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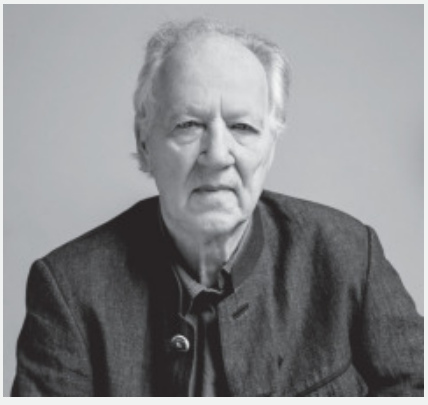

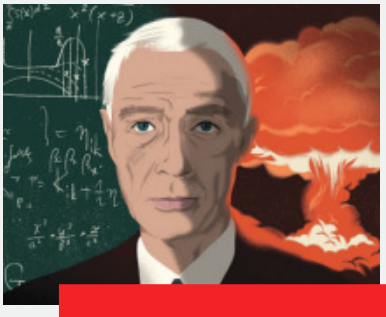

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THE NEW YORKER

NOVEMBER 25, 2024

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THIS WEEK IN THE NEW YORKER APP

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KEITH NEGLEY

THE MAIL

THE END OF BIDENOMICS

I was halfway through Nicholas Lemann's well-researched article about how Joe Biden's economic policies were starting to transform America, when the Presidential election was called for Donald Trump ("The Big Deal," November 4th). On November 6th, I made myself read the rest of the article, and I'm glad I did. The section that casts doubt on whether Kamala Harris would "stay the course" with Bidenomics brought to mind a litany of explanations for her loss. Biden worked with Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren to forge a sweeping new economic agenda. The idea, Lemann explains, was that "what people see happening around them matters far more than what the latest statistics tell us about the state of the economy."

But Harris, who has significant ties to Silicon Valley, seemed more wedded to Wall Street than to a fresh progressive economic vision. When fielding questions on inflation, she talked mostly about trusting economists. For some voters—including many who stood to benefit from the continuation of Bidenomics—her messaging came off as classist. While increasing the child tax credit and providing a financial boost to first-time homeowners were nice proposals, they were not far-reaching enough for those of us who live paycheck to paycheck.

Buffy Aakaash
East Calais, Vt.

GARDEN VARIETY

Kathryn Schulz, in her absorbing review of Susana Monsó's "Playing Possum," mentions snakes among the "creatures that feign death" (Books, November 4th). I'd like to single out a case for accolades: the eastern hognose snake (*Heterodon platirhinos*), a nonvenomous, at-risk species that can be found in my region of Ontario. When sufficiently alarmed, the eastern hognose adopts the mien of a cobra, coiling, rearing its head, flattening its neck, hissing, and making faux strikes. Having witnessed the show myself, I would imagine that for potential predators this usually suffices. But, should it prove ineffective, the snake will roll over and play dead, lolling its tongue, secreting blood, and soiling itself. I have not seen these aspects of the repertoire but happen to know that, given sufficient berth, one of the snakes on my property, Hoggy, will curl up peaceably in a sunny spot, more companionable dog than fearsome serpent, and let one get on with the garden chores.

Anne Marie Todkill
Wollaston Township, Ont.

GREEK ART

Jazmine Hughes's article on Alpha Kappa Alpha, the oldest Black sorority, offered an enlightening social history of middle-class Black identity in the United States ("Alpha Girls," October 28th). I was the head of public programs at the National Gallery of Art in the nineteen-eighties and nineties, when, as Hughes writes, Black people made up sixty to seventy per cent of D.C.'s population. N.G.A. educators worked on a number of programs to engage Black students and teachers, hoping to broaden the museum's audience, but, in retrospect, we would have done well to reach out to "the Divine Nine"—the council of the largest Black fraternities and sororities. The Divine Nine has recently promoted the work of Black American dance companies; could art museums be next?

Linda Downs
New York City

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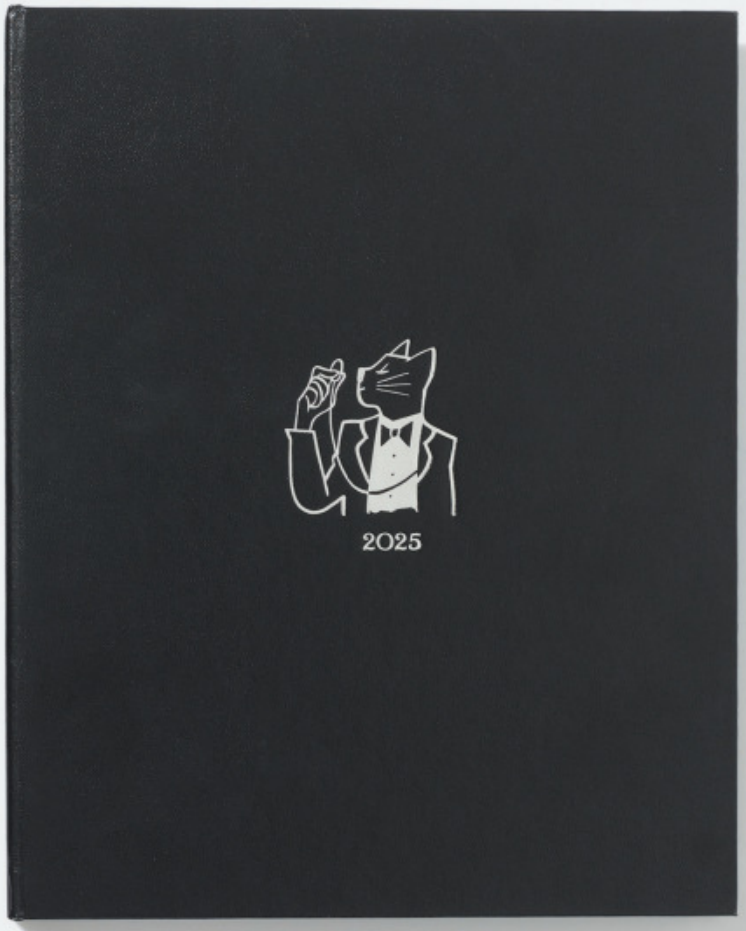

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GOINGS ON

NOVEMBER 20 – 26, 2024

What we're watching, listening to, and doing this week.

There's a built-in elegiac quality to the work of Robert Frank, but Frank's genius was in knowing that life keeps moving, even if we want to stop it—or aspects of it—in a frame. MOMA's exhibition **"Life Dances On: Robert Frank in Dialogue"** (through Jan. 11) starts with Frank's earliest work in black-and-white photography ("Detroit, 1955" is pictured) and moves with ease through his turns as bookmaker, diarist, and filmmaker. It shows him working with various friends and muses, including Mick Jagger, who is one of the stars of Frank's funky and exciting 1972 documentary, "Cocksucker Blues." It's an important show, and a wonderful way to be reminded that making art depends on a kind of restless curiosity, and openness.—*Hilton Als*

ROBERT FRANK / COURTESY JUNE LEAF AND ROBERT FRANK FOUNDATION / MOMA

ABOUT TOWN

DANCE | If any music matches the holiday magic of Tchaikovsky's "Nutcracker," it's Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn's "Nutcracker Suite." That jazz reimagining, from 1960, is the score for **Dorrance Dance's** entertaining tap-dance take. Although the recorded suite is only thirty minutes, the production squeezes in the full story of the ballet, not leaving it much space to breathe. But the show finds some air in unaccompanied sections, such as a Waltz of the Snowflakes in which feet scraping sand provide the sound of snowfall, and the terrific cast swings brightly with Andrew Jordan's wild costumes. The score is supplemented with a selection of holiday standards, sung live by Aaron Marcellus.—*Brian Seibert (City Center; Nov. 22-24.)*

BROADWAY | In the nineteen-eighties, the "Praise the Lord" television ministry, created by the evangelist Jim Bakker (Christian Borle) and his wife, **Tammy Faye** (Katie Brayben), dominated American culture. Why? You won't find out in the repetitive, strangely empty musical "Tammy Faye," since the book writer James Graham and the songwriters Elton John and Jake Shears skate past Tammy Faye's part in devising an extractive prosperity gospel—"P.T.L." stole millions—to focus on her laudable embrace of queer Christians. The director Rupert Goold's desultory staging relies on live video, amplifying Brayben's powerhouse vocals and zooming in on Borle's precisely judged chin wobble. But the show itself never gets close to its subjects' motivations, settling instead for applause lines about women claiming agency—a queasy match for the parable at hand.—*Helen Shaw (The Palace; open run.)*

HIP-HOP | As drill music, the blistering rap subgenre founded on Chicago's South Side, has grown into a global phenomenon, with perches in Brooklyn, Detroit, London, and beyond, one of its progenitors, the grumbler **Chief Keef,** has evolved from the form's teen prodigy to a carefree experimentalist on its fringes. Since his major-label début, "Finally Rich," from 2012, became a key drill text, Keef has pushed toward a more expressionist approach, prioritizing melody and ad-libs, making music that suits his impish whims. His second release of 2024, the album "Almighty So 2," is his most resolute in more than a decade. The triumphant, largely self-produced statement LP finds a recommitted innovator, yet to turn thirty, in conversation with his outsized legacy.—*Sheldon Pearce (Brooklyn Paramount; Nov. 23.)*

BROADWAY | In **"A Wonderful World,"** a jukebox bio-musical about Louis Armstrong, the book writer Aurin Squire crams sixty years into the plot, which, predictably, flattens most interactions into an outline. Pressure seems to be the theme: you can hear it even in James Monroe Iglehart's voice, as he imitates the jazz musician's famously raspy timbre. The best scene comes in an exchange between Armstrong and the actor known as Stepin Fetchit (DeWitt Fleming, Jr.), as they reveal private calculations about racial performance and disguise. Much of the night is spent dancing away from thoughts like those, though: Armstrong himself turned from suffering toward music, so at least he'd approve of the show's nearly thirty thrilling numbers, all handsomely sung, with gorgeous choreography by Rickey Tripp and Fleming, Jr.—*H.S. (Studio 54; open run.)*

MOVIES | The musical melodrama **"Emilia Pérez,"** directed by Jacques Audiard, is the quasi-operatic story of a Mexican drug kingpin, Manitas Del Monte, who wants gender-reassignment surgery and hires a talented lawyer (Zoe Saldaña) to arrange it. Manitas, taking the name Emilia Pérez, also wants a new life; but, after breaking with family and with crime via elaborate deceptions (of the sort that take the term "dead name" literally), Emilia pursues reunions and repentance riskily. The action is perched at the edge of danger, and the catchy musical sequences range from sentimental to splashy, but Audiard betrays scant curiosity about his characters' inner lives or practical conflicts. His view of Emilia is facile and essentializing, yet Karla Sofía Gascón's powerful portrayal of Emilia and Manitas gives both roles far more substance than does the script.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on Netflix.)*

CLASSICAL | Fluxus, the international avant-garde collective that arose in the nineteen-sixties, counted John Cage, Nam June Paik, and Charlotte Moorman among its members. Although a "Fluxfuneral" was held in 1978, Fluxus's ethos of experimental freedom and its emphasis on the process of creation have continued to inspire. As a part of Merkin Hall's "Artist as Curator" series, the saxophonist and avant-jazz composer **Darius Jones** presents the Fluxus-influenced piece "fLuXkit Vancouver," a vivid, knotty abstraction of saxophone, violin, cello, bass, and drums. Also on the program is his extraterrestrial meditation on communication, "Samesoul Maker"—featuring four performers on "voice and bell" and one on vibraphone—enhanced by the work of the visual artist Marisha Roxanne Scott.—*Jane Bua (Merkin Hall; Nov. 21.)*

ON AND OFF THE AVENUE

Countdown to the Holidays

The advent calendar was, according to most historians, invented by a solemn bunch of German Lutherans in the eighteen-hundreds, and it was fairly dull business: each day in the run-up to Christmas, someone got to make a festive chalk mark on the wall. In the centuries since, though, advent calendars have had a secular glow-up: they are now not so much about Awaiting the Nativity as they are about Getting Delightful Stuff in December Generally. The It calendars of the season have their own cult followings—and tend to sell out by Thanksgiving.

You can find luxurious advent offerings in almost every category: caviar, macarons, chili oils, Japanese snacks, fountain-pen inks, rare teas, Swarovski crystals, puzzles, natural wine, La Mer creams. It's a capitalist free-for-all, and no industry is immune. And yet, after sifting through the morass of December drops, I found a few that stand out for their ingenuity. The much-desired, limited-edition **Diptyque** calendar ($495) is not cheap, but it somewhat justifies its price tag with a dazzling presentation (this year's box, designed by the artist Lucy Sparrow, opens on golden hinges) and a robust collection of shrunken candles and wee Parisian perfumes. The **Bonne Maman** calendar, from the French jam company, has been a hit since it launched in the U.S. in 2017, and with good reason: it's affordable ($44.99), it contains exclusive flavors (spreads this year include caramel coffee and cherry pink peppercorn), and who doesn't love a teensy-weensy jar of marmalade? In terms of creative packaging, my favorites this season come from the spirits retailer **Flaviar**, whose calendar ($250), containing twenty-four whiskey samples in lab vials, along with two little snifters to drink them from, is designed to look like an old-timey steamer trunk, and from **Onyx Coffee Lab,** whose ornate take ($189) unfurls like an accordion.

But the advent M.V.P., for my money, is **Dandelion Chocolate,** out of San Francisco, whose innovative calendar (in two sizes, for $185 and $295) is a triumph of artful curation. Each year, the company's director of product, Lauren Martin, and her team seek out the twenty-four most exciting chocolatiers around the country (this time, the search included an open call and a competitive in-house ranking), with whom they develop brand new bonbons in surprising flavors like ube, yuzu, and strawberry Linzer. When Dandelion first launched its calendar, in 2014, Martin told me, they barely sold fifty. ("We couldn't give them away," she joked.) Now the calendar is a multimillion-dollar enterprise, and it sells out in weeks. Getting into the box (which is giant, round, and gilded) can help make a budding confectioner's career. "We think of it like the Oscars of chocolate," Martin said. As I bit into one of this year's decadent sweets—a Pecan Pie Dragée from the Las Vegas chocolatier Melissa Coppel—all I could think was: Thank you, Jesus.

—Rachel Syme

BAR TAB

Superbueno
13 First Ave.

In one of the last episodes of "Seinfeld," Cosmo Kramer, far from the comforts of the Upper West Side, rings Jerry for help. "I'm at 1st and 1st," he wails. "How can the same street intersect with itself? I must be at the nexus of the universe!" Patrons of Superbueno, whose moody scarlet lighting casts a lambent glow on that very corner in the East Village, will also find themselves at a crossroads, one involving a whirlwind of Mexican street culture, neon pop art, and, as one regular recently told a pair of parched newcomers, "really, really fucking delicious cocktails." The Mexican-born Nacho Jimenez, a co-owner of the bar, pays homage to his background with an inventive drinks menu. "There's a severe lack of my culture in New York's cocktail scene," he said. "I wanted to represent it on the highest level." Standouts include the Vodka y Soda, a scrumptious, guava-flavored callback to the Boing! soft drinks of his youth, and the costeño-chili-oil-topped Green Mango Martini, a tribute, Jimenez says, to the women hawking mangos in New York's subways. The food, too, packs a piquant punch, with dishes such as the Birria Grilled Cheese, a mouth-watering combination of braised beef and cotija. The bar's convivial ambience, not unlike that of a friend's house party, owes a debt to the waitstaff, who, on a recent evening, debated patrons on the merits of the Latin American bands Zoé and Attaque 77. As if on cue, a maudlin number by the Argentinean rockers Los Enanitos Verdes began blaring through the speakers, accompanied by a bartender's velvety baritone: "Yo estoy aquí, borracho y loco, y mi corazón idiota siempre brillará" ("I am here, drunk and crazy, and my idiotic heart will always shine"). Seeing far too much of themselves in the refrain, the newcomers seized the moment to make their exit.—*Taran Dugal*

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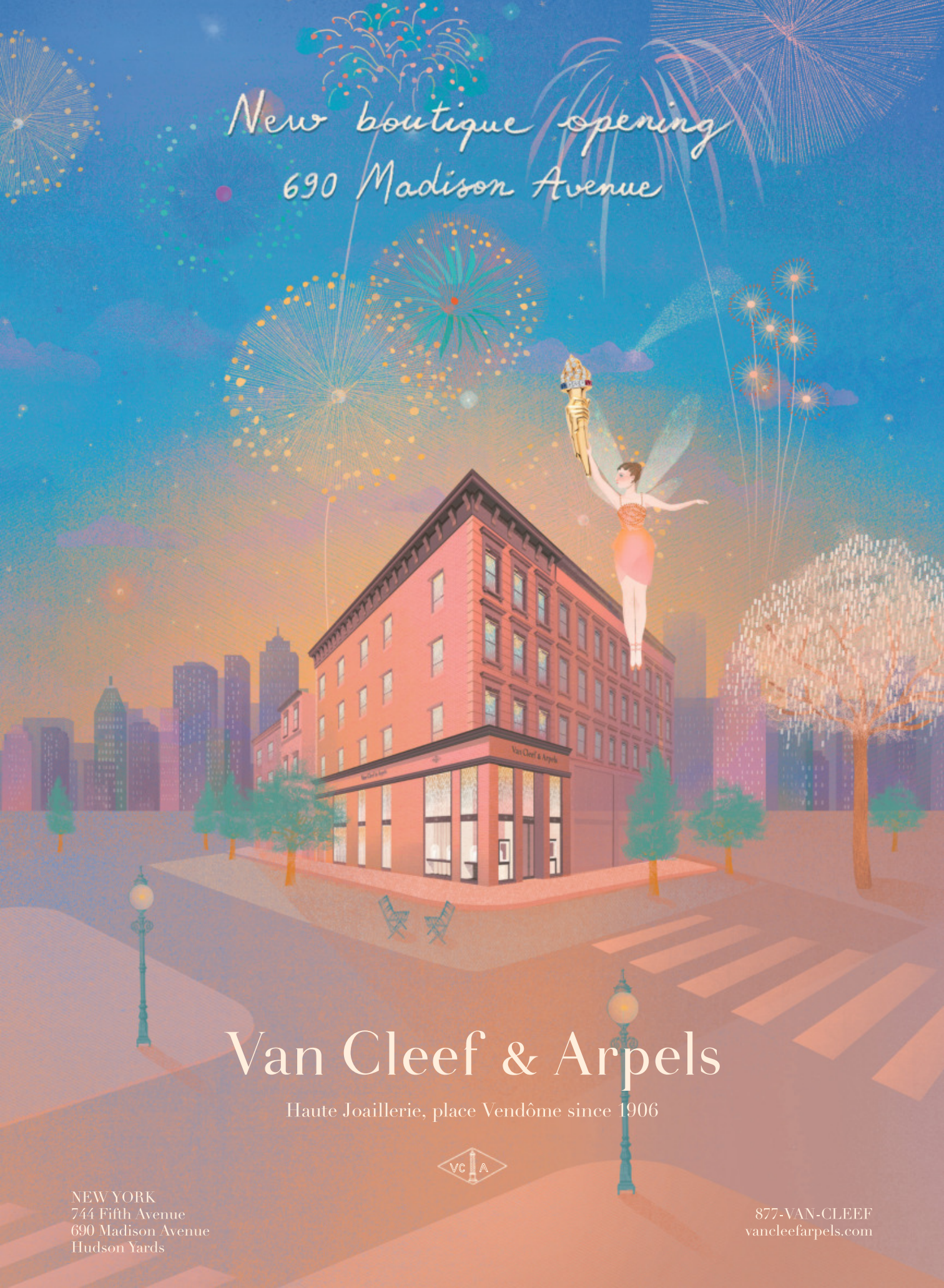

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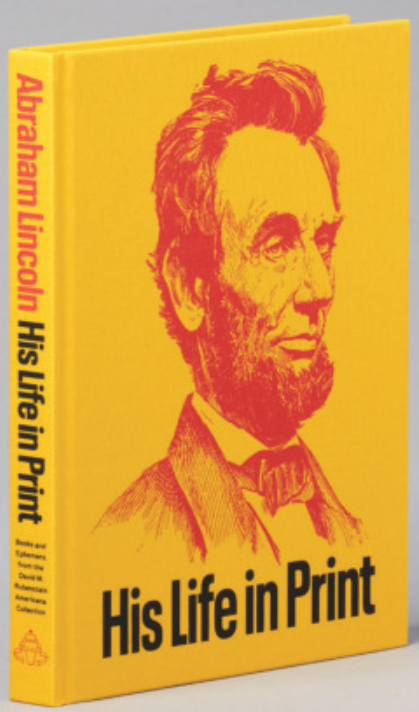

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THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
CABINET OF WONDERS

In the first few days after the reëlection of Donald Trump, one heard across the fruited plains and the canyons of the great cities a noisy welter of accusation, self-laceration, celebration, and rationalization. There were also conspicuous assurances of normalcy that went like this: The sun went down in the evening and came up in the morning. Democracy did not end or even falter; the election *was* democracy, after all. The once and future President would surely dispense with his frenzied campaign threats and get down to the mundane task of governing. Making America great yet again required sobriety and competence, and Trump and his councillors would undoubtedly recognize that obligation.

For the titans of business, the new Administration promised untold prosperity: regulation would ease, tax rates decline. Elon Musk would make government just as civil, generous, and "efficient" as his social-media platform, X. Jeff Bezos, having ordered the editorial board of his newspaper to spike its endorsement of Kamala Harris, selflessly tweeted "big congratulations" to Trump, on his "extraordinary political comeback." Wall Street executives and Sand Hill Road philosophers exulted that the "mergers-and-acquisitions climate" would now bring opportunities beyond imagining. (How these opportunities might benefit the working class they presumably would clarify at a later date.)

Meanwhile, the President-elect convened his loyalists at Mar-a-Lago, where they went about putting together a White House staff and a Cabinet. Historically, this is a deliberative process that can, even with the noblest intentions, go horribly wrong. In "The Best and the Brightest," David Halberstam wrote about an American tradition of mandarins in Washington as

> an aristocracy come to power, convinced of its own disinterested quality, believing itself above both petty partisan interest and material greed. The suggestion that this also meant the holding and wielding of power was judged offensive by these same people, who preferred to view their role as service.

Halberstam's larger subject was the aristocracy of Robert McNamara, Dean Rusk, McGeorge Bundy, and all the other exceptional men of the Ivy League and corporate boardrooms who helped guide the country into the Vietnam War.

At least as a matter of rhetoric, Trump is uninterested in conventional notions

of expertise (which smacks of élitism). Nor is he focussed on assembling a council of constructive disagreement, a team of rivals (which smacks of disloyalty). As his personnel choices rolled out in recent days, it became clear that they pointed wholly to his long-held priorities—and they are not the common good. The nominations of Matt Gaetz as Attorney General, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., as Secretary of Health and Human Services, Pete Hegseth as Secretary of Defense, and Tulsi Gabbard as the director of National Intelligence are the residue of Trump's resentments and his thirst for retribution.

In Gaetz, who faces allegations (which he denies) of illegal drug use and having sex with an underage girl, Trump sees himself, a man wrongly judged, he insists, as liable for sexual abuse. In Kennedy, an anti-vax conspiracy theorist, he sees a vindication of his own suspicion of science and his wildly erratic handling of the COVID crisis. In Hegseth, who defends war criminals and lambastes "woke" generals, he sees vengeance against the military establishmentarians who called him unfit. In Gabbard, who finds the good in foreign dictators, he sees someone who might shape the work of the intelligence agencies to help justify ending U.S. support for Ukraine. In other words, Trump's nominations—in their reckless endorsement of the dangerously unqualified—look like the most flagrant act of vindictive trolling since the rise of the Internet. But it is a trolling beyond mischief. All these appointees are meant to bolster Trump's effort to lay waste to the officials and

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

the institutions that he has come to despise or regard as threats to his power or person. These appointees are not intended to be his advisers. They are his shock troops.

Or could it be that the President-elect is out to reduce the country to the status of a global laughingstock? Until this spate of appointments, observers had long remarked that Trump had no sense of humor. Al Franken, late of the U.S. Senate and "Saturday Night Live," is among those who have said that they have never heard Trump laugh. Smirk, perhaps, at the misfortune of others, but not laugh in the joyful sense.

Back in the days when Trump swanned about Manhattan as a caricature rich guy and gonif construction magnate, he was part of a metropolitan jokescape, up there in lights with John Gotti and Leona Helmsley. *Spy*, the satirical magazine of its time, fact-checked his finances (inflated) and his books (preposterous). Trump was not amused. His lawyers sent frequent letters to the editors, threatening litigation. He found himself in a similar mood, many years later, when Barack Obama, who had suffered Trump's constant insinuations about his place of birth, took the occasion of the White House Correspondents' Association dinner to rib the political aspirations of the host of "The Celebrity Apprentice." Trump left the ballroom in a funk, nurturing, perhaps, an ominous resolve.

Trump has always been obsessed with dramas of dominance and submission, strength and weakness, who is laughing at whom. This is his lens for human relations generally, and particularly when it comes to politics, foreign and domestic. As long ago as January, 2016, Niraj Chokshi, then an enterprising reporter for the Washington *Post*, calculated the many times that Trump had pointed out that someone—Russia, China, OPEC, "the Persians," "the mullahs"—was "laughing at us." More recently, in this, his third Presidential campaign, Trump told a crowd at Mar-a-Lago, "November 5th is going to go down as the single most important day in the history of our country." He added, "Right now, we're not respected. Right now, our country is known as a joke. It's a joke."

Now Trump's critics and an increasing number of his supporters are taking stock of his most disgraceful appointments—these men and women of perfect jawlines, dubious reputations, and rotten ideas. They wonder if this is not the ultimate joke, with national endangerment as its punch line. Dean Acheson, who helped Harry Truman design NATO and rebuild Europe under the Marshall Plan, titled his memoir "Present at the Creation." Which of Donald Trump's new advisers will line up to write the sequel?

—David Remnick

THE BOARDS

TAKING THE SPACE

Hunkered down in a West Side restaurant the other night, the writer and director George C. Wolfe and the choreographer Camille A. Brown reminisced about how they'd met. Wolfe, who is a puckish seventy years old and had on a fuzzy blue sweater, couldn't quite remember. "It was in 2018, I believe," Brown said. She is forty-four, and had long dreadlocks and gold hoops in her ears. She reminded Wolfe that he had hired her that year to choreograph his film "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." Now the two are working together on the upcoming Broadway revival of "Gypsy," starring Audra McDonald as the first Black Mama Rose.

Wolfe weighed in on how it was going: "Robin Wagner, the brilliant set designer, had this saying: ' "Collaboration" is a word that directors invented to make everyone feel good about obeying them.'" Brown smiled. Wolfe added, "Camille is having the time of her life."

Brown and Wolfe had arranged to go together to the Midnight Theatre, near Hudson Yards, to see a burlesque dancer named Angie Pontani perform. Pontani has been consulting with Brown about the strippers' dances in "Gypsy," including the famous number "You Gotta Get a Gimmick," featuring the Strumpet with a Trumpet and her fellow-ecdysiasts. (Brown's work on the warhorse Jule Styne–Stephen Sondheim musical will not include Jerome Robbins's original choreography.) Before the show, the two friends were catching up in the private dining room of the theatre's restaurant. On arriving, Wolfe took one look at a table set for twelve and said, "Lots of seats. One for each of our multiple personalities."

Sipping a cranberry juice, Wolfe explained how, in his conception of "Gypsy," "burlesque is the place where truth gets told." In the musical, which is based on Gypsy Rose Lee's memoir, the stage mother Rose finally gives up on vaudeville and pushes her daughter Louise into stripping. "By the time we get to Act II, vaudeville is dead," Wolfe said. "In place of aspiration and romanticism is truth. And, if strippers are going to survive this place, then truth becomes their weapon. So it becomes this crash course between What We Were Planning For and What Is."

Louise comes into her own on the burlesque stage, eclipsing her cosseted little sister, June. "Having been the girl who was never 'seen,' Louise winds up being very, very seen," Wolfe said.

"It's not voyeurism," Brown noted. "It's her *taking the space*." Later in the show, Mama Rose takes the space in her own way, belting her showstopping cri de coeur "Rose's Turn." "One story is told through song, and one is told through dance," Brown said.

"Some people call Rose a monster," Wolfe said. "This is a character in a

Camille A. Brown and George C. Wolfe

musical written in 1959, who is standing center stage and singing, 'Someone tell me, when is it my turn? Don't I get a dream for myself?' A mother, saying, 'Where's mine?'" He went on, "Male characters get to sing about that stuff all the time: 'I gotta be me!' 'To dream the impossible dream!'" Brown nodded. Wolfe added, "Welcome to the mess of parenting. Welcome to the mess of not receiving what you thought you were due."

Ten minutes before curtain, Wolfe and Brown took their seats in the theatre. Pontani came out wearing a sparkly silver ensemble, accessorized with long gloves and heels, and performed three slinky, sensuous dances, interspersed with peppy versions of standards performed by a quintet led by Pontani's husband, Brian Newman, who is the bandleader for Lady Gaga's jazz shows. During the burlesque numbers, Pontani energetically manipulated her arsenal of G-strings and feather fans into a storm cloud of come-hither and don't-even. When she gleefully swirled her tasselled pasties in her husband's face, Wolfe burst out laughing. Earlier, he'd talked about the strippers in "Gypsy" and how they have "a toughness, but also a humanity." Pontani, he said, "helped us find not just what is sensually assaultive but that which is humane."

After taking their bows, Pontani and Newman came out into the audience to say hello to Wolfe and Brown. Pontani, in a honking Jersey accent, expounded on one of her dances, a ballet-themed piece in which she'd been draped in a bit of gauzy white fabric. "I love a costume that fits in a ziplock," she said.

Thanking her, Wolfe said that he had an early rehearsal, and Brown needed to catch a train. A few moments later, they were gone. Gone like vaudeville.

—Henry Alford

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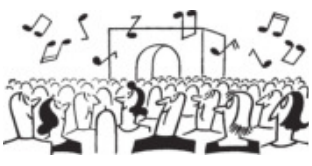
CLEAN YOUR PIPES



In 1868, horse-drawn carriages delivered the ten-thousand-odd components of a giant pipe organ from the factory of Henry Erben, near Manhattan's Five Points neighborhood, to St. Patrick's Basilica, on Mott and Prince. The parish, then largely Irish, was still grieving the loss of so many young men from the Fighting 69th at Bull Run and Antietam. Moneyed interests were moving uptown. Erben's organs, meanwhile, were regularly shipped thousands of miles, to Havana, Caracas, the Western frontier. For an immigrant neighborhood in a young country that had just survived a great rupture, the purchase of a cathedral organ to rival Europe's finest was a source of pride. A wave of Italians followed the Irish. (The Erben organ appears in "The Godfather: Part III.") Then came Dominicans and Chinese. The organ remained in service. After more than a hundred thousand liturgies, the church's musical director would say that the sound of the Erben at Old St. Patrick's still carried "a tinge of sadness" from the Civil War.

Or maybe it was the accumulated soot and the clumps of plaster in the pipes, the duct tape over cracked leather. By 2024, at any rate, the organ, like the nation's politics, was in rough shape. Rather than let it die, a group called Friends of the Erben Organ (supporters include Martin Scorsese) committed to a painstaking renovation. Over three weeks in February, a crew disassembled the contraption. "Half of the church was covered in pipes and mechanisms," Jared Lamenzo, the musical director, recalled, noting that the wooden levers that supplied wind to the bellows were so large they "looked like you would tie up a pack of Clydesdales to them." Off the organ went, in several box trucks, to an old tobacco warehouse in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, one of the few places left where horse-drawn carriages transport anyone other than tourists, and where craftsmen specialize in pre-electric technology.

"You still smell tobacco on a damp day," Hans Herr, one of the owners of Brunner & Associates, an organ works, said recently, thumbing a suspender, after greeting Lamenzo and some fellow organ mavens, who had arrived from the city in a Porsche Cayenne that was now parked next to a cornfield. Inside the warehouse, and in a garage behind it, technicians were working on the organ's innards: applying alcohol to the oxblood-stained wooden pipes, attending to "witness marks" (dried candle wax, pencil notations) on the bellows, which turned out to have been reconfigured during a prior intervention, in 1902. A worker who was huddled over a slanted desk joked that he was packaging antique "New York City coal dust" for resale. To a novice eye, the only clear indication that all this labor was in the service of a musical instrument was the triple-decker keyboard sitting on a table, next to some bubble wrap, on the second floor. The keys themselves looked filthy. "We could put hydrogen peroxide on it, but I'm guessing Jared probably likes the yellowed look," Herr said. Lamenzo nodded, but he acknowledged that the ivories had been replaced in 1969.

Jared Lamenzo

One of the buffs who had accompanied Lamenzo was Laurence Libin, a curator emeritus of the musical-instrument collection at the Metropolitan Museum. He theorized that hand lotions and sanitizer expedited the aging process. Libin approached with a device for measuring the width of the keys and noted some irregular spacing between them. "It's interesting that the ones in the center are gentle at the corners, and the ones that you don't use are sharp as nails," he said.

Up on the third floor, another technician demonstrated cone tuning, a means of bending the tops of thin metal pipes either inward or outward by using a cone-shaped brass hammer. He

surprised his guests by mentioning a phone app that specifies exactly how many millimetres of adjustment are required to achieve a desired pitch. "There's an app for this?" Libin asked, incredulous.

"There's an app for everything," the technician went on. "It'll also correct for temperature. You can tell it, 'I'm tuning the organ and it's sixty-three degrees in the room, but I need it to sound correct when it's seventy-two degrees.'"

"Cutting-edge technology applied to medieval technology," Libin said, marvelling.

In the garage, dozens of crates labelled "Erben NYC" were untouched. It'll be months before Herr and his colleagues are ready to reconstruct the organ and test it, only to break it down again to be trucked back to Mott Street. The atmosphere in the warehouse was studiously cheerful, and a visitor, thinking ahead to the 2026 midterms, wondered whether the tinge of sadness could yet be exorcised from the organ's sound.

—Ben McGrath

CASTING CALL
NUDITY NOT REQUIRED

From the ferry to Cherry Grove, a historic queer enclave on Fire Island, the Belvedere Guest House looks like a plate of meringues. Closer up, pastel gates and an ornate fountain hint at the compound's high-camp interior. As a rule, the guests are all men. But this year an artist and onetime Guggenheim-grant recipient named Samantha Nye persuaded the Belvedere's owners to let her rent the grounds for a four-day film project—a lesbian takeover of the inner sanctum.

Several weeks before the shoot, in the waning days of the regular season, Nye walked two freshly thawed cakes to a community center situated a few blocks from the Belvedere, to serve at an afternoon casting call. She was looking for ten to fifteen lesbians over the age of sixty for a large group scene that she referred to as a "pleasure party." She had secured soft commitments from a few out-of-towners, including a former nun, but, given the cost of accommodations in Cherry Grove, she needed to drum up interest among the locals.

