes so they can be sold ready to cook—*tanabel* translates to “lazy people.” In April, 2020, the name became even more apt: Goldberg shifted to delivery, and currently offers three-course “dinners for two” and larger-format “feasts” on Thursday and Saturday evenings, respectively, to parts of Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens.

On a recent Thursday, a startlingly vernal salad—green chickpeas, lightly grilled asparagus, zucchini, and spring onions, and tiny leaves of endive, fresh mint, and watercress on a bed of squash *moutabal* (a cousin to baba ghanoush)—preceded succulent chunks of skewer-grilled chicken strewn with cherry tomatoes and sautéed red onion, to be spooned over an expansive, fluffy flatbread with cucumber-mint yogurt. For dessert, there was orange-blossom milk pudding, its surface glossy with sour-orange marmalade.

Goldberg’s co-chef that evening was Fatima Kwara, who arrived in New York from Damascus, by way of Jordan, in 2016. A few days later, the pair produced a tahini-themed feast in partnership with Seed + Mill, a tahini-and-halvah brand. Every dish contained tahini, and yet the menu wasn’t remotely repetitive. The ingredient lent a floral note to a creamy, fuchsia-hued yogurt-and-

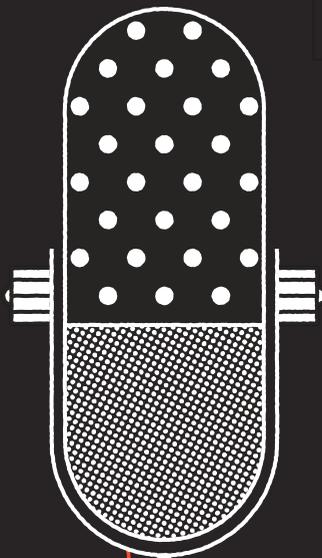
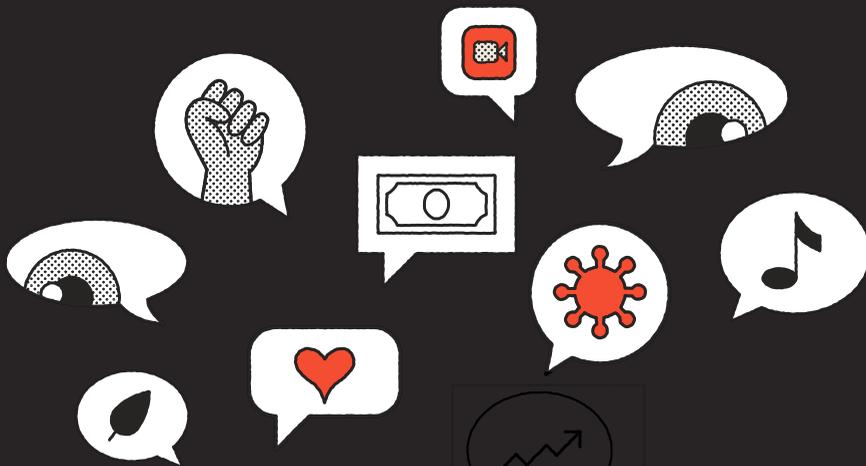
roasted-beet dip, and in a rich sauce it played earthy foil to buttery, pan-roasted cod topped with caramelized onions and fried almonds.

The following Saturday was Nowruz, the Persian New Year. A pre-Nowruz Thursday dinner for two featured a smoky eggplant salad called *kal kebab*, the bean, greens, and noodle soup *ash-e reshteh*, and a small cake drizzled in saffron-rose syrup and encrusted with almonds. For Nowruz itself, my delivery bag was like Mary Poppins’s satchel—I could hold it in one hand without effort, and yet somehow it contained enough food to cover a six-foot table, and gorgeously.

Handfuls of fresh herbs were scattered with edible flowers and radishes cut to look like blossoms, to be grazed on with Persian cucumbers, walnuts, wedges of fresh, salty cheese, and a golden oval of *barbari*, a traditional Iranian flatbread. Crisp yellow-pea fritters came with ruffled leaves of lettuce, for wrapping, and a sweet-sour sauce. The classic Iranian omelette known as *kuku sabzi*, more herb than egg, was sliced into neat rectangles and garnished with barberries; still more herbs and barberries were stuffed into the cavity of a whole trout. The featured chef was Roya Azhari, who fled Tehran for the U.S. last year. For Nowruz in past years, Goldberg worked with Nasrin Rejali, also from Iran. This year, Rejali was otherwise occupied. Her new company, Nasrin’s Kitchen, was offering a Nowruz feast for delivery, too. (*Dinners for two* \$60; *feasts* around \$135.)

—Hannah Goldfield

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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT AT THE BORDER

During the past decade, three U.S. Presidents have each faced a humanitarian emergency at the southern border. Barack Obama did in 2014, when tens of thousands of children from Central America arrived, without their parents, to seek asylum. Five years later, under Donald Trump—and the harshest border-enforcement regime in more than half a century—record numbers of children and families overwhelmed federal authorities. Now, two months into Joe Biden’s Presidency, it’s his turn. Last Thursday, the topic dominated the first press conference he has given since taking office. “What we’re doing right now is attempting to rebuild the system that can accommodate what is happening today,” he said. “It’s going to take time.”

There are currently some eighteen thousand unaccompanied migrant children in U.S. custody, including more than five thousand who remain in holding cells, as the government scrambles to find space to house them. Republicans who were silent when Trump was separating migrant children from their parents and eviscerating the asylum system are now denouncing “Biden’s border crisis.” The messaging appears to be effective; it’s causing all sorts of confusion. Biden is turning away forty per cent of asylum-seeking families and virtually all single adults arriving at the border, under a controversial Trump policy known as Title 42, which he has left in place. Even so, everyone from TV news anchors to the President of Mexico is blaming Biden for encouraging

more migrants to travel north, because he vowed to stop Trump’s heedless cruelty. Senator John Cornyn, Republican of Texas, tweeted that Biden has “emphasized the humane treatment of immigrants, regardless of their legal status.” He meant it as a criticism.

The Secretary of Homeland Security, Alejandro Mayorkas, has predicted that the United States will encounter more migrants by the end of 2021 than it has at any point in the past two decades. He has also, like the rest of the Administration, avoided labelling the situation a crisis. “This is not new,” he said. “We have experienced migration surges before.” What is new, though, is the pace: for most of March, about five hundred and fifty children have been arriving at the border every day. Both Mayorkas and Biden have gone on television to announce that the border is closed; at a White House press briefing, Roberta Jacobson, from the National

Security Council, made the announcement in Spanish. But it was directed more at critics in Congress than at people in Honduras and Guatemala, the countries from which most of the families and children are coming.

The word “crisis” is both an overstatement and an understatement of the situation. There were more families and children seeking asylum at the border under Trump in 2019 than there are now. And the current numbers, if higher than Biden anticipated, are not unexpected. The pandemic has led to renewed desperation in Central America, as have two hurricanes that devastated the region last fall, displacing tens of thousands of people. Yet, in another sense, the situation is worse than much of the public understands, because the issues involved are genuinely complex and nearly impossible to settle as long as policymakers in Washington continue to regard decency as a sign of political weakness rather than of moral strength.

The emergencies of the past decade are really three chapters of the same struggle: an exodus from Central America has been under way, as families and children attempted to escape violence, poverty, and government corruption. The immigration system at the border, which was built up in the nineteen-nineties, with single, job-seeking adults from Mexico in mind, was not designed to handle a population seeking asylum on this scale. On average, it takes almost two and a half years to resolve an asylum claim, and there’s now a backlog of 1.3 million pending cases, up from half a million under Obama.

Biden faces another burden: by the



time Trump left office, he had effectively ended the practice of asylum and left the most vulnerable people to their own devices. Some seventy thousand asylum seekers were forced to wait indefinitely in Mexico, under a policy called the Migrant Protection Protocols. Trump also, in the name of a dubious public-health order issued last March, turned away nearly everyone who sought asylum at the border, including some sixteen thousand children and thirty-four thousand families. That order had the perverse effect of leading people to try to cross multiple times; in the past year, there have been more than five hundred thousand expulsions. Biden planned to phase the asylum program back in gradually, partly for operational reasons and partly for political ones. If the Administration appeared to be floundering, it would give Republicans an opening to attack its broader agenda, which includes legislation to expand the legal immigration sys-

tem and to provide a path to citizenship for eleven million undocumented immigrants already living in this country.

The number of unaccompanied children, however, has exceeded the government's ability to move them into the care of the Department of Health and Human Services, which is responsible for placing them with family sponsors. The priority is to keep them from languishing in the holding cells run by the Department of Homeland Security; by law, children are not supposed to be in such facilities for more than seventy-two hours. But the H.H.S. shelters are almost at capacity. Nine emergency shelters have been set up, two in convention centers in Dallas and San Diego, yet the average amount of time that many children are spending in D.H.S. facilities is almost twice the legal limit. "We're providing for the space again to be able to get these kids out," Biden said on Thursday, adding that he had "used all the re-

sources available" to free up five thousand more beds, at a Texas military base.

The Administration has rightly said that the problem needs to be addressed at the source. To do that, it intends to provide more aid to Central America, and to target it in ways that circumvent corrupt officials. The White House also wants to restart a program begun under Obama, and ended by Trump, to process children as refugees in their home countries, and to set up regional facilities to expedite their legal claims before the children reach the border. The plans are ambitious and still largely untested, and, as Biden admitted, they will take time—years, not months—to implement.

Trump sought to hide the asylum issue south of the border. Biden is paying a price for bringing it back into view. The question is whether he can withstand the political onslaught long enough to begin to set things right.

—Jonathan Blitzer

## SECOND ACTS DARK COMEDY



Habib Zahori, an Afghan war reporter, who is currently a writer for the CBS sitcom "United States of Al," was musing the other day on what separates the gravest brutality from the highest comedy. Take, for instance, the Taliban. Funny? "The beating and the torture and the prison," Zahori said—definitely not funny. The public shaming, though perhaps worse, was another story. "One time, during Ramadan, they caught somebody eating. They put him on the back of a donkey, and they forced him to hold this piece of bread between his teeth." Zahori began laughing. "Why would you do that to another human being? It's *absurd!*"

Zahori, who has a shaved head and a beard, was taking a break from the virtual writers' room. He sat in his home office, in Ottawa, where he lives with his wife, Paula, and their two cats, Pope Francis ("We both just love that man—as an individual, not as the head of an institution") and Bodie. The show, which

premières this week, follows an Afghan interpreter, Awalmir, who is granted refugee status and moves in with a downbeat Marine pal in Ohio.

Before Zahori was hired, the producers asked him to e-mail some Afghan jokes. These generally come in two varieties. The first are regional ad hominem, teasing Wardak Province—Afghanistan's New Jersey. The second are dirty jokes. (From Zahori's list: A waiter brings a man a steaming bowl of *shurwa*. Customer: "Excuse me, why is your thumb in my stew?" Waiter: "It's broken, and the bonesetter told me to keep it warm." Customer, angry: "Well, why don't you stick it up your ass!" Waiter: "Doesn't work. I tried that before the stew.")

Zahori is one of four Afghan writers on the show, which is a Chuck Lorre production. Many plotlines originate from their own stories and sense of dislocation. Zahori spent a decade as a journalist, covering corruption and war for the *Times*, and was a fixer for foreign correspondents. Eventually, the danger became too great—assassinations, kidnappings, the random killing of friends. Canada offered him refugee status after he illegally crossed the border from Maine, carrying a bike, through knee-deep snow. He'd been in the U.S. for a Fulbright fellowship; his first stop had been the Uni-



Habib Zahori

versity of Oklahoma, for "cultural orientation." "I was just standing there, and four young women are walking in these shorts," he said. "Jean shorts. I almost had a heart attack. I had never seen women's legs!" The incident became an episode in which Al, flustered by his first encounter with shins, flunks his driving test. ("Didn't you once charge a bunch of Taliban?" Al: "The Taliban were wearing pants!")

Zahori prefers comedy that is ridiculous and ironic. He loves stoner humor, especially Seth Rogen. Referential humor,

the stuff of many sitcoms, is not his bag. Although the Taliban banned pop culture, some movies (“Rambo,” “The Terminator”) seeped in. And, in 1998, “Titanic.” “We all got haircuts like Leonardo DiCaprio,” Zahori said. “But we’d hide it under a turban or a hat, because the Taliban *hated* that haircut.” After the Americans arrived, he said, “they used to air that super-racist and problematic show called ‘24: In Afghanistan!’” He continued, “I remember people’s dogs were named Jack Bauer.”

Hollywood is riddled with Jack Bauers. Zahori initially had reservations about writing for a mainstream American show. But the producers’ vision was kind, he said, and they were open to critique. Now he’s hoping to move to Los Angeles.

“There are definitely some traumas that are so powerful that there is absolutely no way you could use humor to dismiss it,” Zahori said. These include the horrors of the civil war, which began in 1992. His teachers warned students not to pick up toys they found along the road; often they hid bombs. Zahori’s family moved within Kabul frequently, claiming Tajik ancestry in one neighborhood, Pashtun in another. Schooling stopped. The family burned their Leninist books, but they insisted that their kids keep learning. They’d find years-old newspapers to read—news from a different world. When Zahori was sixteen, he was memorizing the Quran, preparing for a life of devotion, when a friend gave him a copy of “Les Misérables.” “I started questioning everything—everything!—that was around me,” he said. “Men and women’s relationships, poverty, religion, God.” From then on, novels consumed him. He read at night under the lights of shuttered shops. Arundhati Roy was smuggled into mosques, “The Three Musketeers” into weddings. (“I hate weddings,” he said.)

Above his desk in Ottawa, across from a framed copy of his first script, he has hung portraits of Hugo, Tolstoy, and Dostoyevsky. He plans to add more of the people he most admires, mainly authors: Harper Lee, Malcolm X, James Baldwin. “I would die a happy person if I died surrounded by a bunch of books,” he said. Perhaps, years from now, the stacks would tip over as he read, and that would be that. “What a way to go!” he said. It made him laugh.

—Zach Helfand

## ON THE COUCH COMMON THREAD



Zoë Weiner, an editor at a wellness Web site, received an e-mail last week from ABC Carpet & Home, the high-end furniture store near Union Square. “It’s never easy to deliver an update like this,” it began, “but we are experiencing production and delivery delays.” It would be about six weeks before she received the sofa that she’d ordered during a Black Friday sale last year—a sectional from ABC’s Cobble Hill line, custom-upholstered in a deep-pink velvet called Vance Blossom.

When, months ago, as Weiner was moving into a new studio in Greenwich Village, the original February delivery date was pushed up to May, she “had a bit of a meltdown,” she recounted over FaceTime. “I decorated this whole apartment around this very statement-making, coral-colored, massive couch.” This time, she was unfazed. Of greater consequence was the e-mail itself—an apologetic note signed by ABC’s C.E.O., Aaron Rose—on which two hundred and three other couch-expectant recipients were cc’d instead of bcc’d.

The reply-all avalanche began immediately. Frustration crescendoed into outrage: “So what’s the current ETD?,” followed by “I ordered in October! Paid in full. This is just ridiculous.” Then, a turning point: “Oh come on,” a woman named Funda Rozan replied. “Like you’ve never had a bad day at work because you’re exhausted, covid-weary, and stuck with the song ‘never eat soggy waffles’ in your head. Now at least we have a little (but mighty) community of 204 people during this unprecedented shortage of artisanally manufactured goods.”

Weiner seized the moment. “I’d personally like to make the most out of this bonkers thread and throw it out there that I’m a 29-year-old single woman in NYC looking for a Jewish man.” The floodgates opened. “You go Zoe shoot your shot!!” a woman named Tanesha Smith-Wattley responded. “This is legitimately funny and I am grateful for

all of you, my new family of complete strangers,” Matt Freeman chimed in. Gus Goldsack: “Looking forward to meeting you all at Zoe’s wedding!” Moe Phillips: “I’d invite you all over but I don’t have a couch.”

Anger had been supplanted by light-hearted commiseration. “This is sooo amazing we should either unionize or form a cult!” Roberta Garza suggested. “Guess nobody’s hiding their afikomen in their ABC couch this year,” Caren Reuven wrote. “I’ve been sitting on a broken couch for 3 years,” Deirdre Curry admitted. “Finally caved and bought the Hannah in peacock . . . Instant regret once purchased. Think I have couch commitment issues.”

Discussions of how to wangle free shipping or discounts dovetailed with a proposition that the group start a fundraiser for a family in need—a worthy use for money saved. Moments later, a GoFundMe page titled “Serendipitous ABCCers” went live.

Photos were exchanged: of fabric swatches being used as coasters, and of a cargo vessel blocking the Suez Canal (“Maybe our stuff is here”). Jane Rosenbaum, an interior designer who’d ordered a sofa for clients, felt guilty. She’d told them to throw out their old love seat: “I now wear the Vance Blossom fabric swatch as my scarlet letter.”

Other singles expressed interest in being fixed up: “Holler if you find any good ones that are more in the 35-40 age range.” (“I wonder if ABC does Chup-pahs,” Almond Zigmund, an artist in East Hampton, said.) A yoga teacher named Tara Glazier wrote, “After a year inside with my family . . . I wish i was single.” A former student on the chain said hi.

Theirs was not the only reunion. “204 people and the world is getting smaller,” Henry Lee wrote. “I have just reconnected with my friend Melissa here. Now I don’t have to go to Zoe’s wedding solo.” Lee ordered a new couch after his ex got their Muuto sofa when they split. Referring to the pandemic, he said, by phone, “When I saw the e-mails, I thought, We’re in that struggle together. The couch is minor.”

This was not the first time a community had sprung up around couch-related problems. In 2016, a writer named Anna Hezel bought a West Elm model called the Peggy (à la the “Mad Men” character),

which began to fall apart almost immediately. An article she wrote for the *Awl* went viral, legions of dissatisfied Peggy owners banded together, and the company offered refunds. In this case, the villain is less obvious. By phone, Rozan, a third-grade teacher and a parent of two, said that she felt empathy for Rose. “You know, what’s going on in his life?” she said. “Maybe he has kids on his back, climbing all over him.”

Rose, who joined ABC two years ago, does have children, whose remote schooling he’s been helping with—sometimes on the couch, a Cobble Hill in gray velvet. Although the mass e-mails hadn’t come to his in-box, his team had kept him abreast. Citing the appeal of ABC’s “sense of community,” he said, “This is a great example of the loyal customers that we’ve had over time,” although he regretted being “the catalyst for it.” He took responsibility for the delays, explaining that supply chains worldwide have been disrupted by COVID, and that disastrous weather in Texas and Louisiana, where chemicals used to make furniture foam are manufactured, has affected production.

ABC matched the donations raised by GoFundMe, bringing the total to more than three thousand dollars. Three days after the initial e-mail, Weiner was reaping her own benefits. “I have two dates,” she reported, “and have been of-

fered a wedding planner, an Airbnb vacation home upstate, and a place to stay in Morocco on our honeymoon—all from the thread community.”

—*Hannah Goldfield*

## DEPT. OF NAMING WOULD SMELL AS SWEET?



For a decade and a half now, motorists on the Taconic State Parkway, north of New York City, have been confronted by exit signs for a Donald J. Trump State Park. At first, the name was merely curious; unlike hotels, mixed-use towers, and deli sandwiches, state parks are rarely named for reality TV stars or blowhard real-estate developers. After the past six years, however, the name is still curious but also, for many, grotesque. Help may be on the way.

Like America, Donald J. Trump State Park is split in half: one section, totaling a hundred and fifty-four acres, is in Yorktown Heights, in Westchester County; the other, made up of two hundred and eighty-two acres, straddles the border between Westchester and Putnam Counties. Trump bought the land between 1998 and 2000, intending to

build twin golf courses, but after environmental concerns scotched that plan—uh-oh, wetlands!—he donated the parcels to the state. The “understanding,” according to a letter from his attorney, countersigned by a representative of the state, was that “each of the properties will bear a name that includes Mr. Trump’s name . . . prominently displayed at least at each entrance.”

The State Legislature has become determined to do something about this. The cause gained steam after January 6th, and bills that would strip Trump’s name from the park are pending votes in the state senate and Assembly. At a joint legislative hearing in January, Commissioner Erik Kulleseid, of the state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, testified that his staff was “reviewing” just how binding the old letter of understanding would be if the legislation becomes law. There’s a big gray area here: yes, the former President is famously litigious, but his lawyers will likely be battling on many fronts in the next few years. “I doubt he’ll have the resources to care about that when the time comes” is how Assembly Member Daniel O’Donnell, a Democrat from the Upper West Side, put the odds of a suit at the hearing.

Although Trump paid just shy of three million dollars for the land at the end of the nineteen-nineties, he later claimed that his gift, bestowed in 2006, was worth more than twenty-six million. In 2015, a campaign spokesperson made an even more lordly valuation—a hundred million. Whether such figures made their way onto Trump’s tax returns as write-offs is precisely the type of thing Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance, Jr., is said to be investigating.

At the hearing, Kevin Byrne, a Republican Assembly member whose district includes the park, suggested that renaming it might be seen as an affront to the millions of New Yorkers who voted for Trump—including, in 2016, a majority of Byrne’s constituents. State Senator Brad Hoylman, a sponsor of the senate bill, remains steadfast. “I think the symbolism is enormous,” he said. A legislative “rejection of Trump and what he stood for” would be an important signal to “all New Yorkers—and, frankly, Americans.” Hoylman, who is running for Manhattan borough president, said that voters bring up the name-change



“Hey! I’m takin’ my little walk here!”

issue to him all the time. “I think people like their elected officials to take on bullies, to right past wrongs, and to shine a light on dubious philanthropy,” he said.

Assembly Member Nily Rozic, a Democrat from Queens, has sponsored multiple bills to rename the park. Aside from the principles at stake, she said, a switch would provide a financial benefit, given that the current signs frequently need to be replaced as a result of vandalism. (One defacement, channelling Jon Stewart, read, “Fuckface von Clownstick State Park.”) She’s open to suggestions for new names.

If you want to enjoy Donald J. Trump State Park while it still honors the former President, bring a smartphone or a G.P.S. device: there are no signs once you exit the Taconic, and the potholed roads are tricky to navigate. Neither half boasts many amenities; mainly, they are open spaces with pretty, woodsy terrain. On the first day of spring, a single young family was observed at each otherwise empty park. They, too, seemed polarized. The father of a daughter at the southern section, who spoke with a Scandinavian accent, said that he hoped the park’s name would be altered to “something more reasonable.” At the northern site, another father, who had on a “United States of Freedom” sweatshirt, disagreed. “I think it’s retarded they want to change the name,” he said. “Trump has nothing to do with the park. He just donated the land.”

Should the legislation be signed into law, MAGA recreationists may still have options. A state representative in Ohio has introduced a bill to rename a park in that state for the former President. The equally enticing current name: Mosquito Lake State Park.

—Bruce Handy

## DEPT. OF SOUS-CHEFS NOT A SERIOUS GUY



**B**enny Blanco is all about chilling. On a recent morning, the music producer, songwriter, and recording artist was pattering in his West Hollywood studio. Bed-headed and affable, with the impish grin of a man used to being liked,

Blanco, who is thirty-three, wore a ratty Notorious B.I.G. T-shirt (“My pajamas,” he explained, over Zoom) and a mess of necklaces—one beaded, another with a Star of David pendant. You might think of a recording studio as a dark box, where an on-the-clock producer, hunched at a mixing console, seethes at missed takes. But Blanco’s high-ceilinged space, with its white walls, cheerful canvases by such artists as George Condo, Andy Warhol, and Jonas Wood, and even a bed, seems more of a spot for a good-vibes hang. “My whole shtick is I’ll never work with someone I’m not friends with,” Blanco said, sprawled on a couch. “Like, why would I want to work with you if I don’t know you? Maybe you’re a shitty person! So my thing is you come over to the studio and, first of all, I’m cooking for you, I’m talking to you about your life. I don’t put pressure on anything.”

Blanco, né Benjamin Levin, grew up in the Virginia suburbs. As a teen, he was an aspiring rapper but quickly grew interested in producing and songwriting. “I was so nerdy,” he said. “I’d do this thing where I’d print out the liner notes from an album and cover up the names of the producers, engineers, everything, to see if I could guess who worked on the song just from listening.” In his early years as a producer, he apprenticed under Dr. Luke, with whom he collaborated on tracks like Katy Perry’s “Teenage Dream” and Britney Spears’s “Circus.” Later, he produced songs on his own for Rihanna, Justin Bieber, and Kanye West. In 2018, he decided to put his own name on an album, “Friends Keep Secrets.” The record spawned several hits, among them the heartstring-puller “Eastside,” featuring Halsey and Khalid. (“It became the biggest song. I was, like, Holy shit, O.K., I guess I can do this.”)

Last week, Blanco released “Friends Keep Secrets 2” (why mess with a winning formula?), which includes “Lonely,” a track featuring Bieber. The song, which Blanco co-wrote with the musician Finneas, is a keening ballad that draws on Bieber’s experience as an isolated young megastar. (“’Cause I’ve had everything/But no one’s listening/And that’s just fuckin’ lonely.”) “Me and Finneas, he’d come over for sessions, and we’d never work. Ever,” Blanco said. “We’d talk for hours, laugh, some-

times walk to get coffee, and he’d leave. One day I was, like, ‘We gotta write something for Justin.’ And he just sat down at that Wurlitzer, and I had a little keyboard in front of me, and we started riffing and talking and in thirty



Benny Blanco

minutes we had the basis of the track.”

At first, Bieber was unsure about the song. “He was, like, ‘Do people really want to hear this shit from me?’” Blanco said. The song has gone platinum.

Poignancy, though, is not Blanco’s dominant mode. “There’s so much serious shit in the world, and I’m not a serious guy. I want to be the guy you come to for dick and fart jokes,” he said. Recently, he’s been reprising his role as a cocky, loquacious music producer on the FXX show “Dave,” whose second season will premiere in June, and which stars and was co-created by Blanco’s close friend Dave Burd, a.k.a. the rapper Lil Dicky. “I’m more humble in real life, but, otherwise, it’s not that far off,” Blanco said.

How did Blanco know that he was ready for the spotlight? “I worked for all these artists for so many years,” he said. “Say I work at an Italian restaurant, on the line, making Caesar salad, for ten years. And I’m good at it.” He leaned forward, getting into the food metaphor. “I toast the croutons the right way, I’m getting the sauce fucking creamy, I got all the Parmesan. And one day I’m, like, I’ve been watching the guy next to me make pizza for so long. I think I can try and make a good one!”

—Naomi Fry

# THE COLLAPSE AT ARECIBO

*The loss of Puerto Rico's iconic telescope.*

BY DANIEL ALARCÓN

Just before eight in the morning on December 1st of last year, Ada Monzón was at the Guaynabo studios of WAPA, a television station in Puerto Rico, preparing to give a weather update, when she got a text from a friend. Jonathan Friedman, an astronomer who lives near the Arecibo Observatory, about an hour and a half

Every year since Arecibo's completion, in 1963, hundreds of researchers from around the world had taken turns pointing the radio telescope toward the sky to glean the secrets of the universe. It had played a role in the fields of radio astronomy and atmospheric, climate, and planetary science, as well as in the search for exoplanets and the

acades of wear and tear. It was, in many ways, a death foretold. Even so, when the inevitable finally occurred, Monzón was stunned.

Monzón is a presence in Puerto Rico, a much beloved and trusted figure, as meteorologists sometimes are in places where reporting on extreme weather can be a matter of life and death. She'd covered Hurricane Maria and its harrowing aftermath, as well as dozens of lesser but still dangerous storms and the resulting floods or landslides. She'd done a Facebook Live through a magnitude-6.4 earthquake. Still, she told me, the end of Arecibo was somehow harder, more personal. "It was devastating," she said. "One of the most difficult moments of my life."



*For more than half a century, the Arecibo Observatory had the world's largest single-aperture telescope.*

from San Juan, had sent her a photo, taken from his sister-in-law's back yard, of the brilliant blue Caribbean sky and the green, heavily forested limestone hills. In the picture, a thin cloud of dust hovered just above the tree line; the image was notable not for what it showed but for what was missing. On a normal day—on any day before that one, in fact—a shot from that back yard would have captured Arecibo's nine-hundred-ton radio-telescope platform, with its massive Gregorian dome, floating improbably over the valley, suspended from cables five hundred feet above the ground. Accompanying the photo was Friedman's message, which read, simply, "Se cayó"—"It fell."

study of near-Earth asteroids that, were they to collide with our planet, could end life as we know it. There were even biologists working at Arecibo, studying how plant life developed in the dim light beneath the telescope's porous dish.

Monzón, along with thousands of other scientists and radio-astronomy enthusiasts for whom Arecibo held a special meaning, had been on high alert for weeks, ever since two of its cables had failed, in August and in early November. Although the telescope seemed to have survived Hurricane Maria, in 2017, without serious damage, the earthquakes that followed had perhaps weakened components that were already suffering from de-

Arecibo, she added, "was a place of unity for everyone who loves science on this island, and all of us who truly love Puerto Rico."

For more than half a century, Arecibo was the world's largest single-aperture telescope, its global reputation built on grand discoveries that matched its size: from the observatory, the presence of ice on the poles of Mercury was first detected, the duration of that planet's rotation was determined, and the surface of Venus was mapped; the first binary pulsar, later used to test Einstein's theory of relativity, was found by astronomers working at Arecibo. (They were awarded a Nobel Prize for the discovery in 1993.)

In 1974, a team led by an astrono-

mer at Cornell University named Frank Drake (which included Carl Sagan) put together the Arecibo Message, a radio transmission that was beamed to a cluster of stars more than twenty-five thousand light-years away. The message was meant to celebrate human technological advancement, and, supposedly, to be decoded and read by extraterrestrials. Not all radio telescopes can both receive and transmit: this was one more way in which Arecibo was special. The message itself—a series of bits and squares containing the numbers one through ten, the atomic numbers of certain elements, and a graphic of a double helix, among other scientific touchstones—was mostly symbolic, to mark the occasion of an upgrade to the telescope’s capabilities, but it captured the public imagination nonetheless. In theory, were any alien life-forms to respond, we earthlings could discern their answer at Arecibo.

Each year, more than eighty thousand visitors came to the observatory, including tourists from all over the world and twenty thousand Puerto Rican schoolchildren, who had their first brush with the cosmos there. The 1995 James Bond film “GoldenEye” featured an absurd fight scene that was shot at Arecibo, which culminated in Pierce Brosnan’s Bond dropping a scowling villain to his death from the suspended platform; two years later, in the film “Contact,” Jodie Foster and Matthew McConaughey shared a kiss beneath a starry sky with the Gregorian dome as a backdrop. “If you had to tell someone about Puerto Rico,” Monzón told me, “you’d say, ‘We have the largest radio telescope in the world,’ and they’d say, ‘Oh, sure, Arecibo.’”

That December morning at the WAPA studios, Monzón told the production team that she had to go on the air right away, and minutes later she was standing in front of a weather map, her voice cracking: “Friends, with my heart in my hands, I have to inform you that the observatory has collapsed.” She bit her lip and shook her head. “We tried to save it however we could. And we knew this was a possibility. . . .” She trailed off, looked down at the phone in her hand, and stammered that the director of the observatory

was calling. She answered on air and, for an awkward moment, even wandered off camera. Everything was true, she told her audience when she returned. It was gone.