An advertisement for the event featured one of Nye's recent paintings, a Hieronymus Bosch-like tableau of nude seventysomethings. "Weirdly, I never went through a phase of not painting older women," she said. Peers bored her as subjects. In art school, the only self-portraits she painted included her mother and grandmother. Slowly, she took herself out of the work. "I'm thinking of Matthew McConaughey in 'Dazed and Confused': 'I get older, they stay the same age,'" Nye, who is forty-four, said. "It's kind of like that, but in reverse."

She set up in the community center's theatre, where leaflets announced upcoming productions: a trans reimagining of Sondheim, a one-man show called "Pearl Necklace." She changed into a striped yellow caftan, her black curls piled high.

A few women trickled in, including Kathleen O'Donnell, a longtime renter who had offered to photograph the event. She was too young to participate, but she had been trying to spread the word about Nye's project. The reaction had been mixed. "When people hear 'pleasure party,' they kind of think of one thing," she said.

"If it can help you get the friends that feel timid, I'm happy to rename," Nye told her. "Because pleasure really tends to everything." Examples were furnished: sunbathing, holding hands, a fully clothed simulation of a book club. "The only thing I ask is that people are comfortable around nudity and sexuality, because other people may choose to perform in that way," she said.

Nye approached O'Donnell's friend Martha Lorenzo, a retired special-education teacher, who wore a raffia cowboy hat. "You seem interested," Nye said. "A little on the fence, but—"

"I have commitment issues," Lorenzo said.

O'Donnell offered her friend a gentle encouragement: "How cool would it be for you to be in it? After the fact?"

Lorenzo scoffed: "Oh, so, when I'm not here on earth you can watch me?"

Nye: "We want to experience it with you *now*, and then, yes, have this artifact."

Lorenzo considered. "I'm going to be a tree," she said.

"You *can* be a tree!" Nye replied.

"No, I *actually* want to be a tree," Lorenzo said. "When I die, I want to be a tree."

Nye explained that an intimacy coördinator would be on hand at the shoot. "She has ways that people can be nude, feel nude, be seen as nude, but not actually be nude," Nye said.

Lorenzo cut in: "You mean, you would Photoshop me to have a new body?"

"No!" Nye said. "No Photoshop."

She ushered some guests to a folding table, where the two cakes sat, oddly, amid plates of fake desserts. "You have to decide what you *think* is real," she said.

The event wrapped shortly after a visit from a union electrician who introduced herself as Nikki Tits. Nye was desperate to cast her, but she was hard to pin down. Later, Nye canvassed the beach, without much success. A dog pawed at a sand sculpture of a prone cowboy in a Speedo. The dog's owner was too young to participate in the film, but she directed Nye down the sand. "There are ladies down that way that might be in your age group," she said. "And they're both fully naked, like, all of the time." Nye approached. Two friends, Judy Greenberg and Ellen Gold, clothes off, were smoking a joint and sipping vodka-cranberries from red cups. They said that they had met years earlier at Robert Moses beach, when Greenberg spotted Gold sitting alone knitting pocketbooks out of videotape. Nye made her pitch.

Greenberg said, "I heard about it, but I didn't inquire, because we're not lesbians."

"You know what?" Nye said. "That doesn't matter to me." Greenberg gave her a spliff for the walk back.

—H. C. Wilentz

PODCASTING DEPT.
VERY VETTED

The National Security Agency's new podcast takes its name from the clandestine organization's own nickname, No Such Agency, and its hosts—Cam Potts, Christy Wicks, Brian Fassler, and John Parker—are all N.S.A. employees. They were the winners of a talent search that was, given the nature

of spycraft, held in-house, the house being a giant campus in Fort Meade, Maryland, where the specifics of what the employees do for the Defense Department is, to put it mildly, secret. The podcast, which is only seven episodes old, is the opposite of some of America's top podcasts: in contrast to "Call Her Daddy" or "The Joe Rogan Experience," where guests share details about their sex lives or shards of climate denialism, respectively, "No Such Podcast" feels scripted, with four people in a secure N.S.A. studio throwing around terms like "mission capabilities" and "unclassed." As it happens, everything on the podcast *is* unclassed—i.e., not subject to security classification. "I mean, before we even go on air, this stuff has been vetted," Wicks said, Zooming with her co-hosts from N.S.A. headquarters.

"Very vetted," Fassler added.

Though it mostly feels like a recruiting tool, the frisson of proximity is the tease. A blurb from a recent episode: "It's 3 A.M. A war has broken out halfway across the world. Someone needs to tell the President." The episode featured Doug Nieman, the director of the N.S.A.'s National Security Operations Center, or NSOC, and Yemi Rotimi, a systems analyst who works on the NSOC floor. Nieman recounted how the N.S.A. helped get a child hostage released in an unnamed country a decade ago. He said, "It's a great example of where the things that N.S.A. does are not known by the American public, but they really make a difference."

Rotimi recalled engaging with a member of the U.S. Cyber Command, when in walked DIRNSA, DIRNSA being both the nickname and the acronym for the N.S.A. director, General Timothy Haugh.

"Uh-oh!" Potts said.

"Pressure!" Wicks added.

"You *know*?" Rotimi replied.

The vibe on "No Such Podcast" is relaxed, but Potts confessed to feeling some pressure to apply for the host job from his co-workers, who knew that he had a background in TV news, at the NBC affiliate in Baltimore, his home town. (All four hosts grew up there.) He described how his interest in the N.S.A. was sparked by "my very first breaking-news assignment." An abandoned baby was found in the woods; a witness called the police, then tipped off Potts at WBAL. That led him to tell himself, "Oh, I've got to look into crisis comms." Online, he found an opening for an N.S.A. communications officer. "I applied," he said. "I didn't look back."

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Brian Fassler was invited to try out for the host job when he was auditioning for a voice-over on an internal N.S.A. video. He came to the agency after the small local bank he worked for was bought by a larger one. "My job went away," he said. The podcast's devotees know Fassler from his conversation with Vinh Nguyen, the N.S.A.'s Chief Responsible AI Officer, in an episode titled "AI and the Future of National Security." Nguyen, in describing the ways in which the N.S.A. monitors the military plans of foreign leaders, said, "What we found was that A.I. can be embedded through the entire intelligence-analyst workflow."

Christy Wicks came to her host role after working TV-news jobs in Nebraska, Virginia, and then Baltimore, where she was recruited by the F.B.I. as an intelligence analyst. Fifteen years later, she wound up at the N.S.A. "I moved from telling secrets to keeping secrets," she said. Wicks's favorite episode of the podcast is "The Women of NSA: Codemakers and Codebreakers." It concerns Elizebeth Smith Friedman, a Shakespeare aficionado who, during the Second World War, cracked the German Enigma machine, using pencil and paper, and also Debora Plunkett, who got into code-breaking in the nineteen-eighties. "On her very first rotation, she was in a target area and realized that the call signs of this country were using the French spellings of animal names," Jen Wilcox, an N.S.A. historian, said.

Wicks's co-host on "The Women of NSA" was John Parker, who once worked at Medieval Times, selling swords, shields, and knights' helmets. In an episode titled "What It's Really Like to Work at NSA," Parker interviewed two other staffers about the long background checks, the repeated vetting and polygraph tests, and the no-smartphones and no-texting protocols, even when your wife just had a baby—as Parker's did just before he started the job. In contrast to the twenty-first-century cyber threats they confront, N.S.A. staffers' own communications are very 1991. "That was kind of an adjustment," Parker said.

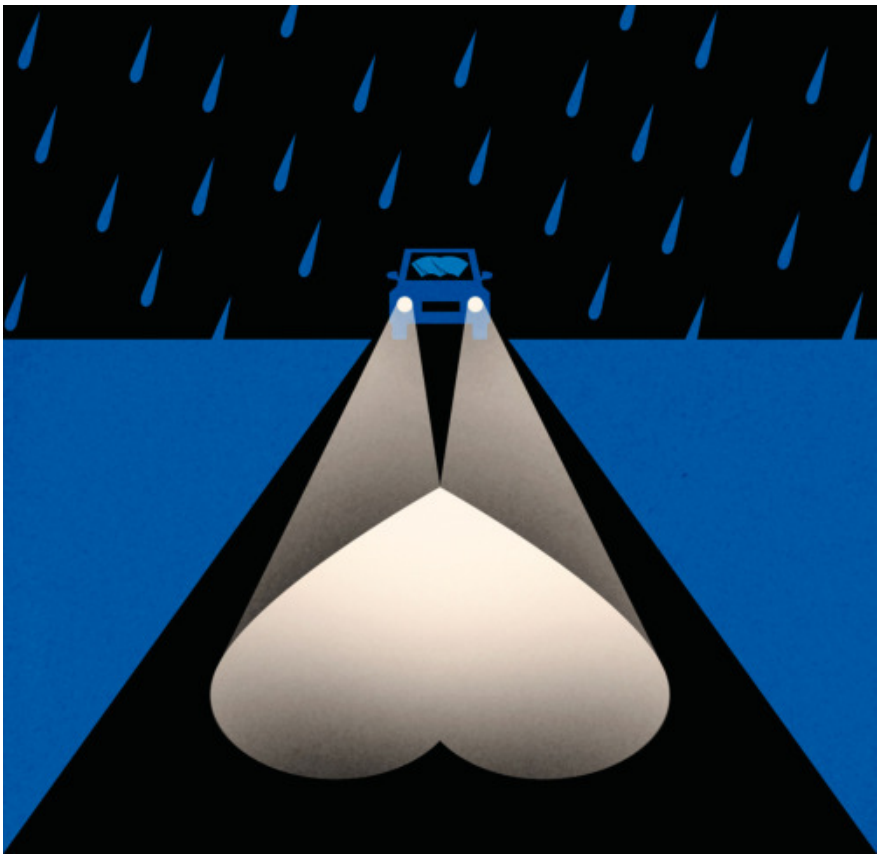
—Robert Sullivan

PERSONAL HISTORY

A LONG WAY HOME

Travelling with Hugh.

BY DAVID SEDARIS



Ordinarily, I hate staying at someone's house, but when Hugh and I visited his friend Mary in Maine we had no other choice. There weren't any hotels on the small island where she lives in the summer, and she'd seemed so genuine when she extended her invitation that we really couldn't refuse. Mary and Hugh went to college together a hundred thousand years ago, back when tuition was affordable and you could study things like acting without bankrupting yourself. Her auburn hair had turned mostly white since I'd last seen her, fifteen years earlier, and she wore it in an untidy bun.

There was another old classmate of Hugh and Mary's at the house that weekend. Luckily, his girlfriend was there as well, thus there were two of us who felt left out when the talk turned to former teachers and whatever happened to so-and-so.

Mary's secluded four-bedroom house was deep in the woods yet, still, on the waterfront. The bay she faced was quiet and as calm as a pond. It was August and we'd hit a patch of perfect weather. The days were warm without being hot, the sky blue and cloudless.

"I do have one rule," she said when we arrived. "No cell phones, iPads, or laptops on the ground floor."

You what? I thought. But it was her house, and so, for the first time in recent memory, I spent two and a half days talking to people and having them talk back. It was shocking to see no one staring down at their devices. That said, at our ages, we sort of needed them. "Did anyone see that movie . . . the funny one directed by the Greek who did that other movie about what's-her-name? Oh, you know, it starred . . . that actor. She was on that British TV show?"

A phone would have moved us along quicker. Still, it was refreshing not to have one. No photos were shared, no social-media posts. If you wanted to check your e-mail or text someone, you were free to do so in your second-floor bedroom or up in the third-story crow's nest, but then you'd miss whatever was being talked about. That was the rub, since anything said by our hostess and two fellow-guests was far more interesting than a fifteen-second video of a Komodo dragon eating a baby goat. I don't know how Instagram tagged me as a person who wants to watch this sort of thing, but it was right on the money.

I wish I could say I spent three days entirely offline, but I had my Duolingo streak to maintain, so I sneaked off twice a day and did my German lessons while getting my steps in. The coastal Maine landscape was not familiar to me, and I found it singularly beautiful—the pines, the rocks, the cattails. One afternoon, I saw a bald eagle and, the next, one of those eerie twelve-foot-tall Home Depot skeletons in someone's front yard. It wasn't standing upright but, rather, was on its knees, looking as though it were struggling to get back up. The skeleton wore a star-spangled vest, leading me to wonder if it wasn't some kind of a political statement.

Compared with England, where I'd been only a few days earlier, the people on the island were remarkably friendly. Every driver that passed me waved, and the clerks in the two small grocery stores I ducked into were warm and chatty. While walking on that first afternoon, a man stopped his truck, introduced himself as Rocky, and asked me what my favorite color was. Do I even have one? I wondered, looking at him through the passenger-side window, on which rested the head of a panting dog.

"Red!" I said, just to offer an answer.

Rocky rooted around in a cloth bag beside him and handed me a tomato-hued flashlight the size of my penis

ILLUSTRATION BY JACK SMYTH

when I was twelve. "Um, thanks," I said.

Our dinners on the island were well thought out and prepared. Everyone but me was a terrific cook, and after eating we spent hours around the table, talking about America the way people in a play might. I liked seeing Hugh in the context of his old friends. The affection and respect he had for them was evident and put him in a good mood that lasted until we headed to the ferry that would take us back to the mainland.

"Just so you know, you are not doing your stupid Duolingo in the car," he said through his teeth, smiling at the others as he waved goodbye from the driver's seat.

Hugh is very handsome. Everyone says so and always has. Take a picture and he's guaranteed to be the best-looking person in it, unless you're at the Emmys or in Brazil. You never have to ask him twice to do something tedious or horrible: fill out visa forms for Pakistan, for instance. He is honest to a fault and true to his word. The trade-off is that he doesn't travel well. Once he reaches his destination, he's fine. It's the door-to-door part that's difficult, especially for me, who has to endure his short temper for however long it takes to get from point A to point B. "It's not like we're *walking* to Maine," I'd reminded him on our way to Heathrow at the start of our trip. "You have absolutely nothing to complain about."

This kind of talk only makes him angrier. "You can work anywhere," he'll remind me. "I'm the one being uprooted." Sometimes a third party can tamp down his fury—my sister Amy, for instance, whom I began to wish we'd brought along.

"Just so you know, I *am* doing my Duolingo in the car," I said as we left the gravel road that led from Mary's house to the paved one, since another thing I've learned over the years is that tiptoeing around Hugh only makes him crabbier.

"Which line do I get in?" he demanded as we reached the ferry dock.

He asked this as if I'd spent my entire life on the island and travelling to the mainland and back was something I did every day.

"This woman here might know," I said, rolling down my window.

"She's on foot," he snapped. "How can *she* help us."

"O.K.," I said. "Then how about that person over there with the uniform on." That was when he noticed a sign telling us which line we should be in.

"Just put your arm back in the car," he said, adding for the second time that morning that as someone who'd never got his license—who couldn't be bothered to do even that—I had no idea what he was going through. Which was true.

It was a short ferry ride to the mainland, under thirty minutes, and by the time we arrived Hugh was reasonable again. Then came an uneventful, hour-long drive to Bangor airport. It was a Sunday, so there was no traffic to speak of. In the terminal, I bought a coffee and answered some backed-up e-mails. We were scheduled to leave at four and had just lined up to board when the gate agent announced an hour delay.

Uh-oh, I thought. It wasn't that I had to be home by a certain time. It was that Hugh can't handle any change of plans. Though the airline might chalk up the delay to bad weather or a maintenance issue, he knows the truth. And the truth is that it's all my fault.

Come five o'clock, it was announced that, owing to thunderstorms in the New York area, we would now be taking off at seven-thirty.

I didn't like this any more than anyone else. Still, I kept my disappointment to myself until around six, when they announced that our flight was cancelled. At about the same time, the flights at the gates to the left and the right were cancelled as well. "Should we rent a car?" I asked.

"So, what, *you* can drive us?" Hugh snapped.

His tan, which brought out his lovely blue eyes and the silver of his hair, made him extra handsome. I'd been going to say as much, but instead I walked away thinking, I can't deal with you right now. With all the cancelled flights, the first thing to do was to find a nearby hotel. All the choices were bad, but there's make-your-own-waffles bad and what-are-these-bites-on-my-stomach? bad, so I called the nearest make-your-own-waffles place. When I told Hugh I'd booked us a room, he said that he had a doctor's appointment the following morning and announced that he would be renting a car and driving—this in a tone that meant, Whatever you do is your own business.

"That's what I suggested ten minutes ago," I reminded him. But I was talking to the air. He was halfway to the escalator by then. Enterprise had nothing left on its lot, so while he got in line at Budget I got in line at Hertz, and ceded my spot to him when it turned out to be our only option. While standing beside me, furious, he called our travel agent.

According to my phone, it would take around seven hours to drive to New York, and that was without the heavy rains and possible flooded roads we had been told to expect.

"Are you *sure* you can drive that long?" I asked Hugh, who has sciatica—also completely my fault, because I control all the nerves in his legs.

"Yes, but you are *not* doing Duolingo in the car," he growled. "I mean it, too. One lesson and you and your little flashlight are going to get out and walk the rest of the way. And you will be sitting upright in the front seat, not lying down in the back. Your job is to keep me awake, understand?"

Our travel agent secured us one of the last available cars, and while Hugh filled out the paperwork I studied the crowd around me. Aside from children, most everyone seemed to have at least one tattoo, a lot of them on exposed legs—even people you wouldn't expect them on, a grandmother, for instance. The withered butterfly on her ankle resembled a crumpled Post-it note. The only person I spotted without one was a young Asian woman who was seated on a bench beside two large knapsacks. She wore black, patterned leggings with a light jacket and was talking to someone on the phone who seemed to be giving her bad news. The woman had a Chinese accent and perfect English grammar. "Excuse me," I said, after she hung up. "Where are you trying to get to?"

"New York," she told me. Up close,

I saw that she had a stud in her nose and five delicate rings in each ear.

I looked across the room at Hugh. "New York where?"

"Manhattan," she said. "The Upper East Side."

"Do you know how to drive a car?" I asked.

She said that she wasn't great at it but that she did have a license.

"Come with me," I said. "I'll get you to the Upper East Side."

Hugh was still filling out forms. "This is Susan Du," I told him. "She'll be riding with us and driving part of the way. Does she need to show her license or anything?"

The look he gave me was not one I had never seen before. That said, it had been a while—not since I'd offered his mother's Paris apartment to someone I'd met on a train platform. "But he's a kid," I'd argued in the young man's defense. "Think back to when you were his age and how happy this would have made you. And it's only for six months!"

Had I proposed earlier that we invite someone stranded to come with us to New York, Hugh would have said no. But Susan Du, who had to be at work the next morning, performing a job I did not understand, was so grateful that there was really no way for him to back out. The car we'd been given was massive, with three rows of seats.

"You can take the front," I said to Susan as we walked through the lot with our luggage. It was still light outside, but the sky was clouded over and ominous-looking.

"How do I work this stupid navigation system?" Hugh demanded, not pressing the screen on the placemat-size monitor so much as punching it with a finger. "Why couldn't they just give me a map? What's wrong with a goddam map?"

Susan acted upon him like a tonic. "Here," she said. "Let me take care of it."

When she deftly connected her phone to the screen, Hugh became a different person, at least in regard to her. "I just don't know why they make it so complicated," he muttered, no longer sounding angry but helpless, left behind.

"Let me know when you want me to take over," Susan said. "I really appreciate this, by the way." She told me that when I'd first spotted her she had been on the phone with her mother-in-law. "She did not want me driving all this way on my own, so she found a flight out of Portland that will not leave until eleven tomorrow morning and was going to cost seven hundred dollars!"

Hugh told Susan about the friends we had visited. "We went to school together at Northwestern. Where did you go?" He asked about her husband

and her job. I listened for a few minutes and then moved into the third row of seats, stretched out with my iPad, and did German lessons until my eyes crossed and it was dark outside. I'd just closed my Duolingo app when my sister Amy sent me a link to a New York *Post* article about a man who'd put a two-foot-long eel up his ass. The beast had chewed through his intestines, and now the guy was wishing he'd given the idea a little more thought. The comments tended toward "Must be a Dem" and "A libtard for sure."

Why all the anger? I wondered.

At around ten, I asked Hugh if he could pull over at a Starbucks. He didn't, and half an hour later, figuring all the Starbucks would be closed by now, I asked if he could stop at a McDonald's. "That way, if someone wanted to use the rest room, they could," I said.

"McDonald's!" he wailed. If his new best friend Susan Du had asked, he'd have got off at the next exit, but I was apparently still paying for our cancelled flight. "Why not just a gas station?"

"We could get food at McDonald's," I explained, thinking that maybe Susan was hungry but had been too polite to say so.

"You call *that* food?" he said.

Hugh passed a McDonald's, then another and another, until, at around eleven-thirty, at my insistence, he exited the interstate and followed the directions to one.

Susan Du headed to the rest room as soon as we walked in. "Is it unisex?" Hugh asked me.

I looked at him the way he deserved to be looked at. "This is *McDonald's*," I said. "They don't have unisex bathrooms."

"Well, how should *I* know?" he said.

Hugh had never been to a McDonald's until a few years ago, when we were driving from Emerald Isle to the Raleigh airport. "I guess I'll have a B.L.T.," he'd said to the young woman at the counter.

I'd said, "They don't have B.L.T.s at McDonald's."

A few months later, again driving from the beach to the airport, but early, at 7 A.M., we stopped, and he asked for a Danish.

On this night, before heading to the rest room, Hugh told me to order something for him. "What have they got at this hour?" he asked.

"You might be surprised to hear it, but their spaghetti and McMeatballs is actually very good," I told him.

"I'll have that, then, and a black coffee," he said as he walked away.

I don't recall if there was music playing at McDonald's. Only one other table was occupied as we took our seats. I had ordered a Big Mac and Susan, who insisted on paying, a piping-hot casket of McNuggets, which neither Hugh nor I had ever eaten.

"Try one," she said. She had two sauces to go with them, one sweet, the other with mustard in it. I wanted to ask if Susan was really her first name or if she'd chosen something that Americans might bother remembering. My friend Dawn once spent four months doing an arts fellowship in the Xinjiang region, and because her name made no sense they gave her a Chinese one that translated to Friendship Flower, which is how I now introduce her to people.

"Did you read there was a panda born today?" Susan asked.

We talked about how ridiculously small their cubs are—no bigger than hamsters—and I asked why they have so much trouble reproducing.

"It is because their wombs are so tiny," Susan said.

I suggested replacing the womb of a panda with a much larger one from a grizzly, and when Hugh pooh-poohed the idea I doubled down, because there's no limit to what science can do now

and it's actually a pretty good idea. "People are living with pig hearts, so why not at least give it a try!"

The other customers in McDonald's—a group of three teen-agers—got up to leave. I watched them walk out the door, and as they headed toward their car, and one of them, a girl wearing a hooded sweatshirt, turned to look at us through the window, I wondered if she thought Susan Du was our adopted daughter. "We're very proud of her," I imagined myself saying if this were the case and the three of us were indeed a family. "She went to N.Y.U. and now has a good job we don't understand."

Susan, we learned, was from Yueyang, a city of more than five million, in Hunan Province. She had no brothers or sisters and had not seen her father—he and her mother live separately—for almost six years.

I marvelled at what a long way from home she was, and at how much she had managed to accomplish on her own. A lot of women would have hesitated to get into a car with two strange men. Was her fearlessness a Chinese characteristic, or could she tell by looking that Hugh and I were harmless? "I talked to some people earlier when we were upstairs at the airport gate," she told us. "They said they were going to rent a car and drive to New York, but they did not invite me to join them, and I worried it was rude to ask."

"Had you gone with them, you couldn't have come with us," I said, not adding that I'd needed her as a buffer. "And had you never come with us," I continued, "we never would have experienced the McNugget!"

For the next few hours, Hugh sat in the passenger seat and Susan Du drove. It started raining soon after she took the wheel, lightly at first, then suddenly so heavily that the windshield, even with the wipers going, was like one of those opaque windows people put in their bathrooms. "Let me drive," Hugh said, but it was too dangerous to pull over. The noise of the rain as it pelted the roof of the car was so deafening that I could hardly hear the developmentally disabled bachelor I was watching on my iPad. It was a show from New Zealand akin to "Love on the Spectrum." On that program, people with autism are set up on dates. On this new one, all the singles have Down syndrome and fall for their potential partners within five minutes of their first meeting. It doesn't matter what the other person looks like or what his or her interests are—they're ready to have sex, settle down, and stop looking.

Hugh and I, likewise, committed pretty quickly. Eight months after our first date, we were living together. Now here we were, thirty-five years later—in our mid-sixties—jerking and weaving through a rainstorm with Susan Du. A truck passed, and as our car shuddered in its wake another came close from the lane to the right of us. For a moment, I felt certain we would all die, and I laughed, thinking of how Hugh's family would react when they got the autopsy report and read that he had Chicken McNuggets in his stomach.

"McDonald's!" I could hear his mother say. "What on earth was he doing there?"

Then a worse thought occurred to me: What if Susan Du and I lived and only Hugh died? What would it be like to continue on without him, to arrange his funeral and have people over to the apartment afterward? Amy would help with the food and so forth, but the whole time we'd be thinking of how much more smoothly this would be going if only Hugh were here to take care of it. I know we don't have a choice in these things, but I really hope that I die before he does, or that we die together. "When the time comes, we can throw ourselves off the terrace," I'd proposed in our New York apartment a few months earlier.

Hugh looked down at the street, twenty stories below us. "I don't want to make a mess and have the doormen see us like that."

"We put ourselves in body bags first," I said. "Or, no, first we load up on liquor and pills, *then* the body bags, *then* we jump."

"What if one of us chickens out at the last minute?" This is Hugh in a nutshell.

"O.K., then. We'll both get into the same body bag."

"It won't be big enough," he argued.

"Are you worried about comfort in the last ten seconds of your life?" I asked. "Believe me, the body bag will be big enough. If not, you can sew two of them together."

I have the end of our relationship all figured out. It's just this next bit that's fuzzy.

The rain let up at around 1 A.M. Then both Susan and I had to pee, so we stopped at a gas station that turned out to be closed. As our car pulled into the lot, two men dressed in knee-length black coats, men wearing wide-brimmed hats, their bearded faces bordered on either side by springy, column-like curls, stepped out from behind a dumpster, tugging at their flies.

"Hasidim!" I said, the way I might have said "Deer!"

In the distance, through a stand of soggy, dripping trees, we could make out a shopping plaza, also closed. There were no other cars in sight, no homes. Susan walked to the dumpster and reported that there was a security camera trained on it. Then she said, "Oh, well. It is not like anyone here knows me." After she went, Hugh and I did, too, though separately, because he insisted on it. He doesn't like it when I can hear him peeing. "Cover your ears!" he'll shout from the other side of the bathroom door. I can completely see this with No. 2, but No. 1 as well?

I wanted to ask Susan if people said No. 1 and No. 2 in Chinese but worried it might embarrass her, and so, instead, I got back into the car and fell upon an Instagram video of someone tweezing ticks off the head of a snake. There were five of them, gathered so closely to one another that they resembled a crown. He looked furious, the snake, much like Hugh had at the airport. Does he not know that the person with the tweezers is only trying to help him? I wondered.

"What are you up to back there?" Hugh asked. "Me?" I said. "Nothing much."

It was shortly after two when we dropped Susan Du off on the Upper East Side. She offered to pay for half the car rental, but we wouldn't hear of it. "It was our pleasure," we told her. I hopped into the front seat after retrieving her two backpacks, and Hugh and I, ten blocks now from our own apartment, waited with the engine running until she was safely through her building's front door and well on her way to the elevator. ♦

LETTER FROM INDIA

HOLD YOUR TONGUE

Can the world's most populous country protect its languages?

BY SAMANTH SUBRAMANIAN

Ganesh Devy believes that India's polyglot nature is fundamental to its identity.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SOHRAB HURA

In some Indian languages, the word for "language" is *bhasha*—the vowels long and warm, as in "car" or "tar." It has a formal weight and a refined spirit. It comes to us from the classical heights of Sanskrit, and it evokes a language with a script and a literature, with newspapers and codified grammar and chauvinists and textbooks. But there is another word, *boli*. It, too, refers to language, but its more accurate meaning is "that which is spoken." In its sense of the oral, it hints at colloquialisms, hybridity, and a demotic that belongs to the streets. The insinuation is that a *bhasha* is grander and more sophisticated than a *boli*. The language of language infects how we think about language.

For more than forty years, the distance between these two words has preoccupied the literary scholar Ganesh Devy. He knows precisely when it all began. In 1979, as he was completing his Ph.D. in English literature at Shivaji University, in the Indian city of Kolhapur, he found in the library a commentary on India's censuses. The 1961 census had identified sixteen hundred and fifty-two "mother tongues"—many of them, like Betuli or Khawathlang, with speakers numbering in the single digits. But the 1971 census listed only a hundred and eight; the hundred-and-ninth entry was "all others." That made Devy wonder: What had happened to the other fifteen-hundred-odd languages, the various *boli* deemed too unimportant to name? "The 'all others' intrigued me, then it bothered me, and then I got obsessed with it," Devy said. "Literature is a product of language, so at some point I thought, When I know that so many other languages have been masked, do I not have any responsibility toward them?"

Too often, India's riotous profusion of languages is conveyed through metaphor, adage, or anecdote. You may compare India to Babel, or quote the Hindi aphorism that roughly runs, "Every two miles, the taste of water changes / And every eight miles, the language." (My own anecdotal offering: My grandmother, who never finished high school, spoke five languages fluently.) Five of the world's major language families are present here—but beyond that quantification has proved elusive. After 1961, the Indian census did not count languages with any rigor; it mainly published the names of all the languages that people *said* they spoke. The last one, from 2011, registered around nineteen thousand "mother tongues"—a plain absurdity. In the world's most populous country, no one knows how many languages are living, or how many have died.

Devy, who is seventy-four, is a mild-mannered man—his voice low and his shoulders rounded, as if from a lifetime spent hunched over books in sepulchral libraries. One of his oldest friends, the political theorist Jyotirmaya Sharma, affectionately described Devy's accent as *ghaati*—a Hindi word meaning "rustic." Which is to say, Sharma told me, that, while Devy's former English-department colleagues at the Maharaja Sayajirao University, in the western-India city of Vadodara, spoke "as if they were eating sandwiches in Manchester," Devy discussed Milton and Coleridge in the same homegrown tones that he used for the Mahabharata and the Bengali philosopher Aurobindo Ghose. Like many of Devy's acquaintances, Sharma mentioned his wicked sense of humor. Once, as the two men were returning on Devy's scooter from a printing press where they'd just put a journal to bed, they saw a truck bearing down on them. "The scooter only

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occasionally had brakes," Sharma told me. He feared the worst. Then, in his recollection, Devy said dryly, "Jyotirmaya, put down your legs with all your might to create some friction, and I will change gears. Then perhaps the future of good literature might be saved."

Over the years, Devy has taught literature, won the Sahitya Akademi award—perhaps India's highest literary honor—for a work of literary criticism, crusaded for the rights of India's Indigenous communities, and founded a tribal academy in a forest two hours outside Vadodara. But the capstone of his career is the People's Linguistic Survey of India (P.L.S.I.), which has enlisted more than three thousand volunteers to map India's motley splurge of languages for the first time in a century. The exercise began in 2010, and the results have been published in state-specific volumes bearing olive-green dust jackets, with names like "The Languages of Tripura Part 1" and "The Languages of Kerala and Lakshadweep." In April, Devy, the chief editor of the project, will submit the manuscripts for five additional volumes before beginning the last book of the series: his diagnosis of the health of India's languages.

Sometimes a language withers because of customs we consider normal, and even desirable: intermarriage, migration, participation in the global economy. But Devy believes that any progress incapable of giving people the means to keep their language is no progress at all. Everywhere, the effacement of some languages by others—Nahuatl by Spanish, Aleut by Russian, Uyghur by Mandarin Chinese—is really a result of how power and wealth behave. English is so widely known, for instance, not thanks to any inherent syntactic or grammatical felicity but because it is an artifact of the British Empire and the American twentieth century. In India, the politics of language have always been especially overt: in the constitution's aversion to designating a national language; in the north's leverage over the south; in the demarcation of states along linguistic lines. Invariably, Devy said, the people who speak many of the languages grouped under "all others" in the 1971 census also live on India's economic margins. In 2010, the death of Boa Sr, a woman in her eighties who was the last known speaker of Bo, a language of the Andaman Islands, marked the extinction of a tribe that had been forcibly resettled around the archipelago and subjugated by the mainland. Bo might have been outlived by another Great Andamanese language, which in turn may feel menaced by Bengali, which itself feels the encroachment of Hindi—languages turning turtle all the way down.

Since 2014, when the Bharatiya Janata Party (B.J.P.) came to power, it has made the future of Indian languages even more uncertain. In addition to its well-known Hindu fanaticism, the B.J.P. wishes to foist Hindi on the nation, a synthetic marriage that would clothe India in a monolingual monoculture. Across northern and central India, roughly three hundred million people speak, as their first language, the standardized Hindi that the B.J.P. holds dear—but, this being India, that leaves more than a billion who don't. Even so, the government tried to make Hindi a mandatory language in schools until fierce opposition forced a rollback. The country's Department of Official Language, which promotes the use of Hindi, has had its budget nearly tripled in the past decade, to about fifteen million dollars. A parliamentary committee recently urged that Hindi be a prerequisite for government employment, raising the possibility that such jobs might become the preserve of people from the B.J.P.'s Hindi-speaking heartland. Three years ago, India's Home Minister called Hindi the "foundation of our cultural consciousness and national unity"—a message that he put out in a tweet written only in Hindi.

In India, where language scaffolds culture and identity, this pressure affects daily life. On social media, people routinely bristle at encountering Hindi in their non-Hindi-speaking states—on bank documents, income-tax forms, railway signboards, cooking-gas cylinders, or the milestones on national highways. Two years ago, a man set himself on fire in Tamil Nadu to protest the imposition of Hindi. In Karnataka, the state where he lives, Devy sees a simmering resentment of Hindi-speaking arrivals from the north.

The B.J.P. believes that India can cohere only if its identity is fashioned around a single language. For Devy, India's identity is, in fact, its polyglot nature. In ancient and medieval sources, he finds earnest embraces of this abundance: the Mahabharata as a treasury of tales from many languages; the Buddhist king Ashoka's edicts etched in stone across the land in four scripts; the lingua francas of the Deccan sultanates. The coexistence of languages, he thinks, has long allowed Indians to "accept many gods, many worlds"—an indispensable trait for a country so sprawling and kaleidoscopic. Preserving languages, protecting them from being bullied out of existence, is thus a matter of national importance, Devy said. He designed the P.L.S.I. to insure "that the languages that were off the record are now on the record."