The construction of a world-class radio telescope in Puerto Rico was, in some ways, an accident of the Cold War. After the Soviet Union launched the Sputnik satellite, in 1957, there was a lot of money in Washington for big ideas that could showcase American power and technology, particularly in space. Enter a Cornell physicist and astronomer named William Gordon, a veteran of the Second World War in his early forties, who wanted to use radio waves to study the upper atmosphere—something that required a giant transmitter and a massive dish. Nothing on this scale had ever been done. Radio astronomy was still in its early days; Cornell was among the first American universities where it was studied. The Advanced Research Projects Agency, created by President Eisenhower, funded the project, hoping that it would detect any intercontinental ballistic missiles cutting a path across the upper atmosphere.

In order to be useful for planetary study, the telescope had to be situated in the tropics, where the planets pass overhead in their orbits. Cuba, in the midst of revolution, was not an option. Hawaii and the Philippines were too far away. Puerto Rico, which had formalized its colonial relationship with the U.S. less than a decade earlier, emerged as a possibility, facilitated by a Ph.D. candidate from there who was studying at Cornell. The rest, as they say, is history. Gordon, who died in 2010, described the rather arbitrary nature of the site-selection process in a 1978 interview: “Our civil-engineer man looked at the aerial photographs of Puerto Rico and said, ‘Here are a dozen possibilities of holes in the ground in roughly the dimensions you need.’ And we looked at some and said, ‘Well, that’s too close to a town or a city or something.’ Very, very quickly he reduced it to three, and he and I went down and looked at them and picked one.”

The one that they picked was a half-hour drive into the hills from Arecibo,

a town of about seventy thousand, with a harbor and a lively central plaza. In the sixties, it was a hub of rum production, home to one of the island’s largest cathedrals and three movie theatres. Every year during carnival, people came to Arecibo from all over the island to dance to steel-drum bands. There was a fifty-room hotel on the plaza, where visiting scientists and engineers sometimes stayed, and where the *New York Times* and the *Daily News* were delivered every Sunday. Gordon and his team moved to Arecibo in 1960, setting up shop in a small office behind the cathedral. Several other mainland scientists and their families, along with a few Cuban engineers, settled in Radioville, a seaside development a couple of miles west of the center of town—named for a radio station, not for the observatory, which, in any case, was still just an idea.

Size was always a core-value proposition of the observatory at Arecibo. At the time, the largest radio telescope, near Manchester, England, had a diameter of two hundred and fifty feet; Arecibo’s telescope would be a thousand feet wide, dwarfing every other such instrument in use. The limestone hills of northern Puerto Rico were dotted with natural sinkholes, which made the excavation and construction simpler, though there was nothing simple about building a spherical dish with the area of approximately eighteen football fields. The curve of the dish had to be precise in order for the radio waves to be gathered within a movable instrument platform. According to the astronomer Don Campbell, who arrived at Arecibo in 1965 and is now working on a history of the facility, the construction of the observatory—which was built at a cost of around nine million dollars, the equivalent of more than seventy million today—was a tremendous achievement.

The original walkway to the suspended platform had wooden slats. There was no phone communication from the observatory to the city, though there was a radio link to a phone that rang on the fourth floor of the Space Sciences Building at Cornell. Back then, the trip from San Juan to the observatory might take two or three



*"You want me on time, or you want me in a turtleneck?"*

hours, longer during the harvest season, when trucks piled high with sugarcane clogged the narrow roads. Joanna Rankin, a radio astronomer at the University of Vermont, who made her first observation at Arecibo in 1969, told me that the terrain at the site was so steep and unforgiving she found it miraculous that the place had even been built. "Going up there at night was like being on an island in the sky," she said. "So vast and so delicate." The facility attracted an adventurous sort of personality in those early days, Campbell said. Still, it was good living: the scientists worked hard all week and went to the beach every Sunday. The Arecibo Country Club, which had no golf course and whose swimming pool was often drained of water, nonetheless hosted great parties, to which the scientists were often invited. And, of

course, the chance to work on a telescope of that magnitude was unique.

Planetary and atmospheric researchers used Arecibo to transmit a radio signal toward a target—a planet, an asteroid, the ionosphere—and deduced information from the echoes that came back. Radio astronomers, on the other hand, mostly listened to naturally occurring radio waves that originated in space—what was once known as "cosmic noise." Because radio astronomy doesn't require darkness, Arecibo operated at all hours of the day and night, and several of the scientists I spoke to described a tight-knit community, with colleagues working across disciplines, delighting in one another's discoveries. When word came that Joseph Taylor and Russell Hulse had won the Nobel Prize, in 1993, it was as if all the sci-

entists at Arecibo had won it. Those who heard the news while having breakfast in the cafeteria danced joyfully around the table. Taylor later had a replica of the prize made for the observatory's visitors' center.

The instruments and equipment at Arecibo were in a constant state of reinvention. In 1974, the wire mesh that originally formed the spherical surface of the dish was swapped for roughly forty thousand perforated-aluminum panels, which made it possible to observe at higher frequencies. The most striking upgrade came in the nineties, with the twenty-five-million-dollar construction of a Gregorian dome, to house more sensitive instrumentation, which added an extra three hundred tons of weight to the platform. According to Campbell, Gordon, who had retired by then, visited the site and joked that the addition "destroyed the symmetry of my telescope."

The problems began for Arecibo in the mid-aughts, when the National Science Foundation, which owned the site and supported it with about twelve million dollars a year, convened a panel of astronomers to evaluate the foundation's holdings. With the N.S.F. facing flat budget allocations, and with several large investments in new telescopes under way, the panel recommended a multimillion-dollar cut to the Arecibo astronomy budget, to be implemented over several years. The report was stark and final: if partners couldn't be found to help cover the cost of maintaining the site by 2011, Arecibo should be closed.

According to Daniel Altschuler, who was then the observatory's director of operations, the report had a catastrophic impact on morale. But Congress provided a lifeline when it mandated that NASA track at least ninety per cent of near-Earth objects larger than four hundred and fifty feet—the kind, in other words, that could wipe out entire cities. As it happened, Arecibo's powerful transmitter could beam radio waves at asteroids and measure their size, the quality of their surface, their speed, their orbit, and their rotation in astonishing detail. This added a few million dollars to the yearly budget—a

stay of execution, more or less, which eased the pressure without providing a long-term solution. Scott Ransom, a staff astronomer at the National Radio Astronomy Observatory, in Charlottesville, Virginia, made observations from Arecibo for twenty years. He told me that there was always a sense that the facility was living on borrowed time. “The next hurricane, the next earthquake, the next downturn in the economy, the next political turn was going to be the end for Arecibo,” he said.

Bob Kerr, who became the director four years after Altschuler left, said that the observatory had somehow become “the poster child for so-called life-cycle planning”—the notion that limited funds require decision-makers to decommission older facilities as new ones are developed. Even now, Kerr finds this attitude mystifying. Not only were the scientists at Arecibo still producing cutting-edge research but the observatory played a significant role in fulfilling many of the N.S.F.’s stated goals, including democratizing access and inspiring young people, particularly Puerto Rican and other Latino students, to enter the sciences. “These are things that you would have thought N.S.F. would have held as a jewel in the crown,” Kerr said. “I’ve never been able to understand why N.S.F. walked away from that accomplishment.” In 2015, he resigned. “Many staff members feared they would have to be the ones to turn off the lights,” he told me.

In 2018, less than a year after Hurricane Maria, a partnership led by the University of Central Florida took over management of the observatory. Ray Lugo, the director of U.C.F.’s Florida Space Institute, who was appointed after a long career at NASA, told me that, when Cornell oversaw the observatory, contributions from the N.S.F. ran to tens of millions of dollars a year. U.C.F. has enjoyed no such largesse. By 2023, the last year of its contract, N.S.F. contributions are slated to be reduced to just two million dollars. “They’re looking for a graceful exit,” Lugo said. U.C.F. proposed that the N.S.F. pass the title and ownership of the site to the State of Florida, which would mean that a

significant part of the fight for dollars to support the observatory would take place in Tallahassee, not Washington. But the move stalled, according to Lugo, because of opposition from José E. Serrano, a congressman representing New York, who has since retired. (Serrano, who was born in Puerto Rico, saw support of Arecibo as a federal commitment to the people there. “I didn’t want to let the N.S.F. wash their hands of it,” he said.)

Meanwhile, the damage from Hurricane Maria was assessed, and the consensus was that the telescope had been spared any serious impact—something of a miracle, considering the power of the storm. It’s less clear what the consequences of the thousands of earthquakes that shook the island in early 2020 may have been. In any case, maintenance and repair on the instrument, given its size and complexity, had always been somewhat ad hoc. “It’s not as if replacement parts can be taken off the shelf,” Luisa Fernanda Zambrano, a Ph.D. candidate who has worked at Arecibo for seven years, told me. “If something broke, repairs were always a little bit MacGyver.”

The first cable came loose on August 10th, tearing a hundred-foot gash

in the dish and damaging about two hundred and fifty of its panels. It was concerning, but did not, at the time, seem to represent an existential threat to the observatory itself. The N.S.F. authorized the purchase of replacement parts. Then, on November 6th, while engineers were still studying how repairs could be made, a second cable broke. At that point, there was no way back. On November 19th, the N.S.F. declared that Arecibo’s telescope would be decommissioned, pending an analysis of the safest way to disassemble it. That question became moot less than two weeks later, when the remaining cables gave way. The observatory, the most iconic symbol of U.S. investment on the island for nearly six decades, was gone. All that was left, in Lugo’s words, was “a bunch of aluminum panels sitting at the bottom of a sinkhole.”

A few days after the collapse, the N.S.F. released a video of the moment the telescope fell, shot from a drone flying just above the Gregorian dome. The soundless video shows the cables beginning to unravel, first one, then another, then several strands snapping at once, before the camera turns,



*“No, I’m not interested in your new hygiene protocol.”*

gazing suddenly down at the ruined dish. Another video, taken from below, near the base of one of the towers from which the dome was suspended, shows the scene with sound, an ominous, heaving rumble before the cables give and the platform swings behind the trees and offscreen. The tops of the towers snap like matchsticks.

Online, videos of the collapse were sometimes posted with a trigger warning. Chris Salter, an astronomer who worked at Arecibo for twenty-six years, told me that he hadn't been able to bring himself to watch them yet. "It's like losing a family member," he said. On social media, hundreds of Puerto Rican scientists and students posted tributes to the observatory, under the hashtags #WhatAreciboMeansToMe and #SaveTheAO. To scroll through them was to be struck again and again by the staggering scale of the loss. According to scientists at Arecibo, data collected there has fuelled thirty-five hundred scientific publications and nearly four hundred master's or Ph.D. theses. More than twenty asteroids were studied from the observatory and named after Arecibo scientists and technicians. Abel Méndez, an astronomer at the University of Puerto Rico at Arecibo, told me that the very presence of the observatory had helped him overcome the impostor syndrome that might otherwise have plagued him, as a working-class kid from a public school who dreamed of entering the sciences. He'd first seen the telescope as an eleven-year-old boy. There was no visitors' center then, so he had called from a pay phone across the street from his school and asked if he could tour the observatory. "They took me beneath the dish," he said. "To have a place like that here, in Puerto Rico, it gave me a sense of confidence."

The collapse came at a particularly fraught moment for Arecibo. Every ten years, scientists from the various branches of astronomy produce a document, a kind of road map for the coming decade of research, setting priorities for new instruments and the most promising fields of investigation—all of which is a precursor to the allocation of N.S.F. funding. Before the collapse, the team at U.C.F.

and collaborators had written more than twenty-five white papers arguing for the continued value of the observatory's work. They were, until December, cautiously optimistic, but unfortunately the decadal committee's review was nearly complete when the telescope fell. There was no indication that it would be modified at such a late date to take what had happened at Arecibo into account.

When the second cable broke, a group of astronomers from around the world began holding daily vigils on Zoom. After the collapse, the focus of those meetings widened to include plans for rebuilding. There was a sense of urgency, a desire to take advantage of the public outpouring of grief. Some of the scientists, led by Arecibo's head of radio astronomy, D. Anish Roshi, met through December and January, and in early February released another white paper, with a proposed design for what they called the Next Generation Arecibo Telescope. The telescope, which would cost an estimated four hundred and fifty million dollars to build, would provide five times more sky coverage than the fallen instrument, with more than double the sensitivity in receiving radio signals and four times the transmitting power. Some two thousand scientists and enthusiasts in more than sixty countries endorsed the white paper. In a statement to me, an N.S.F. spokesperson wrote that the foundation had received the paper and was still "collecting such input." In a report released in early March, the N.S.F. said that it was planning a community workshop this summer to encourage the submission of proposals for the future of the observatory.

Many Puerto Ricans, though, fear that Arecibo will be yet another illustration of the abandonment and neglect that have colored many aspects of life on the island. It's been decades since Puerto Rico was the prosperous tropical outpost of American capitalism, used as a contrast and a cudgel against socialist Cuba. The brightest years of the island's economy corresponded with the golden age of Arecibo, when the observatory was buzzing and the science was at its most revolutionary. The tax exemptions that

fuelled Puerto Rico's economy were phased out the year before the N.S.F. first threatened to shut down the observatory. The island has been in recession for the majority of the past fifteen years, while its debt has ballooned to more than seventy-two billion dollars—a figure so preposterous that, in 2015, Alejandro García Padilla, Puerto Rico's governor at the time, announced that it was simply unpayable. Even before Hurricane Maria, the population had shrunk by more than ten per cent from its peak, in the mid-two-thousands; after the storm, an estimated hundred and thirty thousand people moved to the mainland. And the earth continues to shake: right now, the island is experiencing hundreds of tremors every month. "We've been through a lot," Monzón told me. "There are people who don't like the word 'resilience,' but that's really what defines us." Nonetheless, the fall of Arecibo was a painful setback.

When I spoke to Lugo in mid-February, he told me that workers were preparing to clear away the debris from the shattered Gregorian dome, cutting it free from the limestone into which it had embedded itself when it fell. Some aspects of the grim cleanup, which was projected to cost between thirty million and fifty million dollars, were already under way, and the hundred or so Puerto Rican staff members on site were struggling. On more than one occasion, Lugo told me, he'd turned a corner and come across an employee, alone, overcome with emotion. Lugo, who is of Puerto Rican descent, understood what they were going through, because he was going through it, too. Zambrano was assigned to a team tasked with salvaging parts from the debris, but for weeks she avoided looking directly at the damage. When she finally did so, in early February, she wept. Among the ruins, her team found two seven-foot klystrons—specialized vacuum tubes that amplify radio frequencies—that had somehow survived the crash nearly intact. They had been installed shortly before the first cable broke and had never been used. Now she wondered if they might be saved, not to be used as intended but to be part of a museum exhibit about what Arecibo had once been. ♦



## MY APPLICATION ESSAY TO BROWN (REJECTED)

BY MICHAEL IAN BLACK

Community disruptions such as COVID-19 and natural disasters can have deep and long-lasting impacts. If you need it, this space is yours to describe those impacts.

—*The 2020-21 college-admissions Common Application.*

COVID-19 is a very destructive respiratory disease that has caused much pain and suffering for millions of people around the world. Although my heart grieves for all the lives lost, each of us has suffered in our own unique ways. For me, that suffering took the form of not getting an opportunity to play the lead in our spring drama, which was, so tragically, cancelled.

For years, I have been working toward this goal. As a freshman, I auditioned for the role of Laura in the Tennessee Williams famous American drama “The Glass Menagerie.” While I did not win the role, I find it very ironic that now, only three years later, we have all become aware that life is as precious as those fateful glass figurines due to COVID-19.

As a sophomore, my efforts to secure the role of the wrongly accused Desdemona in William Shakespeare’s important play “Othello” were, once again, thwarted. Our drama coach, Ms. Wilkie, told me during the audi-

tion process that sophomores would be considered for leading roles, but the parts of Othello, Iago, and Desdemona all went to upperclassmen, even though none of them had taken private acting classes, as I have, with Leonard Michaels (Broadway credits include “Company,” “Starlight Express,” “Pump Boys and Dinettes”), at the Willows Dramatic Academy for Young Performers.

This experience taught me that authority figures do not always have “the answers,” a lesson reinforced when Dr. Anthony Fauci, who is a very respected medical adviser to many Presidents of the United States of America, said at first that masks should not be worn but then said that they should.

When discussing masks these days, it is impossible not to conjure in one’s mind images of the famous “Comedy and Tragedy” masks, which were worn in ancient Greece during the classical period, from approximately 500 to 300 B.C.

Junior year was a turning point for my high-school theatrical career. I auditioned to portray Abigail Williams in “The Crucible,” a play that on the surface purports to be about the Salem witch trials but is in fact a

parable about McCarthyism, which was a terrible episode of American history that itself had a long-lasting impact on American history. Although I did not receive the part of Abigail Williams, I did play the pivotal role of Deputy Governor Danforth, who has several lines. Our school newspaper declared my presentation “dramatic” (review attached).

This year, my senior year, Ms. Wilkie said that we would be doing the Pulitzer Prize-winning drama “Our Town.” Never could I have foreseen that “our town” would be affected by the respiratory disease only a few short months later.

Needless to say, I watched in horror in January and February of last year as news reports emerged from China about a new respiratory ailment that threatened to sicken people and shut down vast portions of the economy. In March, we received word that our very high school would be closing its mahogany doors. The curtain on my high-school theatrical career, tragically, fell forever, before I even had the chance to audition for the central role of the Stage Manager, which I planned to reinterpret as a strong, independent woman in the wake of #MeToo.

Perhaps Fate is the real Stage Manager.

The Stanislavski method of acting teaches us to incorporate our actual experiences into our Craft. Should I have the great honor of studying at the Department of Theatre Arts and Performance Studies at Brown University, I vow to incorporate the suffering of this past year into my Art as a tribute to all those, including myself, who have experienced such tremendous loss.

It is believed that the immortal bard, William Shakespeare, said, “Instead of weeping when a tragedy occurs in a songbird’s life, it sings away its grief.” My time at Brown will be my chance to “sing away grief,” except that, unlike the tragedies of Shakespeare and other playwrights, my tragedy is real and therefore more tragic.

Please find attached a video of me in a scene from Herb Gardner’s “A Thousand Clowns” (performed with J. Leonard Mitchell, member, Actors’ Equity). ♦

# WHERE THE WILD THINGS GO

*How animals navigate the world.*

BY KATHRYN SCHULZ



One of the most amazing things I have ever witnessed involved an otherwise unprepossessing house cat named Billy. This was some years ago, shortly after I had moved into a little rental house in the Hudson Valley. Billy, a big, bad-tempered old tomcat, belonged to the previous tenant, a guy by the name of Phil. Phil adored that cat, and the cat—improbably, given his otherwise unenthusiastic feelings about humanity—returned the favor.

On the day Phil vacated the house, he wrestled an irate Billy into a cat carrier, loaded him into a moving van, and headed toward his new apartment, in Brooklyn. Thirty minutes down I-84, in the middle of a drenching rainstorm,

the cat somehow clawed his way out of the carrier. Phil pulled over to the shoulder but found that, from the driver's seat, he could neither coax nor drag the cat back into captivity. Moving carefully, he got out of the van, walked around to the other side, and opened the door a gingerly two inches—whereupon Billy shot out, streaked unscathed across two lanes of seventy-mile-per-hour traffic, and disappeared into the wide, overgrown median. After nearly an hour in the pouring rain trying to make his own way to the other side, Phil gave up and, heartbroken, continued onward to his newly diminished home.

Some weeks later, at a little before seven in the morning, I woke up to a

banging at my door. Braced for an emergency, I rushed downstairs. The house had double-glass doors flanked by picture windows, which together gave out onto almost the entire yard, but I could see no one. I was standing there, sleep-addled and confused, when up onto his hind legs and into my line of vision popped an extremely scrawny and filthy gray cat.

I gaped. Then I opened the door and asked the cat, idiotically, "Are you Billy?" He paced, distraught, and meowed at the door. I retreated inside and returned with a bowl each of food and water, but he ignored them and banged again at the door. Flummoxed, I took a picture and texted it to my landlord with much the same question I had asked the cat: "Is this Billy?"

Ninety minutes later, Phil showed up at my door. The cat, who had been pacing continuously, took one look and leaped into Phil's arms—literally hurled himself the several feet necessary to be bundled into his erstwhile owner's chest. Phil, a six-foot-tall bartender of the badass variety, promptly started to cry. After a few minutes of mutual adoration, the cat hopped down, purring, devoured the food I had put out two hours earlier, lay down in a sunny patch of grass by the door, and embarked on an elaborate bath.

How Billy accomplished his remarkable feat remains a mystery, not only to me but to everyone. In 2013, after an indoor cat named Holly went missing during a road trip with her owners to Daytona Beach and turned up back home two months later, in West Palm Beach, two hundred miles away, the collective ethological response to the question of how she did it was "Beats me." And that bafflement is generalizable. Cats, bats, elephant seals, red-tailed hawks, wildebeests, gypsy moths, cuttlefish, slime mold, emperor penguins: to one degree or another, every animal on earth knows how to navigate—and, to one degree or another, scientists remain perplexed by how they do so.

What makes this striking is that we are living in a golden age of information about animal travels. Three hundred years ago, we knew so little about the subject that one English scholar suggested in all seriousness that storks spent their winters on the moon. Thirty years ago, a herd of African elephants, the largest land mammals on earth, could still stage an annual disappearing act, crossing be-

*Why are other animals so much better than humans at way-finding?*

yond the borders of a national park each rainy season and vanishing into parts unknown. But in the last few decades animal tracking, like so much of life, has been revolutionized by technology, including satellites, camera traps, drones, and DNA sequencing. We now have geolocation devices light enough to be carried by monarch butterflies; we also have a system for tracking those devices installed on the International Space Station. Meanwhile, the study of animal travel has acquired tens of thousands of new contributors, in the form of amateurs who use cell phones and laptops to upload observational data points by the billions. And it has also acquired—perhaps unsurprisingly, given the enduring, “Incredible Journey”-esque appeal of the subject matter—a spate of new books about advances in animal navigation.

Two main lessons emerge from those books—one tantalizing, one tragic. The first is that, although we are developing a clearer picture of where animals go, we still have a lot to learn about how they find their way. The second is that the creatures with a credible claim to being the worst navigators on the planet have steadily reduced the odds of all the others getting where they need to go, by interfering with their trajectories, impairing their route-finding abilities, and despoiling their destinations. Those feckless creatures are us, of course. While other animals lend this field of study its fascination, we humans distinguish ourselves chiefly by adding existential undertones to the fundamental questions of navigation: How did we get here? And where, exactly, are we going?

Nature, in her infinite creativity, has devised many ways for animals to get from A to B. Birds fly, fish swim, gibbons swing from tree branches (the technical term is “brachiate”), basilisk lizards walk on water, and web-toed salamanders curl up in a ball and roll downhill. Certain spiders drift about on home-spun balloons, certain cephalopods use jet propulsion, and certain crustaceans hitch rides on other species. But, however they get around, all animals move for the same reasons: to eat, mate, and escape from predators. That’s the evolutionary function of mobility. The evolutionary problem it presents is that anything capable of moving must also be

capable of navigating—of finding that meal, that mate, and that hiding place, not to mention the way back home.

Some impressive examples of this ability are widely known. Salmon that leave their natal stream just months after hatching can return after years in the ocean, sometimes traversing nine hundred miles and gaining seven thousand feet in elevation to do so. Homing pigeons can return to their lofts from more than a thousand miles away, a navigational prowess that has been admired for ages; five millennia ago, the Egyptians used them, like owls at Hogwarts, as a kind of early airmail. Many other exceptional navigators, however, are humble and unsung, and learning about them is one of the pleasures of “Supernavigators: Exploring the Wonders of How Animals Find Their Way,” by David Barrie, and “Nature’s Compass: The Mystery of Animal Navigation,” by the science writer Carol Grant Gould and her husband, the evolutionary biologist James L. Gould. Each winter, a member of the crow family, the Clark’s nutcracker, recovers the food it has previously cached over a hundred square miles in up to six thousand separate locations. When spiders of the Salticidae family are confined to a maze and shown a prey animal, they will reach it even when doing so initially requires moving in the opposite direction. Rock lobsters migrate en masse from colder waters to warmer ones, travelling, as the Goulds write, “in tandem conga lines, antennae to tail” and maintaining a perfectly straight course, despite powerful currents and the uneven ocean floor.

All this is to say nothing of the greatest navigational feats in the animal kingdom: the long-distance migrations undertaken by many bird species. If, like me, you live in North America and don’t know much about ornithology, you probably associate those migrations with a jagged V of Canada geese overhead, their half-rowdy, half-plaintive calls signalling the arrival of fall and spring. As migrants go, though, those geese are not particularly representative; they travel by day, in intergenerational flocks, with the youngest birds learning the route from their elders. By contrast, most migratory birds travel at night, on their own, in accordance with a private itinerary. At the peak of migration season,

more than a million of them might pass overhead every hour after dark, yet they are no more a part of a flock than you are when driving alone in your S.U.V. on I-95 during Thanksgiving weekend.

The stories of these avian travellers are told in abundance in Scott Weidensaul’s “A World on the Wing: The Global Odyssey of Migratory Birds.” An ardent ornithologist, Weidensaul sometimes shares a few too many details about a few too many species, but one sympathizes: virtually every bird in the book does book-worthy things. Consider the bar-headed goose, which migrates every year from central Asia to lowland India, at elevations that rival those of commercial airplanes; in 1953, when Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary made the first ascent of Mt. Everest, a member of their team looked up from the slopes and watched bar-headed geese fly over the summit. Or consider the Arctic tern, which has a taste for the poles that would put even Shackleton to shame; it lays its eggs in the Far North but winters on the Antarctic coast, yielding annual travels that can exceed fifty thousand miles. That makes the four-thousand-mile migration of the rufous hummingbird seem unimpressive by comparison, until you realize that this particular commuter weighs only around a tenth of an ounce. The astonishment isn’t just that a bird that size can complete such a voyage, trade winds and thunderstorms be damned; it’s that so minuscule a physiology can contain a sufficiently powerful G.P.S. to keep it on course.

More generally, the astonishment is that *any* physiology can contain a navigational system capable of such journeys. A bird that migrates over long distances must maintain its trajectory by day and by night, in every kind of weather, often with no landmarks in sight. If its travels take more than a few days, it must compensate for the fact that virtually everything it could use to stay oriented will change, from the elevation of the sun to the length of the day and the constellations overhead at night. Most bewildering of all, it must know where it is going—even the first time, when it has never been there before—and it must know where that destination lies compared with its current position. Other species making other journeys face additional difficulties: how

to navigate entirely underground, or how to navigate beneath the waters of a vast and seemingly undifferentiated ocean.

How might an animal accomplish such things? The Goulds, in “Nature’s Compass,” outline several common strategies for staying on course. These include taxis (instinctively moving directly toward or directly away from a given cue, such as light, in the case of phototaxis, or sound, in the case of phonotaxis); piloting (heading toward landmarks); compass orientation (maintaining a constant bearing in one direction); vector navigation (stringing together a sequence of compass orientations—say, heading south and then south-southwest and then due west, each for a specified distance); and dead reckoning (calculating a location based on bearing, speed, and how much time has elapsed since leaving a prior location). Each of these strategies requires one or more biological mechanisms, which is where the science of animal navigation gets interesting—because, to have a sense of direction, a given species might also need to have, among other faculties, something like a compass, something like a map, a decent memory, the ability to keep track of time, and an information-rich awareness of its environment.

The easiest of these mechanisms to understand are those that most closely resemble our own. Most humans, for instance, routinely navigate based on a combination of vision and memory, and

we are not alone. One scientist, puzzled to find that his well-trained rats no longer knew their way around a maze after he moved it across his lab, eventually determined that they had been navigating via landmarks on the ceiling. (That was a blow to the notion, much beloved by behaviorists, that such rats were just learning motor sequences: ten steps forward, turn right, three steps forward, there’s the food.) Other animals use senses that we possess but aren’t very adept at deploying. Some rely on smell; those migrating salmon can detect a single drop of water from their natal stream in two hundred and fifty gallons of seawater. Others use sound—not in the simple, toward-or-away mode of phonotaxis but as something like an auditory landmark, useful for maintaining any bearing. Thus, a bird in flight might focus on a chorus of frogs in a pond far below in order to orient itself and correct for drift.

Many animals, however, navigate using senses alien to us. Pigeons, whales, and giraffes, among others, can detect infrasound—low-frequency sound waves that travel hundreds of miles in air and even farther in water. Eels and sharks can sense electric fields and find their way around underwater via electric signatures. And many animals, from mayflies and mantis shrimp to lizards and bats, can perceive the polarization of light, a helpful navigation cue that, among other things, can be used to determine the position of the sun on overcast days.

Other navigational tools are simul-

taneously more prosaic and more astounding. If you trap *Cataglyphis* ants at a food source, build little stilts for some of them, give others partial amputations, and set them all loose again, they will each head back to their nest—but the longer-legged ones will overshoot it, while the stubby-legged ones will fall short. That’s because they navigate by counting their steps, as if their pin-size brains contained a tiny Fitbit. (On the next journey, they’ll all get it right, because they recalibrate each time.) Similarly, honeybees adjust their air-speed in response to headwinds and tailwinds in order to maintain a constant ground speed of fifteen miles per hour—which means, the Goulds suggest, that by tracking their wing beats the bees can determine how far they have travelled.

I have presented these navigation mechanisms serially, but most creatures possess more than one of them, because different conditions call for different tools. What works at noon might not work at night, what works close to home might not work far away, and what works on a sunny day might not work in a storm. Yet even all these tools in combination cannot account for the last of the way-finding strategies described by the Goulds, which is by far the most arresting and confounding: true navigation.

True navigation is the ability to reach a distant destination without the aid of landmarks. If you were kidnapped, taken in pitch darkness thousands of miles away, and abandoned somewhere uninhabited, true navigation would be your only option for finding your way home.

To do so, you would need a compass, along with the know-how to use it—for instance, an awareness that magnetic north and geographic north are not identical. Failing that, you would need to be able to orient based on the movement of the sun—a tricky business, especially if your kidnappers weren’t kind enough to inform you of your latitude. If you plan to travel after dark, you’d better hope that you aren’t in the Southern Hemisphere, which has no equivalent of the North Star, or you’d better be able to rival Galileo with your knowledge of the nightly and seasonal course of the constellations. But, even if all this applied, you would still be in trouble if you did not also have a map. Being able to main-



tain a given bearing with perfect precision isn't much help if you have no idea where you are vis-à-vis your destination.

Some animals plainly do have such a map, or, as scientists call it, a "map sense"—an awareness, mysterious in origin, of where they are compared with where they're going. For some of those animals, certain geographic coordinates are simply part of their evolutionary inheritance. Sand hoppers, those tiny, excitable crustaceans that leap out of the way when you stroll along a beach, are born knowing how to find the ocean. When threatened, those from the Atlantic coast of Spain flee west, while those from its Mediterranean coast flee south—even if their mothers were previously translocated and they hatched somewhere else entirely. Likewise, all those birds that embark on their first migrations alone must somehow know instinctively where they are going.

But instinct alone does not explain what such birds can do. In 2006, scientists in Washington State trapped a group of white-crowned sparrows that had begun their annual migration from Canada to Mexico and transported them in a windowless compartment to New Jersey—the avian equivalent of the kidnapping thought experiment. Upon release, the juvenile birds—those making their first trip—headed south along the same bearing that they had been using back in Washington. But the adult birds flew west-southwest, correcting for a displacement that nothing in their evolutionary history could have anticipated. That finding is consistent with many others showing that birds become better navigators during their first long flight, in many cases learning entirely new and more efficient strategies. Subsequent experiments found that mature birds can be taken at least six thousand miles from their normal trajectory and still accurately reorient to their destination.

How do they do it? At present, the most compelling theory is that they make use of the earth's magnetic field. We know about this ability because it is easy to interfere with it: if you release homing pigeons on top of an iron mine, they will be terribly disoriented until they fly clear of it. When scientists went looking for an explanation for this and similar findings, they found small deposits of magnetite, the most magnetic of earth's

naturally occurring minerals, in the beaks of many birds, as well as in dolphins, turtles, bacteria, and other creatures. This was a thrilling discovery, quickly popularized as the notion that some animals have built-in compass needles.

As with many thrilling and popular scientific ideas, however, this one started to look a little strange on closer inquiry. For one thing, it turned out that birds with magnetite in their beaks weren't navigating based on north-south alignment, as we humans do when using a compass. Instead, they were relying on the inclination of the earth's magnetic field—the changing angle at which it intersects the planet's surface as you move from the poles to the equator. But inclination provides no clues about polarity; if you could sense it, you would know where you were relative to the nearest pole, but you wouldn't know which pole was nearest. Whatever the magnetite in birds is doing, then, it does not seem to function like the needle in a compass. Even more curiously, experiments showed that birds with magnetite grew temporarily disoriented when exposed to red light, even though light has no known effect on the workings of magnets.

One possible explanation for this strange phenomenon lies in a protein called cryptochrome, which is found in the retina of certain animals. Some scientists theorize that, when a molecule of cryptochrome is struck by a photon of light (as from the sun or stars), an electron within it is jolted out of position, generating what is known as a radical pair: two parts of the same molecule, one containing the electron that moved and the other containing an electron left unpaired by the shift. The subsequent spin state of those two electrons depends on the orientation of the molecule relative to the earth's magnetic field. For the animal, the theory goes, a series of such reactions somehow translates into a constant awareness of how that field is shifting around it.

If you did not quite grasp all that, take heart: even researchers who study the relationship between cryptochrome and navigation do not yet know exactly how it works—and some of their colleagues

question whether it works at all. We do know, though, that the earth's magnetic field is almost certainly crucial to the navigational aptitude of countless species—so crucial that evolution may well have produced many different mechanisms for sensing the field's polarity, intensity, and inclination. Taken together, those mechanisms would constitute the

beginnings of a solution to the problem of true navigation. And it would be an elegant one, capable of explaining the phenomenon across a range of creatures and conditions, because the magnetic field is omnipresent on this planet. Given some means of detecting it, you could rely on it by day and by night, in clear weather

and in foul, in the air and over land and underground and underwater.

That kind of sweeping explanation would be convenient, because true navigation, which was once thought to require the kind of advanced reasoning and sophisticated toolmaking exclusive to humans, seems increasingly likely to be a widely shared capacity. Countless bird species can do it, as can salmon. Those conga-line rock lobsters are so good at it that they appear to be impossible to disorient, which we know because scientists have gone to outlandish lengths to try to do so. As Barrie describes in "Supernavigators," you can cover a rock lobster's eyes, put it in an opaque container filled with seawater from its native environment, line the container with magnets suspended from strings so they swing in all directions, put the container in a truck, drive the truck in circles on the way to a boat, steer the boat in circles on the way to a distant location, drop the lobster back in the water, and—voilà—it will strike off confidently in the direction of home.

Needless to say, you and I cannot do this. If you blindfold human subjects, take them on a disorienting bus ride, let them off in a field, remove the blindfolds, and ask them to head back toward where they started, they will promptly wander off in all directions. If you forgo the bus and the blindfolds, ask them to walk across a field toward a target, and then conceal the target after





*“The white gown is for the religious ceremony. The red gown is for the secular tomato fight.”*

they start moving, they will stray off course in approximately eight seconds.

The problem isn't that humans don't have any innate way-finding tools. We, too, can steer by landmark, and we can locate the source of sounds or other environmental cues and make our way toward them. (With sounds, we do this much like frogs: by unconsciously assessing either the intensity differential or the time delay between a noise in our right ear and in our left one.) We also have a host of specialized neurons to help keep us oriented: head-direction cells, which fire when we face a certain way (relative to a given landscape, not to cardinal directions); place cells, which fire when we are in a familiar location; grid cells, which fire at regular intervals when we navigate through open areas, helping us update our own position; and boundary cells, which fire in response to an edge or obstacle in our field of vision.

All this is key to our day-to-day functioning, but none of it enables us to navigate even half as well as a newt. Still, we do sometimes perform extraordinary acts of way-finding; unlike rock lobsters, however, we have to learn how to do so. If you are the kind of person who never really grasped the parallax effect and doesn't know your azimuth from your zenith, that process can be painful. But basic way-finding competence was once far more widespread in our species than

it is today, simply because it was crucial to survival: you can neither hunt nor gather without straying from home.

Moreover, some individuals and cultures have long excelled at navigation. In “From Here to There: The Art and Science of Finding and Losing Our Way,” the British journalist Michael Bond rightly marvels at the navigational brilliance of the early Polynesians, who, about five thousand years ago, began paddling their canoes around a vast area of the Pacific Ocean now known as the Polynesian Triangle: ten million square miles of water, bounded by New Zealand, Hawaii, and Rapa Nui, with perhaps a thousand other islands scattered throughout. To steer from one of those islands to another, on routes as long as twenty-five hundred miles, those early navigators relied on “the patterns of waves, the direction of the wind, the shapes and colors of clouds, the pull of deep ocean currents, the behavior of birds, the smell of vegetation, and the movements of sun, moon, and stars.” The price of distraction or error was dire; in the vast open waters of the South Pacific, the odds of hitting an island by chance are close to zero. Understandably, then, those early Polynesians revered good navigators, and began training each new generation of them very young.

Give or take some centuries and miles, you can find similar feats in almost every culture. Many indigenous peoples of the

Far North were wonderfully adept at navigating terrain that most of us would find all but featureless; the Inuit, for instance, made their way overland using extensive systems of landmarks and could navigate coastal waters in dense fog, by means of careful attention to wave patterns and the birdcalls of their home cove. In the equally unforgiving landscapes of the American Southwest and central Australia, native peoples navigated in part by cultivating an oral tradition full of toponyms, each one containing detailed geographic information. By the fourth century B.C., the Greeks had made their way to the Arctic Circle; by the second century A.D., the Romans had reached China; and by the ninth century Indonesians had landed in Madagascar. As time went on, we began supplementing observation and memory with more and more physical tools: the astrolabe, the sextant, the compass, the map, the nautical chart, the global-positioning system.

Perversely, it is partly because these tools got so much better that so many of us got worse at navigating without them. In the past twenty years alone, the ubiquity of G.P.S.-enabled maps has all but eradicated the need to orient on our own. But long before the advent of that technology other factors were already eroding our aptitude for way-finding. High on the list was urbanization: after some three hundred thousand years of living in close proximity to wilderness, we migrated, in vast numbers and for the most part in just a few centuries, into cities. Those can be navigationally demanding in their own way, but they are full of obvious landmarks, written signage, public-transportation systems, cab drivers, and throngs of locals more or less able to offer directions. Moreover, all those artificial aids have rendered unusable certain helpful natural features. Rivers that were once easy to follow have been routed underground; the movement of the sun over days and seasons is largely obscured by narrow streets and tall buildings; and ninety-nine per cent of Americans live someplace where light pollution has reduced, sometimes to just a handful, the number of visible stars in the night sky.

On top of these changes to our natural environment, and arguably more deleterious, are changes to our social norms. We know from countless studies that the more children explore the world the bet-

ter their sense of direction. But, as Bond notes, how far they are allowed to roam on their own has declined drastically in just two or three generations. In England, in 1971, ninety-four per cent of elementary-age kids were permitted by their parents to travel alone somewhere other than to and from school. By 2010, that percentage had dropped to seven.

Those factors take a toll on our navigational abilities. Compared with neighborhood maps drawn by kids who regularly walk or bike, maps drawn by children who are driven everywhere are woefully impoverished, and the spatial memory of adults who rely heavily on G.P.S. declines more than that of those who do not. We do not know what other price we might pay for letting our navigational abilities atrophy; Bond goes too far beyond the current science when he ponders a relationship between diminished way-finding and Alzheimer's. But we do know, from other areas of learning as well as from other species, that what we do or don't internalize in our earliest years can be determinative. Perhaps there are Canada geese living year-round on a golf course or in a local park in your home town. If so, that's because they or their ancestors, having somehow missed that first flight with the rest of the flock back when they were goslings, never learned how to range far away and still find their way home.

But it is not just our own navigational capacities that we humans are endangering. Everything that has caused those to deteriorate—our increasing urbanization, our overreliance on automobiles, our ever more distant relationship to the natural world—is also wreaking havoc on the ability of other animals to get where they are going.

That havoc now takes countless forms. Illegal logging is destroying the mountain ecosystems of western Mexico, where monarch butterflies overwinter. Glyphosate, one of the world's most commonly used herbicides, is interfering with the navigational abilities of honeybees. Our cities stay lit all night, confusing and imperiling both those animals that are drawn to light and those that rely on stars to plot their course. And as we appropriate more and more land for those cities and for timber and agriculture, the portion available for other species grows

correspondingly smaller. The Yellow Sea, for instance, was once lined with nearly three million acres of wetlands that served as a vital stopover for millions of migrating shorebirds. In the past fifty years, two-thirds of those wetlands have vanished, lost to reclamation—a word that suggests, Weidensaul writes, bitterly but accurately, “humanity taking back something that had been stolen, when in fact the opposite is true.” Species that rely on those wetlands are dwindling at rates of up to twenty-five per cent per year.

And then there is climate change, which poses by far the greatest threat to the customary movement of animals around the earth. No species is unaffected by it, but long-distance navigators are particularly at risk, partly because they are reliant on more than one ecosystem and partly because the cues they use to get ready for their journeys—typically, the ratio of daylight and darkness—are increasingly decoupled from the conditions at their destinations. That is bad for the migrant, which even under optimal circumstances arrives desperately depleted from its travels, and terrible for its offspring, which may be born too late to take advantage of peak food availability. In no small measure, this pattern is to blame for the plummeting numbers of countless bird species.

Problems like these aren't caused by higher temperatures, *per se*. The Goulds point out that, throughout the two-hundred-million-year evolutionary history of birds and the six-hundred-million-year evolutionary history of vertebrates, “average global temperatures have ranged from below freezing to above one hundred degrees Fahrenheit.” During that time, the ocean has been both hundreds of feet higher and hundreds of feet lower than it is today. Not every species survived those fluctuations, but most animals can adapt to even drastic environmental change, if it happens gradually. Ornithologists suspect that those bar-headed geese fly over Mt. Everest because they have been doing so since before it existed. When it began rising up from the land, some sixty million years ago, they simply moved upward with it.

The first problem with our current climate crisis, then, is not its nature but its pace: in evolutionary terms, it is a Mt. Everest that has arisen overnight. In the next sixty years, the range of one song-

bird, the scarlet tanager, will likely move north almost a thousand miles, into central Canada. All on its own, the bird could make that adjustment fairly swiftly—but there is no such thing in nature as a species all on its own. The tanager thrives in mature hardwood forests, and those cannot simply pick up their roots and walk to cooler climates. Compounding this problem of pace is a problem of space. Over the past few centuries, we have confined wild animals to ever-smaller remnants of wilderness, surrounded by farmland or suburbs or cities. When those remnants cease to provide what the animals need, they will have nowhere left to go.

If there is a silver lining to any of this—and one must look hard to see it, as with the stars at night now—it is that the more we learn about how animals travel the more we can help them keep doing so. Knowing that salmon follow the scent of their natal stream, scientists added an odor to hatcheries and used it to lure the fish back to the Great Lakes, years after pollution levels there, now ameliorated, caused a local extinction. Knowing that peak songbird migration lasts no more than six or seven days in a given area, ornithologists have led successful efforts to dim lights during the relevant time frame. Knowing that a shorebird migrating twenty thousand miles a year uses less than a single square mile of land along the way has helped conservationists engage in smaller, more affordable, more effective preservation.

All these examples are arguments for continuing to refine our understanding of animal navigation. Some of what we stand to learn may prove existentially critical, not only for other species but for our own. In “Supernavigators,” which came out the year before the pandemic, Barrie presciently notes that we cannot control the spread of zoonotic diseases if we don't understand the travel patterns of the animals that carry them. Other findings might simply satisfy some long-standing curiosity, like that piqued by Billy's adventure; even today, Barrie writes, “the navigational skills of dogs and cats have received surprisingly little serious scientific attention.” But the chief insight to be gleaned from how other animals make their way around the world is not about their behavior but about our own: the way-finding we must learn to do now is not geographic but moral. ♦

## PAST IMPERFECT

*Elizabeth Loftus changed the meaning of memory. Now her work collides with our traumatized moment.*

BY RACHEL AVIV

Elizabeth Loftus was in Argentina, giving talks about the malleability of memory, in October, 2018, when she learned that Harvey Weinstein, who had recently been indicted for rape and sexual assault, wanted to speak with her. She couldn't figure out how to receive international calls in her hotel room, so she asked if they could talk in three days, once she was home, in California. In response, she got a series of frantic e-mails saying that the conversation couldn't wait. But, when Weinstein finally got through, she said, "basically he just wanted to ask, 'How can something that seems so consensual be turned into something so wrong?'"

Loftus, a professor at the University of California, Irvine, is the most influential female psychologist of the twentieth century, according to a list compiled by the *Review of General Psychology*. Her work helped usher in a paradigm shift, rendering obsolete the archival model of memory—the idea, dominant for much of the twentieth century, that our memories exist in some sort of mental library, as literal representations of past events. According to Loftus, who has published twenty-four books and more than six hundred papers, memories are reconstructed, not replayed. "Our representation of the past takes on a living, shifting reality," she has written. "It is not fixed and immutable, not a place way back there that is preserved in stone, but a living thing that changes shape, expands, shrinks, and expands again, an amoeba-like creature."

George A. Miller, one of the founders of cognitive psychology, once said in a speech to the American Psychological Association that the way to advance the field was "to give psychology away." Loftus, who is seventy-six, adopts a similar view, seizing any opportunity to elaborate on what she calls the "flimsy curtain that separates our imagination and

our memory." In the past forty-five years, she has testified or consulted in more than three hundred cases, on behalf of people wrongly accused of robbery and murder, as well as for high-profile defendants like Bill Cosby, Jerry Sandusky, and the Duke lacrosse players accused of rape, in 2006. "If the MeToo movement had an office, Beth's picture would be on the ten-most-wanted list," her brother Robert told me.

But after the conversation in Argentina, and after reading more about the allegations, she referred Weinstein to a different memory researcher. Over the phone, she told his lawyers, "He's a bully, and I've experienced that bullying myself." She didn't realize that Weinstein was on the line until he piped up: "I'm sorry if you felt I was bullying you."

She resisted the job for about four months, but Weinstein and his lawyers eventually prevailed, persuading her to fly to New York and testify on his behalf, in exchange for fourteen thousand dollars, only ten thousand of which was ever paid. "I realized I was wanting to back out for selfish reasons, and I didn't want to live with that feeling about myself," she told me. (The only time she has ever turned down a case for reasons of repugnance was when she refused to testify for a man accused of operating the gas chambers at Treblinka.)

On February 6, 2020, the day before she testified, she received an e-mail from the chair of the psychology department at New York University, where she was scheduled to give a lecture. Her plane tickets had already been purchased. "Unfortunately, due to circumstances beyond our control it is necessary to cancel your talk," the professor wrote. Loftus asked whether the cancellation was because of the Weinstein trial; the professor never responded.

Loftus can't remember the last time that she bought something she considered unnecessary. At Weinstein's trial,

she wore a red jacket that she bought at Nordstrom Rack for about eighty-five dollars and a thin necklace with a golden feather that she has worn every day for the past forty years. As she walked through the courthouse, she looked as if she were struggling to appear sombre. "I have to admit," she told me later, "that it is fascinating to be, you know, in the trenches with the trial of the century."

She testified for roughly an hour, presenting basic psychological research that might lead a jury to think that neutral or disappointing sexual encounters with Weinstein could have taken on new weight in light of revelations about his predatory history. "If you are being urged to remember more," Loftus said at the trial, "you may produce, you know, something like a guess or a thought, and that then can start to feel like it's a memory."

"Can an event that was not traumatic at the time be considered traumatic later?" Weinstein's lawyer asked.

"If you label something in a particular way, you can distort memory of that item," Loftus said. "You can plant entire events into the minds of otherwise ordinary, healthy people." She explained that in one experiment, her most famous study, she had convinced adults that, as young children, they had been lost in a mall, crying. "The emotion is no guarantee that you are dealing with an authentic memory," she said.

The Assistant District Attorney, Joan Illuzzi, challenged the idea that experiments done in a "pretend situation"—free of context, stripped of gender and power dynamics—are relevant to understandings of trauma.

"You do not treat victims of traumatic events, is that right?" Illuzzi said.

"I may study them," Loftus said, "but I do not treat anyone officially."

Illuzzi went on, "And isn't it true, in



*Loftus has testified for Harvey Weinstein and Jerry Sandusky, describing a “flimsy curtain” between imagination and memory.*



*Loftus, seen as a baby, has few vivid memories of her mother, Rebecca.*

1991, that the name of your book was ‘Witness for the Defense?’

“One of my books is called ‘Witness for the Defense,’” Loftus answered.

“Do you have a book called ‘Witness for the Prosecution?’” Illuzzi asked. A few people in the courtroom laughed.

“No,” Loftus said, calmly.

The next week, at the U.C. Irvine law school, where Loftus teaches classes, she passed by a colleague who specializes in feminist theory. “Harvey Weinstein—how could you?” the professor said. “How could you!” (Loftus remembers that the conversation occurred at the buffet table at a faculty meeting, but the colleague told me, “I know that it didn’t, because I would

not have stood next to her in a buffet line.”) Loftus said, “I was reeling. How about the presumption of innocence? How about ‘the unpopular deserve to have a defense?’”

Not long afterward, the dean of the law school received a letter from a group of law students, who demanded that the administration “address the acute problem of Elizabeth F. Loftus.” “We are terrified that she is a professor for future psychologists and lawyers and is training them to further traumatize and disenfranchise survivors,” they wrote. The students asked that Loftus be removed from the faculty, but she continues to teach.

Her friends and family were also

skeptical of her decision to testify for Weinstein. Her ex-husband, Geoff Loftus (whom she calls her “wasband,” because they still treat each other like family), an emeritus professor of psychology at the University of Washington, said that he thought, “Oh, God, Beth, really? Come on.” Her brother David told me, “Here these women are blossoming into a world in which people are finally going to listen to them, and then they’re going to have some professor on the stand—someone they’ve never met before—tell the jury that they can’t be believed.”

“I’m completely satisfied with my life,” Loftus wrote in a leather-bound journal, in 1958, when she was thirteen. “I have a pretty good personality (not dull or anything), my family is one of the happiest.” She grew up in Bel Air, in Los Angeles, and spent weekends at the beach or at friends’ pools. For six years, she wrote in her journal every day, marking whether the weather was clear, cloudy, or rainy; recording compliments (in a middle-school poll, she won “best figure,” “lovable,” “most comical,” and “irresistible”); and describing the expanding circle of boys with whom she chatted on the phone. “Life is really my best friend,” she wrote.

She almost never mentioned her parents, whom she outlined in impersonal terms—“the family.” When I asked Loftus to describe her mother, Rebecca, she could come up with only one vivid memory, of shopping for a skirt with her. Loftus’s brother Robert said that he also faced an “empty canvas.” He told me, “I can’t grab an adjective or noun to describe my mother. There’s nothing that will allow me to say, ‘This is who she was as a person.’ There is no coagulation, no coherence.” He does have one memory, from when he was seven or eight, of standing by the front door of their house and misbehaving: “I was waiting for her to counter my disobedience with enforcement, and she just couldn’t pull herself together. I remember thinking, Oh, my God, she can’t even parent me. I pitied her.”

One evening, when Loftus was a young teen-ager, she and her father, a doctor, who was barbed and aloof, were driving through Los Angeles. They stopped at a red light and watched a couple, laughing,

cross the street. “See those people having fun?” Loftus’s father said. “Your mother can’t have fun anymore.”

Loftus’s diaries read like an exercise in proving that she existed on a different emotional register from that of her mother. She summarized her mood with descriptions like “happyville,” “I’m so happy!” and “Everything’s GREAT!” It’s as if she were continually trying to outdo herself. “I can honestly say that this was one of the happiest days I’ve ever lived through,” she wrote in eighth grade. A few days later, she reached new heights: “I’ve never been so happy. I love the world & everyone.”

Loftus and her brothers didn’t have language to describe what ailed their mother. Their father seemed annoyed by her vulnerability. Eventually, Rebecca’s siblings intervened and sent her to a private psychiatric hospital in Pennsylvania, near her brother’s home, where she was treated for depression. “My mother’s family blamed my father for being so emotionally flatlined and unavailable that he drove her to madness,” Robert said. In her journal, Loftus, who was then fourteen, never mentioned her mother’s absence. “Life’s wonderful!” she wrote, after Rebecca had been away for four months. “When I’m old and lonely at least I’ll know once I wasn’t!”

After nearly half a year, Rebecca was discharged from the hospital, and Loftus and her aunt Pearl, along with her daughter, Debbi, drove to Pennsylvania to pick her up. They planned to spend time together at a vacation lodge in the woods, fifty miles south of Pittsburgh, that Loftus’s uncle owned. But, five days after arriving, Loftus drew an arrow in her diary that pointed to a smudge on the page. “A tear,” she explained. “Today, July 10, 1959, was the most tragic day of my life,” she wrote. “We woke up this morning and found her gone, and an hour later we found her in the swimming pool. Only God knows what had happened.”

The coroner ruled the death an accident. “She apparently fell in unnoticed,” a front-page article in the Uniontown, Pennsylvania, *Evening Standard* reported. But when Loftus returned to California and described the death as accidental, Robert said, “our father tried to overrule her in his fatherly way, to give his realistic stamp on what had happened. He

told her, ‘Beth, it was suicide.’” For decades, Loftus and her brothers didn’t discuss with one another what had happened, but they all individually decided to ignore their father’s interpretation.

Within a week of her mother’s death, Loftus’s journal had returned to its usual jaunty tone. “I’m a happy teenager!” she wrote in December. “It’s sort of sad to leave this year behind—it was such a wonderful year for me.” But, on some pages of her journal, she used a paper clip to attach scraps of paper, where she shared private thoughts that she called “removable truths.” She could pull them out if anyone ever demanded to read her journals. In one “removable truth,” she blamed herself for her mother’s suffering. “She would be watching T.V. and ask me to come sit by her,” she wrote. “‘I’m busy now,’ was my usual reply.” She labelled the memory, written in elegant cursive, “My Greatest Regret.”

When Loftus discussed her mother’s death, Maryanne Garry, a former postdoctoral researcher in Loftus’s lab, was reminded of the passage in John Knowles’s novel “A Separate Peace,” from 1959, in which the narrator “jounced the limb” of a tree, causing his best friend to fall and eventually die. The language in the passage is vague enough that it’s unclear if the act was intentional. “I was always struck by something similar in Beth’s ambiguous framing of her mother’s death,” Garry told me. “It was as if the death existed without causality or agency.”

Loftus’s career has been defined by her recognition that the language we use to describe an event will change the way we remember it. She received her Ph.D. from Stanford in 1970, writing a dissertation, on mathematical word problems, that she found boring. She wished to study a topic more relevant to people’s lives. In 1973, around the time that she accepted a job at the University of Washington, she borrowed recordings of car crashes from police departments and began examining the participants’ recollections. When she asked people to estimate the speed of the cars when they “smashed,” they remembered the cars going faster than when she used the word “hit.” She went on to publish dozens of studies showing that she could manipulate people’s

recollections of the past in predictable and systematic ways. “Does the malleable human memory interfere with legal justice?” she titled one article, in 1975. She said, “I remember my father saying to me, ‘I don’t like the word ‘malleable.’”” She doesn’t recall why. She stuck with the term, which became closely associated with her body of research and gave energy to an emerging innocence movement. (Her father died not long after the conversation.)

Defense lawyers began calling on her to testify about the ways that memories are distorted by leading questions, sloppy police lineups, and cross-racial identification of faces. (The chance of misidentification is greatest when the witness is white and the defendant is Black.) James Doyle, a former head of Massachusetts’s Public Defender Division, who co-wrote a book with Loftus, said that she “obliterated the idea that there is a permanent, stable memory capacity in humans.” He told me, “Her work changed the whole story of what an eyewitness case was about, and destabilized a solid and routine part of the criminal caseload.”

Beginning in the early nineties, Loftus began getting questions about a new kind of case. Incest had entered the American consciousness, and women in therapy were uncovering memories of being abused by their fathers. The discovery was reminiscent of a similar one, a century earlier, when Freud realized that his patients had suppressed memories of being sexually abused as children. Within a few years, Freud had changed his mind, arguing that his patients were afflicted by fears and fantasies surrounding sex abuse, not by memories of the actual thing. In doing so, Freud walked away from a revelation—that sexual abuse of children was prevalent—but also proposed a more complex theory of the mind.

A new generation of therapists was careful not to repeat Freud’s mistake. “If you think you were abused and your life shows the symptoms, then you were,” Ellen Bass, a leader in the recovered-memory movement, wrote, in 1988. The movement challenged the foundation of family life—the home, it turned out, was the site of cruelty and betrayal—as well as the authority of experimental psychology. Trauma was described as an

extraordinary and idiosyncratic experience that could not be simulated in a lab, or even expressed by the rules of science. “Trauma sets up new rules for memory,” the psychiatrist Lenore Terr wrote, in 1994.

Loftus emerged as perhaps the most prominent defender of her field. She could find little experimental evidence to support the idea that memories of trauma, after remaining dormant for a decade or more, could abruptly spring to life, and she worried that therapists, through hypnosis and other suggestive techniques, were coaxing memories into being. As she began testifying on behalf of men who she believed may have been wrongly accused, she came to be seen as an expert who was complicit with, rather than challenging, institutions of power.

Phoebe Ellsworth, a social psychologist at the University of Michigan, said that, when Loftus was invited to speak at her school in 1989, “the chair would not allow her to set foot in the psychology department. I was furious, and I went to the chair and said, ‘Look, here you have a woman who is becoming one of the most famous psychological scientists there is.’ But her rationale was that Beth was setting back the progress of women irrevocably.” Ellsworth and Loftus, who are friends from graduate school, had started their careers at a time when female research psychologists were so rare that the two of them were treated “like dogs walking on hind legs,” Ellsworth said. Loftus identified with an earlier generation’s feminism—she wanted to be treated as equal to men, but she preferred not to draw attention to her particular experiences as a woman. “I’ve trained myself to be wary of emotions, which can distort and twist reality,” she has written.

Loftus rose to prominence at a time when the computer was becoming the dominant metaphor for the mind. Social and cultural forces were treated as variables that compromised memory processes, turning people into unreliable narrators of their own experiences. “That’s the frightening part—the truly horrifying idea that what we think we know, what we believe with all our hearts, is not necessarily the truth,” Lof-

tus wrote in *Psychology Today*, in 1996.

But social influences on memory, however transformative, need not lead to a “horrifying” result. Janice Haaken, a professor emerita of psychology at Portland State University, who has written several books about memory, told me, “Scholars who look at the history of trauma understand the importance of groups—often created by political or social movements—in holding on to memories. There is always a contest over versions of truth in history, and, if you don’t have other people to help you hold on to your memories, you are going to be disqualified, or seen as crazy.”

Haaken, who has been deeply involved in feminist activism for forty years, added that she is cautious of slogans, popularized by the MeToo movement, urging people to “believe women.”

She said, “I think, in some areas of the women’s movement, white feminists have not dealt with our country’s history of putting people in prison, usually those of color, based on eyewitness testimony that is wrong.” Few psychologists have been more influential than Loftus in revealing how standard police procedures can contaminate memory. Haaken said, “We have enough history behind us as a movement to demand more than the principle ‘believe women,’ which reduces us to children and denies us the complexity and nuances of everyday remembering.”

Loftus talks about her personal history candidly, yet there’s a sense in which it is also deadwood. Her openness does not translate into reflectiveness, though she welcomes personal questions. Garry, her former researcher, described her as a “disarmingly friendly, fuzzy Muppet.” She seems genuinely curious about other people’s experiences and a little tired of her own. The first time we talked, she warned me that, because of the pandemic, “I’m feeling a little bored and boring.”

She has lived alone for thirty years. She and Geoff tried to have a child, in the mid-eighties, but, Loftus said, “it was many years of seeing blood at the end of the month and saying, ‘Oh, shit.’” When her gynecologist recommended that she have surgery to remove a fibroid from her uterus, she was so annoyed by

the idea of missing days of work that she turned her surgery into an experiment. Her anesthesiologist read her a hundred words while she was unconscious, to see if she could recall them later. “We here report the results of a rigorous experimental test conducted on a patient who was undergoing an abdominal myomectomy under general anesthesia,” Loftus wrote in the journal *Acta Psychologica*, in 1985. “The patient was an experimental psychologist with a keen interest in human memory.”

The fibroid was removed, but she couldn’t get pregnant. Six years later, she and Geoff divorced, in large part because of the intensity of her work ethic. “When I let up to do something that seems frivolous I feel guilty,” she told a friend in an e-mail. Loftus had asked Geoff how many vacations she had to take per year to save the marriage. But he said that relaxation quotas wouldn’t work: even if she consented to theoretically pleasurable activities, she wouldn’t enjoy them.

For decades, during cross-examinations, lawyers have accused Loftus, a childless scientist, of being unable to comprehend the pain of victims. “You really don’t know anything about five-year-old children who have been sexually abused, do you?” a prosecutor asked her, in 1985, at the trial of a camp counselor accused of molesting his campers.

“Well, yes, I do,” Loftus responded. “I do know something about this subject because I was abused when I was six,” by a babysitter. At that moment, she later wrote, “the memory flew out at me, out of the blackness of the past, hitting me full force.”

The defense attorney at the trial, Marc Kurzman, recalled a “stunned silence.” He said, “That was supposed to be the big finale of the cross-examination, and it pretty much shut the whole thing down.”

Some scholars have proposed that Loftus has her own repressed memories. “She has not been able to integrate her own experience into her research,” two literary critics wrote, in 2001. “There is something split off in Loftus,” the psychologist Lauren Slater asserted in her book “Opening Skinner’s Box,” from 2004. “She is the survivor who questions the validity of survivorship. That’s one way out of a bind.”



The criticisms seem to suggest that there is only one kind of story that women can tell about sexual abuse. But Loftus never forgot what happened. She had shared the memory with Geoff shortly after they married. "It wasn't 'Oh, my God, I was abused,'" he said. "It was more like 'What's more, I myself was abused.'" He went on, "I have a very poor recollection of the conversation, which means that I probably wasn't shocked by either the act itself or the casualness with which she described it."

Loftus's babysitter used to sit on the sofa with her, gently scratching her arm with the tips of his nails—"a sweet touch, soft, comforting, lulling," as she writes in "Witness for the Defense," a memoir focussed on her work in court. One night, after her brothers had gone to bed, the babysitter led her into her parents' bedroom, lifted her dress over her head, took off her underpants, and pulled her on top of him. Their pelvises were touching and she felt him pushing against her, until she squirmed off the bed and ran out of the room.