Devy and his wife, Surekha, a retired chemistry professor, live in the town of Dharwad, in a small, neat house surrounded by guava and coconut trees. Their shelves are lined with books that have survived repeated cullings of their library. Devy now holds an academic post at a Mumbai university, and he lectures constantly around India; when he's home, his living room hosts impromptu symposia. One afternoon, some friends dropped in for a chat: an archeologist, a lawyer, a literary scholar, an activist, a college principal. Each took or declined a cup of tea, then waited for the talk to ebb before speaking up, like a pedestrian dashing through a break in traffic. I counted four languages: Hindi, Kannada, English, and Marathi. Devy is in his element in these conversations—so immersed that, on occasion, he will talk over others saying their piece. "I still work four or five hours a day on the P.L.S.I.," Devy told me. "The rest of the day, I philander in this way."

Among the books on Devy's shelves are the maroon volumes of the original Linguistic Survey of India, conducted by an Irishman named George Grierson between 1896 and 1928. Grierson held a string of roles in the British Raj, but he'd long been an ardent linguist, so coming to India must have felt like being a botanist who was dropped into the Amazon. With the help of district officials and schoolteachers, Grierson collected "specimens" of each language:

a standard list of two hundred and forty-one words and test sentences, a passage of text, and a translation of the Biblical passage about the prodigal son. In all, Grierson identified a hundred and seventy-nine languages and five hundred and forty-four dialects—the distinction between language and dialect being entirely his own. The experience moved him. At journey's end, he wrote breathlessly, "I have been granted a vision of a magnificent literature enshrining the thoughts of great men from generation to generation through three thousand years."

The survey was an imperfect enterprise. Grierson gathered plenty of material in northern India, where people speak languages from the Indo-European family, and from the east's Sino-Tibetan tongues. But he got almost nothing in the south, so Dravidian languages barely figure in the survey. For several languages, he never received a complete set of specimens. Nevertheless, Ayesha Kidwai, a linguist at New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University, admires Grierson's work for its openness to linguistic variations (or "shades," as he calls them), its grammatical scrutiny, and its care in laying a base for further scholarship—on how Indian languages ought to be grouped into families, or how linguistic traits have diffused and converged across these families. (Indians, for example, share a fondness for "echo words," such as *puli-gili,* in Tamil, where *puli* refers to tigers and *gili* is a rhyming nonsense term meaning "and the like." This quirk occurs in South Asian languages from at least three families but perhaps in no other language anywhere in the world—a discovery that Grierson's specimens helped make possible.) Since Grierson, though, there has been no similar linguistic survey in India—or indeed, Kidwai says, in comparably polyglot countries like Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, and Indonesia. Around 2005, the Indian government briefly proposed an update to Grierson, but then lost interest. At which point Devy thought, Why wait for the government to initiate the survey? Why should ordinary Indians not step in instead?

In 2010, Devy began holding workshops in every state, inviting professors, writers, folklorists, activists, and anyone else who might assist with the project. They would put together a rough list of a state's languages; then a native speaker, ideally, would furnish an entry for each one. Devy tried to compensate writers and translators, paying between forty and sixty dollars apiece—"a pittance," he acknowledges. Many refused their fee. He'd raised roughly a hundred thousand dollars from a corporate philanthropy to fund the project, but he also paid for some of it himself.

Very few of Devy's contributors were trained linguists. In the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand, a sculptor took on Rungloo, a Sino-Tibetan language; in Sikkim, in the northeast, a woman who ran a typesetting shop helped assemble the entry on Thangmi, a language also spoken over the border in Nepal. So there were more workshops still, in which Devy explained what the survey aspired to collect, and how to collect it. He didn't want to discriminate between language and dialect, and he particularly didn't want any language to be excluded because it had no script of its own. If seventy per cent of a language's word stock was unique, it was fit to be in the survey. Devy asked his writers to set down whatever they knew of their language's history, in addition to a few songs, poems, and stories. He asked for linguistic features—how tenses operated, or whether nouns were gendered. He'd read that, in near-extinct languages, words for colors are the final embers to die out, so he suggested contributors collect those as well. He asked for kinship terms, which he described to me as "the sauciest material for any anthropologist. Society is a structure of kinship, after all, as Claude Lévi-Strauss said." And he wanted lists of words for the most common aspects of life: farming implements in an agrarian community, say, or words for the desert in Rajasthan. In the state of Himachal Pradesh, up in the Himalayas, the P.L.S.I.'s writers compiled an Indian twist on Franz Boas's old cliché about Inuit languages: scores of terms for snow, across several languages, including those which describe "flakes falling on water" or "snow falling when the moon is up."

Devy's project has its critics, both mild and severe. Since neither he nor many of his surveyors are professional linguists, the entries aren't academically rigorous, as those in Grierson's survey were. "I wouldn't necessarily make this criticism," Peter Austin, the former director of the endangered-languages program at London's School of Oriental and African Studies, told me. "But some people might say, 'This is just a bunch of waffle about this language, and that's a bunch of waffle about that. We can't compare the two.'" Kidwai finds the collections of lore and

"He's still struggling with the piano, but he was potty trained a full year younger than Mozart."

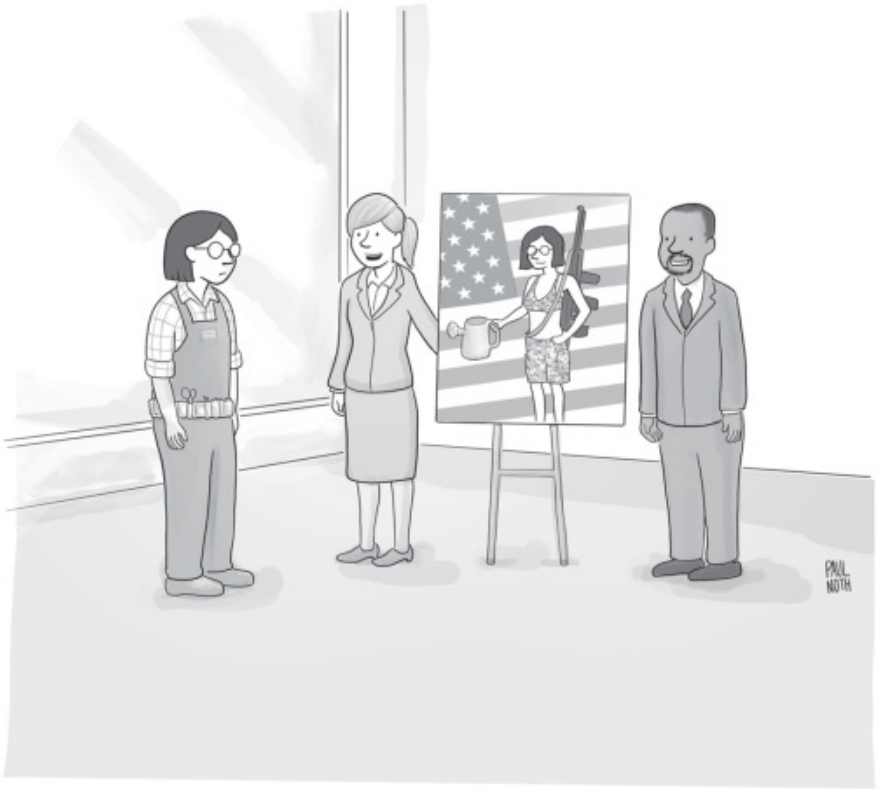
songs, and also the grammars, inconsistent, and sometimes entirely absent. But she also thinks that the very idea of the classic linguistics survey is defunct. In India and other developing countries, she said, there are few monolingual speakers: "No language lives alone in a person." Equally, she added, every language exists on a spectrum; Hindi comes in several flavors, a variation the P.L.S.I. fails to capture.

Devy acknowledges these shortcomings. He describes the survey as "more ethnographic than scientific," arguing that it reveals not so much the structure of language as the structure of Indian society. And it gives hope to communities worried about the future of their language. "If they want to lead a movement to preserve it, they have something to start with now," he said. Since 2010, the P.L.S.I. has consumed him. "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" he asked, quoting the final line of a W. B. Yeats poem. "It became like that with me and the survey. To know me is to know the P.L.S.I., and to know the P.L.S.I. is to know me."

Like many Indians, Devy grew up effortlessly multilingual. He spent his childhood in Bhor, a small town a few hours southeast of Mumbai, where his father serially set up and bankrupted businesses: a grocery store, a milk co-op, a timber depot. At home, the family spoke Gujarati, the language of their ancestors. On the streets and in school, Devy spoke Marathi, the language of the state in which Bhor lies. A mile away from his house was a small library, holding abridged Western classics in Marathi translation. Devy would check out a book—"Tarzan," or Charles and Mary Lamb's "Tales from Shakespeare"—finish it by the time he reached home, and return for another. When his family moved to Sangli, a bigger town nearby, he picked up Hindi in movie theatres, and in his early teens he heard English frequently for the first time, words like "city bus" and "milk booth." In school, he learned not only Sanskrit but also, from his classmates, the dialect spoken by a community of stone-crushers called Wadars. "These children were so full of colorful words of abuse—it was the greatest fun," Devy told me. "It unfolded a vast cosmos before me of how the human body's intimate spaces could be described."

By the time Devy was born, Indian leaders had begun to regard language as an existential dilemma. This was a fresh, unstable country, already rent by strife between Hindus and Muslims; to mismanage the linguistic question would be to risk splintering India altogether. Mahatma Gandhi, fearing India wouldn't hold without a national language, proposed that it be Hindustani, which encompasses both Hindi and the very similar Urdu of many Indian Muslims. (In the history of new nations, Gandhi's concern is not an uncommon one. Both Mao Zedong and Giuseppe Mazzini desired a standardized language to bridge the dialects of China and Italy, respectively.) The framers of the Indian constitution, though, declared Hindi and English to be only "official languages," for use in the business of federal governance. State bureaucracies could use their own official languages. In a quirk, English—the colonizer's legacy—became an emblem of autonomy; as the native language of no Indian, it could be the neutral language for all Indians. When, in the nineteen-sixties, it seemed as if the government would drop English as an official language, rioters in southern India destroyed trains and self-immolated in protest. These ructions were so violent that English was not only retained as an official language but also built into the Three-Language Formula, a 1968 policy enjoining schools to teach Hindi, English, and another major Indian language of their choosing. (States weren't forced to follow the formula—something the B.J.P. wishes it could change.) Devy admires the policy's pragmatism but not its principle. He'd prefer that children be able to learn, and learn in, any of their region's languages, however meagrely spoken. "That's not unmanageable," he told me. "Even so-called small languages in India are large in numbers. Most of them have tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of speakers."

When Devy was thirteen, his father abandoned the family. They moved to a shack with a tin roof, and Devy occasionally worked after school, as a street vender or a furniture porter. Twice he started undergraduate studies but left after a year; the second time, he moved to Goa, working in a bauxite mine by



"'Prepping with Patriot Mom' tests a lot better than 'Gardening with Gail.'"

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day and then cycling to a library to read English books with a dictionary by his side. He felt that English met his curiosity about the world in a way that Marathi literature did not. "I thought English was a condition of modernity—of having a social condition beyond caste and religion," he said.

Language could liberate, but it could also disintegrate, as Devy witnessed throughout his youth. In 1952, a man named Potti Sreeramulu began a hunger strike to demand a separate state for Telugu speakers; after his death, eight weeks later, the Indian government acquiesced. Nativists who spoke Gujarati and Marathi, Devy's first languages, carved out their own states from the greater territory of Bombay. In 1971, Bangladesh, to India's east, wrenched itself free of Pakistan, partly for linguistic freedom. And in Sri Lanka guerrilla groups commenced a decades-long civil war in a quest to claim the island's north and east as a Tamil nation. It must have been hard not to view these uprisings as post-colonial ailments, or to wonder if the subcontinent actually comprised dozens of nations that had been only artificially glued together by imperial authority.

For Devy, the third time around, university stuck: he got a B.A. in English literature, then went to Kolhapur for a Ph.D. He resolved to burn through the Western canon at the rate of three hundred pages daily, often spending entire nights in the library. One day, he spotted a young woman studying and went up to talk to her. "Before I even knew her name, I'd asked her to marry me," Devy said. Surekha remembers the episode the same way, but she noted, with a laugh, "I'd studied in Marathi and wasn't very conversant with English. When he started speaking in English, I probably didn't understand what he said." Kolhapur was just an hour north of where Surekha had grown up, but her version of Marathi was so different from Devy's that when he first visited her family, he told me, "I made them laugh. They'd look at my lips when they moved!" The papaya has a feminine gender in Devy's Marathi and a masculine gender in Surekha's. "Even today, when we go to the market to buy fruit, we try to correct each other," he said.

Devy has a very sure grasp of the arc of his life—of how cause turned into effect, how impulses matured into intellectual pursuits. In his narrative, the eighties were a decade of both disillusionment and discovery. When he began teaching at Maharaja Sayajirao University, in Vadodara, in 1979, he was still wedded to Western literature. Jyotirmaya Sharma, who studied under Devy, recalled the professor assigning him one-page summaries of a few hundred books, beginning with Kafka's "The Castle." ("That was my real education," Sharma said.) But in time Devy's syllabi came to include English translations of Indian literature. "It was unusual in an English department in India at the time," Sachin Ketkar, a former student who now teaches at Maharaja Sayajirao, told me. "There were people who thought this ideology of nativism was too parochial."

Throughout the decade, Devy felt energized by a stream of new books in other languages and by writers of the kind who had never previously made it into textbooks, like the firecracker poet Namdeo Dhasal, a Dalit who wrote in Marathi. Devy founded a journal for translated literature. He made frequent excursions into the countryside around Vadodara, a habit that had started during a drought-relief campaign. On his infamous scooter, and later in his first car, Devy visited the villages of tribal communities—called Adivasis, or original inhabitants—and came to believe, as he wrote later, that "culture has no expression but language. The two are one and the same."

Devy was also growing impatient with English's hold over the Indian imagination. The purpose of the colonial imposition of English, he wrote in his 1992 book, "After Amnesia," was not so much "to civilize India as to institutionalize the British view that India was uncivilized." "After Amnesia" positions Indian languages like Gujarati, Marathi, and Kannada against not only the engulfing influence of English—a common villain of post-colonial thought—but also that of Sanskrit before it. Sharma calls "After Amnesia" the "methodological signpost of Devy's enterprise." To bring about

true democracy, Sharma said, "you must know the country—you must know its past, and therefore its languages." Following the book's publication, Devy quit his job at the university, and stopped reading voraciously in English. "I was getting a little sick of books," he told me, adding that turning away from literature allowed him to think more like the Adivasis he encountered.

What do we lose when we lose a language? For Devy, it's a world view—the disappearance not only of many words for snow but also of a way of life and thought intimately bound to cold weather. Not everyone agrees. Peter Austin suggests that Devy's stance—that the way we see the world is determined by the language we speak—is a case of faulty essentialism. Austin thinks the losses are of bodies of knowledge: "The history that goes along with a language, the poetry, the music, the oral culture, the storytelling."

Like Devy, Austin believes that the modern erasure of languages is not an organic, irreversible process. He has witnessed resurrections—of Gamilraay, for example, an Australian Aboriginal language that he researched in the seventies. Gamilraay was in such a parlous state, he said, "that the most any individual would know was about two hundred words—very common words like 'hand' and 'meat' and 'shit.'" Today, the language is taught in schools and universities, thanks to Austin's success in documenting it, in addition to remarkable grassroots organizing. It's the kind of comeback that Devy hopes the P.L.S.I. will facilitate. "For a long time, I thought this was literary and cultural work," Devy said. After a conversation with a sociologist friend, he realized that he "was saying things with great political implications—that to talk culture and challenge culture is deep politics."

Devy would never have left Vadodara had it not been for the murder of a writer nine years ago. On a quiet Dharwad street, populated mostly by the solemn houses of university professors, two men rode up on a motorcycle, walked through the gate of M. M. Kalburgi's bungalow, and asked for him at the door. When Kalburgi emerged, one of the men grabbed his sweater, put a pistol between his eyes, and fired. Then the killers fled, their motorcycle roaring.

Kalburgi was a feisty writer; in Dharwad, where they speak a Kannada flecked with Marathi, people noted his *bhanddtana*, or stubbornness. His work habitually castigated the orthodoxies of Hinduism: its paralyzing caste hierarchies, its rituals, its idolatry. The Sanatan Sanstha, a Hindu-nationalist outfit believed to have ordered the hit on Kalburgi, was already suspected of assassinating two other writers who criticized Hinduism's most regressive aspects. (Alleged members of the Sanatan Sanstha have been convicted for one of these murders and are on trial for the other two.) "The killing upset me profoundly, and it made me so restless," Devy said. He'd met Kalburgi just once, but he and Surekha decided to move to Dharwad—to help Kalburgi's family seek justice, to show solidarity, and to make some noise. When the Devys found a house to rent, they discovered that the local headquarters of the Sanatan Sanstha was right next door.

Weeks after Kalburgi's murder, Devy returned his Sahitya Akademi award. Kalburgi had won the same prize, and yet the Akademi committee, nominally independent but funded by the Indian government, hadn't raised a murmur of condemnation about the killing, Devy said. Dozens of other writers gave back their state awards as well, protesting the right-wing violence that had swelled in the years since the B.J.P. came to power. After arriving in Dharwad, Devy organized student protests and conferences drawing hundreds of writers. He enlisted a lawyer to petition India's Supreme Court to combine Kalburgi's murder trial with those of the other two assassinated writers. (The court rejected this plea.) Twice, Devy visited Karnataka's Chief Minister to urge the prosecution to proceed more quickly. The second time, he ran into the journalist Gauri Lankesh, who was there for the same purpose. Days later, Lankesh was shot dead outside her house; the man suspected of driving the getaway vehicle also stands accused of Kalburgi's murder. For all this, the Kalburgi trial has inched along; the case is being heard one day a month in a Dharwad court. As of September, only twelve out of a hundred and thirty-eight witnesses had been examined. "Because of Ganesh Devy," Umadevi Kalburgi, the writer's wife, told me, "we were able to muster our courage and pursue the case."

During his time in Vadodara, Devy had seen, up close, the rise of an ugly, intolerant Hindu fundamentalism. On the street one night, he encountered a Hindu mob hunting for Muslims to harm; he sent them in the wrong direction. When the famed playwright Habib Tanvir came to the city, invited by the university's theatre department, landlords refused to rent him an apartment because he was Muslim. In 2002, a Hindu-led pogrom against Muslims ripped through Vadodara and other cities in the state of Gujarat, leaving more than a thousand people dead. The state's B.J.P. government, run by its Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, didn't stop the savagery for weeks; subsequently, Modi and his party were accused of abetting the Hindu rioters. Surekha started a relief camp for Muslims who had been driven out of their homes, but after a week city officials forced her to shut it down, claiming that she was stirring unrest.

Throughout that period, Devy lay in his bed at night but found himself too distraught to sleep. "I became more openly political," he told me. "Previously, I'd had a naïve faith in the state. After 2002, my view changed." In 2014, Modi became India's Prime Minister, a role he has held ever since. "What we began to see in India after 2014 had already happened in Gujarat," Devy told me. "Violence had been built in the atmosphere."

Devy's vocal opposition to the B.J.P.'s virulence has not left him unscathed. Surekha's career at Maharaja Sayajirao, which is a public university, foundered because her research and travel grants dried up, she told me. Just before Modi and the B.J.P. came to power, Devy had secured a three-year government grant of nearly two million dollars to support his work on Adivasi languages. The funds were to be channelled through the university, which received the first tranche just as Modi became Prime Minister. Devy never got his money. A former university official, who asked to remain anonymous, told me that his colleagues became reluctant to displease Modi, the B.J.P., and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (R.S.S.), a paramilitary organization that is the B.J.P.'s ideological parent. The R.S.S. and Gujarat's education

minister also leaned heavily on the university to refrain from disbursing the grant, he said. Local R.S.S. members told him that Devy's mission to preserve Adivasi languages and culture contradicted its own doctrine that everyone native to India ought to be Hindu—even tribes with beliefs that don't map neatly onto the narrow, upper-caste, puritanical Hinduism that the R.S.S. promotes. Devy's return of his Sahitya Akademi award was the final straw, the former university official said—proof, for the B.J.P., that he'd "joined the anti-Modi intellectual gang."

In a way, the B.J.P. and Devy are two sides of a single coin. The B.J.P.'s political project is also a decolonizing one: an attempt to shake off the traumas of subjugation, and to revive an older, singular Indian spirit. But the B.J.P. sees that spirit as uniformly Hindu. By corollary, it regards India's linguistic heritage as a product of Sanskrit, an ancestor of Hindi and the language of Hinduism's liturgy. Ayesha Kidwai told me that the government has stopped funding several institutes of endangered languages in public universities. The Central Institute of Indian Languages, part of India's Ministry of Education, has been tasked with theorizing an "Indian macrofamily" of languages, to "unify" differences between Sanskrit-based tongues and those of other language families. "There's a sudden emphasis on how many Sanskrit borrowings are in Malayalam, say," Kidwai told me. "I'm very perturbed about this."

Jyotirmaya Sharma believes that the B.J.P.'s imposition of a single linguistic sensibility on India will, if anything, be even harder to achieve than the imposition of a single faith. "This monolingual project will bring about their downfall," Sharma said. It reminded me of an observation by the nineteenth-century philologist Friedrich Max Müller. "It is said that blood is thicker than water," he noted in an Oxford lecture, "but it may be said with even greater truth that language is thicker than blood."

One afternoon, the Devys and I drove from Vadodara to the village of Tejgadh, where Devy founded his Adivasi Academy, in 1999. The campus's red brick buildings—including a library, a clinic, and a residential multilingual school for Adivasi children—lie in a forest clearing at the foot of a hill. The Adivasis around Tejgadh speak a language called Rathwi, whose P.L.S.I. entry was co-authored by Naran Rathwa and Vikesh Rathwa, two unrelated farmers from the community, now in their forties. Until they met Devy, they hadn't properly registered their culture's slow erosion during the past quarter century, as more temples to unfamiliar Hindu gods sprouted up, d.j.s played Bollywood songs at weddings, and Rathwi yielded to Gujarati and Hindi. "Our parents don't speak either language very well," Naran Rathwa said. "But if my father wants my son to bring him sugar, he'll have to use the Gujarati word *khand* and not the Rathwi word *mures*." In the space of two generations, songs and stories have been lost, and mutual comprehension has broken down.

For more than a year, the two men interviewed, and sometimes struggled to understand, the elders in Tejgadh and nearby villages. They noted, for instance, how the "d" sound in Gujarat often transformed into "l" in Rathwi, so that *gadu*, or "bullock cart," became *galu*. They recorded the story of Pithora, their chief deity, who was raised by his mother on milk and dried tree leaves. They wrote down the specific words for the predawn hour of 4 A.M., the hour between 2 P.M. and 3 P.M., and the dark and bright halves of each lunar month. There were a number of particularities relating to farming, such as *ponyeta*, meaning "to use three or four bullocks for a task." Since Rathwi doesn't have a script of its own, they wrestled it into the Gujarati script—an awkward process, akin to forcing a round rug into a triangular room. And they felt saddened that not a word of Rathwi was taught in schools.

To needle them, I asked, Why did that matter? Surely scores of languages have died in the past three hundred years, but no one has run out of songs to sing or stories to tell. Aren't the conveniences of modern life—mobile phones, widespread schools, the other appurtenances rubbing out *bolis* and *bhashas*—worth keeping?

Of course they are, Vikesh Rathwa said. But if we accept them too unthinkingly, and if we keep losing languages by not tending to them, "the world becomes just a machine."

The P.L.S.I. has identified seven hundred and eighty languages in India, in every conceivable state of health. (Devy thinks he may have missed a hundred or so.) Nandkumar More, a professor of Marathi, wrote about Chandgadhi, which he spoke while growing up, in a village near Maharashtra's border with Goa. Chandgadhi is shaped by Konkani and Kannada, but dusted with English and Portuguese, vestiges of the community's mercantile past. In the language, More found imprints of the local geography: there was a tool called the *hendor*, forged to break up the region's sedimentary rocks, and another called the *gorab*, a bamboo-leaf umbrella that shelters women while they work in the fields during the monsoon. These words were old, and the implements had fallen out of use, but many people still hauled them out of their houses to tell More about them.

In the northeastern state of Sikkim, on the other hand, the social linguist Balaram Pandey had to help write about Majhi, a language he didn't know, because he could find only one living speaker—an old man who once ferried boats for a living, and who died soon after Pandey interviewed him. "He told me, 'Nobody understands my language, so I go down to the river and speak to the stones,'" Pandey said. Another of Sikkim's sixteen languages, Bhujel, was once thought nearly extinct, but in the past decade scholars have developed a script, a dictionary, a digital font, and textbooks for it. In 2022, the Sikkim government added Bhujel to the list of the state's official languages—a triumph that Pandey ascribes to its inclusion in the P.L.S.I.

Every resuscitated language is a victory, Devy says: "If it's possible for people to make their livelihoods in their own languages, that's all that matters. Everything else becomes academic." Linguistic plurality, by itself, is no guarantor of peace or prosperity—and it may even devolve into a fetish for numbers, Sharma said. But he reads Devy's enterprise as a democratic one—as a way to steel the spines of people who endeavor to resist. When many languages thrive, Sharma told me, there is the possibility that "the smallest language, the most innocuous dialect, might contain the potential of saying that all-important word: 'No.'" ♦

THIS ELECTION JUST PROVES WHAT I ALREADY BELIEVED

BY RIVER CLEGG

I hate to say I told you so, but here we are. Kamala Harris's loss will go down in history as a catastrophe that could have easily been avoided if more people had thought whatever I happen to think.

Take immigration. It's a major issue, and I believe that the Harris campaign should have tacked to the left on it instead of trying to beat Republicans at their own messaging. Except I also think that Democrats should be trying harder to appeal to conservative rural voters who worry that immigration is out of control. Doing both of these things at once would have been so simple. And yet.

I hate to sound smug, but this was totally predictable if you happen to share whatever my exact world view is.

Then there's the economy. Some people say it's bad and that's why she lost. Other people say it's good but not enough people *know* it's good and that's why she lost. Unfortunately, I am the only voter who is smart enough to believe both.

Just look at the polling. Americans want to fight climate change in a way that doesn't disrupt our current system, which fuels climate change. Democrats need to start speaking to these people!

And Liz Cheney? Kamala never should have campaigned with her. But also she should have campaigned *way more* with her, and they should have got matching tattoos and competed as a team on "The Amazing Race." One thing you can't deny: whatever thing I think, I was right.

The list of issues I was correct about goes on and on. Guns? Harris owns too many, but also not enough. Tim Walz? He was a terrible choice, but also the best choice. Charlotte? Kamala should have changed her first name to that, except, hold on, doing so would have made no sense.

When you look at things from my perspective and no one else's, it all becomes clear.

There's sure to be a lot of finger-pointing among Democrats in the coming months. But one thing is certain—Democrats need to have a bold, progressive vision for the future that does not alienate voters who dislike things that are bold, progressive, or visions for the future.

We're just begging to lose again if we don't do this.

In the meantime, the Party has a lot of soul-searching to do. How are we going to win back pro-labor voters? I ask this based not on data, which I am too intelligent to actually look up, but on a vague feeling I have that we need to win back pro-labor voters. Similarly, when will we start directly addressing the concerns of affluent suburban families while at the same time not worrying about those families and instead going all in on disaffected, left-wing youth?

And why aren't we talking more about Social Security? Unless we should actually be talking less about Social Security? These are the questions that Democrats need to be asking themselves.

This is not the first time I've been right. When Barack Obama was elected President in 2008, it proved what I believed, which is that running left of center is a winning strategy. When he won again, in 2012, it backed up my belief that Mitt Romney was weird and off-putting. When Donald Trump won in 2016, I was once again vindicated because I argued something that I now forget but which undeniably made sense at the time—you had to be there, I guess. And in 2020 my being-correct streak continued as Biden swept into office with over all less hair than he had in the nineteen-eighties, as I predicted he would.

You've got to hand it to observers who are me and no one else. We totally saw this coming. Take notice, fellow-Democrats. All that's left for us to do is to pick up the pieces and learn some tough lessons that reaffirm whatever thing we already believed. You know, the way we always do. ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

ANNALS OF LAW

THE BIG SPIN

A district attorney's office investigates how its prosecutors picked death-penalty juries.

BY JENNIFER GONNERMAN

One morning this past March, Aimee Solway arrived at her job at the Alameda County district attorney's office, in Oakland, California, and found about a dozen boxes piled next to her desk. Each was labelled with the name of a defendant, Ernest Dykes, and inside were the files of the prosecutors who had worked on his case. Dykes had committed a murder during the course of a robbery in 1993, when he was twenty years old, and he was convicted and sent to death row. Now fifty-one, he was still fighting his sentence.

In California, death-penalty litigation often takes decades to be resolved, and five years ago Governor Gavin Newsom ordered a moratorium on executions in the state. So last year, in an effort to ease the backlog, a few old cases were referred to a federal judge, Vince Chhabria, of the Northern District of California, for possible settlement—to see if there was a way to resentence the defendants and end their litigation. One of the cases was Dykes's.

Solway, a deputy district attorney, had been hired to review old convictions, and Dykes's case was one of her first assignments. She would need to weigh in at an upcoming settlement conference with Judge Chhabria and Dykes's lawyers, so she had ordered the trial files. She opened a box, glanced at a few of the documents, and then turned to other tasks, including a call with Dykes's attorneys. Later that day, she went back to the boxes—she was looking for the police reports—and in one of them she discovered a stack of index cards held together by a rubber band.

On the cards were handwritten notes, which Solway realized were comments about prospective jurors for Dykes's trial, presumably compiled by the prosecutors. One card described an "MW"—male, white—who was a Republican and in favor of the death penalty. That didn't seem too surprising, but a card for a Black woman read "Don't believe she could vote D/P"—for the death penalty—and characterized her as a "Short, Fat, Troll." A card for a forty-seven-year-old man said that he had a "Jewish background." Another card, for a man who had a Ph.D. in physics, read "I liked him better than any other Jew But No Way," then added, "Must Kick, too Risky."

Solway immediately knew that some of the notes posed a serious problem. Historically, prosecutors had sought to keep certain groups of people off juries who they assumed would be less likely to vote for a conviction. That practice had denied untold numbers of Americans their constitutional right to a fair trial. To counter this, the California Supreme Court, in 1978, banned striking jurors because of their race, ethnicity, or religion. In 1986, the U.S. Supreme Court, in Batson v. Kentucky, prohibited prosecutors nationwide from eliminating jurors based on their race. "The harm," the Court found, "extends beyond that inflicted on the defendant and the excluded juror to touch the entire community," and the result is to "undermine public confidence in the fairness of our system of justice."

Solway knew that, if prosecutors in Dykes's case had discriminated against potential jurors, his constitutional rights had been violated. She also knew that the remedy for that sort of violation was to reverse the conviction. Given that possibility, another prosecutor might have put the index cards back in the box and tried to forget about them. Solway did not. She had previously worked at the California Appellate Project in San Francisco, a nonprofit organization that helps lawyers representing people on death row. But, because she was only a few weeks into her job at the D.A.'s office, she wasn't sure how her bosses would react to her discovery. She later recalled that she "sort of sheepishly" walked into her supervisor's office to show her the cards—and to say that she thought they should be handed over to Dykes's lawyers. Solway remembers telling her, "I don't think we can settle this case without disclosing this evidence."

Soon, the Alameda County district attorney, Pamela Y. Price, was studying the cards. Price had just become the D.A., in 2023—she was the first Black person to hold the position—and she thought the cards contained "pretty incontrovertible evidence that you're excluding Jewish people" from the jury, she later said. Her team shared the notes with Judge Chhabria, and he ordered Price to do a full review of the office's past capital convictions. At a press conference on April 22nd, Price announced, "We do have evidence of actual prosecutorial misconduct." She added, "We have notes made by prosecutors in some of the cases," as well as courtroom transcripts showing "the ways in which the jurors were questioned." The evidence "suggests plainly that many people did not receive a fair trial in Alameda County," she said. "It is something that we have to make right."

The Supreme Court determined twice in the nineteen-seventies that the death penalty was being enforced in ways that were unconstitutional. In 1977, the California legislature passed a new death-penalty bill to comply with the latest ruling, and the following year voters passed a state ballot initiative to significantly expand the list of "special circumstances" under which a prosecutor could seek the death penalty for first-degree homicide. In the next few decades, California prosecutors sent more than a thousand people to death row.

Governor Newsom declared the moratorium in 2019, but there are still

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"We do have evidence of actual prosecutorial misconduct," the D.A. said. "It is something that we have to make right."

ILLUSTRATION BY MIKE McQUADE

more than six hundred people, including twenty women, with death sentences in California—more than in any other state. Thirty-four were prosecuted by the Alameda County D.A.'s office. They range in age from thirty-three to eighty-one. The one with the oldest case arrived on death row in 1981; the most recent was sentenced in 2016.

To comply with Chhabria's order, Price's staff searched decades-old files, identified thousands of pages of jury-selection materials, and shared them with lawyers for the defendants. Prosecutors' offices are sometimes referred to as "black boxes," because their inner workings are shielded from public view. But the old trial files in Alameda County have revealed the jury-selection tactics sometimes used in capital cases, particularly by some prosecutors assigned to an élite group known as the Death Team.

In 1980, James Anderson became the first prosecutor in the Alameda County D.A.'s office to win a death-penalty case after capital punishment was reinstated. The son of a milkman, Anderson grew up in San Francisco and joined the D.A.'s office straight out of law school, in 1969, when he was twenty-six. When the office created the Death Team, in the mid-eighties, he was assigned to it. Anderson was up by five every morning, ran five miles, and was at his desk before seven-thirty. He handled many of the most notorious murder cases, and was prone to using terms like "hyena" or "reptile" when referring to defendants during closing arguments. In a memo to a judge about one defendant, who was convicted of murdering a young woman after kidnapping, robbing, and raping her, he wrote, "An early execution is only too fitting for him."

The Death Team worked on the ninth floor of the Alameda County Courthouse, an eleven-story Art Deco structure built in the nineteen-thirties, next to Lake Merritt, in Oakland. (The county encompasses Oakland, where about a quarter of the population lives; thirteen smaller cities, including Berkeley; and several unincorporated areas.) The D.A., John J. Meehan, had his office on the ninth floor, as did many of his top officials. In the late eighties, Anderson began sharing an office with a fellow death-penalty prosecutor named John R. Quatman, known as Jack, who had spent seven years studying at a seminary before transferring to U.C. Berkeley, in 1967, and then attending law school. He was a few years younger than Anderson and, at five feet six, several inches shorter. Colleagues called him Squatman, and he often poked fun at his own height in an attempt to win over jurors—standing on his toes, for example, when he went up to speak to the judge. He and Anderson were close friends, and were among the highest-profile prosecutors in the courthouse.