Loftus was under the impression that all girls start menstruating at the age of thirteen. But, when her thirteenth birthday passed and she hadn't got her period, "I wondered if he did something that made me turn pregnant," she told me. Loftus imagined that she had somehow been in a state of latent pregnancy for seven years. Eventually, she got her period, but she was distressed when she couldn't figure out how to use a tampon. "I actually went to my father and said, 'I'm worried there's something wrong with me, because I can't get this in,'" she told me. "And he drew me the hymen and explained that I was still a virgin, and then I felt better."

"That actually does sound traumatic," I told her, in one of our many conversations on Zoom. "Seven years later, it was still in your mind that you might have been raped."

She paused for a few seconds, and ran her hand through her hair, which is the color of frost, and spread it like a fan. "I'm not sure," she said. "I know you think that. But, somehow, you know, somehow when your mother gets depressed and goes away and drowns in a swimming pool—I mean, I had a lot more on my mind."

She explained that, in "Witness for the Defense," to avoid liability, she gave her babysitter a pseudonym. "I don't know why I named him Howard," she said.

When reading her diary, I noticed that Howard was the name of Loftus's first boyfriend—an important and ambiguous figure who "serenaded me on the phone" ("Wow! Blast!") and also dumped her for another girl, causing her to cry in front of her mother.

Loftus dismissed the idea that the name had any significance. She'd had many boyfriends as an adolescent, so, she said, "whatever name I gave the babysitter might have been, at some point, the name of a boyfriend."

Her brother David said that he had once encouraged Loftus to go to therapy, but she told him, "I can't, because the next time I take the witness stand they'd grill me with questions." (Loftus doesn't remember the conversation.) He said, "I'm not sure if that's why, or if the wounds are so deep and her habit all her life has been to avoid them."

**A**t court appearances in the late nineties, Loftus was often asked about a landmark case that seemed to provide concrete evidence of repression. In 1984, a child forensic psychiatrist, David L.

Corwin, recorded an interview with a six-year-old named Nicole, whose parents were fighting for custody of her. Nicole seemed sad and subdued. She said that her mother was "rotten" and had put her finger up her vagina, an allegation that her father also made, in court. Corwin found the story of sex abuse credible, and, as a result, Nicole's mother lost custody.

Ten years later, when Nicole was sixteen, her father died, and she was placed in a foster home. She couldn't remember why she and her mother were estranged, and she asked Corwin if she could see the video from when she was a child. Corwin agreed, but by the time they met to watch the video, nearly a year later, Nicole had reunited with her mother. She had begun to wonder if, to get custody of her, her father had made up a story about abuse and coached her to say it. "I want her to be my mom," Nicole told Corwin. "I don't want to deny her a part of my life, so I've chosen to say, 'Well, if my dad did lie, it was just because he wanted me so badly.'"

"Do you remember anything about the concerns about possible sex abuse?" Corwin, who recorded the conversation, asked her.

"No," she said, closing her eyes. "I



*"Oh, great. Now I'll be late for work."*

mean, I remember that was part of the accusation, but I don't remember anything." She inhaled deeply. "Wait a minute, yeah, I do."

"What do you remember?" he asked her.

"Oh, my gosh, that's really, really weird," she said. "I remember it happening, that she hurt me." She started crying. "I was getting a bath, and I don't remember anything specific until I felt that pain." She went on, "It's like I took a picture, like a few seconds long, a picture of the pain. . . . That's all the memory consists of." With Nicole's consent, Corwin published a paper in *Child Maltreatment*, in 1997, that described how a forgotten memory of sexual abuse had resurfaced eleven years later. He also played the set of videos of Nicole at professional conferences. Nicole cut off contact with her mother again.

Loftus watched the videos and was skeptical of the conclusions that psychologists had drawn from them. She decided to embark on what she called "my own little innocence project." Although Nicole's name wasn't used in the paper, there were biographical clues in the videos. With the help of two private detectives, Loftus discovered Nicole's identity and obtained sealed court records, which revealed that child-protective services had originally dismissed the allegations brought by Nicole's father. Loftus interviewed Nicole's foster mother, stepmother, and mother, Joan Blackwell, who shared with Loftus poetry that she had written about the pain of being separated from her daughter. Blackwell told me that she felt at ease with Loftus. "It had been a long time since I had felt anyone believed me," she said, adding that the family-court system had seemed sexist. "The attitude was 'He wouldn't lie.'"

Not long afterward, an administrator from the University of Washington's Office of Scholarly Integrity told Loftus that she had fifteen minutes to hand over all her notes and files on Nicole's case. Nicole had accused Loftus of invading her privacy. The university forbade Loftus to research Nicole's case, or even to speak about it, an experience that Loftus described as an "Orwellian nightmare." "Who, after all, benefits from my silence?" she said, in 2001, in her acceptance speech for the William

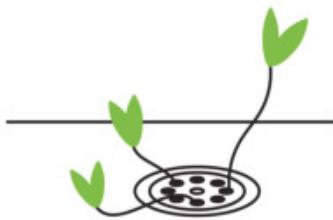
James Award, one of the most prestigious honors in the field of psychology.

After an investigation that lasted nearly two years, the university cleared Loftus of scholarly misconduct, but she felt so betrayed that she took a job at U.C. Irvine. In 2002, she published the results of her research in the *Skeptical Inquirer*, arguing that Nicole's mother had likely been wrongly accused. Loftus called her report a "case study of a case study—a cautionary tale." Her friend Jacqueline Spector, a lecturer at the University of Washington, said that Loftus's psychological motivations were clear. "Beth didn't have her mother long enough, and here was this mother that, clearly—from Beth's perspective—had been robbed of her daughter."

Loftus told me, "I think I had this fantasy—maybe I could bring the mother and daughter back together."

Instead, Nicole sued Loftus for defamation. Reading Loftus's article, she told me, was like "taking a very coarse piece of sandpaper and rubbing it over my entire life."

In Nicole's interview with Corwin when she was seventeen, she told him that she hoped to become a psychologist. "I'm prepared to give my life, devote my life, to helping other kids who have gone through what I've gone through," she said. After ten years in the Navy, working as a helicopter pilot, she fulfilled her goal, getting a Ph.D. in clinical psychology and writing her dissertation on how trauma affects mem-



ory and identity. By then, her case was so well known—in the lawsuit against Loftus (which she ended up losing), she disclosed her full name—that one of her professors likened her to H.M., the famous patient with an unusual form of amnesia who was studied from 1957 until his death. "I was appalled," Nicole told me. "My professor was making the point that Loftus had the right to do

what she did, because my case has now become one of these 'for the good of science' kind of situations."

As part of her psychological training, Nicole led a therapy group for adult survivors of sexual abuse. As she listened to the other women's stories, she felt, for the first time, that she was part of a collective. Her suffering no longer seemed like a character flaw. She wasn't an object in someone else's story—she could tell it in her own words. Being a survivor soon became the defining fact of her life, the scaffolding on which she rebuilt her identity.

Yet there were days when she asked herself, What if it didn't happen? She tried to ignore the question. But, occasionally, when a friend asked about her case against Loftus, or when she was cleaning her office and came across her old copy of the *Skeptical Inquirer*, she would revisit the article. She was disturbed to see that Loftus had made compelling points.

Some days, Nicole believed that her mother had been wrongly accused, and then she'd wake up the next morning having changed her mind. In a conversation with the philosopher Eleanor Gordon-Smith, who interviewed Nicole for her book "Stop Being Reasonable," from 2019, Nicole said that her uncertainty "affected every *single* relationship, in every possible way. It requires me to have a sense of self that is not dependent on whether I was sexually assaulted by my mother. It's a really big ask." She tried to step away from her identity as a survivor, a process that she compared to dieting: "You start, and then you lose your motivation and you go back to the way you used to eat. I would start, and then I would revert back to my old way of thinking."

Nicole, who is forty-two, spoke to me from her home office, in San Diego, where she now sees patients remotely. She sat in a swivel desk chair and wore a T-shirt that quoted Desmond Tutu: "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor." When I asked if she knew of psychological literature about the effects of having one's memories doubted, she told me, "Oh, no. There would not be literature on that, because clinical psychologists are trained to believe."

I was interested in what it meant to

## PEERS

I'm thinking of you beautiful  
and young, of me young  
  
and confused and maybe  
beautiful. There were lots of us—  
  
these were our twenties, when,  
post-9/11, we were about to  
  
inherit the world, and we had no idea  
what to do with it. And look  
  
what we did, and we didn't.  
And now look at us, and it.  
  
We turned away for a blip, started  
whispering, kissing, had kids,  
  
bought houses, changed bulbs,  
submitted claims, changed channels,  
  
FaceTimed, streamed, upgraded,  
were two-day-shipped to, and midway  
  
through our prime earning years  
we look up again, decades groggy,  
  
decades late. Forgive us, we thought—  
but now it doesn't matter. These are our  
  
outcomes, consequences, faults,  
forties, when the hourglass  
  
is beeping and bleak and people  
like us have memories like this  
  
and wonder if the beauty that's left  
is really still beautiful, if it was.

—*Craig Morgan Teicher*

“cross the bridge,” as she'd described it, from victim to survivor. I asked if it was similar to what Susan Brison, a philosopher who has written about her experience of rape, had characterized in her book, “Aftermath,” as a process of taking control of one's narrative. “That control, repeatedly exercised,” Brison wrote, “leads to greater control over the memories themselves, making them less intrusive and giving them the kind of meaning that permits them to be integrated into the rest of life.”

Nicole was silent for a few seconds. “You know, I realized something,” she said. A few weeks earlier, she had exchanged e-mails with a woman whose memories of abuse Loftus had cast doubt on at a civil trial. “We kind of realized together that we are survivors of Elizabeth Loftus,” Nicole said. For years, she'd had intrusive thoughts. “I'm not sure if there is a greater sense of outrage than that of having your own memories challenged,” she said. She had felt terror at the idea of seeing Loftus at psychology

conferences. Recently, though, “I stopped wanting to hide under a chair every time I thought she might be at a conference and decided, No, I'm going to stand here and let her see me,” she said.

Nicole has entered a new phase in sorting out whether her mother abused her. “Instead of waking up and wondering where I'm going to land today,” she told me, “I just know that I don't know and that I'm probably not going to know in my lifetime.” She has found herself in a position not dissimilar to that of Freud's female patients whose memories of abuse were believed and then, a few years later, discredited. But she doesn't feel commandeered into someone else's theory anymore. “On the face of it, I look like a sexual-trauma survivor,” she told me, referring to problems that she had with trust. But she wondered if the conflict between her parents or her time in foster care were traumas that could hold similar explanatory power. In recent years, she has drifted in and out of a relationship with her mother. “I realized that I could just never give her what she wants from me, which is to go back in time and be allowed to mother me again,” she said.

I told her of Loftus's hope that her work might have inspired Nicole and her mother to reunite. “It's transference,” Nicole said of Loftus's preoccupation with her case. “To act out this darkness from her own past.” In her clinical practice, Nicole is cautious whenever she faces patients whose struggles remind her of her own. “It is paramount that I say to myself, ‘Nicole, it is not your job to save this person. You can't go back and save yourself by saving this person.’”

“I unravelled it,” Loftus's brother David, a seventy-four-year-old lawyer and the president of a Buddhist meditation center, told me in our first conversation. One night, when he was in his late thirties, he was in a hot tub and began to feel sleepy. “It was part of some drug experience, and, as I was beginning to submerge, something woke me up,” he said. “I thought, Wow, this is what happened to our mom. It became so clear to me that there was nothing intentional about her death.”

His younger brother, Robert, a property manager in Garberville, a small town near the northern tip of California, had

pieced together a different explanation. In the years after their mother's death, he was in "grief free fall," he told me. "It's like somebody jumping out of a plane who hasn't figured out to pull the cord on their parachute—and that's where I came up with the idea of 'accidental suicide.' The fact that it is an oxymoron doesn't bother me at all." He theorized that his mother might have taken sleeping pills and then had some sort of panic attack—perhaps she felt that her skin was on fire—and jumped into the water. He went on, "But David tries to big-brother me and outmaneuver me, and the other night he was trying to get me to walk back the 'accidental suicide' label and say, 'Why not 'accidental drowning?'"

Since the pandemic began, Loftus and Robert have spoken on the phone daily. David joins their calls most week-ends. Recently, on a Saturday evening, we all talked together on Zoom. "I'm pretending it's happy hour," Loftus said. She sat in her home office, in her three-bedroom condominium in University Hills, a residential complex for faculty at U.C. Irvine. "So, hey—cheers," she said. She took a sip of white wine.

A few days earlier, I had interviewed their cousin Debbi. "Oh, it was suicide," she told me when I asked about Rebecca's death. That I had framed this as a question seemed absurd to her. "We found her, my mother and I," she said. "We found her in a cold spring. I remember it like it was yesterday." Debbi had been twelve at the time. Later, her father showed her a suit of his with a bullet hole through one sleeve and explained that Rebecca had initially attempted to kill herself with a gun that he kept in his bedroom closet. "She must have fired it too early," Debbi told me. "The bullet went through my father's suit. It was at that point that my parents knew she needed to be institutionalized."

Debbi hadn't seen her cousins for years. Loftus asked me what I had learned. "We all would like our memories stimulated, if they can be," she said, at the beginning of our call.

I warned them that Debbi did not think there was any ambiguity about their mother's death. "Maybe there's a reason you've not asked her these questions," I said. "I don't want to mess around with your—"

"Denial system?" Loftus asked.

"With the way that you've made peace with things that happened a long time ago," I said.

"I understand that completely," Loftus said. "In Linda Meyer Williams's paper"—a 1994 study in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*—"she did not want to tell people, 'I have records from the hospital that you were abused,' because, if they were in denial and living with that, maybe it would do something bad to them. But I think we are giving you permission."

"You have to tell us, or you're not in our circle of trust anymore," David joked. He was sitting at his desk in a two-bedroom wooden geodesic dome in Northern California.

"Yeah, our memories are already polluted to the saturation point," Robert said.

I explained that Debbi had been with their aunt Pearl when she found Rebecca's body—in a cold-water spring, not a pool. I was about to continue when Loftus interrupted, "The swimming pool was a little lake-ish, so I'm not sure I trust that. I mean, if it were in an urban area you would know the difference between a lake and a pool, but in this summer place—what is a pool?"

"Sounds to me, from the country-property point of view, that our idea of a pool is much different," Robert said. He had been a math prodigy, the most brilliant of the three children, Loftus had told me. Now his speech had the cadence of someone who had spent his formative years socializing with stoners. He does not have an Internet connection, so he was sitting in the trailer of his adult son, Abe, who lives on his property, and was sharing his hot spot. Abe sat next to him, staring out the trailer window.

"What else did Debbi remember?" Loftus asked.

I said that Debbi seemed surprised that anyone believed Rebecca's death was an accident. "She sort of acted like it was a no-brainer," I said.

"If she believes that..." Loftus paused for a few seconds. "I'm not sure she believes it from her own observation or what she would have learned afterward. Debbi was living in the world of the relatives who hated our father, so I don't think Debbi's age-twelve observations

are—I mean, Debbi's great, but." She stopped mid-sentence.

The sun was setting in California, and there were few working light bulbs in Abe's trailer. Robert wore a flannel shirt, unbuttoned, and his image was so dim and grainy that he somehow looked like he was twenty again. He said, "When Beth did the Weinstein case, she was saying that after one of the gals went through the interrogation it sort of massaged her memory in a way to get it to migrate."

"You don't need to bring in Weinstein right now, Robert," Loftus said, amiably.

"I was sort of thinking of this in terms of how Debbi viewed what happened to Mom," Robert continued, "and how the general attitude in her home might have affected Debbi's memory."

"Leave Weinstein out of it," Loftus said. "You know, because honestly—I was a blind witness. I didn't even talk about any specific people. It was just stuff about memory."

When I had first spoken with David, he mentioned hearing a story about his mother getting hold of his uncle's gun. I told him that Debbi had heard about a similar incident.

"That is total news," Loftus said.

"Not to me," David said.

"How did you know?" Loftus asked him.

Beyond interactions on social media, David hadn't had a conversation with Debbi in several decades, and even as children they were not close. "I bet she posted something," he said. "That's my only guess. On Instagram. Or Facebook."

"Debbi wouldn't have posted about this on Facebook," Loftus said.

"I know—that doesn't make sense," David said. "That's so interesting: when you have such a clear memory and then you go, Well, how did I come to know what I believe? And you can't think of any way in which you could have acquired that knowledge." David spent five years studying Tibetan Buddhism in a Himalayan village in India, and he seemed well suited to this line of pondering. "Did something happen in a dream and I remembered it as true?" he said.

Earlier that day, Loftus had forwarded a scan of her 1959 diary to David. It was the first time he had read her

# Visions\* OF THE Post-Pandemic Future

\*REVISED

LAST SPRING, I HAD ALL THESE FANTASIES ABOUT WHAT IT WOULD BE LIKE WHEN THE PANDEMIC ENDED.

I'M GONNA HUG EVERYONE SO HARD--

CAN'T WAIT TO PUT MY FACE RIGHT INTO ALL THE OTHER FACES!



THIS SPRING, MY VISIONS OF THE FUTURE ARE DIFFERENT, BECAUSE I'M DIFFERENT.

HOW DO I... PEOPLE?



INSIDE THE GRIM COCOON OF QUARANTINE, I'VE METAMORPHOSED INTO... SOMEONE ELSE.

OR SOMETHING ELSE. LIKE A TOAD, BUT WITHOUT THE COOL AMPHIBIAN POWERS.



NOW I JUST TRY TO PICTURE HOW I'M GOING TO PRESENT THE NEW ME ONCE THINGS OPEN UP FOR REAL.

...HELLO...



MY INSTINCT IS TO GET OUT IN FRONT OF ANY CRITICISM BY BEATING EVERYONE TO THE PUNCH.

OK, SO I KNOW I'VE BECOME A TOAD ON THE OUTSIDE. BUT IT'S IMPORTANT THAT YOU KNOW I'VE ALSO BECOME A TOAD ON THE INSIDE.



I THOUGHT THIS YEAR WOULD BE ENOUGH TO BURN AWAY THE LAST OF MY VANITY.

NOPE! JUST ENOUGH LEFT TO BE APPALLED AT MYSELF! DO THEY MAKE NECK MASKS?



MY INTERNAL COMPASS FOR PHYSICAL INTERACTION IS COMPLETELY OUT OF WHACK.

WAIT, AM I HAVING A FIGHT, FLIGHT, OR FUCK RESPONSE? WHAT IS HAPPENING TO ME?



I KNOW I'M GONNA BE OVERWHELMED BY THE LITTLST THINGS.

OH, MY GOD, MOUTHS, MOUTHS EVERYWHERE--



I GUESS I COULD JUST LEAN INTO THE WEIRDNESS OF WHAT I'VE BECOME.

HELL WITH IT, IT'S MUUMUUS AND SOCIAL AWKWARDNESS FOR ME FROM NOW ON.



I MEAN, I HAVE TO FIGURE EVERYBODY ELSE GOT WEIRD, TOO.

HELLO... I EAT FLIES NOW.



ee.flake



ADT

*"We ended up with a few extra flying buttresses, so we buttressed some other stuff."*

journal, and he was curious about the entry she had written the night before their mother's death. "Should I read it?" he asked.

Loftus, who hadn't read the journal for years, nodded.

"My mother and I had a long talk until midnight all about her childhood and many other things," he read. "I was really happy because we'd never been too close before, and now we were talking like we really were."

David looked up from the page he was reading. "Beth, are you crying?" he said, tenderly.

She was. "It's O.K.," she said, nodding quickly and pursing her lips. She had never paid close attention to the time line. "But, if I really was with her until midnight the night before," she said, "it is a little bit weird that we're having this really wonderful night and she dies the next day." The timing had struck me, too. Sometimes, once people resolve to commit suicide, they become uncharacteristically lucid and emotionally expansive, perhaps because the end of their suffering feels near.

"Was she apprehensive about going back to California—to an intolerable household reality, to the responsibilities of motherhood and parenting?" Robert asked. "I mean, where did I get that infusion of images?"

"I said that to you, because I do believe that," Loftus said. "But I don't

know where I got that. I have no idea."

"If Debbi is sure it is suicide," Robert said, "it might be that some people come into their experience of mental illness with a baseline rigidity. They can't relate to mental illness and see these people as extraterrestrial."

Robert's son, Abe, who has had psychiatric treatment, suddenly chimed in: "The first question they ask is 'Have you had any suicidal thoughts?' They shame you right off the bat. The minute you get in their office. How can you answer something like that? And then they say you're depressed because you can't answer it correctly. That's just me, though—sorry."

"No, it's O.K.," Loftus said. "Abe, is this weird for you?"

Abe said that he didn't realize he had relatives who lived in Pennsylvania. Then they reflected on what a child in the nineteen-fifties would have understood about mental illness. "We could not fathom it," Robert said. "We had no metrics."

I proposed that maybe there was some truth to the theory of "accidental suicide"; their mother may have been in so much pain that it wasn't possible to speak of her as having full volition.

Loftus said that she had a friend, a mother, who had tried to kill herself. "And when I said to her, 'I can't believe you did this—do you realize your kids will be still talking about this years

later?,' she said, 'I honestly thought they would be better off without me.'" She told her brothers, "Mom could have had that thinking."

David recalled a memory of their mother standing at the top of the stairs in a slip when their father came home from work. "Dad yelled at her," David said. "He said, 'How can you run around the house naked in front of the children?' And she cried and ran back into the bedroom."

"Oh, wow," Loftus said. "I never knew you had that." She had a poorer memory of childhood than her brothers, and she treated their memories as possessions they'd been gifted unfairly.

Robert, who was now barely visible in the darkness, recalled that Debbi's father, Harrold, a former marine, had a den where he kept all his paraphernalia from both World Wars. "It's plausible that Mom would be rummaging around in there, and maybe Harrold had a sidearm in a holster that was draped over one of his uniform jackets, and this could have been what set the stage for this alleged event," he said. "I don't buy the fact that she attempted suicide with one of Harrold's sidearms."

David was building a fire, and we could see only his legs. He came back to the screen and said, "Well, the interesting thing is I had this idea, which I never really evaluated, that Dad had thought it was suicide and Mom's family thought it was some accidental thing. But I think everybody knew it was suicide."

"Nope," Loftus said. "Not everybody."

"I'm getting more comfortable with the idea of accidental suicide," David said.

"Why?" Loftus said. "I thought you were rejecting Robert's label."

"If somebody dies like that, then you go, 'Well, I don't know—I can really think whatever I want,'" David said. "But if you then hear there was a previous suicide attempt—"

"If there was," Loftus said.

"Yeah, if there was," he repeated. "You think Debbi may have misremembered that?"

"I think Debbi was twelve years old and what Debbi knows she learned from adults who had their own ideas," she said. "It's all these different memories." Her voice rose in pitch. "And the idea that here we are, in our seventies, try-

ing to sort this out!” She said this like it was funny, but she looked upset. Loftus’s approach to the conversation was so studious that it occurred to me that this call, like the surgery that she turned into a memory experiment in a peer-reviewed journal, might be another way of channelling life events into publishable work.

I told Loftus that it seemed hard to avoid the thought that her career had been shaped by the slipperiness of this foundational memory. “No,” she said, shaking her head. “No way. No way. It was purely, Got a chance to work with a professor in graduate school on a memory project, got a chance to—no. None of all this.” She asked her brothers, “Would you guys agree?”

“You’re kind of like Forrest Gump,” David said. “You’re the Forrest Gump of psychology, because you just tumble into these situations.”

“Oh, my God,” Loftus said, laughing, perhaps harder than necessary, because it was such a relief no longer to be talking about her mother. “You know—it is a little Forrest Gump-y. I step into it and suddenly there is Phil Spector, and suddenly there’s Harvey Weinstein, and there’s Martha Stewart, you know, and Michael Jackson”—she had assisted with the defense of all four—“and I don’t even know why I’m here. You’re right.”

“All the people you mention are corrupt,” David said, to no one in particular.

She said that Spector, who was convicted of murder in 2009, had sent her a beautiful card before he died. It was on the bookshelf behind her.

David asked if she’d like to read it aloud, but she said no. We’d been on Zoom for three hours, and Robert’s dog, which had spent the conversation in a parked car nearby, needed to be let out. Loftus said she still believed that her mother’s death was either an accident or “accidental suicide.” Nothing in the past three hours had changed her view. “We should not use a twelve-year-old’s memory,” she repeated. She suggested that they find some sort of concrete evidence, perhaps a map of her uncle’s vacation property. “I don’t know why, but I don’t like it being a spring,” she said. She shrugged. “I’ve always said it was a pool and remembered it was a pool, and I don’t know why that’s im-

portant to me—to not even challenge that fact.”

The next evening, Loftus e-mailed me saying that she and David had just spoken with Debbi. “We caught Debbi in two major memory errors tonight!” she wrote. Debbi had forgotten that she’d driven, rather than flown, to Pennsylvania. She also claimed that Loftus’s father had never once called to check on Rebecca—a memory that Debbi had to retract once David read aloud a passage in Loftus’s diary showing that her father had, indeed, called. The tone of Loftus’s e-mail seemed somewhat disciplinary, but when we talked on the phone it was clear that she saw nothing shameful about Debbi’s errors. Instead, she expressed a sense of camaraderie; they were fellows in misremembering—her cousin was just as human as she. “Thank goodness for independent corroboration,” Loftus told me. “Especially when you have somebody who expresses their memory with such confidence that you’re tempted to just capitulate to it.”

Every week, Loftus receives letters from prisoners, and she (or her research assistant) always responds. “We empathize with you,” she recently wrote to a man convicted of murdering another inmate while in federal prison. “We wish you the best and welcome updates,” she wrote to a man convicted of shooting someone multiple times. “I received your letter and request for



information on ‘my theory,’” she wrote to Jerry Sandusky, who in 2012 was convicted of sexually abusing children while a football coach at Penn State. “It must be terribly difficult for you and your family, and I hope you have the legal help needed to resolve your situation justly.”

David joked that maybe Loftus experienced some sort of Stockholm syndrome. “Because who would pick that

side?” he said. “Now, I’m not totally attached to this view—because it seems like something I’ve contrived as an explanation—but it’s possible that she never got appreciation from our father, so she’s now trying to win that approval by representing the other rich white guys who have been accused of doing bad things.” (Loftus has testified for numerous poor defendants of color, too, in cases that tend to get less attention.)

But there are rarely just two sides. A larger cast of characters, embedded in different institutions of power, determine what kinds of stories get believed. Even Loftus’s study about being lost in the mall, which has assumed an iconic status, becoming one of the most famous experiments of the century, has lent itself to conflicting interpretations over time. (Its reputation is discordant with its size—there were only twenty-four subjects.) In the study, subjects came to believe the story about getting lost in a mall because older relatives falsely told them that it was true. Loftus and others have described the study as a kind of parable for skepticism. But Steven Brown, a social psychologist at England’s Nottingham Trent University who studies memory, told me, “For those of us differently positioned, the parable is entirely about power.” The study reveals the ease with which children can be betrayed by adults, who lie to them, re-writing their stories.

In an interview on a Dutch television station, Loftus once said that if she had wanted to do experimental research that emerged from her own childhood experiences she would not have studied memory errors and distortions. “I would have designed my experiments to answer different questions,” she said. After the conversation with her and her brothers, I asked Loftus what those research questions would be. “You know, I’m not sure,” she said. She paused for a long time and then teared up. “It’s the M-word,” she said, referring to “mother.” Her brothers told me that they have a saying: “Don’t say the M-word, or Beth will break down.” She waved her hand in front of her face, as if to cool the emotional temperature. “Maybe it would be about, you know, how come this never goes away?” she said, crying. “And is that true for other people?” ♦

## GUNS DOWN

*With the number of shooting deaths rising, Shaina Harrison is teaching kids to turn anger into advocacy.*

BY IAN FRAZIER

At eight-fifteen on a pre-pandemic Friday morning, Shaina Harrison arrived at the Bronx Academy of Health Careers, one of seven specialized high schools in the massive Evander Childs Educational Campus building, in a northerly part of the borough. She had come from Red Hook, in Brooklyn, where she lives, to teach a weekly for-credit class on gun violence and how to prevent it. New Yorkers Against Gun Violence, or N.Y.A.G.V., the nonprofit organization of which she is one of three full-time employees, has been sending her to teach in New York City high schools for nine years, since she was in her mid-twenties. She is almost six feet tall, and she wears false eyelashes, bright-red lipstick, and striking clothes—on this day, a red fleece coat, a bold black-and-white-checked blouse, wide-leg trousers, and square eyeglasses with pink-and-black frames. Her black, wavy hair hung to below her shoulders.

The students in the class were ninth graders, some still not much more than little kids. She told them to call her Shaina. Some kids were paying attention, others had receded back into their hoodies like monks in cowls, and two or three laid their heads on their desks and closed their eyes. Harrison announced that this would be a safe space and also a brave space where everybody could say things that were hard to say, without being judged. Turning to some girls in hijabs who were talking, she picked up the rhythm, chatted with them, and said to the class, “I’ll always receive what you give, and hear it, and give you something back. I want to hear what you’re saying. Your voice is more important to me than mine.”

She told everybody to take out a pen and a piece of paper, because they were going to play a game. The kids groaned. She said the game was called Two Truths and a Lie. She told them to write down

two things about themselves that were true, and one that was a lie. The rest of the class would then guess which two were true and which one was the lie. She went first: “One, I got in seventeen fights in high school.” The kids with their heads on their desks sat up. She did look as if she might be able to fight. Then she said, “Second, I am a singer. Third, I am famous on Instagram. Now you tell me which are the truths, and which is the lie.”

A boy raised his hand. “I think you are a singer, you did get in fights in high school, and you aren’t famous on Instagram.”

“Why am I a singer? Because I look like maybe I sing in a church choir?”

“Yeah. And I think you got in fights in high school because people bullied you.”

“Why did people bully me?”

“I don’t want to say.”

“Nothing will bother me. This is a safe space and a brave space.”

“Because you’re overweight?”

“O.K., I hear that. I receive that. And why don’t you think I’m famous on Instagram?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t think you are.”

Another kid said, “You’re a smart person. You don’t waste your time on social media.”

More discussion. Finally, Harrison said, “O.K., here’s my answer. I did get in seventeen fights in high school—that is true. I didn’t like to fight, but somehow I got a reputation as a fighter, and then people were always wanting to fight me. Just bumping up against someone in the hall, suddenly I’d be in a fight. When I applied to colleges I had all those suspensions on my record, so even though I got all A’s and my test scores were good, some colleges were afraid to take a chance on me. Bowling Green, a college way out in Ohio, did give me a full scholarship.

But that’s something we’ll talk more about later in the year—how things you do in high school can stay with you and affect your life later.

“Second truth: Yes, I am Instagram famous. I am a plus-size fashion influencer and mommy blogger with my own blog that tens of thousands of people follow every day. My hashtags are #FatGirlsBeWinning and #MyBravestSpace. And why wouldn’t someone like me have a fashion blog? Look at how I dress. I promise you will never see me twice in the same pair of glasses. I have at least ninety-seven pairs.”

Now every student was paying attention. She continued, “So, what is my lie? I said I’m a singer. That is definitely not true. Not all large Black women can sing. Some of us can hardly sing a note. I wish I could sing, I like music, but I don’t have that gift. See, you made a decision about me based on how I look. But how we look might not be who we are.”