Obtaining a death verdict, Anderson once said, was a "mark of distinction" in the office. As Quatman put it, "Anybody can try a homicide successfully. Not everybody can try a death-penalty case successfully." A capital prosecutor had to win twice: first at trial (persuading twelve jurors to convict a defendant of first-degree murder with a so-called special circumstance) and then during the "penalty phase" (persuading all the jurors to sentence the defendant to death). The key, Quatman said, was to pick the right jury, and the pressure to win was intense: "Every other day, the boss comes by—'How's that case going?'" Preparing for and trying a death-penalty case could take at least a year, and after Anderson or Quatman sent a defendant to death row they framed his mug shot and hung it on their office wall, next to a copy of his death verdict.

The first death-penalty case that Quatman prosecuted was that of Fred Harlan Freeman, a mechanic from Richmond, who had suffered severe hearing loss as a child. He was forty-seven years old and had been charged with fatally shooting a man during a robbery at a bar in Berkeley, in 1984. The case had seemed almost impossible to win—it was nearly three years old when Quatman got it, and the police had lost some of the evidence. And Quatman himself had misgivings about the case. He later said, "My big issue with Fred Freeman was that it never should've been a death-penalty case because he wasn't that bad a guy." (Freeman had two prior felony convictions for armed robbery, but, Quatman explained, nobody had been shot in those incidents.) He added, "We had shootings in bars every day in Oakland, and they weren't death-penalty cases." But a committee in the D.A.'s office decided which cases were capital cases, and, Quatman said, a prosecutor who questioned the committee's decision risked losing out on future death-penalty assignments.

Picking a jury in a capital case was far more onerous than in a typical homicide case. Prospective jurors had to fill out questionnaires and be interviewed individually by lawyers for both sides to determine not only whether they could be fair but whether they were "death qualified." (Those who said that they could never vote for the death penalty were dismissed, as were those who said that they would always vote for it.) This part of the process could take a couple of months, and eventually the prospective jurors who remained—perhaps a hundred people—returned to the courthouse for the second phase, known as the Big Spin. On that day, they sat together in the spectator section of the courtroom while a clerk spun a metal cannister, pulled out cards, and read off names. The first twelve people who were called took seats in the jury box.

Prosecutors and defense attorneys had the names of all the prospective jurors ahead of the Big Spin, and they learned as much as they could about them. Quatman was particularly thorough: he checked if they had ever been arrested, pulled driving records, and drove by potential jurors' homes to see if there were any bumper stickers on their cars indicating their political views. During the Big Spin, both prosecutors and defense attorneys could use an allotted number of peremptory challenges, which did not require an explanation, to remove jurors. (The allotted number at the time was twenty-six for each side.) Discrimination based on where a person lives is legally permissible, and Anderson told me, "I had a cardinal rule: if they lived in Berkeley, they were off the panel." Quatman agreed: "You didn't want those guys on the jury. They start questioning everything you do."

Prosecutors often brought notes—one index card for each juror. There

wasn't enough time to read every word on every card, though, so beforehand they would assign each possible juror a score. Quatman used a scale of zero to ten. "Zero is somebody you want to get off that jury any way you can," he explained. "My rule was six and above." Each time a potential juror was removed, another took that person's seat in the jury box. The process ended when the allotted challenges ran out—or earlier, if both sides agreed on a jury.

Judge Stanley P. Golde, a revered courthouse figure known as the Maven, presided over Freeman's trial. Quatman knew Golde well; the judge had been a guest at his wedding, and Quatman was a frequent visitor to his chambers. There was always an urn of hot coffee, and lawyers gathered there to socialize, talk business, and seek Golde's counsel. In April, 1987, one day before the Big Spin began in the Freeman case, Golde permitted lawyers for both sides to eliminate a few additional jurors, though it was not the usual protocol. Freeman's attorney did so, but Quatman did not.

Afterward, in Quatman's telling, Golde called him into his chambers and said, "Quatman, what are you doing? You didn't challenge the Jew," adding, "No Jewish person could sit on a death-penalty jury and return a verdict" for death. Quatman said that Golde, who was Jewish, reminded him that after the former Nazi official Adolf Eichmann had been captured in Argentina, in 1960, Israelis were divided on whether he should be executed. Quatman responded, "Say no more."

Before the trial began, Quatman removed three potential jurors he thought might be Jewish. In the end, he prevailed: the jury convicted Freeman, then voted to send him to death row. (Later, Quatman said that the verdict was "due more to the defense attorneys' incompetence than to my efforts," citing their "substandard" case during the penalty phase, which seemed "thrown together in a haphazard fashion.")

According to Quatman, his fellow-prosecutors often made a point of striking Black jurors, too, especially women, in cases in which the defendant was Black. In 1991, Anderson prosecuted three men; one of them, a white insurance agent, had allegedly hired the other two, both of whom were Black, to kill his ex-wife. During the Big Spin, eleven Black people were called to the jury box, and Anderson removed nine of them. He won two death verdicts—for the ex-husband and for one of the hired men. (The other man got life without parole.)

"I quack-quacked here, I quack-quacked there . . . I mean, I pretty much quack-quacked everywhere. Do you mind if I take my break?"

• •

Anderson was named the head of the Death Team in 1991. Quatman was no longer a member; he had been made a supervisor, overseeing a team of felony-trial prosecutors. In June, 1992, the D.A.'s office sent a group of prosecutors to attend a three-day seminar on trying death-penalty cases, organized by the California District Attorneys Association. Quatman, who by then had won three death verdicts, was one of the speakers; his topic was jury selection. He prepared a four-page outline that included notes about the sorts of people he didn't want as jurors, because he thought they might be too empathetic (psychiatrists, nurses, doctors), and those he did want (women over forty, blue-collar workers).

The seminar was held at Humphreys Half Moon Inn, in San Diego, and was attended by a couple of hundred people, representing district attorneys' offices around the state. Quatman, near the end of his presentation, shared a piece of advice that was not in his outline. As one colleague, Colton Carmine, later put it, "He prefaced his remarks by saying, 'I know I probably shouldn't say this, and I'm probably going to get in trouble.'" But then, Carmine added, "he said, 'Never, ever leave a Jewish person on a capital jury. It's just not fair to the case, and it's not fair to the jurors, given what's happened to them in the past, to ask them to execute another human being by lethal

gas.'" (At the time, California used a gas chamber for executions.)

Yet even though Quatman had publicly encouraged fellow-prosecutors to violate a defendant's right to a fair trial, he was not reprimanded. His boss, Thomas J. Orloff, then a chief assistant to the D.A., later said that nobody told him about Quatman's comments. The California District Attorneys Association, in fact, sent Quatman a thank-you letter, noting that the "attendees seemed to have benefited from the instruction." By the next year, however, Quatman was no longer working in the courthouse. While speaking to a judge in his chambers, Quatman had used a sexist slur to refer to a female prosecutor on his trial team. Another lawyer overheard him, and soon everyone in D.A.'s office knew about it. Quatman was later transferred to the office's consumer-fraud unit, in a building six miles away, and he blamed Orloff for what he saw as a demotion. (Orloff told me that John Meehan, who has since died, "was the D.A. then and made the decision." But Orloff defended the transfer: "I mean, here's a guy you've got doing criminal cases who is a total loose cannon.")

Anderson oversaw the Death Team until 2004, when he retired, at the age of sixty-one, after thirty-four years in the D.A.'s office. A headline in the Oakland *Tribune* read "A passionate foe of killers cedes stage." Anderson had "gotten more murderers condemned to execution than any other prosecutor in California history"—ten death verdicts, the story reported. " 'There was nothing we couldn't get away with,' Anderson said with a mischievous smirk. 'We cut a wide swathe through things, but we produced a lot of results.' "

On March 22, 2005, Jack Quatman was back in a courtroom in the Bay Area, but this time he was on the witness stand. As unlikely as it seemed, he was testifying at a hearing on behalf of Fred Freeman. Quatman's wife, Phyllis, who had worked as a prosecutor in a neighboring county, was in the courtroom that day, too. She remembers seeing her husband's former colleagues "staring at us like we were traitors to the team," as she put it years later. "And we *were* traitors to the team. There's no question, I guess."

After five years in the consumer-fraud unit, Quatman had grown frustrated, and he quit in 1998. He and Phyllis had two young children, and, at her prompting, they moved to Whitefish, Montana, a town of five thousand in the Rocky Mountains, sixty miles from the Canadian border. The couple opened a law practice there. Phyllis also represented a man on death row in California, handling his state habeas petition. (Once defendants have exhausted their direct appeal, they can file a habeas petition in state court, challenging their conviction or their sentence, or both, and if they lose they can file one in federal court. With such a large death row, California often relies on habeas attorneys from out of state.) In March, 2003, Scott F. Kauffman, a lawyer with the California Appellate Project, travelled to Whitefish to help Phyllis with her petition, and she invited him to their home for dinner.

That evening, Quatman and Kauffman got to talking, and the two men finished a bottle of wine, then opened another. The conversation eventually turned to Alameda County. Quatman spoke about his days in the D.A.'s office and his first death-penalty trial—Fred Freeman's—and his uneasiness about it. He also mentioned that, before the trial had started, Judge Golde, who had died in 1998, suggested that he not keep any Jewish jurors.

Kauffman knew one of the attorneys handling Freeman's habeas petition, Gary D. Sowards, and he asked Quatman if he could pass along his comments. Quatman agreed, and Sowards soon met with him in Montana, then sent him a declaration recapping their meeting and asked him to sign it. The declaration stated that "Fred Freeman did not fit the real-world standard for one deserving the death penalty"; that his lawyers had been "worse than ineffective"; that in the Alameda D.A.'s office it had been "standard practice to exclude Jewish jurors in death cases"; and that, in this case, Golde had reminded Quatman to do so.

Quatman initially balked at signing. Friends and other attorneys advised him not to sign—not to break ranks with his former colleagues. But Phyllis saw it differently. She recalled

BEFORE I CAN EXIST, I HAVE TO ENTER THE GIFT SHOPPE

America, like hope's sharp pencil,
winks brightly beyond a gantlet of elegant shill.

I make my way through the pong—
lavender soap, cinnamon sticks, the yeasty throng

of tourists sporting on-brand T-shirts
or breeches made to colonial specs, a flirt

with cosplay which attracts me. I resist, peruse instead
racks of heirloom seeds that tout the man who's dead,

his "green revolution." A table of bowls hand-hewn
from historic trees—a tulip-poplar pen & rolling pin!—

never mind who grew then razed these trees & why & when,
or once hauled water to the gardens & grounds from whence

this stock arose. I judge. Is this how I exist? I choose a magnet
for the fridge. I wait my turn in line. I purchase my exit.

—Lisa Russ Spaar

telling him, "You have to do this because this man's life is on the line, and he didn't get a fair trial, and this"—the unethical striking of jurors—"is endemic in your office." She added, "You have a moral duty to tell the truth." In late May, 2003, Quatman signed the declaration.

In July, 2004, the California Supreme Court ordered an evidentiary hearing in Freeman's case, focussed on Quatman's claims about excluding jurors—and the backlash began. Anderson told a reporter that Quatman's claims were "ludicrous." As Anderson later said to me, "People just couldn't believe that he would suddenly become a turncoat, so to speak, and try and damage the office by making these allegations." He added, "I mean, you've been in the office for so long and all of a sudden just turn against it because you had a falling out with the boss?" That theory, that Quatman was driven by a grudge, was pervasive in the D.A.'s office.

Orloff, who had become the district attorney in 1994, put a prosecutor named Morris D. Jacobson in charge of the "Quatman investigation," as it was known. On November 16, 2004, Jacobson and a few staff members met to strategize. According to notes from the meeting, which District Attorney Price's office released in October, the participants discussed the "sensitive nature of case and need for confidentiality." The notes also read "Left it w/ Morris saying he would give us direction. Wants to find dirt on Quatman."

Jacobson interviewed prosecutors who had worked with Quatman to determine who might be called to testify at the hearing—and an inspector from the D.A.'s office went to Montana to speak with lawyers who knew him there. The California Supreme Court appointed Kevin J. Murphy, a Santa Clara County Superior Court judge who had previously worked as a prosecutor, to oversee the hearing. Freeman's legal team, which included Sowards and three other lawyers, argued that it was a conflict of interest for the D.A.'s office to represent itself, so lawyers from the state attorney general's office wound up defending the office in court.

Six days before the hearing began, the New York *Times* published a story about Quatman's allegations. Anderson gave the reporter, Dean E. Murphy, a quote that was perhaps more revealing than he intended. Murphy wrote that, according to Anderson, "many prospective jurors, including Jews and blacks, were excluded because of backgrounds, professions and political beliefs. 'That is not a racist thing, but just common sense,' Mr. Anderson said. 'It is an axiom. It is not because of prejudice. Their politics are not going to be on your side.'"

The hearing, however, did not focus on whether there was a pattern of Alameda prosecutors striking certain groups of people from death-penalty juries. The California Supreme Court had stipulated that the proceeding should focus on just two questions: Had Judge Golde advised Quatman to strike Jews from the jury in the Freeman case? And had Quatman done so on his advice? (Ordering an evidentiary hearing with such a narrow focus was not unusual for the California Supreme Court.)

Quatman took the stand on the first day, and the attorney representing the D.A.'s office asked why he had struck the three potential jurors he thought were Jewish. "Because you wanted to win, right?" the attorney said. "That's correct," Quatman replied. The attorney also asked why he didn't report Golde's comments to anyone. "Judge Golde was considered the dean of the

courthouse," Quatman said. "I don't think anyone would have believed me, and I would have been transferred and spent the rest of my career in Livermore Muni Court."

Some of the attorneys who testified defended Golde, who, it was noted, was no longer alive to defend himself. Before becoming a judge, he had been a successful defense attorney, whose clients included a former mayor of Oakland, protesters involved with the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, and an Oakland Raiders wide receiver. One attorney described Golde as "my adviser," adding, "He was probably that to many people."

The hearing, which lasted five days, subsequently turned into a referendum on Quatman's character. A few lawyers were brought in from Montana, but their complaints were fairly petty, and one said that Quatman had "a good reputation for truth and honesty." Yet eight current and former Alameda County prosecutors testified, and many recounted unethical acts that he had allegedly committed, such as failing to hand over documents to defense attorneys and coaching a trial witness by leaving a photograph of a person whom he wanted the witness to identify "in plain view on his desk." A former colleague described Quatman as "willing to bend or break rules to win more than any prosecutor should be."

Colton Carmine, who joined the D.A.'s office in 1979, testified about the 1992 seminar where Quatman advised prosecutors against picking Jews for capital juries. He said of Quatman's remarks, "I don't think it's an ethical statement to make." One of the last people to testify was James Anderson. Freeman's attorney asked him if Golde had ever advised him on which jurors to strike. "Nope, never did," Anderson answered. The attorney then tried to ask whether "there were certain axioms in the office about who should be on a jury," but Judge Murphy cut him off, after the defense objected.

Near the end of the hearing, a lawyer from the attorney general's office reiterated the theory that Quatman had made his allegations out of anger, and Murphy seemed to find that argument persuasive. He ruled in favor of the D.A.'s office, declaring, "Mr. Quatman's allegations about Judge Stanley Golde and the alleged incident" are "not true." He added, "I also concluded from the evidence that Mr. Quatman is dishonest and unethical."

This past spring, when Aimee Solway found the juror notes from Ernest Dykes's trial, the D.A.'s office looked to see which prosecutors had handled the case. Carmine had tried it. (He is retired and did not respond to requests

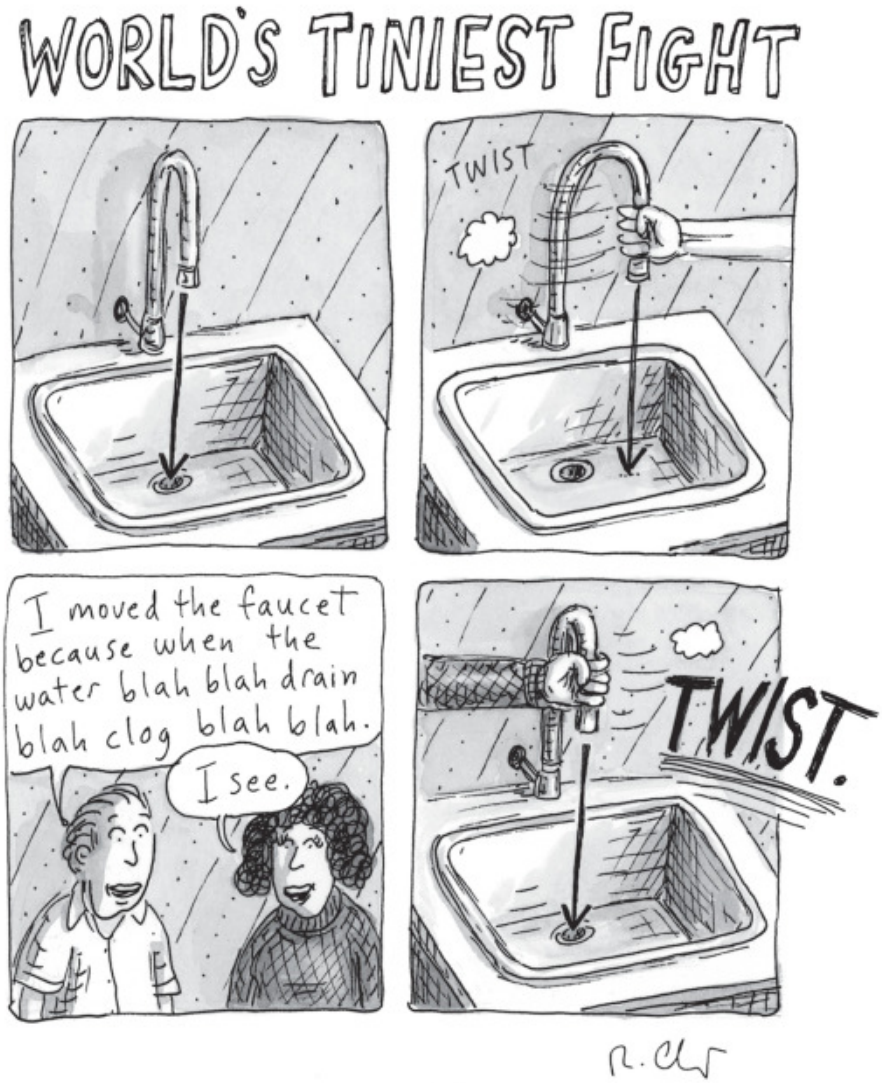
for an interview.) Jacobson assisted during the jury-selection process. Now a judge on the Alameda County Superior Court, he declined to be interviewed, saying in an e-mail that he is "not permitted to comment on pending litigation." (After Price released the notes from the 2004 meeting, Jacobson denied any wrongdoing, telling the *Daily Journal*, "There was no cover-up.") In 2009, Freeman died in prison, at the age of sixty-nine.

When Pamela Price moved into the D.A.'s office, in 2023, she learned that her desk had once belonged to Earl Warren, the former Chief Justice of the United States, who served as the Alameda County D.A. from 1925 to 1938. The executive offices needed renovating, so Price decided to set up an office in a building across from the Oakland Coliseum where some other prosecutors worked—and she took Warren's desk with her. When I met her there, last summer, a quote from Maya Angelou hung on her office wall: "As long as you are breathing, it's never too late to do some good."

Price had not known the name Jack Quatman, but after she started reviewing her office's history of jury-selection practices in capital cases, and discovered the 2005 hearing, she came to her own conclusion. "It was very clear they had circled the wagons around the misconduct," she said. "The strategy was to discredit Mr. Quatman, despite the fact that—as one of my deputies pointed out—he had been a long-term valued member of this office for decades. And then, suddenly, they all decided that he was the biggest liar." She added that the allegations of juror discrimination in capital cases were "a problem that has not been examined or considered credibly in this office. And we are going to do it."

Unlike her predecessors, Price had not previously been a prosecutor. Now sixty-eight, she grew up in Ohio, spent time in foster care, attended Yale and then Berkeley Law, and ran her own civil-rights law firm, in Oakland, where her clients included female prison guards who successfully sued the state after alleging that they had been sexually harassed at work. Price was elected D.A. as part of the progressive-prosecutor movement, which began in 2015 in an effort to address inequities in the criminal-justice system and to end mass incarceration by taking a less punitive approach.

But, by the time Price was sworn in, the movement had lost its momentum, and critics soon accused her of not being punitive enough. She was blamed for Oakland's high crime rate and has received a barrage of negative press coverage, including a recent story in the San Francisco *Chronicle* about her office's failure to meet a one-year deadline to file charges in hundreds of misdemeanor cases, which allowed the alleged perpetrators to go unpunished. In 2022, a recall vote had led to the ouster of the progressive San Francisco D.A., Chesa Boudin. On November 5th, Price herself faced such a vote, and lost by a margin of about two to one. She is expected to be removed from office in December, once the vote tally is certified.



In November, 2023, before the juror cards were discovered in Dykes's case, a federal judge appointed two habeas lawyers—Brian Pomerantz, who is based in North Carolina, and Ann-Kathryn Tria, of Los Angeles—to represent Dykes in settlement conferences. Pomerantz, who was made the lead counsel, already had two clients from Alameda County in prison with death sentences, and he had long suspected that something had gone wrong in the Alameda D.A.'s office. One client was a man named Charles Stevens, who in 1993 was convicted of killing four people and attempting to kill another six, and whose case Pomerantz described as "the worst Batson violation in Alameda County," referring to the Supreme Court decision. During the Big Spin in Stevens's case, the prosecutor,

Kenneth Burr, dismissed six out of six Jews and seven of nine Black people who were called to the jury box. In 1997, Burr was appointed as a judge on the Alameda County Superior Court. (He died in 2023.)

In March, Pomerantz and Tria joined Solway on a Zoom call to discuss Dykes's case. The facts of his crime were that, on the afternoon of July 26, 1993, Dykes, who was unemployed, started drinking malt liquor, and then tried to rob his landlady, Bernice Clark, with a gun while she sat in her Oldsmobile in the parking lot of his apartment building, in East Oakland. A bullet was fired and hit her in the neck, then struck and killed her nine-year-old grandson, Lance, who was seated beside her. Dykes later claimed that the gun had gone off accidentally while he was trying to grab Clark's wallet from her, and that he had not intended to shoot anyone. After a story in the Oakland *Tribune* named him as a suspect, he surrendered to the police.

There was nothing in the court transcript to suggest that prosecutors had discriminated against prospective jurors before Dykes's trial. But, near the end of the Zoom call, Pomerantz complained to Solway about her office's history of violating Batson. He recalled telling her, "Your office has been dirty for forty years. You know it and I know it. If your D.A. really wants to be a progressive prosecutor, go into the files."

It was later that same day that Solway found the stack of index cards, and later that week she e-mailed Pomerantz and Tria thirty-one pages of notes, some from the cards and some from yellow legal pads that she had also found in the boxes. Pomerantz read the notes in disbelief. "For ten years, I've been chasing this," he told me, "looking at stuff from different Alameda cases and trying to prove pattern and practice, and suddenly it was all here."

This spring, when Judge Chhabria ordered Price's office to review its juror-selection files in capital cases, he appointed Pomerantz and Tria to assist with distributing them to the lawyers representing the defendants. Pomerantz hired a team of professionals to scan the documents at the D.A.'s office, and he and Tria collected some sixty thousand pages, which included juror questionnaires and prosecutors' notes. They received eleven thousand pages related to Dykes's case, including about two hundred lengthy juror questionnaires; in another case, they got only fourteen pages. For twelve of the cases, they were told that the jury-selection documents were not found.

For the capital cases prosecuted by James Anderson—six were still being litigated—most or all of the jury-selection materials seemed to be missing. Anderson told me that he had a practice of keeping only the documents that the office needed to handle appeals, and of getting rid of his "work product," including notes that he had taken on jurors and witnesses, as well as personal items, such as thank-you notes from victims' relatives. "We were told to purge the files" of work product, he said, because the office had limited storage space. "It wasn't anything to try to deceive people." (Quatman said that there was no official protocol; some prosecutors kept their notes, and others did not.)

Pomerantz and Tria studied the documents for weeks. "I've seen a lot of disturbing things," Tria told me. Prosecutors sometimes wrote notes about potential jurors that had nothing to do with their views. One card described a white woman from San Leandro as "Attractive for Age." (She was forty-eight.) Another card noted that a nineteen-year-old woman had come to court wearing a "denim long dress slit up side." On another, someone wrote that a twenty-seven-year-old woman from Pleasanton was "cute" and "Loves Animals" and that, as to the likelihood of her voting for a death verdict, "She can do it!"

Reporters began calling Pomerantz and asking questions, including whether the sort of prosecutorial misconduct uncovered in the Dykes case, during the nineteen-nineties, had continued. Before long, he had an answer: he and Tria found evidence showing that Alameda County prosecutors had been documenting which potential jurors were Jewish or Black into the two-thousands. A list from 2008, for example, consisted of summaries of potential jurors and the phrase "Juror is African American" in bold type next to certain names—"clearly trying to make it stand out," Pomerantz said.

In July, I met with Pomerantz at his home, in North Carolina. When I arrived, he was standing in his driveway, talking on the phone to Dykes. A few minutes later, Pomerantz handed me the phone. I asked Dykes what he remembered about his trial. "I had no understanding of what was going on," he said. "But I can tell you what I do remember—just looking forward, not making eye contact with no one. Just staring at that flag that was over the judge, counting the stars."

Dykes had been on death row for decades at San Quentin, the oldest prison in California, with the rest of the state's condemned men. But Governor Newsom had recently ordered the death row dismantled, and the men were moved to other prisons. This spring, Dykes was transferred to a facility in Stockton. When his settlement negotiations started, he thought that his sentence might be changed to life without parole. But, when Pomerantz told him about the juror notes, he began to hope for a better settlement: a sentence that would allow him to go before the parole board and, perhaps one day, to get out of prison. "Maybe I can get twenty-five to life," he recalled telling himself. In fact, it was starting to look as if his sentence might be reduced to just a little more time than he had already served. He sounded shocked by the possibility. "I try not to think ahead," he said, "because to do so would be catastrophic in a sense, at least for me."

Several men at Dykes's prison had been following his case in the news, but, he said, he tried not to discuss his situation with anyone. "There was one individual who came up to me one day—he actually wanted to shake my hand," he said. "I didn't know how to process that, because I know what I did, and I am very remorseful for that." He added, "I took the life of a little boy. . . . And for an individual to come

"This has been a historic mission, which for me personally has represented the culmination of a lifetime of preparation and research in a ceaseless quest to expand mankind's knowledge of the cosmos. But, to answer your question, yes, I sometimes pee in the suit."

• •

up to me and congratulate me because I happened to slip on a banana peel, as far as my trial—I can't be happy about that."

Jack Quatman is now seventy-eight and retired, and he and Phyllis still live in Montana. This summer, I visited them at their home, a modern single-story house with floor-to-ceiling windows. We sat at a long wooden table, from where we could see a neighbor's horses grazing nearby. A few months earlier, Phyllis said, she had received an e-mail from Scott Kauffman, the lawyer who had come to dinner in 2003. He had sent her an article about Price's press conference announcing the discovery of the notes in Dykes's case. Now, finally, there was evidence to confirm Quatman's allegations about the office's jury-selection practices. The news had stunned them, but neither evinced a sense of satisfaction. "Somebody said, 'Don't you want to take a victory lap?'" Quatman told me. "No, I don't want to take any laps."

It was apparent, though, that he still loved to talk about his days as a prosecutor. "I liked the pressure," he said. "I liked the fact that the bell went off and you had to perform." By his count, he had tried at least two hundred cases, including some twenty homicides and the three capital cases. I asked the Quatmans if they wanted to look at some of the juror notes from the Dykes case, and, for the next hour or so, they read them on my laptop. One card stated that a would-be juror was from Texas. ("You want to keep that guy—he's from the express-lane death-penalty state," Quatman said.) Another stated that an individual had previously served on a jury that had voted to acquit. ("Goodbye.") When Quatman saw the two cards that identified prospective jurors as Jews—including the one that read "Must Kick, too Risky"—he said, "I don't know what he was thinking. You don't put the reasons down on the card that you take to court. You just grade him."

Though it had been nearly twenty years since Quatman testified at Freeman's hearing, Phyllis spoke about that day as if it had just happened. "He was sick to his stomach. And he just said, 'I just don't think I should do this. How can I turn against my old office?'" she recalled. "He'd been there twenty-five years. That was like a family." After the hearing, "there was literally no one in the office who would talk to him," she said. "There was a lot of regret on Jack's part because of the backlash." She told me, "I will take the blame for it, because I'm the one that pushed him and said, 'You need to do this.'" But, she added, "I don't regret it."

Throughout the spring and summer, Judge Chhabria oversaw a series of settlement conferences, with prosecutors from the D.A.'s office and the attorney general's office and with lawyers for the defendants, to try to negotiate resolutions in twelve capital cases from Alameda County. The discovery of the notes in Dykes's case had given the defendants new leverage. Habeas attorneys who might previously have accepted a life-without-parole deal were now looking for something better. For the D.A.'s office, the stakes were clear: if a defendant was allowed to keep litigating his case, and there was strong evidence of constitutional violations at his trial, the conviction risked being overturned.

That's what happened in the case of Curtis Lee Ervin, who had been prosecuted by James Anderson in 1991. (Ervin was the man convicted of murder after an insurance agent had hired him and another man to kill his ex-wife. Both of his co-defendants are dead. At the trial, Anderson had removed nine of the eleven Black potential jurors.) The attorney general's office responds to habeas petitions filed in federal court, and for decades it had defended the work of Alameda's capital prosecutors. But this summer the A.G.'s office conducted a full "comparative juror analysis" in Ervin's case—examining the answers given by all the prospective jurors to determine whether race had been a factor in removing any of them. At the end of July, the A.G.'s

office submitted to Chhabria a Notice of Concession of Error stating that "Batson was violated in this case. Ervin is entitled to a new trial."

Chhabria vacated Ervin's conviction on August 1st, and a few days later District Attorney Price held a press conference in which she apologized to the victim's relatives, saying that "because of prosecutorial misconduct, because of the failure of the supervisors of Mr. Anderson and so many failures over the years," the family was having to endure the trauma of "having this whole situation once again brought up." Price had sixty days to decide whether to retry Ervin or to release him. He is now seventy-one, relies on a walker, and has been incarcerated for thirty-eight years. She chose to prosecute him again, and he remained incarcerated, awaiting a new trial. Last month, however, her office changed course and offered him a deal that, if he pleaded guilty or no contest to a lesser charge, would allow him to get out of prison next year. He accepted.

The settlement conferences, in federal court, were confidential—participants were not permitted to discuss what happened there—but the resentencing proceedings have taken place in the courtroom of Judge Thomas E. Stevens, of the Alameda County Superior Court, at the same courthouse where Anderson and Quatman tried their capital cases. The proceedings have been extremely emotional at times, with family members standing up in Stevens's courtroom to voice confusion, shock, distress, and anger that the person who killed their loved one might have his sentence changed. In the case of a man named Maurice Boyette, who shot and killed two people in 1992, at the age of nineteen, a relative of one of the victims told Stevens that it seemed as if the families, not the prosecutors, were being punished for prosecutors' misdeeds.

James Anderson is now eighty-one and lives in a nearby county, where he drives an Alfa Romeo with a license plate that reads "190PC"—a reference to the California penal code for first-degree murder. When I called him to ask about Ervin's case, he said, "How could I have done something wrong" when the jury sentenced two of the co-defendants—"a white guy and a Black guy"—to death but "spared another Black guy," giving him a life sentence, "because he really wasn't the one on the initial contract?" Anderson added, "Tell me that's not a fair jury." He insisted that he had just one consideration when picking jurors in a capital case: "Do you have the guts to do this—look the guy in the eye and say, 'I sentence you to death'?" He said, "It's got nothing to do with race, creed, or color."

In July, another man Anderson sent to death row, Keith Thomas—about whom Anderson had said, "An early execution is only too fitting"—was also resentenced, to twenty-three years to life. "I think they're going after me because I've got the most capital verdicts in the state," Anderson said. "I'm pretty proud of what I did, and I'm very upset with the way Miss Price is trying to undo hard work, which I think was fairly done." He added, "I think she's doing it just because of race." When I asked him what he meant, he said, "Because the people that she's trying to undo the cases—the defendants' races are Black." He went on, "I don't see her trying to undo cases of the white defendants I've convicted." ("All of the cases under review are not only Black defendants," Price said, in response. "Mr. Anderson is not well informed.")

In recent months, some of the defendants' attorneys worried that if Price were recalled her successor would be less committed to resentencing their clients. As the election drew closer, the pace of proceedings picked up, with four taking place in the last ten days of October. So far, of the thirty-four defendants from Alameda County who were in prison with death sentences this spring, fourteen have been resentenced.

Ernest Dykes learned his fate at his resentencing, which took place on August 13th. Kristie Clark Trias, the older sister of the boy Dykes killed, had planned to attend but changed her mind. In a letter to Judge Stevens, she wrote, "My absence from these proceedings does not mean that we no longer care about the outcome. It is a way for me to protect myself from the overwhelming pain."

Pomerantz and Tria were both present in Stevens's courtroom, as was Solway. Dykes followed the proceedings on Zoom from Stockton. In the courtroom, he appeared on a large screen, wearing a blue inmate's uniform and glasses. Recapping the history of Dykes's case, Solway said that her discovery of the notes had been "a bit of a random event" and that "what popped out was immediately recognizable evidence of constitutional violations at trial." She pointed to the fact that Dykes had been just twenty at the time of his crime and that he had suffered "childhood trauma." In her view, "what would have been fair" was a sentence of twenty-five to life. "And Mr. Dykes has now served over thirty years," she said. As a condition of his resentencing, a psychologist had met with him earlier to determine whether he was a threat to public safety. Solway said the psychologist found that "there is precious little reason to believe that the defendant will return to a life of crime."

When it was Pomerantz's turn to speak, he agreed that Solway's discovery "came through random circumstances," but, he said, "it was not a random event, in that their office did what previous administrations would not do"—dig into the allegations of Batson violations to determine their extent. He added, "The documents that came out in Mr. Dykes's case have been there the whole time. They have been sitting there the whole time, and no one else wanted to see what was there." Pomerantz made it clear that he thought there might be further ramifications for the prosecutors involved in this case and others, and he mentioned that the State Bar of California, which disciplines attorneys, had contacted him and Tria. (He had sent the State Bar documents from capital cases handled by seven Alameda County prosecutors.)

The proceeding lasted nearly an hour. At times, Pomerantz and Tria looked up at the screen on the side of the courtroom and saw that their client was getting emotional, taking his glasses off to wipe his eyes. Near the end, Judge Stevens said that he would grant the D.A.'s request for a new prison sentence—thirty-one years and nine months—as long as Dykes agreed to waive his right to appeal. "Does your client agree to that?" Stevens asked.

"Yes, Your Honor," Tria said.

On the screen, Dykes gave a thumbs-up. He will be released from prison in the spring. ♦

METAMORPHOSIS

The director Marielle Heller explores the feral side of child rearing.

BY EMILY NUSSBAUM

Marielle Heller sat in a post-production facility in lower Manhattan, looking shaken. It was June, 2023, and for months she'd been finalizing edits on "Nightbitch," a movie with a Kafka-adjacent premise: a former artist, struggling to adjust to life as a stay-at-home mother, discovers that she's turning into a dog. That day in New York, things felt nearly as surreal. Forest fires in Canada had sent smoke drifting over the Northeast, flooding the air with toxic particles that tinted the sky the lurid orange of a traffic cone.

Heller had already been feeling off kilter, having just had to put her beloved cat, Cleo, to sleep. She'd also recently had a series of unsettling encounters with animals, including one afternoon when a squirrel invaded the Brooklyn home that she shared with her husband, the director Jorma Taccone, and their two children. (She'd cornered the frantic rodent in a bathroom, then released it into Prospect Park.) And all month she'd been having bad dreams, reflecting the anxiety of releasing a new film. In one of them, she'd shown off a picture of a wolf cub to her friends, insisting that it was a beautiful baby. "I could hear them talking behind our back, saying, like, 'Did they think we would think that was a baby? We know that's a wolf!' And I was, like"—she did a goofy imitation of herself, her voice querulous—" 'Jorma, no one thinks our joke is funny.' "

Mostly, however, Heller was brooding about hostile comments from audience members at early screenings of "Nightbitch," which the film's distributor, Searchlight Pictures, had held at a mall in Southern California. The film, which Heller had written and directed, was an adaptation of a strange, lyrical novel by Rachel Yoder that had become a buzzy hit during the pandemic. In the film, Amy Adams plays the artist character, known only as Mother, who has quit her job at a gallery to care for her toddler son. Sleep-starved, agitated by the tedium of domesticity, and bored by the basic moms around her, Mother spins out, experiencing a wild transformation: her senses sharpen, she sprouts a tail and six new nipples, and she begins craving raw meat. In Yoder's book, which takes place inside Mother's head, it's never clear if what's happening is real, and the story is punctuated by graphic brutality, including a scene in which Mother, driven mad by having to take care of yet another creature—the family cat—tears it apart with her teeth. Heller, who doesn't like horror movies, had muted the violence. Even so, "Nightbitch" was an ambitiously odd film, a cathartic, darkly funny fable about how motherhood changes women, by forcing them to tap into a feral physicality, an experience that is overwhelming but ultimately liberating. The story was fuelled by anger—in particular, the rage that Mother feels toward the character known as Husband, who is always gone on business trips, snores through wake-ups, and breezily describes his own role as "babysitting."

The early cut had inspired prickly reactions from male viewers. "One guy said, 'Why would a man want to see this movie? There's no men in it, and the only one has hardly any lines,' " Heller told me, her liquid brown eyes widening. Another man told a focus group that motherhood was, by definition, a boring topic for art. Heller and I huddled together, whispering, as crew members adjusted the sound mix for a party scene in which Mother is toasted by fellow-artists, who clink champagne glasses in her honor.

Heller, who has no poker face, couldn't hide her frustration from her producers on the day of the screenings. The whole focus-group process, which often involves handing out free tickets at malls, struck her as biased against films like "Nightbitch": few parents were able to attend a Monday-night screening on a whim. To keep her spirits up, Heller kept reminding herself that she'd received tough feedback in the past. Early mentors had been put off by the provocative themes of her début film, "The Diary of a Teenage Girl" (2015), in which a fifteen-year-old sleeps with her mother's boyfriend, then vents her story in confessional audiotapes and becomes a punk cartoonist. Focus groups were iffy about the likability of Lee Israel, the bitingly funny, misanthropic literary forger at the center of Heller's second film, "Can You Ever Forgive Me?" (2018). Yet in just five years Heller had pulled off a remarkable accomplishment: she had directed three smart, idiosyncratic, and critically praised films, each one a richly detailed portrait of an artist insisting on his or her voice, even when the world threatened to snuff it out. In her most recent movie, "A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood" (2019), a cynical journalist, played by Matthew Rhys, sets out to write a hit piece on the children's-television star Fred Rogers, only to be won over by his subject's empathetic world view.

Working on "Beautiful Day," which starred Tom Hanks as Rogers, had shifted the way Heller herself viewed the world. She had positioned that film, which celebrated Rogers's philosophy of radical kindness, as an antidote to the cruelty of the Trump era—and since then she had been trying to hew to Rogers's model, to focus on doing meaningful work, not worrying about haters. While making her first three movies, she'd used a different method to cope with focus groups: a flask of whiskey. Unfortunately, since she was recovering from a norovirus infection, she'd had to face the "Nightbitch" screenings sober.

Heller's brother, Nate, who has scored all her films, had joined her at the screenings. "He said it felt like we were in Vegas and there was a 'cooler' in the audience, like, someone who ruins luck . . . who ruins a streak. It felt like someone had just poured cold water on us. Like there

Heller and her kids. Her latest film, "Nightbitch," is about a marriage in trouble, upended when a modern couple slips into retro roles.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ASHLEY MARKLE

was some pervasive, misogynist, male . . .” In response, she was steeling herself for the film’s release. “Maybe I’m getting myself hyped up for something that won’t happen—but I started thinking, People might really *hate* this movie. For reasons that make my heart hurt.” She’d been playing with a new marketing line, one meant to capture the movie’s eccentricity and unusual blend of genres: “Nightbitch” was a comedy for women, but a horror movie for men.

Eight months earlier, in October, 2022, the skies had been clearer. In a leafy neighborhood in Glendale, California, Heller, a forty-five-year-old with dark eyes and a wide, amused mouth, prepared to film outside a house on a street that she had selected precisely because it felt generic: an anytown for an anymom. In the scene, Husband—played by Scoot McNairy—was concerned about his wife’s state of mind. Amy Adams stood nearby, looking realistically haggard, wearing a wrinkled button-up; at her feet, Arleigh Snowden, one of the three-year-old twins cast as Son, made vrooming noises with a toy truck. Cheerfully, he said, “I broke it, Movie Mama!”—the name he used on set for Adams.

In the scene, Husband, who is about to leave on yet another business trip, offers some advice. “I read an article once that said that structure was the key to mental health,” McNairy told Adams, earnestly, and then he added a self-help koan: “Happiness is a choice.” Adams slapped his face, hard (a stage slap—they’d add audio later). Then McNairy gave the same speech again, without a slap from Adams, a tipoff that the violence was inside her head. The film was full of similar fantasy sequences—a funny rant by Mother in a supermarket, a wolfish leap into the air—that dramatized the split between her spiky internal landscape and her flat affect.

Heller, an actress herself, laid out the pacing; then, after a few rounds, she gave McNairy a note. Husband is absolutely confident that he’s being helpful, she told the actor. She compared it to a bit by the standup comic Maria Bamford, in which a date offers Bamford some self-assured, useless advice on her career: “Just make a funny joke. Then make a funnier joke!”

When they shot the scene again, McNairy’s delivery was more layered: his voice was sincere, but his gaze was sweetly robotic. Heller watched intently, caught up in the emotion of the conflict. After Adams slapped McNairy, Heller’s eyes misted with tears.

The crew needed extra time to prepare for the next scene, which took place inside the house, in the kitchen. Heller retreated to the back porch, where she sat in her director’s chair, nursing her two-year-old daughter, Zadie, who was visiting with her nanny. (Her seven-year-old son, Wylie, was at school.) Zadie looked blissful, winding her silky blond hair into the plastic spiral of Heller’s earphone cord. Heller’s own hair was chopped short, a look that she’d adopted after growing it out for a role in the TV show “The Queen’s Gambit.” She wore pink sneakers and hip accessories—on another day, her socks read “MOTHER” and “FUCKER.” On the table sat a large purple water bottle printed with a photograph of Taccone and the children, alongside the words “Family Forever.”

Heller loved being on set, afloat in inventive spontaneity. A month earlier, she’d been in “prep,” the gruelling weeks of location scouting, costume selection, budgeting, and other decisions that could tank a movie before it was even made. She dreaded prep, which, she said, had “all the stress, none of the release” of shooting a movie; on her first film, she’d recorded an angsty voice memo during the process, which she’d saved to remind herself that she’d got through it before. Now she was happy to be immersed in the more playful, physical part of her job, shaping performances. She and the actors had already spent a week bonding, analyzing the characters, and sharing intimate stories about their lives; she and Adams had built warm, trusting relationships with the twins. Heller was particularly pleased that she’d nailed some difficult scenes in a nearby park, including one in which Mother loses Son after he chases some dogs; when the twin playing Son had trouble sitting still, she fixed the problem by telling him to count down for a game of hide-and-seek.

Even so, the long hours were an adjustment. Like Mother, Heller had spent her daughter’s infancy at home; now she left every morning before Zadie woke up. The toddler had been regressing a bit to babyish habits, Heller told me—and, to make the situation more bizarre, Zadie sometimes arrived on set to find the twins sitting on her mom’s lap. “I felt like I was cheating,” Heller told me, with a smile. The conversation was a typical one for Heller, who spoke about her children warmly, often, in detail, and on purpose. She didn’t want to make being a working mother look easy, she said; she viewed this transparency as a way of advocating for other female directors. In recent years, she’d become a proponent for “French hours” on American sets—a more humane schedule that skipped a long lunch break, allowing parents to get home before bedtime.

Zadie was still an infant when, in 2021, Amy Adams and executives at the production company Annapurna sent Heller a copy of the “Nightbitch” novel, wondering if she saw a movie in it. Heller and her family were then living in an isolated farmhouse in rural Connecticut, where they had retreated, a year earlier, when Heller was three months pregnant with Zadie. Initially, they formed a pandemic pod with friends, splitting the child care, but by the time she began writing the “Nightbitch” screenplay she was single-parenting two children for the first time, with Jorma away for weeks at a stretch, producing a television spinoff of his comedy film “MacGruber.” She wrote her script in a fugue state while Zadie napped, tapping out pages in two-hour chunks and propping Wylie, who was six, in front of the television—feeling guilty about it, then folding the guilt into her work. Old memories swam up from the past, like the time Heller got food poisoning and vomited for hours, then wound up flat on her back in the bathroom, utterly drained—only to have her son toddle in and happily begin nursing. She hoped that other people would also find those kinds of stories funny: the slapstick of tending a newborn, or guarding an active toddler and feeling at once exhausted and hyper-alert, “as if you were on suicide watch.” There were so many bewildering, deeply physical experiences that parents forgot about, or maybe repressed, just a few years later.

Heller made some changes to Yod-

er's novel right away. The protagonist's mother, a Mennonite woman, would now be dead, showing up only in posthumous flashbacks. The cat still died, but in a far less grisly way: "There's no coming back from that," Heller said—she knew she'd lose the audience. Smaller moments shifted, too. In the novel, Mother played "doggies" with her son as a way of encouraging him to sleep on his own, and gave him a wire crate to sleep in; in Heller's script, the kid slept in a dog bed—in the Trump era, Heller told me, the wire crate felt too much like "kids in cages." To Heller, "Nightbitch" was about a woman questioning whether motherhood was worth it, and for her it had been. As a result, there was a warmer, more communal tone to her adaptation. Yoder's novel landed on satire, with neighborhood women hawking healing herbs in a multilevel-marketing scheme; in Heller's version, Mother warms up to the uncool moms that she initially rolls her eyes at during a Book Babies event at the library, recognizing them as her "pack."

Heller's biggest change was to focus the story on what interested her the most: a marriage in trouble, upended when a modern couple slips into retro roles. One day, she wrote a showdown in which Husband accuses Mother of having changed: she is no longer the freewheeling, curious woman he married—the one who challenged him, who was politically informed and adventurous, who didn't get mad about little things. "What happened to my wife?" he asks, in frustration. Mother shoots back, "She died in childbirth."

The exchange felt shocking and right—a bit taboo. Heller passed it on to a mom friend, who urged her to keep going. When Taccone came home and read excerpts, he sometimes felt hurt. "He'd be, like, 'Wow, O.K.—this is a little closer to home than I thought we were going,'" Heller told me.

The "Nightbitch" crew finished setting up the next scene, arranging pots of finger paint and taping butcher paper to the floor. In this sequence, Mother has decided to follow her husband's advice by planning an Art Day. But the idea falls apart. Her son goes wild, smearing paint all over the floor and the walls—and then the cat sprints through the paint. When Mother chases it, she slips, ending up on her back, the way Heller had when she got food poisoning. While the cameras rolled, Adams would first encourage Arleigh Snowden to finger-paint; then he'd make a "big mess"; finally, he'd squirt paint on the kitchen island and run out of the room. A three-year-old was too young to learn lines or take conventional direction, so Heller was planning to use gentle, guided make-believe that would keep the scene feeling fun, like a game.

When the boy arrived, the crew chanted his name: "Arleigh! Arleigh!" He smiled shyly and scooted onto the kitchen floor, to sit near Movie Mama. Heller crouched nearby, beaming. "We're going to make a big, big mess," she told him excitedly. Then she explained the game: Adams would tell him to paint on the butcher paper, but he shouldn't listen; instead, he should get the paint everywhere. "Movie Mama's gonna say, 'Oh, no!,' but it's just a joke."

Once filming began, it became clear that it wasn't going to be simple to get the sweet, giggly Arleigh to make a big mess: the boy had been cast, in part, because he was so easygoing. From the sidelines, Heller shouted instructions—"Big mess! Big mess! Take the yellow bottle and squirt it!"—as Adams yelled for him to stop. Arleigh, a bit warily, squirted the bottle. It was easier when Adams urged him to paint on the paper: at one point, after he made a cute picture of a house, she asked him, "Do you live in this house with me?" Arleigh replied, adorably and sincerely, "No, I work here."

The crew cracked up, but it was important to stay on schedule. Ultimately, Heller got the footage that she needed: Arleigh gingerly stuck his bare heels in the paint, then on the paper; he dabbed some on Adams's nose; he hugged Adams, messing up her shirt.

Once Arleigh left the set, the crew filmed the final sequence, including the fall, which was done by a stuntwoman. Afterward, Adams knelt on the floor of the kitchen, swirling a dirty rag in circles, muttering miserably, "Happiness is a choice" and "What's up with that duck?," the nonsense lyric of a sing-along at Book Babies. Heller told Adams to imagine these strange words bubbling up inside her, as if she didn't even realize that she was saying them out loud. Adams sobbed, "What's up with that duck?," then laughed, then sobbed again—and then, out of nowhere, she slammed her hand against the kitchen island, smearing it with green paint, making an even bigger mess. Everyone in the room jumped.

Heller was a classic theatre kid, an extrovert whose talents first blossomed in the warm terrarium of Alameda, California, the Oakland suburb where she grew up. In her family's comfortably messy Queen Anne Victorian, every day was Art Day: her mother, Annie, a sweet art teacher with Mayflower roots, turned their yard into a fairy garden, making a footpath by laying ceramic tiles with insect designs; her father, Steven, a sardonic Jewish chiropractor from Brooklyn, was a woodworker. Heller's brother, Nate, made music; her sister, Emily, became a comedy writer. But it was Heller, the oldest child, who was the family striver, a go-getter with an entrepreneurial streak. She formed a joke band called the Cactus

"What do you mean you're going to recap the last session in case I missed it?"

Cows, handcrafting their merch; once, she rigged up her bedroom with a "Pee-wee's Playhouse"-style system of pulleys. At eight, she got cast in the Alameda Children's Musical Theatre, a professional troupe that staged children's classics such as "Winnie-the-Pooh." At nine, she got a role in a TV special about alcoholism. "I thought, This will completely turn her off," her father told me, of watching his daughter repeat her lines again and again. "And she comes running over and goes, 'Dad, I like it. I feel like I'm floating on air!' She loved the attention, being in front of the camera."

By the time Heller was in high school, Alameda, despite its charms, had begun to feel stifling to her. She was thrilled to be accepted by the tiny, rigorous theatre program at U.C.L.A., which taught Molière and the Meisner technique, rather than musicals. It was a high-pressure environment—you had to audition even to get into classes—but Heller thrived on the competition, winning Shakespearean leads and honing her craft. In her junior year, she fell in love with Taccone, another actor in the program.

During Heller and Taccone's early years, their creative lives happily ran on parallel tracks. Both were the children of artsy, indulgent families with ties to the Bay Area: Taccone's father was the artistic director of the Eureka Theatre, the celebrated venue that commissioned "Angels in America." Together, they strategized about ways to break into an intimidating industry, with Heller booking jobs in regional theatres but mostly waiting tables at L.A.'s vegan mainstay Real Food Daily, slinging seitan to Alicia Silverstone and Moby. When Heller and Taccone bought a condo in Koreatown, they secured a dodgy loan despite the fact that the bulk of Taccone's income that year came from unemployment and from two insurance payouts for car accidents.

Then, in a flash, Taccone's career took off. In 2001, he formed the comedy troupe the Lonely Island with his junior-high-school buddies Andy Samberg and Akiva Schaffer, posting rap parodies and comedy shorts on the Internet years before YouTube existed. In 2005, Taccone was hired to write for "Saturday Night Live." The couple jumped coasts, renting a place on the Upper West Side. It was a huge opportunity—and a shock to their relationship. Taccone, who had vomited twice before his first meeting with "S.N.L."'s Lorne Michaels, was working non-stop, terrified that he'd get fired. He was also suddenly a success in the comedy world, scoring viral hits with videos such as "Lazy Sunday" and "Dick in a Box," and partying with celebrities including Natalie Portman.

Heller, meanwhile, was auditioning to play dead rape victims on TV police procedurals. After her triumphs at U.C.L.A., going on auditions felt like walking into a fog of misogyny—in TV and film, especially, Heller, with her half-Jewish background and wavy hair, was deemed "too ethnic," insufficiently hot. One day, in the craft-services area on the "Nightbitch" set, we spoke about the grind of waitressing, and she riffed off another Maria Bamford routine by doing a quicksilver impression of the world's worst customer demanding a bowl of boiling water with ice. "Boiling, *boiling*," Heller cooed. "But I don't want the ice to get all tiiiiny."

In 2006, not long before her and Taccone's wedding, Heller flipped open a graphic novel that her sister, Emily, had given her for Christmas: Phoebe Gloeckner's "Diary of a Teenage Girl." The book, inspired by Gloeckner's adolescence in the hedonistic wilderness of San Francisco in the nineteen-seventies, is narrated in the irresistible voice of Minnie, a fifteen-year-old who loses her virginity to her mother's sad-sack boyfriend,

Monroe. The story hit Heller like a fever: here, at last, was a nonjudgmental portrait of the artist as a teen girl, radical in its embrace of turbulent experience. Minnie was also exactly the kind of complex female role that Heller, who'd had her own wild years, was dying to play—and, in Hollywood, stories about teen-agers making messy mistakes, sexually and otherwise, were reserved mostly for boys.

For eight years, Heller fought to adapt "Diary," initially staging it for the theatre, playing Minnie Off Off Broadway. After she aged out of the role, she wrote and directed an independent movie based on the material, casting Bel Powley as Minnie. With no background in the film industry, Heller worked new muscles, hustling for financing and pushing back on every no. When Gloeckner turned down Heller's request for the rights to the book, she wrote long, pleading letters, then flew to the cartoonist's home, in Michigan, and befriended her, eventually securing a yes. She persuaded Kristen Wiig, whom she knew through "Saturday Night Live," to play Minnie's mother in the movie. After failing to get her script into the hands of Alexander Skarsgård, whom she wanted to play Monroe, she reached him by texting the comedian Jack McBrayer, who'd described himself as a friend of Skarsgård's in a magazine article that she'd read. She wrote and rewrote the material, ultimately completing ninety-nine drafts.

In 2012, Heller got a major break, scoring a slot in the Sundance Screenwriters Lab, with classmates who included Ryan Coogler and Chloé Zhao. Heller was then picked for the Directors Lab, which let her shoot a few scenes from her "Diary" script. She learned to incorporate (and ignore) notes; she found mentors, including Scott Frank, the screenwriter of "Get Shorty" and "Out of Sight," who became a close friend. Ultimately, she raised a tiny budget—a million dollars—to film "Diary," cutting expenses to the bone. Her sister-in-law designed the costumes. In 2015, Heller's bet paid off, with "Diary" selling to Sony Pictures Classics in a triumphant late-night auction at Sundance. The movie won Best First Feature at the Independent Spirit Awards, launching her new career.

For nearly a decade, though, Heller's vision for "Diary" had often felt as fragile as a dream—one that would surely dissolve, like the TV pilots that Heller had sold with a writing partner or the acting roles that she auditioned for. "Jorma was having this totally different experience of the world," she said. "And he would, without meaning to, disparage things that I was doing. As not real. Or as not valid." The couple long ago worked through these issues in therapy; Taccone has become Heller's biggest supporter. But she hasn't

forgotten those years of feeling overlooked—talked down to by strangers at dinner parties, or pitied as a failed actress. Many women in her position would have accepted the one role on offer, that of "comedy widow"—the nickname that another "Saturday Night Live" writer's wife used for herself—or had children, then used them as an excuse to give up. But Heller was too hungry. "That's the truth of it!" she told me. "We both were ambitious. So there was a period where my career hadn't caught up to my ambition, you know? And I was *aching*. There was something in me that wanted to come out."

A decade later, Heller poured those old resentments into her draft of "Nightbitch," which, at its heart, is the story of an artist who is terrified that she'll never make art again. "Diary" and "Nightbitch" sometimes struck the director as bookends, each one a story about a woman whose cravings make her feel like a monster. But whereas Minnie, her body flooded by adolescent hormones, feels grotesquely visible, Mother feels grotesquely invisible—her needs subsumed by those of her child. Heller had timed her own first pregnancy carefully: "Diary" wound up premièring just five weeks after she gave birth to Wylie; she was pumping breast milk while a makeup artist brushed glitter on her eyelids in the Sundance greenroom just before her big début.

Heller said, "My husband got really upset if I made jokes about, like, 'These are my two babies, coming into the world at the same time!' He was, like, 'O.K., one's the human—let's keep this separate.' But, you know, for me, they were really tied." Her "best and bravest" work had emerged just as she became a mother. "Somehow, the really satisfying stuff has flooded right up against the babies."

"It's such a nice day, I thought we could do this interrogation outside."

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Heller and Taccone had always known what having kids could do to a marriage. A video that they'd sent out as a wedding invitation played off that cliché: a "meet-cute" rom-com parody was followed by a sly kicker, a title card that read "Six months later," and then by a shot of Heller pregnant and chain-smoking as Taccone watched Nascar on the sofa with his hands down his pants. After Wylie was born, the couple agreed to alternate projects, so that one parent could always be at home. During the "Nightbitch" shoot, they moved into the rental house of a famous friend, in the upscale Toluca Lake neighborhood of Los Angeles. When I stopped by for a weekend visit, before Halloween, 2022, their front gate was festooned with construction-paper bats and pumpkins.

The family was gathered in the kitchen, making more decorations. As Zadie struggled to use baby scissors, Heller guided her hand. Easing her daughter around curves, she said, "It's really sharp! Your hand goes there and your thumb goes there. . . . Now open. Yeah! Like that."

"Nice job," Taccone said. Zadie let out happy peeps.

Taccone, an impish figure in a soft gray T-shirt, glued googly eyes onto a paper bat. As we snacked on toffee candies, he described the moment he met Heller, in 1999, on the first day of her junior year. Taccone, who was two years older, had just returned from studying in London; he was dating someone else. But the moment he caught sight of Heller, on a bench with other U.C.L.A. theatre students, with her thick blond hair streaming halfway down her back and an air of sparkling intensity, he was a goner.

Heller, laughing, said that her hair had had a Mormon vibe. "I looked like a polygamist," she said.

"Well, you also had super-short shorts," Taccone said. "It was a cute look. I found it very captivating."

A few days later, Taccone was walking around the parking lot of a Vons supermarket, preparing for the audition that would get him into that semester's classes. He was sobbing openly while reading the climactic monologue from "Our Town"—"Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?"—when he suddenly heard a car horn. It was Heller. She was planning to perform the same monologue, and earlier that day she had gone to the U.C.L.A. library, only to find that the play had just been checked out—apparently, she was now realizing, by him. It felt like Kismet. The two got serious quickly. A year later, they flew to Hawaii to visit his godmother. "We almost broke up there," Heller added, across the table. "Yeah, I don't remember that!" Taccone said, deadpan. "I remember it very fondly."

Cleo, the cat, curled around our legs under the table. They'd adopted her their first year in New York, after they spotted her as a kitten, shivering in a snowdrift, as they stumbled home from

an "S.N.L." after-party. That whole period, Taccone said, felt like a blur, "just *me* focus the entire time." He added, "And now we go to the Oscars!" In the years since "S.N.L.," he had helped make several Lonely Island-ish comedies—among them the hilarious "Popstar: Never Stop Never Stopping," which he co-wrote, co-directed, and starred in. He'd played the asshole artist Booth Jonathan on HBO's "Girls" and, more recently, Pee-wee Herman in a "Weird Al" Yankovic bio-pic. He'd also written a children's book called "Little Fox and the Wild Imagination," doing the audiobook with Wylie. He thought of the couple's professional lives as fundamentally different projects: he made movies; Heller directed films.

"It's hard to talk while the kids are around," Heller said, with a glance at Wylie, who was spinning in a leather chair, shooting me skeptical glances, his long, tangled hair covering his face. Their son wasn't feeling all that enthusiastic about his parents' demanding jobs lately, Heller told me—it had been a big transition to go from the Montessorian peace of Connecticut, a place where cows wandered up to the living-room window, to Brooklyn and L.A. A few nights earlier, Wylie had asked her, "Why would you possibly make a movie when your child is *seven*? That's the worst age to make a movie. All the other movies you've made, I was fine!"

At the kitchen table, Taccone asked Wylie if he wanted to weigh in with his own opinions—and then, seeing his son's expression, added, "No, you don't want to. O.K., fine. That's *also* your right." In response, Wylie let out a long wolf's howl.

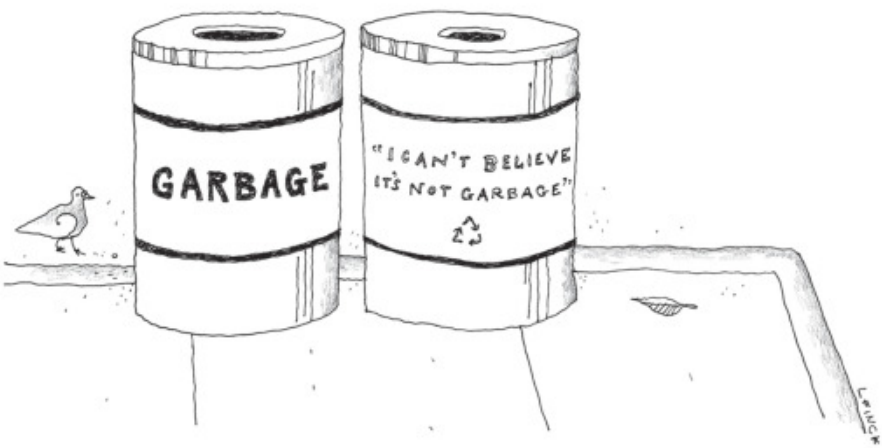
Two years later, I spoke to Taccone while he was on the set of an action-horror movie in Finland, and he was able to speak more directly. When I asked about his early years with Heller in New York, he got choked up, describing his own fatigue and anxiety, and how quickly he'd fallen under the spell of a glamorous job. "It's the greatest failing I had in our relationship, that I didn't really believe in her," he said, bluntly.

The couple had been together for their entire adult lives; their marriage had changed, and been challenged, a few times—when they became parents, and when Heller had a cancer scare, getting half her thyroid removed, after making "Can You Ever Forgive Me?" They'd stood by each other. Still, he winced when he remembered the flash of surprise he'd felt when she got accepted at the Sundance Screenwriters Lab, a mark of prestige that helped him see her the way others saw her.

During our phone conversation, Taccone praised "Nightbitch" as a brave work of art, specifically because it explored something that was ordinary but hard to talk about—a good marriage that had real problems. There was a moment that he'd specifically asked Heller to put in the film: after Husband apologizes to Mother, he also tells her that he's proud of her. Taccone groaned as we spoke about the scene, because he knew how some people might view it. He said, "Like, it smacks of paternalism or condescension—but it's *not*, in our relationship! I'm really fucking proud! I'm, like, astonishingly, overwhelmingly proud of what she's accomplished and who she is. She's a really special artist who's doing something challenging."

It was particularly brave, he added, to show that kind of apology "now, in this day and age," when earnest emotion, especially from men, was so easy to dismiss as "cringe": "It's so easy to shit on everything, to get defensive, but anybody who's in a real relationship knows the pain that it causes, the ups and downs . . . and, like, *looking* at your partner, trying to see that hurt, trying to recognize it—"

He laughed, pulling himself back together: "Thank you for the free therapy session."



After "Diary," Heller got offers mostly for teen films. She didn't want to be pigeonholed; she also didn't want to waste time. She'd been warned that it took women eight years on average to direct a second movie. And whereas men were handed the keys to a blockbuster after a single indie breakthrough, this rarely happened for women. The ground was even shakier for mothers, who often disappeared. Shortly after "Diary" was released, a woman executive, unaware that Heller had had a baby, had told her, "I always want to work with female directors, but they all have kids." That executive was now a mother herself. "I keep my mouth shut," Heller said. "But I'm always tempted to be, like, 'Do you remember that meeting?'"

Determined not to get sidelined, Heller forged ahead: she filmed an episode of "Transparent," which secured her membership in the Directors Guild. Then, in quick succession, she directed "Can You Ever Forgive Me?" and "Beautiful Day"—each a bio-pic, each already in process when she signed up, the rollout for one movie overlapping with preproduction on the next. She even managed to slip in an acting gig: in the two months between the festival première and the theatrical release of "Beautiful Day," she flew to Berlin to play a chess prodigy's adoptive mother in "The Queen's Gambit," a Netflix show written and directed by her Sundance mentor Scott Frank. It was a surprise blockbuster. In her first acting role in a decade, she played a very Hellerian character: a smart, intense woman thrumming with untapped potential. In 2020, she founded Defiant by Nature, a production company whose first release was a filmed version of the Heidi Schreck play "What the Constitution Means to Me," directed by Heller, which streamed on Amazon.

Early in her directorial career, Heller, with her girlish look, had been sensitive about not being viewed as an authority figure. She hid her pregnancy during postproduction on "Diary." (In retrospect, she told me, this was an overreaction. When her crew and producers—many of them parents—learned that she was having a baby, they were supportive.) She rarely mentioned her history as an actress. And although Heller's friends call her Mari—it rhymes with "sorry"—she used Marielle as her professional name, because it sounded grander. Over time, such strategies felt less necessary. She'd established herself, among critics, as someone with a distinct sensibility. She was an empathetic portraitist but not a sentimentalist; she was a socially aware artist but not a polemicist. Heller specialized in alienated outsiders who were easily misunderstood. In the hands of a less humane director, the ornery Lee Israel or the needy, mercurial Minnie might have come across merely as rude or perverted.

Along the way, Heller's unusual path to becoming a director began to feel like an advantage. "I didn't go to film school—I can't talk about Cassavetes and go into, like, some deep film dive," she said. "And then I started to realize that a lot of directors are *scared* of actors." She didn't know much about camera lenses, but she felt at ease with performers, who didn't live in their heads. She also wasn't intimidated by big stars—she persuaded Tom Hanks to do "Beautiful Day," a project that he'd already turned down, after she chatted him up at a birthday barbecue for his grandchild.

Three months after the "Nightbitch" shoot finished, Heller was back in New York, in an editing bay in lower Manhattan. Pinned to the wall were index cards, grouped in three acts. Anne McCabe, who had edited Heller's previous two films, told me, "Heller does a lot of reordering. Every job." The two women had an easy rapport, speaking in shorthand as they tweaked a Book Babies scene with wailing toddlers. Heller held up her iPhone: she had some fresh sobs to add to the audio mix, taken from a video of a friend's child.

"That sounds more like a toddler," McCabe said, approvingly.

"Less like an infant," Heller agreed.

In about six weeks, Heller needed to present Annapurna with her preliminary cut. She'd been thinking about how to grab viewers, to help them empathize with Mother—you had just five minutes to win over an audience, she told me. When she was editing "Can You Ever Forgive Me?," she and McCabe had pinpointed a scene to help viewers feel sympathy for Lee Israel's isolation: a shot of her in her apartment, reciting dialogue from "The Little Foxes" as it airs on TV, then sweetly offering shrimp to her cat. For "Nightbitch," Heller had decided to open the film with a darkly comic loop of sizzling hash browns and bedtime reading—a rapid-cut, percussive montage that would drop viewers straight into the monotony of Mother's life before they had even heard her voice.

Heller scrolled through the latest edit of the film, which now included dream-like moments of Mother transmogrifying into a dog—an elegant red husky that Heller had cast for its resemblance to Adams. There were charming scenes of Adams with one or the other of the Snowden twins, the mother-son chemistry as palpable as the flirting in a rom-com. There was a dynamic interaction in a supermarket, in which Mother delivered a wild fantasy oration in response to a former colleague meeting her baby and asking, "Do you just love getting to be home with him all the time?" The body horror was muted, with key exceptions, particularly a scene in which Mother, alone in her bathroom, poked curiously at an abscess on her tailbone, releasing a flood of pus—and revealing a stringy dog tail. Even then, the kicker wasn't the gross-out: Adams's funny response—a muted "Huh!"—was not so different from that of a menopausal woman spotting a whisker on her chin.

The pacing still worried Heller, and she wavered over whether she'd landed on the right structure. "I like it now—a few days ago, I hated it," she said, with a tired smile, pulling her sweater down over her hands. "My friends have been reminding me that I always feel this way."

Among the people she'd screened scenes for was Ryan Coogler. During the 2012 Sundance Screenwriters Lab, they had bonded over their Bay Area childhoods, and they'd kept in touch as their careers had progressed and they had become parents. Coogler told me that she'd impressed him straightaway as "fucking smart," with an artistry that was anchored by optimism. Not long after they met, Heller visited the set of Coogler's début film, "Fruitvale Station" (2013), on a day when he'd fallen behind schedule and felt as though everything was coming apart. "I remember her face, man, because I was down in the dumps," Coogler said. "She was just smiling. She had the biggest grin, like, 'This is just exhilarating—you're doing it.'"

Jessie Nelson, the director of "I Am Sam" (2001) and a co-writer on "Stepmom" (1998), was, like Scott Frank, one of Heller's Sundance mentors. She remembered Heller scribbling intensely in her notebook, eager to sharpen "Diary." "Some of our fellows are more visualists—everybody has different fastballs," she told me. "But Mari kind of had both." Nelson, a former theatre actress, began her Hollywood career in the nineties, when just nine per cent of the two hundred and fifty most popular films had female directors; at some Directors Guild meetings, she and Nora Ephron were the only women in the room. The corridors of the big studios were full of trapdoors. Nelson recalled, "The head of Sony once said to me, 'You rule with a feather,' and at the time I thought, I guess that's a compliment—but, no, it was really telling me, 'You'd better never be a bitch.'"