The kids went next. A girl said that she liked her English Language Arts class, she was nice, and she spoke four languages. Nobody believed she spoke four languages, but it turned out that she did: French, English, and two African languages, Fulani and Susu; it was not true that she liked her E.L.A. class. Then a boy said that he was from Canada, he liked to cook, and he liked to play basketball. The class decided he couldn’t be from Canada: “If you’re from Canada, why would you come here? Canada is way better than here.” The surmise was correct; he was not from Canada. Another boy said that he had a sister in school, he liked to laugh, and he was a bodybuilder. The class pointed out that he did not look like a bodybuilder; he wasn’t. A girl said she was good at video games, was born in a foreign country, and had two pet turtles. Someone said that it is illegal to own turtles in New York City. The girl



*When Harrison became an anti-gun activist, her neighbors were baffled: "I had to tell them I wasn't snitching."*

happily admitted to having made up the turtles.

When the class began, most of the students were in one of two modes: poker-faced and shut down, or in groups of several kids locked on to one another with that kind of teen-age telepathy in which the slightest raised eyebrow can produce screams of laughter. By the end, they were like citizens of the classroom. “I’m pushing you guys to look at your stereotypes,” Harrison said. “I want you to notice how sometimes you don’t really see other people, how you stereotype them, and how they stereotype you. How does stereotyping lead to gun violence? Because it makes us feel that we’re unsafe, and that we don’t know each other. What we don’t know makes us afraid. People pick up guns because they feel afraid, and powerless. Being afraid is a part of life, and we can deal with it in better ways. And we are not powerless, as I will show you.”

That class took place before COVID, when schools were still open. Harrison has taught *Two Truths and a Lie*, she says, “hundreds of times.” Right now, she is teaching it in Zoom classes, to even more kids. During the year that she has been teaching remotely, gun deaths in New York City increased by eighty-eight per cent. In the past several weeks, eighteen people were murdered in mass shootings in Atlanta, Georgia, and in Boulder, Colorado. In the former incident, the suspect used a gun that he had bought the same day.

New Yorkers Against Gun Violence began as the result of a shooting twenty-eight years ago. On a spring afternoon in Brooklyn in 1993, four teen-agers from Crown Heights tried to steal a new off-road bicycle from a man named Allyn Winslow on a hill in Prospect Park. Winslow resisted and pedalled away, and one of the boys shot him twice with a .22-calibre pistol. One of the bullets hit his heart, and at the bottom of the hill he fell off his bicycle and died.

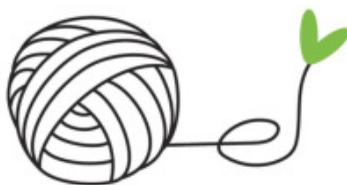
The shooting frightened the neighborhoods around the park. A few days later, people from Park Slope arranged a memorial and an anti-gun rally near the crime scene, with city and state officials and community figures. Hundreds of local residents showed up—a

much bigger turnout than expected. Following that encouraging experience, three of the rally’s organizers started a group called New Yorkers for Gun Control.

For its first act of protest, the group joined with an organization called Parents of Murdered Children and collected about a hundred pairs of shoes that represented some of the people killed by guns in the state in 1993. They lined up the shoes on the sidewalk in front of the office of Alfonse D’Amato, the Republican senator from New York, who always voted with the N.R.A. Afterward, Ellen Freudenheim, one of the group’s founders, did a more ambitious performance-art-like piece on the steps of the Capitol in Washington, this time with thirty-eight thousand pairs of shoes, representing the number of Americans who were dying from gun violence every year. The Silent March, as the event was called, received a lot of press coverage and remains one of the most powerful anti-gun protests ever.

New Yorkers for Gun Control, to broaden its mission, soon changed its name to New Yorkers Against Gun Violence. Two years after its founding, N.Y.A.G.V. started an education fund, to bring the anti-gun-violence message to schools.

I first met Harrison in 2013, when she had been with N.Y.A.G.V. for four years. Bowling Green College had not



worked out. She was there less than a semester when her grandmother, who had raised her and her younger sister, died. Harrison returned to Brooklyn, back to her old bedroom in her grandmother’s apartment, in the Red Hook Houses, and got a job with AmeriCorps, which sent her to a conflict-mediation organization in Crown Heights called Save Our Streets. AmeriCorps paid her four hundred dollars a month, on which she supported herself and her

sister. After she had been with AmeriCorps for two years, New Yorkers Against Gun Violence hired her away.

On our first meeting, she and I walked around the playgrounds and streets of Red Hook as she showed me places where people had been shot, and she described what it was like, in previous years, to hear gunshots all the time. At thirty-three, she still lives in the same neighborhood and now has a three-year-old son.

Rebecca Fischer, the executive director of N.Y.A.G.V., started with the organization in 2013. She is forty and grew up in Massachusetts. Her father is a professor of labor law at Western New England University; her mother taught at the law school. In high school, Fischer hung out with the skateboarders and kids with shaved heads and thought she was the only boring person. She also got good grades, led the school debate team, and played cello. She went to Tufts, where she majored in clinical psychology and comparative religion, and then to Benjamin Cardozo law school. She took a job at a New York boutique firm that advises nonprofits. At twenty-six, she married another lawyer; they have two sons and live in Park Slope, where N.Y.A.G.V. began.

One morning in December of 2012, Fischer was texting with a colleague at her firm when the school shooting occurred at Sandy Hook. The colleague had a six-year-old son in the school. Some time passed before she found out that her son was O.K.; he had sheltered in a classroom and had to walk past bodies to leave the building. Fischer told me that being part of that experience, even at one remove, felt “surreal and insane.” She changed her life—she got involved with social-justice groups at her synagogue, met anti-gun-violence activists across New York, became a volunteer for N.Y.A.G.V., and eventually joined its board. When it was looking for a new director, she applied for the job.

N.Y.A.G.V. has successfully lobbied the state legislature to pass major gun-safety measures. A law now requires that all guns in homes with children be under lock and key, thanks partly to the group. The ReACTION curriculum, developed by Harrison and

scaled up by Fischer, is taught in nineteen schools and serves more than five hundred students. Fischer sees her job as bringing forward the young activists—Harrison and N.Y.A.G.V.'s other teachers—while she supervises, lobbies, and raises money.

The Evander Childs building sits on a major east-west Bronx thoroughfare called East Gun Hill Road. During the Revolutionary War, American troops stored cannons on high ground. One night, when the cannons were unguarded, two saboteurs pounded rat-tail files into the touchholes and broke them off so that the cannons could not be fired. The Americans brought the cannons to a local hill, farther behind the lines, to repair them—thus, East Gun Hill Road. The nation began in gunfire; at the surface of our consciousness and deep in our subconscious, guns are everywhere.

On another morning at the Bronx Academy of Health Careers, Harrison's lesson took up the subject of "toxic masculinity." She was wearing a red, green, and black plaid-flannel shirt, close-fitting black jeans, and shin-high faux-Timberland boots. She asked the students to make one list of the qualities that a "good man" might have, and another of the qualities of a "real man." Then she and the kids talked about each category: a *good* man is caring, takes care of his family, works hard but doesn't necessarily have a lot of money. A *real* man is tough, stands up for himself and his friends and family, doesn't avoid conflict, doesn't cry. "A real man can't be a wussie," one boy said, and Harrison replied, "Thank you for your answer, and you also didn't use the word beginning with a 'P,' and I appreciate that."

She told a story about how her son fell once while playing and began to cry, and the boy's father told him to stop crying like a girl; she told him, "He's hurt! Why can't he cry? Crying is not a gender, it's how human beings react to pain." The class watched a short documentary about men and boys who are told to "man up" and keep their feelings to themselves. Harrison said that that kind of suppression is itself a form of violence. She asked the class what happens if you're not supposed to say how you feel. A boy said, "If you can't



*"Rustle twice if you're in there."*

talk, you make your gun talk for you."

The police department's school-safety agents patrolling the halls sometimes stood outside the classroom door, the staticky bursts from their radios giving small jolts to the day. Between periods, the corridors filled up and feet thundered in the stairwells. Lots of kids knew Harrison from previous classes. She received hugs and greetings in the corridors; she always remembers names. Over the years, she has kept in touch with hundreds of kids, and she gets calls at all hours from those who need to talk or just want to say hi.

In June of 2019, I joined Harrison and Fischer at an anti-gun march across the Brooklyn Bridge. Youth Over Guns (Y.O.G.), an organization of city high-school students and recent graduates, had planned it as their second big public event. Y.O.G. had agreed to affiliate itself with N.Y.A.G.V. as its youth-outreach arm. Members of the group had been in classes Harrison taught; she had inspired them. Luis Hernandez, who was seventeen at the time, put the march together, along with fellow Y.O.G. members Alliyah

Logan, also seventeen, and Andrea Gonzales, eighteen. Hernandez wore his hair in cornrows, and he sometimes wore a sharp powder-blue blazer. Gonzales described herself as "a queer Latinx mestiza," and wanted to get some piercings to make herself look fierce, an effect her friends said she could never pull off, because of her warm, empathetic eyes. Logan's parents are West Indian and "very protective," she said; she watches the world from behind round, scholarly spectacles.

Hernandez had co-founded Y.O.G. after seventeen people were killed at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, in Parkland, Florida. He wanted to remind the public that Black and brown communities lose young people to gun violence every day. Word of the Brooklyn Bridge march spread on social media, and on that Saturday about ten thousand protesters joined with Youth Over Guns as they crossed the bridge. The large turnout completely astonished the young organizers. Today it looks like a precursor.

That October, I joined Harrison and Fischer and the three members of Y.O.G. at a national anti-gun conference in Las

Vegas that was sponsored in part by March for Our Lives, an organization formed by survivors of the Parkland shooting. In the lobby of their hotel, I asked Harrison how she liked the accommodations. Dozens of anti-gun groups attended; the ones that included young people had been booked at this place near the airport because it was affordable and did not have slot machines. “Pfft—it’s not much,” Harrison said. “I was in Las Vegas last summer, and the experience was amazing. People were filming me for some fashion commercials, they got me a suite in a hotel on the Strip with a skating rink and an ice-cream bar on the roof, I was modelling these wild clothes, I went to the ‘Mind-freak’ magic show, the magician cut my body in half on the stage—it was all a hot mess.”

“Why did I assume that Shaina had never been to Las Vegas?” Fischer asked. “Of course Shaina has been to Las Vegas.”

Nevada’s governor, Steve Sisolak, welcomed everybody to the conference and wept all the way through his remarks. Two years before, almost to the day, a gunman firing rifles modified to shoot like automatic weapons had killed fifty-eight people and wounded four hundred and thirteen at an outdoor concert on the Strip. It was the worst mass shooting in the country’s history. Sisolak had spent the previous day remembering the occasion with parents who had lost children, and with other survivors. He told the audience that he had walked the site of the shooting the day after it occurred. “I saw the bodies, I saw the blood,” he said. “And there was an eerie silence, and you would hear a cell phone ring, someone hoping that their loved one would pick up that phone. . . . I’m never forgetting the sound of those cell phones ringing.”

As the spokesman for Y.O.G., Luis Hernandez was the first to ask an audience question. He asked the mayor of South Bend, Indiana, Pete Buttigieg, who was then running for President, how, if elected, he would help people in marginalized communities “who are enduring gun violence at disproportionate rates, and nobody is saying or

doing anything about it.” Buttigieg gave a thoughtful response about building healthy neighborhoods, saying of certain areas that residents have been “red-lined into them and are now being gentrified out.” N.Y.A.G.V. looks for nonviolent ways to overcome powerlessness. For Hernandez, that teaching became real. To stand up in front of the large crowd and the TV cameras and ask his question had required some nerving up. Afterward, he said he felt as if he were on top of the world.



What I mainly took away from the conference was statistics: about forty thousand Americans died that year from gun violence, about sixty per cent of them

suicides; more Americans have died from guns in recent years than have died in car accidents; guns are the No. 1 cause of death for African-American children and young men; the mentally ill are more often the victims of gun violence than they are the perpetrators of it; ninety-six per cent of all mass shooters are male; there may be ten million assault rifles in private hands; and seventy-five per cent of gun owners say that owning a gun is essential to their sense of freedom.

Walking in the Bronx after Harrison’s classes one day, I learned the following: On the afternoon of November 27, 2019, the day before Thanksgiving, someone shot five people at the corner of East 151st Street and Courtlandt Avenue, in the Melrose section of the borough. The victims included a ten-year-old boy, a fourteen-year-old boy, and a young man of twenty who may have been the target. Had I not noticed a “Wanted” poster on a light pole with a photo of the suspect, I probably would never have heard about the shooting.

I went to a protest rally on Courtlandt Avenue at the shooting site. Local leaders and teachers and girls from the nearby Immaculate Conception School were addressing a small crowd, saying that this should not be a regular part of life—people should not be getting shot on a busy sidewalk as neighbors are shopping and schools are letting out.

There are three schools within a few blocks of that corner. The crowd stood quietly as a priest said a prayer. Night fell, and a cold wind blew. Kids lay down on the sidewalk while other kids traced the outlines of their splayed-out bodies with chalk. A man said hello to me and gave me his card. Eventually, the crowd dispersed, but the police vans stayed nearby, their lights still flashing blue and red.

The card said, “James Dobbins III, New York City Health and Hospitals.” I called the number, and a few days later I met Dobbins in his office on the second floor of Lincoln Hospital. He is the assistant director of community affairs for a nonprofit organization called Guns Down, Life Up (G.D.L.U.), which is a part of the hospital. He had a diamond stud in one ear, and he wore a V-neck sweater-vest, a tie, and a receptive expression. Listening to strangers is what he does. As someone who served two prison terms, he qualifies as a “credible messenger”—someone people on the street will pay attention to. He began by telling me two facts: Lincoln Hospital, located in the southwest Bronx, has the busiest emergency room in the city, and people who are shot and survive have a fifty-per-cent chance of being shot again within five years. Of every ten people who present at a hospital with gunshot wounds and don’t die, five will eventually be shot again, and, of those, two will die.

Dobbins and others from G.D.L.U. go to the scenes where violence has occurred and make conversation with bystanders. They visit hospital bedsides, talk to friends and family of victims, and try to find alternatives to retaliation. After victims are out of the hospital, Dobbins keeps up with them. At any one time he is in touch with dozens of people still at risk of violence. Former victims sometimes call him at 3 A.M. “I’ll be in bed, my cell phone rings, I’ll answer, and I’ll hear, ‘He’s right outside my building, and I’m ’on blow the mof’s head off!’ Then I just stay on the line and keep the brother talking.”

Dobbins is one of three men and two women who work for G.D.L.U.; they all stay current in the program’s “catchment area,” which includes the Melrose and Morris Heights neighborhoods, offering their programs for

kids. The group's bright-green hoodies and T-shirts feature the slogan "Guns Down, Life Up," designed by Marley Marl, the hip-hop producer. Dobbins wants everybody in the neighborhood and in the entire city to start wearing them. In spare office space at the hospital, he started classes in fashion design that take kids through the process of producing and mass-marketing these garments. He also leads kids on rides around the city, on bicycles provided by the hospital, and has found a pro-bono recording studio for aspiring rappers and musicians.

"Kids around here see that crime pays," Dobbins said. "They see an eighteen-year-old making two thousand, three thousand a day, driving a Benz. But a drug-dealing person is not who most kids are. They might like the look of it, but who they are deep down is someone else. We're trying to help them find out who that is. I got out of prison the second time and decided I did not want to go back to hustling drugs. Today, I own a house in Queens, and I have two kids. I found what I love to do. I save people's lives. People ask me what I do for a living, and I say, 'I stop people from shooting people.'"

Guns Down, Life Up, multiplied by three dozen or more, gives you an idea of the number of anti-gun-violence organizations in New York City. Through Fischer and Harrison, I met three other men, all of them formerly incarcerated, who do work like Dobbins's; "violence interrupter" is the job description. As mayor, Michael Bloomberg made gun violence one of his big issues, but he dealt with it more through policing, using tactics like "stop-and-frisk," while also funding some community-based anti-violence groups. Mayor Bill de Blasio emphasized and encouraged the latter. In 2017, he formed the Mayor's Office to Prevent Gun Violence. It oversees the city's Crisis Management System, which coordinates and funds community-based anti-gun groups of all kinds. A lot of these, like G.D.L.U., follow a model known as Cure Violence, developed by a doctor in Chicago, which considers gun violence a disease and a public-health crisis curable by a multi-step treatment. The Kings Against Violence Initiative, which is part of Kings County Hospital, in

Brooklyn, is another Cure Violence-based program; Kings County's emergency room is the second busiest in the city.

There are faith-based anti-violence groups, such as the Sixty-seventh Precinct Clergy Council, also known as the God Squad, founded by ministers, one of whom hands out coupons for free funerals to active gang members he sees on the street. Smaller groups, sometimes called "mom-and-pop nonprofits," include Harlem Mothers SAVE (Stop Another Violent End), founded by Jackie Rowe-Adams, who lost two sons to shootings; Hip Hop 4 Life, which uses music and culture to promote a healthy, violence-free life style; LIFE Camp (Love Ignites Freedom through Education), founded by Erica Ford, who uses yoga and mindfulness as tools for preventing violence; and G-MACC (Gangstas Making Astronomical Community Changes), of Brooklyn, whose founder was arrested last year for threatening to have somebody killed (his former lawyer says he's innocent).

As the Las Vegas conference showed, anti-gun nonprofits have grown all across the country. Forty thousand U.S. gun deaths in recent years work out to four or five an hour. Driven by grief, outrage,

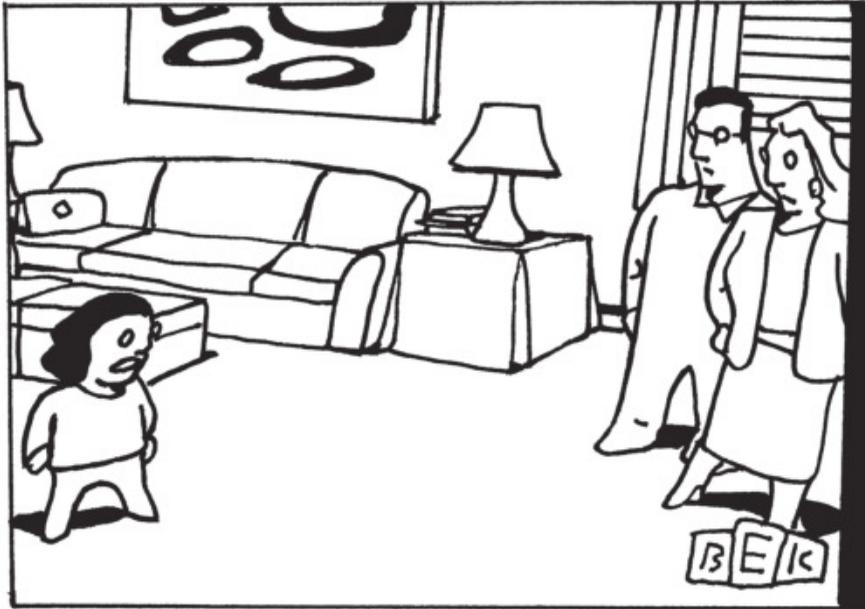
incalculable suffering, and a hope for peace, the anti-gun groups proliferate on one side, while on the other stands the amply funded and seemingly impenetrable N.R.A.

In 2020, there were fifteen hundred and thirty-one shootings in New York City, almost twice as many as in 2019. The number of people hit by bullets was eighteen hundred and sixty-eight. Guns killed two hundred and ninety people in New York in 2020, an increase of eighty-eight per cent from 2019. Forty-eight people were shot in one day during the Fourth of July weekend, and nine of them died. Ninety-five per cent of the victims were Black or Hispanic. A man was shot and killed in the Bronx while crossing the street, holding his six-year-old daughter's hand. A video showed a gun at the end of an arm emerging from the window of a passing car, the man falling, the little girl running away up the sidewalk.

Public-health studies have suggested some possible causes—the increase in unemployment, domestic abuse, drug and alcohol consumption, financial hardship, and firearm sales that came with the pandemic, along with the temporary shutdown of public support services.

In 1990 and 1991, nearly two thousand





*"I'm going to break my silence and have a tantrum."*

people were killed by gunfire in New York each year. Observers disagreed about why the numbers went down, to two hundred and ninety-seven, in 2016, but studies have shown that the more nonprofit organizations a neighborhood has, the fewer the shootings. Conservative critics blame the recent gun-violence surge on bail reform, decriminalization of minor offenses, and cuts in the police department's budget. Replacement numbers of police officers have not kept up with retirements; fewer cops are on the streets. Dobbins thinks that shootings are up because everybody is at home and arguments start on the Internet. "Then, when people see each other on the street, the guns come out," he said.

Dr. Jeffrey Butts, the director of the Research and Evaluation Center at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, dismisses explanations based on bail reform and the rest as "self-serving law-enforcement theories." He told me, "Young men of color in the ages between fifteen and twenty-five, the group most affected by gun violence, are also very likely to have the kind of jobs that disappeared in the pandemic." Summer-job programs were cancelled, too. "And, of course, the schools have been closed for a year," he went on. "These young men

are angry; they go out on the streets, where there now are fewer people, and they take the opportunity to go after their rivals."

Since before the 2020 election, gun stores nationwide have been overwhelmed, with lines of customers sometimes waiting around the block. Gun collectors are making money selling extra ammunition online. The N.Y.P.D. now confiscates dozens of guns in arrests every day. An online nonprofit called the Gun Violence Archive lists shootings in the U.S. almost as they occur. More than a hundred shootings are recorded in a typical twenty-four-hour period. The violence spreads across the map—occurring in cities, rural places, Indian reservations. If we could somehow hear all those shots in real time, it would sound as if the U.S. were in the middle of a non-stop low-intensity war.

Harrison has been teaching at the High School for Public Service, in Crown Heights, longer than anywhere else. Before the city suspended on-site teaching, the class met Wednesdays at twelve-fifteen. By that hour, students were keyed up and extra lively, the way you often see kids acting on the subway in the afternoon.

On a Wednesday in midwinter, they showed up doing things other teachers might have kicked them out for. Arguing, throwing fake punches at one another, making crinkling noises with their empty water bottles, tossing wadded-up paper, shouting, they briefly overwhelmed the classroom. At one point, Harrison was having animated conversations with three or four kids at once and started to go hoarse. But soon she got everybody settled down.

The day's lesson concerned the school-to-prison pipeline that Black and brown young people so often fall victim to. On the blackboard, she had written out the rap sheet of someone named James B. It listed the charges: "Trespassing; Petit Larceny; Trespassing; Disorderly Conduct; Indecent Exposure; Trespassing; Fare Evasion." Someone asked what petit larceny is. She explained that it's the theft of something of small value, as compared with grand larceny, the theft of something pricier: "Petit larceny is if you steal a phone charger. Grand larceny is if you steal a phone."

She told the students to split into groups of six and talk among themselves about who this James was and how he acquired his rap sheet. As they were working, Harrison hit a speed-dial number on her phone and ordered pizza and sodas. After five or ten minutes, she asked the kids how old they thought James was and what his family life was like. Every group said he was about their age—fifteen or sixteen—and lived with his mother. None said his father was in the picture. They all gave him sisters, mostly younger. Harrison asked, "So why does he have three arrests for trespassing?" A consensus said that he was kicked out of the house, maybe because he got in a fight with his mother's boyfriend, and then went into nearby apartment buildings to sleep. Petit larceny? He shoplifted a honey bun from a bodega because he was hungry. Fare evasion? He had no money. Disorderly conduct? "His father is gone, and maybe James thinks he has to be the man of the family, and he got in a fight with somebody who said something mean about his sister," a girl said.

A big stack of pizza boxes arrived,

along with some thirty-two-ounce bottles of soda. The discussion continued as the kids ate. Harrison said, "So, once James has this rap sheet, maybe his school administration and the police think of him only as that—a kid with a rap sheet. So what do you think will happen if James is then arrested for something more serious, like getting caught with a gun?" The kids all said he would go to prison. "If you were the judge, what would you do?" A majority quickly answered that they would send him to prison, too.

"But do you remember what we learned about stereotyping?" Harrison said. "As you just discovered when you were talking about James, there is an actual person with a complicated life behind the rap sheet. Most of you thought only of giving him jail time, and there's an even worse stereotype associated with having been in prison. James gets out, now he has a prison record—and, by the way, I know some very good men who have prison records—and he can't get a job, so he starts selling drugs, and maybe at some point he again picks up a gun so he won't get robbed. In the next class, we're going to talk about restorative justice, and peer mediation, and anything we can come up with together that would change James's story."

As she often does in class, she returned to the theme "Guns do not make you safer," and to the subject of fear amplified by racism. She said, "Our problem is that we are terrified of each other! The people at the takeout place where I used to go in Red Hook would hand you your food through a little window of bulletproof glass! I trusted them enough to eat the food they cooked, but they didn't trust me, they felt a need to be protected against me." The over-all message of her curriculum is that fear, racism, and powerlessness are at the root of gun violence. She believes that finding your ability to speak reduces both racism and powerlessness—the former by letting people know that the stereotypes are false, and the latter by creating the sense of strength that comes from speaking out. Her students learn who their city councilmen, state representatives, congressmen, and senators are, and at the end of the year she and her colleagues at

New Yorkers Against Gun Violence take students on trips to Albany and Washington, D.C., to meet with and lobby some of these powerful people. For her students, the idea that they can participate in making laws that affect their own lives hadn't crossed their minds.

In 2021, N.Y.A.G.V.'s classes have continued, although the school buildings have been closed. "In some ways the online classes are better, more personal," Harrison said. "The kids can see my little son in the background while I talk to them and take care of him. But it's also like being in the classroom, in that many of the kids are slow to participate at the start. At the beginning of the meetings, almost all of them have their screens turned off. But by the end of the first class everybody has their screens on. That's important, because a big part of the curriculum is about making sure that they are seen."

The organization has strengthened its connection with Youth Over Guns by hiring Luis Hernandez, Alliyah Logan, and Andrea Gonzales as part-time employees. Hernandez graduated in June, and Logan and Gonzales are in college. The three help in different areas—Logan in outreach, Hernandez in planning, and Gonzales with the online classes. "I taught a lot of classes with Andrea," said Frank Teah, the program director for N.Y.A.G.V., who's in his thirties. "She made a big difference. Andrea's about the students' age, and that made it easier for them to relate."

"The beautiful part about being young is that you have this incredible amount of imagination," Gonzales said. "We talked a lot about George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, but the classes were also very hopeful. I said we can remake worlds in our head."

As promised, the trips to Albany and Washington took place, but virtually. "In some ways, the trips were better, too," Harrison said. "In a shorter amount of time we got to see more electeds and their staffs. A lot of our kids have never been out of New York City. They might walk on dangerous streets every day,

but going to Albany, our state capital, that faraway place, scares them, and maybe their parents, also. We were having Zoom meetings with, like, the staff of Kirsten Gillibrand, in D.C., or with Jamaal T. Bailey, state senator from the Bronx. We were seeing them in their homes—one staff person was even sitting on the floor of a closet to get away from her family—and that really made them human."

During a recent Zoom meeting of N.Y.A.G.V.'s seven-member staff, everyone agreed that policing and gun violence are not separate issues, and that the problem is racism, plus powerlessness, plus people being terrified of one another. "To reform the police, you need to build a healthier community where there's less need to call the police," Teah said. All seemed surprised by how many allies they discovered they had. Last summer, they taught their Anger to Advocacy program to twenty young anti-gun-violence activists, who are now teaching it to others throughout the country.

"Anger to Advocacy shows you how to take your anger and move it in a positive direction, by engaging with the state and local and national government, the people in power," Logan said. "But a lot of it is also about changing yourself into an anti-gun activist, and how to be comfortable in that identity."

"When I started working with N.Y.A.G.V., people in my neighborhood couldn't understand what I was doing," Harrison said. "Young Black activists were not getting accolades back then. Many people were looking at them like they were quote-unquote snitches. I had to tell them I wasn't snitching, I was trying to build safe communities."

"I've been an activist since I was fourteen," Logan said. "In high school, I would always get up petitions, plan protests and whatnot, and nobody could understand what in the world I was doing, not even my mom and dad. Everybody thought I was just weird. Now I can teach other kids that it's an O.K. identity to have. Everybody should be an anti-gun activist now." ♦



*Sterling HolyWhiteMountain*

# FEATHERWEIGHT

When I first met my love, I had been off my reservation for a little more than a year. I had become acculturated, we'll say, to university life—and willingly! I wanted to know what larger America was all about. I took on the aspect of a young dog; everything was new to me, I had my nose up everyone's ass. First there was Lana, then Julie, then . . . a few other names I can't remember, and then there was Barbara. That should have been the name of a grandmother, but in fact it belonged to a sweet thing who liked to call me her favorite Indian toy.

I'll be whatever you want, I said, long as we keep knocking those boots.

Which we did, because she was young, almost too young for a guy more than a few years out of high school. She had the courage that belongs only to those who don't know that death is just down the block, waiting to introduce himself. As for me, I was not yet old enough to not feel young. According to the literature, I should have been well on my way to a fulfilling life of stability and money and houses or whatever—but she didn't know that. I was just finishing my gen-eds, trying to stay awake, that sort of thing. I called her Barbie. I had always wanted to be with a doll.

Barbie, I would say. Barbie, Barbie. Oh, *Barbie*.

She should have been the one. Me and her, seventeen children of our own, adopt nine more, a farm next to a lake full of muskrats. Two rescue dogs, probably. Lana, Julie, Barbie—their names were mantric. I knew reservation girls who had those names, but there was nothing new or special or fireworks about them. But these ones! What a sight to behold, all that blond hair walking across the U. Clarkston campus. I had no idea where it had come from. And hailing from exotic lands such as Portland. They had a thing going, those white girls. I swear to you, for them everything was power. Either they wanted to steal it from me or they wanted me to wrest it from their tight and brutal fists. Relational theft and subterfuge, so to speak. Northern Plains people, though, it's all out in front for us. No secrets where I'm from. Fist-fights and open hatred and telling some-

one straight out you want to fuck. That's why we're such failures in the white world. We can't keep our mouths shut about anything. All this behind-closed-doors and smile-to-your-face work doesn't vibe for us. Those girls, though, they were at war with themselves and they didn't even know it. They wanted to wrestle on the spiritual banks of the American Dream, they wanted revolutions, they wanted dream lives and dream marriages and dream families, and all I wanted was some ass! Or so I thought.

Me, I was a simple reservation boy. I always had a stalk of grass betwixt my lips. I squinted at the sky and commented in profound tones on the weather. Like a good tourist, I wanted to witness the best the big city had to offer. I went to parties and laughed in a genuine way with white boys—back-slaps and tough handshakes and big grins. I got stupid drunk and pressed my hands between the thighs of white girls in dimly lit alleys. All the truly worst kisses happen in such places. I always asked those girls to take me home—and sometimes they did! I wanted to see where they lived almost as much as I wanted to see them naked. I wanted to get a feel for the glory of another kind of life. There was always something comfortable about those rooms, even when they were spare, something plush as we flopped and rolled and groaned in the sheets. What a wonder the young are. The world is a conflagration and they find nothing to do but play grab-ass.