As the decades passed, Nelson watched many of her peers pull back after they had kids. She felt lucky that she was also a writer, able to work from home while her children were small. "There's a saying that working mothers feel guilt and nonworking mothers feel remorse," she told me. Ephron had summed up the conflict with a trenchant zinger: Your children would rather have you vomiting in the next room than filming on a set. But mothers who dropped their art also struggled, Nelson said: "They lost themselves, they went into depressions." She admired Heller for not downplaying these frictions, which more rarely affected men—it was no good to have women join their

"My apartment may be small, but my cheese selection is massive!"

• •

industry naïvely, only to be shocked by how hard it was. In a business that glamorized the idea of the icy auteur, implicitly male, who imposed his will on the world no matter what it cost the people around him, she saw Heller as a kindred spirit: "It's all about learning to have your sensitivity be your superpower."

There was another set of women who knew Heller intimately, a circle of friends who, for decades, had met once a month for drinks—Heller's own pack. These days, they all had young kids, and a few were stay-at-home moms. They described Heller to me as a generous friend, but also a leader—"an elder-sister archetype," as her friend Julie put it, who was driven by a sense of justice. Julie, a childhood friend who played in the Cactus Cows, remembered Heller once opening a fortune cookie that read, "You're meant to help others," adding, "She laughed and said, 'Like I don't already feel like I'm responsible for all womankind!'"

That was the complexity of "Nightbitch": it was a parable about motherhood, meant to reflect many women's lives, but the people who knew Heller best could see the self-portrait tucked inside. As Heller edited one scene, she told me, "My hair used to look exactly like Amy's." She added that Adams would sometimes joke, on set, "I'm just playing you." The script was full of Easter eggs about Heller's life. "Goodnight, Goodnight, Construction Site," which Mother reads to Son, was the book that Heller read to Wylie when he was a sleepless toddler. "Weird Al" Yankovic's wackadoodle song "Dare to Be Stupid," which plays over the film's mother-son doggie games, is a Heller-family deep cut: it was on the soundtrack of the 1986 animated film "The Transformers," Wylie's favorite movie, and in the depths of the pandemic he and Heller had ridden around Connecticut screaming along to the lyrics. She had threaded her early marital struggles into the film, as well as a happy ending, the kind that is possible only when both partners decide they want more.

Before Heller had children, when she was struggling to get "Diary" made, she had a nightmare that she was pregnant with a two-and-a-half-year-old but couldn't give birth. "It was not a subtle dream—in fact, it made me think my subconscious was sort of lazy," she said, dryly.

A decade later, "Nightbitch," too, got delayed: its release was bumped back a year by the Screen Actors Guild strike, which would have made it impossible for Adams to appear on the festival circuit. When Heller wrote the screenplay, she wondered whether, after the pandemic, American viewers might feel more sympathy for a new mother's isolation, her feelings of instability and exhaustion—we were all wearing soft pants in 2021. Instead, "Nightbitch" was débuting in the hard-pants, post-Dobbs era, in an election year. J. D. Vance, the Republican Vice-Presidential candidate, sneered at "childless cat ladies" and venerated stay-at-home moms. Online, there was a vogue for "trad wives," influencers like Ballerina Farm, who'd exchanged her toe shoes for an egg apron. A variety of "hetero-pessimist" books—most recently, Miranda July's mischievous novel "All Fours"—portrayed marriage and motherhood as a trap for female artists. Two nights before "Nightbitch" was scheduled to début, at the Toronto International Film Festival, a very different feminist body-horror film had the opening "midnight madness" slot: "The Substance," a bravura camp fable about vanity, directed by the French auteur Coralie Fargeat, that was full of winking cinema-history references. In that film, Demi Moore reproduces, but only a younger, hotter version of herself, after which she ages into a monstrous crone.

In September, Heller flew to Toronto for the "Nightbitch" première. She had booked Airbnbs for her family, including her parents and siblings. By now, she'd had time to absorb those rough early screenings; she was ready to make the case for her film. She'd also had a chance to adjust her final edit. In place of the sizzling hash browns, "Nightbitch" now opened with the more inviting supermarket sequence, in which Adams, puffy-eyed and endearingly candid, speaks into the camera about her fears of being a mother: "I am deeply afraid that I am never going to be smart, or happy, or thin, ever again." In the background, Heller herself makes a cameo—she's just another harried mom in a jean jacket, pushing a shopping cart while struggling to keep Zadie and Wylie from pulling cookie boxes off a shelf.

That scene showed up in the movie's trailer, which had been released online, to the dismay of many horror fans, who, given the film's edgy title and source material, were hoping for something harsher,

more like "The Substance." Lying in bed in Toronto, Heller had scrolled through responses on her iPad, bemused. "People were kind of freaking out a little bit," she told me. "I was, like, People think this is going to be cool. This movie's not cool! It's dorky, it's human, it's vulnerable. It's not meant to be cool." Despite its flashes of rage, it was a hetero-optimist movie in a hetero-pessimist age.

We were sitting in her Airbnb, along with her P.R. person and a makeup artist, who was helping to provide "glam." The director sat by the window, her head tilted back, her newly vanilla-blond hair framed by the Toronto skyline. She was hoping for a goth look, she said—a smoky eye to match the pin-striped suit she'd wear to the day's many promotional events, which included a dinner for female directors and the launch of an Oscar campaign for Adams. In the evening, Heller would change into a navy-blue satin number with a plunging neckline, a look that would please Zadie, who kept begging her mother to wear more dresses.

Like prep, this wasn't Heller's favorite part of filmmaking, but she was game. That week, her worst fears wouldn't come to pass: instead of inspiring hatred, "Nightbitch" got wildly mixed reviews. There were raves praising Heller's cinematic daring, with one critic calling the movie "piercingly honest, remarkably sardonic, and breathtakingly brave in the way it lays bare some of women's deepest struggles and truths." There were pans that derided it as a "defanged" version of the source material, insufficiently weird and dark. Many reviews suggested a little of both: in the *Times*, Manohla Dargis wrote that Mother's feminist voice-overs didn't land, but that Adams's rich, vulnerable performance made the film worth it. This divided reception felt like its own kind of success: "Nightbitch" would generate debate, rather than slip through the cracks.

In the past two months, Heller had made some adjustments to her life. One of them was replacing her iPhone with a flip phone. (She kept her iPad, which was too clunky to tempt her at the dinner table.) The phone had been controlling her, she told me. She didn't want to be a hypocrite when her kids asked for their own phones. And there was something to be said for shielding yourself, she'd begun to believe—some value in retreating to a protected creative space, an Alameda of the mind, in a culture that was shifting closer to the abyss. It was a sensitivity that she shared with her son, who didn't like "jolts." To her surprise, the same wasn't true of her daughter: Zadie, now three, had been mesmerized by a childbirth scene from "Nightbitch," which her mother had been editing at home. Heller told me, "She was sitting on my lap, and she kept saying, 'Can I see that again?' And I was, like, 'What part?' And she was, like, 'The *owie*.' And I was, like, 'With the blood?' And she was, like, 'The *owie* part.'" Heller laughed out loud, looking a bit alarmed. "And I was, like, 'What's wrong with you?' And part of me was, like, 'Do you *remember*?'"

Then something happened that occurred frequently while I was reporting this piece: the women in the room all fell into a loose, funny, graphic conversation about childbirth and aging, trading off-the-record details about our bodies, hormones, stitches, night sweats, and perimenopause. We laughed about the crazy mesh underwear all new mothers stole when they left the hospital, or the way your nipples darkened (so that the baby could see them, Heller explained). There was a long discussion about blood clots. "My best friend said, 'Has anyone warned you? That period you haven't had for a

while? It's all going to come out—and it lasts for weeks,'" Heller said, laughing.

Afterward, there was a long pause in the room.

"That feels like heaven," Heller said, as the makeup artist gently touched her face, brushing glitter below her brows.

Heller often spoke about how much she hated movies that made art look easy—no-sweat, effortless genius. The same was true, for her, of portrayals of motherhood. In "Nightbitch," she had tried to make a movie that treated domestic life not as a trad-wife utopia or as a cynical hellscape but as an earthy experience that was unsettling but also richly meaningful, worthy of the same deep attention that Hollywood paid to sexier topics, such as crime or romance. If the film didn't speak to everyone, it didn't have to. Her project reminded me of a Sharon Olds poem, "The Language of the Brag," in which she ticks off the grittiest details of childbirth—"stool charcoal from the iron pills, huge breasts leaking colostrum"—and then compares them, provocatively, to the lyrical works of Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg. The poem ends with a statement of purpose: "And I am putting my proud American boast / right here with the others."

Before the Toronto screening, the "Nightbitch" team gathered at Pink Sky, a swanky bistro with twinkly lighting. Heller sat at a curved banquette with her family, including her mother, Annie, who wore a colorful dress designed by her husband, Steven, who'd constructed both their outfits using a new sewing machine. When the couple met, in the seventies, at a bus stop for the Grey Rabbit, a counterculture alternative to Greyhound, she had been wearing purple pants caked in clay. Back then, Annie was a potter, with a degree from the California College of Arts and Crafts. Before she and Steven had kids, she'd told him that she could imagine herself as "a monk or a mom." Either way, she assumed, she'd keep throwing pots. "Of course, it doesn't turn out that way," she told me later, with a warm smile. After Annie had Nate, her second child, she found it "hard to make a pot, trim a pot, dry a pot, fire a pot, glaze a pot. That whole production. So I gave it up."

She was delighted that all three of her children were artists—and, as the years passed, she'd found ways to be creative, part time. But only recently had she been able to get back into what she described, reverently, as "the flow," after decades of raising children and then caring for her elderly mother. In retirement, Annie painted every day, from around 1 P.M. until sunset, mostly landscapes, many of them of Alameda, with titles like "Meadow Vista." She was proud that her daughter, a "compassionate, capable" mother, had been fierce enough to put her art at the center of her life, fighting to make space for what hadn't been seen. ♦

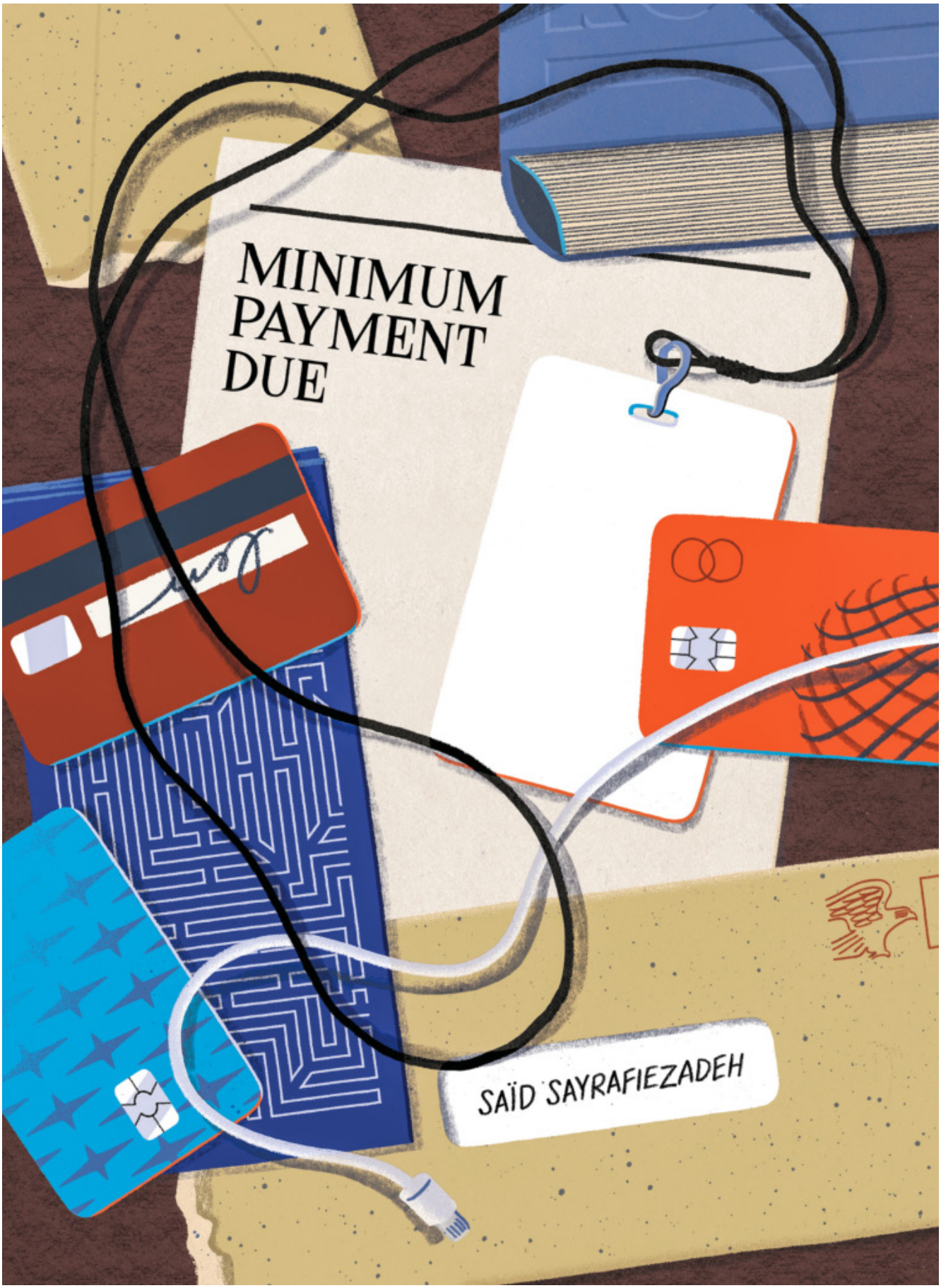


ILLUSTRATION BY HANNAH K. LEE

It was four o'clock in the afternoon and my phone was ringing, number unknown, which meant, of course, that it was one of the collection agencies. They had called me three days ago. They had called me three days before that. They were clearly not going to take no answer for an answer. The last time I'd made the mistake of picking up, the woman had sounded as if she was about twenty years old, calling from somewhere in the heartland, speaking with flat vowels and a maternal tone, firm but loving, never mind the age difference. "We would hate for it to come to that," she said, which was code for legal proceedings. I wanted to tell her that the irony was that sooner or later someone was going to be calling *her* about the student loans she couldn't pay back. Instead, I said, "No, Ma'am. Yes, Ma'am." There was additional irony in the fact that the phone I was using had been bought on credit the week before—because I'm susceptible to sales—increasing the grand total of what I owed, distributed across two Visas, one Mastercard, and an American Express, not to mention Target, Walmart, and Best Buy. But that was the kind of irony that wasn't funny. Meanwhile, compound interest was accruing daily.

Why I decided to answer the phone this time, I don't know. There are a lot of things I do that I don't know. "Who may I ask is calling?" I said. I was hoping that I would come across as professional and aboveboard, as if my insolvency were the result of an unfortunate misunderstanding, as opposed to my habit of spending more money than I made. But I could already feel the resignation creeping into my voice, soon to be followed by panic. In a minute, I would be begging the twenty-year-old to have mercy on me and my financial situation. "Please, Ma'am. Please, Ma'am! Please, Ma'am!!!"

But it was a man calling me. He probably knew I had the day off. He probably knew I was home. He sounded chummy and omniscient as he read off the script. The script said that we were on a first-name basis, which was as good an indication as any of how far I'd fallen in social standing. The script also said that my monetary struggle had been going on for five years, give or take. "What have you been doing these past five years?" he asked me. The strange bluntness of the question, for which I had no adequate answer, caught me off guard. "I've been working," I told him. He liked that I'd been working. "I've been working, too," he said. "I've been working on *myself*." I didn't know what that meant. "I didn't know what that meant, either," he said. "But then I learned." I wasn't quite sure what he was talking about or where this conversation was heading, but I had the distinct feeling that I was stepping into a trap. In a minute, I was going to be hanging upside down in the forest, begging this man to have mercy on me and my financial situation.

"May I share with you what I have learned?" he asked, his voice gentle, his words scripted. He was asking me a question, yes, but it was evident that I had no choice in the matter. In the awkward silence that followed, I was sure he could sense my confusion and trepidation.

He tried again. "Even if I fail," he said, "at least I did my best."

And this was when I realized that I had got everything wrong and that this wasn't a collection agent I was talking to but, rather, my friend Reggie, whom I hadn't heard from in about five years. Reggie, who had grown up down the street from me, two brothers, single mother; Reggie, who had dropped out of high school his junior year, because he was failing anyway, and had come back into my life when he happened to be hired by the mailroom at the tech startup where I worked as a software engineer. He would stop by my desk twice a day to drop off packages, the sunshine streaming through the clerestory windows of the former Nabisco factory, which still sometimes smelled like cookies. His hair was beginning to thin, and I was in the early stages of debt, but I was not badly in debt. We would always take a few minutes to reminisce about our childhoods, which seemed idyllic to me in hindsight. The time we went trick-or-treating in the rain. The time we took three public buses to swim in the wave pool by the mall. Considering that not too long ago we had been equals, I felt a bit self-conscious about the obvious imbalance between us now. I was the twenty-third hire in the company, and he was working in the basement. I was aware of how he would gaze at me with wonder as I sat in my swivel chair in the sunlight, writing code incomprehensible to the uninitiated. I was doing, of course, what had been done to me at great detriment—persuading people to consume. But this was the kind of irony I could not see.

```
class RecommendationSystem:
  def __init__(self, user_preferences, content_
  database):
    self.user_preferences = user_preferences
    self.content_database = content_database
```

"It's easier than it looks," I told Reggie one day.

"Maybe you could teach me," he said. "If it's that easy."

The truth was: it wasn't that easy. "Sure," I said. But, before I had to actually follow through on my promise, the C.E.O. hired a C.F.O., and the C.F.O. downsized the mailroom while I continued to pay the minimum due on my Mastercard.

Now Reggie was catching me up on what he'd been doing the past five years, which mostly centered on the past week, when everything had finally come together for him, just like that. He still sounded chummy, but he also sounded as if he was performing being chummy.

"I'm graduating," he told me.

"From college?" I asked him.

"You could say that," he said.

"What does that mean?" I said.

This was funny to him. "Meaning," he said, as if the word "meaning" had its own deeper meaning. In any case, he wanted me to come to his graduation so that I could celebrate what he had accomplished in the past week.

"May I share with you what I have learned?" He had already asked me this question.

"What have you learned?" I asked him.

He couldn't tell me quite yet. I had to see for myself.

"If you like what you see, maybe you'll sign up."

"Sign up for what?" I asked.

He was unfazed. "Don't worry," he

said, "I was skeptical in the beginning, too."

I thought of my credit cards, my car loan, my overdraft fees. "I'm not interested in signing up," I told him.

This was what he had been waiting to hear. "You answered the phone for a reason," he said.

It had not always been like this, my debt. But precisely how it began, I couldn't quite remember, except that at some point I woke up to find that my outstanding balances had been transformed overnight into an impossible financial liability. I wanted to blame it on a credit-card statement that, early on in my journey toward insolvency, had given me the option to take the next month off, no strings attached, assuring me that there would not be any penalty for forgoing the minimum payment due on the low four figures that I already owed. It was the holidays, and it had seemed like a nice idea at the time, a convenient idea, but I had not bothered to read the fine print, which would have informed me that, payment or no payment, interest would continue to accrue. This was only the first of many reckless errors in judgment that I made, my balance slowly climbing the mountain from four figures to five while I consoled myself, every step of the way, with the thought that I would begin tracking my expenses and monitoring my progress, preferably by way of a computer program that I would write—I was a software engineer, after all. But, mostly, I was hoping that I would come into a windfall that would wipe the slate clean and allow me to start over from scratch.

Meanwhile, there was the lunch I ate at Outback Steakhouse because a menu had been slipped under my front door, and the shoes I bought because of a billboard I had seen, and so on and so forth, the nickels and dimes continuing to add up, until one afternoon, while I was scrolling through Instagram on my new phone—two phones ago from my current one—a photo of a book by Tony Robbins, of all people, popped up in my feed, no doubt reposted by one of his seven million followers. "Awaken the Giant Within," it was called. If it weren't for the million copies sold, I might have scrolled past. "How to Take Immediate Control of Your Mental, Emotional, Physical and Financial Destiny!" read the subtitle. It was the last one in the list, of course, the *financial*, that I most needed the giant to take control of—the rest of it I could have done without. Tony Robbins's big, handsome face was displayed on the cover. He looked like he could have been a quarterback from my high school turned life coach turned entrepreneur. He appeared a little forlorn, a little pained. "I've been there, brother," his expression seemed to say. "I know what you're going through." The list price was $20.99.

I read the five-hundred-some pages while eating my lunch in the cafeteria at the startup, the sunlight streaming through the clerestory windows. By the time I had reached Chapter 3, I was convinced that the giant could probably assist with my emotional, mental, and physical destiny as well. I learned about change and power. I learned about more complex concepts such as submodality and neuro-association. But, true to form, Tony Robbins explained everything in a way I could understand. He was accessible and down-to-earth. He recounted a story of how he had been flying his private jet helicopter to one of his many seminars when he noticed a building below where, years earlier, he had worked as a janitor—which made me think that perhaps one day I would be flying across the city in my own helicopter, reflecting on how far I'd come from near financial ruin. Occasionally, the text would be broken up by a particularly apt cartoon from the funny pages, or some white space for me to write my goals, or an aspirational quote from someone like Seneca or Socrates or Tony Robbins himself: "It is in your moments of decision that your destiny is shaped."

I did what he said to do. Or at least I tried to. I avoided negativity. I avoided procrastination. I tried to alter my submodalities. More to the point, I tried to curb my spending and pay my bills. My debt stabilized. Then it decreased slightly. A month later, it had increased slightly. Up and down it went. Mainly up. I existed in this state for a while, a state of fluctuation and inconstancy which Tony Robbins would have likely categorized as one of the ten action signals: "If the message your emotions are trying to deliver is ignored, the emotions simply increase their amperage." It was right around this time that the startup hired a wellness director who was all in on promoting mental health, with an emphasis on self-care and self-awareness, and it seemed as though this might be the next logical step in my journey toward solvency. In the meantime, I ordered a few more of Tony Robbins's New York *Times* best-selling books for $20.99 each, including "Money: Master the Game." Was it a game? It didn't feel like a game.

The therapist I found was a nice enough guy, mild-mannered, soft-spoken, more uncle than life coach, and only partly covered by my insurance after I met the deductible. He would greet me once a week, in a jacket and tie, in his ground-floor office, with watercolors of foggy landscapes on the wall alongside framed diplomas of his three degrees from three different area universities—B.A., M.S.W., Ph.D. I assumed that these were intended to help accentuate his credentials and offset the fact that he was working out of a converted studio apartment in a residential building which faced a courtyard where I would sometimes see tenants walking past the window with their dogs. This therapist projected neither the command nor the conviction of Tony Robbins, and it made me wonder if he perhaps lacked a certain resoluteness in whatever insights he might have about me. I spent the first few weeks lying on a couch, staring up at the ceiling, trying to pretend I wasn't self-conscious about having a conversation with a stranger while in a supine position. There was a box of tissues beside me on the floor, the presumption being, I suppose, that I would eventually have a breakthrough in which the tears

would flow freely, providing me with clarity and the ability to pay off my bills. When the therapist spoke, he was encouraging and affirming, his disembodied voice seeming to come from behind and above at the same time. "Yes," he would say. "Of course," he would say. But mostly he listened. Mostly, I talked about not knowing what to talk about.

"You reached out to me for a reason," he would say.

Then one session I happened to quote Tony Robbins in passing: "Negative things you tell yourself are inCANTations, turn them into inCANtations." It had always been one of my favorite sayings.

I could hear the therapist shifting in his chair. "Huh?" he said.

"Tony Robbins," I said.

There was a pause. "Tony Robbins is a charlatan," the therapist said. This was the first time he had ever offered something that resembled a personal opinion.

"How do I know *you're* not a charlatan?" I wanted to say. I stared up at the ceiling. Eventually, I said, "Tony Robbins helped me with my debt." This wasn't quite true, but it was somewhat true. This was also the first time I had ever mentioned my debt. In fact, I had been doing my best to avoid mentioning it.

Now the therapist was alert and assertive. "How much do you owe?" he asked. It was too late for me to backtrack. He waited while I calculated the figure in my head, the various principals, the late fees, the penalties, the surcharges. Then I did what everyone does when they are consumed with denial and shame: I rounded down and lowballed the figure. The lowball was still a lot.

He wanted to know how it had come to this.

"I'm easily swayed," I said.

"What does that mean?" he asked.

I thought it was self-explanatory.

Apropos of nothing, he suggested I describe how things had been at the dinner table when I was growing up. "Let's start there," he said.

I didn't want to start there. I knew that he was operating under the assumption that what happened in adulthood must be attributed to what had happened in childhood. I told him that I had been given everything. A middle-class upbringing. Two parents. Private school.

"Dig deeper," he said.

Instead, I stared up at the ceiling. What came to mind was Reggie and his childhood. No father, no future, and a mother who worked long hours as a secretary. Not long after Reggie had been laid off from the tech firm, I had gone to visit him at an S.R.O. where he was staying, on the south side of the city. "Till I get my feet on the ground," he said. We sat side by side on the edge of his bed, because that was the only furniture he had, both of us pretending that he hadn't hit rock bottom. He wanted to know how everything was at work. He didn't seem to harbor any ill will at having lost his job in the mailroom. I overplayed the grind of writing code. "Hang in there," he said. "I'll try," I said. I didn't tell him that the company was about to have its I.P.O.

Six months later, the therapist and I were still at an impasse and I was still in debt.

"These things take time," he told me.

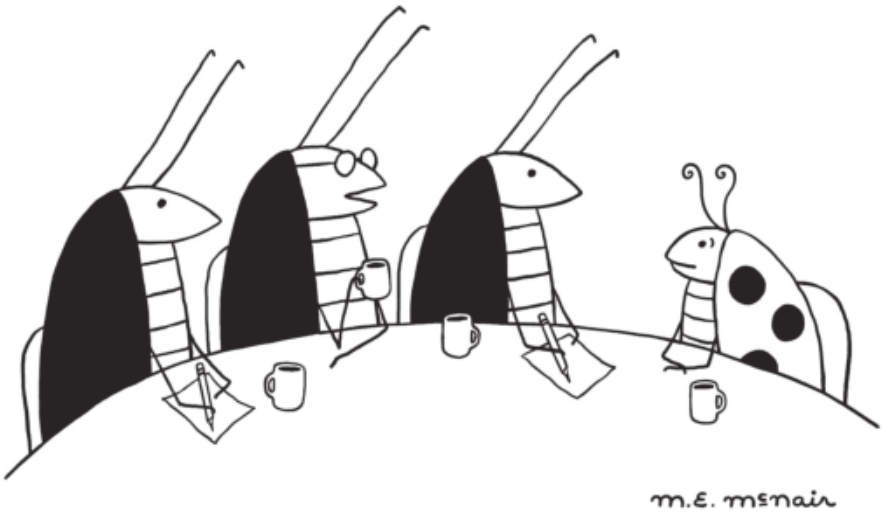
"How much time?" I asked him.

For this, he had no answer. Tony Robbins would have had an answer.

I thought of all the money I owed my creditors. I thought of all the interest on all the money I owed. "Even if I start paying it now," I said, "I will be behind forever."

"Sunk-cost fallacy," he said.

Fallacy or not, I paid for my final sessions using my Mastercard.



"Any ideas on how to convince the public that we're cute?"

• •

The last time I had been to the Wyndham Hotel & Resort was three years earlier, for a three-day expo showcasing the latest in software engineering, like integrated development environments and so forth. Now I was back for Reggie's graduation. It was happy hour, and the lobby was crowded with hotel guests drinking free wine out of plastic cups while smooth jazz played over the speakers. Just past the entrance, next to the luggage carts, I was greeted by a young woman standing behind a registration table with a sign that read "Congratulations Graduates." "We've been waiting for you," she said. If this was intended to make me feel special, it worked. Then she handed me a nametag without a name. She could see my confusion. "We don't believe in names," she said, by way of explanation. "Names are labels." She told me this as if it had already been determined and was now a foregone conclusion. I suppose it did make a certain kind of sense. She smiled at me. She already knew it made sense.

Through the hallways of the Wyndham Hotel & Resort, I walked. I was wearing a suit for the occasion—it was a graduation, after all—which I had bought on sale with one of my Visas, and every so often a guest would

IN PRAISE OF MACHADO DE ASSIS

1. THE INTERRUPTION

If I write another novel
I shall call it "The Interruption"
in honor of Machado de Assis
in short numbered chapters

each with a title like
"God Knows What He's Doing."
I shall write it with
the fountain pen of mirth

and the ink of melancholy
between panic attacks
in my hotel room plus sink on the rue des Écoles

and declaim it at dinner,
a mess of lentils served with the salt of mystery
and the pepper of danger.

2. A THINKING ERRATUM

With every error I make
I refute Pascal
and praise Machado de Assis,

who said man is a thinking

erratum not a thinking reed;
he likes to think his mind,
inspired by the autumn wind,
is in perpetual motion,

like a Poulenc piano piece
without key signatures;
and because each movement

changes the previous
one's errors, there will never
be a definitive version.

3. BECAUSE OF THE ERROR

The preceding chapter
should be deleted
because of the error
concealed in the last stanza

and the likelihood
of a future bibliophile
who devotes his career

pass me going the other way, en route to happy hour, glancing with a mixture of curiosity and concern at the big blank nametag affixed to my new blue suit. Down another hallway, I walked, and then another, the sound of a tenor saxophone from the lobby slowly fading as I went, until I arrived at my destination, the Wyndham Ballroom, with high ceilings and no windows, where some of the other things that this group apparently did not believe in were chairs and overhead lighting. There were about a hundred people sitting cross-legged in rows on the floor, surrounded by a dozen lamps, all turned low. The mood was serene and contemplative. The mood was quiet and expectant. In a different setting, this would have been nap time at a nursery school. At the far end of the ballroom was a temporary stage with a podium, above which hung another banner, this one reading "Welcome Guests." Who were the graduates and who were the guests, I was not sure. Where Reggie was, I did not know. I took a seat on the floor at the end of the back row, beside a young woman who was also wearing a blank nametag and who looked similar to the young woman who had checked me in a few minutes earlier. But in the dim glow of the room I was not sure of this, either. I was not sure of much of anything, except that I had entered a place where certain rules had been rewritten.

The paisley carpeting of the ballroom was soft, surprisingly so, and it smelled as if it had been recently shampooed. I had spent the past nine hours writing code, and another nine hours the day before that, and I had the feeling that the reality of my life was now very far away. If nothing else happened tonight, it would have been worth it just to have the opportunity to sit on the carpet for a while, contemplating nothing. But suddenly a woman appeared onstage, her heels echoing as she approached the podium. She looked stately and important. She exuded power and prestige. She was wearing a long necklace of pearls that showcased her success and partially obscured her blank nametag. From my vantage point, three feet off the floor, she appeared quite tall. There was a microphone on the podium, but she did not use the microphone. Perhaps she did not believe in microphones. No amplification needed. No introduction needed, either. She was clearly the one in charge. She spoke directly to us. She got right into it.

What she got right into was that this was indeed a graduation but not a graduation from college or any type of accredited program. This must have been something of an inside joke, because the audience found it funny for some reason, and sitting there amid the laughter I realized that I might be the only guest here tonight, along perhaps with the woman beside me, who also did not seem to understand the humor.

"No diploma, no degree," the woman in charge said, and again this was funny. According to her, the ceremony tonight was to acknowledge all the hard work that had been done by the students who were not really students,

to Machado de Assis

and spends hours days weeks
studying every sentence
of "The Psychiatrist"

and "Dom Casmurro"
searching in vain
for that error.

4. COUPLE OF DRUNKS

A novel is a mirror
walking down the road,
the narrative straight,
the style direct.

But Machado's story
and his style are a couple
of drunks veering
from side to side,

laughing at unfunny jokes,
raising their fists,
in an episodic distraction
from eternity. Better to fall
out of a cloud than from
a third-story window.

5. THE UNION OF HUMAN FOLLY

According to Aristotle
as revised by Machado de Assis,
if one rolling billiard ball
hits another, effecting

a transference of power,
and the second ball hits a third
and the same thing happens, let the balls
represent (a) the vector of my life

(b) the rejection of the past
and (c) the refusal to accept what
took its place. Thus, extremes of reality

and theory may link or collide
in either case confirming
the union of human folly.

—David Lehman

during three days of classes that were not really classes. But this was only one step in the process. After this step came the next step. The next step was signing up for the next class. "The mechanism takes time," she said. "The mechanism is detailed." I had no idea what mechanism she was referring to, but a low murmur of assent coursed through the audience. By the way, she said, maybe the guests themselves might be interested in signing up for Step One. She paused to let her words sink in. She stared down at the rows of people sitting cross-legged on the floor, as if looking for a show of hands. No, I was not interested. "No, don't decide yet," she said. "Wait until you've heard more." No, I didn't need to hear more.

This was when the brochures were passed through the rows, the brochures that would explain everything. I was aware that the boundary between guest and potential customer was purposely being blurred. The woman in charge seemed to somehow intuit this. She grew despondent at the implication. "Try to stay . . . ," she said, but she trailed off, having apparently lost her train of thought. Her voice was softer now, as she struggled to find the right phrase, the elusive phrase, what was it? Her first oratorical misstep. "Try to stay . . . ," she said again. She was flustered and blushing. She was human and vulnerable. As if to steady herself, she grasped the microphone that she was not using. Then it suddenly came to her—"open-minded" was the word. "Try to stay *open-minded*," she said. Ha ha. When the audience laughed, it was the laughter of empathy and understanding. No one is perfect, ha ha. How silly of her to have forgotten such a basic word.

"Tell that little voice in your head," she said. "You know, that little voice, the one always doubting, always questioning. You know that one?" Yes, the audience knew that one. "Tell that little voice, 'Little voice, for the next couple of hours you can talk all you want. I cannot stop you from talking, but that does not mean I am going to pay attention to you.'" This was not the first time I had heard this suggestion. My therapist had often talked about the necessity of considering new ideas, including unusual ones, *especially* unusual ones, and so had Tony Robbins, with his submodalities and whatnot. Even the credit agents had encouraged me to be flexible. "We want to work *with* you," they would say. For whatever reasons, I had never been able to remain open to what was being suggested. "The reasons are deep-seated," the therapist had told me, but I had not had the patience to try to unearth them. And yet it occurred to me now that perhaps I had made some progress, however incremental, sitting here on the floor of a hotel ballroom, wearing a nametag without a name, doing my best to try to follow along as the woman onstage talked about the mechanism, whatever it was, that would replace all the other mechanisms, whatever those were. She was on a roll, and I was lost. She was obviously speaking to those already in the know. She was nothing if not a compelling speaker. The most I could gather was that she

was referring not to an actual machine or even any sort of object but, rather, to a way of operating—a *mechanism*—that would produce a desired outcome. Or something like that. In any event, it appeared that specific words had been redefined so that their meanings were made unclear—or unclear to the uninitiated. Or perhaps this was one more example of my closed mind.