Long nights, two- or three- or four-times-in-a-night nights, talk in the dark that wanders the most crooked paths, long talks not really looking at each other and maybe not even talking to each other, both of us speaking into the dark. Maybe there's a night-light plugged into the socket in the far corner, maybe a country-music poster on the wall, with a man and a guitar and a flag as big as the Ritz, maybe she has her head on my chest like we really know each other—and maybe we do. Maybe it was a few nights of that or a few weeks of that or a few months of that and then would come the kind of comments these dreamcatcher-dangling white girls always have up their sleeve. It got to where I waited for it, punch-

drunk and almost amused. The last one, she had great abs—she was a former hurdler who had taken up a serious Jim Beam habit to compensate for her athletic prowess. She wore sunglasses that made her look like the woman out in front of the asylum you might want to talk to.

I always wanted to be Native American, she said.

How's that, I said.

You know, she said. Because it's romantic.

Well, I said. It's something. It is really something.

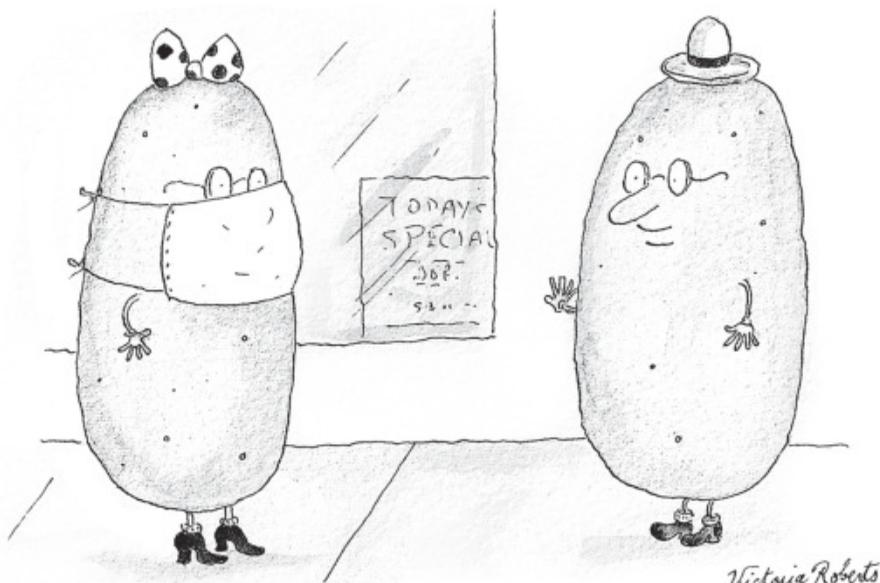
Later, from my love's sunken mattress and box spring resting on the floor of that cold room in graduate-student housing, the prayer flags strung above us in the dark, I would think back to those white girls and their downy beds. There was something about their lives, even those of the tough rancher girls who grew up hearing all the worst things about us—racist cowgirls give the best head—there was nonetheless a certainty about their place in this world that made no sense to me. With them, I sometimes had the feeling I was not in a bed at all but rather that I was resting on pillows that rested on pillows that rested on pillows. It's pillows all the way down, baby! Until you get to the very bottom. Then we're all burning alive like one big happy family. But my mother, my auntie, my gram—how could they not have wanted such beds for me? When my love asked me about the white girls, she had this look of unmitigated disgust on her face, the kind of look that made me want to buy her flowers. Whenever I needed to balance the relational budget, I would joke about leaving her for one of them. And she would say,

Eww, go on, then! See how fun it is being a tour guide for the rest of your life.

Ah! I couldn't get enough! Every syllable like a sword. Sometimes I said things in the hope that she would cut me. She left me with the best scars.

Still, I could never rid myself of my mother, my auntie, my gram—their words, going all the way back to my middle-school years.

You can't go with her, one of them would say, she's So-and-So's daughter,



*“Olga, you don’t have to wear a mask—you’re a potato.”*

and that’s your relative through your great-grandmother Sings Down.

Their voices in my ear, even now! Where I’m from, it’s the women who know how everyone is connected. When I was a boy, they were emissaries of the *mysterium tremendum* itself, they knew all the stories and revealed them like the greatest of secrets. Of course, they had their own agendas, and since I was their lone living male issue, a different kind of weight fell upon me.

Don’t go giving us a half-breed baby, now! they would say. We got enough white blood already.

What if she’s light-skinned? I would say, just to prod them a bit.

Well, if you have to, they would say.

A lot of indians belong to the Church of Latter-Day Eugenicists. Right there out in the open, not even trying to hide the travesty. Brown-skin supremacists. That’s just how they are.

Sometimes the irony is so great that the irony turns into cherry pie: I met Allie on the first day of Native American Heritage Month. I’m still unclear about what we do on that day. Mostly it means selling beadwork to white people and talking big on social media. She had this way of smoking cigarettes—she’d taken on the delicate affect of her roommate, who was French. My love, she was light-complected and light as a

feather. She had these straight bangs and this way of turning her face away from me and covering her mouth when she laughed.

Hey, I would say, reaching for her face. Don’t act shamed.

But of course she insisted. She was like that—anything I said she rejected on principle. Much of life irritated her. She found America in contempt of court.

I knew I could love her, because she was familiarly broken. She was from another tribe, people my people used to kill, so I knew it was O.K. to ask for her number. And because a storm had arrived in Clarkston and wind tore the leaves from the trees and tossed them about in the driveways of all those lamp-lit, Colonial-style homes in the university district—where it seemed that everyone who had ever lived there had known nothing but harmony and warmth and an endless Christmas Eve—I knew that I could go to her door late one night.

It’s really fuckin’ cold out here, I said.

What do you want me to do about it, she said.

Forecast looks dark, I said. Storms and such from here on out.

Sounds familiar, she said.

She was doing that thing women

do, where they spin their hair around a finger. I could have watched her do it forever.

Not long after things got going, we took a trip up to her rez. Her mom, she said this thing . . . I don’t know. It messed me up, gave me prophetic-seeming dreams, and I would wake with bleak and portentous feelings of the future, and the resulting apprehensions rode and whipped me into cowardice. Because that first, titanic fuck had erased all the others, we avoided necessary conversations. Our meetings were exclusively nocturnal. Sometimes I sat on the frameless mattress and box spring she had got a few years before from her cousin who stole and totalled a car and then headed off to prison. From my perch, I watched her study at a slender wooden desk, which she had bargained down from a dollar and fifty cents to seventy-five at a garage-sale situation. The desk’s elegance somehow belied the Soviet simplicity and cruelty of the room itself—blank walls, barren floor, a blanket she sometimes hung over the window to block out the sun. I would stay there until she could no longer ignore my ultra-intense, cosmic-level gaze and told me to get the fuck out of her room, go the fuck home or whatever, she needed to write, she needed to get high, she needed to be alone. I took the vehemence of her response as evidence that the furor in her heart belonged only to me. She rarely let me kiss her, but when she did we kissed gently, the way I have seen elderly couples kiss. They touch lips knowing that only the sweet and simple thing can hold off the dark. Sometimes before I left her room she would call me over, touch my face, and look at me. There was always touch happening.

Her roommate likely resented us. That poor French girl, at U. Clarkston on exchange; she was just there to study in America. Instead she got to hear two savages fuck. What was her name? Madeleine. Sometimes when Allie was showering, or maybe she’d gone out for cigs, I would chat up Madeleine in the living room or the kitchen.

Come on, this one, I would say, just say your name again.

Of course, I always smiled when I asked. I had a great and easy smile back then. I was a toothsome young man.

Her inflected English was a wonder to my ears, and those thin, imported cigarettes in their pastel box on top of the old tube television were like a shot of genius each time I walked into the living room. Though my reservation was only a few hours and a mountain range from that student-living complex, it seemed as far away as Pluto. I often felt I was peering through a complicated series of lenses, and sometimes, looking at her, I couldn't say which way was up. She went to the fridge and I thought,

Ah, there she is, opening a Frigidaire as only the French can.

When I found her eating cold lentils and rice at the small, Formica-topped table under the naked yellow kitchen light, I would think,

So that is how they do it in France.

She was an endless entertainment to me. I once told her that, having seen how she ate, I knew all there was to know about her homeland. She never understood my humor. I was compelled by the possibility that my irony would never reach her.

Now that you've met me, I said, do you feel like you know everything about Indian Country? Will you go home and tell them you've met a real red man?

No, she said, the vowel all up in her nose. But I do wonder why you laugh at me so often.

Everything for her was serious, and because I was always amused when I was around her, our times together were ones of great cross-cultural confusion. She seemed to think that there was nothing in this life to smile about. But who could blame her? There she was, probably turning up the music in her room while me and my love visited utter destruction on each other. Does she ever think about us? Somewhere in France, we are in a woman's head. She looks up from her phone, the flight of a bird has reminded her of something else; for a moment what is gone returns. Love is most often a resurrected thing.

Allie was always getting high alone; she would go into the bathroom and lock the door and light up a joint.

Let's do it together, I would say through the door.

No, she would say.

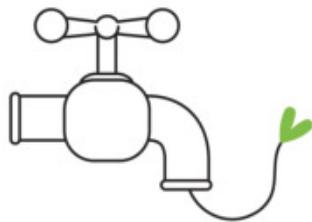
Then let me watch, I would say.

You're too much! she would holler.

I could have kicked the door open, movie style, but I refrained. Sometimes I got down on my hands and knees and put my eyes to the space at the bottom of the door. Like the bear that went over the mountain, I just wanted to see what there was to see. Nothing but the dim red glow from the night-light plugged in near the sink, the sound of the fan, the heavy odor of weed. That was how she liked it. She could never calm down. Her nerves were always at DEFCON 1. One night I told her the true divide between us was not the thing her mother had told us but that I came from buffalo people and she came from fish people.

No, she said. You come from sober people and I come from people who throw plates.

The other day in a used-book store I saw a spine that caused me to recall her desk that somehow withstood those tremendous tomes: "Indigenous Post-Colonial Theory," "Tribal Nation Building," "The United States Supreme Court and the Creation of Indian Country." I marvelled again at the slim legs of that lovely desk—how much dignity they took on under the weight of those titles! She had pub-



lished a paper the year before about the coming death of tribal sovereignty in the age of racialization. And now she was wanted for these panels, there was another paper to research and write and publish, her profs talking how she might *build her academic career*. One night, after getting yet another conference invitation, she flopped down on the mattress next to me and pressed her palms into her tired eyeballs.

I just want to scream, she said.

I didn't say anything. I'm certain I was practicing my active-listening skills.

I fucking hate this, she said. I don't want to spend the rest of my life talking to white people about indians. Excuse me, I mean *the indigenous peoples of North America*.

She made a face and said it in this snarky tone. She was always talking about social-justice terms. None of them belonged to us. It seemed we would never get to speak for ourselves about the things we wanted to talk about in the way we wanted to talk about them.

There will be no justice for us in this life or any other, she said.

That's fucking depressing, I said.

No, she said. What's depressing is learning there's almost nothing you can do about what you've learned.

What if we made out? I said.

You know what you are? she said. You're one of those smart people who like being dumb.

I pulled her to me and kissed her anyway.

She was delicate and slender in my arms, yet even as I held her she remained elusive; sometimes I had to search for her, had to make sure she had not faded out like a photo left too long in the sun. One night she said,

This doesn't qualify as a sustainability practice. I've been known to break things.

The Romantics, I said, believe love transcends space and time.

Writers, she said.

We lay on our sides in the dark. I opened her legs and put my palm against the rough hair between her thighs. Every time I touched her there I felt like I'd returned home.

You belong to me, I said.

Then do something about it, she said.

So that time we were up to Allie's mom's house, the story she told us. . . . There was this guy from my reservation, it was the early nineteen-hundreds, he had a last name that was more familiar than I was comfortable thinking about. He and his young wife, they left and went west over the mountains, ended up on Allie's reservation. This wife might have been my love's great-great-grandma. She also might have

been mine. I don't know. Indian Country is full of big stories and bullshitters. Nothing that matters is on paper and family lines are like strands of twine caught in a hurricane. Later on, when I checked with my mom, she said she'd never heard this story, but when I checked with my gram she said maybe she had. Then she talked to me for, like, two hours, giving me the all and sundry regarding our family. Once she got going you couldn't stop her. But when Allie's mom told us about this woman she had smiled, one of those serious smiles that might have been a threat but was probably more mean amusement than anything. Me and Allie, we weren't having any of it. We were just visiting. We had needed to get out of Clarkston, to get away from all its machinations and façades, friendly smiles and Native Americans on the university home page. We stayed the night in my love's old bedroom and when we fucked she said to hold a pillow over her face so she wouldn't feel shamed out.

You have to, she said. In a second I won't know my own name.

I lived for her cunt. I was always saying I wanted to come in her and she was always telling me no, so I held off. After our first time fucking, when we both lay sprawled out, I said,

What if I knocked you up sometime.

That's not gonna happen, she said.

But why not? I said. I'm the father of millions.

Not mine, she said.

She was like that, she had her own crystal ball.

With her I often found myself tossed into the cold—an unreadable gesture, an unbreakable silence, the slightest turning away of her attention, anything to suggest more than the moment's surface and there I was, overtaken by a maudlin and apocalyptic sense of things. May the black wave come from the black oceanic night and wash us all away. May we all be lost in darkness. Always, when she needed time to herself, when she was writing or reading, the inner workings of my brain would have it that she was out canoodling with whatever man I had seen talking to her earlier in the week—maybe I saw them across the oval walking to class, maybe they were sitting

## MY EMPIRE

My empire made me  
happy because it was an empire  
and mine.

I was too stupid to rage at anything.

Babies cried at birth, it was said,  
because the devil pricked them as introduction  
to knowledge.

I sat fingering my gilded frame, counting  
grievances like toes:

here my mother, here my ring,  
here my sex, and here my king.

All still there. Wrath is the desire  
to repay what you've suffered.

Kneeling on coins  
before the minor deity in the mirror.  
Clueless as a pearl.

That the prophets arrived not to ease our suffering  
but to experience it seems—can I say this?—  
a waste?

by the big fern at the student center.

Who was that? I would ask.

A guy from Ancient Civ, she might say. He sits next to me. We trade notes sometimes.

An exchange of notes! Nothing could be worse! A wild spiral into the dark ensues. How many such note-taking men were there? I'm in my studio apartment, flipping my phone open every five minutes like a true defeated asshole, sitting on the edge of the couch I found on a corner on University Avenue, waiting for the inevitable text, frozen in apprehension about the approaching dark. On such days and nights I was a shambling horror. I slept well only when I slept next to her. Alone, I was a prophesying mess, my mind extending itself into the most byzantine and pathetic and yet dignified of futures. Me at ninety with nothing to show for my life but dying alone with twenty-five published books, my faithful dog nearby, ready to eat my kidneys. Though I attended class, I found myself deaf and dumb. I walked across campus in a som-

nambulant manner. She was using me for attention but some other man was her true satisfaction. I was her science experiment, and our relationship—was it even a relationship?—was her private lab. Her true desire was to use me as fodder for a poem she would someday write from the security of a mythical and tremendous marriage to a white guy with money. When I told her about my psychic peregrinations, she would laugh—and not without a hint of cruelty, or so it seemed.

Afterward, she might reveal her own consultations with fate, which resulted in irrefutable insights and a sense of an all-cloaking darkness—but also had nothing to do with us. Instead, she would outline her vision for the future of Indian Country, and I could do little but listen with unabashed awe and suspicion. Each time I found myself again dazzled and bamboozled by her—I was at the mercy of my love. All it took was to walk into that room and I was overcome by a consuming, Goyaesque knowledge of reality. I

My empire made me happy  
so I loved, easily, its citizens—such loving  
a kind of birth, an introduction to pain.

Whatever I learn makes me angry to have learned it.

The new missiles can detect a fly's heartbeat  
atop a pile of rubble from six thousand miles away.  
That flies have hearts, one hundred and four cells big, that beat.

And because of this knowing:  
a pile of rubble.

The prophets came to participate in suffering  
as if to an amusement park, which makes  
our suffering the main attraction.

In our brochure:  
a father's grief over his dead father,  
the thorn broken off in a hand.

My empire made me happy  
because it was an empire, cruel,  
  
and the suffering wasn't my own.

—*Kaveh Akbar*

wanted to eat her like a moist piece of cake. The impossible desk, the unframed and awaiting mattress in the corner, the prayer flags lonely without a breeze, sweetgrass above the door and sage in the cracked porcelain dish on the high windowsill—what it was was a place of worship. With her I said things I've never said again, in a tone both serious and jocular that I've never used since.

What if we have a baby and it's light-complected like you, I said. My mom might hate it. My gram might float it down the river. We might spend our lives on the run, going from reservation to reservation with my aunts in hot pursuit.

Fuck your aunts, she said. And fuck blood and fuck color. The future of our nations is the only thing that matters. But you don't get that, do you.

I was lying on the bed and she had stood to go smoke a generic-brand cigarette from a pack I had bought her earlier that day. Her face was angular and shadowed in the unlit room. Whenever she spoke like this, the mystical

spell my mother and the others had cast over me disappeared and for a moment I felt free.

Is it true, I said, that what we do in bed is the purest expression of that political discourse to which we most closely adhere?

Look at you, she said.

I can read, too, I said.

The way she stood there, tapping a cigarette from its half-crushed box, I had no choice but to rise and go to her, to push her up against the wall and raise the slinky sequined dress she had lifted from Goodwill.

Where'd your panties go, I said.

They're in absentia, she said, laughing and covering her mouth before she had even finished speaking.

Her body was cool to the touch, her nipples hard under my hands. I was always warming her up. She never wore a bra; she was typically revolutionary that way. Then I had my hand on her neck and maybe I went a little too far.

Careful, she said, rubbing her throat after I had stepped back. Part of me

likes that and part of me thinks you're the wrong kind of ex.

What if this is the only real thing, I said, and life up to now was mere preparation.

I stepped back to her. I kissed her neck.

What if we're related, she said.

What if, I said. I kissed her cheek.

Would you propose? she said. She looked like her mother when she smiled.

Maybe, I said, but only if we're blood.

Eww, she said, pushing me away. You're so gross.

We laughed.

Then it was break and the Clarkston streets were full of red and green lights and monstrous candy canes. We went back to our respective reservations. It was something about being home . . . I don't know. Suddenly I felt high above that other life and all things below appeared clear and resolute and immutable in their nature. Allie began cutting our talks short, and sometimes I didn't answer texts for half a day, maybe more. On New Year's Eve she called me and there were so many voices in the background I couldn't hear what she was saying. I hung up. By the time we saw each other again winter had increased to a cruel fullness, everything buried and frozen and brittle—by giving the wrong look you could snap a light post in half. One night she told me to finish inside her. The moment of what I believed to be the true glory had arrived, but I could not do it. Afterward, we lay next to each other, saying nothing. She asked me what happened, but I didn't know. To this day I can't say if that was all of the truth.

What about you, I said. Did you come?

Never, she said.

With me or . . .

With you, she said. But only a few times ever.

It was very quiet then.

It's not really about you, she said.

Why did you tell me to do that, I said.

She sat up in the dark and searched for her cigarettes.

It doesn't matter now, she said. Then she was getting dressed.

Do you have to smoke right now? I said.

She stopped and looked at me when

she got to the door; she was nothing but a shadow.

Next thing, I heard the flick of her lighter outside the slightly open window. Inhale. Pause. The long exhale. The room was black, and I felt as though I had been jettisoned into space and might be drifting for some time.

In the weeks that followed a new sense about things developed: every day was casual Friday. We were like good friends who had been close many years before and upon reuniting could be only simple and generous and shallow. And in bed the gloves came off. If she had given a fuck before she didn't now. She told me to do things to her that I've never done since and could not have imagined before the moment she asked. When I think about it now, despite the distance, my mitochondria still feel the shock. The plows piled snow into giant drifts on the sidewalks and in the process buried cars and sometimes the reckless elderly and unsuspecting children. Everyone was leaning into the cold, squinting into the blinding whiteness all around. Breathe shallow or you'll burn up your lungs. That sort of thing. Allie stopped going to class. I didn't ask her why. I knew that she would never tell me and if I pushed for an answer she'd just start again with the shouting that of late had become her *modus operandi*. I stopped answering my mom's calls and she got worried enough that she sent my uncle down to Clarkston to check on me. The night he was in town we got drunk and talked about things.

Sounds like you need some new ass, he said.

That doesn't really help, I said.

An hour later he left the bar with a girl who sat two rows from me in *World History*.

One late night me and Allie were trying to get things going but we had run dry. We listened to the weatherman on the radio for a bit and then I turned it off. Outside it was very still. The snow that had been falling since earlier in the night had stopped.

Fuck it, I said. Let's go for a drive.

We had done that sometimes, driving with nowhere to go. The snow was deep. Neon signs pulled us through the dark, past the powdered cars and

under flashing street lights. We drove across town and then circled back. We were the only people making tracks, everything finally belonged to us. We went down a street I had never been on into a neighborhood I had never seen and have not found since and she said,

I don't believe in this anymore.

How so, I said.

She waved her hand.

I'm just another white man's dog, she said. That's all they want. They're training me like a pet.

Someone has to do something, I said.

It ain't me, babe, she said.

She cocked her head and smiled at me without showing her teeth.

Fuck, you're miserable, I said.

Whatever you say, cousin, she said.

She looked out the window and took a long drag from her cigarette. The light from the street lights passed over her hand and face and over her hand and face.

It was not that long ago that my people placed the newly dead on scaffolds of cottonwood, and their bones were given up to the wind and the rain and the ice and the heat of the brutal sun. Those left behind might fast alone in the mountains and wail and cut themselves. Thus it is that we still prefer that our endings be intensely elemental and not without a certain amount of self-harm. A few nights after Allie cast me from her room, first striking me in the face with an open hand and then throwing a lighter at me that exploded against the wall as I left (I had said I was done)—an event that took place a week after she had called me twenty-seven times and sent me thirty-some texts in one night (that afternoon she had told me she was done)—she went out with her cousin, who had just got out of prison on good behavior. Allie had never gone out since I'd known her, but I was not surprised. Some of us are like that. One moment we're one way, the next we're another. A month later we are back to the first way. She was going to a place in herself where I could not follow and I said that watching her do this felt awful.

Go find some nice little white girl,

she said. That'll make you feel better.

We saw each other a few more times, and though there was still something left of the diamond-shock feeling between us, there was also a distance as vast and incomprehensible as that between a mother and child. Allie moved back to her reservation to live with her cousin, sending me a text that said she was out. Next I heard she was flipping burgers at a diner. She had left everything in the apartment to poor Madeleine, who was perplexed but generous when I asked to see the room. There was the graceful desk and those glorious, hopeful, and heavy books, and the prayer flags and the broken dish with the sage, but it was already as if the things that had taken place there had happened to someone else, and standing in the middle of the room I felt myself caught at the center of a slowly turning black hole, and I knew some part of me would never escape the gravity of my own insufficiency. I accepted it completely and forever, just as the sun accepts that it will never catch the moon. I began to sit at the back of class. I let my hair grow long, and I wore sunglasses I'd lifted from a convenience store. Sometimes, when I was riding the city bus, a feeling overtook me like a lightning bolt emerging from an empty sky, the desire to take the life of everyone around me, man or woman or child, to crush their skulls with a stone war club whose head I had painted with the red ochre paint of ceremony, the likes of which I have seen only in museums and in textbooks—and then I would find myself in neighborhoods I didn't know. It was always dark by then, the night heavy with the scent of cottonwood buds. I would begin to look for the bright, uncurtained windows of houses where no one like me had ever stepped foot. When I found one, I watched the people on the other side of the glass and imagined what it was like in their living rooms and kitchens, where life seemed lit by a warm, yellow glow that could dissolve all pasts and histories—and in this way those homes became my salvation, because it seemed I could, if only for a moment, be someone else. ♦

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# THE CRITICS



BOOKS

## BEYOND THE VACCINE

*Preventing another pandemic will be a political task as much as a medical one.*

BY JEROME GROOPMAN

“Just a few years ago, many of us in the global health policy community were thrilled at the prospect of eliminating catastrophic infectious and tropical diseases,” Peter Hotez writes in his new book, “Preventing the Next Pandemic” (Johns Hopkins). He dates this high point of optimism to the start of 2015, when the success of vaccina-

tion campaigns had become dramatically evident. Polio, once endemic in more than a hundred countries, had been limited to three—Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Pakistan. Measles deaths were down by eighty per cent, from half a million children worldwide in 2000 to a fifth of that number. Vaccination campaigns achieved similar reductions

in mortality with diphtheria, whooping cough, tetanus, and a type of bacterial meningitis.

As the world nervously watches the rollout of the various COVID-19 vaccines and surveys the human and economic cost of the pandemic, this period of optimism is hard to imagine. Yet Hotez, a pediatrician and a specialist

*Wars, migrations, and environmental factors were driving a resurgence of infectious disease even before COVID-19 appeared.*

in tropical infectious diseases at Baylor College of Medicine who co-directs a vaccine-development center at the Texas Children's Hospital, shows that pandemics had been rebounding well before the first COVID-19 cases emerged in Wuhan. His book draws lessons from the field of tropical infectious diseases, and also from his international work as a science envoy—a position created jointly by the State Department and the White House—during Barack Obama's Presidency. Hotez is perhaps uniquely positioned to expound a broad vision that marries science with geopolitics. (In the past year, he has been a prominent TV expert on the pandemic.) We learn not only about familiar scourges such as polio and diphtheria but also about a host of so-called neglected tropical diseases, including dengue, leishmaniasis, schistosomiasis, and Chagas. He melds an account of their biology with documentation of the social and political factors that enable them to spread, and passionately insists that we cannot prevent pandemics in isolation from wider global currents. He identifies a cluster of non-medical drivers of deadly outbreaks—war, political instability, human migration, poverty, urbanization, anti-science and nationalist sentiment, and climate change—and maintains that advances in biomedicine must be accompanied by concerted action on these geopolitical matters.

The message comes at a time when the Biden Administration has done much both to stem the pandemic in the United States and to reverse the deleterious approach of the Trump White House. Biden has facilitated widespread distribution of vaccines, recently announcing that all adult Americans would be eligible for shots by the beginning of May, and he has instituted public-health measures, such as mandatory masks on trains and planes, that should have been in place a year ago. He has reaffirmed U.S. membership in the World Health Organization, appointing Anthony Fauci as the head delegate. And the Administration has withdrawn numerous budget-cut requests that Trump sent to Congress, including one that would have cancelled four billion dollars of funding for Gavi, a public-private partnership that provides vaccinations in low-income countries.

As welcome as all this is, any hope of containing future outbreaks will require tackling deeply rooted global problems. President Biden's belief in the power of revitalized American diplomacy will be tested not only in such areas as trade agreements and nuclear-arms control but also in the fight against epidemics that occur far from American soil.

War and Pestilence ride together as two of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, and there is no shortage of historical precedent to demonstrate the aptness of the allegory. The great influenza pandemic that began in 1918 was propelled, in part, by troop movements and population shifts at the end of the First World War. Both the First and the Second World Wars produced typhus epidemics. Armed conflicts cause malnutrition, poor pest control, and sanitation problems; even the soil often becomes contaminated. Medical facilities are destroyed; doctors and nurses, diverted to combat duty, are unable to provide care, and vaccination and other mass-treatment programs usually falter.

The first two decades of this century have furnished many fresh examples. The ongoing conflict in Yemen has produced the largest cholera outbreak in history, which has infected two and a half million people since it began, in 2016. Wars in Syria and Iraq led to a resurgence of measles and polio. The collapse of insect-control programs sparked the spread of cutaneous leishmaniasis, a parasitic disease that results in disfiguring skin ulcers. Known as "Baghdad boil" or "Aleppo evil," it is transmitted through the bite of blood-feeding sand flies, which flourish in uncollected garbage. By 2016, the destruction of infrastructure in conflict zones had brought about a tenfold increase in such cases in Syria, some two hundred and seventy thousand a year, with another hundred thousand a year recorded in Iraq.

Hotez writes that wars in the Middle East have made the region "a new global hot zone of emerging and neglected tropical diseases." The news elsewhere is scarcely better. During conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic,

and South Sudan, measles returned, along with *kala-azar*, another type of leishmaniasis, which attacks internal organs and is frequently fatal. The 2018 Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo left more than two thousand dead. In northeastern Nigeria, attacks by Boko Haram have destroyed as much as three-quarters of the infrastructure required for vaccinations, and there has been a corresponding rise in cases of polio, measles, whooping cough, bacterial meningitis, and yellow fever. A 2019 study cited by Hotez found that a child born within six miles of the conflict zone is half as likely to receive any vaccine as other Nigerian children.

Even in the absence of war, political instability can produce comparable results. Hotez discusses Venezuela, which, under Nicolás Maduro, has suffered a level of economic collapse and social chaos that has led to the unravelling of the country's health-care system. Measles had been eradicated, but it reemerged in 2017. As public-hygiene infrastructure has deteriorated, there has been a spread of schistosomiasis, a disease transmitted by freshwater snails and typically contracted when people bathe or wash laundry in infested rivers. (The snails are vectors for a microscopic parasite whose eggs end up in the liver and gut, causing inflammation and tissue damage.) A breakdown in pest-control measures fuelled a rise in mosquito-borne illnesses, including the Zika virus, chikungunya, and dengue. Of course, once infectious diseases take hold in one country they easily spread to others. A diphtheria outbreak in Venezuela's illegal mining camps crossed the border into Brazil. A flareup of dengue recently reported on the Portuguese island of Madeira, off the coast of Africa, may well have originated in Venezuela.

It is estimated that ten per cent of Venezuela's population—more than three million people—has emigrated, joining the ranks of the world's refugees. In war-torn countries, people flee at even greater rates, whether within the country or outside it. As Hotez points out, refugees often lack adequate food and shelter, as well as access to health care. In makeshift camps, malnutrition, crowding, and lack of vacci-

nation or medical care increase exposure to insects and microbes. Sexual violence spreads viruses like H.I.V.

As refugees from African and Middle Eastern wars have fled to Europe, diseases long thought eliminated have begun reappearing: chikungunya and dengue have surfaced in Italy, Spain, and Portugal; malaria in Greece and Italy. The island of Corsica has experienced its first-ever cases of schistosomiasis. Hotez is rightly careful not to attribute these infections strictly to the migration of refugees, noting that warming temperatures in Southern Europe, owing to climate change, and recessions in Italy and Greece may also be factors. Another factor is that refugees tend to flee to urban areas: in Syria, thousands have crowded into slums in Aleppo; in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kinshasa has become a major hub.

Migration aside, dense urbanization leads to the spread of infectious disease, too, because burgeoning populations quickly outstrip sanitation infrastructure. The coming decade, Hotez writes, will witness “the unprecedented creation of new megacities,” heavily populated urban centers with at least ten million inhabitants. Some forty megacities are predicted to emerge by 2030, many of them in low-income nations of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Hotez paints an alarming picture of megacities incapable of providing safe water and adequate sanitation, leading to typhoid fever and cholera, as well as leptospirosis, which festers in the kidneys of urban rats and dogs and can be passed to people through contaminated drinking water.

To complete this dystopian vision, Hotez highlights how climate change will further inflame contagious disease. Unprecedented heat waves in the Middle East have produced droughts that create food insecurity and fierce competition for water supplies, driving rural populations to already overcrowded urban centers. Warming temperatures also shift insect ecosystems. West Nile virus is now common in Southern Europe. Mosquito-transmitted viruses have swept across South and Central America into the Caribbean and then into Texas and Florida. Hotez cites a recent study, led by the epidemiologist Simon

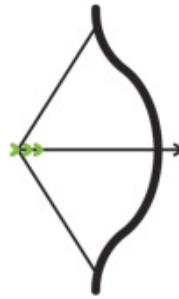
Hay, which predicts that by 2050 dengue infections will have made further inroads into the United States.

Most of Hotez’s infection-boosting factors have clear physical manifestations. The exception, “anti-science and nationalism,” is in many ways the most exasperating. How can it be that we are threatened not only by insects and filth and the frailties of our own bodies but also by something as intangible as our beliefs? For Hotez, the rise of anti-science ideology—most particularly, the anti-vaccine movement—is highly personal. His previous book centered on his daughter Rachel, now in her twenties, and bore the title “Vaccines Did Not Cause Rachel’s Autism” (2018). He now updates us on the results of his efforts to dispel claims that vaccines cause autism-spectrum disorders. Noting that these claims were producing “steep declines in the numbers of kids vaccinated,” he attempted to publicize the “massive evidence refuting any link, or even plausibility, given what we have learned about the genetics, natural history, and developmental pathways of autism.” For his pains, he was pursued online by anti-vaxxers who propagate specious accusations that he personally profited from vaccines.

Hotez observes that there are some five hundred Web sites spreading anti-vaccine misinformation, whose assertions are further disseminated on social media and on e-commerce platforms. “The largest e-commerce platform of them all, Amazon, is now the most active promoter of fake anti-vaccine books,” he writes. “Go to Amazon books, click on ‘Health, Fitness, and Dieting’ on the scroll down menu at the left, and then click on ‘Vaccinations’ to see how legitimate books on vaccines are pushed behind by the fake ones.” He finds that the online sensorium is so clogged with misinformation that it is now hard for concerned parents to find trustworthy data: “Serious and meaningful information regarding this topic resembles a lost message in a bottle floating aimlessly in the Atlantic Ocean.” Action is urgently needed; measles cases are spiking in Europe, and the W.H.O. has identified

“vaccine hesitancy” as one of the world’s most urgent health issues.

Hotez goes on to survey the political power of the anti-vaccine camp. In the United States and Europe, anti-vaxxers have joined forces with populist and libertarian movements, and American groups aligned with the Tea Party invoke “medical freedom,” “health freedom,” or “choice” to justify withholding vaccines from children. Anti-vaxxer political-action committees lobby state legislatures to allow parents to opt out of school vaccine requirements. Under the Trump Administration, more than eight hundred and fifty thousand dollars in loans from the federal Paycheck Protection

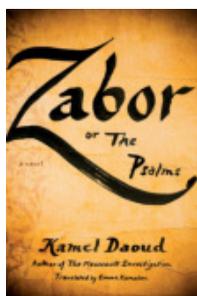


Program went to five major anti-vaccine groups—including such deceptively named entities as the National Vaccine Information Center and Children’s Health Defense. In January, when COVID-19 vaccines were being administered at Dodger Stadium, in Los Angeles, far-right and anti-vaxxer groups blocked the entrance to the site, forcing the police to temporarily shut it down.

Hotez examines how this obscurantist ideology circulates, and offers three case studies. Starting in around 2008, the Somali immigrant community in Minneapolis was offered “town hall meetings” touting the vaccine-autism link, and by 2017 the same community was in the throes of a measles outbreak. In 2019, the Orthodox Jewish community in New York was treated to ads with “fake Holocaust imagery, including yellow stars, to compare vaccines to the Holocaust.” The result was “one of America’s worst measles epidemics in decades.” The third target was the African-American community in Harlem, which received propaganda in which vaccines were compared to the infamous Tuskegee syphilis study. Probing the motivation of the groups that spread such lies, Hotez follows the money and concludes that the perpetrators are often just “monetizing the Internet by selling phony autism therapies (including bleach enemas) and nutritional supplements, fake books, or advertising.”

His suggested remedy is to pressure social-media and e-commerce sites to

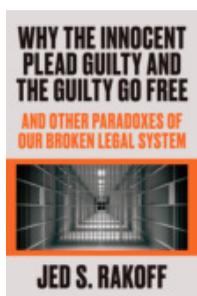
## BRIEFLY NOTED



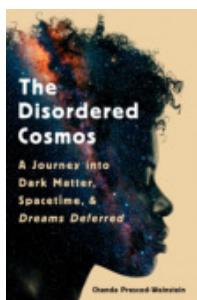
**Zabor, or the Psalms**, by Kamel Daoud, translated from the French by Emma Ramadan (Other Press). This second novel by the celebrated Algerian author of “The Meursault Investigation” is a deeply imaginative allegory about the possibilities of language. Zabor, the narrator, proclaims that writing—not “prayer, medicine, magic”—is “the only effective ruse against death.” After losing his mother at a young age and being abandoned by his father, Zabor is sent to live with an aunt. He develops a passion for reading and writing in Arabic and French, and becomes convinced that writing about a person can delay that person’s mortality. When he is summoned to his father’s deathbed, he grapples with whether to use his power to save the man who spurned him.



**Milk Blood Heat**, by Dantiel W. Moniz (Grove). Set largely in Jacksonville, Florida, this debut short-story collection focusses on the monstrous. Two thirteen-year-old girls fantasize about death, until one goes too far; a woman who recently miscarried sees “little legs dancing” on a counter; a mother punishes a teacher who tries to seduce her teen-age daughter. The characters, mostly women and adolescent girls, know that they harbor dark yearnings, and that you can “be a ghost in your own life” or “a glorious creature, spare and glowing.” Moniz illuminates the uncanny interior lives of women who are connected “in an unbroken chain from the center of time, connected by milk and blood.”



**Why the Innocent Plead Guilty and the Guilty Go Free**, by Jed S. Rakoff (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). The author, a federal judge, examines the failures of a judicial system that currently incarcerates more than two million people (five times more than four decades ago), forty per cent of whom are Black men. Politicians want to appear “tough on crime,” even though incarceration’s role in crime reduction is unclear. Harsh sentences lead the vast majority of defendants, including an estimated hundred thousand innocent people, to opt for plea bargains, a process that lacks oversight. Meanwhile, prosecutors fail to hold high-level executives accountable for serious offenses. The government is allowing corporations to make gestures toward self-rehabilitation while denying ordinary citizens their day in court.



**The Disordered Cosmos**, by Chanda Prescod-Weinstein (Bold Type). Physics and astronomy are often seen as abstract and universal, but this wide-ranging corrective, by a particle cosmologist, emphasizes the fact that they are also “a human, social enterprise,” shaped by the same racism and sexism that plague society as a whole. Prescod-Weinstein, a Black woman, charts the way that the hostility she faced throughout her career tempered her enthusiasm for particle physics, and charges the scientific culture with ignoring the contributions and concerns of ethnic and gender minorities—including Native Hawaiians who oppose the construction of a new telescope on Mauna Kea. The ability to “know and understand the night sky” is a human right, she argues, and should be far more accessible to Black and indigenous children.

take down misleading content. This is already happening, to some extent. In December, Facebook at last banned misinformation about the COVID vaccines—a rule that was expanded, in February, to cover vaccines of any kind—and it has since suspended groups like the National Vaccine Information Center and Stop Mandatory Vaccination. Nonetheless, anti-vaccine accounts on social media continue to flourish, having gained more than ten million new followers since 2019.

Hotez admits that there is no easy way to put “the anti-vaccine genie back in the bottle,” but feels that scientists must “fight back through public engagement.” Two other recent books suggest alternative avenues. In “Viral BS” (Johns Hopkins), Seema Yasmin, a public-health specialist at Stanford, frames the dilemma as one integral to tribal identity. “False beliefs are very much a social and cultural phenomenon,” she writes. “Shared beliefs are the glue of community; they confirm our place, our membership, and belonging. And because belonging is deeply important to humans, beliefs can feel like life or death.” She uses the metaphor of vaccinating society against disinformation—“pre-emptively exposing people to weakened rumors so that they build up mental immunity against attempts to deceive them.” She terms this tactic “prebunking,” but it’s not entirely clear what this would entail in practice. One possibility is described in “Think Again” (Viking), by Adam Grant, an organizational psychologist at Wharton. In a chapter about “vaccine whisperers” in Quebec, he details a nonjudgmental approach based on open-ended questioning. Presenting categorical scientific information typically only hardens resistance, so the whisperers don’t aim to persuade, exactly, but rather to encourage anti-vaxxer parents to see changing their minds as a journey of “self-discovery,” and something that affirms their agency. Grant reports that promising results have led Quebec to fund implementation of this one-on-one approach in neonatal units.

Early in his book, Hotez pays tribute to his “role model,” the American virologist Albert Sabin, a Jewish immigrant from Eastern Europe who, in the mid-nineteen-fifties, forged a

partnership with Soviet scientists to test an oral vaccine for polio. Sabin had developed a vaccine based on live polio strains, but was unable to test it in the United States, where much of the population had already received an intramuscular vaccine. Beginning in 1959, the oral version was given to some hundred million children and young adults in the Soviet bloc, and the results were so encouraging that the United States tested and approved the new vaccine in the early sixties. For Hotez, this collaboration, occurring during the most frigid years of the Cold War, represents “the gold standard for how scientists of different ideologies can overcome diplomatic tensions or even overt conflict in order to advance science for humanitarian purposes.”

Sabin’s example inspires Hotez’s advocacy of so-called vaccine diplomacy, in which countries that have developed vaccines make them available to countries that lack them. The impulse is both humanitarian and, following Joseph Nye’s doctrine of “soft power,” strategic—an attempt to increase international influence by fostering good will. Hotez sketches in a prehistory of the phenomenon, starting in 1806, when the British physician Edward Jenner, who had created the world’s first vaccine, against smallpox, was able to trade on his international reputation to secure the release of English prisoners during the Napoleonic Wars. Napoleon, who had had his troops inoculated, is said to have exclaimed, “Jenner—we can’t refuse that man anything.” Hotez also regards Louis Pasteur as a vaccine diplomat, on the basis of the Pasteur Institutes he founded across the Francophone world, including outposts in North Africa and Southeast Asia, which produced the first rabies vaccine.

Hotez describes a speech by President Obama at Cairo University in 2009 as initiating America’s return to vaccine diplomacy. Obama spoke of “a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world.” He pledged to provide Muslim-majority countries with a polio-eradication campaign, funding for technological development, and science envoys to disseminate expertise in such areas as agriculture, energy, and medicine. At the time, the Middle East and North Africa largely

lacked the technology to create their own vaccines, and commercial pharmaceutical firms had little financial incentive to combat the region’s emerging infectious diseases.

When Hotez became one of Obama’s science envoys, in 2015, he worked mainly in Saudi Arabia and was impressed with the receptiveness of officials there, many of whom had attended American or European universities. Together they assessed the kingdom’s particular vulnerabilities. Diseases spread from war zones in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq, and also entered the country during the two great pilgrimages to Mecca, the hajj and the umrah, each of which annually attracts more than a million non-Saudis. Developing vaccines, essential to the country’s security, could also, by boosting the biotech industry, help it achieve its goal of diversifying its oil-dependent economy by 2030. As a result of these conversations, Saudi Arabia set up a center for neglected tropical diseases, and Saudi scientists came to Hotez’s vaccine-development laboratory in Texas for training.

The approach that Hotez articulates is both pragmatic and humanitarian. Still, one can’t help wondering whether his faith in vaccine diplomacy makes him sometimes insufficiently mindful of its limitations. His work as a science envoy in Saudi Arabia concluded a year before the rise of Mohammed bin Salman, but it’s still jarring that the book contains no mention of the kingdom’s new autocrat—let alone of Jamal Khashoggi, the dissident journalist whose murder he ordered. The kingdom’s role in sponsoring wars that have brought disease to its borders is mostly downplayed. There is only a single reference to Saudi bombings in Yemen, and we are told that, “by 2015, the Kingdom found itself situated between two major conflict zones on the Arabian Peninsula.” Indeed.

This is not to invalidate vaccine diplomacy: a life saved is a life saved. But the approach is subject to the same ethical quandaries that bedevil other forms of engagement and soft power. Exporting vaccines and exporting values are two very different things, and there’s no reason to suppose that medical achievements will translate into political ones. Even the vaccination project

that Albert Sabin and his Soviet counterparts undertook in the U.S.S.R., historic as it was, had no effect on the Cold War. The project had wrapped up by the end of 1961; the next year, the Cuban missile crisis erupted.

When Sabin and his Soviet colleagues were collaborating, the United States had a virtual monopoly on biomedical technology. Things are different now, with American, British, German, Chinese, Russian, and Indian vaccines all vying for customers. The chance to wield soft power in developing nations has been particularly attractive to America’s rivals. Russia, hoping to make its Sputnik V vaccine the preferred option in Latin America, has spread disinformation about competitors. For China, the vaccine is an extension of its “Belt and Road” infrastructure investments around the world, and it has pledged millions of doses to Indonesia, Turkey, Ethiopia, Serbia, Egypt, Iran, and Iraq, among others. As more and more countries embrace vaccine diplomacy, shots are coming to resemble a kind of tradable currency.

Medically speaking, the fact that many countries around the world now have the capacity to create reliable vaccines so quickly is cause for rejoicing. Viruses don’t recognize borders or political rivalries, but a peculiarity of the COVID crisis is that, though inherently global, it has also been intensely national—a time of international collaboration and shared experience but also of travel bans and closed borders. It’s too early to say how the politics of this new era will play out, and Hotez may be right to focus on medical problems rather than getting overwhelmed by political ones. In his previous book, he wrote that he cherishes the rabbinic concept of *tikkun olam*, “repairing the world through good deeds and actions.” In an article published in 2017, he extended this concept to include “science tikkun”—that is, improving the human condition through “science, science diplomacy, and public engagement.” His engagement with the daunting geopolitical drivers of pandemic disease recalls another famous rabbinic concept: “You are not obliged to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.” ♦

## PUZZLING IT OUT

*The writer Sybille Bedford never pretended that her life cohered.*

BY MADELEINE SCHWARTZ



In the summer of 1940, when she was twenty-nine years old, Sybille Bedford took on an unusual assignment: driving Thomas Mann's poodle across the United States. Bedford had known Mann, nearly forty years her senior, since her adolescence, which she spent living among German expatriates in the South of France. An aspiring but so far unprolific writer of fiction and nonfiction, she had come of age under his shadow. Now both she and Mann were refugees in another country. Mann and his family, moving from Princeton to Pacific Palisades, took the train; the country was experiencing a heat wave, and the compartments were air-conditioned. Bedford drove the writer's car with her girlfriend and Nico, the poodle, stopping every once in a while for a bottle of Coke, which she spiked with rum.

Bedford's first novel did not appear until more than a decade after this transcontinental journey, and would be followed, in the course of her career, by similarly long stretches of silence—silences that may help explain why her books, though sharp and discerning, have often slipped out of public view. As the distinguished biographer Selina Hastings shows in “Sybille Bedford: A Life” (Knopf), dedication to work and to life were inseparable for Bedford, and the two were not always in harmony.

Like the writers she grew up with in the nineteen-thirties, Bedford led a life defined by rootlessness. Many of her books feature a scene in which a woman crosses a border; often, she is stymied by the question of where, exactly, she comes from. Bedford rarely settled in a

particular place, and never settled on a particular reckoning of the events she had witnessed. Her novels and memoirs, jagged and patchworked, take on the questions engendered by the period between the two world wars—questions of heritage and national boundaries. When she began reporting, in middle age, Bedford often focussed on law and trials, and compared the consequential whims of different legal systems.

“I had come alive and physically intact through four decades of our frightful century, and I was conscious—intermittently—of the privileges and the precariousness of my existence,” Bedford wrote at the end of her life. The stops and starts of her career were sustained by a strong belief that she was a born writer, and yet writing was, for her, often torturous and slow. In her work, she was driven by an obsession with origins, and also by a conviction that people shouldn't have to be defined by them.

Sybille von Schoenebeck was born in 1911 in Berlin, and her childhood was marked by wars fought globally and domestically. Her father, Maximilian, a Catholic baron, and her mother, Lisa, the daughter of a rich Jewish businessman, had a strained marriage. By the time Sybille was eleven years old, Lisa had abandoned the family, chasing lovers abroad. Left with her father, who had been pushed to the brink of poverty after the First World War, Sybille was isolated, her education neglected. She did not learn how to write until she was about eight years old, later developing handwriting that even she found difficult to read.

At fourteen, Sybille was summoned to Italy by her mother—the first invitation since Lisa's departure. Just before Sybille left, her father contracted appendicitis and died. “This was indeed the point of no return,” she later wrote. As Sybille would recall in one of the many semi-fictionalized depictions of her childhood, Lisa greeted her daughter by asking which language she spoke. Sybille's trip eventually led to a permanent relocation to Sanary-sur-Mer, in France. The expatriates in Sanary included Aldous and Maria Huxley, the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig, and Mann and his wife, Katia. Many of them—“promising, neurotic, vacillating between worship and rebellion,” as Sybille later wrote—would

gather for Sunday luncheons and listen to Mann hold court. And they tangled romantically. Maria became a partner in Sybille's sexual experimentation, Hastings surmises, around the same time that Lisa took up with Aldous. When Lisa, now remarried, discovered that her husband had a mistress, she became addicted to morphine and was known on the Riviera as Madame Morphesani.

The insular circle gave Sybille opportunities to write—and material to write about. In 1933, Mann's son Klaus accepted her essay on one of Huxley's books for his magazine. In it, Sybille mentioned, nearly in passing, the "bottomless stupidity" of Nazi Germany. After it was published, Klaus Mann was stripped of his citizenship. The German government, noting Sybille's Jewish descent, cut her off from the inheritance that had supported her. "How swiftly lives are uprooted, the trappings of life dismantled," she observed in a novel, more than fifty years later. "I found it terrifying."

Mann's daughter had married W. H. Auden in order to escape persecution, so the Huxleys went looking for a gay man who might offer Sybille a similar out. Sybille, now poor and essentially orphaned, found Walter Bedford, the ex-boyfriend of an acquaintance's butler, who agreed to marry her, in London, for a hundred pounds. On the morning the wedding was to take place, Sybille's passport was confiscated, and she feared deportation. Soon afterward, the issue resolved, Sybille von Schoenebeck became Sybille Bedford and never saw her husband again.

In 1940, she and a girlfriend, the author Allannah Harper, took a boat from Genoa to the United States—the last passenger ship to leave the port before war broke out in Italy. The fate of her writing career might not have seemed auspicious: she had drafted three novels by the end of her twenties, and received many rejections. ("Certainly not a professional writer and certainly not a novelist," one agent wrote.) She spent the next decade writing little, mostly in New York and Europe, until she published her first book, a travelogue about Mexico, at the age of forty-two.

Bedford later wrote that English was "the rope to save me from drifting awash in the fluidities of multilingualism." But her multilingualism also shaped her chosen language, giving it

an expansive, variegated sound. Many of her books deal with her personal history, "the same subject taken in a different light and on another scale," she wrote. As other readers have noted, she plays with form in a way that anticipates much of the fictional nonfiction that we've come to see as contemporary. Her work is loosely plotted, animated mostly by dialogue that can sound transcribed rather than written.

Bedford's first and best novel, "A Legacy" (1956), combines scenes, observations, and newspaper excerpts, presented by a narrator who disappears for hundreds of pages. Sometimes she writes whole passages in German or in French; we hear bits of conversation with little indication of who is speaking or about what. The narrator, describing her family history, sees her forebears from the perspective of the only child at the grownups' table. "Is everything only what we remember it to be?" Bedford wrote in a later novel. "Where, then, and when is truth?" The book is both cluttered and vividly, sometimes hilariously precise, giving it a lived-in quality—as if Bedford were presenting not a story to follow but a series of rooms to wander through.

"A Legacy" centers on two families, the Jewish Merzes and the Catholic von Feldens, who find themselves reluctantly intertwined at the turn of the twentieth century. Julius von Felden is an art-collecting dandy who lives in the South of France and insists on traveling with his three apes. When he meets Melanie Merz, his relatives consider her an unfortunate addition to the family and pressure her to convert. The Merzes regularly eat ham; they don't pray. Yet they are horrified that their treasured daughter should be asked to change her religion. Melanie takes things into her own hands, paying a visit to a pastor and returning—triumphant—with a certificate of conversion. Her future sister-in-law Clara, examining it, "emitted a faint hissing sound":

"A Protestant," she groaned and to everyone's consternation slipped from the chair to the floor. "On our knees, my child! and may He have mercy on us."

The Merz matriarch tries to diffuse the situation with a drink. She summons the butler: "Bring the poor lady an egg

in port wine." These disagreements over religion mean that the two families, though permanently linked, never fully mesh. When a scandal threatens the von Feldens, the press seizes on their connection with a Jewish family. One headline reads "Judo-Aristocrats Feast As Unemployment Soars."

"Once you can say, and *believe*, We are right—They are wrong, is that not when wars break out?" Bedford wrote in her final novel, "Jigsaw" (1989). The ambivalent zone between those simple categories, "right" and "wrong," defines many of Bedford's novels. The books deal with similar material—her own autobiography—but play with the boundaries of fiction and fact. In an author's note to "Jigsaw," Bedford is elusive about how and why her characters deviate from reality. "My mother and I are a percentage of ourselves," she writes. "Everyone and everything else, are what they seemed—at various times—to me."

The melding doesn't always work. In "A Favourite of the Gods" (1963) and "A Compass Error" (1968), Bedford has trouble finding a vantage point beyond her own. She returns to the resonant themes of "A Legacy," yet her characters seem trapped by their real-life counterparts. Flavia, in "A Compass Error," is meant to be a seventeen-year-old girl, but, like the fifty-seven-year-old Bedford who published the novel, she has a remarkable command of fine wines.

After the success of "A Legacy," and with the encouragement of her editor Robert Gottlieb, Bedford began covering trials. Her journalism is rarely discussed anymore, especially compared with the work of her friend the writer Martha Gellhorn. It was Gellhorn, Bedford wrote, who "lashed my conscience into actual writing against the forces of self-doubt and sloth." The resolute personality that sometimes hampered Bedford's fiction made her a great nonfiction writer. In "The Last Trial of Lady Chatterley," an account of the public prosecution of Penguin Books under the Obscene Publications Act, in 1960, Bedford keeps her gaze purposefully afar, watching as a procession of scholars and writers, including Rebecca West and E. M. Forster, are brought onto the stand to defend the merits of D. H. Lawrence's fiction, despite its "four-letter words." Bedford notes that the prosecutor read

aloud the definition of “to deprave” and “to corrupt,” while “the chief witness, the book itself, was still unread.”

**T**alent, material, and a taste for risk: why, then, did Bedford not begin to publish until middle age? During the years when she was writing very little, Bedford was having fun: travelling, falling in love, drinking wine, going to parties. Before a trip in Italy, Bedford stayed up late and then kept herself awake during the next day’s drive by reciting poetry to herself. In “Jigsaw,” she tries to square this way of living with her dream of writing: “Is it part of the writer’s flaw, wanting to get across so much and shrinking, so painfully, from the execution?” Hastings quotes from a diary entry that Bedford made before the publication of her first book: “July 20th No work—no excuse. 21st Thinking Fiddling—Dawdling . . . 25th Thinking—Dawdling—Dreaming—Fiddling . . . 22 Aug Hungover.” The anxiety of wasted time comes through in her novels, too. “When one’s young,” Flavia says, in “A Compass Error,”

everything is a rehearsal. To be repeated ad lib, to be put right when the curtain goes up in earnest. One day you know that the curtain was up all the time. That *was* the performance.

Bedford resisted any kind of work that she saw as beneath her. “Where *were* the bootstraps?” she once asked. She occasionally gave lessons and did translations, but said she didn’t want to interfere with her writing, even though there was often little to show for it. Throughout her life, she was supported by a variety of friends and ex-lovers, straining even her closest relationships. “The most unlikely people turn out wonderful when it counts. Others not,” she said, when Gellhorn sent a thousand-pound loan with a letter suggesting that Bedford start looking for a bootstrap or two.

Hastings’s view of these developments contains a bit of irony: “With almost a decade having passed since the publication of Sybille’s most recent book, she at last began to feel ready to return to work.” But even in Bedford’s less productive moments she was always looking for ways to deal with the history that she had lived. She started and abandoned many novels: one about a love

triangle; another about a childhood acquaintance, a Baronessa, who was later married to a Nazi. Raised on literature, Bedford held herself to very high standards—standards that could often suffocate the desire, as she wrote in “Jigsaw,” to seek “the links between private and mass catastrophe.”

But her private world was enthralling and always expanding. No matter where she was, she seemed to find herself in a room with her most interesting contemporaries. For much of her life, these acquaintances were well-known writers, even when Bedford—stocky, bright-eyed, with a taste for men’s suits—had little career to speak of. And, from adolescence onward, she had love affairs with women. A young woman’s attraction to two older women forms much of the plot of “A Compass Error”; a teenage crush appears in “Jigsaw.” In Hastings’s account, Bedford spent time in female-dominated salons in Paris, spaces that fomented some of the most interesting advances in modernism and art.

At the same time, her statements about women and being in love with women were often cold and cruel. “There IS something false about a relationship between two women. At least for me,” she told an ex-lover. She disdained feminism and spoke against the women’s movement. Hastings quotes Bedford’s letter to a girlfriend in which she declines a meeting with a lesbian literary agent in Paris: “I can’t bear this girlyery and cliquerei. One’s tastes are private. It’s bad enough (in some ways) to be oneself.” When asked to speak to the Oxford Gay Society, she wrote back a simple “No.” In an interview with *Country Life*, the magazine of the British upper class, she said, “I do think that emancipation of women has gone far too far. It’s ludicrous.”

**B**edford refused to be categorized by what we might call identity—in her sexuality, as a writer of novels or of journalism, or, for a long time, even as a resident of a particular country. But she relished the ways in which she could control her image. It’s striking to see how often she insisted on fine wine, even while relying on the handouts of ex-lovers. There was a limit to her roving eye; preoccupied by the happenings of cosmopolitan expatriates, she can

seem, at times, trapped in the insularity of the demimonde. In her later years, Bedford continued to move, but with less frequency; her politics hardened. At one point, she began to support Margaret Thatcher, straining her friendship with Gellhorn, which soon ended. Her eyesight failing, Bedford wore a green visor to shield her eyes while working and managed to painfully scrawl only a few lines a day.

In “Quicksands,” the memoir she published in 2005, the year before she died, Bedford is sucked back into the same fragmented experiences that occupy her previous books. This circuitous format allows Bedford to reconcile the history she lived and her reaction to it; her inability to respond as decisively or as honorably as she might have wished to. Publishing her autobiographical account as nonfiction for the first time, she returns to a project that had preoccupied her decades earlier. She describes visiting Ischia with Gellhorn and meeting a Baronessa, the same woman whom she had once tried to characterize in a novel. Bedford recognizes the woman as an old family friend. Gellhorn recognizes her as a woman connected to the Nazis: “How dare she show her face? She must be one of the wickedest women in Europe.” Bedford doesn’t immediately inquire what the Baronessa did during the war. Instead, she notices the woman’s “white silk chemisier” and “perfectly cut pleated skirt, polished Greek sandals.” Bedford is not so put together. “You look a bit shabby,” the Baronessa says. “I suppose that comes from having been on the winning side.”

It sounds like a cop-out—narrated by the Bedford whose interest in the superficial world kept her from writing as much or as ethically as she wanted to. But it might, in fact, be the opposite, a moment in which Bedford is seeing herself, fully, from the outside. She has managed to capture her ambivalence on the page: a profound repulsion at what the Baronessa represents, and also a petty reaction to how she appears. Bedford has finally allowed her works to encompass not only her thoughts but also her life—the morality she strove for and the mottled nature of its actuality. After all, as she writes, “to have survived, one has to have been alive.” ♦

# GAME OVER

*How athletes began telling a new story about sports.*

BY HUA HSU



In October, 2014, three days after Derek Jeter played the last game of his Hall of Fame career with the New York Yankees, he launched the Players’ Tribune, a Web site for athletes to tell their side of the story. It seemed like an odd decision. As a player, Jeter had always been a polite but almost pathologically reserved presence, offering the media pro-forma pleasantries, deflecting deeper inquiries into his personal life. The site, he explained, would give athletes a chance to speak directly to fans, who deserved “more than ‘no comments’ or ‘I don’t knows.’” Naturally, these were just the types of answers that he was known for.

At first, it was a bit funny, the no-

tion of Jeter hounding athletes for their delinquent essays. Most imagined that the site would be little more than a place for tight-lipped players to issue elegant press statements. But Jeter’s peers began to understand the allure of speaking on their own terms, and in their own voice. In 2015, Kobe Bryant announced his retirement by publishing a poem in the Tribune. The following year, Kevin Durant revealed his free-agency decision there. The appeal of the site as a space for storytelling, and the extent to which it was disrupting traditional flows of information, became hard to ignore. In 2017, Dion Waiters, a player renowned for his astronomical level of self-regard,

cemented his legend with an essay about his scrappy upbringing, titled “The NBA Is Lucky I’m Home Doing Damn Articles.” The All-Star forward Kevin Love wrote about struggling with depression. The Tribune helped popularize a wider range of athlete stories. Triumphs were flecked with pain or self-doubt; stars openly shared their traumas.

In the past, if athletes wanted to speak candidly, they would write a tell-all book, do a sit-down interview, maybe phone in to a radio show. If they aspired to work in media, they would try to land a cushy network job, providing expert commentary or analysis. But the Internet, which allows any of us to air the slightest thought, has changed those rules. Players have grown infatuated with sharing their perspectives in real time, in direct, unfiltered ways. Retired greats have realized that they possess endless content—stories, memories, behind-the-scenes morsels—that fans crave. And athletes everywhere are seizing the means of production. Around the time that Jeter launched the Tribune, LeBron James got funding for a new company, Uninterrupted. Its aim was to produce content from players’ points of view, and to show that those players could be “more than an athlete.” People like Jeter and James no longer had to settle for being talking heads. Now they barely had to settle for sports at all.

The space where athletes—or male athletes, at least—have found the greatest success as storytellers is in podcasting. The more polished shows can feel like extended auditions for media jobs, full of the rhythms and recurring segments of mainstream sports talk. The wrestler Chris Jericho hosts a surprisingly brisk interview show, “Talk Is Jericho,” with regular appearances from the Guns N’ Roses bassist Duff McKagan. The controversial, bro-centric media company Barstool Sports produces “Spittin’ Chiclets,” featuring the former N.H.L. players Ryan Whitney and Paul Bissonnette, and helped launch a popular series by the former N.F.L. punter Pat McAfee. Mike Tyson leads “Hotboxin’,” which has a loose, philosophical energy—it’s more “On Being” than “The Joe Rogan Experience.” And, in 2016, the writer Bill Simmons founded a Web site and podcast network called the Ringer, which elevated podcasters like

*A boom in athlete-driven podcasts has illuminated what players actually value.*

the former pitcher C. C. Sabathia, the Golden State Warriors coach Steve Kerr, and the New Orleans Pelicans guard J. J. Redick. If athlete-driven podcasts were once shoestring affairs, they've now been absorbed into the sports-media economy. Last year, the Ringer was acquired by Spotify for around two hundred million dollars.

Redick's current podcast, "The Old Man & the Three," which he started last summer, alongside his own production company, embodies the strengths of these more tightly packaged shows. Redick has interviewed Stacey Abrams, Bob Iger, and Matthew McConaughey, but his primary role is as a sort of liaison between players and fans. He's mellow and thoughtful, conscious of his position as a white athlete from a hippie background, which makes him an outlier in the N.B.A. (His likability might be surprising to those who recall his career at Duke University, where his smug affect made him one of the most hated players in basketball.) Now a respected veteran, he often talks about the tedium of N.B.A. life; after all, it's why he has time to podcast in the first place.