The brochure had an illustration of a maze on the cover—no doubt a metaphor for life, which the mechanism would help solve. The type was small, and the light was dim, and I could barely read any of the text except for the subheadings, Step One, Step Two, Step Three, so on, toward some sort of enlightenment, and on the very last page, at the very bottom, was the price of enrollment, listed at four figures, which could be paid in installments starting at five hundred dollars. In other words, buy now, pay later. That, at least, was a meaning that was clear to me.

"Are you one of those people," the woman in charge was asking us, "who has been trying to solve a problem? But, no matter what you do, you cannot solve the problem?" From thirty feet away, her eyes met mine, and she held my gaze for what seemed slightly longer than normal for the average public speaker. It was long enough to give me the impression that she had been able to discern something essential about my affliction, and it was long enough to make me consider that, if she could know something about me within half an hour, imagine how much could be accomplished in the three days it would take to complete Step One. I thought of my finances. I thought of my maxed-out credit cards, and the late fees, and the ever-accruing interest. "Yes," I said to her in my mind. "Yes, I am one of those people trying to solve a problem. How did you know?" But she was already looking at the woman sitting beside me.

Soon it was time for the testimonials, i.e., the hard sell from the satisfied customers. "But don't take my word for it," the woman in charge told us, and here came the graduates, to share how much they had learned, how much they had changed, how much they had overcome in only a few days, their tales of woe and hardship now permanently consigned to the past. One by one, they spoke, variations on a theme—abuse, trauma, suffering. It was late, and I was tired. Among the other things that they apparently did not believe in were bathroom breaks. Why I didn't just get up and leave, I do not know. And then, from out of the darkness, Reggie appeared onstage. But this Reggie bore no resemblance to the one I had known. He had lost weight and gained confidence. He had somehow gained good looks, too. He was wearing a suit that was nicer than my suit, and if I hadn't known any better I might have thought he was a model who had been hired for the evening. "Distinguished graduates and guests," he said, and even his voice and diction seemed to have been transformed into something powerful and authoritative. Whatever had happened in the intervening years since I had last seen him had been miraculous. But, the way he told it, this had not taken years—it had taken only one class. Now he was going to sign up for the next class. Imagine what the next class would do if the first class had done so much. I wondered, How had he been able to afford two classes? "If I can do it," he said, "anyone can do it."

He'd had a tremendous amount of adversity, beginning with his childhood. His childhood was worse than the other speakers' childhoods. His childhood was worse than I had known. He had never really talked about it with me, and I had never thought to ask. I had accepted his circumstances merely as the natural order of things. But now he spoke openly. He spoke without shame. He did not seem encumbered by the past. "No one gave me anything," he said. Here, I recalled the time he had asked me if I could teach him how to write code. "Someone like me doesn't get to go to college," he told us. He opened his arms wide, as if to indicate that he was now in effect graduating from a college that was not a college but was *better* than a college. He could have been Tony Robbins exhorting us to awaken the giant within as he flew his jet helicopter over the tech firm where he had once toiled in the mailroom. The ballroom was suddenly filled with applause, long and loud, and I applauded, too, because he was my friend, and because I was proud of him, and because to do otherwise would have made me conspicuous in a ballroom full of like-minded people. The woman onstage was embracing him, along with the other speakers. "Reggie!" I wanted to shout. "Reggie!" But I didn't call his name, of course. He didn't believe in names.

Now we had come to the end of the night, when we were supposed to turn to our neighbor and share what problem we were trying to solve. I suppose it was time for *my* testimonial. "What's your story?" the young woman sitting beside me asked. I had no story except my debt. And debt wasn't a story. Debt was a lack of foresight. Debt was being caught up in the moment. Debt was an indication of character. So, instead of telling her my story, I told her Reggie's story. His was a good story. I picked up where he had left off. I told her how I had lost my job, how I had stayed at an S.R.O., how my best friend, who had always been there for me, had come to visit one afternoon, and how he had invited me to his graduation. The woman was leaning in to listen. She seemed to be sitting very close. I was not sure if I was smelling the shampoo from the carpet or the shampoo from her hair. I was not sure if she was the woman from the registration table, but I think I was sure. She wanted to know if I was going to sign up. I told her that I didn't know. She said that she didn't know, either. But she might. She probably would. In fact, she would.

"What do you have to lose?" she asked.

I had a brief glimpse of the future, where the five-hundred-dollar installment plan had turned into thousands of dollars, and then tens of thousands of dollars, and where I threw good money after bad, always thinking that I was just one step away from emerging from the maze once and for all and from finally solving the puzzle.

In the dim light of the ballroom, I could see that she was looking at me with something like compassion. "You came here tonight for a reason," she said. ♦

A CRITIC AT LARGE

GET IT TOGETHER

Anatomizing the crowd.

BY ADAM GOPNIK

In the beginning was the mob, and the mob was bad. In Gibbon's 1776 "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire," the Roman mob makes regular appearances, usually at the instigation of a demagogue, loudly demanding to be placated with free food and entertainment ("bread and circuses"), and, though they don't get to rule, they sometimes get to choose who will. Gibbon was a sort of conservative radical—contemptuous of Christianity and attached to freethinking Epicureanism, but fearful of social disorder—and by "the mob" he meant the lumpenproletariat of any big city, his own London as much as his remembered Rome. What do you do when two mobs are shouting at each other during a public election? So Mr. Pickwick is asked in Dickens's "Pickwick Papers," set in the eighteen-twenties. "Shout with the largest" is Mr. Pickwick's protective advice.

In time, this fearful conception gave way to an image of the crowd that was, mostly, good, and when bad more

The eternal truth, from ancient Rome to now, is that one man's rampaging mob is another man's righteous protest.

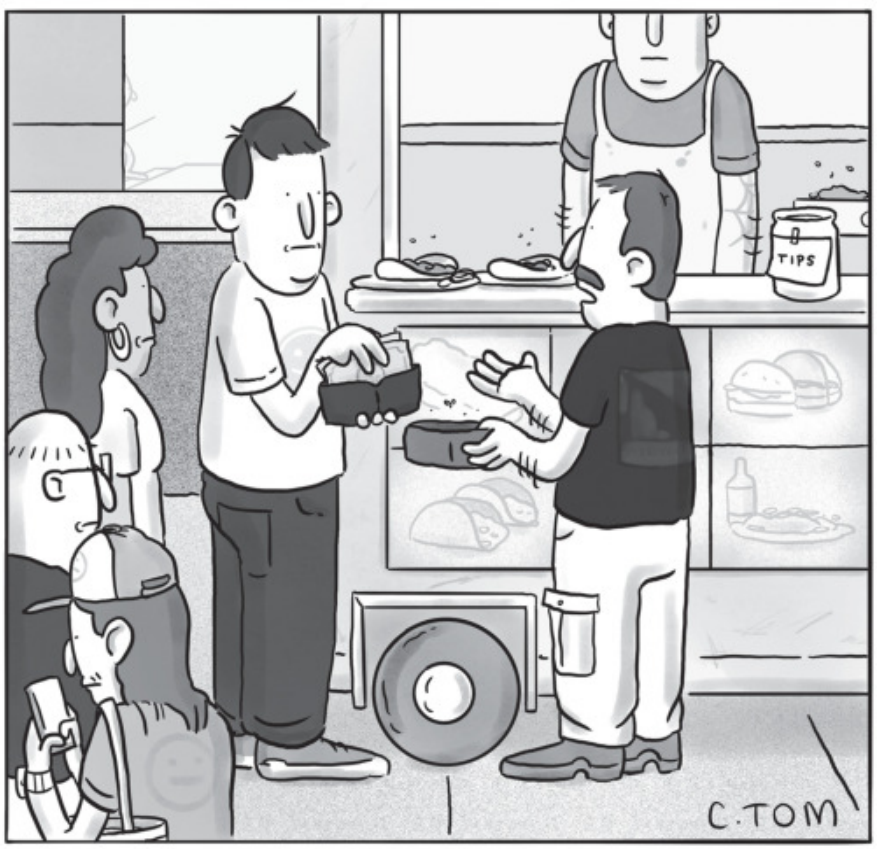
PHOTOGRAPH BY BALAZS GARDI

comic than anything else. In Charles Mackay's "Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds" (1841), the people who swarm to buy tulip bulbs in Holland or shares in the South Sea Company in London are frantic and mutually reinforcing, but their victims are chiefly one another. In a capitalist society, the crowd turns inward, focussed more on making money than on extorting it from power. Indeed, the crowd could now be thought of as the "people"—a concept that might merit approval, as in "We, the People," or abhorrence, as when the Nazis promoted the purity of the *Volk*, whose blood was being poisoned by outsiders. More recently, the crowd returned as a wholly positive force, full of collective savvy. We got books on the wisdom of crowds, while on "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" the best way of answering a specialized question was often to sample the audience, smarter as a group than any shrewd contestant alone. "Crowdsourcing" became a cheery thing. Then January 6th happened, and suddenly the twenty-first-century quiz-show crowd seemed to dissolve back into the Roman mob, violent seditionists instigated by a demagogue and aimed at the destruction of the very idea of law.

Any such willfully succinct summary will, of course, be bound by a thousand quavers and qualifications, and by a larger question: Have crowds actually changed, or is it simply that the words we use to describe them have altered over time? Are crowds, in reality, only ever-shifting gatherings of rational individuals? Or do people, assembled together into a seething group, become, as the Bulgarian British writer Elias Canetti believed, a thing unto itself, acting in ways that none of the individuals in the group would have undertaken alone? The January 6th crowd was clearly composed of some who wanted to act and many who merely went along. Canetti distinguished between "closed" and "open" crowds: the open crowd, like the one that stormed the Bastille, is the kind in which many people of different allegiances come together for a common, if often ill-defined, cause; the closed crowd is an organized gathering for a predefined purpose. Whether you think the Trumpite mob was a closed crowd (an assembly of paramilitaries with a clear goal of creating enough chaos to end the electoral count) or an open one (a confused agglomeration that scarcely knew where it was going or what it would do until it got there) probably affects your degree of panic or fear about what another Trumpite mob might do.

Closed or open, crowds persist as historical agents, and have become a field of study all their own. In his new book, "The Crowd in the Early Middle Ages" (Princeton), Shane Bobrycki, a medieval historian at the University of Iowa, describes a hinge moment in the way people have thought about crowds. It was a period when the rapid de-urbanization of society had reduced or eliminated the Roman *vulgus*, or mob, but when memories of Roman order and disorder lingered. Bobrycki has devoted himself to a blessedly old-fashioned kind of scholarship, digging through ever-finer shades of meaning, sifting through all the Latin terms that refer to crowds and mobs and gatherings. If you have long wanted to discern the subtle differences in medieval Europe between *vulgus*, *plebs*, *turba*, *populus*, and *rustici*, here at last is the book to assist you. And these differences do indeed have weight and significance. It's fascinating to learn how, when the *vulgus* was forced out of the dying cities and into the countryside, it became the *rustici*—the peasants with pitchforks. *Plebs*, meaning, in classical Latin, "common folk," came to mean, more neutrally, "the community." Bobrycki assures us, "Even *vulgus* could be just another equivalent of the broad *populus* that was now the lodestar of all crowd words."

Bobrycki has an ambivalent attitude toward the era of his attention. You would not take up medieval history as a subject if it held no appeal to you as an object. Gibbon's take could be simple: life had been better, and then it was worse, and though the causes were complex—Christians and barbarians both playing a part—the result was clear. Bobrycki, in contrast, describes what looks like a catastrophe but labors not to characterize it as such. Yet obviously one day



"I never carry cash—it's too easy to spend on people who don't carry cash."

there were hot baths in Britain, and then one day there weren't. The thinning of the population which attended what he does not call the Dark Ages, we are assured, "did not make for a better or worse society." Yes, it did. Prosperous and library-bound Roman civilization—however lamed by cruelty, public executions, slavery—was clearly a better place to be than one where all those evils persisted, along with some new ones, and none of the good things did.

In any case, early medieval Europe, noted for its de-urbanization, seems like the nadir of crowds, closed and open; Bobrycki notes, in a beautiful understatement, that it "was undersupplied with gatherings." (On the other hand, he writes, monks and nuns were "crowd specialists," too, in that they connected themselves to a community that encompassed the living and the departed—a lovely poetic point, though not really what we mean by crowds.) What he finds is the rise of the mini-mob: given that travel was dangerous, dignitaries on the move surrounded themselves with an entourage. This invention proved so potent that we still see it today, as in the history of American hip-hop, whose top men, too, are often uneasy travellers. At the same time, the macro-mob was demoted. In fact, the once powerful idea that crowds had a well-earned veto on rulers' bad actions was anathema in medieval Europe, where crowds were often "gendered" and likened to hysterical women.

The closed crowds of the period, in turn, included all of the liturgical processions and staged gatherings designed to create at least an illusion of what Bobrycki calls "spontaneous unanimity." In one memorable incident—after a municipal feud in Ravenna, around the year 700, ended in a Red Wedding-like murder of one clan by another under the pretext of breaking bread—the local archbishop "commanded the whole city to perform a three-day liturgical procession," Bobrycki writes. Open crowds inclined to homicide could be turned to closed crowds performing penance.

Bobrycki ends with a series of questions. His purpose is to demystify the idea of a crowd as a single thing and instead make us feel it as ever changing and contingent, sometimes being exploited by the ruling class for its own ends—held responsible for acts the rulers want both to encourage and to disavow—and sometimes eerily amplifying the long echo of Roman ritual and literature. The New Testament, the holiest of texts at the time, is itself a Roman document, depicting circumstances of a bygone era, including the city mob crying "Give us Barabbas." "Arguably the most important discursive function of the tumultuous crowd," Bobrycki concludes, "was not to condemn its activities, but to obfuscate them. Crowds in discourse were, above all, a tool of plausible deniability." Even in an uncrowded historical time, the idea of the crowd mattered, as a concept, a dream, a way of thinking about the forms of popular sovereignty when none that we would recognize as such quite existed.

In the past couple of centuries, speculations about the role of crowds have tended to center on the French Revolution—and yet the whirligig of classical and medieval terms remains relevant. Is the crowd merely a *vulgus*, the unlettered raving, or is it the *populus*—the community speaking? The French Revolution looms large in the philosophy of crowds because it was the first time that a "mob" or what looked like one was responsible for a decisive turn in the history of humankind. The Roman Republic was always an upper-class affair, with the mob a mere chorus, and even the American Revolution was, as students of Samuel Adams have learned, very much a legislative revolution, made by the manor, with the crowds much smaller than they are remembered to have been. The Boston Tea Party was more a publicity stunt than a significant popular protest. But the French Revolution, though managed by an assemblage of grandees and ideologues, did involve a significant role for large groups of citizens acting on their own. Americans celebrate a group of merchants and planters signing a document on July 4th; the French celebrate a crowd of citizens storming the monarchical prison called the Bastille on July 14th. There is a difference.

Yet the nature and the role of the crowd in the French Revolution have always been contested. For British conservatives of the late eighteenth century, Burke most memorably, the swarming humanity on display was a vengeful monster of bloodlust and violence. This idea, taken over by the reactionary Thomas Carlyle in his history of the French Revolution, and then even more memorably dramatized by the radical Dickens in "A Tale of Two Cities," was given a more scholarly treatment in the French historian Gustave Le Bon's "The Psychology of Crowds" (1895). "By the mere fact that he forms part of an organized crowd, a man descends several rungs in the ladder of civilization. Isolated, he may be a cultivated individual," Le Bon warned. "In a crowd, he is a barbarian—that is, a creature acting by instinct."

Against this view comes a countertradition that saw the crowd effectively as the people enacting choices. This line of French left-wing interpretation reached its apotheosis in Jean-Paul Sartre's 1960 account of the storming of the Bastille, in which Sartre introduces the notion of a "fused group" to indicate the power of a crowd to mobilize chaotic emotion into compelling action.

Sartre was too familiar with modern history not to see the fascistic potential of any street mob. But his is mainly a positive view of mob action, which could not only bring about political change but provide a kind of shared existential epiphany: in moments of decisive action, we reach as a community beyond our mortal despair. Sartre's melodrama of the mob rather understates a larger truth: when the Bastille was at last stormed, there were perhaps seven confused prisoners left inside, the population having been reduced by reform over time. The existential epiphany, as so often with Sartre, was purely theatrical. (Camus once mocked Sartre for snoozing during the liberation of Paris, in a comfortable

armchair at the Comédie-Française.)

In the British historian George Rudé's classic book "The Crowd in the French Revolution" (1959), one gets a more nuanced view of the same gang-ups. Rudé breaks down the mobs of the Revolution into their elements, and shows that, far from being the kind of enraged, unitary monster of Le Bon's fearful description, they were made of precise social kinds—not the true lower ranks of French society but what we could call the petite bourgeoisie, whose specific demands on the state seemed best answered by group action. Neither a bloodthirsty out-of-control monster nor an awakened community, the revolutionary mob was made of craftsmen, small traders, and so on—people who wanted highly specific things, such as more bread and better wages. Very much like their lower-middle-class inheritors among today's French *gilets jaunes*, they wanted to protect their modest allotments from the vagaries of big government and the mercantile classes. The Bastille-busters would not, in truth, have been disappointed to find only seven prisoners in the hoosegow. They aimed to make a point, not a prison break.

And when the Revolution was turned into the Empire? There's a sense in which the rabble was reassembled when the emperor's Grande Armée arose. Indeed, as the military historian John Keegan says, "inside every army is a crowd struggling to get out," and the single thing that commanders fear most is that their regimented forces will devolve back into a disorganized crowd.

The British journalist Dan Hancox, in his new book, "Multitudes: How Crowds Made the Modern World" (Verso), goes much further than his scholarly forebears in the effort to defend the crowd from its defamers. He is an unstinting admirer of crowds and crowd action, not just as a means of social change but as a heady social experience of transcendence. He evokes "the thrilling energy generated by a political crowd," in which one feels "the crackle of history in the air. It follows the realisation that your elected leaders will always fail you, to one degree or another, whether by accident or by design, and flows from the refusal to accept these failings, taking democracy into your own hands, indeed your own body, and letting it guide you out into the town square." When you experience "crowd power," he says, "you are lifted out of the present and commune with the eternal crowd, the Bastille crowd." The crowd is how popular passion opposes power.

His book contains, to be sure, a few "to be sure" moments, in which he acknowledges that crowds may not have an unstained record. But he is reluctant to categorize the more unappealing gatherings as crowds at all. The criterion for distinguishing virtuous crowds from vicious mobs turns out to be whether they share Hancox's politics. His position can be defended only by a series of Humpty Dumpty-like equivocations, in which words mean what the speaker wants them to mean. The January 6th protesters who stormed the Capitol—were they not a crowd as confident of taking democracy into their own hands as any other street army? Well, Hancox explains, they were not really a crowd—they were "not a spontaneous, organic outpouring of mass popular resistance, but something instigated from the very top of American political life." Even if one shares his horror at the Trumpian rhetoric that helped to set them off, no one can doubt that the massed protesters certainly understood themselves to be an outpouring of popular resistance, and,

once unleashed, acted violently, incoherently, opportunistically, sometimes with a clear purpose and often without, and all about as "organically" as you could ever want.

The truth is that Dickens's vision of the maddened mob is hardly a historical fiction. Simon Schama's memorable history of the French Revolution, "Citizens," though sympathetic to the republican cause, found much to vindicate the Carlylean view that there was at least latent evil in the revolutionary mob. Certainly, no one can whitewash the vengeful public rituals of the Jacobins, forcing whole families to watch the executions of their members, one by one, in the public square, while, yes, the mob cheered on the killings. Nor does anyone dispute that a Parisian crowd, having taken over a prison, murdered the helpless Princess de Lamballe, mutilated her body, stuck her head on a pike, and paraded with it in front of the Queen's residence, hoping that she would see what had happened to her friend. The mob may well be manifold—made of many kinds with many purposes, some benign—and still prove murderous.

Hancox would direct our attention elsewhere, focussing his disapproval on the state forces that would contain mass action. And so he praises at length the British crowd that, in 2020, in the city of Bristol, tore down a statue of a slave dealer and philanthropist named Edward Colston, and threw it into the water, on the perfectly understandable ground that the slave dealer had been responsible for the enslavement and death of enormous numbers of people. Yet, if a mob of morally enraged Thatcherites assembled to destroy the giant bust of Karl Marx in Highgate Cemetery, on the ground that his ideology contributed to the needless deaths of millions, Hancox would doubtless find much less to praise in their passionate commitment to their cause.

Nor would his admirable crowds be capable of action in the first place if they were innocent of orchestration. The sink-the-slaver crowd in Bristol was, if not controlled from on high, then certainly no less planned in advance than the stop-the-steal one—hashtagged at a distance, with the whole fuelled with encouragement provided via Twitter and Facebook. The rioters who attacked a mosque in the British town of Southport this past summer, after three children had been stabbed by someone described, wrongly, as a Muslim immigrant, were just as self-organized and spontaneous as the Bristol crowd—and in another way just as "mediated" by their own program of social-media encouragements. What difference would Hancox maintain ex-

ists between the two? Surely the Southport rioters felt exactly the same indignation at how badly their elected leaders had failed them as Hancox reports feeling in relation to his causes, and the same wild thrill at finally feeling free to act against perceived injustice.

When you are "taking democracy into your own hands," what you have in your hands is not democracy, because democracy begins with the recognition that other people have hands, too. The violent Hindu mobs that periodically set upon Muslims in India—sometimes mobilized by an espoused cause no greater than the protection of cows—are just as spontaneous as any of the direct-action protesters whom Hancox celebrates. Everyone was saying "What about going through the official channels?!" Hancox writes scornfully about those who condemned the rioters in Bristol. But nobody was saying that. What they were saying—beginning with Keir Starmer, then the new head of the Labour Party—was: What about submitting our passions to a democratic procedure?

Believing in democratic procedures is not a way of rejecting popular sentiment; it is a recognition that popular sentiment is always dangerously divided. When two mobs confront each other, there is no saying which will yell louder. Starmer had to condemn the rioters' action, if not their purpose, because he understood that what is actually the largest crowd—i.e., the governing community of citizens—was opposed to mob action even when it approved the rioters' ends. (The Theodore Roosevelt monument, in front of the American Museum of Natural History, in New York, with its subordinated Black and Indigenous figures, was taken down by peaceful action and institutional process, and has been remarkably unmourned.)

Tellingly, there is not a single reference in Hancox's book to American Southern lynch mobs. Yet they were the very model of spontaneous and organic popular uprisings, street gatherings in defiance of the impotent local police. The absence of imposed state order is exactly what left the poor Black victims swinging. All the heady emotions that, for Hancox, signal the presence of a popular crowd on its spontaneously organic duty gripped those people, too, as they grinned at their hideous handiwork.

The eternal truth, from Rome to now, is that one man's rampaging mob is another's righteous protest, and the line between the open crowd and the closed—between Sartre's fired-up activists finding meaning and Carlyle's crazed mob seeking blood—remains ever changing. Crowds really are emergent entities, just as Canetti thought: people will do together what they might never do alone. This can be a positive and community-building emotion; crowds supply the reinforcing circles of mutual trust—and, often, the simple insulation of numbers—that keep the authorities at bay. In the carnivalesque spirit, we can be emboldened to laugh together at jokes at the expense of the powerful. But the permission granted by aggregation can also be a wholly cruel and destructive force. That Southern lynch mob brought together people who went to church on Sundays and lived in peace with their Black neighbors, most days.

The point of liberal democracy is to draw group emotions into peaceful contests and orderly exchanges, without trying to reduce the passions that produced the crowd in the first place. As in Dickens, we want to shout with the largest crowd, but first we want to make our crowd the largest, allowing us to shout. We live in fear of what a mob might yet do; we live in hope of what peaceful protest might yet obtain. This ambivalence is built into our social existence, and there's no running away from it.

Can we speak of the wisdom of crowds? Sometimes. The madness of mobs? Sometimes, too. Perhaps, within the winningly minute range of terms that Bobrycki captures, *vulgus* and *populus* and the rest, lies a truth that resonates through centuries, even millennia. We see the shifting varieties of human assembly and search to give them meaning, when the meaning lies exactly in the mutability. To turn a crowd into a mob is always easy; nor should we be surprised when four days later, or four years later, the anarchic mob resisting power becomes the power to be resisted. A crowd can become a mob; a crowd can even become an army. To turn a crowd into a community? Ah, that's the hard work. ♦

GAINING CONTROL

The frenemies who fought to bring contraception to this country.

BY MARGARET TALBOT

Margaret Sanger and Mary Dennett's rivalry was tactical and temperamental.

Judging by how commonly birth control is practiced in the United States, it ought to rank among the least controversial of subjects. In surveys, ninety-nine per cent of women of reproductive age report having used contraception in their lifetimes. Catholics avail themselves of it at about the same rate as other Americans. Evangelicals do, too. Given the fact that heterosexual Americans, like humans in general, tend to be fans of non-procreative sex, this is not so surprising. Nor is it new. In the nineteenth century, lots of people tried to game their gametes, especially anyone lucky or wealthy enough to have a discreet private physician; or who could read between the lines of newspaper ads slyly offering "rubber goods for men" or "married women's friends" or "French periodical pills"; or who knew a midwife able to whip up an herbal concoction that might or might not work. Between 1800 and 1900, the average number of children for white married couples (the group most studied) dropped from just over seven to less than four—a decline marked enough to suggest the purposeful wrangling of fertility, whether through abstinence or intervention.

And yet birth control is contested: condemned, still, by the Catholic Church; regularly undermined by attacks on reproductive rights that are aimed at abortion but take access to contraception as collateral damage; and scrambled into weird fulminations about female sexuality from right-wing talk-show hosts and Trumpian influencers. In Stephanie Gorton's timely and well-researched new book, "The Icon and the Idealist: Margaret Sanger, Mary Ware Dennett, and the Rivalry That Brought Birth Control to America" (Ecco), you can read a number of quotes from champions of reproductive rights which seem bracingly relevant and even radical today.

But the quote that best captures the maddening persistence of this conflict comes from the other side—the judge who, in 1917, presided over the trial of Margaret Sanger for the crime of opening a birth-control clinic. Women, he said, simply did not have "the right to copulate with a feeling of security that there will be no resulting conception." For all that women's roles have changed, for all the new contraceptive products that have appeared since, this attitude seems never to have been entirely vanquished.

"The Icon and the Idealist" is a dual biography of two twentieth-century birth-control crusaders—one (Sanger) famous, the other (Dennett) far less so. It's also a closeup portrait of their rivalry—tactical, temperamental, and at times political.

Dennett was the older of the two women by seven years, born Mary Coffin Ware in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1872. Her father, who made a precarious living as a hide-and-wool merchant, died the year she turned ten. To support Mary and her siblings, her mother became a tutor and a chaperon for young American women touring Europe. The children went to live in a brownstone in Boston occupied by two maternal aunts and an uncle, along with a parade of boarders and guests. The family maintained a proud legacy of New England progressivism—one relative was Lucretia Coffin Mott, the suffragist and abolitionist—and this legacy clearly inspired the young Mary.

The New England prudery that went with it confounded her. Dennett once glimpsed an aunt taking a bath in a "long-sleeved, high-necked night gown," she later wrote, washing "from head to foot without once unbuttoning that stern white cotton emblem of modesty," as though hiding her naked body from herself. It "made me feel that I should be a very shocking and reprehensible little girl if I did not take my own bath in the same manner."

Dennett remembered her youth as "a

SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS FROM GETTY / SHARON SPAULDING / DENNETT FAMILY ARCHIVE

ILLUSTRATION BY CHLOE CUSHMAN

mixture of rebellion and beauty-hunger." She grew into a self-consciously bohemian new woman, who wore glasses and shirtwaists, rode a bicycle, took a keen interest in William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement, and did not rush into marriage. In her late twenties, she tied the knot with William Hartley Dennett, an M.I.T.-educated architect who shared her admiration for Morris. The couple built a house outside Boston in the Arts and Crafts style, attended anti-imperialist and world-peace-movement meetings, and took to sex like ducks to water. "She was determined to shed the prudery of her upbringing," Gorton writes, "and seemed to have succeeded." But Dennett's labors and deliveries were difficult. The birth of the couple's first son, Carleton, in 1900, almost killed her. A second son was unable to nurse from breast or bottle and died of malnutrition at three weeks. The precipitate delivery of their third son, Devon, left her in pain for years. The Dennetts did not want to risk another pregnancy, and, because neither knew much about contraception, they stopped having sex altogether, unhappily for both.

Hartley, as Dennett's husband was known, soon took up with a friend of the couple's, a young suffragist named Margaret Chase, whose husband did not object. Mary did—she was open-minded but monogamously inclined. She viewed Margaret as "the tiger type, but intellectual in her method," and was unmoved by Hartley's new conviction that "no woman should expect the monopoly of her husband's affections." The Dennetts divorced, and, since Hartley refused to pay child support, Mary had to become self-reliant. She moved to New York, and went to work for a women's-suffrage association, where she grew frustrated with the movement's reluctance to racially integrate its first national march, in 1913. ("The suffrage movement stands for enfranchising every woman in the United States," she pointedly wrote in a letter to one of its leaders.) According to Gorton, Dennett soon "formulated her theory that three elements were necessary for a fair society: economic independence for women, the end of every type of privilege, and safe, reliable contraception." Men had to become much more involved in child rearing, too. "It is not possible," Dennett wrote, "for the selfsame work to be broadening and beautifying if women do it, and petty and inconsequential if men do it."

In Greenwich Village, and, in particular, in a radical women's group called Heterodoxy, she found like-minded comrades. The feminists of Heterodoxy engaged in deliriously taboo-bending discussions of free love, free speech, Freud, and socialism, often gathering in a basement bistro on MacDougal Street known as Polly's, where the anarchist management liked to address patrons as "bourgeois pigs." After her divorce, Dennett seems to have had only one other physical relationship in her life, a brief affair, at forty-two, with a married man in the suffrage movement. Before their assignation, in a borrowed apartment, Dennett had to ask him "to look after some safe-guard"—despite committing herself to the cause of family planning, she still knew little about how birth control itself might work.

But, for a person whose life did not contain a lot of sex, Dennett proved to be an ardent and scandalizing champion of it. In 1915, she began work on a sex-education pamphlet for young people. Her boys were then adolescents, and the educational materials available to them about sexuality seemed absurdly sentimental and euphemistic to her, heavy on botanical and pollination metaphors—the birds and the bees, quite literally. Dennett's pamphlet, "The Sex Side of Life," which was published in 1919, enjoyed the unusual distinction of being purchased for chapters of the Y.M.C.A. and lauded by the caustic anti-prig H. L. Mencken. The mutual sexual pleasures that Dennett's text tenderly evokes are, to be sure, restricted to the married, heterosexual sort. Yet its heartfelt dispensing with shame, its empathetic treatment of sexual curiosity and yearning, its reassurances about masturbation, and its anatomically correct drawings (made by Dennett herself) could probably get "The Sex Side of Life" banned in certain school districts in the U.S. today. On one subject, though, Dennett had to be circumspect. "It is against the law," she wrote, "to give people information as to how to manage their sex relations so that no baby will be created unless the father and mother are ready and glad to have it happen."

It was at one of Heterodoxy's meetings, probably at Polly's, that Dennett first met Margaret Sanger, a small, auburn-haired woman with lively hazel eyes, who was perfectly willing to talk animatedly and publicly about birth control. One reason the Dennetts had been so clueless about contraception was the Comstock Act, the federal obscenity statute hustled onto the books by the fervid anti-vice crusader Anthony Comstock. Adopted in 1873, the Comstock Act prohibited the mailing of "obscene, lewd, or lascivious" materials—pornography and sex toys, but also any item or information "intended for the prevention of conception or procuring of abortion." Advocating openly for contraception required nerve and a certain charisma. Sanger had both. Dennett invited her to lunch at her studio apartment, where they told each other their life stories all afternoon. It might have been the beginning of a beautiful friendship, or at least a long and productive collaboration. It wasn't.

Sanger was born Margaret Louise Higgins, in 1879, in Corning, New York, the sixth of eleven children. Her parents were Irish immigrants, and the family never had much money. Her father, Michael, was a stonemason. Her mother, Anne, suffered from tuberculosis, but managed to survive not only those eleven childbirths but seven other pregnancies that ended in miscarriage, before she died at fifty. When Margaret was just eight, she assisted for the first time at one of her mother's deliveries, Gorton tells us, while Michael stood by "offering his wife a flask of whiskey." The Comstock Act and the spirit of repression that gave rise to it meant that such an experience might have no purchase outside the home—no reality, almost. A child could see her mother give birth, in whatever paroxysms of pain or distress, clean up afterward, and then go out into a world where no one was supposed to depict or discuss things like that. (Beginning in the nineteen-thirties, the Hays Code, which governed what could be shown in the movies, explicitly forbade any representation of childbirth, "in fact or in silhouette.") That cognitive dissonance would, in time, radicalize Sanger.

In her early thirties, Margaret went to work as a visiting nurse in the tenements of Manhattan's Lower East Side. Many of her patients begged her for

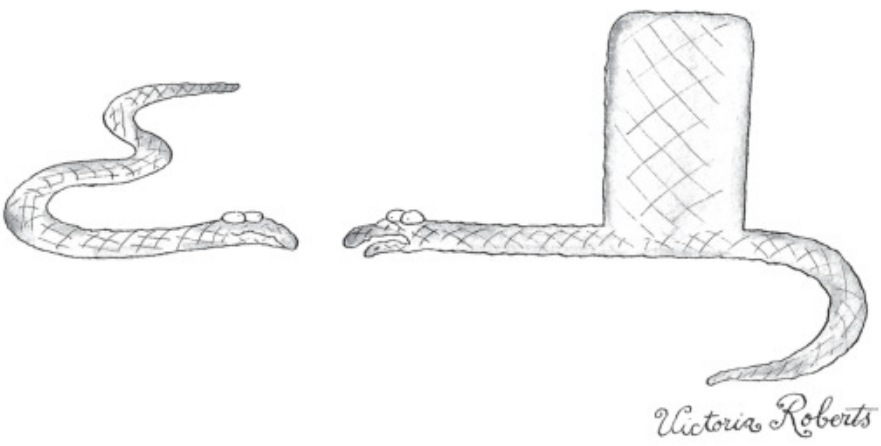
contraception, but she had none to give. "Middle-class women," Gorton writes, "were far more likely to have a diaphragm, sponge or douching solution on hand." The women Margaret was seeing "passed each other advice about how to use a knitting needle, or a cup of turpentine, or a strategic fall to end an unwanted pregnancy." On a hot summer day in 1912, she was summoned to Grand Street by a father of three whose twenty-eight-year-old wife had become unconscious after trying to abort her latest pregnancy on her own. In the story Margaret often told about her epiphany, she called the woman Sadie Sachs. Three months later, she returned to the same apartment, where a comatose Sachs was now dying from another self-induced abortion. By then, Margaret was married to William Sanger, an architect and a socialist, with whom she would have three children. (Unlike Dennett's life, Margaret's was filled with affairs—H. G. Wells, Havelock Ellis, one of her defense attorneys, a Greek anarchist, a Spanish anarchist—along with an alienating later marriage to a wealthy older man who helped fund her cause while complaining bitterly that he had married one.) "After Sadie Sachs's death, Sanger went home to her sleeping household, where she stayed awake all night," Gorton writes. Sanger, in a memoir, recalled vowing to "tell the world what was going on in the lives of these poor women. I would be heard."