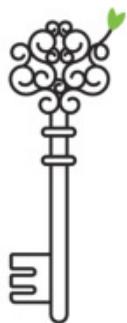
It's particularly fascinating to hear Redick relate to younger players. In a recent episode, he talked to his former teammate Markelle Fultz about a spell a few years ago, in Fultz's rookie season, when the guard dealt with a mysterious injury. As Fultz recovered, the media seemed to delight in dissecting every twitch of his body, and Redick lashed out at reporters. On the show, Fultz expressed his gratitude for Redick's support, before talking about the mental strain of being scrutinized. It was an interesting moment, in which Redick was able to move between being a teammate, sympathetic to Fultz's apprehension of the media, and an inquisitive member of the media himself.

In the past, this kind of mediation was handled mostly by journalists. That arrangement could be mutually beneficial for reporters (who sought access) and players (who wanted to protect their images). But there was always a tension thrumming in the background. Generations of Black athletes witnessed firsthand how they could be misread sim-

ply for having tattoos, wearing certain clothes, or speaking in ways that the media deemed inarticulate. This was especially true in the N.B.A. of the late nineties and early two-thousands, when the league, confronting the decline of its icon, Michael Jordan, cast about for a new identity. At the time, players could enter the league straight from high school, bringing a youthful, hip-hop-adjacent swagger that made owners and officials wary. A turning point came in 2004, when a skirmish broke out in the final seconds of a nationally televised game between the Indiana Pacers and the Detroit Pistons. The Pacers star Metta Sandiford-Artest—then known as Ron Artest—charged into the stands after a fan threw a drink at him. The media demonized the players involved, and new rules about off-court dress were introduced to make the league seem more presentable. Athletes rarely got the chance to speak their minds from inside the fishbowl.

It's not surprising that players from this era have taken to podcasting, and that they produce some of the richest, most vibrant work in the form. An exemplar is "All the Smoke," hosted by the former players Matt Barnes and Stephen Jackson. ("Smoke" refers to their taunting and trash-talking, and winks at their fondness for marijuana.) Barnes and Jackson were scrappy and competitive; they became folk heroes as part of the 2006-7 Golden

State Warriors, an underdog team whose coach now shares the pair's enthusiasm for weed. Their show is loose and meandering, even playfully unhinged. They tell stories that few reporters could pry out of them—gossip about life on the road, women, who was authentically tough. (Jackson was part of the Pistons-Pacers



brawl, and he often ponders how his career might have been different had he not been vilified.) The show routinely sheds light on the fraternal aspect of basketball. Last year, it featured one of the last interviews with Kobe Bryant before his death. At first, Bryant, who had known Jackson since they were teen-agers, adopts his standard, media-trained mode, issuing homilies about creativity and focus. After a few minutes, though, he eases

up, chuckles, and recalls the first time he heard the rapper E-40, in the mid-nineties, at a camp for the nation's best players.

"All the Smoke" rejects the decorum of the TV studio, and one of its pleasures is how openly the hosts talk about their inner lives, their experiences as Black men. In one episode, Barnes asks his former coach Doc Rivers what it was like to grow up with a father who was a cop. Last September, Jackson spoke movingly about his relationship with George Floyd, whom he befriended when they were teen-agers, growing up in Texas. After Floyd's death, Jackson went to Minnesota to help lead protests against police brutality. He described how helpless he felt, contrasting it with the feelings of control that he found on the court. Floyd had fallen into the street life, Jackson said, and their friendship became complicated as they grew older. "That could have been you if it wasn't for basketball," Barnes observed.

The exchange laid bare the fallacy that athletes should "stick to sports"—a call that has grown almost in direct proportion to Black players speaking out about police brutality or racial abuse. A subtle feeling of gratitude runs through "All the Smoke," a disbelief, on the part of Barnes and Jackson, that they are lucky enough to have full lives to look back on. In a recent episode, their guest was Kendrick Perkins, who retired in 2019. Perkins was not a player known for his finesse, and he now draws on his blunt, bruising directness as an analyst for ESPN. Perkins claimed that he appeared on the network for a year without compensation. (Apparently, the promise of "exposure" also works on people who have earned seven-figure salaries.) He initially saw the gig as a ramp into coaching. But he talked about Jackson's influence as a trailblazer, and joked that the success of "All the Smoke" proved that he, too, could speak "broken English" and find a home in the media.

It remains enormously expensive to broadcast live sports. Few things compel millions of people to watch TV like a big game, and the captive audience props up an increasingly outdated economic model of commercial breaks, high-profile sponsors, and advertisers. But fan engagement is no longer bound by live contests, or by seasons at all. Trades,

trash talk, and backstage maneuvering have made leagues like the N.F.L. and the N.B.A. year-round concerns, driving up demand for more content. At times, the sheer volume of N.B.A.-related material online—from Bleacher Report’s House of Highlights brand, which aggregates clips, to the dozens of Instagram accounts devoted to player fashion—can make the games feel ancillary.

Podcasts are a part of this shift, though they operate at a different rhythm. They’re slow and immersive, more concerned with humanizing players than with turning them into culture-war memes. In 2017, the veterans Richard Jefferson and Channing Frye started a podcast called “Road Trippin’,” interviewing their teammates on the Cleveland Cavaliers. Both men admitted that they were just sticking around the league as long as they could, riding the coattails of All-Star teammates like LeBron James and Kyrie Irving. Fans are accustomed to seeing teams as engaged in collective struggle, and we often frame that struggle in moral or political ways. But “Road Trippin’” also depicted the Cavs as a kind of workplace, where you simply had to tolerate some of your colleagues’ strange habits. In one episode, Jefferson and Frye talked to Irving shortly before the 2017 All-Star break. They joked about the aliases they use when checking into hotels, and exchanged thoughts on extraterrestrial life. At one point, Irving aired his skepticism that the Earth was round. “Here we go,” Frye said. Within the flow of their conversation, it was just another quirky moment, proof that Irving was, in the parlance, a different dude. But the clip became a sound bite—evidence, for the wider world, of Irving’s insoluble weirdness. He was constantly asked about it by reporters.

Since then, Irving’s relationship with the media has curdled, especially as he’s become more outspoken about politics. The most in-depth interview he’s given in some time was last fall, when he appeared on his teammate Kevin Durant’s podcast, “The ETCs.” A few months later, at the beginning of this season, he skipped his mandatory media sessions, writing on Instagram that he didn’t speak with “pawns.” Whatever the root offense had been, it was clear Irving no longer felt that reporters could convey the full range of his thoughts or priorities. He was a quester who happened to be very



good at basketball. The sport seemed no more important than the clout it gave him, which he could then apply to the issues—police brutality, Native rights, food insecurity—that he cared about.

In a recent episode of “Real Ones,” a Ringer podcast that pairs the former player Raja Bell with the journalist Logan Murdock, Bell reflected on what it meant for players like Irving to tell their own stories. He brought up a sour period from his playing days in Utah, noting that fans might have treated him differently had he had a more expansive platform. But Bell also suggested that there was a generational difference between someone like him, who came of age in the eighties and nineties, and a millennial like Irving. Back in his day, social media would have been a useful tool against one-sided reporting. Yet he didn’t necessarily share Irving’s need to feel recognized on some deeper, human level. “No one says you have to bare your soul,” Bell said.

**W**hen I was growing up, an athlete like Michael Jordan could feel ubiquitous yet totally unknowable. In the eighties and nineties, this was what it meant to be iconic: people grabbed on to fragments of your persona, as with Jordan’s near-psychotic will to win, and turned them into tokens of virtue. Controlling one’s image meant withholding any signs of weakness or vulnerability.

For the most part, the media abetted this process. Fans turned to sports for escapism, and sports coverage allowed them to view athletes from a distance, as avatars

that they could manipulate. Listening to players talk about what they actually value—for hours, and often to each other—upends this theatre, destabilizing the role that sports play in our lives. If, as Bell suggests, the Internet makes us believe that we might be understood, then athletes are still avatars, but for our real selves, rather than for our fantasies of greatness. Durant, for example, is unflapably cool on the court. But on his podcast he often seems open and slightly vexed, as though whoever he’s talking to might help him figure out something crucial.

I recently began listening to “Knuckleheads,” a podcast launched, in 2019, by Quentin Richardson and Darius Miles, darlings of the stylish, early-two-thousands N.B.A. The two met as kids, in Illinois, and were handpicked by Jordan to star in a commercial for his shoes—a fact that still astounds them. The show grew out of essays they wrote, for the Players’ Tribune, about adjusting to their rising fame, and listening to it can feel like eavesdropping. The pair often digress into Chicago-high-school-basketball minutiae, memories of seeing palm trees for the first time. Richardson is friendly and gregarious; Miles is shyer, and it’s sometimes hard to hear him at all. If it were any other podcast, I probably would have tuned out. But once Miles gets going, his laugh crackly and warm, you hear how simply talking aloud can be a form of therapy. It’s a reminder that claiming your narrative doesn’t necessarily mean that you’ll end up the hero. It means that you will be free. ♦

## LIFE FORCE

*Niki de Saint Phalle at MOMA PS1.*

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

*Saint Phalle, photographed in France in 1962, was an artist ahead of her time.*

**N**iki de Saint Phalle: Structures for Life,” at MOMA PS1, is a ravishing and scandalously overdue New York museum show of the French-American avant-gardist, who died at the age of seventy-one, in 2002, of emphysema probably caused by her use of toxic materials. The self-taught Saint Phalle is one of the late twentieth century’s great creative personalities, ahead of her time in several respects, with traits that once clouded and now halo her importance. Her career had two chief phases: feminist rage, expressed by way of .22 rifles fired at plaster sculptures inside which she had secreted bags of liquid paint, and feminist celebration of womanhood, through sculptures of female bodies, often immense, in fibreglass and polyester resin. The shooting pe-

riod lasted from 1961 until about 1963. The bodies consumed the rest of her life. Her masterpiece, the Tarot Garden (1979-2002), is a vast sculpture park in Tuscany filled with twenty-two free-form, monumental women, animals, and figures of fantasy, some the size of houses and made habitable with kitchens and plumbing. She was popular in Europe but, until late in life, cut little ice in transatlantic art circles. The problem tracks to a schism, around 1960, with triumphant American formalist abstraction, Pop art, and Minimalism on one side, and, on the other, European Nouveau Réalisme, a cohort (all male but for Saint Phalle) of provocateurs given to neo-Dadaist stunts: Yves Klein painting with pigment-splattered naked women, Arman amassing col-

lections of identical common objects, Daniel Spoerri gluing down remnants of meals and hanging them vertically, Jacques Villeglé presenting ragged, found street posters.

Saint Phalle’s gunplay, realized in Paris in 1961, was a stunt for sure: creation by destruction, theatrically perforating first plaster-covered boards and then figurative plaster sculptures of male subjects—avatars of her hated father, who sexually assaulted her when she was eleven. Some pieces concealed spray cans, for explosive effect when hit. That year, Marcel Duchamp, seventy-four years old, introduced the thirty-year-old Saint Phalle and her friend Jean Tinguely, the Swiss kinetic sculptor, to Salvador Dalí, fifty-seven. In honor of Dalí, they fashioned a full-size bull, which, wheeled out after a bullfight in Catalonia, satisfyingly blew up. Saint Phalle usually performed in fashionable white pants suits. The cultural frisson of a beautiful woman wielding deadly weapons and setting off explosives earned her notoriety in France, but there was scant critical curiosity, anywhere, about the motives of the work: a traumatic personal backstory and a politically edged aspiration to better the world.

**B**orn near Paris in 1930, to a tyrannical French banker father and a suffocatingly pious Roman Catholic American mother, Saint Phalle had a childhood of privilege and of horror, first in France and then, after her father’s finance company failed in the Depression, in America. Both parents were violent. Saint Phalle described the homelife as hellish. Two of her siblings committed suicide as adults. She was expelled from two Catholic schools and from the Brearley School, in New York, which booted her for defacing its classical statues by painting their fig leaves red. (Even so, she always praised Brearley for having instilled self-confidence in her as a young woman.) Starting in her late teens, she modelled for *Life*, French *Vogue*, *Elle*, and *Harper’s Bazaar*. At one point, Gloria Steinem spotted Saint Phalle walking down Fifty-seventh Street, purseless and in a cowboy getup. In an interview quoted by the show’s curator, Ruba Katrib, in the catalogue, Steinem recalled thinking, “That is the first free woman I

have ever seen in real life. I want to be just like her.”

At the age of eighteen, Saint Phalle married Harry Mathews, a nineteen-year-old American aspiring musician, who became an experimental novelist after the poet John Ashbery introduced him to the charismatically daft early-twentieth-century work of the Frenchman Raymond Roussel. Crosscurrents of creative influence flowed among many of the international bohemians of the period. The couple quickly had a daughter. Then Saint Phalle broke down. She and Mathews were now living in France and both were having affairs. In 1953, after a bout of sexual jealousy compounded by ill health (she suffered from hyperthyroidism), she attempted suicide. For six weeks, she underwent electroshock treatments and psychoanalysis at a clinic in Nice. It seemed to help. Saint Phalle and Mathews had a second child, and the family spent most of the remaining decade moving around Europe. In 1955, in Barcelona, she was flabbergasted by the buildings and the mosaics of Antoni Gaudí. (Gaudí became “my master and my destiny,” she said.) Plunging into art, at first with naïve styles of painting and assemblage, she separated from Mathews in 1960. He took the kids, but she stayed close to him, as she tended to do, all her life, with miscellaneous friends and (a great many) ex-lovers.

Indeed, sociability was Saint Phalle’s element, to the point of blurring her creative identity. At her first shooting performance, she let the invited guests take turns with the gun that she had rented from a fairgrounds for the occasion, delighting in their cathartic pleasure. As free with giving credit as with claiming it, in the Tarot Garden—which she created on an extensive plot of land donated to her by some wealthy friends—Saint Phalle incorporated homages to the Italian workers who had fashioned the steel armatures for her sculptures, covered them with resin, and helped line the exteriors and interiors with ceramic tiles and shards of mirror. (Videos in the show document the years of exacting labor.) She maintained a productive partnership with Tinguely for years, including throughout an intimate relationship that began in the early sixties and resulted, a decade

later, in marriage, with the pair collaborating on works that combine her sensuous sculptures and his wittily racketing machinery.

Until 1963, Saint Phalle continued to create patriarchal icons in plaster and, with bullets, make them bleed paint. Some were relief portraits of leading politicians, whom she loathed as a class—one was of John F. Kennedy, before his assassination. Then, in 1965, after some fetching sculptural works, mostly in soft materials, on themes of melancholy brides and elaborate, not terribly menacing monsters, came the first of what she called Nanas, using the French slang that was the rough equivalent of “broads” or “chicks.” The Nanas were inspired by a pregnant friend whose body was very curvy—almost hyperbolically female. (It was Clarice Rivers, wife of the painter Larry Rivers.) Saint Phalle fashioned the shape as a container, hollow but apparently formed of seismic internal forces. Nanas proliferated at sizes small and gigantic, turning dancery and acrobatic. Saint Phalle mastered gloss techniques for preserving their painted surfaces—in black-and-white and, often, sizzling secondary and tertiary hues—outdoors, in all weather. Nothing about the work jibed with anything then current in art. Most critics, especially American ones, dismissed it. Today, as categorical distinctions among art mediums and styles deliquesce, it comes off as heroic.

There’s a playhouse feeling and, in some cases, a function to Saint Phalle’s big women and to such occasional monsters as “The Golem” (1972), which occupies a playground in Jerusalem. Three snaking red tongues protrude as slides for kids. (When citizens opposed the commission by the city’s mayor, Teddy Kollek, Saint Phalle argued successfully that scary things help children master their fears. It was a big hit.) She brought an unchanging spirit to her public works, occasional architecture (a three-part home in the South of France which nestles children’s rooms inside a Nana’s breasts), and abundant drawings and handmade books. She never winks to educated taste. There’s a frequent tendency to deem Saint Phalle’s childlike imagery sentimental, but I don’t think it is. No matter how playful, the benign

quality of her later work drew on the same fund of contrariness—the proto-feminist animus—that fuelled her early weaponized exhibitionism. (She said that she enjoyed the thought of men looking “very small” next to looming Nanas.) At a time that was biased against figuration and only just becoming alert to feminism, she risked—or perhaps guaranteed—condescension. It didn’t faze her at all.

If anything disconcerts about Saint Phalle, it’s a steely consistency of tone. As a prolific pamphleteer during the AIDS crisis, in which she lost many friends, she saw no need to darken her bouncily cartoonish graphic style, though she embellished it with language that conscientiously addressed the disaster. Art was a place in her. Any work by her is like a destination that, once reached, lets you go elsewhere only by retracing the way you came. Other artists are like this, notably those who are termed outsider or self-taught: birds with their single songs. Saint Phalle’s enthusiasm for Gaudí’s sophisticated designs extended to the work of such visionary eccentrics as Ferdinand Cheval, a nineteenth-century French postman and the creator of a surreal imaginary palace; and Simon Rodia, of the Watts Towers, in Los Angeles. This predilection points to a compulsive hold on the life force that had propelled her from the start.

In her later years, Saint Phalle slipped into celebrity. She designed and marketed a perfume, jewelry, and scarves, to finance the protracted construction of the Tarot Garden. (“Why don’t I become my own patron?” she asked.) Those commodities look great, by the way—they are continuous with her inventive drive, in an art world that was on its way to welcoming heterodox pursuits including retail commerce and overt politics. She pioneered, as well, an epochal rise of installational and environmental art, though with forms too idiosyncratic to be directly imitable. The PS1 show is a cascade of bedazzlements. Is it lovable? Not quite. Saint Phalle was too guarded—wound too tightly around herself—to vamp for adoration. Attention was enough. Understanding proved more elusive, but was foreordained, eventually, by a fearlessness that sweeps a viewer along from start to finish. ♦

ON TELEVISION

## CHILDREN'S HOUR

*"Waffles + Mochi" and "City of Ghosts," on Netflix.*

BY DOREEN ST. FÉLIX



“Listen to your vegetables and eat your parents!” So ends the earworm theme song of “Waffles + Mochi,” a food-travelogue series for kids, sprung from the cosmopolitan minds at Netflix and Higher Ground, Michelle and Barack Obama’s production company. To the young viewer, a Roald Dahl-esque jingle like this one pinkie-promises a trippy, macabre world of adult order undone, an imaginative expanse where edible monsters roam free. Our protagonists are cute puppet monsters for sure—Waffles is the child of a waffle father and a yeti mother, and Mochi is an emotive but nonverbal Japanese dessert—and they are sensualists, but they are not free.

Really, they are the least willful characters I’ve seen on television in some time.

The strength of “Waffles + Mochi,” which was created by Erika Thormahlen and Jeremy Konner, is its awareness that the children of the twenty-first century have been watching screens possibly since birth, and are conscious agents, emboldened by the ease of the iPad, who are able to distinguish bad children’s media from the quality stuff. The series is good educational television, comparable to the best of PBS. Its eclectic form—animated musical interludes featuring Maiya Sykes and Sia as singing fruits; live-action cooking demos starring famous chefs and well-cast kids; stunningly deft explana-

tions of non-American food traditions—mirrors the experience of scrolling through YouTube Kids. Many caretakers will be pleased to find a sophisticated “mini-me” version of Anthony Bourdain’s “Parts Unknown,” or “Drunk History.” (The latter show was also produced by Konner.)

At the beginning of the series, a mysterious van rescues Waffles and Mochi from their home, a bleak, monochromatic tundra called the Land of Frozen Food. There, with no other options, they had subsisted on meals of ice. Sounding pained, a narrator explains the ups and downs of the habitat: “Ice cream never melts, and dreams, well, they get frozen, too.” This origin story, one of Dickensian misery, casts a pall that the show quickly dissolves. The van drops our creatures off at an exciting and sophisticated supermarket, where the abundance of fresh food lights up their lives. They bump into a talking shelf, named Shelfie, who introduces them to a mustachioed mop. “You must be Moppy,” Waffles says, eager to ingratiate herself in the new place. “No! It’s just Steve,” the mop retorts. This kind of snappy satirical humor is present throughout the series; later in the season, Tan France, of “Queer Eye,” guest-stars, and tries to make a potato—which some elementary-school-aged talking heads refer to as “ugly”—fashion-forward, only to realize that the vegetable is beautiful just as it is. Such kid-friendly sendups of adult programs (including “Finding Your Roots,” in an episode where Mochi travels to Los Angeles and Japan in search of his ancestry) are genuinely funny.

Waffles and Mochi get jobs at the market, where the owner asks them to run errands, which, in turn, teach them about nutrition. The puppets have a lot of fun at work. Boarding a talking magic cart, they circle the globe, meeting experts who share their knowledge of tomatoes, rice, and corn. In Peru, a local chef and her son teach the puppets how to roast potatoes in a *huatia*, an outdoor oven made of rocks and soil. At the home of Bricia Lopez, the co-owner of a Oaxacan restaurant in Los Angeles, Waffles and Mochi learn about the potency of salt. Waffles, tasked with putting the finishing touches on a salted-chocolate-chip cookie, had been screwing up the assignment, because she had no one to teach her the virtue of moderation.

The puppets travel as far as Mars to

*Michelle Obama produced and stars in the kids’ series “Waffles + Mochi.”*

get their work done. They enjoy learning what it means to eat properly, and also pleasing their boss, who, at the end of each episode, rewards the duo with a badge. The owner of the supermarket, by the way, is Mrs. O—Michelle Obama, who is not only an executive producer of the show but one of its stars. Mrs. O, a benevolent mentor figure, stays largely above the fray. While her workers scour the planet for eggs to bring to the chef Massimo Bottura, in Italy, for his special tortellini recipe, she hangs out in a garden atop the supermarket and is aided by a stuffy bureaucrat bee called Busy, who can't be bothered to remember Waffles's name. I'm not sure how a child might metabolize these details, but, to me, Obama's performance—especially compared with those of some of the celebrity guests—is rather opaque, overly dependent on her esteem outside the boundaries of the show.

Mrs. O punctuates the episodes with truisms, spun from the subject of the day's adventure. In the episode about pickling, she explains the importance of restraint: "It takes a lot to exercise patience, especially when you want something to happen right away." Obama delivered platitudes on "Sesame Street" a decade ago, but, now that she owns the block, her sermonizing feels a bit different.

"Waffles + Mochi," which clearly descends from Obama's somewhat polarizing anti-obesity campaign, *Let's Move!*, promotes the broader and more widely accepted philosophies of the liberal parenting Zeitgeist. In her post-White House life, the former First Lady has pivoted from lecturing on healthy eating to talking about moral living, but a trace of élitism lingers. You are what you

eat, and "Waffles + Mochi" believes that you are also what you watch—what a child consumes, in all senses, will dictate her character. In order to be good, you have to absorb other good, organic things: mushrooms freshly pulled from the earth, and politically astute kids' programming. Waffles seems to be motivated by an unspoken shame regarding her pre-epicurean days—a shame that some kids know before they have the language to express the feeling. The show celebrates Waffles's frantic willingness to conform to the mores of a diverse and foreign world. But are there other puppets languishing back in the Land of Frozen Foods? Who will save them?

Counteracting the suavity of "Waffles + Mochi" is "City of Ghosts," also on Netflix, a documentary-style animated series that overflows with soul and cool. Here is an un-Western ghost story, set in the American West—L.A.—that invites viewers of all ages to sit still, be quiet, and listen to the past over the din of the technocratic present. Four young Angelenos have formed the Ghost Club, a film crew that provides a ghost-whispering service to adults who believe that they are being haunted by unsettled spirits. By the sheer force of their bigheartedness, the club coaxes these spirits out of hiding, and the spirits then sit for charming interviews, in which they convey the particularities of pre-gentrification life. Zelda, a little girl whose microphone is a hairbrush, is our host; her older brother, Jordan, provides the "camerawork."

Elizabeth Ito, the creator, an alum of "Adventure Time" and "Phineas and Ferb," has put together an uncanny pal-

ette. A couple of times, I had to hit Pause; Ito blurs animation and photography, prompting viewers to mistake partially illustrated images for the real thing. The story lines, too, blend the texture of true biography with the conceit of the show. The characters are often voiced not by actors but by ordinary people with a connection to whatever neighborhood the intrepid researchers are visiting. ("I just wanna show you how much more free you can be," the "ghost" of a jazz musician, named Jam Messenger Divine, tells the Ghost Club, in the historically Black neighborhood of Leimert Park.) The series breaks down the mammoth notion of cultural history in ingeniously discrete and carefully considered parts.

"City of Ghosts" respects the crush of the city, its noise, its smell, its unpredictability. It also respects the intelligence of children, their ability to process complex and painful truths. Many of the adults in "City of Ghosts" are initially unable to understand the spirits in their midst, and are frightened. The Ghost Club explains to Chef Jo, who has just opened, in her words, an Asian-inspired restaurant in Boyle Heights, that the missing chili flakes and the overturned fryer at her eatery are expressions of valid frustration, not evil. Subtly, Ito presents adulthood as a state of perpetual disconnect. One elder, Mr. Craig, has not lost touch with his roots. Rather, his face is lined with the burden of remembering. His episode is a remarkably dignified tribute to the Tongva, the indigenous people who once inhabited the Los Angeles Basin. With the guidance of Mr. Craig and a Tongva poet, the children meet an ancestor, in the form of a crow, who sings to them through the wind. ♦

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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 Akeem Roberts, must be received by Sunday, April 4th. The finalists in the March 22nd contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the April 19th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit [contest.newyorker.com](http://contest.newyorker.com).*

### THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“ ..... ”

### THE FINALISTS

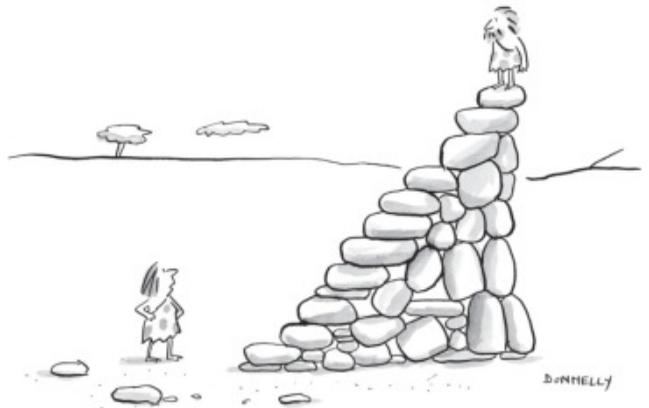


*“I don't like to cook in an empty stomach.”*  
Ben Wiener, Jerusalem, Israel

*“Not the return to inside dining I was expecting.”*  
Amy Thomas, Centerville, Mass.

*“I guess it's just us for dinner.”*  
Robert Carlson, Sherwood, Ore.

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*“So that's where all the furniture went.”*  
Andrew Gray, Jackson, Tenn.



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**LANCÔME**  
PARIS

# THE CROSSWORD

*A moderately challenging puzzle.*

BY WYNA LIU

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		11	12	13	14
15											16			
17											18			
19							20			21		22		
23				24		25		26			27			
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32	33	34						35		36				
37					38				39		40			
41				42		43				44				
45					46		47							
	48					49		50				51	52	53
54				55			56		57		58			
59			60			61			62					
63						64								
65						66								

**ACROSS**

- 1 Dummy text used in publishing and based on a work by Cicero
- 11 Includes
- 15 Vaporware?
- 16 Pressing need?
- 17 Item whose slipperiness was the subject of a 2014 Ig Nobel Prize-winning study
- 18 Gregarious bird known for its ability to mimic sounds
- 19 Rocinante, Don Quixote's steed, for one
- 20 Ballot measure, for short
- 22 Band with the nineties hit "Creep," to fans
- 23 "Illmatic" rapper
- 24 Band with the nineties hit "Creep"
- 26 Lagoon lead-ins
- 28 Tart fruits that aren't tart
- 30 Specialty of Domenico Scarlatti
- 32 Complex cetacean crooning
- 36 Dweller along the Volga
- 37 Artist Walker known for her cut-paper silhouettes depicting American slavery
- 38 "Succession" actress Sarah
- 40 Nothing more than
- 41 Longest river in Deutschland
- 43 Mountain and tree, for two
- 45 Disingenuously appeal (to)
- 47 Seltzer brand with a bear named Orson as its mascot
- 48 Like a hare vis-à-vis a tortoise, usually
- 50 Disclose
- 51 Dollop
- 54 Opposite of *norte*
- 55 "I feel \_\_\_" (expression of validation)
- 57 Certain work of kinetic art
- 59 End result of a tie?
- 61 Air-pollution warnings
- 63 Proverbial concession
- 64 Magnet for mockery
- 65 Kiddo
- 66 Leaders with intelligence?

**DOWN**

- 1 Duran Duran singer Simon
- 2 Florida city called the Horse Capital of the World

- 3 They're used to make zest
- 4 "A Visit from the Goon Squad" author Jennifer
- 5 Aquatic mammal whose closest living relative on land is the elephant
- 6 Longtime host of "This American Life"
- 7 Vim
- 8 Itemized instruction
- 9 Where endometria are located
- 10 Fruits you might knock on to test for ripeness
- 11 Asset for an archer
- 12 Bootleggers' destinations
- 13 "Keep your eyes to yourself!"
- 14 Gesture that may accompany "Aw, nuts!"
- 21 Gardener's area
- 25 Baddie's buddy
- 27 Totally captivate
- 28 Checked patterns
- 29 "Doggystyle" rapper, familiarly
- 31 God who aids the Trojans, in the Iliad
- 32 "\_\_\_ in Cincinnati" (bygone sitcom set at a radio station)
- 33 LOL-worthy
- 34 Music for the masses?
- 35 With "the," eighties band whose songs are featured in the jukebox musical "Head Over Heels"
- 39 Type of olive in a Greek salad
- 42 Team that plays its home games at Barclays Center

- 44 New-wave band named after an illicit form of radio promotion
- 46 Piecemaker?
- 49 Change, as controller buttons
- 51 Mournful composition
- 52 Modify
- 53 One-ups
- 54 "Mr. Show" bit
- 56 Like one who asks too many questions
- 58 Muppet with a unibrow
- 60 "\_\_\_ End"
- 62 Place to train

*Solution to the previous puzzle:*

A	T	H	O	S		C	E	D	E		A	G	E	S		
B	O	B	B	Y	D	A	R	I	N		B	O	A	T		
C	O	A	L	M	I	N	I	N	G		A	F	R	O		
S	T	R	I	P	P	O	K	E	R		L	O	L	L		
			G	A	P	E			A	H	O	R	S	E		
S	A	F	E	T	Y		H	A	V	A	N	A				
A	B	A	S	H			E	Y	E	T	E	S	T	S		
G	U	T		I	M	M	E	N	S	E		P	E	A		
A	T	H	A	Z	A	R	D				W	H	I	N	Y	
			E	V	E	N	T	S			P	A	I	N	T	S
M	A	R	I	S	A					W	A	T	T			
U	C	L	A		S	C	R	A	T	C	H	P	A	D		
T	H	A	T		S	O	U	R	C	H	E	R	R	Y		
T	O	N	E		A	L	L	T	H	E	R	A	G	E		
S	O	D	S		S	E	E	S			D	E	M	O	S	

Find more puzzles and this week's solution at [newyorker.com/crossword](http://newyorker.com/crossword)

Swedish design with a green soul

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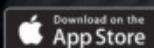
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