Being heard, to Sanger, meant being confrontational in a way that suited a personality more flamboyant than Dennett's. Soon she was writing a column, "What Every Girl Should Know," for the New York *Call*, a socialist paper. It drew the attention of Comstock's Post Office censors, who declared the paper unmailable. Demonstrating a flair for creative provocation that would serve her and her movement well, Sanger produced a final column in the form of a blank box under the headline "What Every Girl Should Know: NOTHING! By Order of the Post Office Department." Sensational arrests for breaking the law were part of Sanger's M.O. from early on. In 1916, when she opened a Brooklyn clinic that distributed diaphragms and contraceptive advice, men and women, some pushing baby carriages or trailing children, lined up around the block, dramatic testimony to the demand that Sanger was trying to meet. And when, ten days later, the police shut the clinic down and arrested her, Sanger "insisted on walking the mile-long route to jail, thus making herself available to reporters," Gorton writes. At least one desperate patient yelled after her, "Come back! Come back and save me!"

Dennett took a dim view of Sanger's commitment to lawbreaking—shortsightedly, given how much publicity it brought for their shared mission. She was focussed instead on changing the laws, and, specifically, on getting Congress to excise the reference to contraception from the Comstock statute. In 1915, Sanger returned from Europe to face charges at home stemming from her latest publication, a magazine called *The Woman Rebel*. Pegging Dennett as an amiable comrade who knew her place in the movement, she paid her a visit, asking for the support of Dennett's new organization, the National Birth Control League. Dennett turned her down. For Sanger, who, as Gorton points out, had spent a year in exile and would shortly be grieving the death of her five-year-old daughter, Peggy, from pneumonia, this must have been a galling disappointment. For Dennett, it was simply a matter of protecting the strategy she believed in from unnecessary scandal or controversy. She would lobby the virtually all-male House and Senate for that change in the Comstock law repeatedly, and fruitlessly, throughout the next decade. Now and then, she'd win commitments from a member of Congress—who would later back out. One admitted that his willingness to address the issue had made him the laughingstock of the Senate cloakroom.

The rift that began with Dennett's refusal to back Sanger in 1915 grew wider over the years. Dennett periodically turned up at rallies and meetings to support Sanger, but she also prodded her single-mindedly, and with little encouragement on Sanger's part, to endorse Dennett's lobbying goals. The tactical dispute had a deeper significance. Sanger eventually supported a change to the Comstock Act that would allow physicians, and physicians only, to mail birth-control information and devices—a compromise she thought would win institutional legitimacy and insure safety. Dennett's approach, by contrast, was based on the idea that freely circulating information was a good in itself, and should not be subject to a professional monopoly that might help some people more than others.

Sanger's plan earned the movement the vital support of the American Medical Association, but Dennett had a point: the emphasis on medical gatekeeping has sometimes undercut reproductive rights. It has made mail-order abortion medication vulnerable to fearmongering about its safety, for example, and probably postponed the arrival of over-the-counter birth-control pills. (The first ones went on the market in the U.S. this year, though they have long been available in dozens of countries.) But the rivalry between the two birth-control leaders was also personal. Dennett thought that Sanger cared too much about her own glory and wanted to dominate the movement. Sanger could be notably mean about Dennett, and once wrote to



"I can't find my phone."

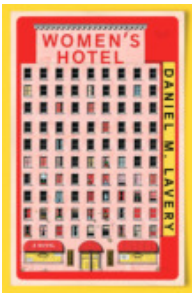
a colleague, "The more I see the acts of the person in question, the more I am inclined to believe that a sanitarium is the proper place for her."

For many years now, Sanger's reputation has suffered from the knowledge that she sought out allies in the eugenics movement and parroted some of its rhetoric. She came to find eugenics useful, much more so than the socialism and feminism she'd espoused in the teens. Eugenics made it acceptable to talk about sex and reproduction in places—the halls of Congress, for example—where it had always been avoided. So much more palatable, in nineteen-twenties America, to invoke the breeding of fitter, native-born children than to speak of gender equality or sexual freedom. Besides, as Gorton says, Sanger seems to have believed in this claptrap. It must have been easier to buy into once she'd mostly cut herself off from the bohemian left that had nurtured and challenged her in her Greenwich Village days. (Emma Goldman had once been a mentor; Sanger turned her back on her when she was deported.) In 1932, Sanger gave a speech titled, disturbingly, "My Way to Peace," in which she called for a "stern, rigid policy of sterilization"; the restriction of immigration to keep out the "feeble-minded, idiots, morons, insane, syphilitic, epileptic, criminal, professional prostitutes"; and the lifelong sequestration of "illiterates, paupers, unemployables . . . [and] dope fiends" to farmlands and homesteads where they'd be taught to work.

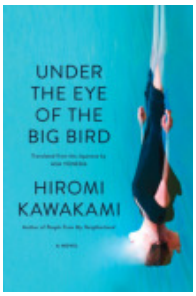
Dennett was different. She was not immune to the popularity of eugenics, which had sunk rhizomic roots in American culture. She, too, "insisted birth control would bring higher quality offspring," Gorton writes. But "she was decidedly less keen than Sanger was to meld her birth control activism with the eugenics movement, and she never embraced 'negative eugenics' as Sanger did when she repeatedly argued the 'unfit' should not be permitted to reproduce." Dennett was wary of any theory that might encourage the state to encroach on private lives for nationalistic interests, and critical of arguments about the global threat of overpopulation.

Gorton says she started off wanting to champion Dennett as "the underdog

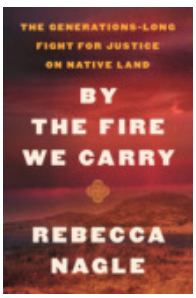
BRIEFLY NOTED



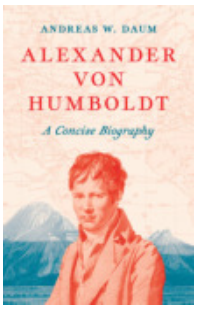
Women's Hotel, *by Daniel M. Lavery (HarperVia)*. This novel, about residents of a fictional New York City hotel exclusively for women, takes stock of women's (sometimes circumscribed) lives with cynicism, humor, and curiosity. Set largely in the early nineteen-sixties, the story treats its characters' alcoholism, anarchy, and kleptomania with tender irreverence. What most interests Lavery, however, is the life that such a hotel offers to women who wish to live without men. The residents consider marriage—"any man that you liked had to be seen through the light of a potential future employer"—but tend to reject it in favor of the charms and headaches of their floor mates.



Under the Eye of the Big Bird, *by Hiromi Kawakami, translated from the Japanese by Asa Yoneda (Soft Skull)*. Told in a series of loosely linked vignettes, this novel takes place in a future where humanity has nearly gone extinct and then been reborn—though, thanks to scientific advances, in slightly altered form. As Kawakami bounds through centuries, she explores mutant creatures, genetically identical children with numbers for names, and a group of bioengineered A.I. caretakers. Her terse, candid prose emphasizes the alienation of a world where death, sex, and clones all feel equally mechanical. At the same time, the processes by which these not-quite-humans begin to re-create religion and society feel innately familiar.



By the Fire We Carry, *by Rebecca Nagle (Harper)*. This richly reported book centers on McGirt v. Oklahoma, a Supreme Court case that, when it was decided, in 2020, reaffirmed Native American sovereignty over large parts of the state. Nagle, a Cherokee journalist, illuminates the case's relevance through the related legal battle surrounding a Muscogee convict's death sentence, the validity of which is contested by a public defender who believes that, since the crime took place on tribal land, Oklahoma state law enforcement did not have jurisdiction over it. Throughout the book, Nagle places these events in the context of centuries of injustice. By focussing on figures such as her ancestor John Ridge, a prominent nineteenth-century Cherokee politician, she also shows how "Indigenous resistance formed the first large-scale political protest movement in the United States."



Alexander von Humboldt, *by Andreas W. Daum (Princeton)*. The discoveries of the Prussian nobleman, cave botanist, and humanitarian Alexander von Humboldt, who was born in 1769, are the central attraction of this concise biography. Based on his research conducted in South America, Humboldt located the magnetic equator and defined the concept of climate zones for plants. He ventured high into the Ural Mountains and the Andes, and made a daring ascent on the volcano Chimborazo, in Ecuador. He also consorted with Napoleon, Thomas Jefferson, and Charles Darwin. Daum interweaves these exploits with noteworthy episodes that took place during the nine decades of Humboldt's life, among them the decline of feudal Europe, the birth of photography, and the combustion of revolutionary fervor across the world.

hero of the birth control movement," but became more appreciative of Sanger's boldness and organizational genius in a way that made that reclamation project less straightforward. In the end, she offers a measured assessment of Sanger—clear-eyed and critical, but unwilling to discard her legacy. Sanger's eugenics, she argues persuasively, focussed on weeding out disability, not sorting by race. This is cold comfort, but worth pointing out, since one strand of the anti-abortion movement has painted abortion as a means of genocide against Black Americans, with Margaret Sanger as the scheme's mastermind. (She did not actually advocate for the right to abortion, deeming the matter too controversial.) The fact that Sanger established birth-control clinics in Harlem and in the South—albeit with the backing of W. E. B. Du Bois and other Black leaders—has been taken as evidence of a targeted eugenics campaign. Clarence Thomas invoked this line of thinking in his opinion in Box v. Planned Parenthood in 2019, and Samuel Alito took up the thread in the Dobbs opinion.

My own experience of reading about the two women led me in the opposite direction from the one Gorton took: I grew to admire Dennett more. It wasn't just that Dennett kept a healthy distance between herself and the eugenics movement. It was also that she conquered her shyness and fear of notoriety (both of which were magnified when her divorce was covered in the newspapers as a titillating scandal) to become the center of a significant case in the history of American free-speech law. In 1928, Dennett, who for years had been quietly selling "The Sex Side of Life" in small print runs that she financed herself, got caught in what Gorton calls "a classic Comstockian trap." An agent for the Postal Service had posed as a "Mrs. Miles" from Virginia, who was interested in buying a copy of Dennett's sex-ed pamphlet, and Dennett had subsequently been arrested on obscenity charges. She went to trial, represented by the A.C.L.U. attorney Morris Ernst, in January, 1929. The jury was made up entirely of men. The judge insisted that he had never before seen the word "vagina" in print, and seemed to Dennett to have been "inexpressibly shocked" by her pamphlet. Dennett took comfort in the presence of her two adult sons, sitting on either side of her throughout the trial, and tried her best to ignore the description of her in the press as a "little grandmother." She was one by then, but she was also an "energetic fifty-seven," in Gorton's words, and not exactly confined to a rocker on the porch. (Much of the press about the case was sympathetic and indignant: *The Nation* condemned her persecution for "sexological heresy"; a New Jersey newspaper suggested that her trial would expose as much American ignorance as the Scopes trial had.)

Dennett was found guilty. "It is the government which is disgraced," she said of the verdict. "Not I." She and Ernst appealed to the Second Circuit, and Judge Augustus Noble Hand (the cousin of his fellow-judge Learned) sided with Dennett, establishing an influential new precedent in American obscenity law. An "accurate exposition of relevant facts," written in "decent language" and with serious intent, could not be regarded as obscene, Hand wrote. The ruling undermined the so-called Hicklin test, a British import that had been relied upon since the nineteenth century in such cases, which held that if any portion of a work could arouse libidinous urges in anybody it had to be held obscene as a whole. Hand ruled that such an "incidental tendency" was insufficient, and "outweighed by the elimination of ignorance, curiosity and morbid fear" that a work such as "The Sex Side of Life" might accomplish. The decision opened the way for a series of rulings in the twentieth century, with implications for everything from the importation of contraceptive devices (United States v. One Package of Japanese Pessaries) to the publication of modernist literature (United States v. One Book Called "Ulysses").

One of the most valuable takeaways from Gorton's book is how it complicates the usual dichotomies of movement leadership: the insider versus the outsider, the institutionalist versus the radical, Martin Luther King, Jr., versus Malcolm X. Sanger remained committed for many years to direct action: opening illegal clinics, getting arrested, proposing a global birth strike. But her tactics were more transgressive than her social vision was. She ended up seeking the mantle of professional respectability among "scientific" eugenicists and the medical establishment. Dennett was the more cautious personality, and she devoted many years to the conventional politics of Washington lobbying. Yet she ended up embracing and promoting a liberatory, democratic vision of free speech, in which access to knowledge would transcend economic or professional privilege.

Dennett lived out the rest of her life in a low-key fashion, attentive to her family and indulging an interest in handicrafts. (In one of those charming, when-worlds-collide moments, she sold a pair of leather bookends she'd hand-tooled to Marlene Dietrich.) She died in 1947. Her son Carleton kept "The Sex Side of Life" on the back of the toilet so that his children could read it easily and without asking. Sanger remained a leader of the movement, and lived until 1966, long enough to be interviewed on television by a cigarette-smoking Mike Wallace, and to see the Supreme Court uphold a right to contraception for married couples in the 1965 case Griswold v. Connecticut.

The Comstock statute survives both women. In 1971, Congress removed the reference to contraception, but Comstock itself lives on as a so-called "zombie statute," on the books but seldom enforced, maintaining until recently the ghostly purity of its creator. In the lead-up to this year's Presidential campaign, however, a number of people on the right—including the authors of Project 2025, an unofficial policy blueprint for a second Trump Administration—proposed reviving enforcement of the 1873 statute as a way of criminalizing the mailing of abortion drugs. Eugenics, too, is enjoying something of a moment again, this time almost exclusively among conservatives—the pro-natalism of J. D. Vance and Elon Musk, Donald Trump's invocations of "bad genes" and immigrants "poisoning the blood of our country." The closure of family-planning clinics in the wake of Dobbs, meanwhile, has made it harder for many people to access birth control. Americans just elected a man who, in the menacingly paternalistic Comstock mold, vows that, "whether the women like it or not, I'm going to protect them." Sanger and Dennett would probably remain rivals if they were alive today. But they would both be appalled to learn how many of their battles are still being fought. ♦

ON TELEVISION

REBELS WITH A CAUSE

"Say Nothing," on FX.

BY INKOO KANG

"Say Nothing" is a sophisticated drama of political disillusionment.

In the new FX/Hulu series "Say Nothing," life as an armed revolutionary during the Troubles has—at least at first—an air of glamour. Dolours and Marian Price (Lola Petticrew and Hazel Doupe, respectively), two teen-age sisters born and raised in Belfast, are confronted almost immediately with the clash of expectations versus reality. The pair are still novice militants when they decide to devise their own mission, entering a local bank sporting nuns' habits and guns and announcing their intent to "liberate" funds on behalf of the Irish Republican Army. The heist doesn't go smoothly. A stern-faced woman refuses to coöperate, calling the sisters' disguises "sacrilege"; a visibly panicked Marian implores her to lie down, sweetening the request with a "pretty please." In the end, the stunt nets the I.R.A. just thirty-eight quid, but the sisters are giddy. "We're all anyone's talking about right now," Dolours declares. *That*, she believes, is "fucking priceless."

For such a scrappy operation, image is everything. It's difficult to deny the worthiness, even the romance, of the Republican cause: the Irish have been resisting English invasion, colonization, and exploitation for eight centuries. The Price siblings see themselves as part of that grand tradition, as did their parents before them. (In the pilot, the sisters' father, Albert, regales his young daughters at the dinner table with tales of bomb-making and prison beatings.) By the early nineteen-seventies, when the series begins, the movement had splintered, with some taking up arms to secure Northern Ireland's independence from British rule. "Say Nothing" understands—and often captures—the excitement and allure of this fight. But the show is ultimately preoccupied with the way violence comes to weigh on its perpetrators, however noble their aims, and with the gulf between what the I.R.A. should've been and what it actually was.

Created by Josh Zetumer, the nine-part drama is a deft adaptation of a nonfiction book of the same name, by my colleague Patrick Radden Keefe. Zetumer's version of the story, which spans more than forty years, distills its essence while rearranging the plot into a highly episodic format. Each installment is built around a discrete event—a bid to rescue an ally, a hunt for a mole—that also contributes to the larger project, dramatizing the wounds inflicted in the name of the would-be revolution. In setting, subject matter, and theme, the series stands refreshingly apart from most other American programming, and its longitudinal account of political disillusionment makes it one of the year's finest shows.

Dolours, a miniskirted redhead with a reputation as a flirt and a passion for the arts that she might have parlayed into a career, promptly establishes herself as "Say Nothing"'s protagonist—another structural departure from the source material, which takes an ensemble approach to the history. As one commanding officer in the series says, almost reverently, "Dolours could have been anything she wanted." But, even as she rises through the I.R.A.'s ranks and eventually becomes a cause célèbre, she remains defined by—and against—her sister. Dolours, the elder of the two, is the visionary whose finger falters when pressed against the trigger; Marian is the soldier who keeps her head down but seldom hesitates to shoot. Prestige TV is full of Peggy Olsons: lone young women who suffer cuts on their way through the glass ceiling, often without the balm of sororal support. "Say Nothing" feels distinct in part because Dolours and Marian can depend on each other as they take on roles previously unimagined for women within the I.R.A. There's even a bittersweet poignancy in the way they comfort and push each other forward in a hunger strike after their capture by British forces, their weakening bodies only strengthening their bond.

ILLUSTRATION BY NADA HAYEK

By the time Dolours is released, she's spent seven years of her life behind bars. At thirty, she has to figure out what she wants her adulthood to be. As children, she and her comrades had imagined they'd die by hanging or by firing squad for their subversive activities; getting older didn't occur to her as a possibility. One of the greater surprises of Keefe's book, at least to this reader, was the callowness of the organization's rank and file. The mission that cements Dolours's place within the pantheon of the I.R.A. is carried out by a ragtag team mostly made up of teen-agers, at least one of whom gets falling-down drunk the night before. The rebels are no more polished in their bombing campaigns, which blow up plenty of unintended targets, including some of the bomb-makers themselves.

The efforts to bring discipline and order to the resistance are largely taken up by two leaders, the populist Brendan Hughes (Anthony Boyle) and the philosophical Gerry Adams (Josh Finan). The duo constitute a brotherhood that, in contrast to the Price sisters' relationship, fractures irreparably over time, and that deterioration forms the backdrop for some of the series' most engaging debates. Like Dolours, Brendan allows himself to have a heart, as when he discovers two spies who have betrayed him—one a friend, the other a seventeen-year-old boy from the neighborhood—and flips them into counterspies in a desperate bid to save them from certain execution. For Gerry, there's only the pursuit of the bigger picture, no matter the collateral damage—a world view that he pays for years later, when the fate of a widowed mother of ten named Jean McConville, who was disappeared by paramilitaries, becomes a black mark against the movement. (At the end of each episode, a title card notes that the real-life Gerry Adams denies ever having been a member of the I.R.A.)

Throughout the series, the sisters' youthful exploits are intercut with testimony from I.R.A. fighters who, in the early two-thousands, opened up to a historian on the condition that their interviews—a sort of secular confession—wouldn't be released until after their deaths. A middle-aged Dolours (played by Maxine Peake) is among them. Such time jumps, now commonplace in television, can come at the expense of real character development. But the ones in "Say Nothing" prove striking, as time softens some members, like Dolours; hardens others, like Marian; and utterly transforms the likes of Gerry, who leaves the underground to join the British Parliament. (The decision, while devastating to the movement he renounced, may have been prescient: Sinn Féin, the party he led until 2018, is now the dominant power in Northern Ireland.) The adaptation somehow makes wild twists in the post-prison life of the actual Dolours Price, such as her marriage to an Oscar-nominated actor, feel organic. If this final act doesn't quite succeed in conveying the instability of her later years, it at least offers a wonderful showcase for Peake, a perennially underrated character actor who makes the most of a role worthy of her range.

Zetumer's attempt to pack in as many historical details as possible results in occasionally exposition-heavy dialogue, and reduces some important facts to brief asides—not least the reality that many Irish people disapproved of the paramilitary's tactics. The series' emphasis on the extreme loyalty of Catholic Belfasters—and its tendency toward cinematic flourishes—can create the opposite impression: in one memorable sequence, a fleeing Brendan crashes through the window of another man's home, and knows exactly where in the living room he can find a hidden gun to turn on his pursuers.

The show soon complicates both narratives. As the decades pass, the silence that kept so many members safe from British retribution turns oppressive, and the I.R.A.'s victims and volunteers alike find themselves unable to move on. Gerry is, as ever, aloof to the casualties, having long since internalized the message that "Peace doesn't come without cost." But "Say Nothing" allies itself more closely with those who are forced to bear that burden, and digs into the disquiet that it creates. Early on, Dolours is ashamed at having "choked" during a mission, failing to fire quickly enough to insure a clean escape for her crew. Brendan reassures her. "I trust the ones that hesitate," he says simply, noting that their enemies are "all some mother's son." Then he explains, with equal calm, the conviction that will come to haunt him: "Sometimes people get in the way." ♦

THE THEATRE

AGAINST THE CURRENT

"Give Me Carmelita Tropicana!," at Soho Rep, and "Gatz," at the Public.

BY HELEN SHAW

Alina Troyano and her alter ego haunt Branden Jacobs-Jenkins (Ugo Chukwu).

It may be bright and getting brighter on Broadway these days, but Off Broadway the shadows are lengthening. Desperation-level real-estate pressures are pushing established theatre companies out of spaces that have long been part of the city's fabric—I keep going to shows and realizing that I'll never be inside a certain venue again. It's particularly gutting that the scrappy Soho Rep is leaving Walkerspace, a tiny storefront conversion in Tribeca, its home since 1991. Several of the most important shows of the past decades premièred in the sixty-five-seat shoebox, including Jackie Sibblies Drury's Pulitzer Prize-winning "Fairview" and Anne Washburn's "10 Out of 12."

To bid the cramped, magical old space farewell, the playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins and the Cuban-born performance artist Alina Troyano have co-written the elegiac farce "Give Me Carmelita Tropicana!" It's a bantering conversation between two longtime friends—Jacobs-Jenkins, a Tony Award-winning playwright, was Troyano's student in 2007, at N.Y.U.—and a kind of anarchic catalogue raisonné, in which Troyano's most famous stage alter ego, Carmelita Tropicana, summons a living inventory of three and a half decades of radical (and radically queer) performance work. For Jacobs-Jenkins, the show is a homecoming; his gleefully deconstructed melodrama "An Octoroon," produced at Soho Rep in 2014, made his reputation. Both he and Troyano are now on the theatre's board.

Troyano plays herself, a pugnacious bantam with short hair dyed tennis-ball green, while the mischievous Ugo Chukwu is cast as Branden, snug in a checkered cardigan and an air of wry self-regard. (Greg Corbino designed the costumes.) A secondary character describes him as "a handsome African American millennial homosexual—with attitude," and we sense the real Jacobs-Jenkins somewhere peeking at us, to see how we take it.

Habitat loss is the play's inciting crisis. Troyano's gigs are drying up as downtown venues close. Branden, flush with cash from a "peak TV" deal, offers to buy the Carmelita persona rather than see it disappear. The transfer of intellectual property quickly turns metaphysical: after assorted mayhem involving a bust of the seventeenth-century Spanish poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Carmelita possesses Branden, pushing his consciousness into a limbo populated by other Troyano characters, from a "Cuban mansplainer" to a saucy cockroach newswoman.

The show, directed with velocity by Eric Ting and liberally sprinkled with puppets, surreal dance breaks, and other experimental-theatre mainstays, sways like an unsecured scenery flat. I mean that as a compliment—or at least as a way of describing my pleasure in the deliberately confusing and unfinished. There are moments of sheer comic bliss, often thanks to Chukwu's dry delivery or the chaos agent Will Dagger, a Muppet-y menace in a mustache, who plays several characters, including a vengeful, scene-stealing goldfish. (Corbino builds him incredible fish puppets of increasing size.) Sometimes artistic strategies do rub against each other. Troyano, a veteran of rowdy, hybrid spaces, fills conceptual lacunae by pouring in energy; Jacobs-Jenkins likes to retreat to an ironic distance, to let us do the work ourselves.

We often feel the latter's amused gaze on us as we watch: Branden gives a late speech about the experimental performances he saw as a younger man, which were full of "ideas and ingenuity and curiosity and wonder and interesting failure." He neatly forestalls any quibbles we might have with this show by explicitly connecting it to a galvanizing, process-oriented past. The

ILLUSTRATION BY AMRITA MARINO

evening concludes with Carmelita reinhabiting Troyano, whose charisma blinks on like a searchlight. She prowls along the front row: "Have you ever touched a lesbian performance artist before?" she asks, laughing. The night I saw it, the feeling in the room was ecstatic, and, for an instant, the piece felt like the beginning rather than the end of something.

This is a season of farewells. Over at the Public, Elevator Repair Service is mounting a final New York staging of its masterpiece, the marathon "Gatz," from 2010. If you somehow missed the original, or one of several return engagements, the production features a man (Scott Shepherd) in a gray office reading F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby" as he and his workmates drift into position and then into character. From the first line ("In my younger and more vulnerable years, my father gave me some advice"), Shepherd becomes Nick, the novel's narrator; others play Daisy (Tory Vazquez), Tom (Pete Simpson), Jay Gatsby (Jim Fletcher), and the rest. It takes about six hours to get through every word of the 1925 text, and, with intermissions plus your dinner break, you wind up putting in a full day with the company. It's not work, though. "Gatz" may be the world's least likely blockbuster show, but there's no doubt that it is one. The defining nonmusical production of the twenty-tens, it provides an all too relevant observation of heedless decadence, while the performance itself, given its patience and duration, restores to its viewers a deep focus that modern life has made more and more difficult to sustain.

In 2004, when the director John Collins and his company started presenting the show in workshop, the Fitzgerald estate wasn't particularly keen. Bigger commercial interests had the rights. I saw an early, unlicensed staging of it, where the illicitness was part of the excitement. Now, of course, the novel's copyright has expired, and dramatizations crowd the field. I've seen two musical adaptations this year alone: Kait Kerrigan, Nathan Tysen, and Jason Howland's lurid "The Great Gatsby," on Broadway, and "Gatsby," Florence Welch, Thomas Bartlett, and Martyna Majok's version, at A.R.T., in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Both shows emphasized ecstasy; both missed the green light for the trees. Without the astringency of Nick's often contemptuous commentary, the story's love plots sweeten into romantic schlock.

"Gatz," on the other hand, is almost all astringency. For much of the show, Shepherd's light, skimming voice seems to hold every word in quotation marks—and the audience at a distance. "Gatz" continually punctures illusion: even as party music plays, the crummy desks and computer stacks on Louisa Thompson's set never turn into the dreaming spires of Long Island. Instead, we're thrust back onto Fitzgerald's words, specifically their shapes and rhythms, as they lap against one another, like waves in the Sound.

The glitzy musical dramatizations pretty much run out of juice when Gatsby gets shot. I guess they figure that the love triangle's done, so what's the point in continuing on. "Gatz," though, has nearly an hour to go. And it's at this point that the ironic tone shifts. Gatsby's father, Henry C. Gatz (played with an arthritic tenderness by Ross Fletcher, the Gatsby actor Jim Fletcher's actual father), comes out of the deep Midwest to see his boy buried. Gatz, Sr., keeps showing Nick a copy of "Hopalong Cassidy," in which he found a to-do list written by his teen-age son before he went East. Gatz can't stop marvelling over the reminder "Be better to parents." Ross Fletcher stoops his huge shoulders and shakes his shaggy head. "He was reluctant to close the book," Shepherd says.

The final twenty minutes consist of Shepherd, as Nick, looking out at us and musing on what he's discovered about America, about the size of it, and about the way people from different parts of it can't seem to fit with one another. Here's where Fitzgerald's writing lifts from its low seabird vantage over events into language that flies high up, taking in the continent. "Gatz" has accidentally become, like the production at Soho Rep, a treatise on time; E.R.S. created the work when its members were all close to the age of their characters, and now we get to see what the very play we're watching has made of them. I'm not sure that the thirty-year-old character of Nick would have much sympathy for the coating of sorrow that now lies over this beautiful show, like dust on one of the office's many ignored files. But it's been twenty years that we've been listening to his story together, and he wouldn't want us to forget what we've learned. ♦

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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 Ali Solomon, must be received by Sunday, November 24th. The finalists in the November 11th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the December 9th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST

" "

.....

THE FINALISTS

"You missed your flight. It's not the end of the world."
Kathy Wrobel, East Hartland, Conn.

"Your gate is yet to be revealed."
Zack Windheim, Studio City, Calif.

"Unburden thee of thy worldly goods by about five pounds!"
Brigitte Sutherland, Victoria, B.C.

THE WINNING CAPTION

"C'mon, you left the barn door, the gate, and the garage open?"
Dan Singleton, Chatham, Ont.

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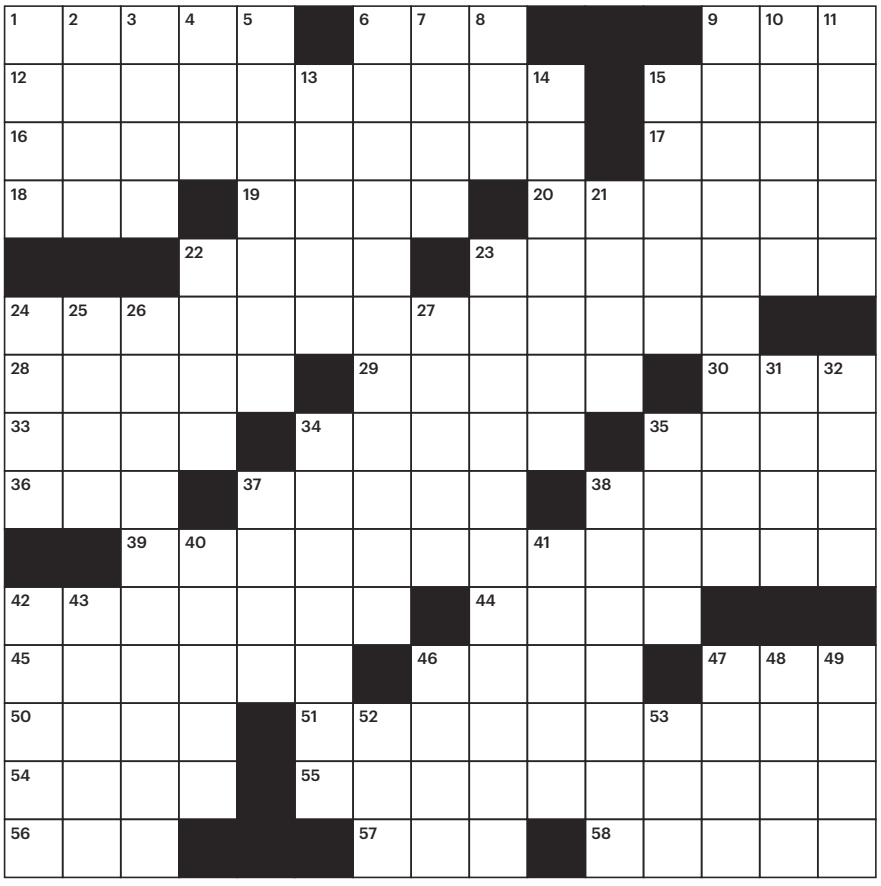
PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A moderately challenging puzzle.

BY AIMEE LUCIDO



ACROSS

1 Contemplate
6 PC's "brain"
9 Plastic-pipe material, for short
12 Religious or cultural renegade
15 Whopper purveyor
16 Bakers' inner circles?
17 Alma mater for Francis Ford Coppola and Alexander Payne
18 Naval officer below a lieutenant: Abbr.
19 Heroine of a Thomas Hardy novel
20 Poems often featuring natural imagery
22 Target for a Bioré strip
23 Acts the social butterfly
24 Nursery-rhyme boy with a rhyming name
28 Gig for some clowns
29 "Warrior" actor Nick
30 Hit playfully
33 Memorial Day weekend event, familiarly
34 Fusilli noodles, shapewise
35 Track assignment
36 Grp. that advises the President on foreign-policy matters
37 Like a wallflower
38 Croquet alternative
39 Entrée that Panda Express calls its "signature dish"
42 Crush
44 Ingredient in many purportedly healthy cookie recipes
45 Patrick Bateman in "American Psycho," for one
46 Rewrite, say
47 "Yes, Captain!"
50 Disney character whose last name is Pelekai
51 One prone to wandering?
54 "Brockmire" actress Amanda
55 Person who might not need an alarm
56 Altitudes: Abbr.
57 Bit of a laugh
58 Machines in the Sahara?

DOWN

1 Yawning
2 Class for which "The Wealth of Nations" might be assigned reading, for short
3 Charged atoms
4 Bearded beast
5 Phrase spelled out in the chorus of a Chappell Roan song
6 "That'll do"
7 Friends
8 Find a purpose for
9 Shot with a salty chaser
10 Cherish
11 Boorish
13 "S.N.L." alum Oteri
14 Where some jokes are printed
15 2023 animated film role for Charlie Day
21 Opposite of a *démon*
22 Arnold Schwarzenegger's character in the movie "Predator," e.g.
23 Baby
24 Flash one's pearly whites
25 Seemingly forever
26 Strange bedfellows
27 Asset for a politician
31 Intro to children's literature?
32 Part of a hammer
34 Admit defeat
35 Twisted do
37 Bamako's country
38 Angostura product
40 Put down roots elsewhere?
41 Like a werewolf
42 Slender, elegant woman
43 "___ on Set" (docuseries about the dark side of nineties and two-thousands Nickelodeon productions)
46 Jane who marries Edward Rochester
47 Defiant retort
48 Chuck, slangily
49 Does wrong
52 Sound at a spa
53 Feel crummy

Solution to the previous puzzle:

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

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

Paris (Red), 2023, 30 x 20 inches, oil on canvas. © 2024 Mitchell Johnson.

Mitchell Johnson

"Like all of Johnson's works, a latent conflict is built into the scene, in the form of often abrupt contrasts of space and form. Strange as it may seem to say so, they are implicitly psychodramas disguised as physical drama. I am arguing that they have an emotional cutting edge, making them more than matter-of-factly descriptive and ingeniously abstract." —Donald Kuspit, *Whitehot Magazine*, July 2023

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